

THE
Pennsylvania
Magazine
OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

*A Projected British Attack Upon
Philadelphia in 1781**

THE vicinity of Philadelphia was the scene of some bitter fighting during the summer and fall of 1777. The fighting died down during the following winter, but the Philadelphia area continued to suffer from requisitions made by the opposing armies. The ravaged countryside was finally relieved of the strain of supporting thousands of hungry soldiers when Sir Henry Clinton's British and German troops marched away toward New York in June, 1778, with Washington's Continentals in close pursuit. However, the departure of the armies did not result in a resumption of prosperity; on the contrary, Philadelphia continued to suffer from economic inflation, due partly to wartime conditions which were general throughout North America and partly to the blockade maintained at the mouth of the Delaware River by ships of the royal navy. Moreover, Philadelphia remained in danger as long as the British military and naval forces retained strength and mobility enough to be able to make an attack upon the city.

It is interesting to know that carefully considered plans for a raid upon Philadelphia were drawn up at General Clinton's headquarters

* The author is indebted to the Lehigh University Institute of Research for a grant-in-aid which has helped to make this study possible.

in New York in the summer of 1781.¹ Although the raid never took place, General Clinton was prevented from ordering its execution only because of circumstances which were beyond his control. He had planned to commit several regiments from the New York garrison and several more from Lord Cornwallis' army in Virginia to the attack.² Cornwallis became an unwitting benefactor of Philadelphia, however, by declining to send the reinforcement to New York which his commander in chief had requested.

In the first three months of 1781, before an attack upon Philadelphia was under serious consideration, the principal British offensive effort was made by Cornwallis' army in the South. Some 3,500 British troops advanced into North Carolina intent upon conquering that state and driving out or destroying the small force of Continentals and militia commanded by generals Nathanael Greene and Daniel Morgan.³ The British onslaught was blunted by the loss of nearly eight hundred men in the engagement at Cowpens on January 17.⁴ Nevertheless, Cornwallis ordered the remainder of his troops to advance. The British soldiers fought and floundered for three hundred miles through rain, swollen streams, and the thick red mud of the North Carolina back country to the banks of the Dan River. General Greene retreated skillfully until his army had received considerable reinforcements; then he advanced against his erstwhile pursuers with the intention of forcing a battle upon them. The battle took place near Guilford Court House on March 15 and the British won control of a few acres of wooded hills at a cost of 532 killed and wounded from an effective strength of a little more than 1,900 officers

¹ Sir Henry Clinton (1738?-1795) was commander in chief of the British army in North America from May, 1778, until May, 1782.

² Charles, first Marquis and second Earl, Cornwallis (1738-1805) was in command of the British army in the South from June, 1780, until his surrender at Yorktown in October, 1781. Lord Cornwallis was second in command to Sir Henry Clinton and had been chosen to become commander in chief in case of the latter's death or retirement.

³ Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene (1742-1786) was appointed to command the American army in the South in October, 1780. He served in the Carolinas from December, 1780, until the end of the war. Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan (1736-1802) served under Greene until he was forced into retirement in February, 1781, because of illness.

⁴ Morgan to Greene, Jan. 19, 1781, Papers of George Washington, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress. See also Cornwallis to Clinton, Jan. 18, 1781, in Benjamin F. Stevens, ed., *The Campaign in Virginia, 1781* (London, 1888), I, 318-321.

and men.⁵ After his "victory" at Guilford, Cornwallis was obliged to withdraw to the seaport of Wilmington.⁶ His army was burdened by hundreds of sick and wounded, and his total force was reduced to about half the strength which it had had at the beginning of January.⁷

