

Thy Revolutionary
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WASHINGTON'S MASTERLY RETREAT THROUGH THE JERSEYS

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Washington's Masterly Retreat Through the Jerseys

WE ARE APPROACHING the sesqui-centennial of one of the important events of the War of the Revolution. The beginnings of that struggle were at Lexington and at Concord in Massachusetts. The closing scenes took place on the banks of the York River in Virginia; but one of the great tragedies of the war was enacted upon the soil of New Jersey. There were many crises during the eight long years of that heroic conflict, there were many times when final disaster and total collapse threatened, but never was there a crisis more acute, never was the danger of total disintegration more imminent than it was one hundred and fifty years ago, during the closing weeks of 1776. Because of this fact, it is eminently fitting that at this annual meeting of the New Jersey Historical Society we should direct our thoughts to those eventful days.

Before considering in detail this period of the Revolution, let us fix our attention upon some of the preceding events. Nearly three centuries had elapsed since the discovery of the New World. During the first century following that discovery no permanent colonies had been established, but during the next two centuries, there had come to America various groups of people from the different nations of Europe. The French had occupied Canada; the Spanish had settled in Florida, and in Central America and South America; but the territory fringing the Atlantic Sea Coast from the St. Lawrence River to Florida had been settled by the English. It is true that there were localities in this area where the Dutch and other nationalities had formed settlements, but these were limited in extent and at the time of the Revolution thirteen English colonies had become firmly established.

The inhabitants of these colonies spoke the English tongue; they retained the English customs, and they shared with their cousins across the sea the joy and the pride of an English heritage. In fact there were mystic bonds of friendship and of kinship reaching from the hearthstones of the New World to the hearthstones of the Old World, which time and space and environment had not obliterated. At no period of the colonial years was this sense of union more pronounced than during the French and Indian War for both the English and the Colonists were anxious to prevent the encroachments of the French upon the Northern and Western frontiers. During the years of that conflict, the Colonists raised and maintained an army of twenty-five thousand troops. Approximately an equal number were sent to the New World from England. These soldiers from Old England and from New England fought side by side, and when men suffer together as they suffered both in the camp and on the battlefield, there is established a bond of fellowship which is of incalculable strength.

That war ended in a complete victory for the English and the Colonists. At one time in our Colonial history, the French possessions were nearly twenty times as great in extent as were the possessions of the English, but with the fall of Quebec, France lost her foothold on this side of the Atlantic and was never again able to regain her possessions.

During these years, England had incurred heavy debts. Wars have always been costly and even to the victor there has always been the burden of a war debt to be borne by the people. The period following the French and Indian war was no exception to this rule for at that time England was carrying the burden not only of this war, but also of three other wars. She had been fighting France in America. She had been an ally to Frederick the Great of Germany in the Seven Years War with Austria and her allies. She had been fighting Spain, and she had been carrying on another warfare in far distant India. The French and Indian War had cost England sixty million pounds, and as a result of all these wars, England had incurred a war debt of one hundred and

forty-five million pounds, a huge amount in those days. To meet this burden of debt, the English government attempted to impose various taxes upon the Colonists. This was not done by mutual agreement. The Colonists were not consulted as to whether this was just or as to how this should be accomplished. The English government arbitrarily asserted its right to impose its will and its decree not upon a subject race or an inferior tribe, but upon an integral part of its own people, and to impose that will without their co-operation or consent. To this servility, the Colonists were unwilling to yield. In town meetings and in public assembly, their protests were voiced by able and fearless men. A cry of indignation extended all the way from Faneuil Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, to the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, Virginia. It was the voice of Samuel Adams and of Patrick Henry giving audible expression to the sentiments of hundreds of thousands of English freemen. Nor were these expressions of protest limited to the Patriots of the New World. In the British Parliament there were men of vision who sensed the injustice of these acts and who spoke earnestly and fearlessly in behalf of America. Said William Pitt, "In my opinion this kingdom has no right to lay a tax upon the colonies—They are the subjects of this kingdom, equally entitled with yourselves to all the natural rights of mankind, and the peculiar privileges of Englishmen, and equally bound by its laws—I rejoice that America has resisted. Three millions of people so dead to all the feelings of liberty as voluntarily to submit to be slaves, would have been fit instruments to make slaves of all the rest."

