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"THE HIGH WATER MARK OF THE BRITISH INVASION."

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[Address delivered on September 21, 1907, before the Pennsylvania Society Sons of the Revolution, the Burgess, Council, and Citizens, at the intersection of Nutt's Road and Bridge street, Phoenixville, Chester County, Penna., on the unveiling of the memorial stone erected to mark the farthest inland point of invasion in Pennsylvania, by the British army, September 21, 1777.]

We meet here to-day upon the outer edge of the classic region of America. On the battle-field of Gettysburg the Government of the United States has erected an elaborately inscribed memorial to mark the farthest northward surge of the waves of rebellion. In like manner the borough of Phoenixville has here set up this stone of native granite from the shores of the French Creek to designate the westernmost inland point reached by the main army of British invaders during the Revolutionary war, in the times that tried men's souls. Philadelphia was then the metropolis and capital city of the country, the centre of its literature, science, and cultivation, as well as of its trade and wealth. In that city had met the preliminary Congress of 1774, and there, in the most memorable of American buildings, the state house of the Province, the Continental Congress had in 1776 issued the fateful Declaration of Independence, and in 1777 were holding their daily sessions. The purpose of the Campaign of 1777, with its many battles and its long and rapid marches, was upon the part of Howe to capture, and upon the part of Washington to protect, the city of Philadelphia. Both of the contestants were of the opinion that the outcome of this campaign would in all probability determine the result of the war. On the one side it was believed, and on the other it was feared, that the fall of Philadelphia would lead to a cessation of hostilities and to the restoration
of British control over the Colonies. Howe took his army by sea to the Chesapeake Bay, and on the 25th of August landed at the head of the Elk River. On the 5th of September, Washington, then at Wilmington, said to his soldiers:

"Should they push their designs against Philadelphia, on this route, their all is at stake. They will put the contest on the event of a single battle. If they are overthrown they are utterly undone. The war is at an end. Now, then, is the time for our most strenuous endeavors. One bold stroke will free the land from rapine, devastations and burnings, and female innocence from brutal lust and violence."

On the 11th, the two armies met at Chadd's Ford on the Brandywine Creek, and the Americans were defeated. Howe reported to his superiors at home: "The enemy's army escaped a total overthrow that must have been the consequence of an hour's more daylight;" and Washington, having retreated across the river to Germantown, on the 13th, consoled his soldiers as best he could by saying:

"The General has the pleasure to inform the troops that notwithstanding we gave the enemy the ground, the purchase has been at (the cost of) much blood, this being by far the greatest loss they ever met with since the commencement of the war."

The armies encountered each other again on the 16th, near the Warren Tavern, and a decisive engagement was anticipated, but a heavy rainstorm wet the ammunition and separated the combatants. Twenty-one Americans were killed, forty-three were taken prisoners, and many were wounded. It was the opinion of the Baron De Kalb that since the British were separated and the Americans united, Washington on this occasion lost a great opportunity.

Into the battle, Isaac Anderson, a young Lieutenant then seventeen years of age, and afterward a member of Congress from this district, whose name heads the list of those who voted in favor of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, led a
company of men from this neighborhood. They lay in the Warren Tavern through the night of the 15th, and in the morning were stationed on the left of the army, on the South Valley Hill. It now became the object of Washington to prevent Howe from crossing the river, and that same night he withdrew his army to the Yellow Springs. At this place he issued an order that the loads were to be drawn from the guns, "but if they cannot be drawn, they are to remain loaded, for not one gun is to be fired in order to clean it. The General desires the officers to pay the most particular attention to these orders. Not only their own safety, but the salvation of the country may depend thereon." From there he marched to Parker's Ford, on the Schuylkill, where in the earlier day Edward Parker had established a landing for the iron from Coventry and Warwick, to be carried in boats down to Philadelphia. Sheeder, in his MS. history of Vincent, upon the authority of Judge John Ralston, who acted as guide, says that Washington came from the Yellow Springs to the General Pike, a few hundred yards above where we now are, and thence turned northward on Nutt's road. If this statement be correct, it establishes the interesting fact that both armies were at this place within three days of each other. The meeting between Washington and Ralston is very graphically depicted in the quaint and uncouth language of Sheeder, who says:

