

Making More Sense of Machin

By Kenneth Lifshitz
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Recently the pension of Thomas Machin was posted on Jim Morrison's pension website (obtained from NARA) and it contains, in addition to the pension request itself, several important papers regarding Capt. Machin which previously were not in general circulation probably due to their poor condition. For students of Thomas Machin's military career these documents represent a vein of scholarship that is both rich and illuminating. They include several personal correspondences from George Clinton, a letter from Lt. Robert Parker of Lamb's 2nd Artillery and a letter from Parker's brother-in-law Andrew Porter (later General) and detached to the 4th Pennsylvania Artillery and one from 'E' Porter. (Parker was later promoted to Captain and assigned to General Washington's personal staff and Porter went on to become a general and Surveyor General of the United States). Both Parker and Porter had been members of the Sullivan expedition, along with Thomas Machin. The affection and esteem with which these men regarded Machin is overwhelmingly evident in the letters. By contrast the letters from George Clinton seem cold and businesslike. (The fact that Machin by then had become very 'well to do' may have inspired some jealousy in Clinton which would explain the change in tone, one which Machin himself apparently never picked up on or chose to ignore.) Some interesting further documentary evidence regarding Thomas Machin Jr.'s invalid pension request is added pursuant to which it seems Machin was examined in Albany by two doctors there, Dr. Jonathan Eights and Dr. Oliver Lathrop (which represents now a further avenue for research into his wound).¹

The two Porter letters, the first from Andrew and the second from 'E' Porter, datelined a year and a half apart are extremely interesting and they mark the bookends in the events leading to Machin's fall from favor. Up until his visit to Philadelphia 1781, Machin had been a rising star in the ranks and by the time of Yorktown one of the 'golden boys' of the artillery. Clearly by then it was evident the chain had succeeded in its purpose. He had gone on to win honor at the battle of Newtown in routing Brant's force with accurate artillery fire and now he had been given command of the artillery at Yorktown. In a telling incident he here won a personal bet for his commander Henry Knox in a gunnery contest, showing up by his accurate sighting the newer artillery of his French counterparts by blowing up a particular target within the city on the first try. It was Knox no doubt who had subsequently first introduced him to the prestigious Wharton family in Philadelphia which then introduced Machin into the world of real estate and finance in the winter of 1781 following the victory.

Clearly Machin, cognizant of his newfound status and popularity and of the opportunities for social advancement and entrée that this offered him to Philadelphia society, had intimated his intent to get married to his old friend and fellow captain, Andrew Porter during their sojourn there. Porter had been a captain in Lamb's and had joined Clinton's army at Canajoharie in June of 1779 and Machin had met up with them at Lake Otsego. Porter was widely given credit for the novel idea of raising Lake Otsego by damming it to float General Clinton's army down the depleted Mohawk to Tioga to join Sullivan that August but it is clear from other reasons that this idea originated with Machin though characteristically he let Porter take the credit. Having been

subsequently attached to the 4th Pennsylvania Artillery Porter also gained further fame at Yorktown by laying out the American artillery positions there.

The first letter dated 1781 is from Andrew Porter and it clearly intimates that Machin has enlisted him in his campaign now to find a suitable wife. Evidently he was successful but as the latter letter shows, the outcome of this was not what everyone had hoped. The 'fix up' was evidently with someone high in Philadelphia social circles as clearly his failure to consummate this courtship with a match and the events surrounding the breakup resulted in grave consequences for Machin's career. Indeed, this letter marks the beginning of Machin's downfall that will result in his Courts Martial less than a year later. Porter's star on the other hand seemed to rise in the same proportion as Machin's was on the decline. By the time the second letter was written, Porter was a Colonel in the Artillery on his way to becoming a general and Machin was back doing recruiting duty in New Windsor.

The second letter is from ('E') Porter and datelined 'the barracks' in Philadelphia. Clearly from this second letter Machin has identified the object of his prior romantic attentions who Porter refers to here as 'P___'. Machin has informed him of his marriage to Susannah in August of 1782, and the writer (Porter) is counseling him against just then renewing his affections to the mysterious 'P___' which Machin apparently seems intent on doing despite his newlywed status. What is notable is that the letter is not from Andrew Porter, his former comrade, but Porter's (unidentified) relative, though Andrew conveys his congratulations at the bottom, one must question if things were still 'hunky dory' would not his former fellow captain wanted to congratulate him on the event in a line of his own?

