

WASHINGTON
AT
ELIZABETHTOWN

By

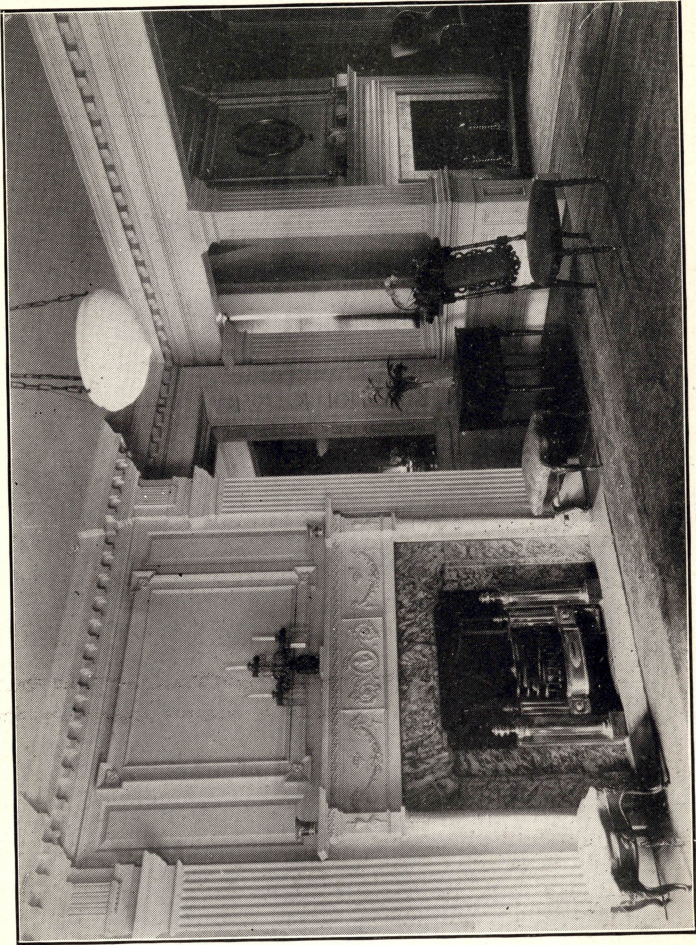
DR. ARTHUR D. JOHNSON

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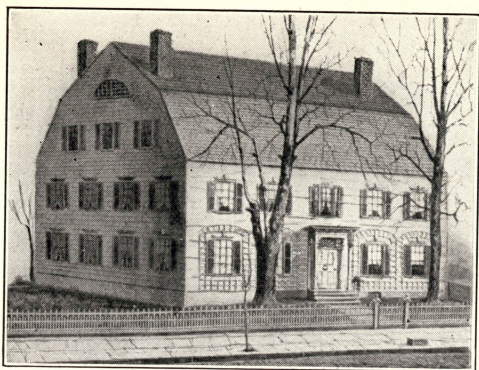
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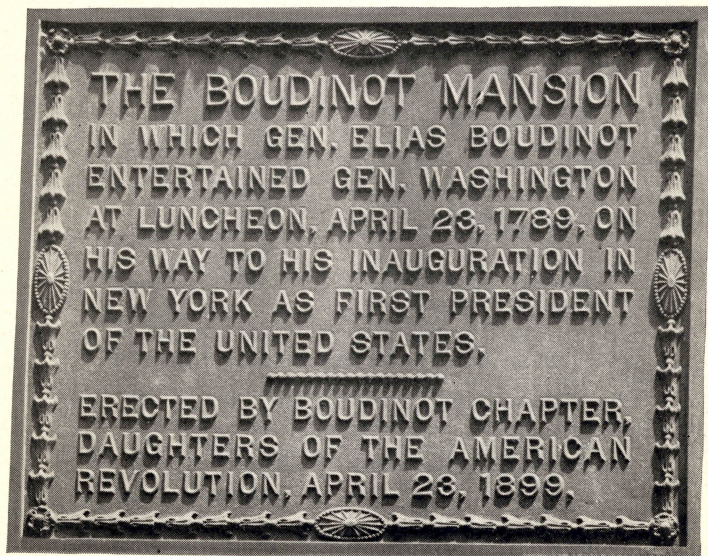
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INTERIOR OF BOUDINOT MANSION