"Now I shall proceed to make some remarks of which I never seen any mention of on record which is concerning g. Washington and John Ralston Esq. deceased. Of the later the writer was for 25 years an near neighbor of intimate entercourse. He a many times related to me when the conversation on the Revolutionary (war) was the subject, that when g. Washington was about leaving the Springs he made inquiries of how and who he could get with sufficient trust to guide him to Reading. Captain John Ralston was recommended to him to be such a one. He the General wrote a few lines, sent one of his officers to induce Captain John Ralston to appear before him. The captain was for
making some excuses but the request was so pressing that he must go with the bearer. * * His good conscience cheered him as he had done no wrong to his country and had acted the part of a good patriot and with this animation got to his usual vivacity, and when arrived at the general’s quarters he was introduced to G. Washington by saying ‘here is Captain John Ralston.’ The general at this time was sitting at the Table writing, but immediately got on his feet and walking back and forwards in his room making inquiries how far he lived from the Springs, and how far his father lived from there, and how they all were, and where he had been born, and the captain had answered all of these questions, the next was ‘are you acquainted with the roads in these parts?’ When the general put this last question he made a halt before the captain where he had been requested to take a seat and staring the captain in the face. Then the captain used to say that then his heart beat faster than at any time before, looking at this monstrous big man. The captain replied ‘yea.’ Then he was asked if he knew such and such a road that the general made mention. The captain said ‘no’ he knew of none by that name. Like lightning he clapt his hand in his pocket, drew out a book with the maps in. (In all this the captain knew nothing of the general’s design. Here whenever the captain related this circumstance he made the same motion as the general did when he clapt his hand to his pocket) and looking for the road he entented to know of the captain and then said ‘the Ridge road leading by Brumbach’s church.’ The captain answered ‘yes’ he was well acquainted with (it). Then said the general by laying his hand on the captain’s shoulder ‘You must be my pilot to Reading’ and not till then the captain’s heart ceased beating and the general ordered him to be ready at such an hour tomorrow and appear at his room. The captain done as ordered and the line of march was commenced from the Springs to Kimberton road, then to down Branson’s road to where now the General Pike is where this and the Schuylkill road forks to git across
French creek bridge as there was no stone bridge known of far and near at them times. Then up the Ridge road."

After again crossing the river to the east bank, Washington marched down and encamped upon both sides of the Perkiomen at its mouth, watching the different fords below. From the French Creek he sent Wayne with a division of fifteen hundred men to the rear of the British to harass them. This plan which separated his army resulted disastrously since Gen. Grey, with a force double in number, fell upon Wayne on the night of the 20th, at Paoli, and defeated him with serious loss. Thereupon Howe turned his back upon Philadelphia and marched northward, having in view, it may be, the stores accumulated at Reading, the more shallow fords further up the river, or more probably only intending a deceptive manoeuvre.

At 2 P. M. on the 19th, the column of Lord Cornwallis encamped at the Bull Tavern. On the 21st, of which day we are now celebrating the one hundred and thirtieth anniversary, Howe marched up Nutt’s road, and the left wing of the army reached the point where this stone is erected. Howe says:

"On the 21st the army moved by Valley Forge and encamped upon the banks of the Schuylkill, extending from Fatland ford to the French Creek."

This general description did not quite hold out at either end. Major John André, who later met so sad a fate, kept a journal, and it fortunately happens that he prepared a careful plan of the location of the army along Nutt’s road. He says they covered an extent of three miles from Fatland ford to "some distance beyond Moore Hall."

Howe’s headquarters were at the house of William Grimes, on the high ground near the Bull Tavern. The first brigade were upon the east side of the road, about a mile above the Valley Forge. Then came the second brigade on the west side of the road. The fourth brigade were on the high ground on the east side, overlooking the river back of the Bull. The third brigade were on the west side of the
road on land of Matthias Pennypacker, still owned by some of his great grandchildren, opposite the present hamlet of the Corner Stores. Gen. Grey, the victor at Paoli the night before, had his quarters at a house at the southwest corner of the White Horse Road and Nutt's Road. The 2nd Regiment of Light Infantry and the Hessians under General Stern were here.