In process of time, the English government realized the temper of the Colonists. The Stamp Act, which had been passed in 1765 by a vote of two hundred and ninety-four to forty-two in the House of Commons and by a unanimous vote in the House of Lords, was repealed, and the greater part of the obnoxious taxes were removed, but King George and his reactionary ministers still insisted upon maintaining a small tax on tea. It was only a three-pence a pound. It was practically nothing as a revenue measure, but the King was unwilling to recede from the position that he had taken as to

his right to tax the Colonists. Here was a direct conflict of principles. On the one hand, the divine right of Kings; the right to impose an imperial will upon the people. On the other hand, the principle that governments exist by the consent of the governed, or as was expressed in a later generation, that government is of the people, by the people, and for the people.

This disturbed condition of affairs between the English government and the Colonists continued for several years. During that period, the breach was constantly becoming wider. The imperial government, chagrined because of the refusal of the Colonists to obey its mandates, and baffled in its attempt to enforce its orders, sent armed troops to Boston. The Colonists, determined to maintain their rights, organized companies of Minute Men. Diplomacy had run its course and had failed. The fateful day of armed resistance is at hand. In our imagination, let us stand upon the village green of Lexington. It is the early morning hour of April 19, 1775. Grouped together on the further side of the green is a small company of Minute Men under the command of Captain John Parker. They are only seventy in number. They are without uniform and without formation, but there is a determined look upon their countenances and there are flint locks in their hands. A few hundred feet distant are six companies of British soldiers. The Patriots are ordered to disperse. They refuse. The British raise their muskets to their shoulders. They fire. Seven lifeless forms fall to the ground while ten others are wounded and are carried away by their comrades. The Minute Men have had their first baptism of fire and of blood. The war of the Revolution has begun.

Now let us pass from the Spring of 1775 to the Summer of 1776.

Concord and Bunker Hill have been fought, and George Washington has been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Armies. By his masterly tactics he has compelled the British to evacuate Boston and they have gone to Halifax, taking with them eleven hundred Boston Tories.

Washington knew full well that they would receive reinforcements and return again, not to Boston, but to New York, the possession of which was of far greater importance, and so he led his troops to that vicinity and made careful preparation for the coming conflict.

Let us picture two scenes which occurred in the mid-summer of 1776, but which were strangely different the one from the other.

In the State House in Philadelphia, now known as Independence Hall, great events are transpiring. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia arises in the Second Continental Congress and offers a resolution of independence, "Resolved that these United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown; and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is and ought to be, totally dissolved." Four days later a Committee is appointed to draft a suitable Declaration. That committee consists of Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut and Robert R. Livingston of New York. On July first and July second, Congress debates and finally adopts the resolution of independence that had been presented by Richard Henry Lee.

This having been accomplished, the Declaration of Independence is considered and is studied word by word and section by section, a suitable preparation for an instrument that is destined to live throughout the ages.

Finally, on July fourth, late in the afternoon, a vote is taken and the delegates of all the thirteen colonies vote for the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. By that action, those representatives of the American people, announce to the world the birth of a new nation—a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.

While these momentous events were transpiring in Philadelphia, other events of a far different nature were taking place in New York. An English fleet of over a hundred and thirty ships enters the Lower Bay. Admiral Howe has returned from Halifax and has landed twenty-four thousand troops together with eight thousand Hessians upon Staten Island preparatory to an attempt to occupy New York. On August 22nd fifteen thousand of these troops cross over to Long Island. They are well equipped, well drilled and well disciplined. Five days later, on August 27th, they advance toward Brooklyn and come in contact with the American forces. General Washington had selected General Greene, one of his ablest generals to undertake this most difficult task of checking the British advance. Unfortunately, General Greene was stricken with a fever which was then prevalent and consequently the command fell upon General Sullivan, General Putnam and General Sterling. The result of this battle of Long Island is well known to every student of American history. The Americans were both out-numbered and out-generated. They beat a hasty and disorderly retreat toward New York, losing about a thousand prisoners, including General Sullivan and General Sterling. We can well imagine the distress of Washington as he witnessed this disaster. The British and Hessian soldiers were eager to follow up their advantage and at once annihilate the American forces, but General Howe was so certain that a surrender could be effected without further loss of life that he decided to defer further action until the morrow. The two following days were so stormy that military activities were suspended. During this interval, Washington collected all the available boats and brought them to Brooklyn. During the night of August 29th and the early morning of August 30th, the American soldiers were ferried across the East River to New York. Fortunately a dense fog obscured this movement and when the fog lifted during the morning hours of August 30th, General Howe beheld the American troops on the further side of the river.

