



FREE

# VBC Magazine

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# THE FIRST VETERANS

VOICES FROM THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- FRONTLINE STORIES
- WHICH SIDE FREEDOM?
- MOLLY PITCHER
- FROM SOLDIER TO CITIZEN

WILLIAM HUTCHINGS  
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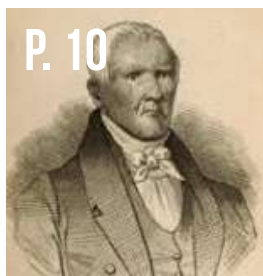
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Cover image: The background artwork depicts the Boston massacre which occurred on March 5, 1770. It was engraved and printed by Paul Revere. The black and white foreground photo is a portrait of Revolutionary War veteran William Hutchings. He enlisted in 1779 at the age of 15 and served in Col. Samuel McCobb's Massachusetts Militia for six months before being taken prisoner. (Public Domain)

VBC Magazine is published quarterly by The Veterans Breakfast Club, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that harnesses the power of storytelling in order to connect, educate, heal, and inspire.

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# FROM THE DIRECTOR

This special edition of *VBC Magazine* celebrates the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It is also a dramatic departure from our usual approach of featuring veterans' stories from World War II to the present. Instead, we've chosen to reach back—way back—to our nation's founding generation of veterans, those who served in the American Revolution.



We tend to think of these men and women as marble heroes. But they were ordinary human beings: eager recruits, scared sailors, exhausted surgeons, hardworking wives and mothers, and old veterans looking back on a time that shaped the rest of their lives.

As a historian, I was trained to think of the past as a "foreign country," profoundly different from the present. And it is. But my work with the Veterans Breakfast Club has also taught me to see the continuities. Every veteran is unique, and every story is different. But each shares in a common heritage, a brotherhood and sisterhood of service, that stretches back to the beginning, to 1775.

However different the conflicts, there is something universal in military service and in the experience of war. Looking back now at the Revolutionary generation, I can't help but hear our veterans' voices as echoes of theirs.

This issue is an effort to recover those old voices, so that all of us can better understand where today's veterans come from and where they belong in a 250-year American story.

In the middle of this issue, we've included a section on StoryFest '26, a special three-day storytelling event we held in February in Santa Monica, California. The StoryFest spread, with its color photographs and contemporary voices, interrupts the Revolutionary material. That contrast is deliberate. It reminds us that history is being made every day, and the stories veterans shared at StoryFest are the stories future generations will inherit, learn from, and build on. VBC cares deeply about the past, but only because it helps us serve the living.

The Revolutionary voices in this issue show us where our tradition of veteran storytelling began. StoryFest reminds us that it is still going on.

This issue of *VBC Magazine* is longer, denser, more text-heavy, and deliberately so. We wanted to let these voices speak. We wanted to resist the temptation to summarize too neatly or smooth away too much of the rough texture of their firsthand accounts of the Revolution. Veterans' stories do not arrive in perfect order. They come to us in fragments, in bursts of memory, in stories told and retold, in official records that miss the point, and in moments of candor that survive almost by accident.

If this issue has a theme, it is how well storytelling travels across time. In these old voices, we hear how war disrupts ordinary lives, creates strange forms of fellowship, opens doors for some and closes them for others, and leaves people to figure out who they are once the fighting ends. The uniforms, the weapons, and the languages change. But the human experience is always relatable.

Thank you for reading, for listening, and for helping us keep these voices alive.

Todd DePastino, Executive Director  
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[todd@veteransbreakfastclub.org](mailto:todd@veteransbreakfastclub.org)



# UPCOMING IN-PERSON PROGRAMS

Our VBC in-person events feature veterans of all eras, backgrounds, and branches sharing memories of service. All in-person events begin at 8:30am and include breakfast, unless otherwise noted. Also, **all VBC breakfasts are now free of charge** (unless otherwise noted) for anyone who would like to attend. However, we do request you make a reservation so we can prepare the space and meal. Please RSVP to [betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org](mailto:betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org) or 412-623-9029.

**We request RSVPs for all events.**

**RSVP to [betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org](mailto:betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org) or 412-623-9029.**

Events added often. Check [veteransbreakfastclub.org/events](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events) for updates.

**SATURDAY, April 11, 8:30-10:30am:** Operation Troop Appreciation (2017 Pennsylvania Ave, West Mifflin, PA 15122)

**TUESDAY, April 14, 8:30-10:30am:** Center for Veterans & Military Families, UPMC Events Center (6001 University Blvd, Moon Township, PA 15108)

**THURSDAY, April 23, 8:30-10:30am:** Monroeville UM Church (219 Center Rd, Monroeville, PA 15146-1748)

**WEDNESDAY, April 29, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**TUESDAY, May 5, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

**WEDNESDAY, May 13, 8:30-10:30am:** Ridgcrest Senior Living (8870 Duncan Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15237)

**SATURDAY, May 23, 8:30-10:30am:** University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg (The Hempfield Room, Chambers Hall, Greensburg, PA 15601)

**WEDNESDAY, June 3, 8:30-10:30am:** Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

**WEDNESDAY, June 17, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**THURSDAY, July 2, 8:30-10:30am:** Memorial Park Presbyterian Church (8800 Peebles Rd, Allison Park 15101)

**TUESDAY, July 7, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

**FRIDAY, July 10, 8:30-10:30am:** Sechler Law Firm's Event Center (500 Commonwealth Drive, Warrendale, PA 15087)

**WEDNESDAY, July 15, 8:30-10:30am:** American Legion Post 982 (158 American Legion Rd, Latrobe, PA 15650)

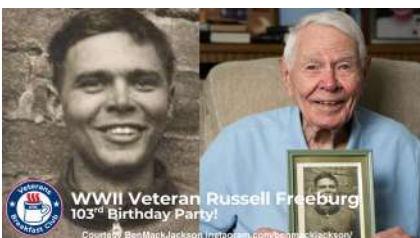
# UPCOMING VBC LIVESTREAMS

Mondays and Thursdays at 7pm ET (4pm PT) on Zoom and simulcast to YouTube and Facebook. See schedule and connect at [veteransbreakfastclub.org/events](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events)



# RECENT VBC LIVESTREAMS

Watch past programs at [veteransbreakfastclub.org/past-events/](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/past-events/).



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# IF A REVOLUTIONARY WAR VETERAN VISITED THE VBC...

## HE'D FIT RIGHT IN

By Todd DePastino

As a historian drawn to veterans' stories, I sometimes indulge a private daydream. One morning at a Veterans Breakfast Club gathering, just as the coffee is being poured and the conversations begin, the door opens and in walks a small, weathered old man in a dusty colonial militia uniform.

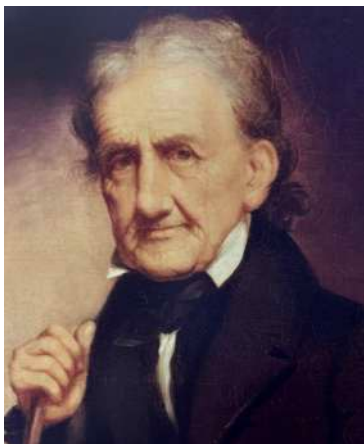
He's bent with age and leans on a cane. A scar across his forehead hints at old battles. There's a sparkle in his eye and a wry half-smile on his lips. He takes a seat with a cup of coffee and begins talking the way veterans do—plainly, but proudly—about fighting the Redcoats and later sailing the seas as a Patriot privateer.

As it happens, he is the last surviving veteran of the American Revolution, and he's stumbled into the Veterans Breakfast Club.

The man in my daydream was real. His name was George Robert Twelves Hewes, and he was a humble shoemaker. He possessed a sharp wit, an uncanny memory, and storytelling prowess that would have made him a star at our VBC gatherings. If he walked into the VBC today, he'd fit right in.

### How George Hewes Entered the History Books

History isn't made to record the stories of people like George Hewes. He was born into a poor family in Boston, lived a hard-scrabble life, and died in poverty. Nothing about him advertised heroism. He stood barely five-foot-tall, and after the Revolution, he returned to his quiet life as a shoemaker.



Joseph Greenleaf Cole portrait of George Robert Twelves Hewes now hanging in the Old State House in Boston. (Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum)

The only reason we know George's story is because late in his life, people around him started listening. They took an interest in George because they knew the original "Greatest Generation," those who had fought in 1776, was rapidly passing away.

On July 4, 1833, George was living at his son's house in Richfield Springs, New York. Without income or savings, he depended on his fifteen children for support. They took turns hosting the old man before shuttling him off to the next sibling.

On this Independence Day 1833, the town poured out to the village green for speeches and a parade, ceremonial gunfire and the reading of the Declaration of Independence. Standard July 4th celebrations also included thirteen toasts, one for each original state, plus an extra for George Washington.

Among the crowd that day was a tiny old man, resplendent in his ancient Massachusetts militia uniform. In prior years, he'd probably been overlooked. But by 1833, Americans knew that the generation that had

fought the Revolution and founded the country was fading. There'd been an outpouring of interest in the old-timers in 1826 for the 50th anniversary of 1776. That fascination hadn't abated, and anyone old enough to have served in the War of Independence was considered someone to be celebrated and listened to.

George didn't shy away from the attention. He allowed people to gather around him and began making extravagant and, frankly, unbelievable claims. He said he was the last living veteran who had been there when the war broke out in 1775. That was false. He also said he was 100 years old. In truth, he was nearly 91.

When the good people of Richfield Springs learned George was from Boston, they began peppering him with questions.

*"Were you there for the Boston Massacre?"*

"Why, of course!" George answered. He relayed how he'd rushed out to the Boston Custom House on King Street on March 5, 1770, to throw snowballs at the British soldiers who'd been harassing a fellow apprentice. A Redcoat smashed his shoulder with a Brown Bess musket. He watched in horror as British soldiers fired into the crowd and five young Americans fell.

*"What about the Boston Tea Party? Were you part of that?"*

"Of course, I was part of it," George responded. He waxed nostalgic about dressing up as a Mohawk Indian and joining a group that snuck aboard three ships—the *Dartmouth*, the *Eleanor*, and the *Beaver*—the night of December 16, 1773. He explained that he was assigned to the *Dartmouth* and given leadership of his vigilante squad by virtue of his unusual talent for whistling commands. After confronting the ship's captain and demanding keys to the tea chests, he and his squad spent the next three hours dumping the tea into the harbor.

These stories were only the beginning. George told all kinds of far-fetched tales about fighting in land battles as a militiaman and even serving at sea as a pirate (politely referred to as a "privateer") stealing cargo from British ships. He talked about knowing all the Boston bigwigs: Samuel Adams and John Adams, John Hancock and Joseph Warren—the very leaders of the American Revolution. He even claimed to have had dinner with George Washington himself.

It turns out that, apart from his age and status as the last Revolutionary survivor, every other detail George shared about his life was true. Every last story. It all checked out. He had been part of the Boston Massacre mob. He had been a member of the Sons of Liberty and had thrown British tea in Boston Harbor. And he had fought in the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778 and had helped to capture seven enemy ships while serving as a privateer sailor. He'd even met Washington.

The citizens of Richfield Springs were held spellbound by George on July 4, 1833.

One of those fascinated listeners was a writer, James Hawkes, who turned the stories George told that day into a book published the following year, *A Retrospect of the Boston Tea-Party, With a Memoir of George R. T. Hewes, A Survivor of the Little Band of Patriots Who Drowned the Tea in Boston Harbour in 1773*.

Hawkes' book was a sensation at a time when the nation was paying its final public tribute to the Heroes of 1776.

*A Retrospect of the Boston Tea-Party* made Hewes a celebrity. He was invited to Boston to sit for a formal portrait to hang in the Massachusetts State House (it's still there). He became the subject of a second biography by Benjamin Thatcher that reached even more readers. And he was feted by dignitaries and crowds of admirers for the next seven years.

George Robert Twelves Hewes might have made it to 100 years old, if he hadn't fallen while boarding a carriage on July 4, 1840. He never recovered after breaking his hip and died four months later at age 98.

The two old biographies of George capture his life experiences, his colorful character, and warm sense of humor. They also address what I would have tried to get George to talk about at my imagined Veterans Breakfast Club event.

