

## *Frances Keegan Marquis, Women's Activist, Pioneering Army Officer*

West Newbury's [most famous World War II Army officer](#) was a woman: [Frances Keegan Marquis](#). She was born on October 15, 1896 at her family's home at 325 Main Street, a [property she came to own in 1919](#) after her family moved nearer Boston. Her father, [John L. Keegan](#), was a foreman in Haverhill. Frances Keegan grew up on Main Street and [graduated from high school here at 14](#). She was among the Brightest, Best Student, and Most Promising of [Simmons College's class of 1916](#).

After college, Frances Keegan Marquis became a [successful career woman](#), holding [executive positions in organizations that promoted women's issues](#). She managed Boston's [Franklin Square House](#), a non-profit residence hotel providing housing and social services for some 700 unmarried women students and wage earners. She fundraised for and then managed [The Town Hall](#) in New York City, an offshoot of the suffrage movement. She was an executive at the [American Woman's Association](#), created as a place where a working woman could network and develop leadership skills, and at the [Women's City Club of New York](#).

In 1931, Frances Keegan met and married Harry Goshen Marquis, a ginger-ale salesman at the time; it was a second marriage for each of them. In a [New Yorker article](#) ("[Warrior's Husband](#)") written upon her deployment abroad he praised her career accomplishments, saying, "Not only that, ... but if [at 5'9"] she wasn't two and half inches taller than I, I would call her a beautiful woman. As it is, I will call her handsome."

In July of 1942, Marquis joined the first [Women's Army Auxiliary Corps \(WAAC\)](#) officer training class. Chosen from some [30,000 applicants, she was one of 440 in her class, of whom 90% had attended college and 99% had successful civilian careers](#). Upon graduation, Marquis entered the military at age 46.

In December, Marquis learned that she would command the nation's first women's expeditionary

force, the elite 149<sup>th</sup> WAAC Post Headquarters Company. This handpicked group of some 200 [women served in such jobs as drivers, switchboard operators, secretaries, and mail clerks in General Dwight Eisenhower's North African headquarters](#) in Algiers. They arrived at the end of January, 1943 and by July Ernie Pyle wrote of the 149<sup>th</sup>, "[When a WAC takes over a switchboard from a soldier, efficiency goes up about 1000 percent.](#)"

In late September, 1943, as the WAACs transitioned from auxiliary status into the Women's Army Corps, Captain Marquis [returned to the States to fight a different war](#). To combat the [Slander Campaign against military women](#) (which included, among other things, the near-indelible [fabrication that many if not most WACs in North Africa had been sent home pregnant](#)), Marquis toured the country giving speeches and interviews about [her troops' life in the theater of war](#), including their commitment as volunteers, qualifications and training, assignments, long work hours, supervised social life, and housing in a convent.

After her return to civilian life at the war's end, Marquis turned to volunteer work, again with an emphasis on women's issues. Having previously served [Altrusa](#) (an organization of professional women's clubs focused on community service) as president of the New York City chapter and publicity chairman of the international organization of clubs, [Marquis became Altrusa International's official United Nations observer](#) and traveled about the country giving speeches about the U.N. Marquis also served as [an officer of Camp Fire Girls in New York](#).

[Frances Keegan Marquis died at her Manhattan home on August 4, 1984](#), leaving no immediate survivors. She did, however, maintain friendships in West Newbury throughout her life, returning for high school reunions and becoming a [lifetime member of the Historical Society](#). She donated some of her papers, photos, and medals to the West Newbury Historical Society.

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Capt. Frances Keegan Marquis 10/1943 ([US Army photo](#))

Frances Eleanor Keegan  
upon graduation from  
West Newbury  
High School 6/1911  
([Ancestry.com](#);  
from the family of  
Eudora Corbin,  
West Newbury  
High School  
Class of 1911)

