



UNCOMMON SOLDIER

By Jamie Roberts

Joseph Plumb Martin and His Memorable Diary of the Revolution



Read nearly any history of the American Revolution and you're almost sure to encounter the name Joseph Plumb Martin. A young private in the Connecticut militia, Martin was fairly well-educated and kept a journal of his service throughout the war. First published in 1830 as *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Danger and Suffering of a Revolutionary Soldier, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Incidents that Occurred Within His Own Observation*, Martin's diary was re-discovered in the 1950s. The lively, wry memoir of an Everyman soldier has become a valuable resource for historians, researchers and even reenactors, lending color and detail to bare facts.

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Eager to Serve

Martin was born in Becket, Mass., on November 21, 1760. His parents were the Yale-educated Ebenezer Martin, the sometimes unorthodox minister of the local Congregationalist Church, and Susannah Plumb, the daughter of a successful Connecticut farmer. When he was 7, Joseph was sent to live with his affluent maternal grandparents in Milford, Conn. They ensured he learned to read and write.

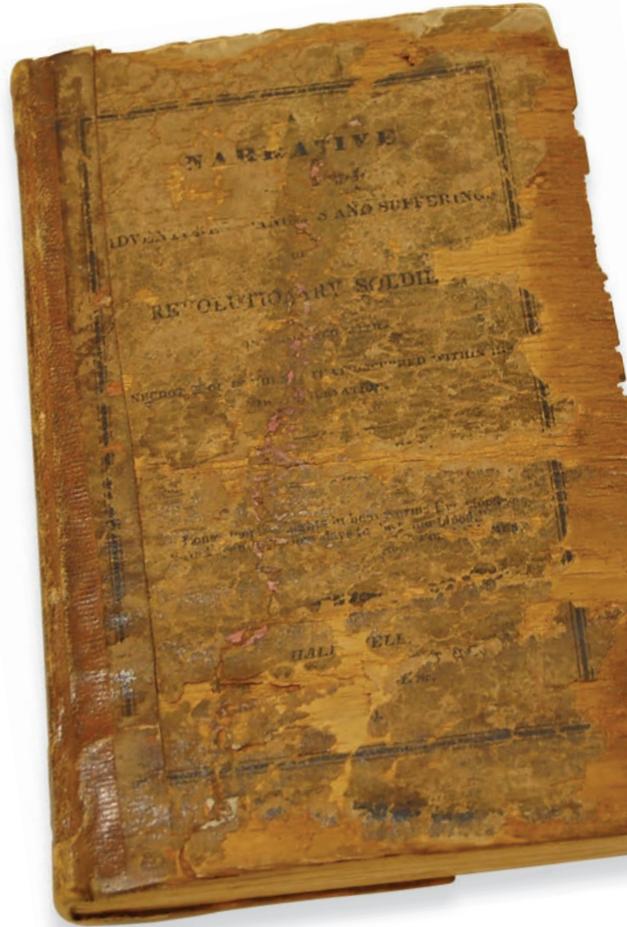
After the Battle of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, 14-year-old

Martin was eager to join the war effort, tempted by the "adventures" his hometown friends were having as well as tales of the war from American soldiers who wintered at his grandparents' home. He wrote: "*They will come swaggering back, thought I, and tell me of their exploits, all their 'hairbreadth 'scapes.' ... O, that was too much to be borne ... by me.*"

Though his grandparents were opposed to Martin enlisting because of his age, he threatened to run away and join a naval ship if he was not allowed to join. In June 1776, the 15-year-old

enlisted for a six-month engagement as a private in the Connecticut militia. "Like many soldiers in America's conflicts, the common Continental was, on average, quite young," wrote Christopher Geist for an article on the Colonial Williamsburg website. "One historian found that in nine New Jersey towns nearly 75 percent of boys who were 15 and 16 at the onset of hostilities served in the army or the militia."