### A VBC Question for George

"George," I would ask, "what was your life like before the Revolution?" The story George shared and which I now share with you, is one he told countless times.

At twenty-one, George, a shoemaker's apprentice in Boston, repaired a shoe for a wealthy merchant named John Hancock. At the time, Hancock worked in the countinghouse of his uncle Thomas Hancock, the richest merchant in Boston. Hancock was so pleased with the repair he sent a message inviting the young apprentice to pay him a visit on New Year's Day.

In colonial Boston, where the gap between a grandee like Hancock and a lowly apprentice like George was vast, the prospect of paying Hancock a social visit was terrifying. Every movement, every word would have to follow script. George would have to make sure he paid Hancock the honor, respect, and deference he was due.

On New Year's Day, young George washed his face, put on his best jacket, and walked trembling to the great Hancock mansion on Beacon Hill.

He knocked on the front door.

A servant answered.

"Is 'Squire Hancock at home, sir?" George asked, bowing and removing his hat.

The servant ordered him to sit in the kitchen while word was sent upstairs. A few minutes later the man returned, suddenly much more polite than before, and ushered George into Hancock's sitting room.

George later admitted he was "almost scared to death."

Hancock greeted him kindly. George tried to deliver the speech he had prepared—something polite and respectful that would announce his visit and allow him to leave as quickly as possible.

Hancock interrupted.

"Well, my lad," he said, "take a chair."

Then Hancock reached into his pocket and placed a crown coin in George's hand. He thanked him for the New Year's greeting and invited him to drink a toast. Wine was poured and glasses were clinked, a ritual that was unknown to George.

As soon as he could, George bowed again and escaped.

### What George's Meeting with John Hancock Reveals

This simple story reveals something important about the world George grew up in. Colonial society ran on deference. Poor men bowed. They removed their hats. They stepped out of the way when a superior approached. They spoke carefully and never looked an aristocrat in the eye. They knew their place.

And it wasn't just about manners. Ordinary craftsmen and farmers didn't hold office or make decisions for the colony. They mostly didn't

vote. They deferred to, that is, they accepted the rule of their social betters.

What we call the American Revolution shattered this old deferential world, and you can trace the transformation, the birth of a new American society, in George's stories about the Boston Massacre in 1770, the Boston Tea Party in 1773, and what was, for George, his most painful encounter with colonial authority: his clash with British customs officer John Malcolm on January 25, 1774.

George had just finished his dinner and was walking back to his shoe-making shop along Fore Street when he saw a disturbing scene unfolding ahead of him. Malcolm was cursing at a small boy who was pushing a toy sled through the street. The customs officer shook his heavy cane threateningly, offended that the boy had not moved out of his way fast enough.

George watched for a moment, then stepped forward.

"Mr. Malcolm," he said, "I hope you are not going to strike that boy with that stick."

It was a bold thing for a poor shoemaker to say to a man like Malcolm. Malcolm was no ordinary bully. He was a fierce defender of royal authority and proud enforcer of imperial law—the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, the Tea Act, and all the other regulations odious to the people of Boston.

Malcolm turned on Hewes immediately.

"You are an impertinent rascal," he barked. "It is none of your business. And a vagabond like you has no place to speak to a gentleman in such a way."

George held his ground.

"I'm not a vagabond, and you should not strike a boy with such a heavy stick."

That was all it took for Malcolm to explode in rage. He lifted his cane and struck a blow squarely on the shoemaker's forehead. The cane's metal tip carved a gully George's skull, and he collapsed to the ground unconscious.

Friends rushed him to Dr. Joseph Warren, the patriot physician who would later die at Bunker Hill. Warren treated the wound, which left a visible scar on George's forehead for the rest of his life.

The Sons of Liberty, made up mostly of artisans like George, took matters in their own hands.

That evening, they stormed Malcolm's house, dragged the official out, placed him on a sled, and hauled him through the streets with thousands of Bostonians jeering.

What followed became the most famous tarring and feathering of the American Revolution.

Malcolm was stripped to the waist, coated in hot tar and feathers, paraded through Boston, and taken to Liberty Tree, an old elm on Orange Steet near Boston Common. There the crowd demanded he renounce his royal office or be hanged.

Meanwhile, back at Dr. Warren's house, George Hewes came to, heard what was happening, and, his head swathed in bloody bandages, rushed to the Liberty Tree.



*Philip Dawe's The Bostonians Paying the Excise-man or Tarring and Feathering 1774 depicts the fate of the infamous John Malcolm. (Public Domain)*

The tender-hearted George brought a blanket with him and tried to throw it protectively over Malcolm's shoulders. He pleaded with the vigilantes to let the humiliated man go.

The crowd did, eventually, release Malcolm, but not before forcing tea down his throat and making him give mocking toasts to King George III. Malcolm soon left Boston, never to return.

### Another VBC Breakfast Question for George

Even in my daydream, I couldn't resist asking George Robert Twelves Hewes my standard question. The one I ask every visitor to our breakfasts. "Why did you join up?" The reasons this Revolutionary War veteran gave were true to his time and place in history – the military George joined was The Continental Army – but the essentials of his answer echoed with rationales cited by today's veterans.

George joined, in part, to further the work of the Revolution, do away with royal bullies like John Malcolm, and bring into being the new world that George had first glimpsed in the Boston Massacre and the Tea Party. But he had other motives.

One was the search for adventure. All his life George had been a shoemaker, an occupation he'd never liked and had kept him bent over a bench from morning to night stitching leather for other people's feet.

The war offered something different.

The first opportunity came in 1776 when George signed on to a privateering vessel out of Providence. Privateering was the eighteenth-century version of legalized piracy. The government issued a "letter of marque" authorizing privately owned ships to hunt enemy vessels and seize their cargo. The captured goods were sold and the proceeds divided among the owners, the officers, and the crew.

For a poor craftsman like Hewes, the promise was intoxicating. Prize money might mean a house, a new shop, apprentices of his own, maybe even a chance to rise in the world.

His first cruise went well. He sailed aboard the *Diamond*, and the ship captured three enemy vessels. He helped sail one of the enemy ships back into port. It must have felt triumphant, proof that fortune had finally turned his way.

But the sea had its dangers.

On one occasion, off Newfoundland, George and two shipmates nearly drowned when a rope they were standing on snapped and threw them overboard. Sailors rushed to haul them back onto the deck before the freezing Atlantic swallowed them.

There were also long stints of exhausting labor. George described manning the pumps for eight straight days and nights on a leaking ship just to keep it from sinking.

The payoff for all this pain and suffering was more than pirate's booty. It was the sense of common purpose, camaraderie, and shared mission. Aboard ship, on those privateering voyages, ordinary sailors had a voice. They earned respect. Captains consulted their crews before making decisions. When the crew of the *Diamond* had gone weeks without sighting an enemy vessel, the captain gathered the men and asked them for one more week. The crew agreed.

Later, aboard another privateer, the *Defence*, the crew voted whether to extend their cruise in pursuit of enemy ships. George would remember that moment the rest of his life.

For the first time, men like him—poor sailors and craftsmen—had a say in the decisions that governed their lives. They were voting for what they wanted, instead of bowing to superiors who decided for them.

When George wasn't at sea, he served in the Massachusetts militia. His tours were short—usually one or two months at a time—but they were demanding. There was endless marching, long nights of sentry duty, and weeks spent guarding the coast from British attack.

He saw action during the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778, one of the largest battles fought in New England during the war. He remembered rowing silently through the darkness toward a British fort in a night attack that had to be abandoned when one soldier spoke out of turn and gave away their position.

### How Military Service Shaped His Life

George never claimed any great heroism. His stories are full of marching, waiting, guarding, and hard labor, the kind of service most soldiers know well.

But, again, something about that experience stayed with him for the rest of his life.

For the first time, George Robert Twelves Hewes felt himself to be part of something larger than his shoemaker's bench. He was fighting alongside other ordinary men who shared the same risks and held to the same purpose. It was a brotherhood, and a dignified one at that.

Seventy years later, as an old man sitting on the village green at Richfield Springs on the 4th of July, George recalled one small incident that illustrated just how much the Revolution had changed him.

Sometime around 1778 or 1779, George was in Boston looking to ship out again. War service had become part of his life now. He had already sailed on one privateer and served in the militia, and he was eager for another cruise.

He signed up to serve aboard a twenty-gun warship called the *Hancock*.

One day, while George was walking through the streets of Boston, a lieutenant from the ship encountered him and ordered him to remove his hat.

In the old-world George had grown up in, this would have been routine. A poor workingman took his hat off when addressed by a social superior. It was automatic.

But, now, after what he'd endured, George refused.

"I do not remove my hat for any man," he told the lieutenant, and walked away.

Instead of joining the *Hancock*, George voted with his feet and transferred his enlistment to another ship.

The frightened apprentice who had once stood speechless before John Hancock was gone. The Revolution had remade him. In his place stood a proud veteran of the Boston Massacre crowds, the Boston Tea Party, the clash with John Malcolm, and several years of war on land and sea.

I think if you multiply the experience of George Robert Twelves Hewes by the two-million or so free Americans who lived in the thirteen colonies in 1776, you can begin to see what made the American Revolution revolutionary. The Revolution wasn't just a change in government or the rules governing taxation and representation. It was a deeply personal transformation in how Americans thought about themselves and their place in the world. It was the birth of what we might call American citizenship.

The Revolution didn't make George rich or even lift him out of poverty. After the war he went back to his shoemaker's bench and struggled the rest of his life to support his family. But it changed how he saw himself and others. And that new consciousness is summed up well in the famous words we celebrate every July 4th: "All men are created equal."

And so I come back to my daydream.

Imagine, again, George Robert Twelves Hewes wandering into one of our Veterans Breakfast Club events, steadied by a cane, twinkle in his eye. We immediately recognize him. Not because of his threadbare uniform or his Revolutionary War celebrity, but because he sounds exactly like the veterans we know today. He's one of us, and we are merely the inheritors and stewards of the heritage he and his original Greatest Generation won for our country.

When George stands to speak, our veterans see themselves in him. They hear their own voices echoed back through time as George describes digging a fox-hole, manning a gun, and eating lousy rations. He's not that different from our veterans today. He carries our history in his stories, showing us that history is not just made by generals and presidents, but by ordinary people who find themselves living through extraordinary times.

That is why the citizens of Richfield Springs gathered around George Hewes on that Fourth of July in 1833. They sensed that the living memory of the American Revolution was slipping away, and they wanted to hear it while they still could.

We feel that same urgency today.

At the Veterans Breakfast Club we gather to listen, to remember, and to understand. When our veterans speak, they bring the past to life and teach us lessons you can only learn from those who were there. ■

*If you'd like to learn more about George Robert Twelves Hewes, the best modern account of his life is historian Alfred F. Young's remarkable book The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution (Beacon Press, 1999). Young rediscovered Hewes in the 1980s and showed how this humble Boston shoemaker helps us understand the American Revolution from the perspective of ordinary people who lived it. You can also learn more of George's story at the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum, which interprets the famous protest of December 16, 1773. A portrait of Hewes painted in 1835 can be seen at the Old State House Museum in Boston.*



## We Salute You

Thank you to the Veterans Breakfast Club and its members for honoring those who dedicated their lives to serve our country.

