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The Story of Hannah Weston: and Her Part in the First Naval Engagement of the Revolution, June 12, 1775

Daughters of the American Revolution, Hannah Weston Chapter (Machias, Me.)

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The Story of

Hannah Weston

and Her Part in the
First Naval Engagement of the
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Daughters of the American Revolution
Machias, Maine
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FOREWORD

One hundred and fifty years ago the beauty of a June day was broken by the sound of guns in Machias Bay. A pioneer colony, which had barely established itself, dared unhesitatingly to resist the first faint hint of British supremacy in its midst. Honored are the names of those intrepid men and women who forgot themselves in their devotion to their country.

Among the many names which have become loved household words in Machias Valley is that of Hannah Weston. This record of her life and service has been prepared at the suggestion of the Hannah Weston Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, Machias, Maine. Its committee, consisting of Mrs. Julia P. Saunders, Mrs. A. K. Ames, Mrs. Lucy M. Bailey, gladly arranged to have this book published. The Memorial Centennial of Machias and Mr. Drisko's "Life of Hannah Weston" were reference books in preparing this account. The tribute is written by the daughters of the late William Bartlett Smith.
Hannah Weston—name honored everywhere by the Daughters of the American Revolution as well as by the wider circle of patriotic sons and daughters of America! The heroic story of Hannah (Watts) Weston and her sister-in-law, Rebecca Weston, brings up vividly before one the thrilling times in which they lived.

The bravery, the patriotism of the New England communities in colonial days has never been questioned. Their minute-men are symbols of all that is lofty. But we must consider carefully what patriotism involved to the colonists on the shores of eastern Maine. The British were strongly established on both sides in close proximity. They could sail quickly and easily from the Canadian Provinces, or from Boston, to the Maine seacoast, where the settlements were feeble ones. Machias was settled in 1763 and Chandler’s River (now Jonesboro) at about the same time, and all, the small groups of families who came to these localities from time to time built up the towns very slowly.
curred not so long before, was Hannah Weston's great grandmother. The sad memory of similar manifestations of hostility was not far away. The true story of the relations of the Indians to these colonists of the eastern provinces cannot be told briefly. with justice. The situation was unusual. The Eastern Indian Department was recognized by the government as distinct, and Colonel Allan was appointed Chief Commissioner in charge of it. He was a man of remarkable ability and through his breadth of vision and great discretion, the Indians, as a whole, remained friendly and helped to save the Machias Valley during the early years of the Revolution. They visited often in the homes of the early settlers; and stories of their heroism and bravery were the themes of story and song. It was of one of these true and tried natives that the lines were written:

"He of Nature's nobleman, noblest of his race,
In the Happy Hunting Grounds, now hath found a place."

War today brings before us the picture of well-trained forces, of the sound of rifle and cannon, of the waving of flags and the reverberation of many feet. In 1775 it meant a struggling and impoverished people, a republic that had not yet been or-
ganized, nor even named. It meant, too, a straggling army, poorly furnished in every way, armed often, as at Lexington, with the simple tools from the farmer's barn.

The situation at Machias was in every sense unique, when the echoes of the guns of Lexington reached this northeastern coast of Maine. A weak colony had been established there; weak in numbers, but strong in its undaunted patriotism. "A hot-bed of patriotism" was the comment of the British upon it. Every citizen was ready to respond to his country's need. Even the brave and scholarly pastor, Rev. James Lyon, sympathized with the ardent spirit of his people, and had his own well-considered plans for America's future. An old letter tells us of his writing to Washington about a plan to win over Nova Scotia to the side of the new-born republic. Lyon wrote to Washington, "I shall—pray—as I ever do that God may smile on the American arms till all our enemies are subdued before us."

