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THE PRINCETON SURPRISE, 1777

CIRCULATE

The flank movement of the American army in the early morning of January 3, 1777, was a brilliant conception in the soldierly mind of General Washington. In General St. Clair's narrative the following remark occurs: "The General summoned a council of the general officers in my quarters, and, after stating the difficulties in his way, the probability of defeat, and the consequence that would necessarily result if it happened, desired advice. I had the good fortune to suggest the idea of passing the left of the enemy in the night, gaining a march upon him, and proceeding with all possible expedition to Brunswick. General Mercer immediately fell in with it, and very forcibly pointed out its practicability and the advantages that would necessarily result from it, and General Washington highly approved it, nor was there one dissenting voice in the council."

In General Wilkinson's "Memoirs" (I. 40) we read what he remembered to have heard of the proceedings of the council of war: "I have before observed that General St. Clair had been charged with the guard of the fords of the Assunpink, and in the course of the day, whilst examining the ground to his right, he had fallen on the road which led to the Quaker Bridge. Whether from this circumstance, or what other information I will not presume to say, it was this officer who, in council, suggested the idea of marching by our right and turning the left of the enemy. The practicability of the route was well understood by Colonel Reed, Adjutant-General; and the Commander-in-Chief, as soon as satisfied on this point, adopted the proposition."

In a recent work entitled "Life and Public Services of Arthur St. Clair, Soldier of the Revolutionary War," by William Henry Smith, in allusion to this event, we find the following remark: "Hereupon one of the council made a suggestion so happily solving the problem as to add in its brilliant execution to the well-deserved renown of Washington. . . . It was the inspiration of true genius."

Mr. Bancroft, in his "History of the United States" (IX. 246), questions the assertion made in the above-mentioned works that General St. Clair first suggested the movement of turning the left of the British column, and says: "St. Clair liked it so well that, in the failing memory of old age, he took it to have been his own."

It has always seemed strange to me, familiar as I have been all my life

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with the movements of the American army in the Revolutionary period, in and near Trenton, N. J., that General Washington waited until a council meeting at night before he prepared for some movement which he must make before the dawn of the following day. I cannot be convinced, with my knowledge of this locality, and my study of the character of Washington, that he put off his plans for the next day until the voice of General St. Clair, around the council-table that night, indicated what was best to be done.

In examining into the truth of this claim of General St. Clair, his aide and his biographer, it will be well to note here a few of the events which had just been enacted, and study for a moment the position of the respective armies on January 2, 1777.

The American army having been driven from the forts on the Hudson River, had beat an inglorious retreat through the Jerseys and over the Delaware River. Recrossing that river in a fierce storm and in the crushing ice, they had suddenly surprised the Hessian Rall and his veterans, overcome with their Christmas revels, and had carried off nearly a thousand of the trained soldiers of European wars. These prisoners had been safely taken over the river into Bucks County, Pa., and soon after, Washington and his army crossed the stream again and quartered in Trenton, prepared once more to meet the foe, with some additional force which General Mifflin, General Cadwalader, and Colonel Hitchcock had brought over from Bristol, Pa., to the south bank of Assunpink Creek. On the morning of January 2, 1777, the British army commenced their march from Eight Mile Run, near Maidenhead, now Lawrenceville, four miles south of Princeton. All day the advance party of Lord Cornwallis's force contended with the American riflemen under Colonel Hand, and later with the troops commanded by General Greene, and night came on as they reached the Queen Street Bridge, leading over the Assunpink Creek. The whole British army quartered in Trenton that night, except a detachment under General Leslie at Maidenhead and a brigade under Lieutenant-Colonel Mawhood at Princeton. The British army then held the north bank of the Assunpink Creek, and the American army the high ground on the south bank of this little stream. Washington had hardly 2,000 Continentals and 3,000 militia, and Cornwallis had at least 7,000 men, the finest troops in the British service. This was the military situation at this critical moment in the winter campaign in New Jersey.

Every officer, every man in the American army must have seen the danger to which they were now exposed. In front lay a proud, confident, valorous foe, nettled by the seizure of the German brigade, boastful that

they would bag the rebels on the morrow. To the rear of the patriot troops was a comparatively level country, with no natural means of defence, and no position from which either to damage, or even to hinder an advancing enemy. To the left was a river, which could they but safely cross again would certainly protect them, but to cross in boats under a raking fire was sure destruction.

The alternative was then presented, either a running fight southward along the river, toward Burlington, a struggle across an icy river with an insufficient number of boats, or a quick movement on the rear of the enemy at Princeton.

General Washington knew from his scouts the numbers of the British army advancing on him. He knew all day of January 2d what his position would be at night, if, by any good generalship, he could keep the foe from crushing him during the daylight hours. Can it then be for one moment supposed that he postponed his plans until the assembling of the council, and until General St. Clair rose to suggest a scheme which, by twelve o'clock midnight, was in full process of being carried out?

General Wilkinson, then Major Wilkinson, and an aide to General St. Clair, says that the General, being charged with the guard of the fords of the Assunpink (meaning the upper crossings by Henry's Mill and at Phillips's Ford), while examining the ground, had fallen on the road which led to the Quaker Bridge. Are we then to suppose this was a road unknown to Washington, and not suggested to him all day of January 2d by other officers than St. Clair, and only mentioned to him for the first time in council that night?

