Two Little-Known Molly Pitchers

In keeping with this volume’s emphasis on the non-famous, we are pleased to present the following articles on Mollie Brown and Minerva White-
man. Although written 101 years apart and from very differing perspectives, each of the articles ties its heroine to Molly Pitcher.

In the old Carlisle Cemetery, Cumberland County, an impressive statue and monument mark the grave of the famous Molly Pitcher. She was Mary Lud-
wig, a Carlisle servant girl who followed her husband into the Revolutionary War, and her story is well known. At the Battle of Monmouth (NJ) she carried water from a nearby spring to the soldiers on the battlefield. When her husband was wounded and the cannon he had been manning was about to be removed from the field, Mary seized the ramrod and kept the gun in action. After the battle, she continued carrying water to the wounded and was greeted as “Molly Pitcher.” When the war ended she returned to Carlisle to eke out a living as a washer woman until she was properly recognized for her heroism and granted a pension. She died in 1832.

The first article from the April 20, 1854, Christian Advocate tells the story of Molly Brown. Sub-
mitted for publication by William Seibert, son of the Philip Seibert of the first paragraph, it tells of the conversion and faith of an unforget-
table woman. This Methodist Molly Pitcher died in 1833, one year after her more famous contemporary.

The story of equally unfor-
gettable Minerva Whiteman by noted Evangelical minister and historian A.D. Gramley both conveys an interesting account that might other-
wise be lost and also illustrates the attention of Rev. Gramley to one of God’s humble creatures that many others would have gladly passed over. Gramley fittingly notes that the remains of this spunky and deter-
mined woman lie not far from those of Molly Pitcher, a more celebrated but no more courageous figure than Minerva Whiteman.
Chambersburg, Pa. April 4, 1854. In June 1803 the Philip Seibert family emigrated to this place from Baltimore, Maryland – he a member of the Lutheran Church, but his wife belonging to the then despised and ridiculed Methodists. When she arrived in Chambersburg, Mrs. Seibert found but three Methodists residing in the town – the rest, consisting of five or six, resided in the country. The news of her being a Methodist had preceded her arrival, and, as it appeared afterward, the neighbors in the vicinity in which she was to reside had held a caucus and decided to have no communications whatever with the family.

In those early days of Methodism, singing formed a prominent part around the family fireside, as well as in public worship, and it was quite common to hear the voices of praise ascending from houses occupied by them. In the songs of Zion, they worshipped the God of their salvation by singing with the spirit and understanding the message the words conveyed. They also taught their children to sing these good, old-fashioned hymns – still retained in our excellent Hymn Book. I speak of such songs as:

And let this feeble body fail,
And let it faint or die.

and

O glorious hope of perfect love!
It lifts me up to things above.

and

O joyful sound of gospel grace!
Christ shall in me appear.

These beautiful hymns they sang with a melodious voice and spirit that realized all the poet felt who composed them. And while sending their voices in prayer and praise to be wafted by ministering spirits to the throne of God, they taught their children to come in with them.

At a quarterly meeting occasion, and perhaps the first one in 1803 after the arrival of the Seiberts, Mollie (the subject of this sketch, and who then resided about eight miles from town) came to hear these strange people preach and to judge them for herself. This was at the earnest solicitation of her sister and niece, both of them sometime before having united themselves with the church. Never having heard any good of the Methodists, she reluctantly yielded to their request. Alas, the preaching in the forenoon made no impression on her mind.

After this was over, she was invited to go with her sister and her niece to the residence of the Seibert family to get something to eat. While the sister of the house was busy getting refreshments for her guests, she commenced singing

And let this feeble body fail
And let it faint or die.
My soul shall quit the mournful vale
And soar to worlds on high.
After starting the hymn, she left it to her two children (one nine and the other seven years of age) to carry on. Once in a while she would continue to strike in, to keep them properly in tune.