In a council of war that followed, the American Generals realized that they could not hold New York. General Greene

was in favor of burning the City which he declared was largely Tory, but Washington was unwilling to sanction this destruction. Then followed the retreat of the Americans to Harlem Heights, the disaster at Kips Bay on the East River, and the further retreat to White Plains.

On October 16th another council of war was held and it was decided to withdraw the army to New Jersey, leaving only a strong garrison at Fort Washington on the Hudson River. Fort Washington had been constructed on the Eastern Shore of the Hudson so as to prevent the British from using that stream. The position was an exceedingly strong one and the garrison consisted of over three thousand men under the command of Colonel Robert Magow of Philadelphia. Washington felt that this fort could not be held even with this force, but Congress, then in session at Fishkill, was unwilling to abandon this strategic position and General Greene also was of the opinion that the strong garrison could withstand the assaults of the British and Hessians.

Let us now picture the events that follow. On November 15th General Howe demands the surrender of the fort. To this demand Colonel Magow replies, "Actuated by the most glorious cause that mankind ever fought in, I am determined to hold this fort until the last extremity." On the following morning, across the Hudson on the summit of the Palisades at Fort Lee stands Washington. A small number of his officers are grouped about him. In the early morning hours the mists obscure his vision but after a time the atmosphere is clear and with his telescope he sees the advance of three thousand Hessians from the North and five thousand of British from the South. With an anxiety which we cannot comprehend he awaits the issue. Slowly but surely the Hessians press on and he beholds the bayoneting of his troops by these hirelings. For an hour and a half, Cadwallader with eight hundred Pennsylvania militiamen withstands the assaults of the five thousand British, but the odds are far too great. A white flag flutters in the breeze. Colonel Magow has surrendered. Fort Washington with its garrison of three thousand troops is lost. Washington's grief is beyond expression.

For two months he has witnessed a series of disasters and now he beholds the greatest of them all.

After the loss of Fort Washington, General Washington realized that it was futile to attempt to hold Fort Lee. These two forts had been established on opposite banks of the Hudson River for the purpose of preventing British ships from using that stream. The cannon of 1776 were as nothing when compared with the artillery of to-day and even when the Americans were in the possession of both forts, the control of the Hudson was only partially complete. With the loss of Fort Washington, the remaining fort on the Jersey cliff was of no military value. Consequently Washington gave orders to General Greene to remove the military stores that had been placed there and prepare for the evacuation. These orders were promptly put into effect. All the wagons that could be procured were laden with ammunition and camp equipment and sent to Hackensack, to Newark, to Elizabethtown, and Paramus. The British were not slow in taking advantage of their great victory. On the night of November 19th, two hundred boats were collected in the Harlem River and these were filled with British soldiers. The night was stormy. In the darkness, they silently crossed the Hudson and before the dawn of day of the twentieth of November, six thousand British troops under the command of Lord Cornwallis had landed at Closter and were soon upon the summit of the Palisades, a short distance above Englewood and eight miles north of Fort Lee. Here they were observed by the American Scouts. In the early morning an officer galloped over the unfrequented road and conveyed this unwelcome information to General Greene. Without waiting for further instructions from General Washington, who was at Hackensack, General Greene ordered the army to break camp. He also dispatched a messenger to Washington informing him of the situation.

Fort Lee was located upon the summit of the Jersey Palisades. It had been fortified under the supervision of General Hugh Mercer, a brave soldier, who in a few short weeks was to lay down his life upon the battlefield of Princeton.

A road crossed the high plateau from the Fort to the English Neighborhood, now known as Leonia. The American troops ate a hasty breakfast and marched over this Red Hill Road through the English Neighborhood. Then turning northward they marched over the King's Road, now Grand Avenue, to the Liberty Pole which stood near the circle where the Soldiers Monument is now located in Englewood. There they were met by General Washington who had hastened thither from Hackensack. It was of the utmost importance that the troops should cross the Hackensack River before they were intercepted by the British for if they failed to do so they would be hemmed in between the Hudson River and the Hackensack River with Cornwallis bearing down upon them from the North and with escape cut off on every side.