Martin was assigned to the New York City area and served at the battles of Brooklyn and White Plains. His first



This first edition of Joseph Plumb Martin's diary is held at Morristown National Historic Park. The volume is unusual in that both the front and back boards are literally boards. The cover consists of paper-covered wood with a gold-tooled and quarter leather spine. There is an inscription on the title page presumably from a former owner which reads, "Charles C. Tyler Cooper, 1839."

tour of duty ended in December 1776, and he returned home just before the battles of Trenton and Princeton.

While living in Connecticut throughout the winter and spring, it wasn't long before Martin felt the urge to return to

the field of battle, and he reenlisted in the Continental Army on April 22, 1777. He signed on for the rest of the war and saw action at a number of major battles with the 17th Continental Regiment, also known as the 8th Connecticut Regiment

under the command of General James Varnum.

Martin served at Fort Mifflin from September 26 to November 16, 1777. He wrote about the weeks-long siege in unvarnished detail:

"I was soon relieved from this guard, and with those who were able, of our two regiments, sent to reinforce those in the fort, which was then besieged by the British. Here I endured hardships sufficient to kill half a dozen horses. Let the reader only consider for a moment and he will still be satisfied if not sickened. In the cold month of November, without provisions, without clothing, not a scrap of either shoes or stockings to my feet or legs, and in this condition to endure a siege in such a place as that was appalling in the highest degree."

Winters to Remember

Martin spent a long, punishing winter at Valley Forge, then served in the Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778. Valley Forge wasn't the only harsh winter encampment Martin had to withstand. Though Morristown, N.J., located between New York and Philadelphia, was a strategic location for the Continental Army to set up camp, the 1779–1780 winter season there "was among the harshest on record as 28 snowstorms turned Morristown into a frozen wasteland," according to the website for the Morristown National Historic Park. Martin wrote that his fellow soldiers were "so enfeebled from hunger and cold, as to be almost unable to perform their military duty or labor in constructing their huts."

Whether Martin wrote of his deprivations as a young soldier or remembered them as an older veteran, the severe shortages of food, clothing and firewood are rendered in stark detail:

"We are absolutely, literally starved. I do solemnly declare that I did not

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put a single morsel of victuals into my mouth for four days and as many nights, except for a little black birch bark which I gnawed off a stick of wood. I saw men roast their old shoes and eat them.” He wore “what laughingly could be called a uniform, and possessed a blanket thin enough to have straws shoot through it without discommoding the threads.”

In the summer of 1780, Martin was promoted to sergeant in the Corps of Sappers and Miners. Prior to the Siege of Yorktown, the corps was responsible for digging the entrenchments for the Continental Army, and during the battle, they cleared a field of sharpened logs so that Alexander Hamilton’s regiment could capture a vital redoubt.

Martin also witnessed Cornwallis’ surrender: “Now we concluded that we had obtained what we had taken so much pains for, for which we had encountered so many dangers, and had so anxiously wished. Before night we were informed that the British had surrendered and that the siege was ended. ... After breakfast, on the nineteenth, we were marched onto the ground and paraded on the right-hand side of the road, and the French forces on the left. We waited two or three hours before the British made their appearance. They were not always so dilatory, but they were compelled at last, by necessity, to appear, all armed, with bayonets fixed, drums beating, and faces lengthening.”

A Community Founder

Martin was released from the army in June 1783. He taught one year in upstate New York, but soon the lure of low-cost land encouraged him to settle in Maine’s frontier, where he began farming. As one of the founders of the town of Prospect, near modern-day Stockton Springs, he helped forge the community by serving as selectman, justice of the peace and town clerk, a position he held for more than 25 years. In 1794, he married Lucy Clewley, the daughter of a neighboring farmer. They had five children: Joseph, twins

‘We Were Young Men and Had Warm Hearts’

Joseph Plumb Martin’s accounts of his years at war are not overburdened with minute details of military skirmishes or written in the overblown language of his commanding officers. Instead, they’re blunt and straightforward and enlivened with the vernacular of his time, giving a sense of immediacy to events that happened more than two centuries ago.