Molly, as will appear at the close of this narrative, was deeply affected—but she tried to conceal the deep emotions working in her breast. Nothing more was heard of the effect produced by this singing until the day of her death. To her it was the handwriting on the wall. The trembling of Belshazzar seized her, she feared her feeble body might fail and die—and her unprepared soul sink into hell. Her stony heart now subdued and prepared for the word of life, she went again at night to hear the preaching—with a heart open to conviction. The seed was sown on good ground, the stones had been removed, and the fruit that sprang up in a few weeks enabled her to say that God had power on earth to forgive sins.

After Molly had obtained the knowledge of salvation by the remission of her sins, she united with the Methodist Episcopal Church in this place. Although she then resided eight miles from town, nothing but sickness could prevent her from walking in on Saturday and remaining until Monday morning—so that she might enjoy the full benefit of a Sabbath spent in the sanctuary of God. It was amiable in her sight, and no sacrifice was too great to afford her enjoying all the blessings of Christ. Molly was poor in this world’s goods but rich in faith and Christian experience.

Prior to her conversion she had been the mother of twenty-one children, all of whom she survived. In the days of her youth she had followed her husband, who was a soldier in the Revolutionary War for American independence. She shared with him the dangers and privations of the army. At the Battle of Trenton she supplied the wounded with water while bullets were flying thick and fast around her—but the cry of “Water! Water!” from the wounded made her, she said, forget the dangers of a battlefield.

The last few years of her life she received a pension from the state of Pennsylvania of forty dollars per annum. When Molly received the first payment, she never had had so much money in her life at any one time and she didn’t know what to do. She went to the stores and bought all she thought she needed, but still she had money left. Then, being a lover of good strong coffee, she went back and laid in an additional bag. But long before the six months had expired, before she could draw the semi-annual twenty dollars, her money was all gone and Molly had to live again by faith.

From 1803, the time of her conversion, until 1813 she resided eight miles from town. From 1813 until 1824 she resided about three and a half miles from town. From the last named year until her death in 1833 she lived in town. But no matter where her residence was, she always was a regular attender at the meetings of the society. It was her duty, as well as a pleasure, to testify that God had power on earth to forgive sins. She wanted to impart this knowledge to all who sought Him as she had sought Him. Molly thought little of walking eight miles to town, and then eleven more to Shippensburg to be present at a love feast—to deliver her
testimony to Jesus and to tell what God had done for her. She usually was the first on the women’s side to rise and speak her experience.

Molly had some peculiar notions – notions that the church today would do well to diffuse among the membership. One was that the Gospel had done so much for her that she must do all she cold for it. When told a thing was not required of her she would usually reply, “I must do something, for I cannot be happy if I do not – the church has done so much for me.”

She taxed herself twenty-five cents for quarterage – and for church repairs and for missionary purposes from twenty-five to fifty cents. But it often happened that when Molly came to town on quarterly meeting occasions, she had nothing to give. When this was the case she was unhappy, and her usual recourse was borrowing. “When I get a job of spinning done that I now have on hand,” she would say, “I will pay you back again.” If unsuccessful in borrowing, she would beg twenty-five cents for quarterage. This obtained, Molly was happy – although there was no meal in her barrel or oil in her cruse at home. Her faith was strong and she would sing

Yet one thing secures us, whatever betide;
The promise assures us the Lord will provide.

And it was even so with Molly, for her bread and water were sure – if not in her own house, then in the houses of her Christian friends where she was always made welcome and never knew what it was to want.

From 1813 to 1824, when she resided three and a half miles from Chambersburg, in coming to town she had to cross the Falling Spring, a stream that rarely freezes. For foot passengers to cross over, planks were laid with their ends resting on stones. But Molly could not walk the plank, and every time she came to town she had to wade this stream which was from thirty to forty feet wide and from five to nine inches deep. No matter how cold the day, she would take off her shoes and stockings and pass through barefooted – and at this time she was over seventy years of age. When expostulated with for the danger she exposed herself to, her ever-ready exclamation was “Glory to God, He protects me; glory to His ever-blessed name, He keeps me from taking cold.” Nor could her friends ever perceive that she had suffered any injury by wading the stream to get to her class meeting – even if she knew there would be no preaching. Class meeting and social conversation with her friends amply rewarded her for the toil in walking and the risk of crossing the stream.

