



NEWSLETTER

#1 2002

A Chronology Of The Revolutionary War

with emphasis on Bedford County, Pennsylvania's role

Continued

1777: Princeton

Pluckamin, January 5, 1777

Sir: I have the honor to inform you, that fince the date of my laft from Trenton I have remov'd with the Army under my Command to this place. The difficulty of crofsing the Delaware on Acct. of the Ice made our pafsage over it tedious, and gave the Enemy an opportunity of drawing in their Several Cantonments, and afsembling their whole Force at Princeton. Their large Picquets, advanc'd towards Trenton; their great preparations, and fome Intelligence I had received, added to their knowledge that the firft of Janry. brought on a difsolution of the beft part of our Army, gave me the ftrongeft reaons to conclude that an attack upon us was mediating...

So began a letter that General George Washington wrote to the delegates meeting in Congress in Philadelphia as the new year of 1777 dawned. Following the Patriot victory at Trenton, Washington had recrossed the Delaware River, landing at McKonkey's Ferry. The Hessian troops under Colonel Carl Von Donop, who had been stationed at Mount Holly, were now withdrawn to Allen's Town; he also takes the Hessian troops stationed at Bordentown with him. The Hessians who were holding Burlington were dispersed to Princeton and Brunswick.

The American Patriots were on the move also. Colonel John Cadwalader received word of

Washington's success at Trenton on the morning of the 27th of December, and immediately made the crossing of the Delaware with his detachment of 1,800 troops. Upon reaching the New Jersey side of the river, Cadwalader received the letter Washington had written to him on that morning of the 27th, informing that he had returned to the Pennsylvania side of the river. Cadwalader's initial impulse was to make the crossing of the river once more to join with Washington's troops. But Colonel Joseph Reed, not realizing that the Hessians had been evacuated, urged Cadwalader to press on in order to possibly take the enemy at either Bordentown or Burlington. Cadwalader

agreed, and it was then upon reaching those two locations that they discovered the Hessians had withdrawn. Cadwalader sent a message to Washington with the news of the evacuated Hessian posts.

General Washington once again embarked his troops onto boats and crossed back to the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. In a letter to the Continental Congress, written on the 1st of January, Washington noted that: "*On Monday Morning [30 December] I passed the Delaware myself; the whole of our Troops and Artillery not till yesterday owing to the ice which rendered their Passage extremely difficult and fatiguing.*" The General soon learned that Lord Cornwallis and General James Grant had assembled an army that numbered approximately 8,000 at Princeton.

General Lord Charles Cornwallis was at New York City when word had received him that

the Americans had attacked the Hessians at Trenton. Howe canceled Cornwallis' plans to head back to England for the winter. Instead, he was instructed to gather his troops together from the various posts to which they had been assigned for the winter and head back south to bring the war to a conclusion. Cornwallis made the trip of fifty miles from New York City, arriving at Princeton on the 1st of January. General James Grant arrived on the same day to rendezvous with Cornwallis. Grant left six hundred of his men at Brunswick, and brought the balance of about 1,000 men to Princeton.

The state of the American army at this point was quite shaky. It was the end of one year and the start of another, and that meant that enlistments were up for most of the troops. A sergeant in Washington's camp wrote the following:

At this trying time, General Washington, having now but a handful of men and many of them new recruits in which he could place but little confidence, ordered our regiment to be paraded and personally addressed us, urging that we should stay a month longer.

He alluded to our recent victory at Trenton, told us that our services were greatly needed, and that we could now do more for our country than we ever could at any future period, and in the most affectionate manner entreated us to stay. The drums beat for volunteers, but not a man turned out. The soldiers worn down from fatigue and privations, had their hearts fixed on home and the comforts of the domestic circle, and it was hard to forego the anticipated pleasures of the society of our dearest friends.

The General wheeled his horse about, rode in front of the regiment, and addressing us again said, "My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do and more than could be reasonably expected. But your country is at stake, your wives, your houses, and all that you hold dear.

You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you will consent to stay only one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty and to your country which you probably never can do under any other circumstances. The present is emphatically the crisis which is to decide our destiny."