With such a spirit burning in the dark forests of the Machias Valley, the historian realizes more easily how quick and instantaneous was the community's response to the needs of that hour.
At the beginning of this early chapter in our national history, we must not forget how sincere had been the interest of Capt. Ichabod Jones of Boston in the good of this place. From as far back as 1765, when he was no longer in active service as shipmaster, he had been free to enjoy visiting along our coast. He always took pains to put provisions on board to help in the exchange of lumber. On this cruising, Machias had been especially called to his attention, and he decided to come here. It speaks well for Jones as a man and as a trader that his second trip soon followed and that he was invited by the Fosters and others to join with them in building a double saw mill on the west bank of the East Machias River. Still a third trip was made that summer. The next year came Capt. Jones' nephew, Judge Stephen Jones, as he was known and honored here for fifty-six years. In April 1774, Capt. Jones brought his family here on a visit which turned out to be a prolonged one; for he felt sure that Boston would soon be in the midst of a serious disagreement with the Mother country.

One year passed and Machias had early tidings of the battle of Lexington and had divined its significance. Capt. Jones was now here loading the Unity and the Polly for Boston. Arrived there, he
the 19th of April it was not for them to build British barracks.

On Sunday the eleventh Benjamin Foster summoned the leading men to a secret meeting in the woods just outside the village, on the road to Machiasport. This man had been in the battle of Louisburg in the old French war, and he could not be lured by any military glamor. Even these picked men had to acknowledge that they were facing a grave issue in setting an isolated hamlet against Great Britain.

An epic poet, an inspired painter, could do no more than hint of the majesty involved in this face-to-face deliberation of free-born men. The wilderness in which they were standing bore its witness to the arguments on the one side. These were not unpractical men. It was their very shrewdness which had made them devote their energies to that timber with which nature had bountifully supplied them. Yet timber, like money, must needs change hands if the hungry are to be fed.

"Yes," said the other side, "if we are of the wilderness, let us perish with the wilderness. If, however, the men of Lexington are our brothers, shall we do the impossible, take possession of the
“Margaretta” and make the officers prisoners?”
“Further assaults and certain destruction” could not be denied.

The parley must come to an end. Benjamin Foster, on the one side, stepped across the brooklet at their feet, and called upon those who were equal to the summons to follow him. His spirit struck fire. The majority followed him instantly. The others paused, as true men, for reconsideration of their own ground, and then they, too, “took the step” together. To a man the company declared war and decided on instant action.

The church service was going on and Capt. Jones, as well as the officers of the “Margaretta,” was there. Secure these, and the vessels could be taken without bloodshed. Muskets in hand, a few men turned their steps to the meetinghouse. It was one of our warm summer days, even thus early in the month. Through one of the opened windows, Parson Lyons’s servant, London Atus, descried this warlike band crossing a foot-bridge leading from Dublin Mill Island to Single Mill Island. He cried out in alarm and jumped through the window at his side. Suspicion at once filled the room. Jones, as well as Capt. Moore and the officers, took to the
open windows. Jones himself escaped to the woods where he remained for several days. The officers of the Margaretta made their way to White's Point, near the old Toll House, where the Margaretta lay. When all were on board, Capt. Moore at once weighed anchor and dropped down below the Narrows. From there he sent word that if his vessels were touched, the town would be attacked.

Undismayed, Foster and the others planned to take the sloops the next morning. Foster's vessel got aground, but O'Brien did not flinch from making the attack alone. The contest was sharp and close. It ended in the fall of Capt. Moore at the hands of Samuel Watts. The Margaretta was brought up in triumph on this same Monday, June 12th. It is interesting that we have the names of about thirty of our men who won this extraordinary victory. A victory marked in history as the first naval battle of the Revolution.

When this news of the arrival of the British ships was brought from Machias to Chandler's River, it was quickly spread from house to house, and the men responded in full force to what they knew was their country's call. All who could leave their homes (about twenty in number) hastened without delay to join the forces at Machias. A tedious jour-
ney of sixteen miles lay before them through a pathless stretch of woods, meadows, and streams. Hastily equipping themselves with such meagre ammunition as they happened to have on hand, they gathered naturally, at the home of one who had always been a leader among them, Josiah Weston. There they quickly made their last arrangements for the rough journey to Machias. They planned to blaze a trail for those who might join them later. It was the part of Hannah Weston, with a keen sense of the seriousness of the situation, to make a careful note of the number of men and their equipment. With characteristic bravery she helped the little party to set off. Among them was her own husband, as well as her brother Samuel who, though only eighteen, was to take a valiant part on the morrow.