Once while she resided at this place there was a camp meeting at brother Light’s place opposite Williamsport, Maryland. Molly walked to this place – three and a half miles to Chambersburg, and then twenty-five miles to Williamsport. Then she waded across to get to the camp meeting. It is true that the river was low at the time, but Molly had perhaps never seen the Potomac before. Her anxiety to get to the camp ground urged her on. Trusting and confiding in God to deliver her from all dangers, she forded the river safely.

On the 13th of March, 1833, Molly sent for the writer of this narrative and stated she wanted to see him. I went in and found her propped up in bed. Her
voice was loud and strong. She had no particular request to make, but said, “I thought I was going when I sent for you, and I wished you to be present.” She then commenced shouting “Glory, glory, I shall soon walk the streets of the New Jerusalem; I shall soon see my blessed Jesus and shout loud ‘Hallelujah’s’ in heaven.”

After her sentiment had in a measure subsided, I observed to her, “Molly, you certainly love to sing.” This started her again and she said, “Yes, and I will soon be singing in heaven.” After she had quieted down I remarked, “Remember those good old-fashioned hymns we used to sing when you first joined the society.” She gave her assent in a gust of praise and I commenced with

\[
\text{And let this feeble body fail} \\
\text{And let it faint or die.}
\]

During the singing she responded to the lines, every one of which seemed to suit her case, with loud shouts of praise.

After the singing was over, a prayer was offered. After we rose from our knees and Molly had calmed down enough to talk, she commenced her story:

Thirty years ago, when William was a little boy, I came to town with my sister to hear the Methodists. I had heard a great many bad things about them, but I had never heard any of their preachers. My sister Peggy and her daughter had been converted some time before, and at their request I came with them to the quarterly meeting to hear for myself. The preaching in the morning did not affect me. My heart was hard and my eyes were blinded; I neither felt nor saw myself a sinner before God. After preaching we were invited to William’s father’s to get something to eat. While his mother was preparing the meal, she started the hymn he has just sung – leaving it to him and his sister Mary to carry on while she would strike in once in a while to keep them on the tune. To hear two such little children singing as they did was remarkable. And the words –

\[
\text{My soul shall quit this mournful vale,} \\
\text{And soar to worlds on high.}
\]

The scene before me, with the import of the words, made a deep impression on my mind. I felt that the words sung were not my experience – but if my feeble body was to fail and die, my soul would be lost and sink into hell. The tears commenced running down my cheeks, but I was ashamed to own the feelings working in my heart. When they wished to know what the matter was, I told them a lie. I said I had the toothache, but it was not so – it was the heart-ache. And now he comes and sings the same hymn again. It was the first to awaken me – to break my hard and stony heart, and to bring tears to my eyes. And it will be the last I shall hear until I reach that heaven of joy and love that I know is reserved for me. Glory! Glory!

I left her about nine o’clock a.m. on the above day not thinking, from her loud and strong voice, that the messenger of death was near at hand. Her ability to talk and shout as she had done for the last hour, without any apparent decrease of physical ability, led me to conclude that she might survive for some days. But judge of my surprise, when I came home between twelve and one o’clock to dine, at the news that Mollie was dead. She had entered, we reasonably hoped, into the rest prepared for the people of God. And from all I could learn, the hymn of
Charles Wesley we sung was the first to awaken her and was the last to cheer her before she entered into rest.

This sketch of Mollie Brown, who moved in a humble sphere of life and yet adorned the profession that she made, is offered to stimulate others to seek that inheritance that is full of life and immortality. Thus lived and thus died Mollie Brown, in the eighty-fourth year of her age and thirtieth year of her Christian experience. Her remains lie in our graveyard, but there are few who can point to the spot where she is buried.

