

Mrs. Warner's Winter Warfare *A Memento of Arnold's Campaign*

By Dr. Curtis Carroll Davis

If a woman were to defend the cause of her sex, she might address him [a man] in the following manner: . . . "When you offer your blood to the state think that it is ours. In giving it our sons and our husbands we give more than ourselves. You can only die on the field of battle, but we have the misfortune to survive those whom we love most. Alas! while your ambitious vanity is unceasingly laboring to cover the earth with statues, with monuments, and with inscriptions to eternize, if possible your names, and give yourselves an existence, when this body is no more, why must we be condemned to live and to die unknown?"

Anon., "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex,"
Pennsylvania Magazine, August 1775

Whether or not those sentiments derived from the pen of Thomas Paine, they appeared in the columns of his magazine and contain some of his language.¹ The essay has been termed the earliest plea for woman published in the American colonies. Certainly the Great Agitator would have been impressed by the woman's story that follows here, and not merely because he himself was a sometime resident of Lancaster.

In June 1775 the Continental Congress resolved to invade and annex Canada, and turn it into a "fourteenth colony." By mid-November the troops of Brigadier General Richard Montgomery had taken Montreal, and the concept of the operation – to employ a modern phrase – seemed to be proving itself. But

off there farther north was still Quebec, capital of the province, a flourishing little city of some fifteen hundred houses, well fortified.

To augment Montgomery's advance, therefore, General Washington decided to unleash a parallel invasion force from the eastward. As its commander he appointed Connecticut-born Benedict Arnold — ex-druggist, ship merchant, and horse trader — an audacious, inspirational careerist who, as a colonel of Massachusetts militia, had assisted Ethan Allen in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in early May.

On September 5th, accordingly, General Orders were issued for the expedition and a call sent forth as well for volunteers to assemble at Cambridge, opposite Boston. Eventually some eleven hundred men had responded from as far afield as Virginia. From southeastern Pennsylvania came two companies of riflemen under Captains William Hendricks and Matthew Smith. A volunteer in Smith's company was Private James Warner, from the Lancaster area. Warner had just gotten married to a girl named Jemima, and she elected to make the long journey north with her husband. There was only one other woman attached to these Pennsylvania units, the wife of a Sergeant Grier.

Traversing the three hundred and sixty-odd miles to Massachusetts colony, the Pennsylvania marksmen presently spearheaded Arnold's troops as they departed from Cambridge on September 13th, 1775. On the nineteenth the soldiers boarded transports at Newburyport and sailed to Gardinerstown, now Pittston, on the Kennebec River, Maine, where they arrived on the twenty-second. On September 25th, from Fort Western, now Augusta, the expedition started up the Kennebec in bateaux, those flat-bottomed boats designed for riverine usage. From Fort Western to Quebec, via the Chaudière ("boiling") River, lay three hundred and fifty miles of what Surgeon Isaac Senter labelled "a direful howling wilderness not describable."²

Along about now, if not before, certain misgivings as to the wisdom of the over-all strategy must have been nagging at the minds of some of the expedition's leaders. For one thing, the bateaux had not only been constructed of green lumber but were also in many cases poorly fashioned; they were, moreover, much too cumbersome to face the rapids and portages that lay ahead. For another thing, Colonel Arnold had miscalculated the length of the march, and food supplies began inexorably to dwindle. Also, the weather turned mean: heavy rains plagued the troops' passage, and on October 21st a hurricane of historic proportions flayed the invaders.

Nor were all of those troops the foresters and watermen originally solicited. Too many were just farm boys; too many as well were impressed non-volunteers. In sum, Arnold's foray into Canada was from its inception accursed. Marvellously, they made it to Quebec (about half of them) by December 31st, and badly frightened that stronghold. But they failed to take it. And they lost

one of their commanders, Arnold, to a crippling wound and the other, General Montgomery, to a killing wound. Over half their assaulting force was captured. A gloriously foolhardy enterprise sputtered to its collapse. And young Jemima Warner, a tiny statistic against that imperial backdrop, had suffered through it all.