BOUDINOT MANSION



TABLET ON BOUDINOT MANSION

WASHINGTON AT ELIZABETHTOWN

BY DR. ARTHUR L. JOHNSON

THE pages of history are littered with the wrecks of former greatness, who have scarcely survived the century in which they "lived and moved and had their being." Many strutted across the stage for one brief moment, others were the leaders in the revolts of factious nations, while a few have come down to us chiefly because they were the actors in a great drama, that dismembered a kingdom or established a principle, which has brought justice and freedom to all mankind. The historian delving among the aged and forgotten records in the little known public archives, "finds broken toys of empires, discarded heroes, torn flags, damaged souls," who in the light of the new revelation stand in their real likeness, shorn of those vestments of glory, which dazzled and blinded the eyes of their own generation. Some nations, like individuals, are but a memory, and all that we have today to remind us of their past greatness is a broken column, a ruined temple, a bronze sword, a fragment of sculpture, a faded piece of tapestry, or the linen wound body of a forgotten king.

Historical literature during the past decade has busied itself in part by producing the annals of the great and near great. In the effort to reveal the real individual as he appeared to the rest of the caste in the great drama of life, many have made a labored effort to destroy the idealist's conception which has become a part of our patriotic inheritance. In this character analysis there has been no consideration of position, service, devotion, or self-abnegation. All have been subjected to the same critical scrutiny void of sentiment and with an utter disregard of time, place and conditions. There has, furthermore, been no weighing of evidence, no classification of major and minor acts, no attempt to reveal the true greatness of a character but rather to disclose some obscure indiscretion and amplify it to the proportions of greatest magnitude. "Washington, secure in his niche where generations have placed him, honored and revered by nations as well as by all mankind, has stood in bronze for more than a century, immobile, frozen in his perpetual attitude, a member of that startling company of founders of empire."

It is not the purpose of this discussion to consider the "Father of his Country" from the standpoint of biography, diplomacy, or politics, but rather to reveal a segment of his career which has an intimate relationship to the community in which we live.

Perhaps no man of his generation knew more fully or more in detail the territory through which his armies operated or the adjacent and more remote sections of the states where active operations were in progress. His itinerary included every possible location that might afford a vantage point for an army in action or a possibility of escape for a military organization in retreat. To one who has studied his

individual perigrations, it is not beyond the realm of belief that some remote farmhouse on some distant highway, furnished him with entertainment for the night, or was used for a temporary headquarters while he was exploring surrounding territory, although there may be no written evidence to confirm his residence, there are frequently definite family traditions that numerous homes afforded him temporary shelter.

During the period when armies were marching and counter-marching throughout this entire section, we have every reason to suppose that Washington attended every movement and was a frequent visitor at Elizabethtown. What more natural to suppose, knowing his great mastery of detail, that in making the proper disposition of his troops the territory was carefully explored and strategic points indicated under his intelligent supervision. We have the evidence of his generals, supported by the statements of his geographer, Erskine, "the forgotten general", that the indication of strategic location was given him by the commanding general, who always directed the field survey. It is not a matter of idle speculation that Washington knew with a fair degree of intimacy all the main roads and their intersecting links, in and out of Elizabethtown and in his many journeyings had frequent occasion to ride through the town over familiar highways to communicate with the various divisions of his army. Then, too, we have the testimony of numerous individuals, who met him sometimes accompanied only by a single orderly on his mission of inspection and investigation. It can be accepted without challenge that no great general, with the possible exception of Napoleon, ever gave so much personal attention to the disposition of his troops. Few have ever shown such undaunted courage in the face of the enemy or such personal bravery during the critical moments of a great battle. Few generals have ever possessed the ability of personal leadership to lead an army to victory or to reform the broken ranks of disorganized troops and forge them into a thunder bolt to crush the confident advance of a victorious army. This very success is contingent upon the possession of magnetic power, and a knowledge of the terrain so definite that every hillock and ravine may afford just those strategic advantages which contribute to the success of a victorious general.

