



{Historic Homes}

MANCHESTER'S **LITTLE {RED} HOUSE**
HOME
OF A
NEW HAMPSHIRE
HERO

By Phyllis McIntosh · Photography by John Gauvin



For 270 years, the little red house—Manchester’s oldest structure—has survived legions of Stark children, decades of neglect as a rental property and a mile-long move to a new location.

Photos on pages 44–47: After enduring the chaos of the battlefield while leading rebel troops, John Stark looked forward to the solace he found at the little red house that he shared with his wife, Molly, in Manchester, N.H. From handmade embroidery bearing the Stark initials and a rare double loom to framed wartime correspondence and wire-rimmed glasses (and even a lock of John’s hair), the restored home and its furnishings capture the lives of the devoted Patriot couple.

General John Stark, New Hampshire's most famous soldier, was the quintessential American Patriot. An inspirational military leader, he was a hero of the French and Indian War and the battles of Bunker Hill and Bennington during the Revolution. Also a dedicated farmer and family man, he liked nothing more than to return home to Manchester and his beloved wife, Molly.



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Today, the Molly Stark Chapter, Manchester, N.H., carefully preserves the memory of a devoted couple—whose lives were so entwined with the birth of the nation—at the house where John grew up, and he and Molly lived as newlyweds.

For 270 years, the little red house—Manchester's oldest structure—has survived legions of Stark children, decades of neglect as a rental property and a mile-long move to a new location. Now restored to its 18th-century glory, the house plays host to visiting schoolchildren, historic interest groups, local walking tours and guests of the Molly Stark Chapter, which holds its meetings there.

Born in 1728 in Londonderry, N.H., John Stark was the son of Scottish immi-

grants Archibald and Eleanor Stark. When the family home burned in 1736, Archibald purchased 800 acres along the Merrimack River in what is now Manchester. There he built a house by the Amoskeag Falls where he and Eleanor raised seven children. John, the fourth child, lived there from age eight until the 1750s, when he went off to fight in the French and Indian War. While attending to his military duties, he wooed and married Elizabeth Page, whom he nicknamed Molly.

In 1760, with the promise of a lasting peace, John brought Molly to live at the Manchester house, which he had acquired following his father's death. Two children, John Jr., and Archibald, were born there. With another child on the way by 1765, the little house seemed cramped. John, who by then had bought all of the land his siblings had inherited from his father, decided to build a grand mansion nearby. (Unfortunately, that home burned in 1865.)

In 1775, as soon as news of clashes with the British at Lexington and Concord reached New Hampshire, Stark joined thousands of other volunteers to take up arms. After distinguishing himself at

Bunker Hill, he crossed the Delaware with General George Washington on Christmas 1776 and fought at Trenton and Princeton.

Passed over for promotion in 1777, Stark resigned from the Army, but soon accepted a commission in the New Hampshire militia when the British captured Fort Ticonderoga and threatened the American supply depot at Bennington, Vt. He was instrumental in the victory at the Battle of Bennington, which led to the British defeat at Saratoga—the turning point of the war. As reward for his service, the Continental Congress commissioned him a brigadier general.

Mighty Molly

While Stark was at Bennington, Molly was never far from his mind. He rallied his troops with the words, "There is the enemy, boys. We must flog them, or this night Molly Stark will sleep a widow." A British cannon captured during the fray was affectionately dubbed the Molly Stark Cannon. Today "Old Molly" belongs to the state of New Hampshire and proudly rests on the common in the town of New

Boston. Other tributes to the woman who kept John Stark's home fires burning include the Molly Stark State Park in Wilmington, Vt., and the Molly Stark Trail, which marks the route taken by Gen. Stark as he led his troops across Vermont to Bennington.

Molly was a brave, independent woman who managed the farm and family during her husband's frequent absences. She bore 11 children and raised 10 of them to adulthood, a remarkable feat in that time. Following the Battle of Bennington, she nursed men wounded during the conflict or afflicted with smallpox. Blessed with vigorous good health, she was sick hardly a day in her life until she contracted typhoid fever and died at age 77.

