



DEAR AMERICA

*The Second Diary of
Abigail Jane Stewart*



*Cannons
at Dawn*

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SCHOLASTIC INC. • NEW YORK

While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Abigail Jane Stewart is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gregory, Kristiana.
Cannons at dawn : the second diary of Abigail Jane Stewart /
Kristiana Gregory. — 1st ed.
p. cm. — (Dear America)
Sequel to: The winter of red snow.
Summary: From the winter of 1779 until 1781, Abigail Stewart and her family follow the path of her father's Continental Army unit after their Valley Forge home burns down, enduring harsh winters and scarce food, and narrowly escaping danger time and again.

Trade Paper-Over-Board edition ISBN 978-0-545-21319-6
Reinforced Library edition ISBN 978-0-545-28088-4

1. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Juvenile fiction.
[1. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Fiction. 2. Diaries—Fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.G8619Can 2011
[Fic]—dc22
2010032431

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 11 12 13 14 15

The text type was set in ITC Legacy Serif.
The display type was set in Dear Sarah.
Book design by Kevin Callahan

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, May 2011

Cannons at Dawn is dedicated to my wonderful mother, Jeanne Kern Gregory, whose ancestors marched with General Washington and were from Kernstown, Virginia. Mom's love for writing, reading, and research inspired me as a young child and inspires me still.

Also, this is in loving memory of Ann Reit, my longtime editor—a formidable and often terrifying one—who guided me through The Winter of Red Snow. It was great fun brainstorming with her and we became dear friends. About writer's block she said, "Forget about it. Just tell the story!" I miss her deeply.



*Valley Forge,
Pennsylvania*



1779

*January 2, 1779, Saturday,
morning*

“Abby, when will Papa come back home?” Sally asked again. Though she is seven, she understands naught about war and she asks this question every morning. She is poking the coals for breakfast and holding back her long apron, careful that it doesn’t catch fire like last winter.

“Papa will come home when General Washington says so,” I answered. I sit by the hearth so my little ink jug will keep thawing. It is freezing from last night and snowing again. Gusts of wind rattle our windows.

Elisabeth just came in from the barn, eggs in her apron. Snow covers her cap and even the strings tied under her chin. Beth is the eldest of us three sisters. She smiles to see me writing in my journal. We both know that any moment our mother will turn from the fire and see that I am not frying the pork as I should be.

“Abigail, dear,” Mama said, right on schedule. “Time to rest thy quill. The skillet is ready. You are twelve and should know this by the good smell of butter and onions in the pan.”

“Yes, Mama,” I said. She has picked up Johnny from his cradle and is drying his bottom with the hem of her skirt. Her eye is on me, but she is smiling.

Before bed

A full moon has broken through the clouds. It is so bright, this table by the window needs no candle. Elisabeth is opposite me, writing another letter to Ben Valentine. He has asked for the pleasure of her company in the hospital while his wounds heal, but Philadelphia is eighteen miles by snowy road. She fancies this soldier. As her quill moves over the paper I pretend not to look, but I *am* looking. I squint, hoping to see a love word.

“Abigail,” she whispered. “You’ll hurt thy neck staring.”

“Beth, what say you to Mr. Valentine? How far up did the doctors cut off his arm?”

“Hush, Abby. We’ll wake Mama.” She glanced toward the bed we share with our mother.

Sally was asleep in her trundle, Johnny in his

cradle, though soon he shall be too big for it, as he has passed his first birthday. When Papa joined the Army a few weeks ago, we closed the upper room to save heat and now all of us sleep here by the fire. Even so, by morning our water bucket has ice.

We worry about him being a soldier. This war has gone on for nearly four years. My father is a cobbler. He is not young.

“A man needs to stand up for his country,” he told us before walking down the lane with neighbours who were also joining the Continental Army. They each carried a hunting rifle and rolled-up blanket. The morning was cold with a light snowfall. I wished Papa had waved to us before the road turned, but I saw only the tuft of his queue and snow gathering on the back of his shirt.

Now he is camped with Washington’s main Army in New Jersey and our enemies are wintering in the fine houses of New York, the city. The British will grow fat there, I hope, and be too merry for war. I hate them. I want them to sail back to

England and leave us alone. We have declared our independence from King George III, but still they fight us.

Elisabeth is sprinkling sand on her page to dry the ink, now I shall do the same. We are both yawning this late hour. The night is lovely, the fields aglow from the moon, but the wind is fierce. Sparks are blowing down our chimney onto the rug—

Days later

Philadelphia. My throat is sore from crying. Our pretty little house in Valley Forge is gone!

I am writing this by an attic window in Philadelphia. We arrived by sleigh a few days ago, distraught and unbelieving.

That terrible night Elisabeth and I tried to stomp out the burning rug—holding high our hems so our skirts wouldn't catch—but flames jumped to a curtain. We screamed for Mama. She scooped up Johnny and pulled Sally awake. Beth grabbed blankets. I swept all from our table into a basket: a bowl of walnuts and our writing things.

When we opened the door to run out, wind fueled the fire with a hot *swoosh*.

There was no time for us to draw water from the well. Neighbours came running with buckets, but there was naught they could do.

We stood barefoot in the snow, shivering, while flames hissed out the windows then brought down the walls. Sparks flew to the barn. It flared like a torch. When we heard the helpless shriek of Buttercup, our faithful old mare, Elisabeth and I ran to pull open the door. Our chickens squawked and there was one long *moo* from Brownie as they fled out into the cold night.

Though our animals are safe with neighbours, I am still teary writing this.

To continue . . .

We are not with relatives as we had hoped. How weary we are from having walked in the cold – three long days – looking for my uncles, who live here in Philadelphia. At night we took shelter in a stable, warmed by burrowing in

hay. Our only clue to our uncles' whereabouts came from a shopkeeper sweeping snow off his step, who knew them. He said that when the British occupied this city last winter, they ransacked and burned many houses. My uncles and their families moved away, but where, he did not know. It seems the enemy destroyed their letters to us.

"Those swine Englishmen," said the shopkeeper. He spit in the icy gutter. "Now they have taken New York City. How many Patriots there have been forced from their homes, God only knows."

On our fourth day of wandering and being so very hungry, a lady kind in heart and deed saw us in the street. Actually, she heard Johnny yowling from Mama's cloak, and invited us into her tiny cottage. Her name is Mrs. Darling.

The five of us have made a cozy bed in her attic, with the blankets Elisabeth rescued. I am awake as an owl; Mother, too. I can see firelight through cracks in the floorboards and feel some warmth from the stone chimney. Still it is cold. My breath makes frost.

“Can you not sleep, Abby?” Mama just whispered.

“Not yet, Mother.”

“Then mind thy candle, dear.”

“Yes, Mama.” I am careful with fire. I always lick my thumb and finger to pinch the flame so a draft will not relight it.

Where was I? Oh yes. The night of the fire, our neighbours, the Doogans, took us in. Then the next morning friends came to console us. They brought shoes, a cloak for each of us, a kettle, some spoons, also a basket with figs, apples, and beef pies. All offered us shelter, but Mama thought it best to be with Papa’s brothers in Philadelphia.

Our farewells were tearful.

Without a house and without Papa to build one, would we ever return?

Mr. Doogan helped us into his sleigh, set warm bricks at our feet, and covered us with quilts. He whistled to the horses then drove out of Valley Forge. The countryside was white save for the smoldering black ruins of our home.

Mama was silent.