On the 15th of June, 1775, Washington was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the American army. During the month preceding the bloody conflicts had occurred at Lexington and Concord, and the militia of New England together with a rapidly increasing number of volunteers had invested Boston. The whole country was aroused and an impending crisis seemed imminent. Without hesitation and with only a hasty farewell to his family and friends, Washington, two days after his appointment, began his long journey from Mount Vernon to Boston. It is indicative of the spirit and ability of the man, that he was able in such a brief period of time, to put his affairs in order, and sever all his connections with his landed interests for an indefinite period of time. It is not unreasonable to suppose that realizing the rapid march of events, he had long before put his house in order and

with characteristic foresight had mapped out a course of action to be followed, when the crisis arrived.

Washington was not unknown to many individuals in the northern states, because of his service in the French and Indian War and he was no stranger to that political group in each state whose patriotic interests had led them to follow the trend of thought expressed by the most conspicuous leaders in each of the colonies. The journey of Washington across New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, furnished an opportunity for the patriots in each of these states to both see and to learn something of the man who had been selected as the champion of independence. Wherever he went, his associates bear testimony that he made a profound impression in the various towns through which he passed. This impression was heightened to some extent at least by the fact that he was accompanied by Generals Schuyler and Lee, and during the entire journey was surrounded by a brilliant cavalcade of officers.

Washington was greeted with great enthusiasm in New Jersey from the time he crossed the Delaware until he left the shores of the state for New York. Our State at this time, unlike the colony of Massachusetts, had suffered less from external oppression than from internal dissention. The house was divided against itself. Bitter, partisan strife had developed between citizens of divergent sympathies, fostered by the misrule of the last royal governor, William Franklin, the royalist son of the most ardent patriot America produced. It was at Elizabethtown on this journey to Boston that the Commander-in-Chief met for the first time the man who was to become his chief supporter among the governors of states—William Livingston. Washington was impressed at once by the sterling qualities of this ardent patriot, and for a few hours was his guest at "Liberty Hall." Here in the quiet of the old mansion, far removed from the center of military activity, it is quite probable that these two champions of the cause of liberty, outlined a course of action which would eventually result in successfully promoting the cause of independence.

Among the citizens of Elizabethtown during the Revolutionary War, none was more conspicuous because of his wealth, ability, and patriotic service than Elias Boudinot. At the outbreak of the War of Independence he was in the prime of life, a lawyer who had established a large practice, and a business man with an ample fortune. Unlike others of his class, he early announced his purpose to cast his lot with those courageous and patriotic souls, who, while mindful of their probable fate should their effort fail, preferred a life of freedom to one of chains and slavery.

It was the event of the marriage of Elias Boudinot's younger brother Elisha, to the daughter of William Peartree Smith which brought Washington to Elizabethtown in 1778 upon a purely social mission. This visit was a tribute to his friend and councillor, Elias Boudinot. When we consider the great danger of attending the wedding it may be rightfully considered a more than ordinary tribute.

The wedding took place at the home of William Peartree Smith, known at the time as the former residence of Governor Belcher and the house now owned and occupied by Mr. Warren R. Dix. The home of the bride was on East Jersey Street and but a short distance from "Boxwood Hall" the home of Washington's friend Elias Boudinot. Although there is no written record, it does not require the exercise of the imagination to presume that the distinguished guest called first at the Boudinot Mansion in order that he might have a friendly chat and enjoy his company at the ceremony.

The wedding was a magnificent as well as romantic affair. It appears that the guests were more interested in the coming of the General than in the bride or bridegroom. All was expectancy; for some time before the ceremony, it was whispered that Washington was to be present, although the information had been carefully guarded. The Commander-in-Chief came to Elizabethtown by a circuitous route in order to avoid suspicion, and a knowledge of his purpose being carried by spies which infested the town and countryside, to the British forces stationed on Staten Island. Alexander Hamilton, not yet married to the beautiful and accomplished daughter of General Schuyler, was the master of ceremonies. It was the most uneasy period of the war, and, because of the possibility of surprise and capture, it was necessary for Washington to take every precaution. Sentinels were stationed at various points and instructions given to report only to Hamilton and the Commander-in-Chief, if signs were discovered of approaching raiding parties. A few moments before the ceremony began there was an alarm, known only to Washington and Hamilton. The general's aid went out and after quiet investigation, found the situation less alarming than had been reported. None of the guests present having had any knowledge of the sentinels's report, the ceremony proceeded without interruption and at the close of the wedding and after his good wishes for the future of the bride and groom had been expressed, Washington returned to his headquarters, accompanied by his guard.

