

BARBARA FRIETCHIE HEROINE OR MYTH?

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON



SEPTEMBER morning 75 years ago. Through the streets of the little city of Frederick, Md., marched a column of soldiers wearing the gray uniform of the armies of the Confederate States of America. Their commander was Gen. Thomas J. Jackson, since the Battle of Bull Run, renowned as "Stonewall" Jackson.

In Frederick lived a woman named Barbara Frietchie, ninety-six years old. At the outbreak of the Civil war she had declared "The Union of the States will be maintained. God takes care of His people and He will take care of this country." She had frequently repeated that belief. In a city of divided allegiances she had remained intensely loyal to the Union and as proof of her loyalty she frequently displayed an American flag from the window of her home.

These statements can be accepted as facts, as matters of historical record. But when you go beyond them, you find yourself in a maze of fiction and fact, of assertions and denials, of contradictions and controversy. All this has resulted from a poem written by John Greenleaf Whittier which has taken its place, along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" and

"Maryland, My Maryland!" The main body camped at Frederick Junction, three miles south of Frederick, but a large portion of the army, including the forces commanded by "Stonewall" Jackson, marched through the town and camped at Worman's Mill, two miles north. For three days the Confederates remained in and around Frederick. Then early on the morning of September 10 the army broke camp and began to move west, marching out on West Patrick street which took them past the home of Dame Barbara. But "Stonewall" Jackson was not with his troops when they reached her home. He had left the line at West Second street and ridden up to the Presbyterian parsonage where lived the Rev. Dr. Ross. Under the door of the parsonage an orderly slipped this note:

"Regret not being permitted to see Dr. and Mrs. Ross, but could not expect to have that pleasure at so unseasonable an hour.—T. J. Jackson, September 10, 1862—5:15 a. m."

As he rejoined the column, which had halted, a sudden excitement broke out toward the rear. The word passed up along the line that an old lady was shaking a Yankee flag right in their faces and defying them to take it away from her. Order was soon restored and at the command "Forward—march!" the long gray column filed out of town.

What Happened.

It was not until some time later that Dame Barbara confessed to her niece, Caroline Ebert, what had happened. Her account of this incident was substantially as follows:

Early that morning some people had rushed up to her door and told her to get out her flag because the soldiers were coming. Hearing the tramp of marching men and believing that they were Union soldiers, she took her little silk flag from between the leaves of her Bible and stepped out on the porch where she began to wave the banner.

Immediately an officer rode up, saying "Granny, give me your flag." "You can't have it," replied Dame Barbara, then noticing the gray uniforms, she began waving it more energetically than ever. The officer spoke to his men and they turned facing her. For a moment she believed that they were going to fire on her, but she continued to wave her flag.

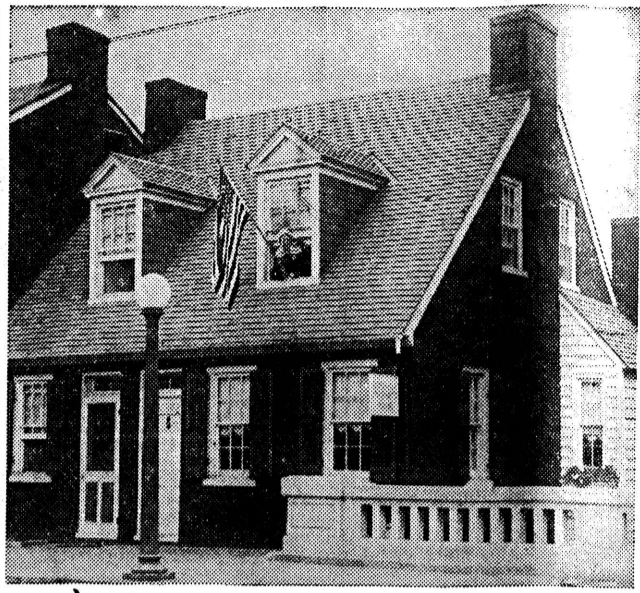


John Greenleaf Whittier

Then the officer rode on a short distance and returned with another officer. This officer said to her "Give me your flag, Granny, and I'll stick it in my horse's head." "No, you can't have it," replied Dame Barbara, whereupon one of the soldiers shouted "Shoot her damned head off!"

