

*New Jersey's  
Revolutionary Experience*

8

*The Battle  
of Springfield*

THOMAS FLEMING

*New Jersey Historical Commission*

## NEW JERSEY'S REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCE

Larry R. Gerlach, *Editor*

*This series of publications is dedicated to the memory of Alfred E. Driscoll, governor of New Jersey from 1947 to 1954, in grateful tribute to his lifelong support of the study and teaching of the history of New Jersey and the United States. He was a member of the New Jersey Historical Commission from 1970 until his death on March 9, 1975.*

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## Foreword

*New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience* is a Bicentennial pamphlet series published by the New Jersey Historical Commission with a grant from the New Jersey Bicentennial Commission. The twenty-six numbers and two teachers' guides are intended to acquaint secondary school students and the general public with the state's history during the era of the American Revolution. Some titles treat aspects of the Revolution in New Jersey, while others show how important themes of the colonial period developed during the revolutionary years; some bring together the results of existing scholarship, while others present the findings of original research; some are written by professional historians, and others by laymen whose investigations of Jersey history exceed avocation. Because the series is directed to a general audience, the pamphlets have no footnotes but contain bibliographical essays which offer suggestions for further reading.

*New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience* is the product of a cooperative venture by numerous individuals and agencies. On my behalf and that of the pamphlets' readers, I accord recognition and appreciation to the individual authors for their contributions to New Jersey history, to the New Jersey American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration Commission and the New Jersey Historical Commission for their support of the project, to Hank Simon, president, Trentypo, Inc., for his invaluable suggestions and cooperation in producing the series, and to the staff of the Historical Commission: Richard Waldron, Public Programs Coordinator, who as project director supervised the series from commencement to completion; Peggy Lewis, Chief of Publications and Information, and Lee R. Parks, Assistant Editor, who edited and designed each number; and William C. Wright, Associate Director, who contributed valuable suggestions at every stage of production.

Larry R. Gerlach  
University of Utah



On June 6, 1780, some six thousand British and German troops crossed from Staten Island under cover of darkness and invaded the state of New Jersey. The climax of this invasion came seventeen days later at a pitched battle fought in and around the town of Springfield. The entire episode has been largely ignored by most historians of the American Revolution. But recent research suggests that the battle of Springfield — the name which is usually used to describe the entire invasion — was one of the crucial turning points of the War for Independence.

This battle and its subsequent immersion in obscurity have some important lessons to teach us — lessons that are meaningful today. It tells us something about the way history is written, the way historical judgments are formed. It also tells us how hard it is for the participants in great historical events to form accurate judgments of them. George Washington was as baffled by what happened at Springfield as everyone else in the American army. Only when historians got access to the diaries, the memoranda, the memoirs of the men on the other side — the British generals and their American Loyalist allies — did the battle of Springfield begin to make sense.

There were sound military reasons for fighting the battle of Springfield, from a British point of view, and if it had been fought according to the intentions and plans of the British commander in chief, Sir Henry Clinton, it almost certainly would have resulted in an American defeat that would in turn have led directly to the collapse of the Revolution. To understand this, we must review briefly the state of the war on the American continent in the spring of 1780. Washington's army in its camp at Morristown was

emerging from the worst winter agony it had yet experienced. Enormous snowstorms and incredible cold waves — at one point both the Hudson River and Long Island Sound were solidly frozen for several weeks — had all but paralyzed the American commissary. His troops, Washington wrote at one point, were “eating every kind of horse food but hay.” On May 26, two regiments of the Connecticut Line, without food for three days, mutinied and attempted to march home. Only swift action on the part of their officers prevented the mutiny from spreading to the other Connecticut regiments, and probably from them to the rest of the army. A steady flow of deserters — over six hundred since January — and an almost total inability to recruit volunteers had reduced the Continentals in Morristown to some thirty-six hundred men.

Meanwhile, in Charleston, South Carolina, twenty-five hundred other Continentals were slowly succumbing to an inexorable ring of steel which Sir Henry Clinton and the engineers and artillerymen of the British army were drawing around them. Another three thousand Continentals were in a kind of suspended animation between Morristown and Charleston. They were not strong enough to break through and relieve the siege. Yet Washington was loath to withdraw them because it would signify that he was abandoning the men inside the queen city of the South. On May 12, with British cannon firing at point-blank range and a storming attack only a day or two away, the Charleston garrison surrendered. It was a staggering blow to the American cause in the South. Savannah was already in British hands, and a royal governor had been reinstalled in Georgia. If South Carolina succumbed, North Carolina, with an even heavier concentration of Loyalists in the western upcountry, would inevitably follow.

Sir Henry Clinton now concocted a plan aimed at breaking the back of the rebellion in the North. Studying his maps, Sir Henry saw his battle and envisioned his victory in the heart of New Jersey. His plan called for a simultaneous assault by his Carolina army and the garrison he had left behind him in New York. The Carolina troops would drive for Mordecai Gap in the Watchung Mountains behind Perth Amboy. The New York garrison would aim at Hobart Gap in the same mountain barrier behind Springfield. In this plan, Washington would be confronted by two armies, each larger than



his thin battalions. To fight either one would leave his base camp at Morristown, with all the irreplaceable American artillery in it, unprotected. To make a stand within the camp would expose him to assault by a combined British force that outnumbered him three to one. Either way, the chances were all too good that the American army would have been dispersed and New Jersey with its heavy percentage of Loyalists would have become the first northern state to return to royal allegiance.

Two things prevented this masterful plan from being executed. One was a fatal flaw in Sir Henry Clinton's character, which inclined him to distrust his subordinate generals and made him reluctant to commit a plan to writing. Instead, Clinton preferred to give hints to aides, or sometimes to the generals themselves, which left the final responsibility for relaying or executing the plan to the man on the receiving end of the information. His morbid suspicions also inclined him to communicate as little as possible with his subordinates while he was distant from them.

In the spring of 1780, Sir Henry's persistent silence created a vacuum of distrust and resentment among the officers he had left behind in New York. They were an interesting collection of characters. In command was Lieutenant General Baron Wilhelm von Knyphausen. A taciturn professional soldier who spoke no English, Knyphausen was handed the command by virtue of his seniority. The senior British commander on Manhattan Island was Major General William Tryon, the former governor of New York. He and Clinton had already had a nasty falling out over the results of his 1779 Connecticut raid, in which Tryon had needlessly burned much of Fairfield and Norwalk.

Then there was Major General James Robertson, the prewar barracks master of New York, a military politician who had helped the government demolish Clinton's predecessor, Sir William Howe, and in return had been rewarded by the empty title — but not so empty salary — of governor of New York. Robertson was known as "Old Clip" because of his fondness for shaving every gold and silver coin that passed through his hands. He cordially detested Clinton and considered himself a much more worthy candidate for commander in chief.

