

Molly Pitcher, Lost Irish American

The Revolutionary Battle of Monmouth was the longest battle of the American Revolution. It was also fought on one of the hottest days ever recorded in New Jersey, with historians believing the temperature reaching 100 degrees and with as many soldiers dying of heat exhaustion as bullets. However, the most enduring story of that battle was “Molly Pitcher”. Joseph Plumb Martin recorded that a woman whose husband belonged to the Pennsylvania artillery, had helped crew a cannon that was actively engaged in an artillery duel. At one point while, stepping forward to grab a cartridge a British cannon ball literally passed between her legs only doing damage to the bottom of her petticoat. The



“Molly Pitcher” by Don Troiani

woman laughingly remarked that it was lucky it had not been higher as it may have carried away something else, and continued to help service the gun. Another account records she acted “with as much regularity as any soldier present.” Thus Molly Pitcher passed into history and legend as an American Joan of Arc.

Who was Molly Pitcher? A “Molly” was a term of the age to describe a camp follower, not a prostitute as is often assumed, but women who chose to follow their men into the Army rather than face an uncertain future at home. They filled various roles, including being water carriers to the men and the artillery and thus “Molly Pitchers”.

After the war “Molly” and her husband returned to their home in Carlisle, Pennsylvania; an area then of predominantly Irish and Scots immigrants. So many Irish represented the State of Pennsylvania in the Revolution that the state’s units were called “The Line of Ireland”. It appears that “Molly” was illiterate, leaving others to tell her story. Contemporaries described “Molly” as speaking with an Irish Brogue. Every contemporary account used “Irish” to describe her. Her first husband named Hays appears to have died shortly after returning home and she remarried John McCauley. In 1822 she was granted a pension from the state of Pennsylvania in her own right for “services rendered”. She died in 1832.

There matters lay until the centennial of the revolution, when interest in the revolution caused historians to trace the roots of the “Molly Pitcher” legend. They knew she was married to a man named Hays at the time of Monmouth. They found a marriage certificate of a Casper Hays of Carlisle married to a Mary Ludwig. They then found an infantryman, not a gunner, at Monmouth named John Hays and concluded that Casper and John were one and the same! The inconsistencies in the evidence and the fact that by every contemporary account that “Molly” was Irish were ignored; overnight Irish “Molly Pitcher” became a German. By now the demographics of Pennsylvania had changed and local German Americans were quick to erect a monument to Mary nee Ludwig Hays and stake a further role in the American Revolution.

However, recent research has found that another Hays from Carlisle was at the battle of Monmouth, William Hays a gunner with the Pennsylvania Artillery. His enlistment papers show place of birth: Ireland. Common sense says that Gunner William Hays of Ireland is far more likely to be the husband of the woman who manned the gun at Monmouth, and Mary Ludwig has no connection to William Hays. German-American Mary Ludwig was not Molly Pitcher, but Irish Mary Hays McCauley was. Despite, this text books, TV programs and even a rest area in New Jersey depict German-American Mary Ludwig as Molly Pitcher.

The lesson for Hibernians as we enter into “Irish-American Heritage” month in March is clear: if we do not defend our heritage we can lose it to others all too eager to claim it.

Did You Know?

- ***Over a third of Washington’s Army were Irish-Americans***
- ***Over 20 of Washington’s Generals were Irish-American.***
- ***Another Irish-American Woman, Margaret Corbin helped fire cannon during the defense of Fort Mifflin and was known as “Captain Molly”.***
- ***Washington’s chief spy in the British held city of New York was Hercules Mulligan***
- ***Among the first units sent by France to aid the Americans were members of the “Irish Brigade” including the Régiment de Dillon and Régiment de Walsh***