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WASHINGTON AND HIS ARMY

at ACQUACKANONK:

AN INCIDENT OF THE RETREAT OF 'SEVENTY-SIX.

An Address delivered at Passaic, New Jersey, October 18, 1901, on the occasion of the unveiling of a Monument commemorating the Crossing of the Passaic River at Acquackanonk by Washington and his Army, on November 21-22, 1776.

By WILLIAM NELSON.

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The Retreat of 'Seventy-six—one of the darkest chapters in the annals of the American Revolution—has been described again and again, in the pages of the historian, the poet, the orator and the novelist. Tom Paine accompanied the army from the Hudson to the Delaware, and has given us one of the most vivid accounts of the sufferings of the gallant little band of heroes. His summing up sounded as a bugle-call to the American patriots:

"These are the times that try men's souls."

After the battles of Long Island (August 27, 1776), and White Plains (Oct. 28, 1776), Washington concluded that the British were planning the invasion of New Jersey, and ordered reinforcements to Fort Lee. To protect his retreat, and also to check the approach of the enemy from the South, Gen. Nathanael Greene, commanding at Fort Lee, ordered troops to Acquackanonk. "That is an important post," he wrote to Gen. Washington on November 9; "I am fortifying it as fast as possible." That very day Gen. Mercer marched

through Acquackanonk to reinforce Gen. Greene. It was an historic day for the little village, as it marked the appearance here of the first considerable body of soldiery—the first wave of that tide destined to ebb and flow along the River Road during the next seven years—now the Buff and Blue, now the brilliant Red-coats, and now the forbidding Hessians, to say nothing of the nondescript desperadoes ever ready to prey upon friend or foe.

Major General the Earl of Stirling crossed the Hudson on Nov. 10, to interpose his tried and true brigade between New Brunswick and Philadelphia, and passed through Acquackanonk probably on the 14th, with eight regiments of foot.

Washington himself arrived at Fort Lee three days later.

The British crossed the North river at Closter on the night of the 19th, Gen. Lord Cornwallis landing six or eight thousand men.

Washington had already ordered the removal of the stores and munitions of Fort Lee to "Acquackanonk Bridge," and other places further South. Gen. Greene now abandoned the

Fort and much of the stores and ordnance, and marched on to Hackensack, six miles distant. The army crossed the Hackensack river and entered the village that night (Nov. 20), the soldiers, many of them "ragged, some without a shoe to their feet, and most of them wrapped in their blankets."

As Washington had been hemmed in between the Hudson and the Hackensack, so now he was between the Hackensack and the Passaic, with an overwhelming force opposed to him. The next morning he wrote to the laggard Gen. Charles Lee: "As this country is almost a dead flatt, we have not an entrenching tool, and not above 3,000 men, and they much broken and dispirited, not only with our ill success, but the loss of their tents and baggage, I must leave a very fine country open to their ravages." To the President of Congress he wrote from Hackensack the same morning, to the same effect.

Then the long-roll was sounded, and the sorrowful retreat was resumed. On the far side of the Hackensack river the British encampment was stretched out in martial array, with

all the insolence of power and the bright panoply of war. On this side, the little band of straggling soldiers, in home-made uniforms or in none, tattered and covered with the grime of the march, plodding along the frosty road, often with bare and bleeding feet.

It was an anxious march that bitter November morning.

Would the Americans reach Acquackanonk bridge before the British? Eagerly they hurried along the lower road from Hackensack, passing through the present Lodi, and so on to the Passaic where now is Garfield, and along the southern bank of the river. Is the bridge still there? And is it in the hands of our friends? What anxiety was theirs! But presently the glad news comes that all is well at the Bridge. A great wave of relief passes from the head of the column to the rear; fife and drum shrill forth a livelier strain, and the men stop and wave lustily as the Bridge comes in sight.

This, the first bridge across the Passaic, had been erected but ten years before, by special act of the Legislature. It was a frail structure,

of wood, of course, with spans eighteen or twenty feet long; the abutments of hewn logs, and the piers of timbers or piles partly resting in cribs filled with stone, and partly driven into the bottom of the river. The width was but twelve feet, just enough for one wagon to cross at a time, or for four men to march abreast. Its location was in the rear of where Speer's warehouse now is. Opposite stood the quaint old octagon-shaped Dutch church, with pyramidal roof, and James Leslie's tavern. A sense of relief is manifest in Washington's letter to Gov. Livingston of New Jersey, dated "Acquackanonk Bridge, 21 November, 1776," and written that morning, in which he says: "I have this moment arrived at this place with General Beall's and General Heard's brigades from Maryland and Jersey, and part of General Ewing's from Pennsylvania. Three other regiments, left to guard the passes upon Hackensack River, and to serve as covering parties, are expected up this evening."

