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When the British held New Brunswick, or ...

1904.

COPY NO. 2

J974.942
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When the British Held New Brunswick
or Six Months with the Revolutionary
Armies in New Jersey. ❁ ❁ ❁

By

JOHN P. WALL

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100 Copies Printed for Private Circulation Only

HOME NEWS PRINT, 1904

J914.942
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WHEN THE BRITISH HELD NEW BRUNSWICK

During the last few years the trend of the fiction reading public has been for the books of the Revolutionary period. One of the most noted of these novels has its scenes and plot laid in and around New Brunswick, N. J. At first thought one wonders at the fertility of a brain capable of producing such a work of fiction. A little study of the time, trials and privations, not to take into consideration, how neighbor suspected neighbor, friend distrusted friend, while father and son were afraid to exchange confidences for fear, as was often the case, that they were ranged on opposite sides, will soon convince one that those novels are not all fiction. Take for instance the months between the second day of December, 1776, when the advance guards of the British, who had been steadily marching towards New Brunswick, appeared on the opposite side of the Raritan River, until the twenty-second day of June, 1777, when they beat an ungallant retreat to Amboy. harrassed on all sides by the Patriot army. It must be understood that in a war like that of the Revolution, it was only natural to find a portion of the inhabitants who sympathized with the invaders, and now as their people were in the ascendancy, the patriots were everywhere exposed to their bitter hatred, and were in constant dread of their treachery. The farmer feared to till his soil, the merchant closed his store, and the mechanic exchanged his tools for the implements of war, while the paper money had little more value than the brown forest leaves of that eventful autumn. The means of the patriots were well-nigh exhausted, and their hopes about extinguished. They had responded again and again to the call to arms, until none but old men, women and children remained

at home. They had also given up even the necessaries of life for the patriotic cause. Such was the situation along the banks of the Raritan when Washington and his army commenced active operation in that vicinity.

On the 28th of November 1776, as the British entered Newark, Washington and his army marched into New Brunswick. At this time a large number of his soldiers were entitled to their discharge and no persuasion could induce them to re-enlist. It was Washington's hope that with the aid of the Jersey Militia to make the banks of the Raritan the bounds of the enemy's progress, but on the first of December the army was greatly weakened by the expiration of the terms of enlistment of the Jersey and Maryland Flying Camps, and, as the Militia did not come in as soon as was expected, another retreat was the necessary consequence.

On the approach of the British, December the second, 1776, the American Army retreated to Trenton, where they arrived December the fourth, and remained until the seventh, when on the approach of the enemy, it was thought best to cross the Delaware.

This retreat was censured by some as cowardly and disgraceful, but those critics did not know that this little band was at one time less than 1,000 effective men, and never more than 4,000, and that the British, as a general rule, kept their fighting strength at about 8,000, exclusive of their artillery, and that this handful of Americans retreated slowly across the State, harrassed on all sides by well armed foes, with a loss of not more than a dozen men from all causes. Had these critics known this they would never have given utterance to the harsh words which they aimed at Washington and his advisers. Howe's first design extended no further than to get possession of East Jersey. Lord Cornwallis had orders not to advance beyond New Brunswick, but finding the advantages that might be gained by pushing on to the Delaware, and the possibility of getting to

Philadelphia, he asked for re-enforcements and accordingly was joined by Lord Howe on the 6th, with the 4th Brigade of British under the command of Major-General Grant. This corps marched in two divisions, and on the 8th, the first advanced to Trenton just in time to see Washington's rear guard pass. Up to this time everything was with the enemy, who becoming intoxicated with their success, resolved to enjoy the fruits of their conquest. Fearless of an attack from a weakened army, they spread misery and desolation wherever they went. Their rage and lust, their avarice and cruelty knew no bounds, and murder, ravishment, plunder and the most brutal treatment of every sex and age were the first acts that signalized their conquest.

While the enemy was in this situation, their position was made more secure by the capture of General Lee, who was, unfortunately, taken in the rear of his army December 13th, at Baskingridge, by a party of Light Horse, commanded by Colonel Harcourt.

The fortune of the American arms was at its lowest ebb, but the tide was on the turn. Pennsylvania became thoroughly aroused at the distress of America, and poured forth its yeomanry to the assistance of the Continental Army. What followed, we all know well, was the battle of Trenton, that master tonic of the Revolution, which infused a new life into the American heart. While those events were being enacted on the shores of the Delaware, things were not so slow along the banks of the old Raritan.