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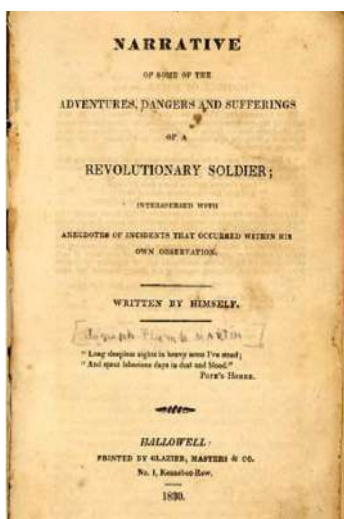


# STORIES FROM THE REVOLUTION'S FRONTLINES

*Military service is a transformative experience, no less today than it was during the American Revolution. What follows is a narrative journey tracing the experiences of men and women who answered the call to duty, from their enlistment to their return home. Excerpts from diaries, memoirs, and postwar depositions tell veterans' and others' stories in their own words, while historical sidebars provide context. We think you'll agree that, while America 250 years ago was profoundly different from today's world, the continuities of serving in the Armed Forces and living through war then and now are unmistakable. Across the centuries, the voices of veterans sound more familiar than we might imagine.*

## Joseph Plumb Martin 1774-6 A Teenager Joins the Connecticut Militia

*In 1776, 15-year-old Joseph Plumb Martin signed up with the Connecticut Militia and was assigned duty in New York City, arriving just before the opening of the British Long Island Campaign. His first tour of duty ended in December 1776. The next spring, the 16-year-old veteran enlisted in the Continental Army for the duration of the War of Independence. Martin wrote his memoir in 1830, concerned that veterans' stories were being forgotten. His book, A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier, is one of the rare enlisted-man accounts from the Revolution and chronicles hunger, cold, boredom, terror and the strange mix of humor, pride, and hardship that binds soldiers together.*



Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier  
by Joseph Plumb Martin.  
(Public Domain)

I remember the stir in the country occasioned by the Stamp Act [the first direct British tax on colonists] but I was so young that I did not understand the meaning of it. I likewise remember the destruction of the tea at Boston and elsewhere. I was then thirteen or fourteen years old and began to understand something of the works going on. I used, about this time, to inquire a deal about the French war, as it was called, which had not been long ended; my grandsire [grandfather] would talk with me about it while working in the fields, perhaps as much to beguile his own time as to gratify my curiosity. I thought then, nothing should induce me to get caught in the toils of an army—“I am well, so I’ll keep,” was my motto then.

Time passed smoothly on with me till the year 1774 arrived, the smell of war began to be pretty

strong, but I was determined to have no hand in it. I felt myself to be a real coward. What—venture my carcass where bullets fly! That will never do for me. Stay at home out of harm’s way, thought I, it will be as much to your health as credit to do so.

The spring of 1775 arrived. Expectation of some fatal event seemed to fill the minds of most of the considerate people throughout the country. I was ploughing in the field about half a mile from home, about the twenty-first day of April, when all of a sudden, the bells fell to ringing, and three guns were repeatedly fired in succession down in the village. I had some fearful forebodings.

I found most of the male kind of the people together; soldiers for Boston were in requisition. A dollar deposited upon the drum head was taken up by someone as soon as placed there, and the holder’s name taken, and he enrolled, with orders to equip himself as quick as possible. My spirits began to revive at the sight of the money offered; the seeds of courage began to sprout; but they had not as yet germinated. O, thought I, if I were but old enough to put myself forward, I would be the possessor of one dollar, the dangers of war to the contrary notwithstanding.

This year there were troops raised both for Boston and New-York. Some from the back towns were billeted at my grandsire’s. Their company and conversation began to warm my courage.

During the winter of 1775–6, by hearing the conversation and disputes of [the farmers], I collected pretty correct ideas of the contest between this country and the mother country. I thought I was as warm a patriot as the best of them. I felt more anxious than ever, if possible, to be called a defender of my country.

In the month of June, orders came out for enlisting men for six months. The troops were to go to New-York; and, notwithstanding I was told that the British army at that place was reinforced by fifteen thousand men, it made no alteration in my mind; I did not care if there had been fifteen times fifteen thousand, I should have gone just as soon as if there had been but fifteen hundred. I never spent a thought about numbers, the Americans were invincible, in my opinion.

I one evening went off with a full determination to enlist at all hazards. When I arrived at the place of rendezvous, I found a number of young men of my acquaintance there. The old bantering began.

“Come, if you will enlist I will,” says one.

“You have long been talking about it,” says another. “Come, now is the time.”

Seating myself at the table, enlisting orders were immediately presented to me; I took up the pen, loaded it with the fatal charge, made several mimic imitations of writing my name, but took especial care not to touch the paper with the pen. [At last], I wrote my name fairly upon the indentures. And now I was a soldier, in name at least, if not in practice.

But I had now to go home, after performing this, my heroic action. How shall I be received there? But the report of my adventure had reached there before I did. In the morning when I first saw my grandparents, I felt considerably of the sheepish order. The old gentleman first accosted me with, “Well, you are going a soldiering then, are you?”

I had nothing to answer; I would much rather he had not asked me the question. I saw that the circumstance hurt him and the old lady too; but it was too late now to repent. The old gentleman proceeded, — “I suppose you must be fitted out for the expedition, since it is so.”

Accordingly, they did fit me out in order, with arms and accoutrements, clothing, and cake, and cheese in plenty, not forgetting to put my pocket Bible into my knapsack. — Good old people!

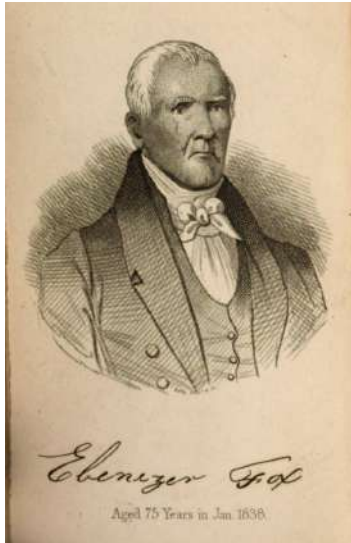
I was now, what I had long wished to be, a soldier; I had obtained my heart’s desire; it was now my business to prove myself equal to my profession. I went, with several others of the company, on board a sloop, bound to New-York; had a pleasant, though protracted passage; passed through the strait called Hellgate; arrived at New-York; marched up into the city, and joined the rest of the regiment that were already there.

And now I had left my good old grandsire’s house, as a constant resident, forever.

## Ebenezer Fox 1789 A Teenager Joins the Massachusetts Navy

*Ebenezer Fox was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1763 and grew up amid the political upheaval of the American Revolution. He was bound out as an apprentice at the age of seven and spent his youth in servitude at various trades, including a stint as a cabin boy on a voyage to the French colony of St. Domingue and later as a wigmaker's apprentice in Boston.*

*As revolutionary ideas filled the streets and workshops of Massachusetts, the young Fox began to see his own apprenticeship as a kind of bondage. At seventeen, swept up in the excitement of the war, he enlisted aboard the Massachusetts warship Protector in 1780. Writing late in life, Fox recalled his teenage state of mind and describes the rowdy spectacle of naval recruiting in Revolutionary Boston.*



Ebenezer Fox  
(Public Domain)

I had for some time been dissatisfied with my situation and was desirous of some change. I had made frequent complaints of a grievous nature to my father, but he paid no attention to them, supposing that I had no just cause for them and that they arose merely from a spirit of discontent which would soon subside.

Expressions of exasperated feeling against the government of Great Britain, which had for a long time been indulged and pretty freely expressed, were now continually heard from the mouths of all classes—from father and son, from mother and daughter, from master and slave. A spirit of disaffection pervaded the land; groans and complaints,

injustice and wrongs were heard on all sides. Violence and tumult soon followed.

Almost all the conversation that came to my ears related to the injustice of England and the tyranny of government.

It is perfectly natural that the spirit of insubordination that prevailed should spread among the younger members of the community; that they, who were continually hearing complaints, should themselves become complainants. I, and other boys situated similarly to myself, thought we had wrongs to be redressed and rights to be maintained; and, as no one appeared disposed to act the part of a redresser, it was our duty and our privilege to assert our own rights.

We made a direct application of the doctrines we daily heard, in relation to the oppression of the mother country, to our own circumstances, and thought that we were more oppressed than our fathers were.

I thought that I was doing myself great injustice by remaining in bondage when I ought to go free, and that the time was come when I should liberate myself from the thralldom of others and set up a government of my own—or, in other words, do what was right in the sight of my own eyes.

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I continued to perform my duties in the shop until I was about seventeen years of age, when a spirit of roving once more got possession of me, and I expressed a desire to go to sea. The [economic] condition of the country was at this time distressing; and, my master had not more business than he and one apprentice could perform.

Our coast was lined with British cruisers, which had almost annihilated our commerce; and the state of Massachusetts judged it expedient to build a government vessel, rated as a twenty-gun ship, named the Protector, commanded by Captain John Foster Williams. She was to be fitted out for service as soon as possible to protect our commerce and to annoy the enemy.

A rendezvous was established for recruits at the head of Hancock's Wharf, where the national flag, then bearing thirteen stripes and stars, was hoisted. All means were resorted to which ingenuity could devise to induce men to enlist. A recruiting officer, bearing a flag and attended by a band of martial music, paraded the streets to excite a thirst for glory and a spirit of military ambition.

The recruiting officer possessed the qualifications requisite to make the service appear alluring, especially to the young. He was a jovial, good-natured fellow, of ready wit and much broad humor. Crowds followed in his wake when he marched the streets, and he occasionally stopped at the corners to harangue the multitude in order to excite their patriotism and zeal for the cause of liberty.

When he espied any large boys among the idle crowd around him, he would attract their attention by singing in a comical manner the following doggerel:

*All you that have bad masters  
And cannot get your due,  
Come, come, my brave boys,  
And join with our ship's crew.*

My excitable feelings were roused. I repaired to the rendezvous, signed the ship's papers, mounted a cockade, and was, in my own estimation, already more than half of a sailor.

About the last of February, the ship was ready to receive her crew and was hauled off into the channel, that the sailors might have no opportunity to run away after they were got on board. Upwards of three hundred and thirty men were carried, dragged, and driven on board—of all kinds, ages, and descriptions, in all the various stages of intoxication, from that of "sober tipsiness" to beastly drunkenness, with the uproar and clamor that may be more easily imagined than described. Such a motley group has never been seen since Falstaff's ragged regiment paraded the streets of Coventry.

## Joseph Plumb Martin 1776 In New York, a New Recruit Gets a Taste of Army Life and Madeira Wine: "I expected to be hanged."

The soldiers at New-York had an idea that the enemy, when they took possession of the town, would make a general seizure of all property that could be of use to them as military or commissary stores, hence they imagined that it was no injury to supply themselves when they thought they could do so with impunity. I was stationed in Stone-street, near the southwest angle of the city; directly opposite to my quarters was a wine cellar, and in it at this time were several pipes of Madeira wine.

By some means the soldiers had smelt it out. Some of them had taken the iron grating from a window in the back yard, and one had entered the cellar, and by means of a powder-horn divested of its bottom, had supplied himself with wine, and was helping his comrades through the window with a delicious draught.

I concluded I would take a flask amongst the rest, which I accordingly did, and conveyed it in safety to my room, and went back into the street to see the end. The owner of the wine soon found out what was going forward on his premises, and, finding that he could affect nothing with them, went to Gen. [Israel] Putnam's quarters.

The General immediately repaired in person to the field of action, mounting himself upon the doorsteps of my quarters, began haranguing the multitude, threatening to hang every mother's son of them.

I took every word he said for gospel and expected nothing else but to be hanged before the morrow night.

I got home as soon as the General had left the coast clear, took a draught of the wine, and then flung the flask and the remainder of the wine out of my window.

However, I might have kept it, if I had not been in too much haste to free myself from being hanged by General Putnam. I never heard any thing further about the wine or being hanged about it.

## Ezra Tilden 1776 The Things He Carried

*Ezra Tilden was a militia man during the American Revolution who was drafted to serve on July 20th, 1776. Tilden traveled along with Captain Endicott's Company from Stoughton, Massachusetts, joining Colonel Ephraim Wheelock's Militia Regiment at Ticonderoga. Before leaving for Ticonderoga, he wrote an account of what he carried in his knapsack.*



*The Capture of Fort Ticonderoga, May 10, 1775. (New York Public Library)*

August 5, 1776

An Account of some things I carried into the Army in my Pack:

A woolen Shirt with a snuff bottle full of ground coffee in it, and one and a half of chocolate in it too, wrapt up in a piece of brown paper and a new cotton and linen shirt and a new milk cheese wrapt up in it which weighed five pounds, a pair of white stockings, a pair of blue stockings, a bag of plumbs, a bag with three pounds and half of sugar in it, a pair of boots, a cap, a powder horn, four sheets of paper wrapt up in a piece of brown paper and four quills in it, a brown paper with two pieces of soap in it, one great pin, four small ones, one brown thread needle, and one worsted darning needle, one ball of white yarn, one ball of blue yarn, some strings, some thread, some sealing wax, a snuff box full of snuff, a pewter bason, a wooden plate, a spoon, a fork, a Jack-knife, a pen-knife, a pair of knee buckles, a pocket book and case to it, a small toothed comb, a pocket looking glass, an under-jacket, a short coat, a great coat, a pair of grey stockings, two pair shoes, a striped shirt, a pair of long trowsers, a hat, two handkerchiefs, a pair of shoe buckles, a pair of garters, a pack to carry my things in, some bread, a pair of arm strings, a pair of leather breeches, a pair of cloth breeches, a leather strap, a cod line, a frock, some tow.