While Cornwallis' army was being worn down by combat and hardships, Lord George Germain in London was dreaming of victories. Lord George was the member of the cabinet who was primarily responsible for the conduct of the war in America.⁸ He had drawn up a plan of campaign which called for the retaking of all the colonies south of Virginia, and, finally, for an invasion of Virginia itself.⁹ Cornwallis' army was to be the principal instrument of victory, but it was to be aided by an amphibious force operating in the Chesapeake. The project looked highly promising to Lord George, but Sir Henry Clinton was inclined to be far less optimistic about it. Nevertheless, Sir Henry had hopes, in March, 1781, that Cornwallis' army would succeed in conquering North Carolina. Clinton wrote to Cornwallis in that month that there was a good possibility that "rebellion" might be given a "mortal stab" before the end of the year if a "proper reinforcement" of 10,000 men should be received soon from the British Isles.¹⁰ He added that it would be essential to the success of the campaign that the royal navy should maintain "a permanent superiority at sea."¹¹

While still ignorant of the failure of the British offensive in North Carolina, Sir Henry sent Major General William Phillips to Virginia

⁵ "Field Return of the Troops under the Command of Lieutenant General Earl Cornwallis in the Action at Guilford, 15th. March, 1781," and "Return of the Killed, Wounded, and Missing of the Troops under the Command of Lieut. Genl. Earl Cornwallis in the Action at Guilford, 15th. March, 1781," in the Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library.

⁶ Cornwallis to Clinton, Apr. 10 and 18, 1781, in Stevens, I, 395-399, 414-416.

⁷ "State of the *Troops* that marched with the Army under the Command of Lieutenant-General Earl Cornwallis," *ibid.*, I, 376. Not counting officers and sergeants, Cornwallis had 3,224 men under his command on Jan. 15, 1781; by Apr. 1, he had only 1,723 men remaining.

⁸ George Sackville, first Viscount Sackville (1716-1785), assumed the title, Lord George Germain, in 1770. He was Secretary of State for the colonies from 1775 until the downfall of Lord North's ministry in 1782.

⁹ Germain to Clinton, Oct. 4 and Nov. 9, 1780, and Jan. 3, Feb. 7, Mar. 7, and May 2, 1781, Clinton Papers. See in particular the letter of May 2 which appears in Stevens, I, 464-470.

¹⁰ Clinton to Cornwallis, Mar. 2, 5, and 8, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 342-343.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

with a corps of 2,355 troops.¹² Phillips' corps absorbed the 1,500 officers and men who were stationed at Portsmouth under command of Brigadier General Benedict Arnold. The combined force was under orders to facilitate the operations of Cornwallis' army by destroying various arsenals and supply depots in Virginia.¹³ However, Phillips was not ready to go into action until the beginning of April, and, by that time, the British offensive in North Carolina had collapsed. Cornwallis rested and regrouped his soldiers at Wilmington in April, and then prepared to march into Virginia in order to make a junction with Phillips' corps. Sir Henry Clinton was quite upset when he received word of his subordinate's decision,¹⁴ for he considered it Cornwallis' first duty to safeguard his bases and outposts in South Carolina. Cornwallis, however, had arrived in Virginia before his commander in chief's words of censure and advice reached him. By that time, General Greene's army had invaded South Carolina and had forced the British to evacuate their base at Camden after an indecisive engagement had been fought at Hobkirk's Hill.¹⁵ In a few weeks' time, detachments from Greene's army had captured half a dozen British outposts and had taken about 1,000 British and Loyalist prisoners of war.

When news of the disasters in the Carolinas and of Cornwallis' march to Virginia reached him, Sir Henry Clinton had to formulate a new plan of campaign. He had to face the fact that the invasion of North Carolina had been a costly failure. Also, his reinforcements from Europe had not arrived, and he had no definite word of when they would arrive. However, he could count upon the garrisons of Charleston and Savannah to defend themselves against General Greene's ragged and ill-equipped little army. He could also count upon the use of the army in Virginia, an army which numbered more than 5,000 officers and men after the arrival in Virginia of the remnants

¹² "Embarkation Return of the following Corps under Command of Major General Phillips, New York, 6th. March, 1781," Clinton Papers.

¹³ Clinton to Phillips, Mar. 10, 1781, in Stevens, I, 347-350.

¹⁴ Cornwallis to Clinton, Apr. 23, 1781, and Clinton to Cornwallis, May 29, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 424-425, 493-498. See also Cornwallis to Germain, Apr. 23, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 420-422.