The Hessian General Knyphausen had his quarters at the house of Frederick Buzzard, on the west side of the road above the Corner Stores. Elizabeth Rossiter, a daughter of Moses Coates, who lived on Main street west of Nutt's road, gave in 1841, when eighty-five years of age, this description of their approach:

"The first that I saw of the British was the evening after the massacre at Paoli. Four girls of us were out walking in the road opposite to father's close by Polly Buckwalter's lane, when accosted by three men sitting on their horses near by us. They said 'Girls, you had better go home.' We asked 'Why?' 'Because the English regulars are coming up the road.' At this moment two more Americans came riding up the road at full speed and announced that the army was just behind. We looked down the road and saw them in great numbers opposite Becky Lynch's. The army encamped the whole way from Valley Forge to Mason's Hill by the tavern."

André says that large bodies of the Americans were seen on the opposite shore and that they frequently fired on the sentries. That same night Washington hastened to Potts Grove twelve miles further up the river.

At that time the rules of warfare were more lax than they are at present and the British occupation resulted in much destruction of property and violence to persons, and it caused the greatest consternation among the inhabitants. The Valley forge and Col. Wm. Dewees' mill at that place were burned, the powder mill on the French Creek near here where Peter Dehaven was making powder for the Continental army was destroyed, and at Matthias Pennypacker's
mill on the Pickering, after all the grain and flour had been taken, the soldiers broke up the machinery and cut the bolting cloths into pieces. Upon all sides it was a scene of plunder. Patrick Anderson at that time had a company in the Continental army and his family abandoned their home and fled for safety, with a team of oxen, horses and provisions to a lonely place in the woods along Stony Run. In their absence the British destroyed the furniture and carried away property valued at £303. 3s. 6d., including 11 cows, 7 other cattle, 40 sheep, 10 swine, 19 geese, 6 turkeys and 96 chickens.

The family of Edward Lane lived in a Conestoga wagon in the woods near Diamond Rock for several days. The beds in the house were ripped open and everything about was destroyed. A daughter of Moses Coates related in 1841:

“No sooner were they encamped than they began to plunder the surrounding country. They came in great numbers to my father’s, carrying away potatoes, fowls, hay, and every thing they could make use of. A flock of geese in the yard was taken from the door. A Hessian taking one by the neck and holding it up before us said ‘Dis bees good for de Hessian mans,’ when Elizabeth told him she hoped he would choke on the bones.”

William Fussell then lived here in a house later converted into the Fountain Inn. It was thoroughly ransacked. His wife thinking to save some bed curtains wrapped them about her person and covered them with her dress, but some Hessian women, of keen vision, without any ceremony, threw her down on the floor and unwound the coils.

The house of Benjamin Boyer had been stripped of everything of value. Some of the family then carried the hives of bees inside, and putting them in the room in the west end of the first floor covered them with a sheet. An intruder appeared, and demanding to know what was there concealed, was informed they were bees. Not to be deceived by what seemed to be so plain a subterfuge, he jerked off
the sheet and was severely stung by the already disturbed and enraged insects. This story was told of no less important a person than Lord Cornwallis.

Joseph Starr accused of being a spy was placed in confinement and very much abused, but was soon afterward released.

Most of the young women secreted themselves and kept out of the way, but the three sisters of a farmer living within half a mile of this point, whose name I forbear to give, were dragged to the camp and outrageously maltreated.

A son of Moses Coates, then a mere youth, owned a horse which was stolen from the pasture field by some of the British. The young man went to headquarters and upon asking to see the general in command was met with derisive smiles. He however insisted and was finally ushered into the presence of Howe. There he was questioned and told that he could have his horse if he would cross the Schuylkill and report the location and condition of the American army. The proposition was enforced by an offer of six guineas in addition. He indignantly declined the suggestion, and after it had been found that he could not be prevailed upon to serve their purposes, he was given permission to search for his horse and take it away. That this family were held in high favor by the American officers appears from a letter to Col. Thomas Bradford dated Moore Hall, May 19th 1778, and published in the Lee papers which says:

"Col. Biddle mentions to me Mr. Moses Coates about a mile from hence just back of his quarters where there is a good house and agreeable family with every convenient accommodation and will probably suit you both at least equally well with your present situation."