The main stores of the British were at New Brunswick, under a small guard, and being very much alarmed as to their safety, as well as the prosecution of further offensive operations being out of the question, they marched immediately after the affairs at Trenton and Princeton, to guard them from attack by the patriots. These supplies were obtained from Amboy, but for three months, January, February and March, 1777, they were

completely shut off from all relief, and were compelled to lurk within the scanty confines of New Brunswick and Amboy, surrounded by detached corps whose advantageous situation enabled them to discover and repel any plundering party that hunger could force to sally out. Scarcely a day passed without an attempt to forage and plunder, but the bravery and vigilance of the Patriots obliged the enemy to return commonly without plunder, and often with a very great loss of their men and baggage.

The English and Hessians did not get along very well. The quarrels that took place at Trenton and Princeton, between the officers had spread to the ranks, and at one time—February 21st—it became necessary to disarm over 200 Hessians, pending a settlement of the dispute by General Howe. Another source of discontent among the British soldiers was, that they were jealous of the plunder the Hessians got. They insisted upon the same privileges, which General Howe was obliged to allow. The devastation they made wherever they went cannot be surpassed in history. They made no distinction with anyone; Whig or Tory was all the same to them.

On Friday, December 17, 1776, a party of Patriots made an attack on the picket guards for the purpose of destroying, if possible, the magazine and stores of the enemy. They were repulsed and lost about 30 men in killed, wounded and prisoners. Those attacks were very frequent and constituted one of the main reasons for the maintainance of a strong force to protect the stores.

While in New Brunswick, Lord Howe made his headquarters in the large brick building on Burnet, near Hiram street, and known as the "Neilson House." The Hessian commander, DeHeister, had his headquarters in the Van Nuis house, on Neilson street.

During the short stop made in the city by General Washington, his headquarters was located on the south-

west corner of Albany and Neilson streets.

Numerous private houses were occupied by British officers, thus compelling many citizens to abandon their dwellings. While the enemy occupied the city many encounters took place, and the treatment of the town-folks was nothing better than that given to their neighbors, nor should it be expected by them, for the patriotism of Middlesex County well stood the test. Howe's supplies were obtained from Amboy, but for three months they were completely shut off. To relieve this, various foraging parties were sent out, one of the most successful of those was that of February 8, 1777, which surprised a body of Americans at Quibbletown, and captured everything in the camp as well as killing 12 Americans and taking a captain and five privates prisoners, who were brought back, with the forage to New Brunswick.

The supplies taken in this manner could not relieve the wants of the troops, and as the provisions must be replenished, word to that effect was sent to Amboy, on the receipt of which it was decided to send a fleet up the river in hopes of escaping the sharp eyes of the ever alert Patriots, but the scheme was destined to fail, for just as the boats came in sight of the city they were discovered and fired upon with such force that five of the boats were sunk and the remaining ones forced back to Amboy. Later another relief expedition was sent out on foot, but also failed to reach its destination. One of the reasons given for its failure was that the officers in command made a detour of about fourteen miles for the purpose of capturing General Maxwell and his party at Spanktown. He found his fatal mistake when it was too late to remedy it, for he discovered that he had surrounded a nest of American hornets, who soon put his whole body to flight. This skirmish took place March 8, 1777. The men and troops engaged on the American side were: Colonel Patten's battalion of Pennsylvania

Militia, a part of Colonel Thatcher's New England troops, Colonel Cook's Pennsylvanians, also Colonel Martin and Lieutenant-Colonel Lindsley, of the Eastern Battalion of Morris County, Jersey Militia.

On Tuesday, March 5, 1777, five hundred men of the American army attacked the Hesisans, who were on picket guard near New Brunswick, drove them in to the city, took eleven cows, two horses and about twenty loads of hay, which the British had stacked up within their lines.

The enemy left New Brunswick on April 13, 1777, with the intention of surprising General Lincon at Bound Brook, and had almost effected the design, through the carelessness of a militia guard, upon one of the fords on the Raritan river, but Lincon got notice in time to withdraw himself and most of his men to the mountains just in the rear of the town.

Lieutenants Turnbull and Ferguson with a small party of Colonel Proctor's Pennsylvania regiment, were captured with two brass field pieces. This attack was made by Lord Cornwallis with Generals Grant and Mathews, with a body of British troops and Colonel Donop, with a detachment of Hessians. The British version of this affair says that the men captured were the most miserable looking creatures that ever bore the name of soldiers, covered with nothing but rags and vermin.

Early in June the route to Amboy was again opened and troops sent forward to reinforce Howe Cornwallis and DeHeister, the generals in command of the Tory forces.

