

A forgotten Founding Father in film

Joseph Warren could be subject of documentary



Williamsburg author Christian Di Spigna wrote a 2018 book on Dr. Joseph Warren. Courtesy

BY BEN SWENSON CORRESPONDENT

Joseph Warren is the most famous Founding Father you've never heard of.

Warren was a Revolutionary War-era leader and spymaster, not only a member of the Sons of Liberty, but also the man who sent Paul Revere and William Dawes on their famous midnight ride, as well as a direct participant in the Revolutionary War's earliest battles.

Now, a local Warren biographer and the foundation he leads want to bring his story to the big screen.

Christian Di Spigna is a Williamsburg resident and author of “Founding Martyr: The Life and Death of Dr. Joseph Warren, the American Revolution’s Lost Hero,” published by Crown in 2018. He’s also executive director of the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation, a nonprofit that works to amplify Warren’s legacy and provide scholarships for deserving students.

The foundation has embarked on an effort to raise funds to shoot a feature-length documentary on the life of Warren, filming many of the scenes in Virginia.

In February, LionHeart FilmWorks will be shooting a separate colonial-era documentary in Goochland County, northwest of Richmond, complete with a replica of the Green Dragon Tavern. The iconic Boston stopover is called the “Headquarters of the Revolution,” and the place where St. Andrew’s Masonic Lodge held meetings. Warren, who was Grand Master of Massachusetts Freemasons, frequented the tavern, where he met other revolutionaries and planned organized resistance to British rule.

Di Spigna said that the Warren documentary will film on the Goochland County site simultaneous to the LionHeart FilmWorks project.

“J” Hart, who lives in Midlothian, is operations manager for the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation. She has a background in production and said that many documentarians take ample creative license with their subjects, but she said Warren needs no such enhancement. Hart, a former U.S. Marine, said that our modern nation could benefit from more leaders who display Warren’s diplomacy, courage and passion.

“His life and legacy don’t need to be embellished,” she said. “He was such an amazing person that there’s nothing we need to do to embellish his reputation.”

Warren was a physician by trade, treating hundreds of people in greater Boston, remaining in town and inoculating people during a smallpox epidemic. While he was decidedly pro-independence, he was respected by people who took different sides in the conflict.

Di Spigna said that Warren’s importance to the nation’s founding is hard to overstate. He was known as the grandfather of the American Revolution. “Without Warren, we may not have had the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights,” he said.

Fourteen counties across the country are named for Warren, along with dozens

of cities and smaller municipalities, among them Warren County and Warrenton in Virginia.

Nevertheless, there is a question that Di Spigna gets all the time: “If he was so important, then why haven’t I heard of him?”

Di Spigna tells them that Warren’s flame was extinguished just as the Revolution was heating up.

Although Warren was commissioned a major general, he fought in the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill as a private, holding the line against the redcoats as they advanced up Breeds Hill. As the battle drew to a close, Warren suffered a grievous head wound. He died at age 34.

Di Spigna said that the leaders who would become icons of history — men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams — were at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia when Warren gave his life on the battlefield for the cause of liberty.

His death is memorialized in an iconic painting, “The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill, June 17, 1775” by John Trumbull. Although he died at a relatively young age, he accomplished so much in his life, said Dr. Carolyn Matthews, a retired physician and Warren descendent who lives in Virginia and is trustee for a portrait of Warren by John Singleton Copley that belongs to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

“I think he’s an incredible role model,” she said. “He was an amazing physician, orator and writer, and then he went on to play such an important part in American Revolution.” He also was a widower and had four young children when he died, Matthews said.

She said you don’t see many people in their 30s who have accomplished so much. When Matthews was a practicing gynecological oncologist at Baylor Scott & White Health in Texas, the health system honored senior residents who exhibited excellence, leadership and balance with the aptly-named Joseph Warren Award.

Pre-production and filming began this year — the foundation has already produced a trailer — and Di Spigna hopes to have the project completed by late spring in 2024, just in time for the 250th anniversary of major Revolutionary War events, such as the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Di Spigna said there will be heightened interest in the Revolutionary War and affiliated colonial-era sites such as Williamsburg as this important anniversary

comes to pass. Noted documentarian Ken Burns will be releasing a six-part series about the Revolutionary War in 2025.

Matthews said the Warren documentary will be an especially impactful way to present the story of America's forgotten Founding Father as information is increasingly consumed digitally. "A documentary has the potential to bring this important story to more people," she said.

More information about Warren, along with the documentary's trailer, can be found at the website of the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation at www.djwf.org.

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