In many of his accounts, we’re reminded just how young Martin was during his wartime service. Consider his description of his smallpox inoculation:

“I was ... ordered off, in company with about four hundred others of the Connecticut forces ... to be inoculated with the small pox. ... I had the small pox favorably as did the rest, generally; we lost none; but it was more by good luck, or rather a kind Providence interfering, than by my good conduct that I escaped with life. There was a considerable large rivulet which ran directly in front of the barracks; in this rivulet were many deep places and plenty of a species of fish called suckers. One of my room-mates, with myself, went off one day, the very day on which the pock began to turn upon me, we went up the brook until we were out of sight of the people at the barracks, when we undressed ourselves and went into the water, where it was often to our shoulders, to catch suckers by means of a fish-hook fastened to the end of a rod;—we continued at this business three or four hours, and when we came out of the water the pustules of the small pox were well cleansed.”

In other accounts, we see how much military service changed him; he is sensitive and insightful about the contradictory emotions that war can elicit. When he was officially released from the army on June 11, 1783, he lingered with his compatriots for a few extra days before leaving camp. He tenderly describes his affection for his “brothers” and sadness over the loss of comradeship:

“I confess, after all, that my anticipation of the happiness I should experience upon such a day as this, was not realized; I can assure the reader that there was as much sorrow as joy transfused on the occasion. We had lived together as a family of brothers for several years (setting aside some little family squabbles, like most other families,) had shared with each other the hardships, dangers and sufferings incident to a soldier’s life, had sympathized with each other in trouble and sickness; had assisted in bearing each other’s burdens, or strove to make them lighter by council and advice; had endeavoured to conceal each other’s faults, or make them appear in as good a light as they would bear. ... And now we were to be ... parted forever ... We were young men and had warm hearts.”



Nathan and Thomas, James Sullivan, and Susan.

In 1794, Martin began a three-year land dispute with former Revolutionary General Henry Knox, then serving as Secretary of War, who claimed that he owned Martin’s 100-acre farm in Maine. In 1797, Knox won his claim, and Martin’s farm was appraised for \$170, payable over six years either in cash or in farm products. It was an impossible sum for Martin to pay, so he wrote Knox several letters

begging to keep the land. Though Knox didn’t appear to acknowledge Martin’s entreaties, he let him remain on the land and never demanded payment. Martin farmed only eight acres, and by 1811, his farmland was cut in half. After Congress passed the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 to help needy veterans, the 58-year-old Martin appeared before the Massachusetts General Court to state his case. With his total property assessed at \$52, he was practically destitute.

Martin's pension was approved, and he received \$96 annually for the rest of his life. Many of his fellow veterans weren't immediately successful in their fight for pensions. Some scholars believe the 70-year-old Martin published the first edition of his memoirs anonymously in 1830 in order to drum

