ELIZABETH THOMPSON – Housekeeper & Confidant

By: John Whiteside

Before George Washington and his Continental Army were routed from New York City by British forces, he was accustomed to having a number of domestic workers around him, some enslaved and some free. One of those free women was Mary Smith, who served as his housekeeper. During the midst of an uncovered plot to attempt to kill Washington by a member of his Life Guard, information was passed to him that Mary Smith may have been aware of, and even in on, the plot on his life. She was promptly removed from her duties as his housekeeper and fortunate not to be arrested. She would disappear, eventually flee to England, and subsequently receive an English pension, clearly showing her suspected involvement in the plot.

Washington needed a housekeeper for many reasons, and one of the more important reasons was frequently moving his residence for security purposes. Through contact with General James Clinton, he learned of a housekeeper named Elizabeth Thompson with excellent work credentials. Thompson was an Irish immigrant born in 1704 and was 72 years old when hired by Washington in July 1776. Although illiterate, it wouldn't be very long before she would take full control of many on Washington's domestic household staff. They included the laundresses, cooks and cleaning staff and later, most of the male staff as well. She worked his staff fairly, while always expecting attention to detail and
conformance with Washington's needs and desires.

Thompson interacted well with Martha Washington whenever she was present at any of the camps or homes with Washington. Thompson always resided in the same residence or camp with General Washington. One of her most important functions was to direct the packing of all clothing and household goods every time Washington needed to change his headquarters or domicile. It is estimated that he did so nearly ninety different times during the period of the war. Thompson would be trusted to maintain any necessary secrecy in connection with the new location and any other travel plans. The fact that she remained in this critical position for five years is a testament to the trust placed in her by General Washington.

By December 1781, Elizabeth Thompson had reached the exceptional age of seventy-seven as an eighteenth-century woman. She requested that she wanted to return to her home in New York and leave the army. By this time, most of the war had ended, and Washington agreed to her request. Following her return to New York, she asked Congress to reimburse her for property that was destroyed during the great fire in New York while she was away in the army. Congress resolved to pay some immediate funds, and, in addition, an annual pension to be paid quarterly to her for the remainder of her life.

General and Martha Washington did continue limited correspondence with Thompson following the war. They even offered her a place to live with them at Mount Vernon, should she wish to spend the remainder of her days there. She would reply that her “heap of infirmities” made it impossible for her to travel to Mount Vernon.

Elizabeth Thompson passed away in August 1788 in New York. In her will, she left her money to her Presbyterian church to help fund a new school for poor Presbyterian children in New York. The school she helped to finance after her death was opened one year later. There are no known paintings or images of her likeness. Her burial location is unknown but assumed to be in New York City.

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