In the Loyalist shadows just behind these three commanders

stood William Franklin and William Smith. Franklin had been a popular and competent governor of New Jersey for eleven years. His bitter break with his famous father, Benjamin, only made him a more fiercely determined Loyalist. The moment that the Americans released him from captivity in Connecticut in exchange for the rebel governor of Delaware, he had begun bombarding Sir Henry Clinton with plans for forming a Board of Associated Loyalists. Franklin envisioned an eventual guerrilla army of some ten thousand Loyalist Americans which he firmly believed could undermine and ultimately topple the rebellion.

William Franklin's alliance with William Smith was almost accidental — but essential to the drama we are describing. Smith had done everything in his power to remain a neutral. But when the rebel government of New York deported him to British-held territory in 1778, he swiftly became one of Sir Henry Clinton's confidants. Smith's father had been chief justice of New York, and he had known Sir Henry when the British general was a young man living in the colonial city during the years when Smith's father was royal governor. Ensnared only two doors away from Sir Henry's residence at One Broadway, Smith was almost ipso facto a man of influence.

But in his invaluable diary, we see him playing a double role. Flattering Sir Henry to his face, Smith swiftly lost faith in "the Knight," as those around Clinton contemptuously called him. He despaired at Clinton's perpetual inclination to exaggerate the size of Washington's army and the strength of the rebellion. Smith, through many contacts in New York — the rebel governor, George Clinton, had once been his law clerk — thought he knew how weak the rebellion really was and became more and more convinced that a few hard blows from the British army would shatter it.

As the harsh winter of 1780 lengthened into a chilly spring with no word whatsoever from Sir Henry Clinton in South Carolina, Smith began to look for other men to deliver the hard blows. At Tryon's request, he set himself up as the general's intelligence chief and began interrogating the numerous deserters and Loyalist spies that were flowing into New York. All described the appalling weakness of Washington's army. William Franklin, meanwhile, told Smith that he was in contact with Loyalists in New Jersey's Monmouth and Sussex counties, who assured him that given a

modicum of protection by the British army they could seize control of these areas. Another correspondent, one Christopher Sowers, assured Franklin that there were thousands more British sympathizers in Pennsylvania and Maryland who would rise the moment that they saw a British army moving inland. Other reports from covert Loyalists in New Jersey represented the state's citizens as profoundly sick of the rebel government, whose money had succumbed to absurd inflation. Washington was now seizing grain and livestock and horses and paying for them with promissory notes.

All of this information Smith eagerly condensed into memoranda and passed on to Tryon, who in turn handed it to Major George Beckwith, the English aide-de-camp in charge of translating such matters for General von Knyphausen.

To Smith's dismay, the taciturn Hessian did not respond. He was willing to pursue a policy of aggressive raiding — which he did with considerable success throughout the winter and spring of 1780 — but launching a major blow he deemed beyond the latitude allowed him as a temporary commander. As late as May 28, Smith and Franklin and their fellow Loyalists were stewing in frustration over their failure to galvanize Knyphausen. In his exasperation, Smith at one point asked Tryon if there was any hope of convincing Knyphausen of anything. "Are you sure," he asked, "that he has a mind?"

"I can't tell," admitted Tryon, who spoke no German, "but I believe he is a good soldier."

Then the frigate *Iris* stood into New York Harbor with several American ships which she had captured off the coast. The captain said he had a letter for Governor William Patterson which he had been told to deliver at Halifax. Patterson had just been appointed governor of Nova Scotia. The captain was told that the governor was still in New York, and the letter could be delivered to him immediately.

Seldom, if ever, has a friendly letter caused so much bloodshed and turmoil. American-born William Patterson happened to be another Smith confidant. His brother John was married to a daughter of the powerful Livingston clan, as was Smith. Patterson also agreed wholeheartedly with Smith's approach to the war and frequently damned the dilatory defensive tactics that the British were pursuing in New York. Before evening, with Smith's

collusion, the letter was shown to Governor Robertson. He read it with mounting irritation.

Written by Sir Andrew Hammond, a friend of Patterson, it announced the good news that Charleston had surrendered on May 12 at the cost of only seventy British casualties. But had Sir Henry Clinton bothered to inform his subordinates in New York? No, he left them in ignorance, open to the accusation that they were doing nothing to end the war while the "Knight" was doing everything. It was intolerable! The next morning Robertson called Smith to his house and poured out his resentment.

The following day, the letter was shown to Major George Beckwith. "The eyes of the people are on General von Knyphausen," Patterson told him.

"What do we do?" Beckwith asked. "Your letter is the only information that can be respected. Suppose the general took measures and Sir Henry Clinton disapproved?"

"Your general may be more embarrassed by a letter with hints. A total silence leaves him unshackled. He is now at liberty to do what he thinks right."

It so happened that Major Beckwith was in an ideal frame of mind to agree with Messrs. Franklin, Smith, Tryon, and Robertson about the weakness of the American army and the disaffection in New Jersey and elsewhere. Ever since the head of British intelligence, Major John André, had sailed to South Carolina with Sir Henry Clinton, Beckwith had been corresponding with a certain "Mr. Moore," a pen name for an American general who was preparing to defect from the American army — and who had already sent valuable information to British headquarters as proof of his change of heart. The officer had recently told Beckwith that he was prepared "to take a decisive part in case of an emergency or that a capital stroke can be struck." Was there better proof that one more blow might shatter the Revolution? Especially if Washington in his distress gave a field command to "Mr. Moore" — better known in Morristown as Major General Benedict Arnold.

The chorus of voices demanding action from General von Knyphausen was now complete. Robertson, combining ambition and resentment, was more than ready to risk Clinton's possible wrath. If they brought off a victory, he could scoff at Sir Henry and rightfully demand the supreme command. Tryon was equally

resentful and eager to make up for previous failures in his attempt to crush the rebellion with fire and sword. Beckwith knew he could claim a large slice of victorious credit as the ultimate translator-persuader of his tongue-tied chief. Against this chorus General von Knyphausen had no opposing voice, really. For a long time he and his Hessians had been given little but garrison duty to perform. He, too, had resentments which a chance to win an easy victory would assuage.

So, on the night of June 6, through this incredible series of coincidences, while Sir Henry Clinton was preparing to put his victorious Carolina army aboard troop ships and sail north to deliver his coup de grace to Washington, General von Knyphausen launched six thousand men into New Jersey. As he sat in his command post on Governors Island in New York Harbor, supervising the assemblage of a sixty-boat invasion fleet, who should walk into his office but Sir Henry's aide-de-camp, Major William Crosbie. Consternation reigned among Knyphausen and his battle-bound staff. Visions of courts-martial and public censures danced through everyone's head. Major Beckwith ripped open Sir Henry's dispatches. He read them and swiftly relaxed. They were devoid of orders. With his aplomb restored, Beckwith summarized them for him monosyllabic chief. Sir Henry was telling them only what they already knew — that Charleston had been captured at a very small cost.