John never recovered from the loss, though he lived for eight more years. He died in 1822 at age 94 as the last surviving American general of the Revolutionary War. His lasting legacy to the people of New Hampshire was a toast he sent in 1809 to the committee in charge of a celebration commemorating the Battle of Bennington. Noting that "the infirmities of old age" would not permit him to attend, he wrote, "I will give you my volunteer toast: 'Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils.'" In 1945, the New Hampshire Legislature adopted "Live free or die" as the state's official motto.

Restoring the Past

The John Stark House offers a fascinating glimpse into the life and times of this remarkable family. After John and Molly built their new home, John Jr. and his wife, Mary, moved into the little house and raised 12 children there. His descendants sold the house in 1814, and in 1835, a textile company acquired it.

For the next 100 years, the house was largely ignored. Tenants came and went, bricking up the beautiful fireplaces and converting the front entry into a bathroom. When the textile firm fell on hard times in 1937, it deeded the house to the Molly Stark Chapter for a dollar. The chapter undid some of the damage—opening up the fireplaces, stripping paint from the paneling, restoring the front entryway—and continued to rent the property until 1968, when the state relo-

cated the structure to make way for a new bridge. It was not until 10 years ago, when Geraldine Olmstead, a descendant of Gen. Stark, left her estate to the chapter, that restoration could begin in earnest.

In recent years, the chapter has installed a climate-control and burglar-alarm system, new chimney liner and a new white picket fence. Members have also repaired brick entryway steps, restored wall stenciling that suffered water damage and applied ultraviolet screening to the windows to protect the interior from the sun. House Chairman Anne Landini, an interior designer, has taken care to place the 18th and early 19th century pieces as they might have appeared in the Starks' time.

A classic New England design of that era, the house has a small entryway flanked by parlors on both sides. Beyond one parlor is the keeping room, or kitchen, with a large central fireplace. The other parlor leads to a hallway, side door and staircase to two upper bedrooms. In earlier days, the upstairs was likely one large sleeping loft for the numerous children of Archibald and John Jr. An ell extending from the downstairs—an original part of the house thought to have been used at various times as a spinning room, woodshed and chicken coop—now serves as a meeting room for the Molly Stark Chapter.

Among the home's notable features are virgin pine paneling and floors fashioned from boards up to 23 inches wide that were cut from giant trees that grew on Stark land. "Indian shutters" are still in working condition on two windows in one of the parlors. These are solid wood panels that recess into the window casing and could slide across the window to protect against Indian attacks. When the house was moved, workmen discovered a smoke room with pegs for smoking meat contained within the large central fireplace. Long concealed by a wall, that area has now been opened for public viewing.

Original artifacts include John Stark's wire-rimmed glasses, a treasured find in a trunk recently donated by a Stark descendant. A lock of John's hair and some of his wartime correspondence are framed on the wall. A piece of fabric embroidered with an "S" is believed to have been created by Molly. The oldest piece on display is a small travel trunk brought from Scotland by John's father, the only item known to have survived the 1736 fire at Archibald Stark's home.

The most unusual discovery in the house was a mysterious pile of wood that turned out to be a rare double loom. "It is a double face-to-face weaving loom, either made to train little girls, who would face each other as they worked, or for ladies who liked to talk while making bandages or strips of ribbon," explains Phyllis Gagnon, Regent of the Molly Stark Chapter.

A Living Memorial

Now that restoration is complete and the house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the chapter is eager to share it with school groups and anyone interested in its history. Costumed hostesses escort young visitors and explain what daily life would have been like in the 1700s.

The Molly Stark Chapter is proud to be custodian of the house, Mrs. Gagnon says, "because the structure still breathes its tale of a bygone era.

"Its sturdiness tells of the general himself, who survived capture by Indians, the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War," she says. "Its beautiful corner beams, wide pine board wainscoting and flooring speak of the bounty of the Stark land. Its practical design conveys the sensible lifestyle valued by its residents. Today, the 18th century comes alive for those who visit the little red museum." 🏠

Phyllis McIntosh's story on the Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park was featured in the September/October 2006 issue.

Visiting the John Stark House

The John Stark House, located at 2000 Elm Street in Manchester, N.H., is open year-round by appointment only. Call (603) 669-8441 and leave a message. Someone will return your call and schedule your visit.