

[Ordinary Patriots, Extraordinary Sacrifices](#)[Print](#)

Written by Becky Akers

Thursday, 02 July 2009 00:00

0

Like

0



George Washington, Nathan Hale, Thomas Paine, Sam Adams, Patrick Henry: heroes whose names will live as long as liberty does. Yet behind the Founding Fathers and their immortal writings, speeches, and deeds stand hundreds of thousands of ordinary patriots who struggled as sacrificially as their famous contemporaries — and sometimes more.

For example, Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin never bore arms on any battlefield. But the thousands of farmers who did and who survived their wounds paid for their courage the rest of their lives: the primitive state of 18th-century medicine condemned them to chronic pain, and maimed manual laborers often slipped into poverty.

Nor did the public honors and recognition that hailed Jefferson or Franklin soften such suffering. In some ways, those unknown hordes were even more dedicated to freedom than the Big Names. John Adams sacrificed for the Patriots' cause, yes, but he also reaped rewards in return. He spent years away from his family, though always by choice. And he spent those years in the exciting, sophisticated, rarefied air of Philadelphia or at the French and British courts.

Compare his autonomy and fame, the mansions housing him and the state dinners at which he regularly feasted, with the shopkeeper-turned-soldier in the militia or the Continental Army whose days passed in chilblained, hungry misery. Often, these men enjoyed few options when it came to enlisting: if they hoped to defend their homes and families from the British Army marching through their community, they grabbed a musket and joined their neighbors on the line. Once the danger passed, Continental soldiers couldn't leave as well: they must serve out terms running from several years to "the duration" lest they be whipped or even hanged for deserting. Wounds, disease, and capture menaced them all the while. By contrast, congressmen like Adams could and did leave their seats in Philadelphia mid-session. And the gravest danger Adams usually faced during his time overseas came from the European ladies who flirted with the shocked New Englander.

### Who Were They?

Who were some of the ordinary patriots sacrificing their lives, futures, and sacred honor to liberty? One was Joseph Plumb Martin, born in Connecticut to a preacher and his wife. Joseph was only 14 years old when the shooting began in 1775, but that didn't stop him from enlisting — perhaps because, as he put it, he had "collected pretty correct ideas of the contest" and was "as warm a patriot as the best of them." Nor were his scant years unusual: many Continental soldiers and officers were in their mid-to-late teens. Boys even younger occasionally infiltrated the ranks, too. Yet, like Joseph, their youth never prevented their understanding, loving and fighting for liberty.

Joseph signed on for a six months' stint "to take a priming before I took upon me the whole coat of paint for a soldier." Once he donned the coat, however, it fit him like a glove: he served with the Continental Army through the end of the war. Though he was a lowly private for much of that time, he saw many of the Revolution's most famous episodes. He starved at Valley Forge, shivered under the snows of Morristown, fought at Monmouth Courthouse, and glimpsed British Major John Andre "before his execution" for espionage, though Joseph "was on duty that day and could not attend; otherwise, I should."

Joseph was as engaging a writer as he was "warm" a patriot. Fifty years later, he published a witty and incisive memoir that chronicled the drudgery and danger, privations and pain the average Continental endured. He tells of the cold, hunger, raggedness, and fear thousands of Americans bore so that we might live free.

For example, Joseph and the army "proceeded into New Jersey for winter quarters" in December 1779. There they would battle one of the coldest winters of the 18th century, whose climate was already harsher than ours thanks to the Little Ice Age of the mid-1500s to mid-1800s. "The snow had fallen nearly a foot deep," Joseph recalled. "Now I request the reader to consider what must have been our situation at this time, naked, fatigued and starved, forced to march many a weary mile in winter, through cold and snow, to seek a situation in some (to us, unknown) wood to build us habitations to starve and suffer in.... I know how I felt at the time and I know how

I yet feel at the recollection of it; but there was no remedy, we must go through it, and we did go through it, and I am yet alive.... Sometimes we could procure an armful of buckwheat straw to lie upon, which was deemed a luxury. Provisions, as usual, took up but a small part of our time, though much of our thoughts.”

Springtime improved only the temperature, not the accommodations. Joseph recalls one night when his company “turned into a new ploughed field, and I laid down between two furrows and slept as sweet as though I had laid upon a bed of down.”

Boys in their teens are always ravenous, let alone those marching miles per day (indeed, the soldiers defined “easy marches” as “str[iking] our tents at three o’clock in the morning, march[ing] ten miles and then encamp[ing], which would be about one or two o’clock in the afternoon. Every third day we rested all day”). No wonder food and its lack obsessed them. Joseph describes a Thanksgiving at Valley Forge, one “ordered by Congress.... We had nothing to eat for two or three days previous, except what the trees of the fields and forests afforded us. But we must now have what congress said, a sumptuous Thanksgiving to close the year of high living.... Well, to add something extraordinary to our present stock of provisions, our country, ever mindful of its suffering army, opened her sympathizing heart so wide ... as to give us ... half a gill of rice [about two tablespoons] and a *tablespoonful* of vinegar!!” After devouring this “extraordinary superabundant donation,” the still-famished soldiers “were ordered out to ... hear a sermon.” Joseph was so hungry he couldn’t concentrate on the message.

