A NEWLY DISCOVERED LETTER OF
BRIGADIER-GENERAL DUPORTAIL

Introduction and Translation
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MUCH of the correspondence of Brigadier-General Louis Lebègue Duportail (who as founder and first commandant of the engineer corps of the American army, 1777-1783, planned the defenses at Valley Forge) with Washington and other American officials, is now rather well known. On the other hand, his despatches to the French Minister of War, Comte de St. Germain, have been considered lost. While searching through volumes of miscellaneous colonial military correspondence for the Revolutionary period in the Public Record Office, London, the writer of this introduction recently came across a copy of a letter from Duportail to the Comte de St. Germain, dated at Washington’s camp near Philadelphia, which gives new and interesting information on some of the ideas of this officer whom Washington esteemed highly, as his advice did so much to make possible the final success of the American army.

One of Benjamin Franklin’s first official acts upon his arrival in Paris in December 1776 was to inform the Comte de St. Germain that the Continental Congress was anxious to secure the services of several skilled military engineers for the American army. As the French government had already adopted the policy

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1 Elizabeth S. Kite, Brigadier-General Louis Lebègue Duportail, 1777-83 (Baltimore, 1933), p. 59. This writer states: “These letters have not been preserved. In writing to his successor, the Prince de Montbarey, August 10, 1778, Duportail says: ‘I have reason to fear that neither you, Monseigneur, nor your predecessor, M. de St. Germain, have seen the letters or memorials and plans of battles I have had the honor of addressing to both of you, conformably to the orders given me by M. de St. Germain to relate to him all that took place under my observation and add thereto my remarks. Probably the vessels which carried my despatches have been captured, or if not, as I always required the word of honor of those to whom I entrusted them to throw them into the sea in the event of an untoward encounter, perhaps as soon as they perceived a vessel, whether hostile or friendly, they may have begun by getting rid of my package.'”

2 Colonial Office Papers, 5:2.
of permitting secret aid to the colonies, Germain's approval was readily given. The minister made known to Duportail that a request for permission to serve with the American army would be favorably received by the king and his ministers. Early in January, Duportail chose three engineer officers of lesser rank, and the four, having been granted a furlough for two years from February 1, 1777, set sail secretly from France in March, arriving in Philadelphia in July.

The jealousy of colonial army men for high ranking French officers created a difficult situation in the early days of the war, and for several months Congress kept Duportail and his three companions waiting before settling the question as to their pay or a command. Toward the end of the summer Duportail was made first commandant of the newly formed engineer corps with the rank of colonel. He joined Washington on the eve of the battle of Germantown. Washington very quickly formed a high opinion of the military skill of Duportail, and recommended that he be given the rank of brigadier-general, in order to clothe him with the requisite authority to enable the engineer corps to function properly, as officers below the rank of generals were loath to follow Duportail's advice on fortifications. Congress was slow, and Duportail, evidently annoyed, presented a memorial to that body asking for the promotion. This petition was read in Congress November 13, 1777. Congress then acted quickly, and four days later Duportail was raised to the rank of brigadier-general. After serving as commandant of engineers with distinction until the end of the war, he returned to France in 1783 and served with the French army until the early days of the French Revolution.

In 1790 Duportail was made Minister of War. As his policies were seemingly approved neither by the Revolutionaries nor the Royalists he became unpopular and was finally "condemned by accusation" in August 1792. He made his escape and fled to America. For the next ten years he lived the peaceful life of a gentleman farmer on his farm at Valley Forge, and then in response to Napoleon's call for the return of emigré officers, he set sail from Philadelphia for France in 1802, but died on the passage over.
LETTER OF BRIGADIER-GENERAL DUPORTAIL

"Copy of a letter from Monsr. Duportail, a French engineer in the service of the rebels in North America to Monsr. Le Comte de St. Germain, Minister in the War Department at the court of France, dated at Washington's Camp, twelve miles from Philadelphia.

"12 November 1777."

"MONSIGNEUR:

"I had the honor of giving you an account of the battles of Brandywine and Germantown and of sending the plans with that of Philadelphia and the country around about for five leagues, so that you could form an opinion of the predicament of General Howe; I hope that you have received all of these papers.

"Up to the present, General Howe has not taken the forts on the river which prevent vessels from reaching the city and which compel him to communicate only by the little road that I marked on the map and which we could easily cut this winter when we have received a reinforcement of victorious troops from the north. We expect to strike a blow on the other side of the Schuylkill; there are already some troops in the Jerseys, on the left bank of the Delaware river; so General Howe will be obliged to remain in Philadelphia and run great risk of famine. But in truth we do not expect so much.

"He will surely take the forts if he makes a determined attack, and then he will have a sure communication with his fleet. You see, Monseigneur, that for men who have suffered two defeats, we are not in too bad a position, which we owe to the fact that the English have few cavalry and cannot follow up their victories, and still more to our forests, and to obstacles of all kinds by which this country is defended.