Among Knyphausen and his fellow generals irritation now replaced alarm. Once more Sir Henry was saying nothing of his future plans. Everyone turned on Crosbie, testily asking him what he knew about Sir Henry's intentions. Was he returning to New York with the Carolina army? Was he planning a raid into the Chesapeake or perhaps a blow at the French expeditionary force, which was momentarily expected to land at Rhode Island?

Major Crosbie was nonplused. He was on the stickiest wicket that any aide-de-camp ever encountered in the history of warfare. Sir Henry had told him his real plans, but he had enjoined him to strictest secrecy. All Crosbie could do was give "hints" to those "to whom he should judge proper." This left Major Crosbie in an impossible position. He could not hope to screen out "proper" from "improper" hearers without making a host of powerful enemies.

Since Sir Henry had a tendency to be jealous of almost everyone in the army above the rank of colonel, it was easy for Crosbie to construe all of these assembled generals as improper. He had obviously intended to say nothing about Sir Henry's plan. Now he floundered and flapped and blurted out something vague. They had no need to expect Sir Henry very soon, he said — or at least that is what everyone concluded from what he said. After more circumlocutions, everyone had the impression that Sir Henry was going to raid in the Chesapeake.

In that case, Knyphausen growled to Beckwith, who was frantically translating all this, their invasion of New Jersey was strategically sound. It would pin down Washington's main army, leaving Sir Henry free to chew up what parts of Maryland and Virginia he chose. With elaborate courtesy, General von Knyphausen suggested that Major Crosbie join the invasion of New Jersey as a member of his staff. The agitated aide-de-camp mumbled his acceptance and before the night was over, found himself slogging through the marshes of the Staten Island shore to board a New Jersey-bound flatboat.

Knyphausen's six thousand men outnumbered Washington's army by two to one. But neither the German general nor his Loyalist advisers foresaw that they would meet resistance not from the discouraged regulars but from the amateur soldiers of New Jersey — the militia. Springfield was the New Jersey militia's finest hour. True, they were bolstered by the presence of New Jersey's Continental Brigade. The Continentals — barely five hundred of them — were the only organized armed force in Knyphausen's path when he sent this army ashore at midnight on June 6. But when the fire signal on Hobart Mountain blazed into the dawn and the alarm guns boomed, hundreds of New Jersey militiamen seized their guns and raced from their farms to the battlefield. The British and Germans found themselves fighting off attacks on both flanks which slowed their advance to a crawl.

These half-trained young militiamen, most of them without bayonets or cannon, must have gasped when they saw what they were fighting. This was no raid. This was an invasion by an entire army. Yet some of these citizen soldiers tried to make a stand right in the path of the British-German juggernaut. They were buying time so that Washington could move his army from Morristown to

Hobart Gap in the Short Hills behind Springfield. If the British seized that gap, there was nothing between them and Morristown where all of the American artillery, ammunition, and meager supplies of food were sitting like a collection of beached whales. The combination of a shortage of fodder and a shortage of money had stripped the American army of horses.

More than a few of these young militiamen died in the orchard where they made their stand. One of them was the son of Stephen Crane, the mayor of Elizabethtown (modern Elizabeth). He fell only a few yards from his house and the sight of his bayonet-slashed body killed his father.

In the revolutionary war pension applications of the veterans of the battle are many memories of how beautiful the New Jersey countryside was that June day. Flax and oats stood six inches high in the fields. It was the season of ripe cherries, another man recalled. Every farm had an orchard of perhaps three or four hundred trees. There were huge swatches of green pasture where cattle grazed. Most important, New Jersey was a state where the average man had a chance to own land. The men of the New Jersey Continental Line and their brothers and cousins in the militia were fighting for soil that belonged to them or their fathers or their uncles or their friends. In a word, they were fighting for an independent way of life. This was what Loyalists William Smith and William Franklin and their friends in the British army could not understand.

They were a varied lot, these New Jersey militiamen. There was Captain Nathaniel FitzRandolph of Woodbridge, who had been twice captured by the British and had spent months in the worst British prison on Manhattan Island, the Provost. The British provost marshal, William Cunningham, was a sadistic man who systematically abused his prisoners and sold the rations issued to them. Captain FitzRandolph had been released only a week earlier and was still feeble from long months of semistarvation. But his revolutionary spirit was as vigorous as ever. He seized his musket, mustered his men, and marched.

Eighteen-year-old Ashbel Green was on his way to teach school when the alarm gun boomed. Although his father was a minister of the gospel, young Ashbel had been wholly converted to the martial spirit. He and his fellow schoolmaster, Darling Beach, closed their schools and raced to their regiment's alarm post.

Then there was Colonel Sylvanus Seeley of the Eastern Regiment of the Morris County Militia. He was under indictment for trading with the enemy, a charge based largely on the political malice of his fellow Americans. But this did not prevent him from turning out with his men the instant the alarm gun boomed.

Colonel Seeley reminds us of another aspect of the Revolution that we have conveniently forgotten. The Americans spent almost as much time quarreling with each other as with the British. New Jersey was no exception to this rule, in spite of the fact that the state was virtually under the guns of the enemy. Philemon Dickinson, the commander in chief of the New Jersey militia, cordially detested Governor William Livingston. So did Abraham Clark, the state's leader in Congress.

In spite of their differences, the Jerseymen turned out to face the British army. So did Washington's half-starved regulars in Morristown. But no one fought more ferociously on that first day than the New Jersey Continentals. They were led by a soldier who has also been undeservedly forgotten — William ("Scotch Willie") Maxwell, the toughest, hardest-drinking brigadier general in the American army. Militia as well as Continentals loved to fight for him. As early as December 1776, while Washington was desperately trying to regroup his beaten army on the western bank of the Delaware, Scotch Willie was operating in the heart of New Jersey with a thousand militia. He routed a British column trying to march through Springfield during that desperate month.

To help rally the militia, Maxwell dispatched his favorite aide-de-camp, a massive six-footer named Aaron Ogden. His brother, Colonel Mathias Ogden, was commander of the Second New Jersey Regiment of the Continental army. He in turn was married to the daughter of Colonel Elias Dayton, commander of the Third New Jersey. Dayton's second in command, Major Francis Barber, had married the Ogdens' older sister, Mary, before the war began. Colonel Oliver Spencer of the Fourth New Jersey was married to another Ogden sister. It is remarkable how intimately connected these New Jersey regiments were, not only by the grim bond of five years of war but by blood and friendship.