*N.B. I have here set down, not only my pack and things in it, but even my clothes and things that I wear, besides the things in my pockets that I carry & other things.*

## Joseph Plumb Martin 1776 First Taste of Battle

*In August and September 1776, as British forces closed in on New York, seventeen-year-old Continental soldier Joseph Plumb Martin saw the wounded from the battle on Long Island and shortly thereafter came under heavy fire himself at Kips Bay on Manhattan. He describes the mixed feelings of a young soldier: dread, confusion, hunger, exhaustion, and relief at finding his regiment again.*

I saw our sergeant-major directing his course up Broadway, towards us, in rather an unusual step for him. He soon informed us that he had orders to take our regiment to Long-Island, the British having landed in force there.

Although this was not unexpected to me, yet it gave me rather a disagreeable feeling. However, I kept my cogitations to myself, went to my quarters, packed up my clothes, and got myself in readiness for the expedition as soon as possible.

I then went to the top of the house where I had a full view of that part

of the Island. I distinctly saw the smoke of the field-artillery. The horrors of battle then presented themselves to my mind in all their hideousness. I must come to it now, thought I. I will endeavour to do my duty as well as I am able and leave the event with Providence.

We soon landed at Brooklyn, upon the Island, marched up the ascent from the ferry, to the plain.

We now began to meet the wounded men, another sight I was unacquainted with, some with broken arms, some with broken legs, and some with broken heads.

The sight of these a little daunted me and made me think of home.

I saw a Lieutenant who appeared to have feelings not very enviable. He ran round among the men of his company, snivelling and blubbering. Had he been at the gallows with a halter about his neck, he could not have shown more fear. I would have then suffered anything short of death rather than have made such an exhibition of myself.

It was on a Sabbath morning, the day in which the British were always employed about their deviltry, if possible. We lay very quiet in our ditch, waiting their motions, till the sun was an hour or two high. We heard a cannonade at the city, but our attention was drawn toward our own guests.

They being a little dilatory in their operations, I stepped into an old warehouse which stood close by me and sat down upon a stool. All of a sudden, there came such a peal of thunder from the British ships that I thought my head would go with the sound.

I made a frog's leap for the ditch and lay as still as I possibly could and began to consider which part of my carcass was to go first.

The British played their parts well. Indeed, they had nothing to hinder them. We kept the lines till they were almost levelled upon us, when our officers, seeing we could make no resistance and that we must soon be entirely exposed to the rake of their guns, gave the order to leave the lines.

In retreating we had to cross a level, clear spot of ground, forty or fifty rods wide, exposed to the whole of the enemy's fire; and they gave it to us in prime order. The grape shot and langrage (cannon ammunition composed of scrap metal—such as bolts, nails, and broken glass) — flew merrily, which served to quicken our motions.

When I had gotten a little out of the reach of their combustibles, I found myself in company with one who was a neighbour of mine at home, and another belonging to our regiment. Where the rest of them were I knew not. We went into a house by the highway, where two women and some small children were crying bitterly. We asked the women if they had any spirits in the house. They placed a case bottle of rum upon the table and bade us help ourselves. We each drank a glass, and bidding them goodbye, betook ourselves to the highway again.

We had not gone far before we saw a party of men hurrying in the same direction with ourselves; we endeavoured to overtake them, but upon approaching found that they were not of our way of thinking—they were Hessians. We immediately altered our course and took the main road leading to King's Bridge.

Before long we saw another party ahead whom we knew to be Americans; but just as we overtook them, they were fired upon by a party of British from a cornfield, and all was immediately in confusion again. I believe the enemy's party was small, but our people were all militia, and the demons of fear and disorder seemed to take full possession of everything on that day.

When I came to the spot where the militia were fired upon, the ground was literally covered with arms, knapsacks, staves, coats, hats, and old oil flasks thrown away in the hurry.

By this time only the neighbour whom I mentioned remained with me. He had been unwell for some time and was now so overcome by heat, hunger, and fatigue that he became violently sick. I took his musket and endeavoured to encourage him on, for I was loath to leave him behind.

We had not gone far before we found our retreat cut off by a party of the enemy stretched across the island. I immediately quitted the road and ran into a small boggy spot covered with low bushes and weeds. Into these I crept and squatted down to conceal myself. Several of the British came so

near that I could plainly see the buttons upon their coats. They soon withdrew, however, and left the coast clear again.

I then came out of my covert and went on, still carrying my sick friend's musket. I was faint from hunger, having eaten nothing for more than twenty-four hours, and had slept but little the night before.

Soon I came to a brook where several soldiers had stopped to drink. One man had lain down to drink and did not rise again. Someone said he would kill himself by drinking so much water; another replied that he had already done so—which proved to be the case.

Going on again, I soon found a number of men resting under the fences and bushes. Almost the first I saw was my sick neighbour, sitting with his head between his knees. I was exceedingly glad to find him, for I had little hope of ever seeing him again.

"Come," said I, "get up and go on with me."

"No," said he, looking very pitiful, "I must die here."

I told him he should not die there if I could help it; and after much persuasion, and some force, I succeeded in getting him upon his feet again.

A shower of rain soon came on and wet us through to the skin, but we still moved slowly forward. After proceeding about half a mile, we came to a place where two or three hundred of our men had begun to make a stand with a few field-pieces, expecting the enemy every moment.

A sentinel stopped us from going farther. I told the officer that our regiment was just ahead and that my sick companion would die if exposed all night to the damp cold air.

"Well," said he, "if he dies the country will be rid of one who can do it no good."

A very compassionate gentleman, thought I.

Seeing little chance of escaping by fair means, I watched the sentinel closely. Soon an acquaintance of his came up with a canteen of spirits. After drinking, they fell into conversation. I gave my comrades a wink, and we slipped quietly past the sentinel without his perceiving us.

We soon came up with the regiment resting upon the cold ground after the fatigues of the day. Our company seemed glad to see us, thinking we had been killed or taken prisoners. I was sincerely glad to see them also, for I was once more among friends.

Several of the regiment were missing, among them our Major, a fine man whose loss was much regretted. We were the last who came up; all the others who were missing were either killed or taken prisoners.

### **James Thacher 1777** **An Army Surgeon Treats the Wounded**

*James Thacher, a Massachusetts physician and Continental Army surgeon, left one of the most vivid medical records of the Revolutionary War. He wrote this passage in October 1777, after the hard fighting around Philadelphia, when American hospitals were crowded with wounded and sick from Brandywine, Germantown, and the fall campaign, and army surgeons worked from morning until night amputating limbs, dressing terrible wounds, and trying to comfort dying men far from home.*

October 24, 1777. — This hospital is now crowded with officers and soldiers from the field of battle; those belonging to the British and Hessian troops are accommodated in the same hospital with our own men and receive equal care and attention. The English surgeons perform with skill and dexterity, but the Germans, with a few exceptions, do no credit to their profession; some of them are the most uncouth and clumsy operators I ever witnessed, and appear to be destitute of all sympathy and tenderness towards the suffering patient.

Not less than one thousand wounded and sick are now in this city; the Dutch church, and several private houses, are occupied as hospitals. We have about thirty surgeons and mates, and all are constantly employed. I am obliged to devote the whole of my time, from eight o'clock in the morning to a late hour in the evening, to the care of our patients. Here is a fine field for professional improvement.

Amputating limbs, trepanning fractured skulls, and dressing the most formidable wounds, have familiarized my mind to scenes of woe. A military hospital is peculiarly calculated to afford examples for profitable contemplation, and to interest our sympathy and commiseration. If I turn from beholding mutilated bodies, mangled limbs, and bleeding, incurable wounds, a spectacle no less revolting is presented: miserable objects languishing under afflicting diseases of every description, with emaciated bodies and ghastly visage.

No parent, wife, or sister is there to wipe the tear of anguish from their eyes, or to soothe the pillow of death. They look up to the physician as their only earthly friend and comforter and trust the hands of a stranger to perform the last mournful duties. Frequently have I remarked their confidence in my friendship, as though I were endeared to them by brotherly ties. Viewing these unfortunate men as the faithful defenders of the liberties of our country, far separated from their dearest friends, who would be so lost to the duties of humanity, patriotism, and benevolence, as not to minister to their comfort, and pour into their wounds the healing balm of consolation?

It is my lot to have twenty wounded men committed to my care. One of them, a young man, received a musket ball through his cheeks, cutting its way through the teeth on each side, and through the substance of the tongue; his sufferings have been great, but he now begins to articulate tolerably well. Another had the whole side of his face torn off by a cannon ball, laying his mouth and throat open to view.

### **Joseph Plumb Martin 1777** **"We Were Now in a Truly Forlorn Condition":** **The Army at Valley Forge**

*In December 1777, after defeats around Philadelphia, George Washington's army marched into winter quarters at Valley Forge, where teenage Continental soldier Joseph Plumb Martin wrote about the hunger, cold, and desperation that nearly destroyed the army.*



*The Encampment at Valley Forge. (National Park Service: Rocco)*

We marched for the Valley Forge in order to take up our winter-quarters. We were now in a truly forlorn condition—no clothing, no provisions and as disheartened as need be. We arrived at our destination a few days before Christmas. Our prospect was indeed dreary.

However, there was no alternative but desertion. But we had engaged in the defence of our injured country and were willing, nay, we were determined to persevere as long as such hardships were not altogether intolerable.

I had experienced what I thought sufficient of the hardships of a military life the year before. But we were now absolutely in danger of perishing. We then had but little, and often nothing to eat for days together. Had there fallen deep snows or even heavy and long rainstorms, the whole army must inevitably have perished. Or had the enemy, strong and well provided as he then was, thought fit to pursue us, our poor emaciated car-

cases must have 'strewed the plain.' But a kind and holy Providence took more notice and better care of us than did the country in whose service we were wearing away our lives by piecemeal."

We arrived at the Valley Forge in the evening; it was dark; there was no water to be found, and I was perishing with thirst. I searched for water till I was weary and came to my tent without finding any—fatigue and thirst, joined with hunger, almost made me desperate. I felt at that instant as if I would have taken victuals or drink from the best friend I had on earth by force. I am not writing fiction, all are sober realities. Just after I arrived at my tent, two soldiers, whom I did not know, passed by; they had some water in their canteens which they told me they had found a good distance off, but could not direct me to the place as it was very dark. I tried to beg a draught of water from them but they were as rigid as Arabs. At length I persuaded them to sell me a drink for three pence, Pennsylvania currency, which was every cent of property I could then call my own; so great was the necessity I was then reduced to.

I lay here two nights and one day, and had not a morsel of anything to eat all the time, save half of a small pumpkin, which I cooked by placing it upon a rock, the skin side uppermost, and making a fire upon it; by the time it was heat through I devoured it with as keen an appetite as I should a pie made of it at some other time.

**Ebenezer Fox 1780**  
**Hell Afloat: On the Prison Ship Jersey**

While serving aboard the warship Protector in 1780, Ebenezer Fox was captured by the British and held on the notorious prison ship Jersey, anchored in New York's East River.

The rotting hulk held more than a thousand American prisoners of war under horrific conditions of hunger, disease, and overcrowding. Thousands died there during the Revolution. Writing late in life, Fox recalled the experience with a mixture of grim humor and vivid detail. His account remains one of the most powerful firsthand descriptions of the suffering endured by American prisoners during the war.