The day after fighting at Monmouth, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778, Joseph and his fellows “received a gill of rum, but nothing to eat” — an imbalance that frequently beset Continental troops (and one they bore with better grace than the reverse. We might think empty soldiers would protest the lack of food rather than rum. But a paltry or missing rum ration sometimes provoked riots). Fortunately, “Providence” lent a hand when the quartermaster didn’t: Joseph was one of the oarsmen ferrying his brigade across the Hudson some days later when a “large sturgeon (a fish in which this river abounds) seven or eight feet in length ... sprang directly into the boat.” Joseph’s share when “boiled in salt and water” came to “perhaps a pound and a half, for I well remember that I was as hungry as a vulture and as empty as a blown bladder.”

### **An Army Marches on Its Stomach**

Severe hunger was a constant for most Continental soldiers. In 1775, Americans fondly hoped Canadians would join their revolt since those northern neighbors suffered the same abuses from George III’s administration as the lower 13 colonies — and a few more besides. Canada also offered a wealth of resources and more volunteers for the Continental Army. And so Colonel Benedict Arnold marched with 1,100 men from Boston to Quebec, one of Canada’s only two sizeable settlements. He would liberate Quebec from the Redcoats patrolling it while inviting its residents to fight with the Americans.

Royally commissioned maps drastically and deliberately understated the distance to Quebec to thwart anyone travelling there without the British government’s permission. Compounding the misinformation was a series of accidents that destroyed the provisions Arnold carted along for his troops. Food that should have seen them safely to their destination lasted for only the first weeks of what turned into two months on the road — or path: Arnold was following an ancient and exceedingly rugged route through Maine’s wilderness. As if that weren’t challenge enough, winter was descending.

Arnold fed his army dried peas and beef, salt pork, salted fish, and “biscuit” (i.e., hard, dry bread somewhat like very thick crackers). But once those meager, unappetizing rations ran out, the march degenerated into a survivalist’s nightmare. The noise and stench of so many humans scared away game, and though the troops occasionally stumbled across lakes with fish, the rivers along which the path meandered were usually whitewater.

Dr. Isaac Senter, 22, was the column’s surgeon. As did a few dozen of the soldiers, he kept a journal. He noted that some of the troops marching at the head of the column were soon “almost destitute of any eatable whatever, except a few candles [dipped from animal fat], which were used for supper, and breakfast next morning, by boiling them in water gruel, &c.” Incredibly, the menu would worsen: “In company was a poor dog,” Senter related, “[that] now became a prey for the sustenance of the assassins. This poor animal was instantly devoured, without leaving any vestige of the sacrifice. Nor did the shaving soap, pomatum, and even the lip salve [these cosmetics consisted mostly of lard and other edible fats], leather of their shoes, cartridge boxes, etc, share any better fate.”

Eventually, even the candles and cartridge boxes were gone. Some troops eyed the animal skins that had lain “for several days in the bottom of their boats, intended for to make them shoes or moccasins.” They burned the hair off these hides, boiled them, and drank the “juice or liquid.” “No one can imagine,” one starving soldier sighed, “who has not experienced it, the sweetness of a roasted shot-pouch to the famished appetite.”

These men, marching miles up hill and down with heavy loads, rowing and poling boats on rivers that were too shallow when they weren't perilously rapid, were ingesting perhaps a hundred calories per day, if they ate at all. Pvt. Abner Stocking noted the results: “When we arose this morning, many of the company were so weak that they could hardly stand on their legs. When we attempted to march, they reeled about like drunken men, having now been without provisions five days. As I proceeded, I passed many sitting wholly drowned in sorrow.... My heart was ready to burst and my eyes to overflow with tears when I witnessed distress which I could not relieve.”

All the starving and suffering went for naught. Half the column mutinied and returned to Massachusetts. The other half reached Quebec — where the British Army captured most of the Americans. Arnold finally retreated, his campaign and the effort to recruit Canada a heartbreaking failure.

### **On the Home Front**

Families left at home while husbands and sons went to war coped with different but daunting devils. Not only did loneliness besiege them, poverty often did, too, given the breadwinner's absence. And without male protection, women and children feared for their physical safety, especially if the household's weapons had also gone to the front.

Settlers in the “back country” were especially vulnerable. If American Indians hoped to retain their ancestral homes after the Revolution, they must side with the likely winner since its rulers would be setting terms and parceling out lands — and no one expected a mob of malnourished, half-naked rebels to conquer the renowned, almost-always-victorious British Army. That army welcomed and encouraged the native warriors “whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions,” as the Declaration of Independence put it. A wife whose husband exchanged the cornfield for a battlefield must have quailed at every birdcall and southing wind, sure that they signaled an attack.

Other women like Nancy Hart of Georgia fought the enemy — literally. Supposedly six feet tall with red hair, Nancy has attracted so many fantastic details that some historians dismiss her as a legend. Her story underscores the Revolution's internecine nature, with neighborhoods and even families warring against one another.