Clearly Machin's accomplishments signaled him as an officer of superior talents but the coldness in tone from his superiors creeping into correspondence dating from early 1782 (as noted above) becomes more and more evident and his eventual court martial no doubt was due to the fact that Machin's enemies no longer felt constrained by his status and accomplishments from finding an avenue for attacking him.

What was the series of events in Philadelphia which led to such dire consequences? Who was the mysterious 'P___'. We don't know at this point. We may never know. What is certain is that Machin was a passionate individual in both his personal and professional affairs but not always one of the highest discretion on the personal side. (Evidence the Woodward letters concerning their sexual exploits in New Windsor).² From the winter of 1781 Machin is evidently just 'a willing tool' in the eyes of his superiors. Whatever moral lapse occurred in Machin's behavior it evidently colored their opinion of him thenceforth and his eclipse from the social favor of the 'Philadelphia Lions' of genteel society would dog him the rest of his days.

And As Paul Harvey would say, 'That is the rest of the story'.

Thomas Jr.

The major portion of the materials herein were apparently gathered in support of the 1838 widow pension request initiated by Thomas Machin Jr. The final portion of the posting outlines the history of Thomas Machin's original invalid pension subsequent to 1808 but contains no supporting affidavits (as his service had been well established by that time). This latter sequence of events has been abstracted and appended as a chronology at the end of this article and they do not directly relate to the widow pension initiated by his son.

The bulk of the affidavits contained herein therefore were those appended in support of Thomas Machin Jr.'s original pension request on behalf of his mother's estate filed in 1838. The incidental materials introduced and referenced above were evidently papers of his father's which he retained and which were introduced to serve as further evidence of his late father's service during the revolutionary war and they help us to further paint the portrait of that remarkable man. On the other hand, the widow's pension request initiated by his son and the letters relating to that pension tell a rather different and to some extent sordid story.

What instigated the widow invalid pension request was the congressional revision to the pension act in July of 1836, which entitled the then living widows of injured revolutionary war veterans to half pay from the termination of service. Unfortunately, Thomas' mother Susan (Van Nostrand) Machin had passed away in December of 1835 which rendered her and her estate ineligible to receive the benefits of the act which would have been substantial. Had Susan survived until July 1836 she, or her estate would have been eligible for a substantial payment amounting to about \$4,000 as a lump sum (about \$90,000 inflation adjusted in today's money).

Undeterred by the fact that his mother was technically ineligible, Thomas Jr. filed a pension request on behalf of her estate in April of 1838 (as purported sole heir to her estate) which contained several affidavits both regarding her death and his status of sole heir, both of which facts became very publicly suspect and rightly so. Three of the affidavits offered, those of John and Mathilda Bartlett of Canajoharie³ and a Joshua Colgrove⁴ asserted that his mother had died in December of 1836 which would have made her eligible to benefit from the act. Machin's own affidavit asserted she had died in December of 183_ with the last year date blotted out.

In May of 1838 the pension was paid out to the sole heir of Susan Machin, Thomas Machin Jr. in Albany. Over a year later, Henry Yates, the clerk of the court of common pleas in Montgomery County, submits additional pension requests under cover of a letter questioning Machin's veracity to Peter J. Wagner, newly elected Whig member of congress from Montgomery and Herkimer Counties the following month.⁵ (It was the custom for these late requests to be submitted directly to congress.) It is clear that someone has complained to Yates that Machin has committed fraud in obtaining the pension monies and Yates writes to Wagner pointing out that he had personal knowledge that Machin lied in his request. Wagner's reply to Yates in December of 1839 is illuminating. He says he knows Machin Jr. and that "Thom Machin" well he is a 'Case'." It is possible that Yates had waited until a year later to complain, awaiting the outcome of the election and knowing the antipathy Wagner held for Machin.