Jersey, a British prison ship. (Public Domain)

We continued merrily on our course, without seeing friend or foe, during the next day; but, the following morning, the man at the masthead cried out, "Two sail to the leeward." Mr. Little ascended to the main top With his glass, and soon ascertained that they were two large ships, closely hauled upon the wind, in full chase of us.

Our captain, calling all the hands aft on the quarter deck, expressed his opinion, that the ships in pursuit of us were English, and that we should be captured.

We found that the two ships had got up with us. They proved to be the

Roe-Buck, a forty-gun ship with a double deck, and the mayday, of twenty-eight guns.

To attempt resistance against a force so much our superior would have been unjustifiable; and the flag of thirteen stars and stripes, under which we had sailed with much satisfaction and success, was reluctantly pulled down; and this was the unfortunate end of our second cruise.



A British Army guard watches over American prisoners on the Jersey prison ship. (Library of Congress)

The boats of the enemy were manned and sent alongside of our ship. [Soon], the enemy had ascended the deck.

Their first exploit was to strike or kick every sailor that came in their way, bestowing a variety of opprobrious epithets, among which "damned rebels" was of the most frequent recurrence; then they commenced searching in every part of the ship for articles of value.

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Shortly after, we anchored off Sandy Hook, and preparations were made to examine the prisoners, to ascertain what part of them were Englishmen; or rather, who among them would carry the appearance of able-bodied seamen.

About a third part of our ship's crew were taken on board of their vessels, to serve in the capacity of sailors. The remainder of us were put on board of a wood coaster, to be conveyed on board the noted prison ship called the Jersey.

The idea of being incarcerated in this floating Pandemonium filled us with horror; but the idea we had formed of its horrors fell far short of the realities which we afterwards experienced.

We proceeded slowly up the river towards our much-dreaded place of confinement, and at doubling a point we came in sight of the gloomy-looking hulk of the old Jersey, aptly named by the sailors, "The hell afloat." The Jersey was originally a seventy-four gun ship. She was converted into a prison ship, and continued to be used for that purpose during the remainder of the war.

The idea of being a prisoner in such a place was sufficient to fill the mind with grief and distress. The heart sickened, the cheek grew pale with the thought. Our destiny was before us, and there was no alternative but to submit.

I now found myself in a loathsome prison, among a collection of the most wretched and disgusting looking objects that I ever beheld in human form.

Here was a motley crew, covered with rags and filth; visages palled with disease, emaciated with hunger and anxiety, and retaining hardly a trace of their original appearance.

Our keepers were no respecters of persons. We were all "rebels." The quantity and quality of our fare [food] was the same for all. Each prisoner received two thirds as much as was allowed to a seaman in the British navy.

The bread was mouldy and filled with worms. It required considerable rapping upon the deck before the worms could be dislodged. As for the pork, one would have judged from its motley hues, exhibiting the consistency and appearance of variegated fancy soap, that it was an inhabitant of the ocean rather than of the sty.

But whatever doubts might arise respecting the general species of the beast, the flavor of the flesh was so unsavory that it would have been rejected as unfit for the stuffing even of Bologna sausages.

The flour and the oat-meal were often sour . . . it might be nosed [smelled] half the length of the ship.

The first view of our beef would excite an idea of veneration for its antiquity, and not a little curiosity to ascertain to what kind of an animal it originally belonged. It required more skill than we possessed to determine whether the flesh had once covered the bones of some luckless bull that had died from starvation or of some worn-out horse that had been killed for the crime of having outlived his usefulness.

The manner in which [our food] was cooked was more injurious to our health, than the quality of the food; and, in many cases, laid the foundation of diseases, that brought many a sufferer to his grave, years after his liberation.

The Jersey, from her size and lying near the shore, was imbedded in the mud. All the filth that accumulated among upwards of a thousand men was daily thrown overboard and would remain there till carried away by the tide. The impurity of the water may be easily conceived; and in this water our meat was boiled.

It will be recollected, too, that the water was salt, which caused the inside of the copper to become corroded. Meat thus cooked must in some degree be poisoned; and the effects of it were manifest in the cadaverous countenances of the emaciated beings, who had remained on board for any length of time.

No vegetables were allowed us. Many times since, when I have seen in the country, a large kettle of potatoes and pumpkins steaming over the fire to satisfy the appetites of a farmer's swine, I have thought of our destitute and starved condition, and what a luxury we should have considered the contents of that kettle on board the Jersey.

When any of the prisoners died in the night, their bodies were brought to the upper deck in the morning and placed upon the gratings. If the deceased had owned a blanket, any prisoner might sew it around the corpse, and then it was lowered with a cope, tied round the middle, down the side of the ship into a boat.

The fate of many of these unhappy victims must have remained forever unknown to their friends; for, so large a number, no exact account could be kept of those who died, and they rested in a nameless grave.

The miseries of our condition were continually increasing; the pestilence on board spread rapidly, and every day added to our bill of mortality. The young, in a particular manner, were its most frequent victims. The number of the prisoners was continually increasing, notwithstanding the frequent and successful attempts to escape. The officers of the ship endeavored to make amends for [the escapes] by increasing the rigor of our confinement and depriving us of all hope of adopting any of the means for liberating ourselves from our cruel thralldom, so successfully practiced by many of our comrades.

Of all the prisons, on land or water, for the confinement of the Americans during the Revolutionary war, the "Old Jersey" was acknowledged to be the worst. ■



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In late February, the VBC, in partnership with Unlikely Collaborators, held its first annual StoryFest in Santa Monica, California. During this three-day storytelling festival, attendees toured the *USS Iowa*, immersed themselves in Vietnam narratives through new technology, heard from women veterans who smashed the brass ceiling, watched a theatre performance by a Vietnamese American playwright, met authors at book signings and witnessed firsthand how the legacy of war is passed on through generations. Thank you to all who participated. Planning for StoryFest 2027 has already begun. Stay tuned for more information.  
(Chris Frawley Photography - unless credited otherwise.)



Authors and USMC veterans Karl Marlantes and Elliot Ackerman in conversation.



Veterans Hanna Rozzi, Ellen Haring, Joy Bronson and Wednesday Avedisian on stage to talk about equality for women in the Armed Services and the upcoming documentary *The Fight to Fight*. (Joe Skorupa)



Author and Vietnamese refugee Le Ly Haslip with her book *Child of War, Woman of Peace*.



StoryFest Director Daria Sommers talking to veterans Joy Bronson and Ellen Haring, filmmakers of *The Fight to Fight*.



Conversation and book signings.



Actor Cody LeRoy Wilson performs his one-person play *Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?*



Army veteran and author John McBrearty signs his book.



Former US Coast Guard Commander and Vietnamese refugee Marc Nguyen joins VBC Executive Director Todd DePastino on the *USS Iowa* to tell his story.



Vietnam veteran Ron Hathaway and Neuroscientist Dan Panfil discuss the use of immersive technologies to tell veterans' stories.



Vietnam veterans Steve Foreman and Ron Hathaway share experiences.



Author and USMC veteran Brian O'Hare with fans of his book.



Author Joe Peterburs, veteran of WWII, Korea and Vietnam, greets a fan.

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# WHICH SIDE FREEDOM?

## A Black Soldier in the Continental Army

Boyrereau Brinch, later known as Jeffrey Brace, was born in West Africa around 1742, kidnapped as a teenager, and carried into Atlantic slavery before being sold repeatedly in the Caribbean and New England. In Connecticut, he eventually came into the household of Mary Stiles, a widow in Woodbury who, unlike his earlier enslavers, taught him to read. When she died, Brace passed, "like real estate," to her son Benjamin Stiles. Still enslaved when the Revolution began, Brace entered the American army in 1777 and served to the end of the war. His 1810 memoir, *The Blind African Slave*, is one of the rare first-person Revolutionary War accounts by a Black veteran—one who never forgot the bitter irony of fighting for the liberty of men who were still his "tyrants." Brace even contemplated joining the British, following the thousands of enslaved people who took up the British offer of freedom in return for military service. Brace, however, fought with the Americans, and later wrote that his "services in the American war" secured his freedom.

When this lady [Marry Stiles] died, I descended like real estate, in fee simple to her son Benjamin Stiles, Esq. About four years after her death, her two sons, Benjamin and David, were drafted to fight in the revolution. I also entered the banners of freedom.

Alas! Poor African Slave, to liberate freemen, my tyrants. I had contemplated going to Barbadoes to avenge myself and my country, in which I justified myself by Sampson's prayer, when he prayed God to give him strength that he might avenge himself upon the Philistines, and God gave him the strength he prayed for.

I went into Capt. Granger's company, from hence I was drafted into Capt. Barker's company of light infantry, as they wanted six feet men. I then wanted but a quarter of an inch of being 6 feet 3 inches. We marched to Salem. General Worcester commanded the British under the command of General Howe, who attacked us. We beat them back.

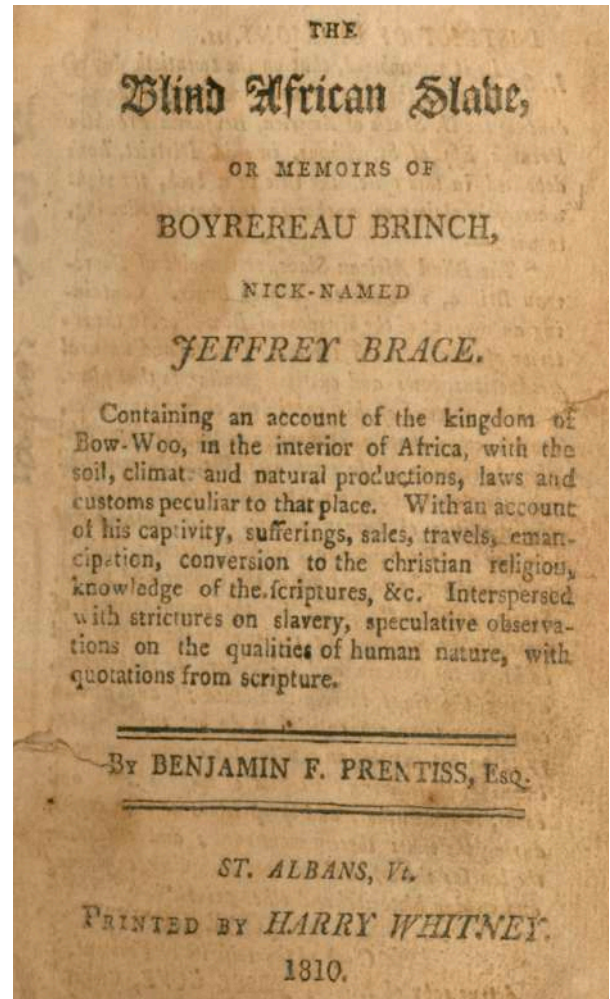
We marched to West Point, and took up winter quarters. While we remained here the soldiers played many boyish pranks. One Samuel Shaw, a brave soldier, but as complete a petty thief as ever graced a camp; not that I would represent him a thievish character; as honesty was never more predominant in any human being, than it was in him, when he pledged himself to any fellow soldier.

However he with myself and some others from our camp, the day before we were to be reviewed, by his Excellency, Gen. George Washington, concluded we would have a soldier-like frolick. Accordingly, we secretly stole from the lines, went to a Farm not many miles distant, which was occupied by a Tory. From him we stole a shoat [young pig]. Shaw was the principle manager in this affair, and we got into camp just before day. We laid the Shoat in the middle of the camp, and sat down, and in the language of gratitude, began conversing upon our success; but short was our confab. As we soon saw the frothing Tory coming for his Hog.

We immediately covered ourselves with our blankets and effected to be asleep. He recognized his property; he went to the Col. to whose regiment we then belonged and reported that we had stolen one of his shoats. Col. [Return] Meigs, came immediately to our company, and with a countenance, that plainly bespoke a determination of punishing us if guilty.

He asked how we came by that Shoat; I answered immediately that the owner had brought it for sale, but that from his manner of conversation (knowing him to have been a tory) we unanimously suspected him to have come as a spy and were determined to keep the Shoat until the officers might have an opportunity of being acquainted with his designs.