These regiments followed, doubtless crossing the bridge that same night. Who can paint the dramatic spectacle presented in the peace-

ful hamlet at this thrilling invasion of war's
alarums, with the great Washington as the
leader? A Jersey poet once attempted it (in
1839) in lines that have a martial ring:

“Tramp!-Tramp!—Tramp!-Tramp!
‘What flying band with thundering tread
Along the bridge disordered led,
With rapid and alarming stamp
Now hurries o'er the tide?
Waking the pattering echoes far and wide?
On—on they come—tumultuous come!
With rattling arms and clamoring drum:
Till all the wooden arches round
Challenge aloud the intruding sound,
And clank for clank, and stamp for stamp rebound!’
“Thus spake a stranger to the crowd
New-gathered on Passaic's banks,
Drawn by the din of trampling ranks,
Resounding far, and loud.”

The Passaic river was a barrier between
the Americans and the pursuers. Full well
the patriots knew that the British would
speedily follow.

“And if they once may win the bridge”

what hope to save the retreating army? But
when has a free country failed of heroes? When
Washington called for men to cut down the
viaduct crossing the river, that the enemy's ad-
vance might be checked, they were promptly

forthcoming. It was a perilous task. The work once begun must be finished, and thoroughly, even though the enemy might fire on the destroyers. As in the days of grand old Rome, there was a brave Horatius to leap gladly forth at the call of his country. John H. Post, a native of Acquackanonk, and hence familiar with the river and its ways, and with the construction of the bridge, was the leader in the work. He found many a Spurius Lartius, and many a strong Herminius to stand by him.

"And Fathers mixed with Commons
Seized hatchet, bar and crow,
And smote upon the planks above,
And loosed the props below,"

and presently timber after timber was hurled into the river, to be swiftly swept down the stream, until nothing was left of the bridge but a few of the upright piles, and they partly sawed or hewed away.

When a detachment of the Sixteenth Dragons, under the British Colonel Harcourt, with some companies of Light Infantry, arrived at the Passaic river at this place on the afternoon of November 22d, they were chagrined to find the bridge down, and the Americans, protected

by the broad river between, impudently "making some show of opposition."

But Washington was still in danger of being overtaken by Cornwallis, or of being intercepted at New Brunswick by a British advance from New York by way of Perth Amboy. So he resolutely pushed on to Newark, where he arrived on the morning of November 23d.

It was the 26th before the leisurely Cornwallis crossed the river, which he was obliged to ford, just below the Dundee dam, and followed with his pillaging, plundering, destroying hordes, down the Dundee Drive, Lexington avenue, Main avenue and the River road, leaving a trail of desolation behind them.

"See! in dazzling pomp advancing,
Banners flaunting, horses prancing,
Seas of plumes in billows dancing,
And far away the frosty bayonets glancing!
. . . They're gone beyond the hills afar:
Convulsive, faint, no longer shrill,
Along Passaic's lonely brink
Swell the last clarion-notes of passing war,
That heave, and sink—
Heave and sink,
And all again is still!

Such is the story—gleaned exclusively from original, contemporary sources—of the event

commemorated by this beautiful tablet you have set up on this spot.

In these days when there is so strong a tendency to exalt success as the highest aim in life, it seems strange to see a tablet in imperishable bronze erected in memory of a retreat.

In the mad haste for what the world deems success, it is well to pause at times and give thought to what is the true victory, and what leads to it.

In the battle of life we often win more from our losses than from our gains.

I read a poem a few years ago, the first line of which often rings in my ears :

"I sing the song of the vanquished."

In every battle there are the gallant heroes who fall in the ranks or by the wayside, and have no part in the glad plaudits that await the victors. Within a stone's throw of this spot, Washington, in that memorable retreat, passed by a humble cottage, the home of a gallant artillery officer, who six weeks later gave up his life for his country, on the battlefield of Princeton. Some day, no doubt, you will erect a monument to the memory of your fel-

low-townsmen, the only Continental officer from this county who was killed in the Revolution.

I have said that your tablet is unusual in that it commemorates a retreat. And I have said that defeats are often more profitable than victories.

"Men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."

How was it with Washington, as he fled through Acquackanonk, before his threatening foe? From Newark he sped on the morning of November 28th, as the British entered the town from the north. He hurried on to New Brunswick, to Trenton, and across the Delaware.

Now his army had learned the lesson of the vanquished. Before that long march was ended they had gained confidence in themselves. As Tom Paine says: "The sign of fear was not seen in our camp."

Above all, they had learned to know their great Chief, and to know Washington was to trust him, to reverence him. The more he is

studied the more worthy of our admiration does he seem.

So when he planned the night attack on Trenton, his army was ready to follow him, crowded in boats, through the floating ice of the Delaware, amid the fearsome fog, and so achieved that magnificent capture of the Hessian garrison at Trenton on the morning after Christmas, 1776. And a week later, still profiting by the lessons of their defeats and their weary retreat through the Jerseys, they again sent consternation into the ranks of the British, and a glow of enthusiasm throughout America, by the splendid victory at Princeton.

And of these glorious triumphs we may honestly claim that not the least of the chain of events leading up to them was Washington's successful retreat across the Passaic river at Acquackanonk.



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