

# Alexander Milliner: Child of the Philipsburg Encampment

By Lindsey Wood

The Revolutionary War would touch the lives of everyone living in the North American colonies at the time. But it was not only the men who fought who were affected. When they left their homes to fight, their women and children had to adjust to survive in their absence. Some had their lives uprooted completely. Military troops, especially when encamped for an extended time in an area, created their own diverse communities. Soldiers ranged in age from teenagers to middle aged men; their wives, mothers, or even women with nowhere else to go often joined them as camp followers. The children came with them and gathered to watch the drills, perhaps even mimicking them, and ran underfoot as the women washed clothes and haggled over food, tools, and other supplies. These civilians accompanying the army were so much a natural part of military life that records seldom even needed to bother specifying about them. Unlike enlisted soldiers no names or dates of joining were recorded for these camp followers, limiting what historians can know about them. However the accounts of one man, Alexander Milliner, provide insights into both the lives of camp followers and young soldiers, as he existed in both spheres.

Milliner was interviewed in 1864 by E. B Hillard for his book detailing the lives of surviving Revolutionary War veterans, both for posterity and to remind readers of the struggles and sacrifices made to create the United States as the Civil War threatened to tear the young country apart. Milliner claimed to be 104 years old at the time but due to some confusion about his birth year he was probably 94 years old. His pension application submitted in 1819 placed his birth year in 1770, a fact Hillard acknowledged but insisted was an error, instead claiming he was born in 1760. During the eighteenth century birthday celebrations were not as commonplace as for us today and so it is not unheard of for discrepancies to be found in records. In fact another, more famous, “Alexander” also left conflicting records, Alexander Hamilton’s birth year remains a subject of uncertainty among historians, though with a notably smaller gap.<sup>1</sup> Though 1770 is almost certainly the correct year, Hillard may have considered it more tactful to stick with the earlier year given that the biography included an anecdote saying Milliner’s father died during the French and Indian War in 1759. In either case the recollections of an elderly man thinking back to his early childhood must admittedly be taken with a grain of salt as dates are hard to pinpoint and personal memories merge with hearsay.

Still, one thing that can be certain was that military service was a family affair for him, and he would spend his formative years in the thick of the Continental army. Alexander was present in the Philipsburg encampment, drumming the reveille in the mornings and perhaps even striking the beat of the march to Yorktown. Military service was the reason his family first came to America. His mother, Jane,<sup>2</sup> was originally from England and married to a goldsmith who worked as an artificer (a skilled artist or craftsman) with Major General James Wolfe’s troops during the French and Indian War.<sup>3</sup> Jane came with him when Wolfe’s troops were sent to Canada, something not unheard of for military wives who may have had no source of income in

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<sup>1</sup> “Happy Birthday Alexander Hamilton! But what year were you born?” National Constitution Center, January 11, 2017, <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/happy-birthday-alexander-hamilton-but-what-year-were-you-born>

<sup>2</sup> “Alexander Millener” WikiTree, last modified April 25, 2020, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Millener-3>

<sup>3</sup> Hillard, E. B. *The Last Men of the Revolution*. (Hartford: N.A. & R.A. Moore, 1864), 39. [https://archive.org/details/gri\\_33125012930976/page/n59/mode/2up?q=milliner](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012930976/page/n59/mode/2up?q=milliner).

their husband's absence. During the war she was widowed when her husband died in the Battle of the Heights of Abraham in 1759<sup>4</sup>. Jane chose to remain in America even after the war, possibly continuing as a camp follower until the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. She gave birth to her son, Alexander, most likely in 1770, and made her way to New York where she met a mason named Florence Maroney and married him. No known records of the marriage have survived, leaving the year uncertain. Alexander recalls that she was a teacher at some point in her life,<sup>5</sup> perhaps as a way to make a living after the war and before remarrying.