My fellow soldiers were glad of the opportunity of confirming the truth of my assertion—which so completely satisfied the Col. of our innocence, together with the circumstance of its lying in fair view, in the middle of the Camp—that he severely reprimanded the man for his insult on him and



Title page for Jeffrey Brace's (*Boyrereau Brinch*) memoir, 1810. (Vermont Historical Society)

his soldiers. The man a little frightened at so unexpected a charge of guilt that he really had the appearance of a condemned culprit and was glad to escape with his dead pig upon his back.

We moved to Hackensack in the Jerseys. Soon after our arrival there, the enemy stole some cattle from our lines. Capt. Granger with twenty chosen men was sent in pursuit of them, with orders to go about two miles to a place called Hackensack-four-corners. I was one of the number.

We pursued our course to a pasture fronting the meadow, into which we discovered [the cattle] had been driven. It was thought prudent, that I should wait upon the hither side of a hill to keep a look out for the enemy.

While I stood there anxiously waiting for their return, I suddenly discovered a man riding up to me not more than eight rods distant on full speed with a pistol in his hand and ordered me to lay down arms.

At first, I thought he was a Jerseyman and was attempting to fool me, as they had played some such pranks before, upon some of the soldiers belonging to our line. Therefore, in return I demanded to whom I was to surrender and by what authority he demanded it.

## WHICH SIDE FREEDOM?

He said I must surrender to him who demanded me in the name of the King his majesty of Great Britain.

I then plainly told him that neither him or his King's majesty would get my arms unless he took them by force.

He immediately cocked his pistol and fired.

I fell flat upon the ground in order to dodge his ball, and did so effectually do it, that he missed me. I rose, he drew his sword and rode up to me so quick that I had no time to take aim before he struck my gun barrel with his cutlass and cut it almost one third off--also cut off the bone of my middle finger on my hand.

As he struck, the horse jumped before he could wheel upon me again. Altho' my gun barrel was cut, I fired and killed him, as he fell I caught his horse and sword.

He was a British light horseman in disguise.

I mounted immediately, and that instant discovered four men on horseback approaching me from different direction.

I fled, passed one man, just before I came to a stone wall. Both of our horses were upon the full run he fired and missed me.

My horse leaped the wall like a deer. They all pursued me.

When we got into the road, they were joined by many more, and all with swords in hand pursued me. I drove my horse as fast as possible, stabbed him with my sword and gun, kicked my heels in his side, but having no spurs, and not being so good a horseman they gained upon me.

I looked forward and saw my Capt. in full view, almost a mile distant.

This encouraged me, and the long shanked negro, soldier with a leather cap, mounted on an elegant English gelding light horse, made all whistle again.

When I came in about twenty or thirty rods, I heard the Captain say, "there come one of our leather caps, and it is Jeffrey. Reserve your fire so as not to kill him!"

However, the men fired, and three balls cut my garments. One struck my coat sleeve, the next hit my bayonet belt, and the third went through the back side of my leather-cap.

They were so close upon me, that the same fire killed four of the British and five horse and wounded some more.

I did not stop for this salute, but pulled on for headquarters. The enemy, being so handsomely saluted upon surprise, made the best retreat possible.

I made no halt until I arrived within our Camp. When I dismounted tied my horse and went to set up my gun, I found I could not open my hand which was the first time that I discovered that I was wounded.

As slight fear and precipitation had turned me almost as white as my fellow soldiers. In consequence of my wounds, I was unfit for duty again for almost three months.

I sold horse saddle and bridle, holsters, pistols and sword, to Col. Sherman for his contract of two hundred and fifty dollars, who thought proper never to pay the same. Yet I felt more gratitude towards the horse than regret for the loss of him, as he with the assistance of divine providence saved my life.

And here I will observe, that I can give no other reason why the enemy did not fire upon me, only I presume, they choose to take me alive. I presume they concluded that I would acquaint them with the state of our army. Perhaps the soldiers thought I might be sold by them and enrich their coffers, as these mercenary beings seem rather more inclined to deal in human flesh and blood than in fighting.

I belonged to one Capt. Baker's company when the attack was made upon us at Hackensack, I was on the flank and the charge was made there; we gave them a warmer salute and lost many brave Yankee-boys. Our Battalion was charged by their light horse, and we beat them off with our bayonets.

After this battle, I was in battle in Stanford, Cambridge, White plains, Monmouth, Princeton, Newark, Froggs-point, Horseneck where I had a

ball pass through my knapsack. All which battles the reader can obtain a more perfect account of in history, than I can give.

At last, we returned to West point and were discharged, as the war was over.

Thus was I, a slave for five years fighting for liberty.

After we were disbanded, I returned to my old master at Woodbury, with whom I lived one year, my services in the American war having emancipated me from further slavery, and from being bartered or sold.

My master consented that I might go where I pleased and seek my fortune. Hearing flattering accounts of the new state of Vermont [which had abolished slavery], I left Woodbury and travelled to the town of Poltney in Vermont.

Here I enjoyed the pleasures of a freeman. My food was sweet, my labor pleasure, and one bright gleam of life seemed to shine upon me.

### A Black Loyalist Chooses the British

*Boston King was born into slavery in South Carolina and, like thousands of other enslaved people during the Revolution, saw the British—not the Patriots—as the more likely path to freedom. When he fled to British lines after the fall of Charleston, he entered a world of war, disease, danger, and military service, only to discover at peace in 1783 that freedom itself might still be taken away. His memoir, first published in 1798, offers a powerful counterpoint to Jeffrey Brace: one Black veteran fought with the Americans and won liberty after the war; the other escaped to the British and feared being dragged back into slavery when the fighting stopped.*

To escape [a master's] cruelty, I determined to go to Charles-Town [Charleston, South Carolina], and throw myself into the hands of the English. They received me readily, and I began to feel the happiness of liberty, of which I knew nothing before, altho' I was much grieved at first, to be obliged to leave my friends, and reside among strangers . . .

I came to Nelson's Ferry [South Carolina]. Here I entered into the service of the commanding officer of that place. But our situation was very precarious, and we expected to be made prisoners every day; for the American had 1,600 men, not far off, whereas our whole number amounted only to 250.

But there were 1,200 English about 30 miles off; only we knew not how to inform them of our danger, as the Americans were in possession of the country.

Our commander at length determined to send me with a letter, promising me great rewards, if I was successful in the business.

I set off on foot about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I expected every moment to fall in with the enemy, whom I well knew would shew me no mercy.

I went on without interruption, till I got within six miles of my journey's end, and then was alarmed with a great noise a little before me.

But I stopped out of the road and fell flat upon my face till they were gone by. I then arose and praised the Name of the Lord for his great mercy, and again pursued my journey, till I came to Mums-corner tavern.

I knocked at the door, but they blew out the candle. I knocked again and entreated the master to open the door.

At last he came with a frightful countenance, and said, "I thought it was the Americans; for they were here about an hour ago, and I thought they were returned again."

I asked, "How many were there?"

"About one hundred," he answered.

I desired him to saddle his horse for me, which he did, and went with me himself. When we had gone about two miles, we were stopped by the picket-guard, till the Captain came out with 30 men.

As soon as he knew that I had brought an express from Nelson's Ferry, he received me with great kindness and expressed his approbation of my courage and conduct in this dangerous business.

Next morning, Colonel Small gave me three shillings, and many fine promises, which were all that I ever received for this service from him. However, he sent 60 men to relieve the troops at Nelson's Ferry.

Soon after I went to Charles-Town and entered on board a man of war.

As we were going to Chesepeake Bay, we [captured] a rich prize [Patriot ship]. We stayed in the bay two days, and then sailed for New York, where I went on shore. Here I endeavoured to follow my trade, but for want of tools was obliged to relinquish it, and enter in service [wage labor].

I then went out in a pilot boat. We were at sea eight days, and had only provisions for five, so that we were in danger of starving. On the 9th day we were taken by an American whaleboat. I went on board them with a cheerful countenance and asked for bread and water.

They carried me to Brunswick [and back into slavery].

It was exceedingly difficult to escape from my bondage, because the river at Amboy was above a mile over, and likewise another to cross at Staten Island. I called to remembrance the great deliverances the Lord had wrought for me, and besought him to save me this once, and I would serve him all the days of my life.

The slaves about Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, have as good victuals as many of the English; for they have meat once a day, and milk for breakfast and supper; and what is better than all, many of the masters send their slaves to school at night, that they may learn to read the Scriptures. This is a privilege indeed.

But alas, all these enjoyments could not satisfy me without liberty! Sometimes I thought, if it was the will of God that I should be a slave, I was ready to resign myself to his will; but at other times, I could not find the least desire to content myself in slavery.

Being permitted to walk about when my work was done, I used to go to the ferry, and observed, that when it was low water, the people waded across the river; tho' at the same time I saw there were guards posted at the place to prevent the escape of prisoners and slaves.

As I was at prayer on Sunday evening, I thought the Lord heard me and would mercifully deliver me. Therefore, putting my confidence in him, about one o'clock in the morning I went down to the river side, and found the guards were either asleep or in the tavern. I instantly entered into the river, but when I was a little distance from the opposite shore, I heard the sentinels disputing among themselves: One said, 'I am sure I saw a man cross the river.' Another replied, 'There is no such thing.' It seems they were

afraid to fire at me, or make an alarm, lest they should be punished for their negligence.

When I had got a little distance from the shore, I fell down upon my knees, and thanked God for this deliverance. I traveled till about five in the morning, and then concealed myself till seven o'clock at night, when I proceeded forward, thro' bushes and marshes, near the road, for fear of being discovered.

When I came to the river, opposite Staten-Island, I found a boat; and altho' it was very near a whale-boat, yet I ventured into it, and cutting the rope, got safe over. The commanding officer, when informed of my case, gave me a passport, and proceeded to New-York.

When I arrived at New York, my friends rejoiced to see me once more restored to liberty and joined me in praising the Lord for his mercy and goodness.

About which time, (in 1783) the horrors and devastation of war happily terminated, and peace was restored between America and Great Britain, which issued universal joy among all parties, except us, who had escaped from slavery, and taken refuge in the English army, for a report prevailed at New-York, that all slaves, in number 2,000, were to be delivered up to their masters.

This dreadful rumour filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror; especially when we saw our masters coming from Virginia, North Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New-York or even dragging them out of their beds. Many of the slaves had very cruel masters, so that the thoughts of returning home with them embittered life to us. For some days, we lost our appetite for food, and sleep departed from our eyes.

The English had compassion upon us in the day of distress, and issued out a Proclamation, importing, that all slaves should be free, who had taken refuge in the British lines.

In consequence of this, each of us received a certificate from the commanding officer at New-York, which dispelled all our fears, and filled us with joy and gratitude.

Soon after, ships were fitted out and furnished with every necessary for conveying us to Nova Scotia. We arrived at Burch Town in the month of August, where we all safely landed. Every family had a lot of land, and we exerted all our strength in order to build comfortable huts before the cold weather set in. ■



# MOLLY PITCHER

## WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTION

By Todd DePastino

You may have heard the legend of Molly Pitcher, which first appeared in the 1830s as the nation was celebrating the last of the Revolutionary War generation.

The nickname “Molly Pitcher” is perfect. “Molly” was 18th century slang for a woman and “Pitcher” conveyed the critical role of water in war-time. During the American Revolution, the hard work of supplying water for cooking, washing, drinking, cleaning wounds, and mopping gun barrels for the next firing fell largely to the thousands of women who served in the Continental Army and state militias at any one time.

Molly Pitcher, then, was not one woman, but many. As historian Emily J. Teipe at the National Archives astutely puts it, Molly Pitcher was to the American Revolution what “G.I. Joe” was to World War II, a collective generic term encompassing masses of anonymous people who served and sacrificed in the cause of our nation.



*A Molly Pitcher heroine at the 1778 Battle of Monmouth as imagined by Currier & Ives, circa 1876. (Public Domain)*

Given the large numbers of women in the Army during the War of Independence, it’s puzzling that we don’t have many vivid first-hand accounts—diaries, letters, memoirs—written by them. That’s why we fall back on composite characters like Molly Pitcher to embody their experiences.

Part of the reason for this thin historical record traces back to General George Washington’s deep ambivalence about these so-called “camp followers.” On the one hand, he needed them to wash clothes, cook meals, and nurse the sick. His Army never had enough men to handle all this work. He also knew that women were good for morale. Many of his soldiers would only serve if their wives could be with them. If Washington kicked the women out, the men would follow.