The drums beat the second time. The soldiers felt the force of the appeal. One said to another, "I will remain if you will."

Others remarked, "We cannot go home under such circumstances."

A few stepped forth, and their example was immediately followed by nearly all who were fit for duty in the regiment, amounting to about two hundred volunteers.

An officer inquired of the General if these men should be enrolled. He replied, "No! Men who will volunteer in such a case as this need no enrollment to keep them to their duty."

Some 1,600 Philadelphia Militia men, under General Thomas Mifflin, were now in the vicinity of Bordentown, and another 2,000 under Cadwalader were at Crosswicks. These regiments were ordered to rendezvous with Washington's own

regiment at Trenton. With the problem of the expiring enlistments out of the way, and with the army once again united, Washington was able to concentrate on the matter of the British who were heading southward from Princeton.

On the Second, according to my expectation, the Enemy began to advance upon us, and after some skirmishing, the head of their Column reach'd Trenton about 4 O'Clock whilst their rear was as far back as Maidenhead; they attempted to pass Sanpink Creek (which runs through Trenton) at different places, but finding the Fords guarded, halted, and kindled their Fires. We were drawn up on the other Side of the Creek. In this Situation we remain'd till dark canonading the Enemy, and receiving the Fire of their Field pieces, which did us but little damage.

Leaving a rear guard of 1,200 troops at Princeton under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood, General Cornwallis proceeded toward Trenton. He then left another unit of 1,200 at Maidenhead (Lawrenceville) under the command of General Alexander Leslie. The remaining 5,500 British troops continued through heavy rain, muddy roads and sniper fire.

The column, marching three men abreast, had met their first sniper fire when they arrived at Maidenhead. From that point, through the rest of the march, American riflemen continued to harass

the British column from behind trees and buildings. The purpose of the sniper fire was simply to delay the British advance. And it did just that. The British were unable to complete their march to Trenton until four o'clock in the afternoon of the 2nd of January. As Brigadier General Henry Knox's regiment of artillery covered them, the Patriot snipers withdrew calmly toward the small bridge that crossed over the Assunpink creek. In a letter that General Knox wrote to his wife, Lucy, he noted that:

Their retreat over the bridge was thoroughly secured by the artillery. After they had retired over the bridge, the enemy advanced within reach of our cannon, who saluted them with great vociferation and some execution. This continued till dark, when, of course, it ceased, except a few shells we now and then chucked into town to prevent their enjoying their new quarters securely...

Although the Patriot artillery was keeping the British at bay on the other side of the Assunpink Creek, General Washington did not like the situation in which he now found himself. The

Assunpink Creek was to the Patriots' front; the Delaware River was to their left; a wooded area was to their right. As Henry Knox noted in his letter to Lucy:

The situation was strong, to be sure, but hazardous on this account, that had our right wing been defeated, the defeat of the left would almost have been an inevitable consequence, and the whole thrown into confusion or pushed into the Delaware, as it was impassable by boats.

Sir William Erskine, General Cornwallis' Quartermaster General, urged his commander to strike the Patriots with an assault before the night was over. He feared that the Americans would not be there when morning dawned. He was very

correct. Washington began a general evacuation of his position that evening. He made the decision to leave about four hundred men at Trenton to give the semblance of the army still being there, and led the rest of the army westward to Sandtown and

then northward along the Quaker Road that traveled on to Princeton.

General Washington gave an explanation of the decision he made to remove the army to

Princeton in a letter he sent to the Congress dated 05 January:

Having by this time discovered that the Enemy were greatly Superior in Numbers, and that their drift was to furround us. I orderd all our Baggage to be removd filently to Burlington foon after dark, and at twelve O'Clock (after renewing our Fires, and leaving Guards at the Bridge in Trenton, and other pafses on the fame fream above March'd by a round about road to Princeton where I knew they could not have much force left, and might have Stores. One thing I was fure of, that it would avoid the appearance of a Retreat, which (was of Confequence) or to run the hazzard of the whole Army's being cut of was unavoidable whilft we might, by a fortunate ftroke withdraw Genl. Howe from Trenton, give fome reputation to our Arms; happily we fucceeded.