**The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Ever Met**

*A Poor Man’s Molly Pitcher*

by A.D. Gramley, 1953

*Mt. Holly Springs, Pa. November 28, 1953.* The most unforgettable little old woman I ever met was Minerva W. Whiteman, the exacting toll-gate keeper in the picturesque gap in Mt Holly Springs. This progressive village originated in 1750, and the first dwelling was located in Upper Holly. Prior to this, the geography now occupied by the borough was a landscape of forests. This strategically located village is six miles south of historic Carlisle, where the pure water of Mountain Creek cuts through South Mountain. Free from chemicals and other impurities, this stream gives the area its fame and is host to two great paper mills. Three-fourths of the filter paper made in the continental United States is manufactured in the Upper Holly Paper Mill. Important condenser paper of the highest quality is made by the Schweitzer Paper Company in the lower mill.

The settlement stretches up through the gap, which is barley wide enough to support both a railroad and a highway. Between the spots where the highway crosses the stream and the railroad, there is nestled by the side of the road a little old stone house with a toll gate attached. Here Minerva held sway for many years as the foxy keeper of the gate.

A toll gate was a place where you pay toll. It was so arranged that a long pole, or pike, could be swung horizontally across the highway to stop traffic, and a suitable person was appointed to collect the gate fees. Vehicles of all kinds were supposed to stop and pay toll, and such fees were used to pay for the upkeep of the road. These roads were called turnpikes and became prominent in America around 1785, when the building of better roads became necessary for the transportation of United States mail.

The first turnpike was built in Virginia, and the most famous of them was the post road built from New York City to Boston. Most of the American turnpikes were built between 1800 and 1840. In those good old horse and buggy days, people traveled in such a way as not to break the speed limit.
The Harrisburg-Baltimore Turnpike Association officials employed Minerva Whiteman as their gate keeper at Mt. Holly Springs. Minerva was trustworthy, but a bit eccentric. She wore an old-fashioned dress, an old-fashioned bonnet, an old-fashioned mood, and old-fashioned methods. With a money-box in her hands, she came out to collect the toll from the traveling public.

In connection with her official duties as gate-fee collector, Minerva conducted a small store located on the side porch. Customers could not enter the miniature store, and the window-sill was used as a counter. She sold candy, pens, pencils, buttons, thread, matches, marbles, and other notions to the school children who came down from the Upper Holly school house. Emma Donnelly told the writer that as a school girl she bought many an article or trinket at this wayside miniature John Wanamaker store in the gap.

The little old lady at the toll gate announced her fees in an alto voice. She charged according to the number of horses in the team. The kind of vehicle used, and whether the tires were broad or narrow. It was her habit to measure the width of the tires by her apron strings and thus determine the amount of toll to charge. Minerva was a bit odd and somewhat whimsical, archaic and curious – but she was a Napoleon in finances.

Minerva secured her drinking water from a strong spring nearby. Just across the pike from her residence was an old wood-shed, and beside it was the kettle place where she heated her wash-water. It was Minerva’s custom in her older days, however, to sleep in her rocking chair. She did not undress or go to bed. For years and years she did this – and seldom used a wash tub, washboard or wash line.

One time a sinister man came to rob the little old lady at the gate. Her front door had a protective chain attached to it, and this allowed the door to swing open only a few inches. Though the bandit could not crawl through the restricted opening, he demanded money. She handed him a $5.00 bill, and in so doing she scratched his face with her untrimmed finger nails.

In 1863, General Fitzhugh Lee and his army passed through the toll gate on their way to Gettysburg, and I do not think she was able to collect any toll from the Confederate soldiers. General Lee had shelled the historic city of Carlisle and was compelled to retreat towards the south.

Mr. Donnelly, the father of Mrs. Iva B. Crumlich of Shepherdstown, was the night watchman in the Upper Holly Paper Mill for years. He became a special friend of Minerva and at her request would clean and oil the revolvers she used at the toll gate. One of these guns is in the possession of Mrs. Crumlich today, and is a treasured memento.

Passing school children would hasten their tardy steps a bit whenever they had occasion to pass through the toll gate. A feeling of strangeness and weirdness, mingled with magical influences, would possess their timid hearts as they passed that way. It was not easy for a child to pass unafraid.