The next day the women were busy about their daily work, with many an unspoken prayer upon their lips for the safety of their dear ones in their hazardous undertaking. New tasks now fell into the hands of the women, for there were no able bodied men left behind. There were the cattle and the gardens to be cared for; but in one home all were alike neglected for Hannah and Rebecca realized that new forms of women’s work lay before
them. When Hannah made her survey of the ammunition with which the little party was equipped, she saw how inadequate the supply was and, with keen instinct, she perceived that more powder must be sent at once to Machias. The messenger, who was sent on Sunday to procure more, refused to return. The only way to send conveniently was by boat but that was impossible now. Keenly realizing how unprepared the men at Machias were, and the probable superior equipment of the British forces, she knew that there was no question about the necessity for sending more help. With her quick perception and a bravery characteristic of the New Englander of those early days, she decided that she herself must go at once to bring help. Hastily collecting all the powder, lead and pewter which she and her sister-in-law Rebecca could find, the two girls started eagerly on Monday, June 12th, through what was practically an unbroken forest. It was to be a strange and rough journey with only a few blazed trees marked by the men who had gone to Machias the day before. The ground beneath their feet was brown and slippery with the fallen needles from the great white pines. Softly swaying in the June breeze, they towered eighty or more feet above the heads of the two young patriots. Many of
these trees were as majestic as those which Capt. Jones had already marked for “King's Timber.” The air was fragrant and soft and their spirits buoyant as they traveled the first few miles of their journey. Balsam firs made a sweet perfume in the forest, and the deep moss beds beneath the red spruces were soft for their tireless feet. Tense and alert as they were at every noise, even the soft sound of a brown rabbit leaping among the bushes sounded like steps approaching their path. The snapping of twigs under their feet would often startle them for a minute in the intense silence of the solitude. They listened to see if they might catch the faint echo of a gun. The air brought no other message than the songs of happy birds in the branches above them. As the afternoon wore on, they made an error on nearing the Machias River and their journey was much lengthened. Hannah did her best to encourage the weary Rebecca and then decided it was time for them both to rest and lunch and get thoroughly refreshed for the last miles.

When, a little later, they went on and were at last able to see the blue waters of the upper Machias River winding through its rich evergreen shores, the shadows of the long June day were already lengthening. The girls now felt much happier, for
they knew that they only need follow the river down. It was still however a difficult proposition for they felt timid lest they meet Indian hunters if they kept close to the river shore. They had, therefore, to follow a more difficult course, crossing brooks and swamps. Rebecca grew more and more exhausted and found the journey all she could stand without carrying her share of the powder. It was now at the site of Whitneyville today. Rebecca was nineteen and Hannah only seventeen and they were attempting to carry a load of thirty or forty pounds. Unhesitatingly Hannah took up the double load and they now continued their way, following the course of the river. The lingering Maine twilight faded and the woods grew darker and more lonely for the tired girls, but Hannah's energy never flagged. As they approached a hill, she left Rebecca resting and hastened up alone. To her great delight she saw from this point a house in Machias not far distant. She carefully marked the bushes there and hastened down to tell Rebecca the good news. Together they climbed the hill and hastened on to Machias, where they were welcomed at the first house, that of Gideon O'Brien. The family was only too glad to give the girls an opportunity to refresh themselves with food and rest.
The men had the happy news to tell of the capture of the Margaretta. Hannah and Rebecca received the generous words of appreciation from the admiring citizens, and twelve yards of camlet were given to them as a slight token of the warm appreciation of their share in the defense of Machias.

It is interesting to read the account of her family and ancestry now that we know the story of her patriotic venture. Hannah Watts was born in 1758 at Haverhill. She was a woman of strong and noble character, of great energy, and untiring in all forms of service to others, sick or well. Though slight in build, she was strong and vigorous and lived to be ninety-seven years old. Her great powers of endurance enabled her to meet the many hard and strange experiences of colonial life.