Above and beyond the soldiers stands another figure — the Reverend James Caldwell. "The Rebel High Priest" was what the Loyalists called him. He was the pastor of Elizabethtown's Presbyterian Church. From his congregation came over forty



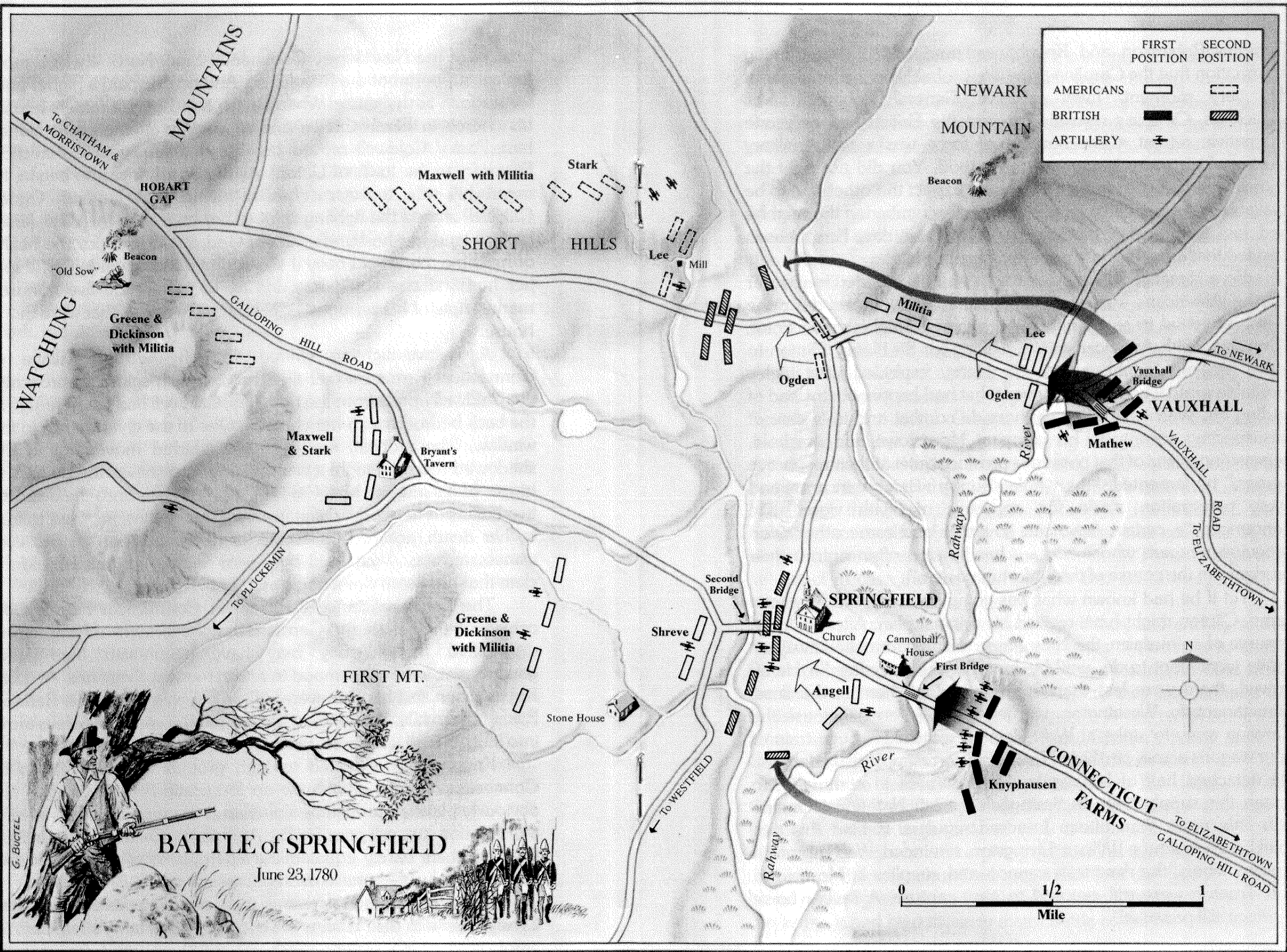
officers of the New Jersey Continental Line. No one was a more fervent supporter of the Revolution. And no one paid a higher price for his faith in the cause. When British and Loyalist raiders burned his church in Elizabethtown and repeatedly attempted to kidnap him, Pastor Caldwell moved his wife and family to Connecticut Farms (now the town of Union). As the British invasion began, he urged his wife to retreat further inland. But Hannah Ogden Caldwell shared the fighting spirit of her cousins in the New Jersey Line — and her husband's faith in God. She feared for the health of her nine-month-old baby if she fled in a jolting wagon. She told her husband she would stay and try to protect the five hundred manuscripts of his sermons — his lifetime work — that were in the house.

As heavy fighting swirled through the little village of Connecticut Farms on that first day, a British soldier approached the Caldwell house from the rear. Mrs. Caldwell had taken refuge in the back bedroom with her children. One of the children ran to the window. The redcoat, seeing only a blurred movement in the shadowed room, thought it was an American sniper and pulled the trigger of his musket. Mrs. Caldwell toppled back onto the bed with two bullets in her body, dying instantly. Americans, aroused to fury by her death, accused the British of deliberate murder. But eyewitness testimony gathered by Pastor Caldwell himself makes it clear that her death was a tragic accident.

The fierce resistance they met at Connecticut Farms soon convinced the British and Germans that the farmers of New Jersey, disgruntled though they may have been with their rebel government, were in no mood to return to royal allegiance. At dusk, Knyphausen and his men were still on the east side of the Rahway River. Meanwhile, Washington had gotten the vanguard of his army into Hobart Gap, effectively blocking the road to Morristown.

Knyphausen retreated to high ground within the town of Connecticut Farms, and threw up fortifications for the night. He obviously planned to resume the assault the next day. This meant the situation was still grim for the Americans. Even with the militia, their numbers barely equaled the enemy's. Washington decided there was only one hope: a midnight assault on the British camp.

While the American generals were planning this attack, Major Crosbie came to their rescue. He confessed Sir Henry's real plan to



Generals Robertson and Knyphausen and added the stunning information that the Carolina army was probably on the high seas at this very moment. Even talkative General Robertson was speechless. Crosbie's revelation meant the British had only one alternative: retreat. Concentration of force was a basic military maxim which every lieutenant understood. You did not fight the enemy with half your force if you could expect the other half to be available in a reasonable length of time. Remembering the men he had lost from militia harassment during the day, Knyphausen decided that an immediate departure was in order.