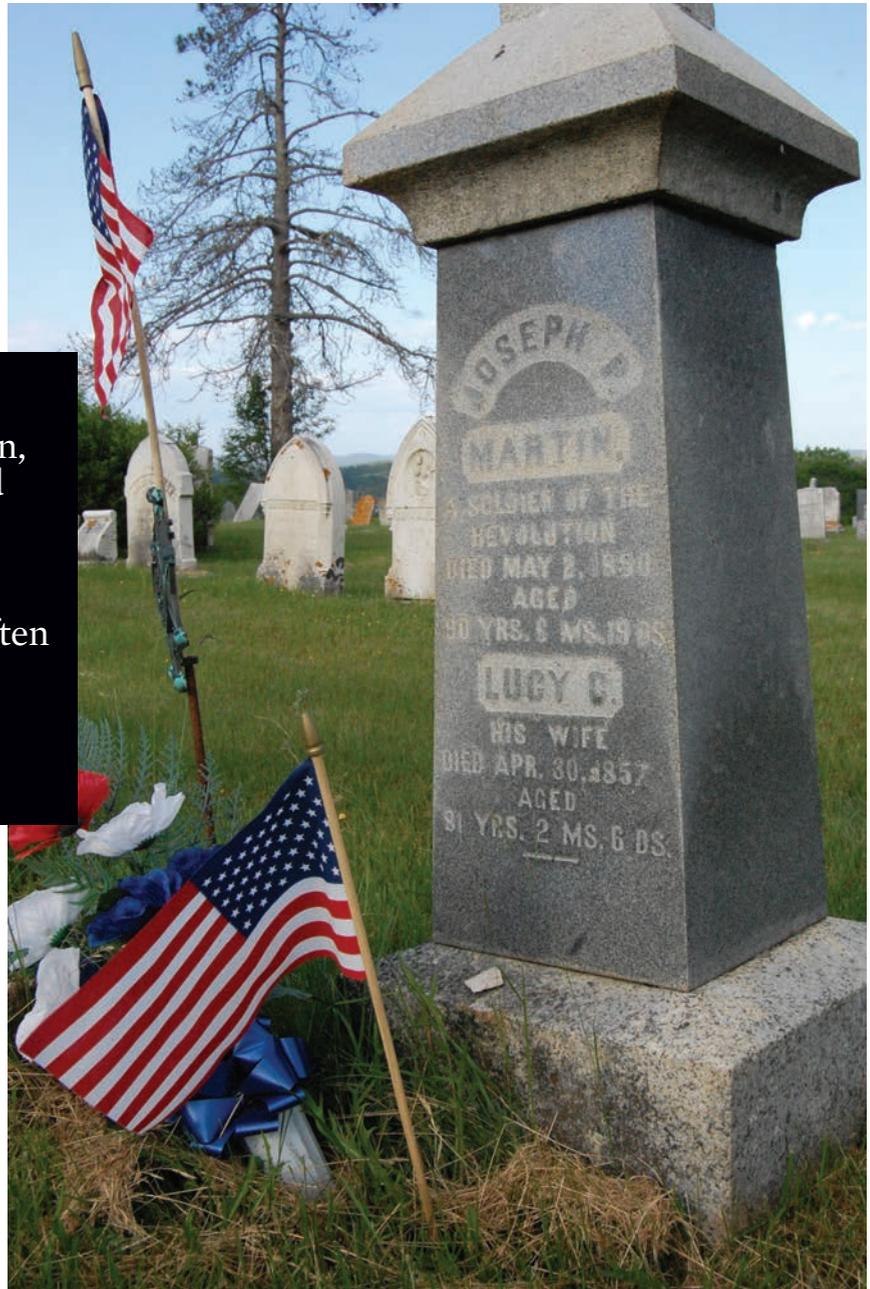
Though Martin fought under George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette and Baron von Steuben, his account is largely that of the soldiers on the front lines, giving an honest, often humorous, voice to their everyday struggles.

up support for his fellow veterans' cause, while Catherine Kaplan, in a 2006 essay in *Early American Literature*, argues that he "likely wrote his text in response to the criticism of that [1818 pension] act that swept the country in the 1820s." Sadly, the diary wasn't successful in his lifetime, and it fell into obscurity for more than 100 years.

Martin died on May 2, 1850, at the age of 89. He is buried with his wife at the Sandy Point Cemetery, outside of Stockton Springs, Maine. Later a monument was erected at his grave with a simple epitaph: "A Soldier of the Revolution."

Diary Rediscovered

Though Martin fought under George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette and Baron von Steuben, his account is largely that of the soldiers on the front lines, giving an honest, often humorous, voice to their everyday struggles. Scholars believe it's likely that Martin used the many hours of downtime between military engagements to write in his journal, and then expounded on



Joseph Plumb Martin is buried with his wife at the Sandy Point Cemetery, near Stockton Springs, Maine. A monument at his grave simply calls him "A Soldier of the Revolution."

those events later in his life. Some of the stories are somewhat melodramatic, but his eyewitness account of the events appears to be accurate. According to available records, Martin's regiment was on hand at every event he details.

In the mid-1950s, a first edition copy of the narrative was found and donated to Morristown National Historical Park. The book was published again in 1962, in an edition edited by George F. Scheer

under the title *Private Yankee Doodle*. Today an unabridged edition of *The Adventures of a Revolutionary Soldier* is now available for free on the internet, and his narrative is quoted in numerous works on the American Revolution, including those written by David McCullough and Robert Leckie. Martin is also honored with an eponymously named trail at Valley Forge National Historical Park in Pennsylvania. 🌀