The necessity for this hasty departure from Fort Lee was so urgent that General Greene was obliged to abandon all of his artillery except two twelve pound cannon, also a thousand barrels of flour and three hundred tents, a most serious loss for an army that was in such great need of food and shelter.

A short time before this march, a bridge had been built over the Hackensack River. This was known as "the new bridge." Toward this bridge the troops hastened, hoping to reach the same before Cornwallis could intercept them. In this way they were successful. We can well imagine the relief that General Washington and General Greene experienced as they saw all of the diminutive army on the western side of the river. After crossing the bridge, the troops rested for a time and then late in the afternoon they resumed the march and entered the village of Hackensack where they encamped upon the village green, in front of the Dutch Reformed Church and burial ground. Washington occupied the home of Peter Zabriskie, a substantial Dutch mansion adjacent to the church. This house is still standing and is now known as the Mansion House. The entire force numbered about three thousand. Many of the soldiers were in rags, some were without shoes, and most of them were wrapped in their blankets. The night was rainy and we can well picture the

discomfort of the troops as they rested upon that green in Hackensack. Thus ended the first day of the retreat.

On the following day (November twenty-first), the long-roll was again sounded and the march was renewed. Leaving the village green the troops passed down Main Street into Essex and then they marched over a winding road that led to Acquackanonk. One river had been crossed but their position was still perilous for they were now on the narrow stretch of land lying between the Hackensack and the Passaic. If only the Passaic could be crossed, then they would be comparatively safe from immediate disaster. This was another anxious day for Washington and his Generals. Ten years before that time, the Provincial Legislature had passed an act providing for the construction of a bridge across the Passaic at Acquackanonk. It was a frail wooden structure, only twelve feet in width, just wide enough for one wagon to cross at a time, or for four men to walk abreast. Over this the ragged army passed. We can again imagine the joy that thrilled General Washington and General Greene as they saw the troops of their diminutive army safely cross this structure. It was late in the afternoon and they were ready for a rest. Here again they encamped beside the village church and burial ground. Washington took up his abode in the Blanchard House. The citizens of Acquackanonk were patriots almost to a man and they extended to Washington a most cordial welcome.

After all the troops had crossed over the river it was deemed advisable to destroy the bridge so as to hinder and delay the British. To John H. Post, a farmer boy of Acquackanonk, this task was assigned. This Horatius of 1776 procured some willing helpers and soon timber after timber was floating down the Passaic until nothing remained except a few piles and even these were partially destroyed. Thus ended the second day of the retreat.

On the following day, November twenty-second, the British reached the river only to find their pursuit temporarily

checked, for the Americans had left Acquackanonk and were marching toward Newark.

The army marched along the River road—they passed through Belleville, they crossed the small stream known as the Second River and during the afternoon of November 22nd, and the morning of November 23rd they entered Newark. Footsore and weary, cold and hungry, they encamped under the shelter of Forest Hill at what is now Elwood Park. There were many sick among them. Some of these were sent to Morristown, others were cared for in Trinity Church, which was used as a Military Hospital. Newark at that time was a hundred and ten years old, and yet it was little more than a large village. It had its Broad Street and its Market Street, and at the intersection of these streets was a tavern which was the starting place for a stage coach which in times of peace carried passengers to New York. It also had a Presbyterian Church, the Church of the founders, an Episcopal Church, and an Academy. The dwelling houses numbered less than a hundred and fifty, and the population did not exceed one thousand men, women, and children. Only two landmarks of that period still remain—the commodious brown stone house situated at the corner of Broad Street and State Street, now used as a rectory for the House of Prayer, and a portion of Trinity Episcopal Church. The Trinity Church of that period was partially destroyed by fire in 1810, but the tower was saved from destruction and the Church was afterward rebuilt.