The story is told of two mischievous boys who always saw the funny side of life and who loved to play innocent tricks. One day they saw two shoes parked
in a fence corner, an old fisherman having taken off his shoes to climb over the fence and wade in the fresh stream water below. He was having a good time catching fish – and not concerned about his shoes. “Let’s hide his shoes and then crawl into the bushes and watch his dire predicament,” one boy said. “No!” said the other, “let us each put a dollar bill in the shoes and then hide in the nearby bushes and watch his great enjoyment.” This they did, and they received more than their money’s worth in the rich joy they found in their kindness.

Other mischievous but less generous boys teased Minerva and tantalized the little old gate keeper. To vex her a bit, when opposite the gate these boys imitated farmer voices and cried out, “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” to fool Minerva. Thinking that teams of horses were in the gateway, she came out to get the toll. When she saw it was a group of mischievous boys, she remarked, “We do not charge for passing jackasses, only for horses and mules.”

Mr. Addison Wolf, who is still living at an old age, told the writer that he knew Minerva. Once, when he was a young man, he tried to avoid paying the toll. But he failed in his attempt. He and his boy friend had not gone very far unannounced when they heard the loud reports of an enraged gun. The toll gate lady shot after them, and the gap echoed and re-echoed with a loud, “Bang! Bang! Bang!” Mr. Wolf says he can hear those shots to this day. It made a vivid impression on the young men. This seemingly impulsive act on the part of this wise little woman at the gate was to frighten the passing offenders into obedience and to warn them. Thus the miscreants were caught in their misdemeanor, and no one was able to slip through the gate unknown to her constant vigil.

One day Minerva spied a transient hobo striking a match to build a wayside fire. She approached him and reprimanded him for usurping her place – set apart for the cremation of her garbage. She told him plain words that he had no business there and peremptorily ordered him to leave the place at once. The stranger resented her orders and became somewhat abusive. Minerva immediately retraced her steps and got her gun out of a shadowy place and shot three times over and against the mountain. This scared the knight of the road, and he hurriedly gathered up his belongings and partially cooked victuals before fleeing post haste up the pike towards Gettysburg and disappearing in the distance. This showed her spunk and courage, for she was unafraid.

Minerva was economical, and she had a genius for handling financial affairs. She was a shrewd business woman and did not waste any resources. She was fair and just and believed in the motto, “Honesty is the best policy.” Minerva Whiteman died October 27, 1905, and her funeral services were held at the old toll gate.

After her death, $4,300 in strange and antiquated paper money of all kinds of denominations was found hidden in crevices and under boards in the tumbled-down premises where she lived. Dr. J. Raymond Snyder, a Spanish-American War veteran, told the writer that he saw the hostler of Charles H. Mullin bring in a half-bushel basket full of greased coins on horseback to his residence in Mt. Holly Springs. Minerva greased her coins to keep them from tarnishing, and so they
would wear longer while in circulation. As Minerva had no legal heirs, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania confiscated all the money.

When Dick Jordan, the colored drayman, hauled her trash ashes away with his old horse and wagon, $300 in greased silver dollars rolled out of the bottom of the ash barrel on his cart. This was quite a thrilling experience for the drayman. Dan Franciscus, at the age of 84 years or more, told me that he used to roll that identical barrel around in the old woodshed and did not know that it contained $300.

There was also a soft side to the old gate keeper. Miss Lizzie Franciscus would stop at the toll gate on her way to work at the Upper Holly Paper Mill and wind Minerva’s eight-day clock. She also brought the Carlisle Sentinel, a daily newspaper, for Minerva. After she had finished reading these papers, Minerva would throw them over the back of her rocking chair to form a cushion for her humped back – the more she read, the thicker the cushion. Minerva took a liking to Lizzie, who performed like a real scout girl and did chores for her. As a reward, Lizzie received a legacy of $500 from Minerva.

Minerva was once a pretty young girl and had black hair. In her younger days she worked in the Upper Holly Paper Mill. She had a winsome and charming personality, and with it all she had a cast iron constitution that enabled her to cut her own firewood and shovel her own snow in the winter time. Indeed, she had in her strange makeup a powerful police force – for she was known not only for keen business acumen, but also for her militant spirit. She was buried in the old cemetery in Carlisle, not far from the burial place of Molly Pitcher, the heroine of the Revolution – a kindred spirit who would have approved of Minerva.