At this time there was living in a cave in the hill just below the Pennsylvania railroad station in the present village of Mont Clare a man named Patrick Gordon, who had been a tenant under the Penns since 1761, and the ford across the Schuylkill where is now the bridge at the terminus of Bridge Street became known as Gordon's Ford. As such it is
famous in the history of the Revolution since here for the first time the British were able to cross the river. Col. John Montresor, Howe's Chief of Engineers, writes in his journal on the 22nd:

"At 5 this morning the Hessian Grenadiers passed the Schuylkill at Gordon's Ford under fire of their artillery and small arms and returned back being intended as a feint."

He further tells us on the 21st "A bridge was ordered to be made across the Schuylkill at this place (Moore Hall) where the river is 120 yards and got in great forwardness intending to deceive the enemy."

André says on the 22nd:

"In the evening the Guards passed the river at Fatland Ford and the Hessian Chasseurs and some grenadiers passed at some distance above Moore Hall. Some light dragoons crossed at dusk at Long Ford. The guns of the Hessians and those of the third brigade fired a few shot across the river opposite their encampment to deceive the enemy with respect to the ford at which it was intended the army should pass."

The firing of cannon therefore extended from here to the Corner Stores and the balls were shot over what is now South Phoenixville. The Long Ford at which the light dragoons crossed is where the White Horse Road passing through the Corner Stores reaches the river.

Howe in his report says:

"On the 22nd the grenadiers and light infantry of the guards crossed over in the afternoon at Fatland Ford to take post, and the Chasseurs crossing soon after at Gordon's Ford opposite to the left of the line took post there also. The army was put in motion at midnight, the vanguard being led by Lord Cornwallis, and the whole crossed the river at Fatland Ford without opposition."

It is plain from the stories of the treatment of Starr and Coates and from other traditions that the British were eager to find local guides who were familiar with the country and ords, and that they had difficulty in securing them. In the vol. xxxi.—26
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early morning Cornwallis and his staff came riding across the fields toward Gordon’s Ford and at the residence of Thomas Robinson they called the old man and told him they wanted him to point out the location of the ford. He declined, but when they threatened compulsion he put on his broad brimmed hat and went along determined to be of as little use as possible. They were on horseback, he was on foot and he was soon lagging far in the rear, with slow gait and tardy steps. When Cornwallis reached the crest of the hill near the Starr farm house he turned to ask some questions and found that his guide was almost out of sight. An aide hurried him up to the general who threatened and swore furiously. Just then however the balls from across the river began to whistle about them distracting the attention of Cornwallis, and Robinson taking advantage of the opportunity briskly disappeared. The wing of the army which crossed at Fatland Ford took with them a son of Edward Lane as a guide. To all questions put to him he answered in a silly way “I don’t know” and they dismissed him as either stupid or obstinate. They then compelled Jacob Richardson to conduct them across the river and he went with them to Philadelphia, and he there remained, afraid to return. During the following winter he one day saw an American officer of some prominence disguised as a Quaker farmer selling provisions in the market. He told the officer he was known and in danger and he aided him to escape. On arriving at Valley Forge, the officer detailed the circumstances and made a certificate of the attachment to the American cause of Richardson who then came back to his home. It appears of record officially that he was proclaimed as a tory and afterward discharged.

To protect the crossing at Gordon’s Ford the British planted a battery on the high ground on the Starr farm and from it they fired at least three shots one of which struck the corner of the farm house in Mont Clare removed by Joseph Whitaker about forty years ago. The crossing was not accomplished without some sacrifice. A Briton and his
horse were shot and killed under the buttonwood trees still standing where the roads to Norristown and Port Providence intersect in Mont Clare. The man was carried away but the horse lay there for several days afterward. A rifleman concealed on the island shot a British officer just as he was about to enter the water at the ford. He fell and was taken back to the house of John Allen on the south side of Bridge Street where in a short time he died. He was buried in the Starr burying ground directly in the angle at the north east corner of Main and Church Streets.