Perhaps the most notable visit of Washington at Elizabethtown was as the guest of Elias Boudinot when the historic luncheon was given in his honor at Boxwood Hall, the day he passed through the city on his journey to New York. The mansion of Boudinot was a great square comfortable structure, with four large chimneys, that was suggestive of an old-time mansion possessing more than the ordinary comforts of the time. "Its entrance-hall and stair-case were of the style so much in fashion before the Revolution, the former being broad enough for a cotillion party, two stately apartments on either side of this central hall reveal even at this late day many traces of former elegance and taste. The mantels with their quaint carving and the curious cornices are worthy of note." The house stood in the midst of lawns with gardens shaded by lofty trees. There were climbing vines, various kinds of shrubbery and many gay-flowering plants that gave a touch of color to the much shaded and embowered homestead.

Washington and his illustrious company were in the best of spirits.

The critical period seemed over. The constitutional convention had been held and the result of its work had received the approval of the states. The man who through eight trying years directed the destinies of the states, and had established a new nation's independence, had accepted the highest office within the gift of the people, conferred not as a tribute of respect and gratitude but rather as an expression of universal confidence. Many of those who accompanied him on his journey to the inauguration were men who had either been companions in arms through those trying years or statesmen and political leaders, defenders of the cause in Congress or at home. In this goodly company were John Langdon, President of the Senate, from New Hampshire; Richard Henry Lee, Theodoric Blaud, and Arthur Lee, from Virginia; General Knox, the Secretary of War from Maine; Tristain Dalton, from Massachusetts; Dr. William Samuel Johnson, from Connecticut; Charles Carroll of Carrolton, from Maryland; Ralph Izard and Thomas Tudor Tucker, from South Carolina; Governor William Livingston, from New Jersey; Egbert Benson, John Lawrence, Walter Livingston, Chancellor Livingston, Samuel Osgood, John Jay and others from New York.

Governor William Livingston was the oldest man at the luncheon, being at that time sixty-six years of age, and it will be remembered had served as governor of the state since 1776. He was also the younger brother of the signer, Philip Livingston, and the Treasurer of the New York Revolutionary Congress, Peter van Brugh Livingston. It will also be recalled by those interested in biography that the governor was the father-in-law of one of the distinguished guests, John Jay. It may not be amiss in connection with this discussion to call attention to the service of Governor Livingston and the intimate relationship that existed between himself and Washington. During the war for independence, he was constantly in correspondence with the Commander-in-Chief, keeping him informed of every movement of the enemy and conducting the affairs of state with consummate skill and untiring energy. He perhaps made a more substantial contribution to the cause than any other governor among the thirteen states of the federal union. During the critical period from 1783 to 1789 no governor was more persistent in his effort to develop and organize his state and to establish a more permanent union. He sat in the convention of 1787 which framed the constitution, and while there is no record of numerous contributions to the discussion, the files of old newspapers bear abundant evidence of a facile pen. Perhaps he was the most erudite member of the convention, having distinguished himself as a brave soldier, an astute lawyer, an able scholar, a poet, essayist, journalist, and possessed of a refined and discriminating literary taste. There was at the luncheon the great trinity of illustrious patriots from Elizabethtown, William Livingston, Elias Boudinot and William Peartree Smith.

No one has written the annals of Washington's luncheon. One statement survives; "The newly elected president occupied the chair of state and it is probable directed the discussion." Presumably the sub-

ject uppermost in the minds of the company was the future of the republic, and the new policies to be formulated as the result of the various provisions of the new constitution. In all probability the discussion was both active and virile. There was a mutual interchange of opinions and ideas, new hopes were born, and new faith established. At the close of the luncheon, it is quite certain, following the custom of the time, that the guests standing with eyes fixed upon Washington, drank to the toast suggested by the host—"His Excellency, the first President of the United States."