The officer who guided General Sullivan's column down the river road to the surprise at Trenton, December 26, 1776, Captain John Mott of Third Battalion, New Jersey Continental Line, and who was now recruiting his company for the Second Establishment, was with Washington at this time. He was born near Trenton, had always lived there, and it is not possible to conceive that he did not know well the road to Quaker Bridge. Colonel Isaac Smith, commandant of the militia regiment in the town, a leading citizen, a physician, and a soldier, was, of course, ready to give Washington any information in his power. The New Jersey militia was commanded by General Philemon Dickinson, a resident of Trenton, and for many years living within sight of the Quaker Road, and this intimate friend and trusty counsellor was certainly prepared to map out the country to his chief. The headquarters of General Washington were at the inn kept by Jonathan Richmond, and he was the barrack-master of the American army in the village. The Quaker Road must have been perfectly familiar to him. On Decem-

ber 30, 1776, Washington sent out his own Adjutan.-General, Colonel Joseph Reed, a native of Trenton and a graduate of Princeton College, to ascertain the position and force of the British army. Colonel Reed must have been familiar with this road in his boyhood days, and even Wilkinson says he "well understood the practicability of the route." When Colonel Reed performed on the day mentioned the little exploit with the Philadelphia City Troop, so fully recorded in Wilkinson's "Memoirs," the only road which he could then have taken from the house where this affair occurred, was by way of Quaker Bridge and Sandtown to Bloomsbury and Trenton. Washington's own aide must then have known the road that he galloped over three days previous.

But Washington also prepared for the midnight march during the day of January 2d, by procuring his guides to lead him over the very road St. Clair afterward "suggested." Ezekiel Anderson lived near Henry's Mills, on the Assunpink Creek, two miles from Trenton. Patrick Lamb lived at Quaker Bridge, a bridge over the upper waters of the Assunpink Creek, a little over one-half the way to Princeton. Elias Phillips lived between Patrick Lamb's house and Maidenhead, where General Leslie's British forces were quartered. These men left their homesteads that day, and it is well known, by tradition in their families, that they appeared in the council room and offered to guide the patriot army that night in the great flank movement. They certainly, in those troublous times, did not leave their homes unprotected unless to do a patriot's duty in compliance with the desire of one whom it was their delight to obey.

In Revolutionary times the road from Bloomsbury, now that part of Trenton south of the Assunpink Creek where the American army was then quartered, to Sandtown, was a well-known and much used road leading toward Cranberry, and thus to Monmouth County or Amboy. From Princeton to Allentown and to Crosswick's was a road blazed for the use of Quakers going to Stony Brook, or Crosswick's meetings. Between Quaker Bridge and Sandtown was a tract over a mile in length, called "The Barrens," just east of the Bear Swamp, from which the scrub-oak trees had at that time just been cut. To avoid the long, circuitous route by Nottingham Square, General Washington chose to cross a field of stumps, by a path somewhat west of the present road, and so reach the blazed road near the Quaker Bridge and the route to Princeton. In Stone's "Life of Howland" (p. 75), we find: "A considerable part of it was by a new passage, which appeared to have been cut through the woods, as the stubs were left from two to five inches high." To guide the army across this very tract Washington wanted Patrick Lamb, of Quaker Bridge, and to keep his column a sufficient dis-

tance from General Leslie's sight and hearing at Maidenhead he needed Elias Phillips. And they were in Trenton before the council meeting, ready for the duty.

General Washington having settled in his own mind the best mode of escape from the apparent *cul-de-sac* in which Cornwallis had placed him, called his officers around a council board in General St. Clair's quarters. It is possible General Washington may have asked General St. Clair, whose guest he then was, to open the discussion, and to have indicated privately to him beforehand the line of march he proposed. Or it is possible Washington may have desired to see what better plan could be suggested by his general officers, and then have heard named the same plan and nothing else than what he had himself been preparing to execute. Was it like Washington to have left so vital a question undecided, unprepared for until so late an hour? His character and his conduct during the war forbid such a conclusion.

In the despatches to Congress sent by Washington December 27, 1776, he made special mention of the "spirited behavior" of his aid-de-camp, Colonel Baylor, and in general orders the same day he gave to Colonel Knox, his chief of artillery, much praise for the handling of the guns in the Trenton fight; but in the official report of this grand flank movement to Princeton, dated Pluckemin, January 5, 1777, the name of St. Clair is not mentioned. General Washington was never so ungenerous as to claim for himself the credit of all the gallant acts of his troops. He was always ready to gratefully recognize and acknowledge the good services of his subordinates, and he would certainly not have omitted to give due praise to one of his general officers had this plan been entirely of St. Clair's conception and suggestion.

It is impossible for me to suppose that General Washington did not know well what he was doing all day of January 2d, and into what a critical position he was being driven. It is quite impossible for me to think he deliberately allowed himself to be placed in a trap, and then, after dark, in deep despair called upon his generals to get him out of a scrape from which he felt himself powerless even to suggest a plan of escape.

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