

Establishing the
True Identity of
an American
Military Heroine
By Megan Pacella



Top—The big covered casket of Margaret Corbin being placed in the hearse for removal to the U. S. Military Cemetery at West Point, N. Y. Young army officers, and as full braves, Capt. George S. Andrews, Capt. W. R. Moore, Capt. W. D. Love, and Lieut. W. R. Fleming. Bottom—At the opening of the original grave of Margaret Corbin (left to right), District George S. Andrews and Lieutenant W. R. Fleming on duty at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, Mrs. Alton Brooks Parker, State Historian, and Mrs. Charles White Nash, New York State Regent.

346



PHOTOGRAPH OF ORIGINAL GRAVE NEAR HIGHLAND FALLS, NEW YORK, OF MARGARET CORBIN, WITH IDENTIFYING CEDAR STUMP AT HEAD.

Revolutionary Heroine Interred in West Point Cemetery

By AMELIA CAMPBELL PARKER
State Historian of New York

FOR many years residents of Highland Falls, New York, have had handed down to them the tradition of a woman known to their ancestors as "Captain Molly." Perhaps they knew her real name, but this was she known because of her distinguished martial bearing, enhanced by the semi-military garb she usually wore, and because they knew she had a right to military distinction. The research, which has authentically connected this "Captain Molly," buried in the Highlands of the Hudson River about the year 1800, with the famous Margaret Corbin whose burial place was hitherto unknown, is of great historical interest.

347

The monument which the Daughters of the American Revolution recently placed at her grave at West Point gives to our Nation another important Revolutionary Shrine.

In the archives of the Library of the West Point Military Academy is the book in which William Price, Commissary of Military Stores, copied the letters sent to Major General Knox (Secretary of War), from 1783 to 1790, in which he asks for supplies for the maintenance of "Captain Molly." These letters show that she was entitled to receive the support of the Government of the United States, from which we draw the definite

Above; The June 1926 issue of *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* reports on the opening of the grave of Margaret Corbin and the reinterment of her remains with full military honors at West Point Cemetery.

Today, **Margaret Cochran Corbin** is considered one of the first wartime American heroines. At the West Point Cemetery, a granite memorial depicting a woman firing a cannon proclaims her great accomplishments: Once known as "Captain Molly," Corbin manned a cannon after her husband was killed in the Battle of Fort Mifflin. She was badly wounded in the battle and became the first woman to receive a military pension.

Despite her bravery, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Corbin's final resting place was unknown and unrecognized. For nearly 125 years, no one connected Corbin to an eccentric woman buried in an unmarked grave at an estate in Highland Falls, N.Y.

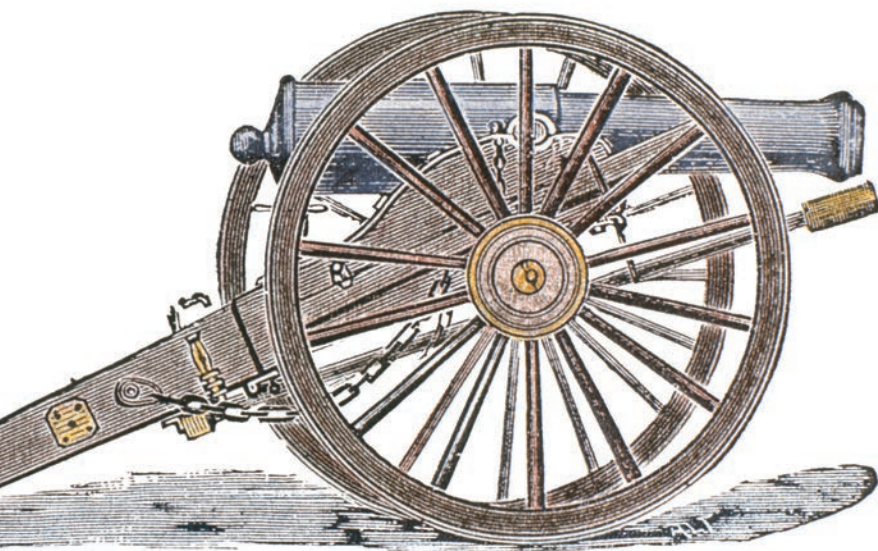
Around 1925, a man named Amos D. Faurot relayed a family history about his grandfather having buried Margaret Corbin and referred to her as Captain Molly. Under the direction of State Regent Mary Frances Tupper Nash, the New York State Organization (NYSO) of the Daughters of the American Revolution formed a committee dedicated to researching the connection between Margaret Corbin and Captain Molly. An article published in the June 1926 issue of *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* reports on the efforts by the NYSO

to document Corbin's wartime service and to confirm that the remains were indeed hers.