So a climactic battle which might well have ended in disaster for the Americans was avoided. For the next thirteen days, the British army sat in soggy misery on swampy Elizabethtown Point, skirmishing with American militia, waiting for Sir Henry Clinton to arrive. As one might expect, Sir Henry exploded with highly justifiable wrath when he discovered what had happened. Instead of finding Mr. Washington "totally hors de combat and in a state of unsuspecting security in his camp at Morristown and the bold, persevering militia of that populous province quiet at their respective homes," he lamented, "the whole country was now in arms and every preparation made for opposing me with vigor." He denounced "a certain American governor and some other oversanguine refugees whose zeal ... has but too often outrun their prudence in the course of this unfortunate war."

Yet if he had known what was going on inside the American camp, Clinton might have revived his original plan. After an initial upsurge of enthusiasm, the New Jersey militia had melted away, as militia were wont to do, until by June 20, the day after Sir Henry arrived, there were less than five hundred of them in the lines. Simultaneously, Washington, worried that Clinton might use the Carolina army to strike at West Point, dispatched a huge train of flour wagons across northern New Jersey to resupply that vital post. He detached half of his regulars, with himself in command, to screen this supply train. In Springfield he left Nathanael Greene with little more than fifteen hundred regulars. Behind this thin shield, as Governor William Livingston reminded Washington in anxious letters, the American cannon and supplies at Morristown and Trenton were still exposed to easy capture. A severe horse shortage still prevailed.

Clinton, knowing nothing about the supply train and assuming that Washington's detached brigades were moving to reinforce West Point (which he had no intention of attacking because Benedict Arnold had already promised to deliver it to him for a price), concocted a plan which might give him the best of all possible worlds.

On June 23, 1780, Clinton sent Knyphausen driving toward Morristown with six thousand men. He himself planned to move up the Hudson with the Carolina army. If Washington swung around the Watchung Mountains northwest of Newark to strike Knyphausen on the flank, Sir Henry would be ashore with the Carolina troops to trap him in a neat nutcracker. Failing this, Knyphausen might break through to Morristown. At the very least, he would beat back the Americans far enough to permit him to retreat to Staten Island without getting his rear guard mauled.

In his headquarters at Bryant's Tavern in the hills back of Springfield, Nathanael Greene was exercising an independent command for the first time. Displaying the poise and calm of a veteran general, he ordered his men to rip up the planks on the two bridges across the Rahway River. One bridge met the Galloping Hill Road, the other the Vauxhall Road. A few hundred yards behind them another branch of the Rahway was spanned by two more bridges, forming a second line of defense. These bridges were left intact in case the defenders of the first set of bridges had to retreat over them.

Greene's plan was to position his infantry and artillery so that the British would have not one but a series of positions to attack. Dayton's regiment and his few supporting militiamen would make the first stand in Connecticut Farms, where they had stopped the British so effectively on June 7. If they were forced to fall back, their retreat would be covered by men from Greene's home state — Colonel Israel Angell's Second Rhode Island Regiment.

On these soldiers fell the responsibility for defending the Galloping Hill Road bridge over the Rahway River — the post of honor. It was a large task to give a regiment that had been weakened by sickness and expiring enlistments until it would muster little more than one hundred sixty men. But the Second Rhode Island had a fighting record equaled by few regiments in the American army. It had bled in every major battle of the war and was best

known for its defense of Fort Mercer on the Delaware in 1777.

Behind Angell on higher ground commanding the second bridge over the west branch of the Rahway River, Greene posted portly Israel Shreve and his Second New Jersey Regiment. Behind them he positioned Major General Philemon Dickinson and some New Jersey militia with himself in command. To back up the men guarding the Vauxhall bridge he sent Mathias Ogden and his First New Jersey Regiment. For a reserve, on the summits of the hills behind Bryant's Tavern, he positioned Maxwell with the rest of the New Jersey Brigade and Brigadier General John Stark with two more New England regiments. Simultaneously, a messenger was rushed to Washington with the grim news: "The enemy are out on their march toward this place in full force, having received a considerable reinforcement last night." Greene might have been a little more hopeful if he had known that General Robertson was staying behind at Elizabethtown with 1,865 men. But not much more hopeful. Even without Robertson, Knyphausen outnumbered Greene five regulars to one.

The American commander in chief was at Rockaway Bridge, eleven miles from Morristown and about fifteen miles from Springfield. Washington must have felt a twist of anguish when Greene's message arrived. He was too far away to come to his aid. The best he could do was fire his signal guns, order the men to cook two days' provisions, and get the army on the road to Springfield as soon as possible.

In the thirty or so houses of the village of Springfield, panic reigned. Civilians flung silver down wells and hid other valuables in fields of rye and wheat, then piled furniture and blankets and bedding on wagons and headed west. Meanwhile, the British were colliding with the first American defense line in Conneticut Farms. The Royal Army's advance guard was composed of a regiment of New Jersey Volunteers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Barton, and the Queen's Rangers commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe. They too had a heavy percentage of New Jersey Loyalists in their ranks.

Colonel Dayton had positioned his men on both sides of a defile that ran through the center of Connecticut Farms. In an orchard on the left he had posted militiamen and a company of his Continentals to stiffen their ranks. On his right, well covered by a



thicket, he had dug in the rest of his regiment. The "Greens," as the New Jersey Volunteers were called, charged up both sides of the defile and began skirmishing with Dayton's men, darting from tree to tree, shouting insults, and blasting bullets at their fellow New Jerseyans. Ounumbered, the Greens recoiled and began looking over their shoulders for help. Where were the Queen's Rangers?

The Rangers were still down on the road, waiting for orders from Lieutenant Colonel Simcoe. They were itching to join the Greens in the fire fight. But Simcoe had other ideas. Calmly he ordered the Rangers to close ranks and follow him down the road on the double without firing a shot. Neither Dayton's regulars nor the militiamen, both busy howling defiance and blasting bullets at the Greens, realized what was happening until the Queen's Rangers were in their rear.

Simcoe barked another order and with lightning precision the Rangers wheeled to the left, opened ranks, and charged. The militiamen in the orchard broke and ran pell-mell across the fields. Colonel Dayton and the rest of his regiment were now in danger of being cut off from their line of retreat across the Rahway River. They did not lose their heads, however. Coolly they executed a fighting retreat with Colonel Dayton in personal command of the rear guard and were soon safely across the Galloping Hill bridge, where Colonel Angell and the Rhode Islanders were waiting.

In a few minutes, the Queen's Rangers and New Jersey Volunteers were joined by General von Knyphausen and the rest of the British army. Swiftly, the German general sent the Rangers, the Greens, the elite British Guards, and several other regiments down a road to the Vauxhall bridge across the Rahway, hoping to turn the flank of Angell and his men. Knyphausen kept most of the German regiments in his army under his personal command, including the elite regiment of Jaegers (Huntsmen), who were highly skilled skirmishers. He waited until the Greens, the Rangers, the Guards, and the other regiments were in position before the Vauxhall bridge, then fired a cannon to signal a simultaneous assault.