The reason we know this is that one of James Warner's fellow soldiers and *Landsman*., a youth named John Henry, was among those keeping a diary of events. Here is the pertinent entry in Henry's account:

November 1st, [1775]. This morning, breakfasting on our bleary, we took up the line of march through a flat and boggy ground. About ten o'clock A.M., we arrived by a narrow neck of land at a marsh which was appalling. It was three-fourths of a mile over, and covered by a coat of ice, half an inch thick. Here [Lt. Michael] Simpson concluded to halt a short time for the stragglers or maimed of Hendricks's and Smith's companies to come up. There were two women attached to those companies, who arrived before we commenced the march. One was the wife of Sergeant Grier, a large, virtuous and respectable woman. The other³ was the wife of a private of our company, a man who lagged upon every occasion. These women being arrived, it was presumed that all our party were up. We were on the point of entering the marsh, when some one cried out, "Warner is not here." Another said he had "sat down sick under a tree, a few miles back." His wife begging us to wait a short time, with tears of affection in her eyes, ran back to her husband. We tarried an hour. They came not.⁴

The location was some fifty miles north of Lake Magantic, in southern Quebec. There Arnold's main force, half-starved, shivering, snow-encrusted, languished along the lake's outlet, the Chaudière. Some of the soldiers had been reduced to devouring a pet dog. Others gobbled up shaving soap, lip salve, and shoe leather.

When, many years later, John Henry — now a respected jurist in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania — decided to revise and expand his original jottings on the subject of "this dolorous and dreadful march," he saw fit to append the particulars that follow about the Warners:

The fate of James Warner, among others, was really lamentable. He was young, handsome in appearance, not more than twenty-five years of age; he was athletic and seemed to surpass in bodily strength. Yet withal he was a dolt. His wife was beautiful, though coarse in manners. The husband on the other hand, was a poor devil, constantly out of view, or in the background of the picture.

We heard nothing of them after entering the marsh, and until a month had elapsed at Quebec. In December [1775] the wife or widow of poor James Warner, came to our quarters on the Low-grounds, bearing her husband's rifle, his powderhorn and pouch. She appeared fresh and rosy as ever. This arose from the religious and gratuitous spirit of the Canadians.

The story Mrs. Jemima Warner told, was extremely affecting, and may

be worth remembering, as it is something like a sample of the whole of our distresses and intolerable disasters.

The husband was a great eater. His stores of provisions after the partition, at the head of the Chaudière, were in a little time consumed. The consummate wife ran back from the marsh, and found her beloved husband sitting at the foot of a tree, where he said he was determined to die.

The tender-hearted woman attended her ill-fated husband several days, urging his march forward; he again sat down. Finding all her solicitations could not induce him to rise, she left him, having placed all the bread in her possession between his legs with a canteen of water. She bore his arms and ammunition to Quebec, where she recounted the story. The nephew of Natanis [a neutral Indian], afterwards at Quebec, confirmed the relation of this good woman. For when going up, and returning down the river with our inestimable friend M'Clelland [Lt. John McClellan], she urged them, suffused in tears, to take her husband on board. They were necessarily deaf to her entreaties. Thus perished this unfortunate man at a period of his age when the bodily powers are generally in their full perfection. He and many others who died in the wilderness, lost their lives by an inconsiderate gluttony. They ate as much at a meal as ought to have been in our circumstances the provision of four days, and a march of one hundred miles. Young men without knowledge or previous experience are very difficult to govern by sage advice, when the rage of hunger assails.⁵

Matthew Smith was the only captain under Arnold to escape capture by the British. Surviving troops from the other companies, less than a hundred, assembled under his leadership, and in due course made the hang-dog trek back south to their homeland. Did Jemima Warner go with them?