"Now it is quite natural, after the experience of this campaign, to ask oneself: 'Will the Americans succeed in gaining their freedom, or not?' In France, without doubt, one can hardly judge only by that which has happened. They will decide in the affirmative, but as for us, who have witnessed everything it is another affair. It is necessary to speak plainly. It is not the good conduct of the Americans which won for them a campaign which on the whole has been so happy; it is rather the mistakes of the English. It was an enormous error for the British government to order General Burgoyne to traverse more than 200 leagues of a

\[\text{\textcopyright } \text{The date is evidently the copyist's error and should be November 17, 1777.}\]
country bristling with obstacles, almost desert, and consequently of no use to take, and that merely in order to join Generals Howe and Clinton in the center of the country. This project might seem very magnificent in the bureaus of London, but for those who know the country, it was very defective. This opinion of mine does not come after the event; you remember perhaps, Monseigneur, that I was greatly pleased with the English for opposing us here with only 10,000 men; that I greatly hoped that General Burgoyne would only arrive here when the campaign would be possible no longer; that his army would be cut in half by hunger, misery, desertion, daily losses on the journey, and our militia, scattered in the woods on his route, and fighting thus in the fashion which is peculiar to them. The result was more successful than I had hoped.

"If the English, instead of making so many diversions, which were all to the detriment of the principal action, had opposed General Washington with about 20,000 men, I do not know exactly what would have become of us. Because, for us, in doubling our army we do not double its strength by a great deal, rather do we triple our difficulty. So much for the plan of this campaign.

"If we consider next the conduct of General Howe, we shall see that he has not done that which he could have done, as I had the honor of informing you after the battle of Brandywine. If the English had followed up their advantage, there would no longer be any question of the army of Washington; and since then, General Howe has conducted all his operations with a slowness, a timidity, which astonishes me every day. But it is necessary to bethink oneself—they can send another general, and then we shall not find ourselves so well off.

"However, events which depend on the ability of generals (a thing impossible to anticipate) must not be considered in our speculations for the future. Having regard only to the number of troops, I believe that if the English could have 30,000 effectives here, they would reduce the country. A second thing that could hasten this reduction, and even bring it about almost alone, is the lack of munitions of war. They are in want of nearly everything here. Another thing, they must have cloth, sheets, leather, rope, salt, brandy, and sugar, etc. These last articles are more important than one would at first suppose.

"Before the war, the Americans, although ignorant of luxury,
had an abundance of everything necessary for a comfortable and agreeable life. Not having much to do they passed a great deal of the day in smoking and drinking spiritous liquors or tea; that is the fashion of the people here. It is, therefore, much against its will that this people finds itself transformed suddenly into a war-like people and reduced to lead a hard and an irregular life. Moreover, they generally detest war. Also it is easy to see that if their privations increase to a certain point, they will prefer the yoke of England to a liberty which costs them the comforts of life.

"This language astonishes you, Monseigneur—such is, however, this people. It is soft, without energy, without vigor, without passion for a cause that it sustains only because it is natural for it to follow for a long time a movement which one has given it. There is a hundred times more enthusiasm for this revolution in a single cafe in Paris than in all the united colonies.

"It is necessary, therefore, that France, if she wishes to assist this revolution, furnish the people with everything that they need and not experience too great privations—it will cost France several millions, but it will be amply repaid by the destruction of the maritime power of England, which having no more colonies, will soon have no marine. Her commerce in consequence will pass to France, which will no longer have a rival among the European powers.

"However, some people have maintained that France has no interest in the English colonies forming a free state—that we would soon run the risk of losing our own colonies; but for one who knows this country, it is evident that it would take several centuries for it to be able to send a fleet to make conquests. And long before that, the jealousies of one province for another (of which one already sees the germ) will have divided it into several states which no one will fear.

"One might ask, that in order to terminate the American Revolution sooner, would it not be better for France to make a treaty with the United States, and by mutual consent with them send 12 or 15,000 men? This would be the best way to ruin everything. This people here, although at war with England, hate the French more than they do the English, (we prove it every day)." Duportail to the President of Congress, read in Congress November 13, 1777. Elizabeth S. Kite, Brigadier-General Louis Lebègue Duportail, 1777-83, p. 33.
spite of all that France has done and will do for them, they would prefer to become reconciled with their former brothers, than to have among them crowds of men that they fear more. For if they would consent in a moment, the natural antipathy soon breaking out would hatch the most fatal quarrels.

"There is still a project to examine, in case France will be forced to make war openly on England, could she not in concert with Congress, seek to conquer Canada? According to the observations of the preceding subject, there is a likelihood that Congress will decidedly reject such an arrangement; the proximity of the French would suffice to disgust them with becoming free, because they would not expect to remain so for long. Dependence for dependence, they prefer that of England.

"If France does not declare war on England, she must so manage it, by all the means that statecraft employs, that the English cannot have more than 25 to 30,000 men at most. The United States of America have hardly an advantage in this campaign. General Washington has never more than 15,000, General Gates 10,000 and General Putnam 5 or 6,000. Perhaps they can augment the total by a quarter.

"Here, Monseigneur, is more than you perhaps desired of me. But pardon all the dissertations to the wish to fulfill at least your desires, and to render my sojourn here useful to my country if it is possible.

"I am with very perfect respect Monseigneur,

"Your very humble and very obedient servant

"DU PORTAIL."

"P. S. Congress has just raised me to the rank of Brig. Gen."