

"An Aged Lady of Flatbush"
an Explication

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There are aspects of this alleged personal account of the experiences of this "aged lady" which give cause for skepticism as to its authenticity. Firstly, the story itself is actually a second hand account as the author of the story is not the storyteller herself, but rather another person who recorded this account. That is, the story is not a memoir. Moreover *hmm...* this story was published over one hundred years after the events described and at the time of their recounting over sixty years had passed. Although the "aged lady" was purportedly "in full possession of all her faculties....," the events recounted were not of recent occurrence and on that basis alone the "aged lady's" recollection warrants critical analysis to determine its accuracy. Furthermore there is insufficient information in the narrative that would enable a researcher to corroborate with certainty whether the "aged lady" even existed. She lived in Flatbush, her name was Femmetia, she was sixteen years old, she spoke Dutch and lived with her mother, father and older sister. With such sketchy identifying information, (verifying the existence of this person would indeed be a difficult and formidable task.) Indeed, how was she even discovered by the author?

Is it necessary, though? why?

Assuming that the "aged lady" actually existed, other questions relating to the historical accuracy of the narrative must be raised. How accurately were the "aged lady's" statements recorded? What was the author's relationship to the "aged lady?" What were the author's views of the American revolution and how did these views effect effect what was recorded? If the "aged lady's" account is to be accepted as an accurate and authentic

primary historical source on life during the American Revolutionary War, these questions must also be addressed.

According to the author's preface, this story was intended for "younger readers" and this must be kept in mind when critically examining its authenticity and historical value. The tendency to romanticize and simplify a story in order to appeal to "younger readers" can lead to distortions of the facts and fictional embellishments that bear little or no resemblance to what actually occurred. The events described in the story had to be traumatic to those who experienced them. To become a refugee fleeing from an invading foreign army and to have your home destroyed are events which cannot be trivialized without sacrificing a sense of how it really must have felt to have lived through the events described. As a children's story, the "aged lady's" tale is indeed quaint; as an historical narrative it is of dubious value since it provided little insight into how the characters in the story actually felt. The childish quality of this narrative undermines its plausibility and value as a bona-fide historical source. If the author's intent was to shed light on what had actually occurred, the story would not have been recorded and published for "younger readers." Rather, the story would have been recorded in a more matter-of-fact manner devoid of any suggestion that ~~this~~ it ~~story~~ was intended to appeal to any specific age group, especially one that would probably be more interested in reading romantic tales than dispassionate accounts of major historical events and the people who lived through them.

Regarding the references to Caesar and Cato, the black

does it?

surely you don't mean this

why?

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I don't see this

people in the story, their relationship to the "aged lady's" family is unclear. Were they hired servants or slaves? Did slavery exist in that part of the colony? Was the relationship between the "aged lady's" family and Caesar and Cato one that would have been considered typical and normal during the period of time and in the region the story takes place? These questions are important in further determining the plausability of the story and its historical value. For if it is a fact that the relationship between the "aged lady's" family and these black people was indeed unusual, then this would further reinforce the impression that the "aged lady's" account never happened or contains significant distortions of the facts. The description of the interaction between Caesar and the English officer, although amusing, and the pasturing of some of the horses of the calvary officers - for profit - although not entirely implausible, rings false and is grossly inconsistent with how the "aged lady's" family would have been expected to behave in view of the severe damage inflicted on them by the British army. To suggest that the "aged lady's" family could have in any way maintained any semblance of a normal relationship with the British troops after the loses sustained by the "aged lady's" family is at best dubious and warrants further investigation. There is nothing in the "aged lady's" story to suggest that the British troops had any motivation to be friendly with her family, and the description of the English officer as being "a kind hearted man" can only be viewed as ludicrous and the romantic ramblings

that's
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only
alternative?

of an "aged lady" who, as a sixteen year old girl, saw an officer of a plundering army as a handsome, romantic figure. The lack of any bitterness in the "aged lady's" account is incomprehensible in view of the mistreatment her family suffered under British occupation. Perhaps what might have been extremely painful at age sixteen was viewed in a very different light at age eighty which often happens when people recollect painful events which occurred many years before.

Another inconsistency in the story which further undermines its credibility as an historical source is the specific reference to the Forty-second Regiment of Highlanders. It is highly unlikely that a sixteen year old girl struggling with her family to survive would have known anything about the whereabouts of any specific military unit. Indeed this reference to the Forty-second Regiment of Highlanders is completely out of character for the "^{AGED}old lady" who is a romantic and who would not be expected to have the kind of information that perhaps a student of military history would be expected to know. How would a sixteen year old romantically inclined girl know about the deployment of troops amid all the confusion and chaos caused by the war? It simply does not fit into the scope of the story, which is narrow and personal.

The fraternizing between the prisoners and young girls described in the story also rings untrue. Although it is possible that a certain amount of fraternizing occurred, in view of the nature of war it is not probable that it happened exactly according to the "aged lady's" account. It is possible that in her recollection what the "aged lady" actually saw was

something far different than a "place of fashionable resort" where prisoners met young girls. It is extremely unlikely that the British occupation forces would have permitted the local civilian population to relate so closely with enemy soldiers who would have welcomed any assistance to help them escape. This inconsistency becomes even more apparent when considering that the "aged lady" had "sympathy for the American prisoners" and a "warm interest in the cause of freedom" which would suggest an inclination to extend aid to the American prisoners if given the opportunity to do so. Instead the "aged lady" saw the presence of the American prisoners as a chance to socialize with soldiers and act upon her romantic inclination reminiscent more of a romantic novel than a historical treatise.

In the story the "aged lady" says that she "looked on the bright side of everything, Sister on the dark side." The "aged lady's" attitude is astonishing in view of what she had experienced and would have definitely effected her perception of events. For the "aged lady" to have a "bright" outlook despite all that had occurred suggests either an emotional immaturity or an appalling insensitivity to her surroundings and to the feelings of others which further contribute to undermining the credibility and accuracy of the "aged lady's" account. The account would have been more believable had the "aged lady's" sister been interviewed too. The "aged lady's" sister may have provided another version of events that would have been far different and far more insightful. In addition

Why?
In fact
this was
the rule
in the
18th
century.

of
course

the "aged lady's" sister was older and was not, unlike the "aged lady," s starry eyed sixteen year old unable to appreciate the devastation all around her.

The "aged lady's" simplistic outlook becomes even more apparent in her trivialized account of how her sick father drove off a British soldier armed only with a cane. This account is entirely implausible. There is no way that a sick man armed only with a cane, even if accompanied by another person, would have successfully driven off a soldier, especially a soldier demanding horses for the British army. The "aged lady's" recollection of this incident is clearly distorted and not to be believed. Not only did the "aged lady" make her father appear to be a hero, his health even improved. No mention is made of the risk her father took in confronting the soldier and how his action could have jeopardized the safety of his family during this time when the entire area was under British occupation. This is another example of why the "aged lady's" story must be viewed with skepticism.

So how do you account for these exaggerations?

There are other parts of the "aged lady's" story which can also be cited to further bolster the argument that the story is a fabrication, a fictional account of a series of highly improbable events reflecting a literary style usually found in a novel. The "aged lady" entertaining an English officer and in the process saving "the Major's" life; the "aged lady" openly expressing her opinions in the presence of the British - too unbelievable to be taken seriously. As a story for "younger readers," it is an entertaining tale of the adventures of a sixteen year old girl and her family during

the American Revolutionary War. Despite the severe deprivations suffered by her family under British occupation, they persevere, displaying personal traits that "younger readers" would probably find appealing. But fiction should not be confused with fact and as a primary historical source the "aged lady's" account is without value.