Alexander's step-father was described as a "well-to-do mason"<sup>6</sup> presumably marrying Alexander's mother when the boy was still very young. For the first few years Maroney would have provided for the family by working at his trade as a mason, perhaps with plans to apprentice Alexander when he was older. However the rising tensions between the colonies and Great Britain uprooted whatever plans the family may have had. In 1776 Maroney enlisted in the 1st New York Regiment of the Continental Army, demonstrating his support for the revolutionary cause by promising to serve for the duration of the war, and immediately was made a sergeant. This left Jane Maroney with a choice. To stay at home would mean providing for herself and her six year old son with the household's main breadwinner gone. Even if she could resume teaching, she would have to worry about soldiers on either side raiding or destroying property in their efforts to either supply their own needs or deny the enemy supplies. The alternative was to once again become a camp follower, living on the move and being close to various battles but remaining close to her husband. Neither choice could guarantee safety, and both would involve strenuous work and challenges, but she had proven herself capable of the latter option once already. Perhaps she even thought of the support system she found among other camp followers when she was widowed, something she may not have felt she could count on at home where neighbors' political sympathies could shift easily, and she would be a woman alone and exposed to passing soldiers. Army records did not keep precise lists of names for camp followers, but it seems a reasonable assumption that she and Alexander joined Maroney at the time of his enlistment.

To further support this assumption, while Alexander did eventually enlist himself in 1780, he evidently had memories of battles and life among the Continental Army that happened earlier in the war. Not surprisingly for an elderly man reminiscing about his childhood his memories as a camp follower and as a drummer seem to have blended together. During the battle of Monmouth in 1778 Alexander shed blood for the Revolution, enough for an alarmed officer to fear he was "bleeding to death" at the age of eight,<sup>7</sup> two years before he officially enlisted as a drummer with the 1st New York Regiment. He notes choosing to become a musician because his youth disqualified him from enlistment as an armed soldier.<sup>8</sup> This claim is the main proof of his 1770 birth year as that would place him at ten years old, too far below the minimum age of sixteen for soldiers to enlist. Especially considering if he were even close to sixteen, Sergeant Maroney, already supporting his step-son's enlistment enough that Alexander was recorded with the Maroney surname instead of Milliner, could likely have bent the rules.

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<sup>4</sup> Hillard, 39

<sup>5</sup> Hillard, 40

<sup>6</sup> Hillard, 40

<sup>7</sup> Hillard, 42

<sup>8</sup> Hillard, 40

In 1781, a year after Alexander's enlistment, Colonel Van Schaick led the regiment from Saratoga to Dobbs Ferry and the Philipsburg encampment. Although his accounts make no direct reference to General Rochambeau or the French troops encamped around his headquarters in the Odell House it is highly likely that the eleven year old drummer did cross paths with them. He mentions often being called upon to play for Washington's Life Guard, soldiers selected to "protect General Washington, the army's cash and official papers"<sup>9</sup> and so may have been present at times when Washington met with Rochambeau and other French and American officers. His biography includes anecdotes of being commended by Washington for playing the reveille while the army was encamped and even being summoned to provide music for the Life Guard and gatherings of officers. Alexander provides no date for one particular event, though probably after 1780 as he was established as a drummer, but it or similar scenes may well have played out in the Philipsburg encampment. He claimed that on one occasion he was summoned to Washington's headquarters, assured a drum was already on hand and spared the trouble of carrying his own. He found Washington with a number of other officers and along with another musician was asked to play a tune for the group. Milliner recalls Washington himself paying him three dollars for his performance and the other officers paid him as well bringing the total to \$15, which he used to buy his mother some tea.<sup>10</sup>

Whether this particular instance did occur in the Philipsburg encampment or not such purchases and trades were almost assuredly happening there. Milliner's biography references his mother serving as a washer woman while she accompanied her husband and son in the Revolutionary War. Meaning she would have been responsible for doing the laundry of various soldiers, a common task for camp followers. Other camp followers however were known to set up as suttlers or establish trading posts within encampments where fellow followers as well as soldiers could buy supplies such as cloth, foodstuffs, buttons, tools, and similar goods. The arrival of Rochambeau's forces may even have expanded the wares available in the encampment as they brought the sort of imported goods that were scarce in the rebelling colonies.

No reference is made to Alexander being able to speak any second language himself, meaning his own interactions with Rochambeau's soldiers likely were limited to appreciation of good music and whether or not the Frenchmen could speak English. However he described his mother as "high larnt" and understanding "all languages."<sup>11</sup> To say *all* languages is certainly an exaggeration as even just knowing all European languages would be a remarkable accomplishment for a working class woman of the eighteenth century. Still, it suggests she at least had a working knowledge of a few languages in addition to English. Having spent time in Canada, French seems a likely possibility. Even without French, as a teacher Latin would have been a useful language for her which would have been familiar to anyone of the Catholic faith, the primary religion in France. This may have put her and by proxy Alexander in the position to be interacting with the French soldiers and their accompanying camp followers more often than the average American.