¹⁵ Greene's army was checked in the action at Hobkirk's Hill, Apr. 25, 1781, but the British evacuated Camden on May 10. See Greene to Baron von Steuben, Apr. 27, 1781, Steuben Papers, New-York Historical Society; and Greene to the President of Congress (Samuel Huntington), May 14, 1781, Papers of George Washington.

of the force which had invaded North Carolina. The troops in Virginia could be used for offensive operations anywhere in the Chesapeake, or they could be embarked for New York to be used for an invasion of New Jersey or an attack along the banks of the Hudson River.

Assuming that British naval superiority could be maintained, General Clinton believed that he had two courses of action from which to make a choice.¹⁶ He could launch an attack upon the American forts in the highlands along the Hudson, as Benedict Arnold had urged him to do, or he could follow the advice of General Phillips who had urged that an attack should be made upon Annapolis and Baltimore. Of the two possibilities, the latter appeared to Sir Henry to be the more practicable.¹⁷ Clinton feared that General Arnold had probably underestimated the strength of the American forts on the Hudson and he was reluctant to attack them. On the other hand, he had received intelligence that Baltimore, Annapolis, and, also, Philadelphia, were not strongly garrisoned and that there were very few regular troops stationed in the vicinity of any of those cities. Indeed, the only force of Continentals available in Maryland was a corps of some 1,500 men under command of the young Marquis de Lafayette.¹⁸ The British army in Virginia outnumbered Lafayette's corps by about three to one, and General Clinton was in a position to send 2,000 or 3,000 reinforcements to the Chesapeake at a moment's notice. Under these circumstances, Clinton decided to postpone an assault upon the forts on the Hudson and to attempt an offensive in the Chesapeake.

In mid-April, before a full report of British misfortunes in North Carolina had reached him, Sir Henry wrote to Lord Cornwallis suggesting that the latter might take a frigate to the Chesapeake and put himself at the head of the army which was being gathered there.¹⁹ Cornwallis was requested to bring with him such troops as could be

¹⁶ Clinton to Germain, Apr. 5 and 20, 1781, in Stevens, I, 383-391.

¹⁷ Clinton to Phillips, Apr. 26, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 430-435; Clinton to Germain, Apr. 23 and 30 and May 1, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 458-462.

¹⁸ Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), was a major general in American service. The most readable and authoritative account of Lafayette's campaigns in Maryland and Virginia is to be found in chapters IX-XIII of Louis Gottschalk, *Lafayette and the Close of the American Revolution* (Chicago, 1942).

¹⁹ Clinton to Cornwallis, Apr. 13, 1781, in Stevens, I, 405-407.

spared from his army in North Carolina. Meanwhile, General Phillips had been given orders to make haste in striking a series of blows at American arsenals, bases, and lines of communication in Virginia.²⁰ Assuming that the campaign in North Carolina was going well—which it was not—Clinton hoped that a powerful British offensive could be launched in Virginia or Maryland before the end of May.

By the end of April, General Clinton had received word of the retreat of Lord Cornwallis' army to Wilmington. The British commander in chief realized at once that his plans for future operations in the Chesapeake had been dealt a severe blow.²¹ However, he was determined to strike at his enemies during the spring or summer. Lord George Germain had rebuked him for his inactivity since the capture of Charleston in May, 1780, and Clinton knew that he could not long continue to retain his command unless he used some part of his 12,000 troops in New York and 5,000 in the Chesapeake to make an attack upon the Americans or their French allies. Therefore, despite the bad news which had reached him concerning the campaign in North Carolina, he persisted in his efforts to plan and prepare for an attack upon Baltimore or Philadelphia.