Wagner, on the 22nd of April 1840, diligently writes to the clerk of the surrogate's court in

Montgomery County requesting the original documents on file there and receives a reply saying that when Machin had certified the original affidavits, he had demanded they be returned to him as he 'had to bring them to Washington'. Over the ensuing spring and summer Wagner researches the facts and confirms that the pension was paid out by the agency in Albany in May of 1838 was in the amount of \$3444.28 and further establishes the actual date of Susan Machin's demise as being in 1835, rendering the request now a case of fraud.

In August, Wagner summons Machin to his house in Fort Plain and angrily demands repayment of the monies. Machin, knowing full well it is impossible for Wagner to comply, has the temerity to say he will repay the monies but only if Wagner returns the original affidavits to him and intimidates him into writing a letter to this effect to the commissioner of pensions that Wagner knows is unacceptable and impossible to comply with (since as both know Machin already has the originals in his possession)

Obviously the attempt to play Wagner for a fool and to coerce his cooperation would not stand for long and the text of these two letters is reproduced here:

"Fort Plain August 4, 1840

Dear Sir,

I have seen Mr. Thomas Machin & he says to me if the original Papers, on file in your office upon which he drew the money, are delivered over to me for him, he will pay over the cash—that is to say, he will then trust definitively with me—What say you to this?

I can see no objection to this, and if consistent or proper, I wish you would send them to me, to deliver in case I receive the money.

I have written Mr. Benton that I was negotiating for this case with me immediately. Your humble & obedt servt. P. J. Wagner"

"Fort Plain, N.Y. August 6, '40

Dr. Sir.

*The letter you just recd from me was written in presence of Machin. He is not aware of 2 years limitation & hence wishes the Papers.*⁶ Perhaps it may be well.

Be over time & that debt be recurred by Montg. Over real estate or Judgt—I suppose & b am sure indeed he cannot pay before the 18th. Inst. – If you think it better to take security by Judge for Montg. Than to prosecute him for the money with me—if so, I will not be consistent & approbation of Benton, U.S.D. Atty—I would insist on paid money at least—of thought expedient give us full discretion. I knew I would bring him to his "Mil R"? & I will bring him to the "Mark" (with interest?) Truly yours, P. J. Wagner. Answer this directly & oblige him & me.⁷

In June of that year, Nathaniel Benton had been replaced by Joshua A. Spencer as U.S. District Attorney for the Northern District of New York. In August it is Spencer who takes up the case and writes to the treasury trying to document who authorized the payment to Machin. They are obviously preparing a fraud case against him. The case is referred by Spencer to James L. Edwards, the Commissioner of Pensions who now apparently calls for Machin to be arrested. Sure enough, in January of 1842 they arrest Machin which apparently was not easy. On January 21st Spencer writes to Edwards, " Sir, We have finally succeeded in arresting Thomas Machin

and holding him to bail at the suit of the United States in a suit to recover back the three thousand & three hundred of dollars obtained from the Gov't by a fraud on the pension laws." Machin has apparently spent the money and now tries to settle the case by offering his farm as collateral for repayment but claims encumbrances on the land which prevent him paying back at present.

Whatever the arrangements for repayment that were eventually made they clearly did not satisfy Machin's enemies and a case for suborning perjury was brought against him in 1847.⁸ It is however evident that Machin managed to repair his reputation. Following his father's example he did this by setting about forming new powerful friendships. Moving to Albany he enlists the help of William H. Seward who had been elected Senator in 1849. In December of 1854 William Seward introduces two resolutions, one asking that additional bounty lands be granted to the veterans of the War of 1812 and secondly a resolution on behalf of Thomas Machin that the congress underwrite the expenses 'for a convention of soldiers of that war', to be held in the city of Washington, on the 8th of January, 1855. He also asks that they make the congressional ballroom available for this purpose. With only three weeks before the event, the request on behalf of Machin was rendered moot by referral to committee."