Sadly Alexander's accounts provide no insight into his impression of the French soldiers specifically. Surely those professional soldiers, clad in matching and neatly kept uniforms, must have been quite the contrast to the Continental and militia troops, wearing everything from

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<sup>9</sup> "Life Guards" Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/life-guards/>

<sup>10</sup> Hillard, 41

<sup>11</sup> Hillard, 40

official uniforms to common hunting frocks, that the boy had spent most of his memorable life with. Most likely Alexander spent the majority of his time in what Louis Alexandre Berthier referred to as the “right wing” of the encampment with the American troops.<sup>12</sup> However his association with the Life Guard may have given him reason to venture to the French side or to be present for meetings between Washington and Rochambeau or perhaps he accompanied his mother to trade or socialize with French camp followers. His interactions with them, if any, can only be guessed at but it is interesting to imagine what sort of amusements a cheerful young boy would get into amid the two armies. Hillard’s impression of the aged Milliner’s temperament was “free, happy, jovial, [and] careless” and believed that characterization to have held true throughout his life- something his casual reference to “bleeding to death” immediately followed by jokes about the size of General Lee’s nose<sup>13</sup> attests to. He was described as “the life of the camp” while in the military, always “full of jokes” and ready to join in song and dance, displaying quite a musical talent even in his old age that was likely honed during his years as a drummer.<sup>14</sup> These descriptions paint the picture of an endearing young boy, at ease in the world of military drills and routines while still a child eager to play and have fun.

While young Alexander may never have let anything trouble him “for more than five minutes at a time” life in a military encampment had no shortage of troubles. As his injury at Monmouth demonstrated no one, be they soldier or civilian, was immune to the dangers of warfare. And even away from the battlefield, camp life offered its own set of dangers. Illness was a very real threat that loomed over armies throughout the eighteenth century, sometimes as a more immediate danger than bayonets or cannon balls. Not to mention exposure to the elements and frequently being on the move, especially for the Continental army where supplies such as food and clothing were often short. Alexander had already survived the bitter cold of Valley Forge and at the Philipsburg encampment he would endure the oppressive heat of summer in Westchester County. Throughout July and August the cramped quarters and limited sanitation common to eighteenth century military encampments would have been a breeding ground for disease. Local churches frequently were converted into hospitals that treated illness just as much as battle wounds and the Philipsburg encampment would have been no exception. Disease or possibly the treatment of them in some cases would claim the lives of many French and American soldiers before they ever reached Virginia.

Alexander’s recollections of Valley Forge include references to Martha Washington visiting such hospitals and even tending to the soldiers there with “motherly care” and even claims that both Washingtons “took a great notion” to him.<sup>15</sup> It is quite possible he was present in the Valley Forge hospitals as he and his mother also helped tend to the sick and injured soldiers. This would have been before his official enlistment, making him another child camp follower expected to work and aide the adults as much as he would have at home. In the Philipsburg encampment Alexander’s duties as an officially enlisted drummer likely took up more of his time but Jane Maroney would certainly have continued to lend a hand in the hospitals in addition to laundering.

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<sup>12</sup> Selig, R. A. *The Franco-American Encampment in the Town of Greenburgh, 6 July- 18 August 1781*. Town of Greenburgh, 2020),

78. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5db7546f2e40281750a67b17/t/5efe1738b415005eed83e4b7/1593710403510/Selig+Encampment.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Hillard, 42

<sup>14</sup> Hillard, 45

<sup>15</sup> Hillard, 41

On August 19, 1781 Alexander's regiment began the march out of Dobbs Ferry towards Yorktown, Virginia. The journey took over a month until the combined French and American forces were ready to attack the British in Yorktown. The Siege of Yorktown lasted from September 29 to October 19 when British General Cornwallis surrendered. Alexander apparently claimed to have shaken hands with Cornwallis. This is most likely an invention of memory by Milliner because Cornwallis did not even surrender his sword to Washington but had a subordinate officer take his place. Whether or not Cornwallis really took the time to shake hands with a small drummer boy in the midst of such a major blow to him and the British war effort is difficult to say. But Alexander was almost certainly present for the surrender of the British, able to offer a description of Cornwallis and even recalling the less gracious reactions to the loss of some of the other British soldiers.<sup>16</sup> The surrender cost the British one third of their army and was a severe blow to morale. The American victory there, made possible by the help of the French army and navy preventing a British retreat, is considered a major factor in the British government's decision to end the war and sign the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783.