Preliminary plans for an attack upon one or the other of the two cities had been discussed by Clinton and Phillips before the departure of the latter for the Chesapeake in March. Additional proposals for such an attack had been made in a joint letter of Phillips and Arnold on April 18.²² General Clinton had replied at the end of April and had shown very warm interest in their suggestions. However, Clinton estimated that 14,000 to 15,000 men would be needed to make the attack if initial successes were to be followed up by the occupation of conquered territory. He believed that only 4,000 to 5,000 men could possibly be spared from New York and Virginia to participate in the operation. This being the situation, he foresaw no immediate possibility of being able to carry out a conquest of the area bordering upon the Delaware and the Chesapeake, but he hoped that it would be possible to send a raiding force into that part of the country to destroy arsenals, magazines, and shipping.²³

²⁰ Clinton to Phillips, Apr. 11, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 401-405.

²¹ Clinton to Phillips, Apr. 30, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 450-455.

²² Phillips and Arnold to Clinton, Apr. 18, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 411-412.

²³ Clinton to Phillips, Apr. 26, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 430-435.

Meanwhile, General Clinton's morale had sunk to a very low point. He was disturbed by the unfavorable outcome of the invasion of North Carolina, and he was depressed because he had been rebuked by Lord George Germain for failing to carry out operations in Virginia as vigorously as the ministers in London had desired. Moreover, he was particularly vexed because of the continued presence upon the North American station of an admiral whose removal he had requested many months before. Relations between the general and admiral had so deteriorated that the former finally threatened to resign his command if the removal of the latter did not take place soon.²⁴

Despite his preoccupation with the problem of the unwanted admiral, General Clinton found time to continue to formulate various projects for an attack upon Baltimore or Philadelphia. He had at his disposal the advice of his generals and staff officers, his own knowledge of the Philadelphia area based upon his experiences there in 1777-1778, and intelligence furnished to him by Loyalists who had escaped from behind the enemy's lines. Colonel William Rankin was foremost among Clinton's Loyalist advisers. Rankin, a native of York County, had organized a secret "Association" of Pennsylvania Tories during the years 1778-1781.²⁵ He had been apprehended and imprisoned in March, 1781, but had escaped from the York jail shortly thereafter and had made his way to New York. He had assured General Clinton that "thousands" of Pennsylvania Loyalists were ready to rise in support of the British cause as soon as an army could be sent to assist them.²⁶

General Clinton knew from many unhappy experiences that performances often fell far short of promises made by Tory leaders. However, Colonel Rankin impressed him favorably, and he wrote to his superiors in London, on April 30, that he believed that the "experiment" of an invasion of "the districts bordering on the upper Chesapeake" might lead to the winning of important victories if the courage and zeal of the Tories of that area proved to be equal to the

²⁴ Clinton to Germain, Apr. 30, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 446-450.

²⁵ Memorial of Col. William Rankin to the commissioners appointed by Parliament to investigate losses of American Loyalists, 1781?, Clinton Papers.

²⁶ Rankin to Clinton, May 20, 1780, *ibid.*; see also the mention made of Rankin's assurances and advice in letters of Clinton to Phillips, Apr. 30 and May 3, 1781, in Stevens, I, 452, 454.

claims made by their leaders.²⁷ By May 3, Clinton had become so convinced of the practicability of the projected raid into Maryland and Pennsylvania that he decided to disclose his plans to General Phillips in order to obtain the latter's criticism and advice.²⁸

Before Sir Henry's letter came to his attention, General Phillips had been stricken by illness which resulted in his death at Petersburg on May 13. Shortly thereafter, Cornwallis arrived in Virginia and took command of all the British troops who were stationed there. Cornwallis replied, late in May, to Clinton's letter to Phillips, and took it upon himself to find fault with his commander in chief's plans. He expressed doubt that the support of the Pennsylvania Loyalists would measure up to the promises made by Rankin. Similar promises had been made to Cornwallis concerning Loyalist support in North Carolina, but his army had received far less than the promised aid. Moreover, the earl thought that an advance upon Philadelphia would require a larger army than could be gathered for that purpose. Finally, he rebuked his chief for using Colonel Rankin's name in his letter to Phillips; in his reply, Cornwallis referred to Rankin under the code name of "Alexander."²⁹