The home of William Livingston, like that of Elias Boudinot was in Elizabethtown in 1789 and the house is still standing, and is at present occupied by Mr. Hamilton Kean. The mansion was erected sometime prior to 1773 and was occupied by the governor about that date. Previous to founding the home in Elizabethtown, Livingston had made his residence in New York, but after his intimate friend, William Peartree Smith, bought the Belcher Mansion, he purchased an estate in the town about 1760 in order to be near his lifelong friend. The two men had much in common; both had become interested in the future of the colonies and held a similar belief regarding the attitude of the mother country. They were alike interested in the classics and in scholarly occupations. Their mutual interest in writing and in poetry particularly, had cemented the bond of friendship. The statesman and diplomat, John Jay, had not been long in taking to himself one of the two most beautiful women in America, Sarah Livingston, to whom he was married the following April, after the Livingston family had established themselves at "Liberty Hall."

It was in the Livingston Mansion that Mrs. Washington was entertained in May, 1789, when on her journey from Mount Vernon to join her distinguished husband at New York after his inauguration as the first President of the United States. Suitable preparations had been made to receive the first lady of the land. The mansion was decorated with a variety of choice flowers grown in the family garden. Livingston's gifted daughters were present to entertain not only Mrs. Washington but a select gathering of men and women who had gathered in honor of the guest. The president's lady during her brief visit occupied the guest chamber over the library, while the one set apart for Mrs. Robert Morris, who accompanied her, was located over the hall in the center of the front of the mansion. On the following day Washington, in company with John Jay, and Robert Morris and other gentlemen, who formed his retinue, arrived at the Livingston Mansion in time to take breakfast with the family. Later in the day the company proceeded to the Point, where a barge was in waiting manned by thirteen sea captains who had seen active service during the war of the Revolution. No queen of a foreign empire was ever escorted to her capital with more conspicuous ceremony than the wife of the President of the United States. The representative men and women of Elizabethtown formed an important part of the cavalcade which escorted the distinguished guests to the port of embarkation. This conspicuous

tribute was a characteristic demonstration of the loyalty and patriotism of that noble group of citizens, who through eight trying years suffered as no other colony had suffered during the entire period of the war.

While many of the present generation may be descended from that patriotic group in Elizabethtown, to which we owe a lasting debt of gratitude, yet there is abundant evidence that some who sacrificed themselves and their all for the cause of independence are but a memory. It is too often one of the tragedies of a great transition that those who contributed most to the great movement are the first to be forgotten. Someone has said that memorials are usually erected to the near great, while those who rendered the most conspicuous service, survive only in the written records of their achievements. Every citizen of Elizabethtown should thrill with pride at the mention of the names of such patriots as Livingston, William Peartree Smith, Boudinot, Dayton, Oden, Caldwell, Crane, DeHart, Barber and others of that glorious company who were companions in arms of the immortal Washington, and who made no small contribution to that great revolt against tyranny which resulted in the establishment of a new nation, a new form of government, which not only brought freedom to one people but established a new conception of liberty for the whole world.

History reveals no other man who ever gave himself as a more willing sacrifice to the cause of freedom. Washington no longer remains an American patriot alone; he has become the lasting heritage of the world. No great military hero ever lived who has been so universally revered, so ardently beloved as the immortal Father-of-his-Country.

May I close with the last stanza of the first poem published in eulogy of Washington. It was written by Governor Livingston in 1778, and is significant because of the poet's prophetic vision:

And when by thousands wept, thou shalt resign
Thy sky-infused and sky-returning spark,
May light supernal gild thy mortal hour.
But mortal to translate thee into life
That knows not death; and then heaven's
 all-ruling Sire
Shall introduce thee to thy glad compeers,
The Hampdens, Sidneys, freedom's genuine sons!
And Brutus' venerable shade, high-raised
On thrones erected in the taste of heav'n,
Distinguished thrones for patriot demi-gods
(Who for their country's weal or toiled, or
 bled),
And one reserved for thee: There envy's shafts
Nor tyrants e're intrude, nor slavery clanks
Her galling chain; but star-crowned Liberty
Resplendent goddess! everlasting resigns.