That was particularly true in the South, where this civil war raged brutally. Five or six Tories — Americans who were loyal to the king's political party — visited “Aunt Nancy” in her cabin. Some accounts say they were simply hungry; others contend that Nancy had helped a fellow Patriot escape the king's forces, for which these former friends intended to punish her. At any rate, Nancy cooked them a meal, then grabbed a gun as they ate and held them captive. One of her prisoners challenged her, so Nancy shot him dead. Patriots hanged the rest.

“Molly Pitcher” is another heroine whose reality historians question. No one knows whether she actually existed, albeit with the more prosaic name of Mary Ludwig Hays or Margaret Corbin, or whether she was a composite of several women. Or perhaps the troops called any female who replenished an artillery company's water during battles “Molly Pitcher.” (Eighteenth-century Americans used “Molly” generically for women and girls, similar in concept to our “Jane Doe.”) And water was essential. Loading an 18th-century cannon required shoving gunpowder down the barrel; after firing, gunners had to swab the hot barrel's interior with water to quench any leftover sparks and prevent a premature explosion while reloading. Molly Pitcher, actual or composite, and her hot, dirty, dangerous hauling of water across a battlefield were indispensable.

Joseph Martin mentions one such heroine at the Battle of Monmouth: “During the heat of the cannonade, ... a woman whose husband belonged to the artillery and who was then attached to a piece in the engagement, attended with her husband at the piece the whole time. While in the act of reaching a cartridge and having one of her feet as far before the other as she could step, a cannon shot from the enemy passed directly between her legs without doing any other damage than carrying away all the lower part of her petticoat. Looking at it with apparent unconcern, she observed that it was lucky it did not pass a little higher, for in that case it might

have carried away something else, and continued her occupation.” Joseph doesn’t identify this insouciant lass, but some historians peg her as Mary Ludwig Hays, a woman from Pennsylvania’s frontier who had joined her husband in time to participate at Monmouth. (Wives often travelled with their husbands’ companies in both the British and American armies. They cooked, cleaned, and nursed the wounded.)

Margaret Corbin, the other contender for the “real” Molly Pitcher, also hailed from Pennsylvania. And, again like Mary, she followed her husband John to war. They manned a cannon during the battle in northern Manhattan on November 16, 1776, when 600 Continental soldiers tried to defend Fort Mifflin from 4,000 Redcoats and their Hessian allies. John died at Margaret’s side, but the new and intrepid widow continued firing their gun. In fact, she didn’t quit until she herself was severely wounded. The enemy triumphed that day despite her heroism. Margaret’s devotion to liberty cost her dearly: not only did she lose her husband, her wound permanently disabled her. She lived on charity until her death at age 49.

Most of us can only envy Margaret’s privilege of blasting away at tyrants. But we can all mimic Peter van Schaack. A New Yorker who studied Locke, Montesquieu, Pufendorf, and other writers favored by the revolutionaries, he was loyal to liberty alone, not to a political party or to mere men.

Van Schaack graduated from King’s College (now Columbia University) in 1765 and founded a law school. His readings in political philosophy persuaded him that no man should force another to his opinion. Certainly George III was guilty of compelling folks to obey his whims — but so were the Patriots protesting his tyranny. The king might fine or imprison colonists who refused to transport their molasses and rum in high-priced British ships, but Patriots often bullied, dispossessed, whipped, and tarred and feathered colonists who refused to damn the king. Men like van Schaack argued that while the king might be despotic, so were the Patriots forcing all Americans to stand against him. The entire debate was “too serious a matter, implicitly to yield to the authority of any character, however respectable,” he wrote. “Every man must exercise his own reason, and judge for himself.” Van Schaack asked the Patriots endorsing compulsion against their neighbors, “Who has constituted you the judge of the rule of right for me, and what claim have you to infallibility?... Do you not differ in opinion as much from me as I do from you, and have I not as much right to blame you as you have me for this difference?” Van Schaack’s autonomy, his refusal to accept the dictates of anyone, even those who caterwauled about liberty, branded him a Loyalist for both contemporaries and historians.

We should cultivate van Schaack’s integrity and independence. Too many organizations and individuals insist they love liberty while advocating measures opposed to its fundamental tenet: that no man has the right to initiate force against others, however many badges he wears, no matter how dire the crisis from which he claims to be saving us. Conservative, libertarian, or free-market think tanks that defend the torture of terrorists are as wrongheaded as the Patriots tarring and feathering Loyalists. Politicians who prolong and protect Social Security’s scam, bail out corporations, or claim to create jobs by stealing money from taxpayers destroy liberty, even if they prattle about small government while committing their crimes. Van Schaack would refute both think tanks and politicians. Nor would their rhetoric in favor of freedom blind him to their sins against it.

After the Redcoats captured him in Quebec, Abner Stocking wrote that the soldiers guarding him and his fellows “appeared to consider us as deluded by the fascinating [sic] sound of liberty and freedom.” May liberty, but never politicians or parties, delude us, too.