

Hello and welcome to the first-ever episode of World Herstory, the podcast that discovers the lives and legacies of lesser-known, badass women from around the world and throughout history. I'm your host, Tabitha Bear, a traveling multimedia specialist with a passion for discovering the hidden tales of the amazing women who have helped shape our lives today.

In this week's episode, we're diving headfirst into the American Revolutionary War - but not in the way you might expect. We're not talking about the old white men in powdered wigs and buckled high heels, but through the roles of the unsung heroines who were vital in the fight for American independence.

We're going to delve into the Battle of Fort Mifflin, explore the emergence of American Feminism and how women challenged the societal norm, and most importantly, shed light on the incredible story of Margaret Cochran Corbin - the first woman to receive a military pension from the US.

### **American Revolutionary War & Women's Roles (Unspoken)**

The American Revolutionary War, also known as the American War for Independence, was fought from 1775 to 1783. It began with tensions between Great Britain and its American colonies over issues of taxation and representation, and quickly escalated into a full-scale military conflict.

At the time of the war, it was known to the colonists as The Cause, and everything they did was in pursuit of equality and liberty and the formation of a new government that represented the American population.

There were several battles during the revolution that had a significant impact on morale and the war's trajectory.

- The Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775 - although the British ultimately won this battle, it was a turning point for the Americans. They proved they were capable of standing their ground against the might of the British army.
- The Battle of Saratoga in 1777 - not only did the Americans defeat the British and uplift Patriot morale, it continued the hope for independence and secured foreign support needed to win the war. This is where the French entered the conflict, aiding the Patriots' cause.
- The Battle of Monmouth in 1778 - so significant as it showcased George Washington's leadership who rallied his troops and prevented a British victory.

- The Battle of Cowpens in 1781 - Part 1 of the end. This battle was fantastically crucial because it ended royal authority in North Carolina and delayed a British invasion of the south.
- The Battle of Yorktown in 1781 - Part 2 of the end. It was the final major engagement of the war, and it ended in an American victory that forced the British to surrender and led to the recognition of American independence.

Women played a crucial role in the fight for independence, and their contributions helped to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society. Throughout the war, they served as Camp Followers - which were nurses, cooks, laundresses, and some even took up arms or worked as spies. However, their efforts were often overlooked or dismissed and rarely valued.

Women's rights weren't a major concern during the overall fight for independence, but women were still advocating for them. Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams, wrote letters to her husband urging him to "remember the ladies" in the formation of the new government.

During this period, women were excluded from the political process and not allowed to serve in the military. Roles were strictly traditional, caring for families and households. They did not have the right to property or the right to vote.

Socially and culturally, women were seen as inferior to men and expected to be subservient and obedient to the male authority. Often, they were subjected to physical and emotional abuse by their husbands or other male family members.

Women still resisted through their involvement in the early feminist movement. This movement was led primarily from upper class women who had the education and social platform to make their voices heard.

They were involved in the boycott of British goods and household goods. They formed their own committees to organize boycotts and spread information about the movement. They created patriotic organizations to support the war effort, such as the Daughters of Liberty.

The Daughters of Liberty was founded by Esther Deberdt Reed, who wrote *The Sentiments of an American Woman*. *The Sentiments of an American Woman* encouraged aggressive feminism and patriotism to The Cause and was a call for women to take up political action. The DOL helped organize boycotts, manufactured goods that were in short supply and even engaged in public protests.

Women also created education societies. Education was largely reserved for men, some women saw the importance of education for their own empowerment and founded societies to provide education to girls and women. Judith Sargent Murray was a huge driver behind women's education and women's rights and consistently distributed literature about it.

Camp Followers were a form of feminism, although it wasn't driven by advocates and pamphlets and protests. It was a silent change that challenged the traditional roles of women while supporting soldiers. While there were more modest roles, such as cooking and cleaning, they also learned to drive, how to fire cannons, and assisted with various support roles during battle. They demonstrated their power through contributions that went beyond the roles of wife and mother.

The perception of these women was awful, however. They were considered dirty drunks, and a lot of people felt like they did nothing for the war effort. I think this initial perception comes from the fact that women were given terrible rations, a crappy place to sleep, and had to face some harsh realities with being around ongoing battles. While I couldn't find anything definitive in my research, I'm sure it goes without saying that these women more than likely faced their fair share of sexual harassment as well.

George Washington tried to limit the number of Camp Followers, but was met with the issue that, as it turns out, the women were helpful. In fact, they were a downright necessity. Their very presence prevented the soldiers from deserting. So eventually, GW left it alone.

