



{ ANN FISHER MILLER }

# Patriotic Hospitality

## *One Widow's Revolutionary Legacy*

By Annelise Jolley

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Buried in an unmarked grave for a century, Ann Fisher Miller's resting place was nearly lost to history. Yet, her legacy lived on through the stories told of one woman's radical, revolutionary hospitality.

### HOSTESS TO THE GENERAL

Ann Fisher was born in Westchester County, N.Y., in 1728. Nothing is known of her youth, but as a young woman she married Elijah Miller, and the couple moved into a farmhouse built by Elijah's grandfather. The house sat in a wooded area just north of the town of White Plains on 660 acres of farmland. Over the following two decades, Ann gave birth to seven children.

Elijah earned his first commission for military service as lieutenant in 1772. He then joined the Westchester County Militia under Colonel Samuel Drake, and he was named adjutant of the regiment in 1775. In the summer of 1776, Elijah and his two young sons fought with the militia to defend New York City from British troops. Elijah died from wounds sustained in battle. Not long after, his sons John and Elijah Jr. died from a disease contracted in camp.

In late October, General George Washington ordered his troops to retreat from the city and form camps northward into Westchester County. Washington approached Ann Fisher Miller—now a widow and grieving mother—to use her home because of its strategic location above White Plains. Ann opened the farmhouse to the general and his troops, turning the home into the Commander in Chief's headquarters. It wasn't long before the house was thrust into the center of the battle.

### FROM BATTLEFIELD TO HOSPITAL TO CHURCH

Less than a week after Washington arrived at the Miller home, British General William Howe advanced into Westchester County. Within hours the farm had become a battlefield, with military tents punctuating the landscape. As gunshots rang and artillery fired, Miller remained in the house with her five living children. She converted her home into a hospital, where she nursed the wounded and comforted the dying.

After the Battle of White Plains, Washington stayed in the Miller House two other times. Once while there in 1778, two of Ann's daughters undertook the dangerous task of delivering

a confidential message to him. He returned for a final stay in 1781. At other points in the Revolutionary War, generals including Charles Lee and Alexander McDougall were the recipients of Ann's patriotic hospitality.

After the Revolution, Ann once again opened her home, this time offering it as the site of Westchester County's first Methodist church. She continued this spirit of hospitality until her death in 1819 at age 91.

### THE WIDOW AT REST

Whether due to nature or vandals, Ann's headstone was destroyed and her gravesite was lost for most of the 20th century. Diligent research by the Daughters of Liberty's Legacy, a nonprofit historic preservation organization, revealed that Ann was buried next to her husband and two sons in the White Plains Presbyterian Church graveyard. In September 2015, the organization installed an 18th-century-style, hand-carved headstone to mark her resting place. It stands today in honor of the generous widow who demonstrated bravery and resilience in the face of personal grief. 🌸

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**SAVING THE MILLER HOUSE** The Miller House, built in 1739, still stands today through the efforts of several local organizations, including White Plains DAR Chapter, White Plains, N.Y. The farmhouse was home to Elijah and Ann Miller from 1770 until Ann's death in 1819. Their daughter, Sarah Miller Cornell, lived there until her death in 1838.

The chapter persuaded Westchester County to purchase the Miller House in 1917, in order to restore the property and operate it as a historical museum. The chapter then worked to raise funds to begin the restoration process and assisted the county in administering the farmhouse in a long-term partnership. Today, the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, and funds have been raised to renovate the building and reopen it as a local museum.