Thomas Machin Sr. Invalid Pension

The circumstances surrounding Machin's wound are confusing, contradictory and troubling. Traditional accounts have him being severely wounded in the chest on October 6th 1777 at the fall of Fort Montgomery and then repairing to recuperate at Governor Clinton's house in nearby Little Britain. The latter assumption is without question untrue, and this is born out both by ancillary correspondence by George Clinton's brother-in-law and Machin's own accounts both of which place him elsewhere. The fact that Machin rode some forty-five miles to a house east of Poughkeepsie following the battle seems to mitigate against a serious wound as does other evidence which I shall recount.

Hugh Hughes, the Deputy Quartermaster General had following the report of the British presence at Tarrytown arranged for the wife of the governor, Mrs. Clinton, and her entourage to vacate east from the Governor's residence in Poughkeepsie fearing of an attack inland on Poughkeepsie by the British, (obviously anticipating the success of the British in passing the forts). Thomas Machin, along with Christopher Tappan, Clinton's brother-in-law and Mrs. Clinton wound up at the house of John Barnes' some eight miles east of Poughkeepsie following the fall of the forts to the British. Hughes personally took care of arranging for the carriages and the transportation of the ladies and he personally reassured Clinton the following day that he would vacate them further east to Connecticut if circumstances warranted, which they did not (the British did not venture inland). His concern for their safety is evident in his correspondence.

The presence of Mrs. Clinton there is easily explained by the concern for her safety but Machin's presence there is not so easily explained. Hughes was, with Putnam and Glover at the council of war at the Continental Village on the east side of the Hudson at the time of the fall of the forts. The case I presented in "DPV"⁹ is that it is highly likely that Hughes met Machin there, after Machin arrived on the eastern shore sometime that day (if my theory is correct, riding Lt. Col. W. S. Livingston's borrowed horse). This would have been sometime around six o'clock and

after he had stopped at Constitution Island to argue with Captain Gershom Mott about getting the artillery there evacuated and encouraging them to hoist the frigate Constitution above the boom to save her, both of which Mott was disinclined to do.

Hughes must have arranged for Machin to go to the Barnes house also either because Machin was severely wounded and in need of care, or, as further protection for the Governor's wife and their party from Tory reprisals, which latter scenario would seem to make sense only if he was he was not wounded badly. Christopher Tappan's letter the day following and common sense seems to confirm the latter scenario; that he was relying on Machin to afford protection for their little group. The fact that Machin resumed his ordinary arduous activities of surveying only a month and half later further supports this thesis.

The fact that the War Department doctor who originally examined Machin in 1812 caused the rejection of his invalid pension is also troubling. Machin arranged for a second physical examination in Albany in 1814 under friendlier circumstances. This occurred at the order of Matthias B. Tallmadge. Tallmadge was George Clinton's son-in-law and obviously friendly to Machin. Tallmadge himself however became the subject of a three-year congressional investigation into misconduct (which may have been partisan). Of the two doctors examining Machin in 1814, Jonathan Eights was the more prominent. He was, along with the well-known T. R. Beck a founding member of the SPUA (Society to Promote the Useful Arts), a learned association, and along with Machin was a fellow mason. The results of this second examination resulted in the granting of the invalid status and the increase of pension benefits.

The question of how Machin received his wound and the severity of it are destined to remain somewhat clouded due to contradictory conclusions reached by doctors later on and the contradictory testimony of the contemporary historical record ((and possibly due to intentional alteration of events concerning the fall of Fort Montgomery battle as described elsewhere (in DPV)).

Chronology Of Thomas Machin (Sr.) Invalid Pension Request

(notations in this chronology refer to the pension request materials held at NARA and published on morrisonspensions.com)

(From Journals of Congress)

April 17th 1806

Congress directs Secretary of War to obtain State invalid pension rolls including militia members.

Pensions are extended to militia members.

(From Machin Letter, November 3rd, 1814)

Thomas Machin is placed on the pension rolls.

(From Journals of Congress)

April 25th 1808

President signs "An act concerning invalid pensioners".

And invalid Pension is granted to Thomas Machin as partially disabled dating from the 4th day of March 1808 at the rate of ten dollars per month. It appears this act makes no distinction in compensation for partial and total disablement.