On Knyphausen's front, a single American cannon commanded by Captain Thomas Thompson, firing from a knoll behind Angell's men, beat back the first two British attempts to cross the Rahway. Then British artillery killed Thompson and knocked out his gun, and the British and Germans reached the east end of

the bridge. Three men, a sergeant and two privates, with exceptionally good balance and great courage crossed on the runners. But they did not get more than ten yards on the other side before they pitched forward, their bodies torn by a half dozen bullets from Colonel Angell's Rhode Island veterans. Finally someone, perhaps Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb of the Jaegers, decided it was ridiculous to reenact Horatio at the bridge when the Rahway River was only three to four feet deep. Colonel von Wurmb and his green-coated Jaegers divided. Two hundred of them raced down the river and two hundred raced up along the banks of the placid stream. Simultaneously, the Thirty-seventh and Thirty-eighth British Regiments opened their ranks and the men plunged into the water on either side of the bridge. Behind them the British artillery moved up to fill the air with grapeshot that kept Angell's Rhode Islanders pinned to the ground.

For more than twenty-five minutes Colonel Angell and his men fought five times their number to a standstill. The fighting was all Indian-style. To add to the confusion, after twenty or thirty rounds from each side, the battlefield was shrouded in clouds of smoke. The soldiers looked like Negroes, their faces blackened by powder, the flesh of their hands raw from their overheated guns.

Suddenly from one end of the American line to the other the cry went up, "Wadding. More wadding." Regular soldiers knew that the paper around the cartridge was not enough to steady the musket ball in the barrel and give the crude gun decent aim. Extra paper had to be crammed down the barrel to assure a reasonably accurate shot.

A frantic messenger was sent racing to the rear. On the road he met James Caldwell, who was riding up and down the battlefield, urging the New Jersey men to stand fast. "I'll get you some wadding," he snapped, putting spurs to his horse.

In minutes he was back, looming through the smoke. He had galloped to the attic of the Presbyterian church parsonage and collected every hymn book he could carry. Most of the songs were written by Isaac Watts, an English clergyman of the early eighteenth century. His lyrics reflected the stern doctrines of Calvinism, but they also contained an appealing sweetness. This aspect was not on James Caldwell's mind as he flung the books to the black-faced Continentals. "Give 'em Watts, boys," he roared and thundered

back to the parsonage for another load.

In spite of Pastor Caldwell's help, the superior numbers of the British and the Jaegers began to take a terrible toll of Angell's courageous Rhode Islanders. The smoke and confusion on the battlefield gave an added advantage to the attackers. Again and again the British would rush a pocket of the blue-coated Americans with bayonets. Before the Americans knew what was happening the enemy would be among them, ripping and slashing with those savage weapons that they used so well. Other men crumpled as bullets came crashing into them from the Jaegers on the flanks. Nothing is more unnerving, even to veteran soldiers, than the dismaying discovery that the enemy is driving home its attack from three sides.

With one out of every four men dead or wounded, Angell's Rhode Islanders fell back to the second bridge, where Israel Shreve's Second New Jersey Regiment and New Jersey militia were waiting with guns primed and ammunition pouches full. The upper branch of the Rahway River was little more than a creek, and the British wasted no time with heroics at the bridge. As they stormed through the shallow water and up the wooded bank, another fierce fire fight erupted.

Neither Shreve's men nor Angell's Rhode Islanders were under orders to hold until the last man died. Nathanael Greene wanted to sell each yard of ground they surrendered as expensively as possible. But if it came to a last stand, he intended to make it on the steep slopes of the Short Hills and not within the town limits of Springfield, almost all of which lay at the foot of this high ground.

Israel Shreve walked up and down his regiment's battle line, calmly encouraging his men. His bulk was seemingly an ideal target, but in five warring years he had yet to be so much as scratched. The Second New Jersey fell back slowly remaining very much in control of the situation. The British showed no inclination to force the issue by an all-out charge. Instead they relied more and more upon their artillery, which had crossed the lower branch of the Rahway River and was close enough to give Shreve's men serious trouble.

Even more worrisome was an attempt by the British Thirty-eighth Regiment to work its way around the American right flank. Here the British collided with two unexpected obstacles. As they passed a small stone house, a blast of musketry poured out its



windows. Nathanael Greene had stationed about thirty Continentals inside, and they had converted it into a miniature fortress. Simultaneously, militiamen who had gathered on this flank launched a savage attack. Caught between two fires, the redcoats reeled back, losing well over two dozen men in the process. For a moment Nathanael Greene thought a genuine counterattack was building up.

But there simply were not enough militiamen to drive the assault home. As the Thirty-eighth recoiled to the shelter of Knyphausen's main army, the militiamen suddenly became the hunted instead of the hunters. Cannonballs whizzed among them from the British artillery, still firing in close infantry support, and the Jaegers all but surrounded them with a deadly curtain of rifle fire. Now it was the militiamen's turn to reel back, dragging their dead and wounded with them. Mournfully General Greene realized that their force was "too small to push the advantage" it had gained.

Once more the Thirty-eighth Regiment, supported by the Jaegers now, began moving toward the stone house and the exposed American flank. Shreve's men, pinned down by artillery fire, were in danger of being surrounded. So were the defenders of the stone house. Glumly Greene sent both units orders to retreat immediately to the high ground he was holding. All of Springfield would have to be surrendered to the enemy.

At the same time Greene sent a messenger to the men defending the Vauxhall bridge to find out how things were going on that front. If the British broke through there, they could drive down the Vauxhall Road and seize control of Hobart Gap, cutting off his entire army.

The man in command of the Americans at the Vauxhall bridge was Major Henry (Light Horse Harry) Lee of Virginia. He had only the men of his cavalry legion, most of them fighting dismounted, and a detachment of infantry under Captain George Walker, and Colonel Mathias Ogden's First New Jersey Regiment — in all about six hundred regulars. On the flank he had a sizeable number of militiamen, but neither the militia nor the regulars had a single cannon to support them.

At Knyphausen's cannon-signal opening the organized assault, the British had surged forward with the Loyalist New Jersey Volunteers and Queen's Rangers once more in the lead. Swiftly

they waded the river on both sides of the bridge. Major Lee had scattered his men in small parties through the fields and woods on the other side of the river. He saw that his divided command was in danger of being swallowed piecemeal. He ordered a slow fighting retreat.

Firing steadily, Lee and his men fell back to the upper (west) branch of the Rahway River. Once more Lee scattered his small force, carefully positioning the companies in echelons so that they could concentrate their fire on the road. But Lieutenant Colonel Simcoe declined once more to send his men into Lee's trap. While Lieutenant Colonel Barton's New Jersey Volunteers skirmished with the militia on the British right flank, Simcoe led his men across the bridge in a column, then rapidly formed the Rangers into an attacking line. Their riflemen and light infantry swung around Lee's left and fought their way through a thicket-filled gully in a series of short, deadly hand-to-hand struggles. Soon they were pouring bullets into Lee's men from the front and flank while behind the Rangers the rest of the British army was advancing to deploy for a massive attack. For a moment a rout seemed imminent.