Because of the amount of women that were part of the everyday routine of life in battle, it was very easy for women to act as spies, for either the Patriots or British. They would often, and easily, enter behind enemy lines, gain information about artillery, troops, and potential deployment plans, then slip back to their lives just as easily.

Now, what about the women who stayed home while their patriarch went off to war? They had the ability to step into the head of household role. They took over the home business, helped with trading goods, managed the finances, created literature about their experiences, and coordinated with other women who were in similar situations.

In regard to African American women, free women contributed similarly to the war effort as white women. The life of a Camp Follower, seamstresses for uniforms, spies, general laborers and various support roles. However, they were paid far less than white women - if at all - and faced far more abuse and discrimination.

Enslaved women worked on plantations that supplied food to colonial forces. With the British Empire promising freedom in exchange for services to the Loyalist cause, there were many who spied on their white households to provide information to the British.

Enslaved women were forced to work in grueling conditions, working long hours in physically demanding jobs and faced sexual exploitation along with other forms of physical and emotional abuse from their “masters”.

Indigenous women had their contributing roles as well, for both the British and Patriots sides. Some women served as guides, using their knowledge of the local terrain to help military forces navigate through this developing frontier. Others served as translators and helped facilitate communication between different groups of people who spoke different languages and dialects.

They were crucial within their own communities, especially since matriarchal communities existed in the Indigenous scope. They served as leaders, healers, and providers of essential resources. Their knowledge of the local environment was used to sustain their communities during times of war and conflict.

Unfortunately, the trend continues that Indigenous women also experienced violence, sexual exploitation, and displacement during the American Revolutionary War. Indigenous communities were targeted by both American and British troops, and women and children were often the primary victims of these attacks.

Whether through art, or challenging societal norms, or military support and efforts, women as leaders and feminist icons began to emerge. Nancy Ward, Abigail Adams, Judith Sargent Murray, Mercy Otis Warren, and Phillis Wheatley, to name a few.

The American Revolutionary War helped lay the foundation for the American Feminist and started to form a new perspective on art, literature, politics, human rights, and society as a whole.

From a human rights perspective, the British promised the life of freedom to any African American who joined the frontlines. It's estimated that 20,000 African Americans joined the British cause.

The Patriots began to offer freedom to the enslaved population as well, and its estimated about 5,000 - 8,000 African Americans joined the Patriot cause.

What is a shame, is that promising freedom to the enslaved was used as a propaganda tool from both sides, yet in all this fighting for independence and freedom and equality - African Americans and the Indigenous were still left out of the paperwork.

### **Battle of Fort Washington and Women's Contributions (Unspoken)**

Although Fort Washington wasn't previously discussed as a significant battle in the overall war for independence, the battle itself is important because it's where our woman of the hour, Margaret, fought.

Fort Washington was built on the island's highest point, known today as Washington Heights in Manhattan. The specific location is now Bennett Park. The ruins of the fort are scattered around.

The goal of Fort Washington, along with Fort Lee in New Jersey, was to have control of the Hudson River and take down any enemy ships that were trying to utilize the river to advance to upstate New York.

Fort Washington was under the command of Colonel Robert Magaw and contained about 3000 troops. On November 2, 1776, William Demont, one of Magaw's officers and sympathizer to the British, defected from the Continental Army and gave Lieutenant General William Howe detailed plans of the fortification and troop placement.

Howe had sent one ship up the Hudson on November 15, 1776 telling Magaw to surrender. Magaw is known to have said he would defend the fort down to the "last extremity".

Fort Washington was not in a good place from a military support perspective. George Washington was on the tail-end of his failed New York campaign, the British had control of Manhattan with the exception of Fort Washington. And the British also had support from Hessian troops under the command of Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen.

At this point, there were about 3,000 Patriot troops versus 8,000 British and Hessian troops.

Fort Washington was undermanned, and had a few design flaws that left it vulnerable because it was built with such haste. One of the major issues is that it didn't have proper storage and couldn't hold the ammunition and food and water supplies it needed to keep the fortification 100% employed.

George Washington planned to surrender the fort, Magaw refused, and because Washington was attempting to reallocate troops elsewhere, he wasn't planning on sending more. So there is this whirlwind of stuff happening with the Continental Army as they try to rebalance from their losses.

You have Demont who has defected with plans of the fortification to the British, and the British and Hessians have everything they need to plan out their attack and take control of the fort.

The Americans are focusing on one thing, the British another.

Now - before we continue any further - let's finally introduce the life of our girl, Margaret Cochran Corbin.

