

FEISTY AND FEARLESS

Georgia Fireball Nancy Hart Outfoxed Loyalists

/ By Emily McMackin Dye /

Women who risked their lives to defend the Patriot cause on the homefront were the unsung heroes of the American Revolution—and none was more colorful than Nancy Ann Morgan Hart. Fiery, fearless and fiercely independent, the Georgia frontierswoman and staunch Patriot became a legend for her courageous stands against British Loyalists in the northeast Georgia backcountry.

Though some of the facts of her life are disputed, Nancy was described as a tough, gangly woman who towered 6 feet in height and had a muscular build, red hair, a smallpox-scarred face and crossed eyes. As one early account noted, she had “no share of beauty—a fact she herself would have readily

acknowledged, had she ever enjoyed an opportunity of looking into a mirror.”

What she may have lacked in looks, she made up for in strength and intellect. Nancy was known for repeatedly outsmarting Loyalists who threatened her family, friends and neighbors and even single-handedly capturing and killing a few Tories. She is also credited with spying on the British and risking her life to provide information to Patriot forces.

War Woman

Born in March 1747 to Thomas and Rebecca Morgan, Nancy grew up on the North Carolina frontier in the Yadkin River Valley. She was rumored to have been a cousin to two



By local recollections, she had a quick temper and a penchant for fighting anyone who crossed her. Cherokee Indians from local tribes were said to have referred to her as “Wahatche,” or “war woman.”

prominent Americans on her father’s side: legendary frontiersman Daniel Boone and Revolutionary War General Daniel Morgan, best known for commanding the Patriot forces to victory at the 1781 Battle of Cowpens, though no documentary proof exists of the family’s relationship.

Around 1760, Nancy married Benjamin Hart, a prominent North Carolinian, and moved with him to South Carolina. In 1771, the couple settled in the Broad River Valley region of Wilkes County, Ga., where they raised eight children.

Though she was illiterate, Nancy was resourceful at taking care of her family. According to the American Battlefield Trust, she was an expert herbalist, a skilled hunter and an excellent markswoman. By local recollections, she also had a quick temper and a penchant for fighting anyone who crossed her. Cherokee Indians from local tribes were said to have referred to her as “Wahatche,” or “war woman.”

When the American Revolution started, Benjamin joined the Georgia militia as a lieutenant under Elijah Clarke, leaving Nancy to manage their farm. Like many frontier families living off the land, the Harts struggled, as evidenced by the Georgia Executive Council’s vote in 1781 to give the family 20 bushels of corn to help them survive.

Bloody fighting pervaded the Georgia frontier, known for its strong Loyalist sympathies, as Patriots clashed with their Tory neighbors. According to local lore, Nancy got involved in the conflict. She supposedly wandered into British camps disguised as a dim-witted man and eavesdropped on soldiers to gather tactical information to pass along to militia leaders. Some

accounts suggest that she was present for the Battle of Kettle Creek, which took place in Georgia on February 14, 1779. Legend has it that when the Patriots desperately needed information about happenings on the Carolina side of the Savannah River, Nancy took it upon herself to procure it, tying together a raft of logs with grapevine and floating across.

Capturing Loyalists

Because of her rebellious reputation, British sympathizers apparently kept a close watch on the Hart cabin. In one oft-repeated story, Nancy was making soap one evening when one of her children noticed someone spying on them. Hart filled her ladle with boiling lye and flung it at the spy, scalding him in the eyes. She then tied the Tory up and turned him over to the local militia. But the most well-known account of Nancy’s brave exploits involved an even more dramatic encounter with local Loyalists.

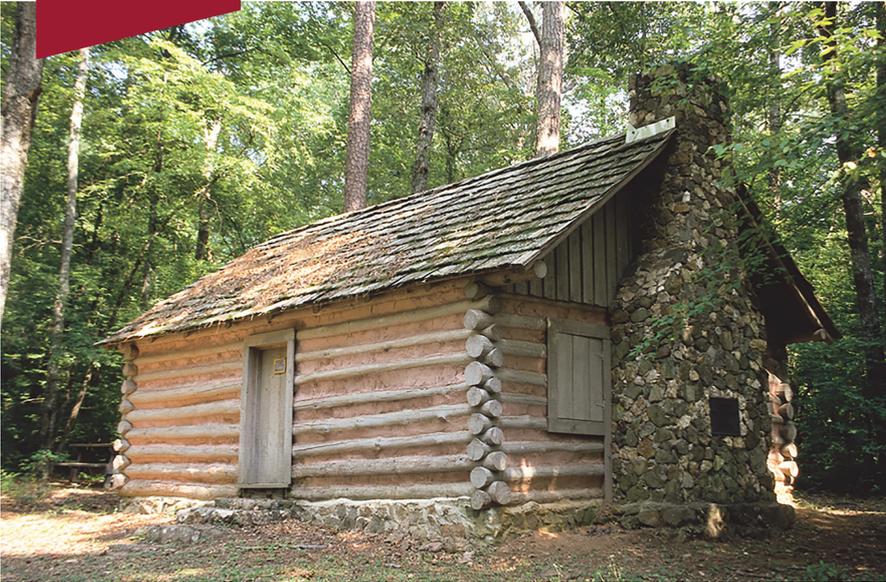
As the most popular version of the story goes, a group of Loyalists barged into Nancy’s home to question her about an escaped Patriot and demanded a meal.