On the twelfth of June, 1777, an elegantly equipped and hopeful army, numbering 17,000 men, under the command of these generals, marched away with flags and banners flying, and encamped at Somerset Court House, with the intention of inducing Washington to leave his post at Middlebrook, and in case he did not

move, to force him from his stronghold. They scarcely realized what a difficult task they had undertaken in so doing. Neither did they take into consideration the calibre of the men they had to deal with, but before long all their visions of an easy victory were dispelled.

For the few days that they made their camp there, Colonel Morgan, with 500 riflemen, continually harrassed them, and in one small reencounter killed 18 Hessians and captured several prisoners, which, with the deserters, and the unneighborly Washington on one side and Sullivan on the other, they found their stay so disagreeable that in a few days after their arrival they packed up their all and pushed off for more hospitable quarters among their own people in New Brunswaik.

Sir William Howe, in his route back stole everything worth carrying off; burned Somerset Court House; meeting house, numberless dwellings and, in fact, destroyed everything that was in the path of his army. They also hung three women at the head of the army—two of them being suspended by the feet—on the accusation of being spies. In short, his whole progress through that part of New Jersey was marked with devastation and cruelty, more like the savages of the wilderness than that of Britons, once famed for honor and humanity, the characteristics of brave men.

One of the most interesting letters bearing on the movements of both armies during this period, and especially when the author is considered, is as follows:

Corell's Ferry, June 15, 1777.

11 o'clock at night.

Dear General,

I have received no intelligence from General Washington since four o'clock last evening, at which time the enemy were encamped at Somerset Court House, supposed to be eleven thousand in number, under the command of Generals Howe and Cornwallis.

This is doubtless their main body. Their first design

seems to have been to cut off General Sullivan's retreat, and possess themselves of this place. Finding that General Sullivan had frustrated their intentions by a forced march, they appeared to have given over their first design, and now wish to draw General Washington from his stronghold, which if, they effect, probably a body from Brunswick will take possession. General Washington will doubtless disappoint them, as he remains quiet in his encampment.

The militia turn out in great numbers in the Jerseys. General Sullivan has gone to Flemington, twelve miles from this. The troops that arrive here are immediately sent after him. I am very fearful that the enemy will retire to Brunswick before you arrive with your reinforcements, and oblige us to attack them at a disadvantage, for fight them we must, when all our reinforcements are in. We cannot avoid it with honor. Our men are in high spirits, and in four days we shall have upwards of twenty thousand. General Putnam has eight thousand with him, General Washington has written three days since for four thousand to be sent immediately to him. I expect every minute to hear from our army and the enemy. Every intelligence of consequence shall be forwarded to you directly.

I am yours, etc.,

B. ARNOLD.

Major General Miffin.

It hardly seems creditable that the man who could write a patriotic letter of such a type should become the arch traitor of the American Revolution—and yet it is a fact, much to be regretted.

Just about the time Benedict Arnold had finished his letter an express arrived with the news that the enemy were in motion, but that their design was unknown.

The morning dawned, and its grey light revealed the fact that Arnold's fears were well founded. The enemy had commenced to retreat back to New Brunswick.

While on their way back they were kept very busy by some of the Jersey Militia and Pennsylvania Riflemen, a party of whom made an attack on a camp of the enemy, who were posted on a bridge over the Millstone river, near the mills of one Abraham Vannest, and killed about 36 British. Later on a detachment of 350 Americans attacked a party of about 700 of the enemy near Bonhamtown, on the road between New Brunswick and Perth Amboy. The superior strength of the British put the party to flight. General Washington and his men, as a general rule, kept to the mountains, while the British were on the flat lands, as near as possible to the coast, where re-enforcements could be most easily obtained from the incoming ships.

The British posts were located along the main roads leading to Amboy, but the main outposts were stationed near Bonhamtown, Piscataway and the vicinity. The American strongholds were at Metuchen, from where they stretched in a chain along to the mountain range that runs along that section of New Jersey. The Americans were, as a rule, the aggressors, and for that reason the majority of the brushes that took place were on the British stamping ground, making the Amboy road one of the most interesting localities connected with those days.

Things were hot in those stirring times and the prevailing motto was:

“Wherever you see a Tory,
Send him to his glory.”

To accomplish this end great risks were taken by the Patriots, of which the following instance will serve to illustrate:

On December 3, 1776, the day after the British had taken possession of New Brunswick, Captain Weiterhausen, of the Grenadiers, was shot dead, while crossing the bridge over the Raritan at New Brunswick, by a patriot, who was concealed on a pier under the bridge.