### **Margaret's Life and the Battle of Fort Washington (Unspoken)**

Margaret was born in 1751, and in the first few years of her life, she and her brother were sent to live with an uncle because of the start of the French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years War.

During the Seven Years War, Indigenous communities allied with the French in a "Land Back" initiative and raids were commonplace. Margaret's father was killed in a raid, and her mother was taken captive never to be seen again.

And this is the introduction to Margaret's life. War and living as a colonist in a somewhat new and still developing frontier.

The important perspective we're going to take away from the Seven Years War for the sake of this podcast is that it was ultimately a British victory, expelling the French from North America. And, because the British empire gained so much territory from it, there was the subsequent plan for westward expansion, yet also concerns of increased taxation from the Crown.

There was an unease in the colonies during Margaret's most impressionable years. By the time she was 20, in 1771, the Stamp Act, Sugar Act, Townshend Acts, and Intolerable Acts had been passed and were attempted to be enforced on the colonies. These four acts were the driving force behind Patriotism and no taxation without representation.

And because of the upheaval these taxes caused in the colonies, the British parliament tried harder to keep the colonists under control by increasing the military presence and making more decisions about the colonists' way of life.

It also came to a ridiculous point with the taxes imposed by the British parliament in the sense that it cost more to attempt to collect the taxes than the amount of money they actually collected from the taxes. When it came to the decisions Parliament was making, they were literally hemorrhaging money.

While there isn't much about Margaret in regard to her impressionable years, based on everything going on, it's very easy to figure out her experiences and upbringing based on the general history of the colonies at that time.

Margaret married a farmer named John Corbin, and in 1775, when she was 24, Pennsylvania recruited soldiers for the Continental Army. Margaret chose to follow her husband and became a Camp Follower and Fort Washington was where he was stationed.

Margaret was nicknamed 'Captain Molly' and cared for the wounded, brought soldiers on the front lines water, and was often found by her husband's side where he loaded the cannons.

Now, let's take a minute to go ahead and full circle on everything we've been talking about.

Margaret was a Camp Follower for about a year at Fort Washington where her husband was stationed, manning the cannons. William Demont defected on November 2, 1776 to deliver details of the fortification to the British. There are less than 3,000 troops stationed at Fort Washington versus the brewing 8,000 British and Hessian troops.

Magaw refused Washington's order to surrender the fort and reallocate the troops. As of November 15, 1776, he told the British he would defend the fort to the "last extremity".

And here we are, the morning of November 16, 1776 - British and Hessian troops were on the move to converge and surround Fort Washington.

Starting at 7 AM, Hessian guns opened fire on the Americans, the British frigate HMS Pearl fired at American entrenchments. South of the fort, artillery fired upon the fort itself.

By noon, the Hessians advanced, and the British troops charged up the hillside, dispersing Americans.

To the north, Hessians moved up the steep hillside and faced no resistance from the Americans - there was nobody there. And were able to quickly advance towards the fort, although they faced some resistance from the swamps and woods of mother nature.

John Corbin was in charge of firing his cannon at the top of the ridge. Margaret, as usual, was by his side.

John Corbin was killed in action, in front of Margaret, leaving the cannon unmanned.

Margaret immediately took charge and started to load the cannon and fire. It was said, she fired with such a fatal accuracy that Hessian and British troops started to aim for her specifically because she caused quite the inconvenience to the advancement of nearby enemy troops.

Margaret is shot in the left arm, her chest, and jaw and yet her cannon is still the last to quiet during the Battle of Fort Washington.

By 3 PM, the Hessian troops that faced no American resistance from the north reached the fort, the British were closing in from the south and east. Magaw surrendered the fort, and by 4 PM, the British flag waved above Fort Washington.

Margaret was found in critical condition by her cannon, and taken prisoner by the British with the rest of the surviving troops. Of the 2800 American troops taken prisoner, marched through the streets of New York City in a shaming parade, and held captive on British ships for a year - 2,000 died from starvation and disease. 800 were released in a prisoner exchange.

Margaret was sent to the Corps of Invalids at West Point shortly after the British found her. Her left arm was paralyzed.

At West Point, she continued to care for the wounded, even though she could barely take care of herself. Between the relationships she developed with the soldiers she was caring for, and her story of bravery on the frontlines, her situation made its way to the Continental Congress.

Men, mostly soldiers, advocated for their dearest Captain Molly - somebody has to do something for this poor woman injured in battle!

July 6 1779, about three years later, the Continental Congress awarded her a lifelong military pension. She is the first woman to receive a military pension from the US government. It was worth half of a man's.



She still cared for the wounded at West Point.