The officer turned angrily upon him, saying "If you harm a hair of her head, I'll shoot you down like a dog!" Then, turning to the old lady, he said "Go on, Granny, wave your flag as much as you please," and a moment later gave the order for the troops to march on.

This is the story which is given in "A Sketch of Barbara Frietchie," a booklet written by Miss Eleanor D. Abbott, a great grandniece of Dame Barbara, and it is substantiated by the later testimony of Confederate soldiers who



Restored home of Barbara Frietchie in Frederick, Md. Shown at the window with the flag is her grandniece, Mrs. Julia H. Abbott.

were in the column which halted in front of her house and witnessed her flag-waving. Among them was Capt. Frank Myers, who asserted that he was the officer who forbade the soldiers to fire upon her.

Three days after the Confederates left Frederick, Union troops commanded by Gen. A. E. Burnside, the advance of McClellan's army, entered the city. Dame Barbara's feat was common talk among the citizens and when Gen. Jesse Lee Reno heard about it he called on the old lady, who showed him two flags. One of them was the small silk flag which she had waved at the Confederates and the other was a large cotton banner which she had, on occasion, displayed from a window in the attic of her home.

Her Flags Preserved.

She gave General Reno the large cotton flag and, after he was killed at the Battle of South Mountain the next day, it was sent with his body to his home in Boston. Later members of the Reno family presented it to the Massachusetts commandery of the Loyal Legion of the United States and it is still on display in the headquarters of that organization in Boston. The little silk flag is now in the possession of Miss Abbott who lives in the reconstructed Barbara Frietchie home in Frederick.

Those who have doubted the "Barbara Frietchie legend" have asserted that "Stonewall" Jackson did not pass her house and had no part in the flag-waving incident, which is true.

In the opinion of this writer the story as told by Dame Barbara to Catherine Ebert, preserved in Miss Abbott's booklet and substantiated by Confederate soldiers who were there at the time and by Union soldiers who heard of the incident three days after it happened, is more convincing than the statement attributed to Valerius Ebert. How, then, does it happen that there has been and still is so much controversy over the "Barbara Frietchie legend"?

That is due to the inaccuracies in Whittier's poem but he is not so much responsible for those errors as is Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, a famous American novelist of those days. Her part in it came about in this manner: Catherine Ebert told the story of her aunt's heroic deed to her cousin, a Mr. Ramsberg, who was living in Washington, D. C. He in turn told it to a newspaper reporter and it subsequently appeared in a Washington newspaper. He also told the story to his neighbor, Mrs. Southworth, who was then living in Georgetown, D. C., and she wrote to Whittier at his home in Amesbury, Mass., as follows:

"When Lee's army occupied Frederick the only Union flag displayed in the city was held by Mrs. Barbara Frietchie, a widow lady of ninety-six years." Such was the paragraph which went the rounds of the Washington papers last September. Some time afterward, from friends who were in Frederick at the time, I heard the whole story. It was the story of a woman's heroism, which, when heard, seemed as much to belong to you as a book picked up with your autograph on the fly-leaf. So here it is:

Mrs. Southworth then gave an account of the entrance of Lee's army into Frederick and their cool reception, quoting the official record that "the town wore a churchyard aspect." She continued:

But Mrs. Barbara Frietchie, taking one of the Union flags, went up to the top of the house, opened a garret window, and held forth. The rebel army marched up the street, saw the flag; the order was given, "Halt! Fire!" and a volley was discharged at the window from which it was displayed. The flag staff was partly broken, so that the flag drooped; the old lady drew it in, broke off the fragment, and, taking the stump with the flag still attached to it in her hand, stretched herself as far out of the window as she could, held the Stars and Stripes at arm's length, waving over the rebels, and cried out in a voice of indignation and sorrow: "Fire at this old head, then, boys; it is not more venerable than your flag."

They fired no more, but passed on in silence, and she secured the flag in its place, where it remained unmolested during the whole of the rebel occupation of the city. "Stonewall" would not permit her to be troubled.