Where was Washington during these days? There are a number of traditions as to the house in which he abode, but the strongest evidence points to the Eagle Tavern which stood next to the Presbyterian parsonage, where lived his intimate friend, Rev. Alexander MacWhorter. This site, the northwest corner of Broad and William Street, is now occupied by a department store. For many years after the war, this tavern was called Washington's Headquarters. After a lapse of several days, Cornwallis resumed his pursuit and on the morning of November 28th, his troops were marching along the River Road toward Newark. The Americans were

unable to oppose them and so the retreat continued. Let us picture Washington and Greene and Dr. MacWhorter, the Patriot Pastor, as they rode through the streets of Newark leading the American forces. They marched down Broad Street and Clinton Avenue and then over the Upper Road from Newark to Elizabeth on to Rahway, to Woodbridge, and Brunswick. A part of the Army, however, went by the way of Camptown, now Irvington, then on to Springfield, to Scotch Plains, to Quibbletown, now known as New Market, and then on to Brunswick, where they joined their comrades. They encamped upon the College Green and Washington occupied a private house nearby. Here again they were harassed by the approach of the British and on Sunday, December 1st, they left Brunswick, destroying the bridge over the Raritan as the British approached, Alexander Hamilton, with his artillery acting as a rear guard. That night they encamped between Brunswick and Princeton, and early the following morning between eight and nine o'clock, on Monday, December 2nd, the constantly diminishing army of Washington entered Princeton, where Washington was a guest at the home of Richard Stockton. Cornwallis was anxious to continue the pursuit, but he received orders from Lord Howe, his superior, to remain in Brunswick. This was Washington's salvation, for his numbers had become so diminished that if Cornwallis had conducted a vigorous pursuit, he could have overwhelmed the inferior American forces.

At last, Lord Howe rescinded his order and on December 7th at four o'clock in the morning, Cornwallis again advanced. Washington then marched on to Trenton, where he had collected a large number of boats and with these he crossed the Delaware in safety. Again he was protected from his pursuers by a river. To Daniel Bray had been committed the task of collecting all of the boats on the Delaware River, and right well did this Patriot perform his task. Every boat for seventy miles up and down the Delaware was collected at Trenton. In these, Washington's soldiers embarked and crossed the Delaware to Pennsylvania. When the British reached Trenton, they searched in vain for some means of transportation, but the boats were safe upon the opposite

side and the pursuit halted. Thus ended the retreat through the Jerseys. It began at Fort Lee. It terminated at Trenton. Against fearful odds Washington had held together his army. They had marched a hundred miles—they had lost many soldiers by the termination of enlistments, but not a man had been killed or wounded, and not a cannon had been captured. But, my friends, although this is the end of the retreat, we cannot leave the story at this point. We have passed through the midnight hour of the Revolution, but the dawn of a new day is soon to illumine the Eastern sky.

Washington is defeated; to all human appearances the end of the patriots' cause is at hand, but in the soul of the great leader, hope still flickers, a hope that is soon to burst into a flame of victory. A council of war is called. Washington lays before that council his plans. It is nothing less than to recross the Delaware and surprise the Hessian garrison at Trenton. It is a bold plot. It required the courage of a Washington to conceive it, but the plan is presented and the council accepts it. Christmas night is cold and cheerless. The Delaware is filled with huge cakes of ice which make a passage well nigh impossible, but in the darkness of the night with the snow and sleet beating in their faces, the vanquished soldiers with their intrepid leader, recross the river, and in the early morning hours they are again on the Jersey shore at McConkey's ferry eight miles above the coveted goal. Throughout the darkness of the night they march toward Trenton, deterred neither by the biting cold nor the storm of sleet, for the courage of their leader has now been transfused into the souls of those men. Four hours later they reach the Hessian pickets. These pickets are driven in and Colonel Rall arouses his troops and leads them on to the attack. He himself falls from his horse mortally wounded. The action is sharp and decisive. The Hessians are driven back before the victorious Americans. They are surrounded on three sides.

With their leader dying and many of their comrades dead and wounded these Hessians realize that further resistance is useless and they surrender themselves to those whom they

had looked upon with utmost contempt. The Patriot cause is not lost. The soldiers are inspired with new hope—new enlistments are now forthcoming—new credits are voted by Congress. A Nation conceived in liberty has not perished, but is destined to endure. Long and weary months and years of conflict were to follow. Many defeats and few victories awaited the Patriot cause, but at last, on the banks of the York River, the forces of Cornwallis, with banners furled and with arms reversed, marched between the victorious troops of Washington and Lafayette. Yorktown was a long distance from Trenton, but it was the victory on the banks of the Delaware that made possible the British surrender on the banks of the York.

In this Sesqui-centennial year we give thanks to Almighty God for those heroic patriots of 1776. We give thanks for that intrepid leader whose faith in the righteousness of his cause and whose trust in the Lord of Hosts gave to him the strength and the courage to lead his vanquished army across our beloved State, through defeat unto glorious victory.