May and early June slipped away without any action on General Clinton's part while he awaited letters from Phillips and Cornwallis. He complained, in a letter of May 13 to Germain, that he had not heard any word from Cornwallis in more than a month.³⁰ By May 20, he was considerably alarmed by news of General Greene's advance into South Carolina, and, despite the welcome news that Greene's army had been checked in the action at Hobkirk's Hill, he was afraid that a number of the British outposts in South Carolina and Georgia would be captured.³¹ He was shocked when he received Cornwallis' letter of May 20 telling of the latter's arrival in Virginia after a long, hard march from North Carolina. He wrote a letter to the earl rebuking him for marching away from his bases in South Carolina instead of retiring to cover them against the attacks of Greene's

²⁷ Clinton to Germain, Apr. 30, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 460-462.

²⁸ Clinton to Phillips, Apr. 30 and May 3, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 452-454.

²⁹ Cornwallis to Clinton, May 26, 1781, *ibid.*, I, 487-491.

³⁰ Clinton to Germain, May 13, 1781, Clinton Papers.

³¹ Clinton to Germain, May 20, 1781, in Stevens, I, 474-475. See also Clinton to Germain, May 18, 1781, Clinton Papers.

determined army.³² However, Clinton had to accept the situation which had been thrust upon him, and he ordered his ambitious subordinate to strengthen his base in Virginia and to carry out a series of raiding expeditions against American supply depots.

Sir Henry Clinton's fears about the military situation in the South were disturbing enough to give him sleepless nights, but news of an even more alarming nature was soon to reach him. Letters which had been intercepted from the enemy contained the unwelcome intelligence that the Comte de Grasse would bring a fleet to the coast of North America to join the French Rhode Island squadron in an attempt to blockade New York.³³ The intercepted letters made it clear that Washington was planning to concentrate a powerful force of French troops, Continentals, and New England militia for a siege of New York and its outposts. Such an attack could prove fatal to the British military position in North America, and Sir Henry lost no time in sending off a request to the admiral in charge of the British navy in the West Indies to send a fleet superior to that of Admiral de Grasse in pursuit of the French as soon as their ships sailed for North America.

Despite his apprehensions concerning a forthcoming Franco-American attack upon New York, General Clinton continued to make preparations for an attack into the Delaware or the upper Chesapeake. He hoped that Cornwallis would be able to strike a major blow against the small corps of Continentals which were stationed in Maryland. A victory over the troops commanded by the Marquis de Lafayette would serve to clear the way for an immediate attack upon Baltimore or Annapolis. However, if such an attack had not been attempted or was not about to be launched, Clinton requested that Cornwallis would send him 3,000 of his best troops to participate in a raid upon Philadelphia.³⁴

While awaiting the arrival of reinforcements from Virginia, Clinton drew up detailed plans for the projected attack. He hoped to be able to add several thousand men from his army at New York to the

³² Clinton to Cornwallis, May 29, 1781, in Stevens, I, 493-498.

³³ Clinton to Germain, June 9, 1781, Clinton Papers. François Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse (1723-1788), commanded the French fleet which sailed from the West Indies to the Chesapeake in August, 1781. Clinton consistently spelled his name "Le Grasse."

³⁴ Clinton to Cornwallis, in Stevens, II, 18-23.

3,000 who were to be sent from Virginia. Admiral Graves had promised to furnish a naval convoy to protect the expedition when it was ready to set sail from New York.³⁵ Lieutenant General James Robertson was to be in command of the expeditionary force of 5,000 or 6,000 officers and men. He was to disembark his troops at or near Chester, Pennsylvania, and to lead them in a forced march toward Philadelphia.³⁶ Since Washington's army, reinforced by about 4,000 French soldiers, was concentrated near New York, no serious resistance was anticipated. The attackers were expected to be able to storm the redoubts which defended the city, and to seize the public stores, magazines, arsenals, and shipping. Demolition squads were then to fire or otherwise destroy systematically all of the public stores and shipping. However, Sir Henry's plan of attack specifically forbade destruction of private property and ordered that sentries be stationed to prevent looting. Care was to be taken to tow the shipping away from wharves to prevent flames from leaping from the ships to the homes of peaceful inhabitants, many of whom were regarded as "friends" to the British cause.³⁷