On the other hand, Washington often regarded these women as a problem to be managed. They consumed scarce rations and slowed his Army down, especially if they were pregnant or traveling with children. They also might have a harmful effect on morale by encouraging “disorder,” a euphemism for drinking and prostitution.

His solution was to allow “humane and industrious women” in camp but to cap their numbers. Some worked in unofficial capacities supporting family and friends. Others were paid members of the military, due rations and subject to military discipline.

Wars tend to upset social order and draw into public life people who had been kept at the margins—women, the poor, the displaced, the very young and the very old. But when the fighting ends, there is often a powerful urge to restore the old order. Women who had fought the Revolution, like women who filled factories in World War II, were urged to step back into domestic and private roles after the peace.

This postwar backlash, in addition to lower literacy rates among women, helps explain the paucity of war memoirs written by women after 1783. It was also considered the height of indignity for a woman even to speak in public. The prohibition against women lecturing or sharing their stories would last until almost the Civil War, after the Revolutionary generation had vanished.

Still, researchers have labored to put flesh-and-bones on Molly Pitcher, to give her a real name and identity to help us understand better the role of women in the American Revolution.

The best claimant to the title is one Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It’s taken decades of research to assemble her story. Mary served with her husband William Hays at the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778. She carried water to exhausted and wounded men under murderous heat. When her husband collapsed, perhaps from heatstroke or a wound, Mary took his place at the cannon and worked it through the battle. We’re fairly certain Mary Hays is the woman described by Joseph Plumb Martin:

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.

Pennsylvania later granted Mary a small annual pension, and nineteenth-century commemorators increasingly identified her as the “real” Molly Pitcher.

Another woman, Margaret Corbin, has an equally strong claim. At Fort Mifflin in November 1776, Margaret Corbin stood with her husband John at an artillery piece in Captain Francis Proctor’s company. When he was killed, she took his place and continued firing until she herself was badly wounded in the arm, chest, and jaw. She earned a place on the Continental Army’s official list of the Invalid Corps.

Congress later granted her half a soldier’s monthly pay and a suit of clothes, making her the first woman in American history to receive a military pension from Congress.

The legend of Molly Pitcher survives because she fills a hole in our memory and stands in for the many women whose labor, endurance, and occasional acts of battlefield courage were essential to the Revolutionary cause. In that sense, Molly Pitcher is less a finished story than an invitation to keep listening for the voices that otherwise would be lost to history.

## Sarah Osborn Benjamin at Yorktown 1781

*One of the rare accounts by a woman who lived and labored with the Continental Army—washing, baking, mending, and carrying food into the trenches—comes from Sarah Osborn Benjamin who was at Yorktown in 1781.*

*In 1837, she gave a pension deposition to prove her husband Aaron Osborn's Revolutionary War service. In doing so, she also created a first-person account of the Battle of Yorktown by a woman. Because her testimony was recorded in the third person by a clerk, we have restored it here as nearly as possible to Sarah's own voice.*



*Sarah Benjamin Osborn lived to be over 100 years old.  
(National Park Service)*

We continued our march to Philadelphia, I riding on horseback through the streets, and came at length to a place toward the Schuylkill where the British had burned some houses. There we encamped for the afternoon and night. We were out of bread, so I was employed in baking all that afternoon and evening. I recollect no females there but Sergeant Lamber-son's wife, Lieutenant Forman's wife, and a colored woman by the name of Letta. The Quaker ladies who came around urged me to stay behind, but my husband said no, he could not leave me.

So the next day we went on again, marching from day to day until we reached Baltimore. There my husband and I, with the forces under General Clinton, Captain Gregg, and several other officers whose names I do not now remember, embarked on board a vessel and sailed down the Chesapeake. There were several vessels in company, and I was in the foremost. General Washington was not in the vessel with me, and I do not know where he was until he arrived at Yorktown, where I saw him again. He may have embarked somewhere else, but I am certain that I embarked at Baltimore, and that General Clinton was in the same vessel with me. Some of the troops went down by land.

We sailed until we had gone up the James River as far as the tide would carry us, about twelve miles from the mouth, and there we landed. The tide being spent, we had a fine time catching sea lobsters, which we ate. We marched immediately for a place I think was Williamsburg. I going alternately on horseback and on foot. When we got there, we remained two days until all the army that had come by land had arrived, and then we marched for Yorktown, or Little York as it was then called.

The York troops were posted on the right, the Connecticut troops next, and the French to the left. In about a day, or less than a day, we reached our encampment about a mile from Yorktown. I was then on foot, and the other females were there also, and my husband was still on the Commissary's guard. What first struck my eye was a large plain between us and Yorktown, and an entrenchment thrown up there. I also saw a number of dead negroes lying around the encampment, whom I understood the British had driven out of the town and left to starve, or else had first starved and then thrown out.

I took my place just back of the American tents, about a mile from the town, and busied myself washing, mending, and cooking for the soldiers, in which I was helped by the other women. Some of the men washed their own clothes. For a number of days I heard the roar of the artillery. The last night the Americans threw up entrenchments, it was misty and foggy, rather wet, though not rainy. Every soldier, as I understood it, threw up

for himself, and afterward I saw those entrenchments and went into them myself. My husband was there at work, throwing up entrenchments, and I cooked and carried in beef and bread and coffee, in a gallon pot, to the soldiers there.

Once, while I was carrying in provisions, I met General Washington. He asked me if I was not afraid of the cannon balls. I answered no, the bullets would not cheat the gallows, and besides, it would not do for the men to fight and starve too.

They dug their entrenchments nearer and nearer to Yorktown every night, or every two nights, until the last. While they were digging that last one, the enemy fired very heavily until about nine o'clock the next morning. Then they stopped, and the enemy's drums beat exceedingly. I was a little way off in Colonel Van Schaick's, or in the officers', marquee, and there were a number of officers present, among them Captain Gregg, who, because of infirmities, did not go out much on duty. The drums kept on beating, and all at once the officers hurried out and swung their hats. I asked, "What is the matter now?" One of them said, "Are not you soldier enough to know what it means?" I answered, "No." Then they told me, "The British have surrendered."

That morning I had provisions ready, and I carried them down to the entrenchments. Four of the soldiers for whom I commonly cooked ate their breakfasts there. I stood on one side of the road and the American officers upon the other, when the British officers came out of the town and rode up to the American officers and delivered what I understood to be the tokens of surrender. I think those were returned again, and the British officers then rode on before the army, who marched out beating and playing a melancholy tune, their drums covered with black handkerchiefs and their fifes tied round with black ribbons. They marched into an old field, grounded their arms there, and then returned into town again to await their destiny.



*The Morning of the Surrender of Yorktown, October 19, 1781.  
(Public Domain)*

I recollect seeing many American officers, some on horseback and some on foot, though I cannot now call them all by name. Washington, LaFayette, and Clinton were among them. The British general at the head of the army was a large, portly man, full-faced, and the tears rolled down his cheeks as he passed. I do not recollect his name, but it was not Cornwallis. I saw Cornwallis afterward and noticed that he was a small man and cross-eyed.

When I went into the town, I noticed two dead negroes lying by the musket house. Out of curiosity I went into a large building nearby, and there I saw cupboards smashed to pieces and china dishes and other wares strewn all over the floor. Among them was a pewter cover to a hot basin with a handle upon it. I picked it up, supposing it had belonged to the British, but the governor came in and claimed it as his. Still, he said he would have the name of giving it away, for it was the last one out of twelve that he could see, and so he presented it to me. I afterward brought it home with me to Orange County and sold it for old pewter, which I have regretted a hundred times.

After two or three days my husband and I sailed back up the Chesapeake to the Head of Elk. We afterward went into winter quarters at Pompton Plains, then to West Point, and later to New Windsor. I continued, as usual, cooking and serving, while my husband remained on duty as a corporal until the army was finally discharged. ■

# A WWII CARTOONIST LAMPOONS THE CONTINENTAL ARMY'S PRUSSIAN SPIRIT

By Todd DePastino

## Baron von Steuben and the Making of a Real Army

America has a long tradition of the “citizen-soldier.” The concept is like an equation: they need to balance each other out for it to work. Too much the citizen, then soldiering suffers. Too much the soldier, then the object of the service, upholding the Republic, gets lost.

When the Revolution began, the Americans were overweighted with citizen zeal. The men who answered the call at Lexington and Concord were mostly local militiamen who drilled now and then, elected many of their own officers, and expected to go home when the immediate emergency had passed.

The Continental Army, created in 1775, was a step toward something more permanent. Eventually, General George Washington convinced the Continental Congress to create unprecedentedly long enlistments—three years or the duration of the war—so that he could have men long enough to train and fight.

Assisting Washington in forming something like a professional army was a colorful Prussian immigrant who called himself Baron von Steuben. Von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge on February 23, 1778, and was horrified by what he saw. This Patriot army was seasoned by hardship and had shown unquestioned courage on the battlefield. But it remained poorly trained, haphazardly equipped, and still guided too much by the “citizen” side of the soldierly equation. This was a war, argued von Steuben, that demanded discipline, coordination, and steadiness under fire.

Von Steuben wasn't really a Baron. Nor was he a general in the Prussian army, as Benjamin Franklin had mistakenly claimed in his letter of introduction to George Washington. But he was a Prussian officer and had risen to captain, though his gaudy uniform with a jeweled medallion suggested something grander. Von Steuben made an unforgettable entrance at Valley Forge, attended by a secretary and servant, and accompanied everywhere by his spoiled Italian greyhound, Azor. For all his theatrical flourish, von Steuben's real magic was his gift for turning a ragged, hungry army into a force that could march, drill, and fight together.

Von Steuben was smart enough not to try to turn these Patriot farmers into little Prussians. At Valley Forge he created a model company—about 120 men drawn from Washington's guard and the different state lines—and drilled them personally in German and French (his English was never adequate). He taught them just the basics.

Those men then returned to their regiments and taught the others. Von Steuben simplified commands, standardized movements, and insisted on regularity in camp. It wasn't just about marching and musket drill but the daily habits that made an army function: sanitation, camp arrangement, inspections, and accountability. He wrote drills by night and taught them by day, staying only a few steps ahead of the army he was remaking.

Sixteen-year-old Joseph Plumb Martin, having served in the more relaxed Connecticut militia, got a rude awakening when he entered von Steuben's Continental Army at Valley Forge. “After I had joined my regiment I was kept constantly, when off other duty, engaged in



Baron von Steuben by Charles Wilson Peale, 1780. (Public Domain)

learning the Baron de Steuben's new Prussian exercise,” he recalled. “It was a continual drill.”

The transformation von Steuben wrought did not happen in an instant, and it did not erase hunger or create boots for those who needed them. But the Prussian helped make the Continental Army something it had not fully been before: a force that could move efficiently and stand in the field with a confidence born of practice.

His larger legacy was the Blue Book—*Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*—which standardized drill, administration, camp order, and military conduct and remained the army's core manual into the War of 1812.

Steuben's manual was not only about how to wheel platoons and fire muskets. It also tried to bring order and hygiene to the daily life of camp.

“The officer of the police is to make a general inspection into the cleanliness of the camp,” the book says, “and not suffer fire to be made anywhere but in the kitchens, and cause all dirt to be immediately removed.”

The regulations deliberately stifled individual initiative and relegated even the fetching of water and wood, again, to a rigid process.

“When any of the men want water, they must apply to the officer of the police . . . all who want water must immediately parade with their canteens before the colours,” and be sent off under two noncommissioned officers. Even a thirsty soldier, in von Steuben's ideal army, did not simply wander off with a bucket.

This is how far Steuben wanted order to reach: not just onto the parade ground, but into the routines of a soldier's everyday life.