At this point Nathanael Greene's messenger, Lieutenant Colonel Francis Barber, appeared. A glance told Barber how the battle was going. It was obvious that Lee would have to retreat again soon. It was even more obvious that he needed help. Barber galloped back to Greene's headquarters at Bryant's Tavern. Greene instantly ordered the two New England regiments he had been holding in reserve to Lee's assistance. They brought a cannon with them.

The New Englanders arrived on the scene just as Lee's men surrendered the last level territory and fell back to the slopes of the Short Hills, which rise precipitously about one hundred fifty yards west of the upper branch of the Rahway River. The sight of another four hundred regulars coolly deploying on this high ground while the militia continued to swarm along the slopes of nearby Newark Mountain brought the British attack to a halt. Only the Queen's Rangers tried to push forward. They stopped abruptly when the first round from the American cannon created two mangled corpses in their ranks.

To continue up the Vauxhall Road now meant running a

gauntlet of cannon and musket fire. It could become a costly operation, especially when there was no guarantee that success would trap the rest of Greene's army fighting in Springfield. Another road forked from the Vauxhall and ran to the center of town. The jittery British commander of the column, Major General Edward Mathew, eyeing the growing numbers of militia on his right flank, decided to take this route and rejoin General von Knyphausen. A reunited army might be able to bulldoze its way up the Galloping Hill Road and do far more damage with less risk than the original battle plan called for. Mathew was also aware that operations on this flank were exposed to the sudden reappearance of Washington and the main American army.

Knyphausen agreed with Mathew, and when the British army was reunited in the village of Springfield, he ordered the Queen's Rangers out to skirmish with the American militia on his flanks and let the rest of his men sit down and eat their dinner. On the heights above Springfield, American confidence rose once more. By two o'clock Nathanael Greene had reformed the scrambled regiments who had borne the brunt of the morning's fight. At the same time he retreated about a mile and a half and ordered most of Henry Lee's regulars to fall back the same distance on the Vauxhall Road to a point where they were in easy communication with Greene's troops on the Galloping Hill Road just a few hundred yards from where the two roads forked and passed through Hobart Gap. Greene soon found himself hoping that General von Knyphausen would resume the attack.

But General von Knyphausen was making up his mind to do the precise opposite. His intention was announced not by the boom of cannon, or a movement of troops, but by a spurt of smoke and flames from first one house and then another house in the village of Springfield. Many of the villagers were among Greene's regulars and militia in the Short Hills. Some of them went almost berserk with rage and grief. Friends had to restrain them forcibly from rushing down to make a suicide attack on the enemy.

A taut-lipped Nathanael Greene ordered his men forward to protect every house not within immediate range of the British guns. But it was only a gesture. All but a fraction of Springfield remained in British hands, and the number of burning houses rapidly multiplied — so rapidly that the fires were obviously part of a

preconceived plan executed at a signal from Knyphausen. Only four houses, belonging to known British sympathizers, were spared — evidence that the New Jersey Loyalists were in charge of the burning.

While Springfield's houses were still ablaze, Knyphausen's army began a rapid retreat. Probably the German general hoped that the Americans would be distracted by trying to save some of the burning houses, making things easier on the march to Elizabethtown. The Royal Army moved in two divisions, one on the Vauxhall Road with the Queen's Rangers as the rear guard, the other division on the Galloping Hill Road with the Jaegers protecting the rear.

The British and Germans needed all the protection they could get. Infuriated militiamen stormed down the Galloping Hill Road after Knyphausen. Nathanael Greene ordered Brigadier General John Stark and the two regiments of his brigade which had seen little fighting to pursue the Rangers and the Guards. Unfortunately the British had a two-mile head start on Stark's men. The militiamen, racing along the flanks of both columns, were the ones who made the enemy pay for his destructive visit to Springfield.

The Jaegers, low on ammunition, and bitter over another day's fighting in which they had suffered heavy casualties, made only half-hearted efforts to contain the angry pursuers. Again and again the New Jersey men got past them to bushwhack the column from thickets and orchards and farm buildings along the line of march. Again and again soldiers toppled out of the ranks to die by the side of the road. No one stopped even to attempt to help them. Well before they reached Elizabethtown, Knyphausen's column had left fifteen bodies behind them, and the survivors were moving at a most undignified trot.

At first the column coming down the Vauxhall Road protected by the Queen's Rangers had an easier time of it. The Rangers had suffered only a few casualties, and the sight of their fellow Americans in hot pursuit, shouting obscenities at them, kept them full of fight. They were also well equipped for rear guard action. Their company of riflemen were all crack shots, and they opened up on the militiamen when they were still far beyond musket range.

A puff of smoke, a distant crack, and a militiaman crumpled with a bullet in his chest. *Crack, crack*, more Ranger rifles spoke,

and two more militiamen lay groaning on the dusty road. "Scarcely a shot was returned in vain," Colonel Simcoe later boasted. Brigadier General Nathaniel Heard quickly reined in his overeager amateur soldiers, ordering them to pursue the enemy at a safer distance.

By 5 p.m. Nathanael Greene knew the battle was over. The British were retreating to Staten Island across Arthur Kill on a bridge of boats constructed by their engineers. Out on the Hudson, Sir Henry Clinton and his Carolina army waited in vain for George Washington to appear. But the cautious American commander declined to show himself east of the Watchungs.

The British adventure in New Jersey was over. It had cost them 307 men dead and wounded. What this did to their morale can be glimpsed by a single line in a report the commander of the Jaegers sent home to Hesse-Cassel: "I regret from the depths of my heart that the great loss of the Jaegers took place to no greater purpose." The defeat also crushed the hopes of William Franklin, William Smith, and their fellow northern Loyalists — and destroyed them as advisers to the British.

As for the Americans, instead of a defeat that would have shaken and perhaps broken their rebellion, they had a victory to buoy their battered spirits.

George Washington, who knew better than anyone else what another defeat would have done to the cause, heaped praise on the New Jersey militia, more than making up for the coals of fire he had flung on their heads when they failed to support him in 1776. Artillery Major Samuel Shaw of Massachusetts declared that Springfield was "Lexington repeated." But most of the American army, engulfed by the fury and excitement and carnage of the event, thought the battle was a defeat. Alexander Hamilton wrote to his friend, Colonel John Laurens of South Carolina,

"You have heard how the enemy made an incursion into the Jerseys and made an excursion out of it. . . . My dear Laurens, our countrymen have all the folly of the ass and all the passiveness of the sheep in their compositions. They are determined not to be free and they can neither be frightened, discouraged nor persuaded to change their resolution. Don't think I rave. Would you believe it — a German baron at the head of five thousand men in the month of June insulted and

defied the main American army with the Commander in Chief at their head with impunity, and made them tremble for the security of their magazines forty miles in the country."