When the task of destruction had been completed, the raiding force was expected to withdraw quickly to Chester. Redoubts were to have been prepared at key points along the line of march to forestall any effective pursuit by the Americans. Finally, since the raiding force was considered to be too weak to hold Philadelphia permanently, local Loyalists were to be warned to make no effort to stage an uprising. However, such Loyalists as should seek to join the King's troops were to be allowed to accompany them upon their return to New York.³⁸

Had the projected raid been carried out, it is probable that the British would have encountered only slight opposition. The circle of redoubts around the city was too extensive to have been defended successfully by the local militia and the handful of Continentals who constituted the garrison. Reinforcements would have had to come

³⁵ Thomas Graves, Baron Graves (1725?-1802), commanded the British fleet in North American waters from July to November, 1781.

³⁶ The details of the proposed raid upon Philadelphia are to be found in an undated set of instructions from Clinton to Robertson, Clinton Papers. The instructions were probably drawn up early in June, but may possibly have been prepared before the end of May.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

from Washington's army when word was received that General Robertson's corps had landed at Chester. However, any reinforcements which Washington might have decided to send would have had to march for ten days to reach Philadelphia from their encampment north of Manhattan Island. The American commander in chief and the Comte de Rochambeau had agreed in a conference held at Wethersfield, Connecticut, on May 22, to concentrate their combined forces against the British posts in and around New York.³⁹ Upon learning that the French fleet on the West Indian station would be sent to North America during the summer, Washington had hoped to be able to besiege New York by land and sea. As early as July 1, some of the French troops who had marched from Rhode Island were in such close proximity to the American army that Washington was able to count upon their support for an assault which was to have been delivered against several forts on Manhattan Island.⁴⁰ Although the projected attack had to be countermanded because of defensive measures taken by the British, future attacks were rendered possible by the junction of Comte de Rochambeau's army with the American army on the fifth and sixth days of July.⁴¹ From that time forward until the departure of the Franco-American army upon its long journey to Yorktown, the main allied army in North America was concentrated a few miles from New York City. There is no hint in Washington's correspondence of June and July, 1781, that he had forseen a British raid upon Philadelphia; on the contrary, he had actually weakened the garrison of the city at that time by ordering a battalion of invalid Continental soldiers to be transferred to West Point.⁴²

Fortunately for the peace and prosperity of Philadelphia, the

³⁹ Washington to the Chevalier de la Luzerne, May 23, 1781, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of George Washington* (Washington, 1931-1944), XXII, 103-104; minutes of the conference with Comte de Rochambeau, *ibid.*, 105-107; Washington to the President of Congress (Samuel Huntington), May 27, 1781, *ibid.*, 119-122; Washington to Lafayette, May 31, 1781, *ibid.*, 143-144; Washington to Greene, June 1, 1781, *ibid.*, 146-147.

⁴⁰ Washington to Rochambeau, June 30, July 1 and 3, 1781, *ibid.*, XXII, 293-295, 306-308, 324-325; Washington to Huntington, July 4, 1781, *ibid.*, 329-331.

⁴¹ Washington's "General Orders," July 6, 1781, *ibid.*, XXII, 332-333. Appropriately enough, the "parole" for the day was "Lewis the sixteenth," and the countersigns, "Luzerne" and "Rochambeau."

⁴² Washington to Huntington, May 27, 1781, *ibid.*, XXII, 121; Washington to Maj. Gen. William Heath, June 20, 1781, *ibid.*, 236-239.

projected attack did not take place. General Clinton's careful plans were suspended because Cornwallis declined to send the reinforcements which Clinton had requested. Cornwallis wanted to carry out offensive operations in Virginia rather than in Maryland and Pennsylvania. His attention was absorbed by the movements of the Marquis de Lafayette's Continentals with whom Cornwallis' troops collided in a spirited but indecisive action on July 6 at Green Spring on the James River.⁴³ After the action, Cornwallis changed his mind and wrote that he would send the Light Infantry, nearly 1,000 strong, to New York at the first opportunity.⁴⁴ He complained that the low country of Virginia was unhealthful during the summer months, and recommended that the bulk of the troops in Virginia be sent to New York as quickly as possible. Thus, at the beginning of July, Cornwallis appeared to be ready to comply with his chief's request for reinforcements.