Incidents of this nature undertaken and carried out by individuals made the life of a Tory, and especially an officer, a very uncertain quantity. In fact the shadow of death continually hovered over them, either from the treachery of the spies in their own ranks or the ever watchful patriot, looking for his chance to even up an old score.

During this time hardly a day passed without a clash of some sort. Among those skirmishes, one in particular is worthy of note, it was made by General Stephen's division early in May, 1777. The division being hastily assembled from different posts, attacked the 42nd, or Royal Highlanders, Foot Regiment, 2nd Battalion of the 71st, or Highland Foot, commanded by Major Simon Foster, and the 33rd, of which the Honorary Colonel was Earl Cornwallis, also six companies of light infantry posted at Bonhamtown, Piscataway and that neighborhood. It was a bold enterprise, as the enemy might have been easily reinforced from New Brunswick, the Landing or Amboy, at which points they had stationed large camps. The Americans made a sudden attack on them while at dinner, which proved a total surprise, killing Major McPhearson, three subalterns three sergeants and about sixty privates. Major Fraser of the 71st, and Captain Stewart of the Light Infantry, also 120 privates wounded, 40 of them so dangerously that they were carried to New York. The loss to Stephen's men was two killed, a Captain and three subalterns and eleven privates wounded. One subaltern was seriously wounded and was taken prisoner with twelve of his men.

The advantage gained over the enemy by this attack caused them to send to New York and bring out one battalion of Hessians, the 10th and 55th British regiments to reinforce these posts. The action was conducted by General Maxwell, and the troops engaged were Jerseymen, Pennsylvanians and Virginians. Later

on in the month the Americans tried their luck again, but were not so fortunate. They made an assault on the 42nd Highland Regiment at Piscataway, who were on picket duty. In a short time they were supported by companies and advanced into the woods, where notwithstanding the superior strength of the Americans, they maintained their ground until joined by the rest of the regiment, when a heavy fire commenced which caused the Americans to retreat. On their way out of they fell in with the Light Infantry, quartered between Piscataway and Bonhamtown, who were going to the support of the 42nd. The Americans, who up to this time, had maintained some show of discipline, now broke way in great confusion to their camp at Metuchen. The British loss was 26 officers and men killed and wounded. Of the Americans 40 were found dead in the woods next day, and 36 taken prisoner.

General Washington, in his report to the Continental Congress, dated "Headquarters, Middle Brook, June 22, 1777. Eleven o'clock p. m., says:

"I have the honor and pleasure to inform you that the enemy evacuated Brunswick this morning, and retired to Amboy, burning many houses as they went along. Some of them, from appearance of the flames, were considerable buildings. From several places of information and from a variety of circumstances, it was evident that a move was in agitation, and it was the general opinion that it was intended this morning. I therefore detached three brigades under the command of Major-General Greene, to fall upon their rear and keep the main body of the army paraded upon the heights, to support them should there be occasion.

A party of Colonel Morgan's regiment of Light Infantry attacked and drove the Hessian picket about sunrise, and upon the appearance of General Wayne's brigade, and Morgan's regiment (who got first to the ground) opposite Brunswick, the enemy immediately

crossed the bridge to the east side of the river and threw themselves into redoubts, which they had before constructed. Our troops advanced briskly upon them, upon which they quitted the redoubts, without making any opposition, and retired by the Amboy road. As all our troops, from the difference of their station in camp, had not come up when the enemy began to move off, it was impossible to check them, as their numbers were far greater than we had any reason to expect, being, as we were informed afterwards, between four and five thousand men. Our people pursued them as far as Piscataway, but finding it impossible to overtake them, and fearing that they might be led on too far for the main body, they returned to Brunswick.

By information of the inhabitants, General Howe, Lord Cornwallis and General Grant were in the town when the alarm was given, but they quitted it very soon after.

In the pursuit Colonel Morgan's riflemen exchanged several sharp fires with the enemy, which it is imagined, did considerable execution. I am in hopes that they afterwards fell in with General Maxwell, who was detached last night with a strong party to lie between Brunswick and Amboy, in order to intercept any convoys or parties that might be passing; but I have yet heard nothing from them.

General Greene desires me to make mention of the conduct and bravery of General Wayne and Colonel Morgan, and of their officers and men upon this occasion, as they constantly advanced upon an enemy far superior to them in numbers, and well secured behind strong redoubts. General Sullivan advanced from Rocky Hill to Brunswick with his division, but as he did not receive his order of march till very late at night, he did not arrive till the enemy had been gone some time.