According to a letter written by General William Howe to Lord George Germain, dated 05

January, the activities of the night of January 2 were played out as follows:

“On the 2d Lord Cornwallis having received accounts of the rebel army being pofted at Trenton, advanced thither, leaving the 4th brigade under the command of lieutenant colonel Mawhood at Princeton, and the 2d brigade, with brigadier general Leslie at Maidenhead. On the approach of the Britifh troops, the enemy's foward pofts were driven back upon their army, which was formed in a ftrong pofition, behind a creek running through Trenton. During the night of the 2d. the enemy quitted this fituation, and marching by Allen's Town, and from thence to Princeton, fell in on the morning of the 3d. with the 17th and 55th regiments, on their march to join brigadier general Leslie at Maidenhead.

At sunrise on the morning of 02 January, 1777, the Patriot army was crossing the Stony Creek within two miles of Princeton. He directed General Hugh Mercer to lead a brigade of 350 troops to a point on the Post Road to Trenton in order to prevent an escape of the British at Princeton, and also to be able to warn the main body of troops should the British under Leslie turn back toward Princeton.

What Washington did not know was that the 800 British troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood had left Princeton early that same morning with the intention of rendezvousing with Cornwallis at Trenton.

Near Princeton the Patriot army made contact with the British 17th, 55th and 40th regiments under Mawhood, in a skirmish which General Washington described to the Congress:

We found Princeton about Sunrife with only three Regiments of Infantry and three Troops of Light Horfe in it, two of which were upon their March for Trenton; thefe three Regiments (efpecially the two firft) made a gallant refiftance and in killed, wounded and Prifoners muft have loft near 500 Men upwards of one hundred of them were left dead in the Field, and with what I have with me, and what was taken in purfuit, and carried acrofs the Delaware, there are near 300 Prifoners, 14 of wch. are Officers, all Britifh.

This piece of good fortune, is counterballanced by the lofs of the brave and

worthy Genl. Mercer [Cols Hazlet and Potter, Captn. Neal of the Artillery, Captn. Fleming, who commanded the 1st Virginia Regiment and four and five] and several other valuable Officers who [with 25 or 30 Privates] were slain in the Field and have since died of their Wounds. Our whole loss cannot be ascertained, as many who were in pursuit of the Enemy (who were chased three or four Miles) are not yet come in. Our Slain in the Field was about 30.

The rear of the Enemy's army laying at Maidenhead (not more than five or Six Miles from Princeton) were up with us before our pursuit was over, but as I had the precaution to destroy the Bridge over Stony Brooke (about half a Mile from the Field of Action) they were so long retarded there, as to give us time to move off in good order for this place. We took two Brass Field pieces from them, but for want of Horses could not bring them off. We also took some Blankets, Shoes, and a few other trifling Articles, Burnt the Hay and destroyed such other things as the Shortness of the time would admit of.

The British (and some of the American participants) gave an account of the action that was a bit different from Washington's view, and with different figures for the losses they sustained. General Washington failed to mention the fact that Mercer's troops, weary and tired from the march from Trenton, and the lack of sleep for nearly two days, broke and fled almost as soon as the British emerged from the woods and opened fire. Mercer's troops were the first of the Patriot units to come in contact with the British. The British troops under Mawhood were just leaving the vicinity of the town as Mercer's nearly four hundred men appeared. They aligned themselves along a rail fence, which glistened with hoarfrost, like everything else in the morning sun; from there delivered the first volley. The British returned the volley and immediately charged against the Patriot line with bayonets on the ends of their muskets. General Hugh Mercer was mortally wounded in the first volley from the enemy. He was on foot and trying to rally his men when all of a sudden he was surrounded by a number of the redcoats. He was knocked to the ground from behind and then

repeatedly stabbed with the bayonets. Mercer's men fled before the onslaught.