However, as July wore away, the earl continued to retain all of the regiments which constituted his army in Virginia, and kept his troops occupied in carrying out a series of raids against American supply bases. Meanwhile, General Clinton waited impatiently for the arrival of reinforcements. His hopes were dashed completely when he received Cornwallis' letter of July 27 which informed him that no troops could be spared from Virginia until a post in that state had been so strongly fortified that it would be secure against any Franco-American attack short of a siege operation.⁴⁵ Cornwallis explained that his base at Portsmouth was too extensive to be defended by the force which would be left under his command after he had sent 3,000 of his best troops to the northward. He added that he felt that he had no choice but to establish a new and stronger post at Yorktown and Gloucester, and in order to do so he would have to retain his entire force until the new defensive works had been completed.⁴⁶ Cornwallis

⁴³ Cornwallis to Clinton, July 8, 1781, in Stevens, II, 58-59; "Return of the Killed, Wounded, & Missing . . . in the Action of the 6th. July, '81," Clinton Papers. See Charles E. Hatch, Jr., "The 'Affair Near James Island' (or 'The Battle of Green Spring') July 6, 1781," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LIII (1945), 172-196.

⁴⁴ Cornwallis to Clinton, July 8, 1781, in Stevens, II, 56-57.

⁴⁵ Cornwallis to Clinton, July 27, 1781, *ibid.*, II, 104-108.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Clinton had reinforced Cornwallis' army until there were more than 7,000 British officers and men in Virginia at the beginning of July. See "State of the Troops in Virginia under the Command of Lieut. General Earl Cornwallis, 1st. July, 1781," Clinton Papers.

had, perhaps deliberately, misinterpreted his commander in chief's instructions. He had given top priority to the establishing of a permanent base in Virginia, when it had been Sir Henry's intention that the sending of reinforcements to New York should have been regarded as the object of highest importance.

By August 12, Cornwallis reported to his chief that he had transferred half of his troops to Yorktown and Gloucester, where they were busily engaged in the erection of fortifications.⁴⁷ He promised to send to New York every man he could spare as soon as the evacuation of Portsmouth had been completed and the post at Yorktown-Gloucester was strong enough to be defended successfully against any attempt to take it by storm. However, he indicated in mid-August that he would have to retain all the troops under his command until his new defensive works had been completed.⁴⁸ He added that he thought it would be more important to attempt an offensive in Virginia in October than to make an incursion into the Delaware or the Upper Chesapeake. Finally, he expressed the hope that General Clinton would lead in person any major expedition which might be sent toward Philadelphia. It is clear that Cornwallis had little interest or confidence in the scheme for an attack upon Philadelphia and that he sought every possible excuse to keep his troops under his own control.

Cornwallis' obstinacy in pursuing his own aims in Virginia spoiled Sir Henry Clinton's plans. The latter waited impatiently for reinforcements to arrive from Virginia, but nothing was forthcoming from that quarter except letters explaining why no troops could be sent to New York for weeks to come. Meanwhile, the long-awaited reinforcements from Europe were also delayed. Some British regiments from Ireland reached North America early in June, but they arrived at Charleston rather than at New York, and Lord Rawdon retained them in South Carolina to afford relief to the fort at Ninety-Six which was besieged by General Greene.⁴⁹ Some 2,600 German troops finally reached New York on August 11, but more than 400

⁴⁷ Cornwallis to Clinton, Aug. 12, 1781, in Stevens, II, 124-125.

⁴⁸ Cornwallis to Clinton, Aug. 16 and 20, 1781, *ibid.*, II, 126-128, 130-136.