Margaret had few friends, preferred the company of soldiers, was a drunk, and had a very rough-around-the-edges personality. From losing her parents in such a violent way at a young age, to losing her husband to war right before her eyes, it's no wonder she suffered a great deal of trauma.

She was also in a great deal of pain because of her injuries sustained. She had difficulty eating and dressing herself and the general duress of living was exhausting.

General Henry Knox himself supplied her with an aid to help her in her final years. She was given an additional allowance for clothing and rum, and was formally discharged in 1783.

Margaret died in 1800 at the age of 49.

### **Margaret's Legacy and the Folklore of Molly Pitcher (Unspoken)**

In 1926, the Daughters of the Revolution sought to verify Margaret's record of service.

The Daughters of the Revolution is a lineage-based organization that was founded in 1890. Its members are descendants of individuals who contributed to The Cause of American Independence during the Revolutionary War. The organization's mission is to promote historic preservation, education, and patriotism.

Since its foundation, the Daughters of the Revolution has been involved with preserving historic sites and documentation, supporting education initiatives such as scholarships for students, and promoting literacy.

The DAR was able to verify her record and Margaret was interred with full military honors at West Point Cemetery - the only woman, and one of the two Revolutionary War soldiers to be buried there.

It was discovered, unfortunately, in the modest grave thought to be Margaret's, was actually that of an unknown male. Her remains have yet to be discovered.

In 1976, women joined the Corps of Cadets, establishing the first class of women at the United States Military Academy. Simultaneously, West Point formed the Margaret Corbin Forum to

educate the Corps on women's roles in the military and to resolve issues integrating women into the academy.

Each spring, the New York State Officer's Club honors Margaret with a memorial and wreath-laying at her monument.

Every year, the Daughters of the Revolution present the Margaret Cochran Corbin award to honor both Margaret and a contemporary woman who carries on her spirit through military service.

The most recent recipient of the award was Colonel Melissa Givens. According to the DAR website, Col. Givens is a retired Army doctor and former program director for the Carl R. Darnall Emergency Medicine Residency and EM-PA Fellowship. Col. Givens most recently mobilized a temporary hospital to treat Covid-19 patients. She is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. She currently serves as faculty in the department of military and emergency medicine at USUHS - which is Uniformed Services University Health Services.

There is some lore behind Margaret, and between her and Mary Ludwig Hays, they are interchangeably referred to as Molly Pitcher. Mary Ludwig Hays had a very similar journey. Her husband was also incapacitated while on duty, and she took over firing his cannon.

Molly Pitcher isn't a real person, but is the equivalent of Rosie the Riveter for the American Revolutionary War. She is inspired by Margaret Cochran Corbin and Mary Ludwig Hays.

### **Conclusion (Unspoken)**

The American Revolutionary War really was this amazing foundation for women suffragettes and the anti-slavery movement. You have colonists who are speaking and fighting for freedoms, human rights, and the need to self-govern. They wanted the right to liberties and the pursuit of happiness, yet there are colonies that thrive economically on enslaving people and have a strict patriarchal society - it just didn't make any sense.

Throughout the war, women played a critical role in the fight for independence. From nurses to spies to soldiers, women contributed in ways that were often overlooked or dismissed. After Margaret received her military pension, hundreds of women received military pensions from their states or the US. Unfortunately, it is unknown exactly who and how many because those records are lost, destroyed, or incomplete. Regardless of the poor documentation, the effort

from women was vital to the Patriot cause and helped pave the way for greater opportunities for women in American society.

An immediate example of this, is the shift in attitudes towards women. They proved they were capable and intelligent beings. In some states, some women were granted limited voting rights in local elections, and in others, they were allowed to own property or engage in business.

However, it's important to note that these new opportunities were not universal or guaranteed. Women's rights and opportunities varied greatly depending on factors such as race, class, and location. For example, African American women faced significant barriers to political participation due to systemic racism and discrimination. Which is something still seen today in 2023.

Beyond its impact on the US, the American Revolutionary War had global implications and inspired similar movements, such as the French Revolution in 1789 and the Haitian Revolution in 1791. As time went on, there was a domino effect trickling throughout history of people fighting for equality, equity, and freedom. The American War for Independence marked the beginning of a new era of global politics.

I do believe we've reached the end of our very first episode.

We've explored the Revolutionary War, women's roles and the start of American Feminism, the Battle of Fort Mifflin, and of course, we've learned about Margaret Corbin's life and legacy. She was a true heroine of the war whose bravery and sacrifice continues to inspire many.

Thank you for listening in - I'm Tabitha Bear and this is World Herstory - don't forget to leave a stellar review and subscribe to us on your favorite podcasting platform.