(From Journals of Congress)

April 29th 1812 president signs,

"an act to revive and continue in force" the invalid pension.

It seems (from Machin's action) this act makes the distinction between partial and total disablement.

Machin is examined by doctor

to establish total disablement.

(From Machin letter dated November 3rd, 1814)

Machin applied for an increase in pension due to total incapacity under the provisions of the act.

It was rejected due to insufficiency in the examining doctor report.

(From notes in Pension office)

March 19th 1812

First physical examination Machin for invalid certificate.

Certificate is deemed invalid (for technical reasons), examination was 'not sufficient'.

(From Order of Judge Tallmadge date October 8th, 1814)

October 8th 1814

Dr. Lathrop and Dr. Eights are appointed by Mathew B. Tallmadge to reexamine him in Albany.

(From Affidavit October 29th 1814)

October 29th 1814

Affidavit from the Albany office certifying the examination of Lathrop and Eights.

Second request for invalid increase.

(From Machin Letter November 3rd 1814)

In this letter Machin complains that his application for increase was denied due to incompleteness in the report of the original examining surgeon.

(From Journals of Congress)

"An act concerning invalid pensioners," passed Congress March 3rd 1815

(From undated Memorandum (from Pension Office?))

March 3rd, 1815

Machin's pension is increased to \$20 retroactive to time total disablement was established by the second examination affidavit of October 29 1814.

(From Journals of Congress December 13th, 1816

Mr. Cady, presented a petition of Susanna Machin, widow of the late Captain Thomas Machin, praying to be allowed the arrearages of the pension to which she alleges her said husband to have been entitled.

Ordered, That the said petitions be referred to the committee on Pensions and Revolutionary Claims.

(From Journals of Congress December 31st, 1816)

Mr. Chappell, from the committee on Pensions and Revolutionary Claims, made a report on the petition of Susannah Machin, which was read, and the resolution therein contained was concurred in by the House, as follows:

Resolved, That the prayer of the petitioner ought to be rejected

1817 (undated)

Susannah writes to President James Monroe

(From War Dept. Pension Office November 7th, 1818)

Susannah Machin wants increase made retroactive to 1812, the date of the first 'botched' examination. Referred to congress with recommendation.

(From Journal of Congress Nov 30th, 1818)

"The Speaker laid before the House a letter from the Secretary of War, transmitting a report in relation to the Claims of Daniel Davis, Elias Davis, David Holton, John Dougherty, and Abraham Le Foy, for pensions; and of Jonathan D. Carrier, Jehiel Judd, and Susannah Machin, for increase of pension; made in compliance with the 3d & 5th sections of the act of the 10th of April, 1806, which was referred to the committee on Pensions and Revolutionary Claims"
No record of action taken

1838 The act to extend benefits to widows of veterans
(And here we go again with Tommy Jr.'s)

Again, thanks to Jim Morrison for locating and posting this valuable material and thanks to A.J. Berry for her transcription and invaluable comments.

Endnotes:

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1. Eights was a well known colleague of the famous T.R. Beck, member of Beck's SPUA and a fellow mason.
 2. Peter Woodward correspondence, New York Historical Society.
 3. John Bartlett is listed as a pensioner from the War of 1812 from Pine Plains, New York. Pension #2,016.
 4. Notes: Joshua Colgrove was a private in John Brown's regiment of Massachusetts levies. Brown was killed at the Battle of Stone Arabia. Machin it appears was married to a Nancy Brown who may have been related, but as of this writing this relationship is not established. It appears he remarried to Nancy McMichael of Kingston, probably sometime around 1817.
 5. Interestingly Judge Sacia who witnessed the affidavits had been the rival for Wagner's congressional seat.
 6. Italics mine.
 7. It is not clear if these two letters are addressed to Spencer U.S. Attorney or to Edwards, the Commissioner. It seems impossible that Wagner would be unaware that Benton had already been replaced as U.S. Attorney as the letter seems to imply.
 8. The outcome of this case is not known at this writing but should be available in the judicial records of Schoharie or Montgomery County.
 9. "Donderburg's Pumpkin Vine", Kenneth Lifshitz, 2004.