According to another letter from Washington to

Congress dated at Quibbletown, June 25, 1777, it appears that it was his intention to move the whole army the day after the evacuation of New Brunswick, to points nearer the enemy, so that he might act according to circumstances. He states that in this he was prevented by rain, and also regrets that an express sent off by him to General Maxwell to inform him of General Greene's movement towards New Brunswick, did not reach him, so that he might conduct himself accordingly. Washington was a trifle suspicious that the messenger went designedly to the enemy, but qualifies the statement by saying that there was reason to believe that the messenger was captured. He was of the opinion that had Maxwell received his orders there would be no doubt but that the whole rear guard would have been cut off from the main army and eventually captured.

Washington's belief in the possibility of his messenger being captured was well founded, as no quarter was given to anyone, by either side, who were caught with information of value to their opponents in their possession. Several of these executions took place about this time, but as a general rule the death penalty was carried out by shooting the unfortunate victim. An exception to this rule was the execution of Abraham Patten, who was classed by the British as a spy from the Continental Army. He was hung in New Brunswick on June 2, 1777, between eleven and twelve o'clock. He had agreed to give a Grenadier of the British army fifty guineas to carry four letters to Washington and Putnam. The soldier took the money and carried the letters to Lord Cornwallis, wherein was proposed on a certain day to set fire to the city in four places at once, blow up the magazine and then set off a rocket as a sign for the Americans to attack the town. Patten acknowledged all the charges against him, and also made a statement to the effect that he was a principal in set-

ting fire to New York. He refused absolutely to divulge the names of his accomplices. He left a wife and four children at Baltimore, Md.

On the retreat of the British from New Brunswick, June 22, 1777, to Amboy, the Americans took possession of the city. General Maxwell, also General Parsons and his brigade, and Lord Sterling, with his division, pursued the enemy for some distance, while the main body of the army, numbering about 6,000 men camped in the city. The enemy laid their bridge, which was destined for use on the Delaware, across the sound from Amboy to Staten Island, by which it was evident they designed to escape if closely pressed.

Howe after making the necessary preparations to cross with his troops to Staten Island, received intelligence that Washington's army had moved down from the mountains, and taken up a position at Quibbletown, with the intention of making an attack on the British rear and being advised that two corps had also advanced on his left, one of 3,000 men and 8 pieces of cannon, under the command of Lord Sterling with Generals Maxwell and Conway, the other a smaller one of 700 men and one cannon. Howe thought it advisable to make a movement that might lead on to a general engagement, accordingly on June 26th he sent out two columns, the right under the command of Lord Cornwallis with Major-General Grant, Brigadier-General Matthews and Leslie, and Colonel Donop, took the route by Woodbridge towards Scotch Plains. The left column, under Lord Howe, with Major-Generals Sterne Vaughn and Grey, and Brigadier-Generals Cleveland and Agnew, marched by way of Metuchen, where a junction was to be made by the two columns. Four battalions were detached with six pieces of cannon to take up a post at Bonhamtown. Cornwallis and his men fell in with the small wing of the Americans soon after passing Woodbridge, who gave the alarm, by the firing that ensued, to the main army at Quibbletown, which

retreated to the mountains. Lord Cornwallis shortly after came up with the division commanded by Lord Sterling, who although making an heroic struggle to maintain his position, was forced to retreat with a loss of 3 brass cannons, 3 captains and 60 men killed, with over two hundred officers and men wounded and taken prisoners. The British loss was reported at five men killed and thirty wounded, among the latter being Captain Finch, of the Light Guards, who died at Amboy on June 29th.

The British troops engaged in the action were the 1st Light Infantry, 1st British Grenadiers, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Hessians Grenadiers, 1st Battalion of Light Guards, Hessian Chasseurs and the Queen's Rangers.

The Americans were pursued as far as Westfield with little effect, and joined the main army in the mountains. The British lay at Westfield that night, returned next day to Rahway and the day following to Amboy. On June 30, 1777, at ten o'clock in the morning, the British began to cross over Staten Island, and the rear guard, under the command of Lord Cornwallis, passed at 2 o'clock that afternoon.

It is estimated that Lord Howe, in moving his army from New Brunswick to Somerset Court House, and from thence back to New Brunswick, to Amboy for his embarkation to Staten Island, did not lose, in killed, wounded and desertions, much short of 1,000 men, something that goes far to prove that the operations of both armies during this period, were of greater importance than they are generally made to appear in American history.

It must ~~be~~ have been with great surprise that King George received the news that his favorite Lords, Howe and Cornwallis, were chased and insulted by less than three thousand men in New Jersey, and that they held his whole army in New Brunswick until an opportunity presented itself to take their army out of New Jersey on a run, baffled and beaten in all their boasted enterprises.