Not long after she and her husband had settled themselves in their first log house, they met with a very sad and dreadful experience. The house took fire and was burned down. Neither of them was in the house, and the intense heat soon enveloped the log structure so that they did not have time to rescue their baby. At another time, when her husband was not at home, Hannah went out into the fields with a baby in her arms to search for
the cattle which had strayed farther than usual that evening. It grew dark before her search ended and clouds gathered for a thunder storm. She became confused about the way and decided she must spend the night in the open. The violence of the storm increased and, protecting the baby with her shawl, she rested in the woods all night.

In her later years, she saw great changes in the little town, and she lived to see the marvelous growth of our country from 1776 to 1855. Many were eager at all times to seek her advice and help as well as to hear her accounts of the old days. Her memory was strong and all were glad to hear her reminisce about her own girlhood days and relate also the stories she had heard from her father.

Her family was among the first settlers at Haverhill. Her grandfather was prominent in the Massachusetts Legislature. His name was Samuel as well as that of her father,—a name, in fact, repeated through seven generations.

Hannah’s father, Capt. Watts, was among the bravest captains during the French and Indian wars. The paper of his commission in 1756, from New Hampshire, in the name of Geo. II, was always carefully preserved. It bears tribute to the confidence
of the government in his "loyalty." In twenty years George III had reason to feel very differently about his "loyalty!" It was at Capt. Watts' house, naturally, that all the neighborhood gathered to celebrate the surrender of Cornwallis. "The British rule is over," he said, "in America—this victory of Washington's is our country's redeeming triumph." He was born in 1716 in Haverhill, moving thence to Falmouth about 1760 where he resided but a short time. He moved to Chandler's River in 1769, being one of a party seeking lumber and grass lands in the great wilderness of eastern Maine.

Hannah's husband, Josiah Weston, was born at Falmouth in 1756, moving to Chandler's River in 1772 in company with his two sisters, Rebecca and Elizabeth. He was engaged in lumber industries and was active in all town affairs. Mitten Mountain in Centerville was the scene of one of his hunting expeditions when he lost a mitten. His marriage to Hannah took place in Machias in 1774. He and Hannah traveled by boat for the ceremony at Machias. The journey took two days, and it was often a dangerous one in stormy weather. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. James Lyon, the ardent pastor, whose sermons must have had strong influence upon his people. His pews were filled on
that eventful June day with the British officers who followed the parson's colored servant as he leaped out the church windows.

After the wedding, Hannah and Josiah Weston returned to Chandler's River where they built a neat log house on the hill, and there they began housekeeping. In about a year, however, came the sad events of the fire. Hannah's helpful kindness was soon known throughout the community, and she was honored everywhere for her strength of character and unselfish services. Mr. Weston was an energetic man, active and persevering in his business and he could soon move his family into a new frame house in 1787.

In Jonesboro, too, Hannah Weston's last days were spent amid her kindred and friends. Her grave on the hill slope received special honors in 1902 when Hannah Weston Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution of Machias joined with her many descendants in erecting a memorial tablet. But the grateful citizens of these valley towns will never forget this characteristic incident of her courage and patriotism. The words of one of her favorite hymns describe her own act.
"A DEED
Of kindness and of good,
To link in closer bonds
All human brotherhood."

Today the stranger rides quickly over a fine road from Jonesboro to Machias, and sees the comfortable and pretty dwellings and farms in the peaceful river valleys. He looks upon the wide stretches of evergreen forest, and here and there he catches a glimpse of the blue sea pulsing against the shore. He is perhaps unconscious how historic is the ground over which he passes. But the loyal lover of Maine's history thrills with the memories which sea and forest have treasured 150 years. To him the beautiful bays of this eastern coast gleam with the white sails of a fleeing British sloop. The roar of the Kwapskitchwock Falls echo back to him at times the guns of the Margaretta. In the dim shadow of the great pine and spruce forests he fancies he sees the young heroine hastening with her burden to the service of her country. Over his head the great trees tower, through summer and winter keeping her memory green; while their boughs sway softly in the sea winds and whisper the name:

Hannah Weston
The above inscription is cast on Bronze Tablet, erected on stone marking the grave of Hannah Weston at Jonesboro, Maine