The Pennsylvania Militia under the command of Colonel Cadwalader, likewise, failed to hold against the bayonet charges of the redcoats. Only when General Washington, himself, arrived on the scene of the battle, did the Patriots rally. Supported by the fire of two pieces of artillery, Colonel Daniel Hitchcock's brigade held the front line as other units closed in on the British flanks.

Initiating a last valiant bayonet charge, Mawhood was able to break through the Patriot line toward the south, and so effected an escape to Trenton.

The Americans pursued the fleeing British troops southward for a distance of several miles. It was said that Washington exclaimed, "It is a fine fox chase, my boys!" as the British troops fled from the field of battle. The Patriots captured roughly fifty prisoners in the chase.

In his letter to Lord George Germain, General Howe stated:

Lieutenant colonel Mawhood, not being apprehensive of the enemy's strength, attacked and beat back the troops that first presented themselves to him, but finding them at length very superior to him in numbers, he pushed forward with the 17th regiment, and joined brigadier general Leflie. The 55th regiment retired, by the way of Hillsborough to Brunswick, and the enemy proceeding immediately to Princeton, the 40th regiment also retired to Brunswick. The loss upon this occasion to his majesty's troops is 17 killed, and nearly 200 wounded and missing.

Washington turned his attention to the 55th and 40th regiments which had headed north toward Brunswick. As the Americans closed on them, some of the British troops from those fleeing regiments attempted to take a stand at Nassau Hall, a large stone structure in the town of Princeton, which housed the College. Nearly two hundred of the redcoats barricaded themselves in the building. Two rounds of artillery fire shot into the structure by Captain Alexander Hamilton's troops brought about a quick capitulation of the British troops.

The battle of Princeton lasted less than an hour, but it has been said to have been one of the most savage of the entire war.

In the end, the Americans were found to have lost twenty-three killed and twenty wounded. The British sustained twenty-eight deaths, fifty-eight wounded and 323 taken prisoner.

George Washington confided to the Continental Congress that his original intent, when he set out from Trenton, was to make Brunswick his ultimate destination, but the *"harrafsed State of our own Troops...and the danger of loofing the advantage we had gained by aiming at too much..."* caused him to change his mind. A conference with his officers resulted in the decision to pull back. He regretted having done so, though, because he believed that if he had pursued the British he would have been able to have *"defstroyed all their Stores, and Magazines; taken (as we have fince learnt) their Military Cheft containing 70,000£*

and put an end to the War." No one would ever know if that would have been true.

Assuming that Cornwallis will attempt to arrive at Brunswick to engage them there, General Washington led his Patriot troops instead to Morristown. The army made camp at Pluckemin, New Jersey over the 4th and 5th of January. Cornwallis, true to Washington's assumption, arrived at Brunswick on the morning of the 4th. He had led his men on an all night march, at one point having to ford the chest-deep water of Stony Brook because the Patriots had destroyed the bridge.

The American Army settled into winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey on 06 January. From that position, Washington would be able to keep watch on the enemy movements in and out of New York and guard the roads that connected New England to Philadelphia. On that same day, Patriot detachments captured the British outposts stationed near the villages of Hackensack and Elizabethtown. The British hold on New Jersey was finally ended. As one British officer noted, they had been *"boxed about in Jerfey as if we had no feelings"*. As the main part of the British army made its way to its own winter quarters at New York City, the only region they still held in the Jerseys consisted of a few square mile area encompassing the towns of Amboy and Brunswick. The British quartered roughly 5,000 troops at each location.

This chronology of the American Revolutionary War will be continued in a future newsletter.

Blair County Chapter Calendar ~ 2002

- Mar 2 1st Quarterly Meeting - Kings Restaurant, 3000 6th Ave., Altoona
- May 3-4 PASSAR Annual Meeting - Ramada Inn, Rt 220, Plank Rd Exit, Altoona
- Jun 1 2nd Quarterly Meeting - Kings Restaurant
- Aug 17 3rd Quarterly Meeting - Kings Restaurant
- Sep 14 Constitution Day Dinner - (location to be announced)
- Nov 16 4th Quarterly/ Annual Meeting - Kings Restaurant

*Note - There will be no George Washington's Birthday Dinner this year.