Inviting themselves inside, they stacked their muskets in the corner of the cabin and ordered her to roast a turkey. Nancy suddenly became very hospitable, plying them with food and whiskey until they got drunk. Meanwhile, she sent her daughter Sukey to the creek under the guise of fetching water, instructing her to blow a conch shell to alert their neighbors to the danger. While the Tories feasted, Nancy discreetly began passing their muskets outside to Sukey through a chink in the wall until one of the men saw them. Caught with a musket in her hand, Nancy drew it back and threatened to shoot the first person who moved. When a soldier lunged at her, she shot and killed him, then wounded another with a second musket. She held the rest of the men at gunpoint until Benjamin and several neighbors arrived. They decided to hang the Tories from a nearby oak tree.

The Making of a Legend

Though no historical records exist of Nancy’s daring acts during the Revolution, stories of her patriotism and bravery circulated for years after the war before ever being written down. In 1912, workmen grading a railroad site less than a mile from where the Hart cabin stood unearthed six skeletons buried neatly in a row about three feet underground. Several of the skeletons’ necks were broken, suggesting they had been hanged. The skeletons were estimated to have been buried for at least a century, indicating that some version of the Nancy Hart legend may have been true.

Records show that the Harts left their home in the Broad River Valley in the 1790s (by then incorporated into Elbert



In 1932, the Stephen Heard DAR Chapter and Nancy Hart DAR Chapter erected a replica cabin at the site of Nancy Hart's cabin, which had been washed away in a flood.

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County, Ga.) and moved to Brunswick on the Georgia coast, where Benjamin served as a magistrate in the local courts and owned 50 acres of land and 15 slaves, E. Merton Coulter wrote in "Nancy Hart: Georgia Heroine of the Revolution" (*The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 1955). After his death, Nancy settled briefly in Clarke County, Ga., with her son John before moving with his family to Henderson County, Ky., where she spent the remaining years of her life. The exact date of her death is unknown, but many believe she lived until 1840.

Nancy's legacy remained relatively unknown outside of the Broad River Valley area until 1825, when the *Southern Recorder*, a newspaper in Milledgeville, Ga., recounted the story of how she captured Loyalists in a sketch timed around the local visit of the famed Marquis de Lafayette on his 50th anniversary tour through America. Other newspapers and publications picked up on the story and even sought out additional sources to build on it. As tales of Nancy's heroics spread, her legend grew, taking on a life of its own. In the 1850s, the Georgia State Legislature named a county and county seat after her. During the Civil War, a band of Georgia women in LaGrange formed a militia company named the Nancy Harts to defend their town from the Union army.

More recently, Daughters in Georgia and Kentucky have helped keep her legacy alive. The Milledgeville, Ga., chapter of the NSDAR was named in her honor, along with several Georgia landmarks. In 1932, the General Samuel Hopkins Chapter, Henderson, Ky., erected a marker on the courthouse square in Henderson to commemorate the Revolutionary War soldiers buried in the county. Nancy Hart and her son John

are among the 25 names on the marker. Around this same time, Daughters from the General Samuel Hopkins Chapter placed a marker on Nancy's grave with these words: "Nancy Morgan Hart. Revolutionary Heroine. 1735–1830. Placed by the Gen. Samuel Hopkins Chapter D.A.R. Henderson." (There are discrepancies with specific dates related to Nancy's life, but documentation on file with DAR shows that she was born in 1747 and died in 1840.) Also in 1932, the Stephen Heard DAR Chapter and the Nancy Hart DAR Chapter erected a replica cabin at the approximate site of Hart's cabin, which had been washed away in a flood. Today visitors can step inside the cabin, which contains stones from the original chimney, to walk in Nancy's footsteps and reflect on the courage and sacrifice of this legendary Revolutionary War heroine. 



In 1928, Georgia Route 77 was renamed the "Nancy Hart Highway" by the Georgia State Society DAR and marked by the Stephen Heard DAR chapter. The marker is located in Hart County, Ga.