Her story has long fascinated historians: Reginald P. Bolton wrote of Corbin in his *Washington Heights Manhattan, Its Eventful Past* (Dyckman Institute, 1924). The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society published Edward Hall's version of the events, *Margaret Corbin, Heroine of the Battle of Fort Washington*, in 1943.

Early Tragedies

Born in Pennsylvania on November 12, 1751, Margaret Cochran was orphaned at age 5. In 1756, her father, Robert Cochran, was killed during an American Indian raid, and her mother was carried into captivity. An uncle raised her until 1772, when she married John Corbin of Virginia. In 1775, after hostilities broke out with Britain, her husband signed on with the 1st Company of Pennsylvania Artillery.



“Camp followers,” as the thousands of wives and women who followed the Continental Army were called, traveled with the soldiers seeking safety, shelter and food. Corbin was one of the many women tasked with cooking, mending clothing, fetching water, and nursing the sick and wounded. At some point she learned to clean, load and fire a cannon—a skill that would prove valuable during the Battle of Fort Washington, where



Herbert Knotel's sketch of Margaret Corbin from the West Point Museum Art Collection, U.S. Military Academy

Margaret Corbin learned to clean, load and fire a cannon—a skill that would prove valuable during the Battle of Fort Washington on November 16, 1776. During the fierce fight that killed her husband, Margaret took his place at the cannon and shot it until she was wounded.

3,000 Americans faced a force of 13,000 British and Hessian soldiers. A spy, William Demont, had provided the British with plans for the fort, and the enemy was well aware of its many weaknesses. Although Washington wanted to abandon the fort before fighting began, he decided to stay based on the counsel of General Nathanael Greene.

During the fierce fight on November 16, 1776, John Corbin was killed while firing a cannon. Margaret took her husband's place and continued to load and fire the cannon until enemy grapeshot hit her three times, with one shot severely wounding her shoulder. Washington, watching the battle



The Margaret Corbin Memorial at West Point Cemetery on the grounds of the U.S. Military Academy

across the river, is said to have wept at the sight of the surviving prisoners being marched out and murdered by the Hessians. The loss of Fort Washington was not only a demoralizing defeat for Patriot troops, but it also forced Washington to admit his mistake in trying to retain control of New York and retreat to New Jersey.

The First Female Pensioner

Corbin was taken prisoner at the Battle of Fort Washington and transported across the Hudson River to Fort Lee. According to Joe Lieberman's article in the February 1999 issue of *Military History*, "With one arm permanently disabled, Corbin served as a guard in the Corps of Invalids

at West Point until it was permanently mustered out in April 1783. There were 286 names listed in that unit, Margaret Corbin's being the only woman's name."

The new U.S. government also recognized Corbin's courage. A record printed in the *Journals of Congress* on July 6, 1779, confirmed that Corbin was wounded and disabled in the attack and would receive one-half of the pay drawn by a soldier in the United States and a complete suit of new clothes. This made her the first female pensioner of the U.S. Army.

Several letters written from Commissary William Price to Major General Henry Knox, the secretary of war, reveal Corbin's unusual character. Legend has it that she became an angry and disagreeable woman over time. According to Lieberman, "She became an eccentric, hard-drinking, bad-tempered individual—hardly surprising given the hard life she had to live."

In a letter written on January 31, 1786, Price admits that he is at a loss about what to do with her. "She is such an offensive person that people are unwilling to take her charge," he wrote. "If you should think proper to extend one or two rations to her, it will be better than money and may induce persons to keep her."

Honoring a Patriot

On March 16, 1926, Margaret Corbin's remains were moved to the West Point Cemetery. When the body was unearthed, a surgeon examined the remains to confirm her identity: He found that her left shoulder and chest had been badly injured, proving Captain Molly was, in fact, Margaret Cochran Corbin.

The grave site was dedicated to Corbin on April, 14, 1926, complete with full military honors. Her memory is invoked by the Captain Molly Corbin Chapter, Grapevine, Texas, and Major Molly Chapter, Hamilton, Mo. And her legacy lives on in tribute to the female members of today's military: The DAR annually presents the Margaret Cochran Corbin Award to a distinguished female member of the armed forces. 🇺🇸

Megan Pacella wrote about pet ownership in early America for the November/December 2010 issue.