John Keiter born at Skippack then lived at the Rhoades farm house on the north bank of the French Creek, and he went over the hill toward the mouth of the creek to watch the army. A Hessian raising his piece fired at him and the ball struck a tree near the river. The tree with its bullet hole stood until a comparatively recent period.

A squad of the British stopped at Gordon’s cave, and there found a goose roasting on the fire. While they were busy having a rich feast, they were abandoned by their comrades and were captured by a body of American militia who had come down from the hills to follow in the rear of the enemy.

While there is some difference in the contemporary statements as to the exact time when the main army crossed the river, Howe and Montresor agree that it began after midnight on the morning of the 23rd and according to Howe it ended at 2 o’clock in the afternoon when Major General Grant with the rear guard and the baggage reached the further shore. Sergeant Thomas Sullivan of the 49th regiment of foot in his journal makes the same statement. The country they had left was a scene of desolation. The fences had been torn down and burned, the corn in the fields had been beaten to the ground by the feet of horses and men, and what was left of the hay and straw from the barns lay in the mud of the deserted encampments. The two wings of the army came together at Bean’s tavern on the Manatawny Road and after stopping “to dry themselves and rest” they went on their way toward Philadelphia.
And what in the meantime was Washington doing, and what did he think of these occurrences? This is what he wrote from Pott’s Grove to the President of Congress on the 23rd.

"The enemy by a variety of perplexing manoeuvres through a country from which I could not derive the least intelligence being to a man disaffected, contrived to pass the Schuylkill last night at the Fatland half a mile below Valley Forge, and other fords in the neighborhood."

It is rather remarkable that the day before Montresor, the British engineer, had written exactly the opposite statement of fact and used the same word saying:

"Inhabitants many about Moore Hall fled, being disaffected."

Gen. John Armstrong wrote to President Wharton from the Trappe a day or two later:

"A feint of the enemy in rapidly moving a part of their body up the Schuylkill by French Creek led the General to apprehend they designed to cross above us and turn our right wing. To prevent this he marched high on this side on the Swamp Road when the same night or next morning they crossed at Fatland Ford. * * So that before full intelligence of their crossing came to head quarters, or rather before it gained credit, they were thought in council to be at too great a distance to be harassed in the rear by fatigued troops."

Upon Friday the 26th of September a cold rough windy day about ten o'clock in the morning fifteen hundred of the British and Hessian grenadiers under the command of Lord Cornwallis, Sir William Erskine and Commissary General Wier, led by Col. Harcourt and his light dragoons, with a band of music playing "God Save the King," marched in triumph into Philadelphia. On the same day, almost at the same instant of time Washington and the Continental army went into camp at Pennypacker's Mills. The campaign which had been believed to be fraught with consequences so momentous had ended with Howe in possession of the
city and Washington out upon the hills of the Perkiomen.

The revolutionary war was brought to a successful conclusion not by the display of exceptional military skill or by brilliant successes upon fields of battle, but by the firmness and undaunted persistence of Washington, supported by a steadfast people. Had they been shaken by the clamor which arose against him at the close of the unsuccessful campaign of 1777, culminating in the efforts of Conway in the army, and certain members of the Congress, to remove him from his command, the colonies would probably have remained in the condition of Canada and South Africa.

Every age is confronted with its own dangers, and there is a lesson in the result of the Revolutionary War and in the conduct of our forefathers of that time amid trying difficulties, to which we may well give heed today. Mommsen wrote of the Celts that they have been "Good soldiers but bad citizens," and that they "have shaken all states and have founded none." The cause is to be seen in that weakness of character which led them to strike at every man who rose above the level of the mass, and therefore brought about internal dissension thwarting every important effort. So long as we cherish the virtues which conduce to self respect, to confidence in and support of those whom we select to administer our affairs, and to faith in our system of government, our institutions are safe, both against assault and disintegration, while the loss of these virtues will be the premonitory symptom of the fate that befell Assyria and Rome.