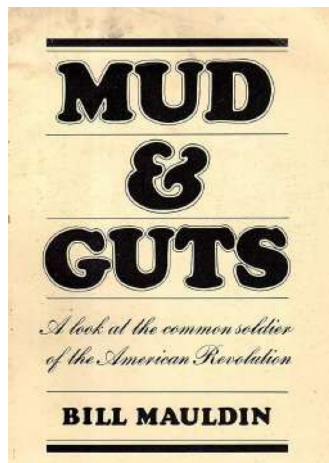
## Bill Mauldin Lampoons the “Prussian spirit” in the Continental Army

In 1976, the National Park Service commissioned World War II GI cartoonist Bill Mauldin to create a book about the common soldier in the American Revolution. The result was brilliant little pamphlet titled *Mud & Guts* (1978).

As he reviewed the historical record, Mauldin found himself no more a fan of George Washington and Baron Von Steuben than he had been of George Patton back in 1944.

In *Mud & Guts*, Mauldin directs his satirical ire at what he saw as the old military habit valuing “show” over “go,” preferring the soldier who looks right on parade over the one who fights well in the field.

In Mauldin’s telling, von Steuben had planted a harmful “Prussian spirit” in the Continental Army with an overemphasis on drills, geometry, inspections, and obedience. Mauldin does not deny that this worked. He sim-



*Mud & Guts - A Look at the common soldier of the American Revolution, 1978. (Public Domain)*



*Cartoon from Bill Mauldin’s Mud & Guts, 1978. (Public Domain)*

ply dislikes what it cost in spontaneity, equality, and common-soldier independence. Ever the citizen, Mauldin couldn’t help but side with the “unlettered, unshaven, sardonic riflemen” over von Steuben, the polished martinet.

His most direct shot at von Steuben shows the Prussian general glaring at an ill-shod soldier with the caption: “... *Und ven I yell ‘achtung!’ I vant to hear dose rags click.*”

In another cartoon, a rough-clad frontiersman is at rest in a makeshift tree stand. He responds to his commander, “*I’m a disgrace to what uniform, sir?*”

It is classic Mauldin: irreverent and funny but also capturing a real tension at work in the Revolution: half-starved, poorly-clothed, and fiercely independent troops chafing against commanders who knew that victory could only be won with order, precision, and uniform standards. ■



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### FAQs

**Do I have to be a member to attend?** No. All VBC events are open to everyone.

**Who can join?** Anyone—veteran or civilian.

**How do I join?** Sign up at [veteransbreakfastclub.org/membership](https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/membership) or mail a check to: Veterans Breakfast Club, 200 Magnolia Pl, Pittsburgh, PA 15228 (“VBC Membership” in memo)

**Can I gift a membership?** Yes—visit our website to purchase a gift membership.

Every veteran has a story. Your membership helps make sure there’s always a place to tell it.

# SAYING GOODBYE: FROM SOLDIER TO CITIZEN

**James Thatcher**

**“On that sad day how many hearts were wrung!”**

*Army surgeon James Thatcher, experienced unexpected heartbreak as he watched the army disband at Newburgh, New York, in 1783. In this passage, he recalls veterans parting in poverty and uncertainty and the formidable Baron von Steuben, the stern Prussian drillmaster of Valley Forge, show mercy to broken soldiers facing an uncertain future. Note: The wording below has been lightly modernized for punctuation and syntax while preserving Thatcher’s meaning and tone.*

At the disbandment of the revolutionary army, when inmates of the same tent, or hut, for seven long years, were separating, and probably forever, grasping each other’s hand, in silent agony, I saw the Baron’s strong endeavors to throw some ray of sun shine on the gloom.

To go, they knew not whither. All recollection of the art to thrive by civil occupations lost, or to the youthful never known.

Their hard-earned military knowledge worse than useless, and with their badge of brotherhood, a mark at which to point the finger of suspicion.

To be cast out on a world, long since by them forgotten. Severed from friends, and all the joys and griefs which soldiers feel.

To go in silence and alone, and poor and hopeless. It was too hard.

On that sad day, how many hearts were wrung!

I saw it all, nor will the scene be ever blurred or blotted from my view.

To a stern old officer—Lieutenant Colonel Cochran of the Green Mountains, who had met danger and hardship at almost every step from his youth, and from whose furrowed face no tear had ever fallen until that moment—the good Baron said what he could to lessen such deep distress.

“For myself,” said Cochran, “I care not. I can stand it. But my wife and daughters are in the garret of that wretched tavern. I know not where to remove them, nor have I the means.”

“Come, my friend,” said the Baron, “let us go. I will pay my respects to Mrs. Cochran and your daughters, if you please.”

I followed them to the loft, the lower rooms being all filled with soldiers—with drunkenness, despair, and blasphemy.

And when the Baron left those poor unhappy castaways, he left hope with them, and all he had to give.

A black man, with wounds unhealed, wept on the wharf. There was a vessel in the stream, bound to the place where he once had friends. He had not a dollar to pay his passage, and he could not walk.

Unused to tears, I saw them trickle down this good man’s cheeks as he put into the hands of the black man the last dollar he possessed. The negro hailed the sloop, and cried, “God Almighty bless you, master Baron!”

**Joseph Plumb Martin**

**“We were to be parted forever.”**

*On April 19, 1783, exactly eight years after the fighting at Lexington and Concord, George Washington announced the War of Independence was officially over. For Joseph Plumb Martin, peace did not bring simple relief. After years of shared hardship and danger, he was leaving his “family of brothers” to face civilian life poor, uncertain, and alone.*

Time thus passed on to the nineteenth of April, when general orders were read which satisfied the most skeptical that the war was over, and the prize won for which we had been contending through eight tedious years.

But the soldiers said but very little about it. Their chief thoughts were more closely fixed upon their situation as it respected the figure they were to exhibit upon leaving the army and becoming citizens—starved, ragged



*Disbanding the Continental Army, November 3, 1783. (Library of Congress)*

and meagre, not a cent to help themselves with, and no means in view to remedy their condition. This was appalling in the extreme. All that they could do was to make a virtue of necessity, and face the threatening evils with the same resolution and fortitude with which they had so long faced the enemy in the field.

At length the eleventh day of June, 1783, arrived. Our Captain came into the room with his hands full of papers and ordered us to empty our cartridge boxes upon the floor—the last order he ever gave us. He then handed us our discharges, or rather furloughs; permission to return home, but to return to the army again if required.

I confess, however, that my anticipation of the happiness I should experience on such a day was not realized. There was as much sorrow as joy transfused upon the occasion.

We had lived together as a family of brothers for several years—setting aside some little family squabbles, like most other families—had shared with each other the hardships, dangers and sufferings incident to a soldier’s life; had sympathized with each other in trouble and sickness; had assisted in bearing each other’s burdens, or endeavoured to make them lighter by counsel and advice. In short, the soldiery, each in his particular circle, were as strict a band of brotherhood as Masons, and, I believe, as faithful to each other.

And now we were to be parted forever, as unconditionally separated as though the grave lay between us.

We were young men, and had warm hearts. I question if there was a corps in the army that parted with more regret than ours did—the New-Englanders in particular. Ah! it was a serious time.

Some of the soldiers went off for home the same day that their fetters were knocked off. Others stayed to obtain their final settlement certificates, which they sold in order to procure decent clothing and money enough to pass through the country with some appearance of respectability among their friends.

At length I obtained my certificates, sold some of them, and purchased a few decent clothes.

I travelled eastward and in the year 1784 arrived in what is now the State of Maine, where I have remained ever since, and where I expect to remain so long as I remain in existence, and here at last to rest my warworn weary limbs.

When those who enlisted for the war engaged in the service, they were promised a hundred acres of land each. But when the country had drained the last drop of service it could screw out of the poor soldiers, they were turned adrift like old worn-out horses, and little said about land to pasture them upon.

Speculators were driving about the country like so many evil spirits, endeavouring to pluck the last feather from the soldiers.

The truth was, the country was served—and that was all that was deemed necessary.

It was, “Soldiers, look to yourselves; we want no more of you.”

I hope I shall one day find land enough to lay my bones in. If I chance to die in a civilized country, none will deny me that. A dead body never begs a grave—thanks for that. ■

# ONE MAN'S QUEST TO CAPTURE THE STORIES OF THE LAST REVOLUTIONARY WAR VETERANS

By Todd DePastino

In 1864, the American Experiment was on the brink of extinction as the Civil War tore the country apart.

That same year, a Connecticut minister named Elias Brewster Hillard quietly embarked on a search for last living veterans of the American Revolution.



Rev. Elias Brewster Hillard, 1825-1895. (Find A Grave Memorial)

Hillard thought that by meeting, interviewing, and photographing these men, who had seen George Washington with their own eyes, he might somehow fan the fading embers of the Republic they forged back in 1776.

“The present is the last generation,” he wrote, “which will be connected by living memory with the Revolution.”

In New York, Ohio, and Maine, Hillard found six men willing and able to sit for portraits and share their stories. They were each over 100 years old and mostly infirm, but proud of their service and sharp in memory.

Hillard’s camera captured faces lined with age. Soft eyes look back, as if seeing beyond us deep into a vanished past.

He published their portraits and brief biographies in *The Last Men of the Revolution*, a small but remarkable book.

“History lives only in the persons who created it,” Hillard insisted.

The same instinct that inspired Rev. Hillard back in 1864 animates the Veterans Breakfast Club. We gather veterans not simply to honor them, but to listen to them as they bear witness to foundational experiences of war and service. Like Hillard, we are aware that we’re always working against the clock. Every generation has its last men and women.

Hillard’s work wasn’t polished history. He relied on memories shaped by decades, and his accounts weren’t rigorously verified. Modern historians, especially Don Hagist in *The Revolution’s Last Men*, have revisited these veterans’ records, correcting details and filling in gaps.



Hillard’s portrait of Daniel Waldo, a Revolutionary War veteran, at age 102. (Public Domain)

What mattered most to Hillard weren’t the precise facts. He was after the look of their faces and cadence of their voices, and what endured in their character from those formative experiences ninety years earlier.

One of those men, William Hutchings of Massachusetts, appears on the cover of this issue. His portrait, made in 1864, bridges an almost unimaginable distance: from 1776 to 2026.

Hutchings’ portrait and Rev. Hillard’s quest served as inspiration for this issue of *VBC Magazine*.

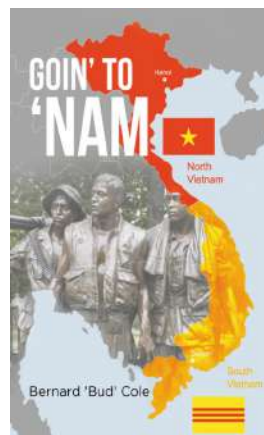
What Hillard accomplished in 1864 with a forty-pound camera, we attempt almost daily with Zoom and PA systems, iPhones and wireless mics. Hillard focused on the last six of our first generation of veterans. We try to reach veterans of all ages, from all the conflicts in living memory.

If we were to speak with Rev. Hillard today, I’m guessing he’d agree with us that understanding our past means sitting down with someone who lived it. And then start listening before it’s too late. ■



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Because of our donors and sponsors, the Veterans Breakfast Club is making a historic change in 2026: **every in-person storytelling breakfast will be completely free—food included, for veterans and non-veterans alike.**

Since 2008, the Veterans Breakfast Club has gathered veterans to share their stories with the public. For nearly two decades, the stories were always free—but the breakfast itself carried a cost.

In 2026, that changes. We will no longer request payment to cover the breakfasts.

We're doing this for a simple reason: **to remove barriers.** We want every veteran, no matter their income, to feel welcome. So, beginning this spring, no price tag. Just stories, conversation, and community.

This step is possible only because of the extraordinary generosity of our donors and sponsors. Thanks to your support, and a banner year for giving in 2025, we're able to pass these benefits along and invest directly in what matters most: bringing people together to listen.

To our sponsors, members, and donors: **thank you for making this possible.** And we look forward to seeing you in the room in 2026!

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**"The Veterans Breakfast Club has never been about the meal. It's the stories, the listening, and the fact that everyone is welcome at the table."**

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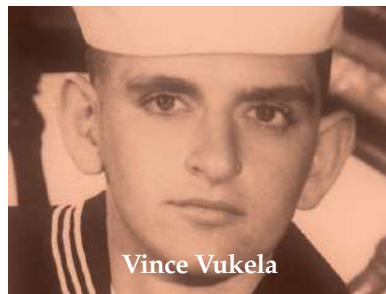
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