Maria Appolonia (Abigail) Hartman Rice

A glimpse into the life of an honorable Revolutionary War nurse

By: Rachael Pei

The stories of women in the Revolutionary War, particularly those who were not wives of famous military leaders, are often overshadowed by accounts of male soldiers' courageous feats in the battlefield. However, these women played a critical role in the war effort, serving as laundresses, seamstresses, cooks, or nurses for the army. One such woman, Maria Appolonia (Abigail, for short) Hartman Rice was a well-known nurse at Yellow Springs Hospital, where many of the Valley Forge soldiers stricken with disease were treated. Her story deepens our understanding of the civilians' experiences during the war.

According to family records, Abigail was born in Germany on September 4, 1742. When she was seven years old, she arrived in Philadelphia on the *Royal Union* ship on August 15, 1750. Her family settled in Pikeland, PA, (located in the upper part of Chester County). They regularly made the 13-mile journey to attend St. Augustine's Lutheran Church in Trappe, which involved traveling over bridle paths on horseback and crossing the Schuylkill River. The pastor there was Henry Muhlenberg, the main founder of Lutheranism in North America and father to Brigadier General John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, whose 1st Virginia Brigade also camped at Valley Forge.

When Abigail was 16, she married Zachariah Rice and gave birth to their first child two years later. In her lifetime, she had an incredible total of 21 children with Zachariah, 17 of whom lived to adulthood.

The *Records of the Annual Hench and Drumgold Reunion* relates Abigail's encounter with George Washington, after the Battle of the Clouds was prematurely terminated by a torrential downpour on September 16, 1777: General Washington and the rain-soaked Continental soldiers were heading toward nearby Yellow Springs when the military leader stopped at the Rice home to ask for something to drink. Abigail reportedly prepared a "flip," a common drink at the time made with water, sugar, rum and spice. She also agreed to let Brigadier General Anthony Wayne's soldiers camp on the Rice family's property that night.

A few months later, during the Valley Forge encampment, Yellow Springs (originally a health spa village boasting various mineral springs) gained new significance as the site of the only hospital commissioned by the Continental Congress during the war. At Valley Forge, disease was a major killer, causing an estimated 2,000 deaths—more than any single battle in the war. Due to the rapid spread of sicknesses like typhoid, pneumonia, dysentery, and typhus at the encampment, the Yellow Springs hospital, being only 10 miles away, was a relatively close refuge to house sick soldiers to avoid the spread of disease. Zachariah, Abigail's husband, helped with the hospital's construction. The building, known as Washington Hall, was completed in January 1778. Approximately 1,300 soldiers were treated there during the encampment.

The environment inside was likely very different from the sanitary hospital settings we are familiar with today. Not much was known about proper medical practice, leading to risky operations, such as amputations. The concept that specific germs are the direct cause of certain diseases (germ theory) had not been developed yet, so hygiene was not often the top priority. Furthermore, soap and medical supplies were not always available due to supply shortages.

Abigail was described in the *Records of the Annual Hench and Drumgold Reunion* as a "stout, well-built woman, warmhearted, and ready to lend a helping hand" (p. 81), visiting the hospital many times to bring food and delicacies for the sick or wounded soldiers. As her visits became more frequent, she started tending to the soldiers, and eventually became a nurse there. Revolutionary War nurses were in charge of keeping the hospital clean, as well as caring for and feeding the patients; however, unlike their present-day counterparts, they did not typically administer medical treatments.

While caring for the sick at Yellow Springs, Abigail unfortunately contracted typhoid fever. She died on November 6, 1789, (aged 47 years old) and was buried at St. Peter's United Church of Christ in Chester Springs (a 15-minute drive from present-day Valley Forge Park). Her original grave marker is no longer there, but it read, "Some have children, some have none, here lies the mother of twenty-one." At her funeral, all 17 of her surviving children walked in the procession to her grave. An attendee reportedly commented that it was the first and possibly last time such a sight would be seen at that church.

Ultimately, Abigail's story endures as a tribute to the women who served outside of the glory of the spotlight, yet whose roles were crucial in our nation's fight for freedom.

Sources:

- https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89062877477
- https://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/valley_forge/health%20_medicine.html
- https://emotich.wordpress.com/2015/12/15/camp-followers-occupations/
- https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0235
- https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/32238493/maria-appolonia-rice
- https://allthingsliberty.com/2016/11/abigail-hartman-rice-revolutionary-war-nurse/
- https://www.flickr.com/photos/road_less_trvled/2424727516/
- https://www.yellowsprings.org/about/yellow_springs.html
- https://yellowsprings.org/about/virtual_tour.html

https://images.findagrave.com/photos/2009/247/39650856_125219915454.jpg

Pictured: Abigail's new (second) headstone, located at St. Peter's United Church of Christ.

Pictured: The remains of Washington Hall, located at Historic Yellow Springs (a 17-minute drive away from Valley Forge National Historical Park). The building was no longer used as a hospital after 1781, and two separate fires in 1902 and 1962 left it in ruins.
The plaque reads “Revolutionary War Hospital.”