Garbled Versions.

From this it will be observed that Mrs. Southworth had received from "friends who were in Frederick at the time" a garbled version of what had actually taken place or perhaps had reported it inaccurately herself in writing to Whittier. She has Barbara climbing "up to the top of the house" (something of a feat in itself for a ninety-six-year-old woman!), whereas the testimony of eye-witnesses is that the old woman stood on her front porch. She has the Confederates firing at the flag, whereas their testimony is that not a shot was fired.

Then Whittier, either relying on the Southworth version of the yarn or adding some imaginary details of his own, transforms Barbara's "Fire at this old head then, boys; it is not more venerable than your flag" into "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head but spare your country's flag."

Whittier's poem appeared in the October, 1862, issue of the Atlantic Monthly. Almost immedi-



T. J. Jackson

ately its accuracy was questioned and in reply to a friend who wanted to know if Barbara was a myth Whittier wrote: "I had a portrait of the good Lady Barbara from the saintly hand of Dorothea Dix, and a cane from Barbara's cottage sent me by Doctor Steiner of the Maryland senate. Whether she did all that my poem ascribed to her, or not, she was a brave, true woman. I followed the account given me in a private letter, and in the papers of the time."

Later an article was published in the Century magazine denying that the poem had any foundation in fact and to this Whittier replied: "Barbara Frietchie was written in good faith. The story was no invention of mine. It came to me from sources which I regarded as entirely reliable. I had no reason to doubt its accuracy then, and I am still constrained to believe that it had foundation in fact. If I thought otherwise, I should not hesitate to express it. I have no pride of authorship to interfere with my allegiance to truth."

Barbara Frietchie was stricken with pneumonia soon after the celebration of her ninety-sixth birthday and died two weeks later, on December 18, 1862. If, as the familiar song has it, "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in his grave, but his soul goes marching on" then it is equally true that "Barbara Frietchie's body lies a-mouldering in her grave" in Mount Olivet cemetery in Frederick. But the controversy over her deed, as reported in Whittier's poem, goes merrily on—even after three-quarters of a century.



BARBARA FRIETCHIE

Thomas Buchanan Read's "Sheridan's Ride," among America's favorite "patriotic recitations."

How much truth is there in Whittier's poem? Did the incident described in it actually take place as he has told it? If not, on what basis of fact does his poetic version rest?

This article, based upon a varied collection of evidence and an evaluation of that evidence, is an attempt to answer those questions.

First of all, let it be recorded that Dame Barbara's name was Fritchie despite the fact that common usage has made "Frietchie" the accepted spelling. (It is occasionally spelled "Freitichie" also). She was born in Lancaster, Pa., on December 3, 1766, the daughter of Niclaus and Catherine Zeiler Hauer, who had emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania in 1754. She was baptized on December 14, 1766, and given the name of Barbara for her sponsor, Barbara Gamber.

Niclaus moved with his family (his wife, another daughter, Catherine, and a son, Jacob), to Frederick, Md., in 1767 or 1768 and there Barbara Hauer grew up. One of the great events in her early life, according to a well-authenticated tradition, was a visit by George Washington to Frederick in 1791. The first President spent the night at the tavern there and his dinner was served to him by the prettiest girls of the village, among them Barbara Hauer. According to the story, Washington was so impressed by her appearance and pleasant manners that he presented her with a beautiful china bowl which she treasured as long as she lived.

An Old Maid.

Despite Barbara Hauer's beauty, however, she does not seem to have been much sought after by the young men of Frederick. At any rate, in an era of early marriages, she postponed hers until she was an "old maid" of forty. On May 6, 1806, she was married to John Casper Fritchie, who was the proprietor of a glove factory and, incidentally, 14 years younger than his bride.

Shortly before the Civil war, when Dame Barbara was past ninety years of age, her cousin, Miss Harriet Yoner, was installed in her home as a companion, probably by her nieces, Mrs. Kitty Hanshaw and Miss Caroline Ebert. As previously related, Dame Barbara was intensely loyal to the Union.

Lee's Invasion.

On September 5 Lee's army crossed the Potomac, singing