⁴⁹ The reinforcement which was received at Charleston numbered 2,319 officers and men, including sixty men who were sick. "State of the British Regts. arrived from Corke under the Command of Col. Paston Gould, Charles Town, June 6th., 1781," Clinton Papers.

of them were suffering from scurvy and many of the remainder were weak as a result of the hardships of a long voyage from an embarkation point near Bremen to New York by a northerly route which had carried them past the extremity of Scotland.⁵⁰ No fewer than sixty-six of the hapless mercenaries had perished during the trans-Atlantic ordeal!

Before the belated arrival of the Hessians, the British commander in chief had given up all hope of being able to send a raiding force to destroy the arsenals and magazines of Philadelphia.⁵¹ He had hoped to have been able to launch the projected attack in June, but June had come and gone without any reinforcements from Virginia or from Europe reaching New York. By the end of July, General Clinton felt obliged to abandon his hoped-for attack upon Philadelphia for fear of utter disaster if Admiral de Grasse's fleet should arrive on the coast of North America before the British raiding expedition had returned from the Delaware.⁵² He anticipated in July that New York itself would soon be under attack, and by August 9, he was worried about the prospect of having to stand a siege.⁵³ The moment for an offensive against Baltimore or Philadelphia had slipped away, and the British forces were thrown upon the defensive during the rest of the campaign. The arrival of Admiral de Grasse's fleet upon the coast of North America at the end of August then enabled the Franco-American army to undertake offensive operations which resulted in the capture of the British army in Virginia.⁵⁴

Had Sir Henry Clinton's plans of May and June been put into effect, it is probable that a major blow could have been dealt the American cause by the destruction of the public stores at Philadelphia. The city could hardly have been defended successfully by its garrison of militiamen. Had there been a raid upon Philadelphia, and had it met determined resistance, it is possible that the city, as well

⁵⁰ Clinton to Germain, Aug. 20, 1781, *ibid.* For a return of the number of troops disembarked and of the casualties suffered during the voyage, see Oliver DeLancey's "State of the German Troops as Disembarked at New York, 11th. August, 1781," *ibid.*

⁵¹ Clinton to Germain, July 13, 1781, *ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*; see also Clinton to Germain, July 18 and 25, 1781, in Stevens, II, 82-87, 91-95.

⁵³ Clinton to Germain, July 28, 1781, Clinton Papers, and Aug. 9, 1781, in Stevens, II, 120-122.

⁵⁴ For an excellent analysis of the strategy of the Yorktown operations, see William B. Willcox, "The British Road to Yorktown: A Study in Divided Command," *American Historical Review*, LII (1946), 1-35.

as the public stores, would have been destroyed during the fighting. The example of the burning of New London in September, 1781, may serve to illustrate the possible fate of Philadelphia under such circumstances. It should be remembered that Brigadier General Benedict Arnold's raiding force had instructions to destroy only the fortifications, the public stores, and the shipping at New London. Arnold's troops encountered unexpectedly heavy resistance, however, and in the heat and confusion of action, the British soldiers failed to tow some of the ships in the harbor far enough away from the wharves before putting the torch to them. In consequence, flames from the burning ships leaped to the wharves and houses of the town, and the heart of New London was reduced to ashes in a few hours.⁵⁵ The tragic destruction of the Connecticut town might well have been duplicated at Philadelphia, but, fortunately for the inhabitants of the latter city, Cornwallis' delay—which amounted to a refusal—in sending reinforcements to New York prevented the raid from being attempted. Moreover, the earl's stubborn retention of his army in Virginia gave generals Washington and Rochambeau and Admiral de Grasse a chance to make a splendid bag of prisoners at Yorktown and Gloucester in October, 1781.⁵⁶

Lehigh University

GEORGE W. KYTE

⁵⁵ Arnold to Clinton, Sept. 8, 1781, printed in Rivington's *Royal Gazette* (N. Y.), Sept. 19, 1781.

⁵⁶ More than 7,000 British officers and men, including Lord Cornwallis, surrendered at Yorktown. For a return of the prisoners, see "State of the Army in Virginia under the Command of Lieut. Genl. Earl Cornwallis, October 19, 1781," Clinton Papers.