Some students of this episode say no, that both she and Mrs. Grier died "violent deaths at Quebec."⁶ Their opinion is based on the statements jotted down by another journal-keeper on the expedition, a fifer from Newburyport named Caleb Haskell. On December 11th, 1775, Haskell wrote: "Today we had a man wounded and a woman killed by a shot from the city."⁷ And the following spring he noted. April 18th, 1776, ". . . a woman belonging to the Pennsylvania troops was killed today by accident — a soldier carelessly snapping his musket which proved to be loaded."⁸ So that takes care of our two girls.

But does it? Observe that Haskell in his second entry is careful to specify that it was a *Pennsylvania* woman who had been killed. Surely, given the admiration that focussed on Jemima Warner for her effort to salvage her husband, had she been the earlier victim in December, the fifer would have been equally specific. Is it not more plausible to assume that the "woman belonging to the Pennsylvania troops" was Sergeant Grier's wife and that the December casualty was some camp-follower or washerwoman attracted to the American camp from the Quebec countryside?⁹ What renders this speculation the more beguiling is a latter-day, isolated fact: on January 9th, 1783, at the old Swedes Church in south Philadelphia, a cooper named Jacob Knorr got married. And his bride was named Jemima Warner.¹⁰

So there a person thus named stands silhouetted in history, on the fringe of great events. To most inquirers she is a mere statistic.¹¹ To one, at least, she

is "a long-neglected heroine."¹² As for ourselves, we are content to believe that the hand Jacob Knorr took in marriage was that of *our* Jemima and that what he got for popping the question was a strong-willed, firm-fibred country lass who, early on, had stirred her stumps and gone forth to see something of the world. □

Notes

1. Thomas Paine; *The Complete Writings* . . . , ed. Philip S. Foner (2 vols, New York: Citadel Press [1945] II, 37-38.

2. Senter, *Journal . . . in September 1775* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1846), pp. 15, 22. Pamphlet. "The hardest march of the war," agrees Charles Royster in his *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press [1979] p. 24.

3. A third was the half-breed girl Jacataqua, who was responding to the charms of one of Arnold's officers, young Aaron Burr.

4. John Joseph Henry, *Account of Arnold's Campaign against Quebec* (New York: Arno Press [1968], pp. 64-67 and n. First edition, Lancaster, Pa., 1812.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Willard M. Wallace, *Traitorous Hero: The Life and Fortunes of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Harper & Bros. [1954]), pp. 60, 70. A clear map of the expedition's route may be found on p. 62.

7. Kenneth L. Roberts, comp. and ed., *March to Quebec: Journals of the Members of Arnold's Expedition* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1938), p. 483 and n.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 495 and n.

9. That there were such sympathizers may be inferred from a letter sent by Major General Guy Carleton, governor of Quebec, to General William Howe from Quebec, January 12th, 1776. On December 7th, last, wrote Carleton, "a woman stole into town, with letters addressed to the principal merchants, advising them to an immediate submission, and promising a great indulgence in case of their compliance. Enclosed was a letter to me, in very extraordinary language, and a summons to deliver up the town; the messenger was sent to prison for a few days, and drummed out." See *American Archives*, Fourth Series, IV (Washington, D.C.: Clarke and Force, 1843), 656.

10. Old Swedes Church (Gloria Dei Marriages) Marriage Register, p. 701, in Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I was steered to this source by a letter from one Frank E. McCone, a Warner family connection, n.p., February 26th, 1957, to the librarian of the Lancaster Public Library, a document now in the Lancaster County Historical Society there.

11. See Justin H. Smith, *Arnold's March from Cambridge to Quebec: A Critical Study* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's, 1903), pp. 423-424; F. J. Stimson's impressionistic *My Story: Being the Memoirs of Benedict Arnold* . . . (New York: Charles Scribner, 1917), pp. 130, 133; and Oscar Sherwin, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York and London: The Century Co. [1931], pp. 53, 63.

12. John Codman, 2nd, *Arnold's Expedition to Quebec* (New York: Macmillan. (1901), p. 101.

About the Contributor

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