

Molly Pitcher: Ordinary Yet Extraordinary

The whizzing of cannonballs. The firing of guns. The moaning of patriots. The impassioned fighting of 11,000 Americans against 10,000 British soldiers. This was the Battle of Monmouth.¹ With a heat index over 110 degrees Fahrenheit, the day-long battle in June, 1778 was unbearable; some soldiers passed out, or even died, from heat exhaustion.² Over this cacophonous din of cannon fodder came the patriots' urgent pleas yelling "Molly, Pitcher! Molly, PITCHER!" as without the assistance of courageous women bringing water to the troops, the soldiers would collapse and the cannons would not fire. Water was critical to the success of the battle--both to quench the thirst of battle-weary soldiers and to operate the cannons--and these women ventured throughout the battlefield, carrying water to the soldiers while risking their lives.³

A specific individual named Molly Pitcher likely never existed; rather, history suggests that thousands of Molly Pitchers supported the American cause.⁴ Since Mary and Margaret were incredibly common names (nearly one in four English women were named Mary), and Molly is a common nickname of Mary, the name "Molly" was routinely heard requesting water.⁵ These dedicated women gradually become generically known as Molly Pitcher, similar to "G.I. Joe" or "Rosie the Riveter."⁶ Although many women served as Molly Pitchers, each demonstrated courage, patriotism, and love of country.

Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley is one of the most famous Molly Pitchers.⁷ She wintered at Valley Forge from 1777-1778, and carried water to soldiers at the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778.⁸ During the height of the Battle, Mary's husband, William Hays, was shot and incapacitated.⁹ Mary took her husband's place at the artillery, swabbing the cannon and dealing heavy casualties to the British.¹⁰ Witnessing Mary's courageous efforts on the battlefield,

¹ William Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*. Ed. William Starr Myers (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1927).

² Tom Moore, "The Battle of Monmouth Featured Deadly Heat and Molly Pitcher," *Weather Concierge*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.weatherconciierge.com/the-battle-of-monmouth-features-deadly-heat-and-molly-pitcher/>.

³ Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

⁴ Emily J. Teipe, "Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?," *National Archives Prologue Magazine*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1999), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/pitcher.html>.

⁵ Historical popularity (frequency) of the name Mary, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.galbithink.org/sense-s8.htm>.

⁶ Emily J. Tiepe, "Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?," *National Archives Prologue Magazine*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1999) <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/pitcher.html>.

⁷ "Molly Pitcher." U.S. History.org, December 27, 2021. <https://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/youasked/070.htm>

⁸ "Molly Pitcher," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Molly-Pitcher>.

⁹ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*. ed. James Kirby Martin (St. James, N.Y.: Brandywine Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Cassandra Good, "Molly Pitcher, the Most Famous American Hero Who Never Existed," *Smithsonian Magazine*, (March 17, 2021).

Commander Washington promoted her to "Sergeant Molly," although no official record exists of that commendation.¹¹ Later, Mary received a pension,¹² a marker at the Monmouth battlefield, and a monument at her gravesite.¹³

Molly Pitcher represents the common man, or rather woman, who selflessly chose to support the American cause by engaging in various acts to support the Revolution. Women provided first aid, washed clothes, tended animals, guarded supplies, gave military information, sewed uniforms, ferried water, and even bore arms.¹⁴ It is estimated that approximately 4,000 wives alone served alongside their husbands during the Revolutionary War.¹⁵ These women risked their own lives to support the American cause. Without instruction, order, remuneration, compensation, recognition or praise, Molly Pitcher transcended social customs and societal norms to serve our country. And these ordinary people, who do something extraordinary, deserve our appreciation. While all of the names and specific contributions of the innumerable Molly Pitchers across the colonies will never be known, we nevertheless honor Molly's selfless actions over 200 years ago. By answering the call of duty, this iconic heroine represents the significant contributions of women, largely unreported and undocumented, in the American Revolution and the enduring place in history Molly Pitcher has earned in representing the American woman's indomitable wartime spirit.

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¹¹ Emily J. Teipe, "Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?" *National Archives Prologue Magazine*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Summer 1999), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/pitcher.html>.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ "Molly Pitcher," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Molly-Pitcher>.

¹⁴ Robert M. Dunkerly, "8 Fast Facts About Camp Followers," *Journal of the American Revolution*, (April 2, 2014).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

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