Colonel Ebenezer Huntington of Connecticut was even more vehement. Writing to his father a few weeks after the battle, he raged, "I despise my countrymen. I wish I could say I was not born in America, I once gloried in it but now I am ashamed of it. The insults and neglects which the army have met with from the country beggars all descriptions."

Others faltered in their resolution when they saw the cost of war. The young militiaman, Ashbel Green, trudged through Springfield the day after the battle, on his way home. On the western side of Springfield bridge he saw three British soldiers "stripped as naked as when they were born." Without the fury of battle in his veins, the young militiaman realized that these were "daring and determined soldiers," men who had charged across the bridge and "met instant death as soon as they reached the opposite side."

Looking around him in the morning sunlight, young Green saw "nothing but gloomy horror, a dead horse, a broken carriage of a field piece, a town laid in ashes, the former inhabitants standing over the ruins of their dwellings and the unburied dead covered with blood and with the flies that were devouring it." He was filled with melancholy. He was ready to say, "Is the contest worth all this?"

Just west of Springfield, Green saw George Washington on horseback galloping down the road accompanied only a single dragoon escort. Something about the way the tall, grim-faced Virginian sat his bay horse, the big hands in firm control, communicated new purpose, new resolution to the militiaman's troubled soul.

Here we see perhaps the most important lesson of this forgotten victory. It was leadership, the mysterious yet crucial ingredient, which George Washington gave the American cause, leadership that renewed the faltering faith of the amateur soldier, the bitterness of the regular who saw Springfield as a defeat.

For the Americans, Springfield's final dividend came a year later when George Washington joined forces with the French and began his march through New Jersey to Yorktown and the victory

that guaranteed American independence. Many Loyalist Americans, including Benedict Arnold, were sure that Clinton could smash the allied army to pieces, strung out as it was in a long exposed line moving parallel to the Hudson through New Jersey. Sir Henry remembered how the New Jersey militia had fought in the previous year, and rejected the idea.

It is hard to decide whom to admire most, the militiamen — the amateur soldiers of New Jersey, who went from peaceful homes to a bullet-filled battlefield — or New Jersey's bitter, hungry, ragged Continentals, who stood up to the British Sunday punches while the militiamen jabbed on the enemy's flanks. In some ways the devotion of the neglected regulars is more wonderful and mysterious than the response of the militia, who were fighting virtually on their own doorsteps to protect their wives and children, farms and houses. Only those who saw what the regulars endured could really appreciate them. "I cherish those dear, ragged Continentals, whose patience will be the admiration of future ages and I glory in bleeding with them," wrote one of Washington's aides.

Yet even the most steely-minded, impartial historian must confess the appeal of the militia's direct, simple solidarity. There is a glimpse of it in the final order a colonel gave to his militia regiment after Yorktown. He congratulated them for living together in harmony and urged them to continue to live this way. They would thus convince "the enemies of the United States that we mean to live and die like brothers and go hand in hand in supporting our country against its oppressors."

Peace settled over most of New Jersey after the battle of Springfield. Never again did the British attempt to invade the "cockpit state." There were still numerous Loyalist raids along the shore, but the men and women of the interior were untroubled. A glimpse of this lovely quiet — coupled with the matter-of-fact courage that produced it — is visible in a succinct line from the diary of Sylvanus Seeley. On July 12, his younger brother, Second Lieutenant Samuel Seeley, declared himself recovered from a wound he had received at Connecticut Farms. He was ready to return to the grim life of a Continental soldier once more. Colonel Sylvanus wrote in his diary: "Samal Seeley went for camp. Plowd my corn."

## For Further Reading

For those who want to explore the British invasion of 1780 in more detail, the author's *The Forgotten Victory; the Battle for New Jersey, 1780* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1973) is a full-length treatment of the subject. For more background on the American side of the story, Leonard Lundin's *Cockpit of the Revolution; the War for Independence in New Jersey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940; reprinted, 1972, by Octagon Books, New York) offers good perspective on New Jersey's war-weariness in 1780. The backgrounds of some of the principal actors in the Springfield drama were well researched in Theodore Thayer's *As We Were, The Story of Old Elizabethtown* (Elizabeth: Grassman Publishing Co., 1964) and Ambrose Ely Vanderpoel's *History of Chatham, New Jersey From its Earliest Settlement Through the Revolutionary War* (Chatham: Chatham Historical Society, 1959). *The Life of Ashbel Green*, Joseph H. Jones, ed. (New York, 1849); "The Autobiography of Colonel Aaron Ogden," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* (2nd series, vol. 12, 1893); and the *Diary of Sylvanus Seeley* (Morristown National Historical Park Library) contain lively first-hand accounts. An overview of the nature and composition of New Jersey's Continental and militia forces is provided by Mark E. Lender in *The New Jersey Soldier*, (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1975), another pamphlet in this series.

For the British side of the story, the indispensable source is *Historical Memoirs of William Smith, 1778-1783*, edited by W.H.W. Sabine, 2 vols. (New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1971). Also valuable is Sir Henry Clinton's memoir, *The American Rebellion*, edited by William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), and Willcox's biography of Clinton, *Portrait of A General; Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964). *Simcoe's Military Journal* (New York: 1844) is a good first-hand account of the fighting at Springfield. *Revolution in America: Confidential Letters and Journals, 1776-1784* by Major Carl L. Baumeister, adjutant general of the Hessian forces, translated and edited by Bernhard A. Uhlendorf (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1957) has some valuable



background on the confusion in the British-German high command. *The Journal of Lieutenant John Charles Philip von Krafft* (New York: New York Times & Arno Press, 1968; first published in the New-York Historical Society *Collections*, vol. 12, 1882) is a good picture of the German mercenary in action. For more background on the last royal governor of New Jersey, William Franklin, the reader might consult the author's biography of the governor's father, Benjamin Franklin, *The Man Who Dared the Lightning* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1971) and a companion pamphlet in this series, Larry R. Gerlach, *New Jersey's Last Royal Governor: The Life of William Franklin* (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1975).

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THOMAS FLEMING, novelist and historian, published his immensely popular *Forgotten Victory*, the story of the 1780 battle of Springfield, in 1973, and received an award of merit from the American Association for State and Local History. His other historical works include *The Man Who Dared the Lightning* (1971), a biography of Benjamin Franklin, and *1776, Year of Illusions* (1975), a reassessment of traditional beliefs about American and British goals and attitudes in the first year of the revolutionary war.



T.M.