Alexander's accounts serve as a reminder of the wide variety of individuals that occupied the Philipsburg encampment and participated in the American Revolution as a whole. Women and children not only kept the Homefront going but found themselves in the thick of battle as well while they provided necessary services like medical care, laundry, cooking, and supplies. And when Alexander enlisted, he assuredly stood alongside soldiers of nearly every race and ethnicity, all of whom risked their lives for the ideals of freedom and equality. European allies brought with them money, weapons, and professional skills that an army of farmers and craftsmen needed. In the same place where great events that would shape the outcome of the war were being planned and coordinated, a little boy played his drum, skipped stones, and bought tea for his mother. The Philipsburg encampment represented a community unto itself, complete with men, women, and children united in the cause of the American Revolution.

### Timeline

#### **1770:**

- *March 14: Born (according to his pension application, Hillard biography and subsequent sources claims 1760 but '70 aligns better with his age during the Rev. War).*

#### **1776: Age 6**

- *November 28: Florence Maroney enlisted for the duration of the war*
  - Mrs. Maroney and son potentially joined as camp followers at same time or soon after
- *October 28: Battle of White Plains*
  - No details but listed in biography - not listed among battles 1st NY was involved in

#### **1777: Age 7**

- *September 19-October 7: Battle of Saratoga*
  - No details but listed in biography - 1st NY was involved
- *September 11: Battle of Brandywine?????*

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<sup>16</sup> Hillard, 42

- No details but listed in biography - not listed among battles 1st NY was involved in.
  - Seems unlikely given occurrence at the same time as the Saratoga campaign, which 1st NY is confirmed to have been present.
- *August 2- 22: Siege of Fort Schuyler/Stanwix*
- *Winter (into 1778): Valley Forge*
  - This may have been when he met Martha Washington

**1778: Age 8**

- *(from 1777) to early Spring [age 7]: Valley Forge*
- *June 28: Battle of Monmouth*
  - Wounded leg, apparently heavy bleeding
  - Recalls seeing General Lee
  - Was probably still a camp follower

**1779: Age 9**

- *Summer: Sullivan Campaign*
  - 1st NY was involved, and memoirs include reference to fighting in the “Mohawk Valley”

**1780:**

- Enlisted as Drummer (*listed under stepfather’s surname “Maroney”*)
  - Age: 9/10
  - Pension application places him at Lake George

**1781:**

- *July (middle): Col. Van Schaick [varied spelling] takes the 1st NY from Saratoga to Dobbs Ferry*
- *August 19: 1st NY Regiment 321 rank and file men depart from Dobbs Ferry down the Hudson towards Yorktown*
  - Age 11
    - No reference to movement in his accounts but he does mention serving under “Colonel Vanscaicks” and was enlisted with 1st NY Regiment and does claim to have been at Battle of Yorktown
- *September 29- October 19: Battle of Yorktown*
  - No details but listed in biography - 1st NY was present
    - Regiment may have been part of the successful attack on Redoubt Number 10

**1783: Age 12**

- Discharged at Snake Hill, New Windsor NY

**Undetermined dates (presumably between 1780-1783 [Ages 10-13])**

- Various encounters with George and Martha Washington
  - *Technically some of these, particularly with Martha, could have been while he was still camp follower(1776-1780, ages 6-10) but most references to George include playing music placing him as Drummer*
- Played for Washington and officers in Washington’s “headquarters” and received 3 dollars from Washington and additional money from the other officers (\$15 total). He bought tea for his mother with it. (He doesn’t specify but camp follower sections of

encampments often included makeshift shops/trading posts that served each other and soldiers)

- *No date provided in any known records and no references to major dateable events. Cannot be confirmed but could have happened in Philipsburg encampment as easily as anywhere else. Could be a fun anecdote/re-enactment to have in Washington's tent.*