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NEW YORK STATE LOCAL HISTORY
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BEDFORD CORNERS, BROOKLYN

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NOTE

These leaflets are intended for the boys and girls in our New York schools so that they may come to know something of the sources of the history which they study. It is hoped that the teachers, their pupils and others into whose hands they come will feel encouraged to make suggestions for similar selections, or even themselves prepare material and present it to the Division of Archives and History for editing and publication.

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BEDFORD CORNERS, IN 1776

(Looking east, along the road to Jamaica)

An imaginative illustration which possibly gives a fairly accurate notion of Bedford Corners as it was in 1776. Of this and other illustrations in his book, Doctor Stiles in the preface to the book, *History of Brooklyn*, from which this is taken, says (I:viii): "The illustrations were all carefully drawn (during the summer of 1867) under my personal supervision, from original (where such exist) or from well-authenticated sketches." A long search has failed to get any of the originals or sketches which he used. The illustration is to be found in his work, I:267.

BEDFORD CORNERS

When we cross the busy thoroughfares at the intersection of Bedford avenue and Fulton street, Brooklyn, today, with the honking of automobiles on the streets and the thundering of the elevated trains overhead, there is nothing to remind us of the historic interest of the spot. Yet, here during the Revolution stood the hamlet of Bedford and in this vicinity took place some of the important incidents in the Battle of Long Island in 1776.

Along what is about the line of Fulton street today once lay the Jamaica road, or, as it was sometimes called, "the king's highway." From the ferry over the East river, at the foot of the present Fulton street, the road ran to the village of Brooklyn (in the vicinity of the present Fulton and Hoyt streets), thence to the hamlet of Bedford and so on to Jamaica. At Bedford Corners, the Jamaica road was intersected by a crossroad. One branch of this latter road, the Clove road, stretched in a southerly direction to Flatbush, while the other branch, called the Cripplebush road, went in a northerly direction to Newtown (maps 1 and 2).

The settlement of Bedford seems to have begun in the last years of Governor Stuyvesant's administration (1647-64). As early as 1668 Bedford had an inn. By 1775 Brooklyn "was a pleasant but quiet agricultural town, numbering between three and four thousand inhabitants, who were mostly grouped within three or four hamlets or neighborhoods." One of these hamlets was Bedford, consisting of some scattered farmhouses with their surrounding fields. Not far from Bedford Corners, which was the center of the hamlet, some of the incidents which go to make up the Battle of Long Island took place.

Before we can understand these occurrences, we must get an idea of the events leading to the battle and of the field on which it was fought. Some time after the British were defeated in the vicinity of Boston and at Charleston, South Carolina, large numbers of their troops were landed on Staten Island with the view of attacking New York City. Washington, after his success at Boston, had come down to New York City, and though his army was far inferior in size, discipline and equipment to that of the British, he could not

give up New York without making great efforts to retain it. The heights on the Brooklyn side of the East river were the key to the possession of New York; for if the enemy obtained these heights, it could easily capture New York. Fortifications stretching from Wallabout bay to Gowanus creek were accordingly erected by the Americans. The chief work was Fort Putnam, on the site of the present Fort Greene Park where today the monument in honor of the prison ship martyrs stands.

The Battle of Long Island, however, did not take place along this line of fortifications but farther south along a range of low hills where the Americans had established some outposts. On August 22, 1776, the British, under General Howe, landed at Gravesend bay without meeting any opposition. They thus took possession of the level plain where today is situated south Brooklyn. To get at the American fortifications, Howe's army had to penetrate the long ridge of hills mentioned above, which extended north-easterly from New York bay. These hills were covered with thick woods, making a strong defensive position. Three roads ran through passes in the hills and thence into the Jamaica road: the Gowanus road near the shore, the road from Flatbush, the Clove road which branched off from the Flatbush road and, as we have noted above, met the Jamaica road at Bedford. Along the wooded range of hills, the Americans had about eight hundred men at each of the three passes. This was all that could be spared. Far to the east lay a fourth pass through the hills, the Jamaica pass, near the site of the present Evergreen Cemetery. This pass, because of the lack of troops and particularly of cavalry, was almost unguarded. General Putnam commanded the main forces of the Americans behind the fortifications near the East river, while his subordinate, General Sullivan, had chief command of the outposts stationed at the three passes. The total of the American army on Long Island was about 7000, while the British numbered about 21,000. Having fixed in your mind the relative position of the Jamaica road, the hills south of it, and the roads leading through the hills (map 2), you are prepared to understand what occurred on August 27, 1776, at the Battle of Long Island.

The British found out through Tory sympathizers that the Jamaica pass, far to the east of the American posts, was not guarded. About 9 p. m. of the 26th, about 10,000 men, commanded by Howe, Clinton and Cornwallis, started from Flatlands



SIR WILLIAM HOWE
(1729-1814)

From an engraving by Corbutt, published in 1778. After the mezzotint in the Emmet Collection, New York City Public Library.

He was forty-seven years of age at the time of the episode at Bedford Corners and was commander in chief.

to the south of Flatbush, and making a wide detour, reached the Jamaica pass at 3 a. m. of the 27th. The only American soldiers in the vicinity were several mounted officers sent out to patrol by General Sullivan. These were easily captured. The British then gained the Jamaica road, and, after a brief rest for refreshment, continued on their march to Bedford. The van reached Bedford about 8.30 a. m. of the 27th. Thus "this flanking corps had succeeded in making a slow, difficult and circuitous march of some nine miles from Flatlands during the night and had placed itself directly in the rear of the left of the American outposts, before its approach was known in the Brooklyn camp."

Meantime, the American force at Bedford pass, about halfway between Bedford and Flatbush, were without suspicion that they were trapped. The British now attacked in a southwesterly direction from Bedford (map 2). The Americans turned about to meet the danger, but they were driven back and forced to flee as best they could. Along the Flatbush road, in what is now one corner of Prospect Park, General Sullivan's men were caught between two fires. The Hessians advanced from Flatbush, while the British flanking column threatened the rear. As the "imperilled troops hurried down the rough and densely wooded slope of Mount Prospect, they were met on the open plain of Bedford by the British light infantry and dragoons and hurled back again upon the Hessian bayonets. . . ." Sullivan's men were compelled to give way, many being killed or captured. This exposed the outposts along the Gowanus road to danger. A force of British advancing along this road were attacking the Americans there, while their rear was threatened by the British coming along the Jamaica road. However, through the bravery of Stirling and some of his men, most of the American detachment in this part of the battlefield were enabled to reach the American fortifications in safety.

Thus we see that when the British flanking expedition had reached Bedford, the Americans were as good as defeated, and that of the three scenes of combat which together made up the Battle of Long Island, one was located just to the south and west of Bedford.

The story of how Washington skilfully rescued the American army after the Battle of Long Island does not belong here. It remains, however, to note that during the ensuing years of the war, a number of British soldiers were encamped at Bedford. The

entrance to their camp was situated on what today is Bergen street, near Franklin avenue. In excavating the land in this vicinity in later times, many relics have been found. The headquarters were at the Lefferts House, which stood for many years after at the corner of Fulton avenue and Clove road.¹

¹For books see list in: Channing, Hart and Turner, *Guide to the Study of American History*, p. 305, and more particularly Johnston, H. P., *Campaign of 1776 around New York* (Long Island Historical Society, *Memoirs*, III; pt 2, documents. Pages 139-206 "The Battle of Long Island"). Stiles, H. R., *The History of the City of Brooklyn*. Field, T. W., *Battle of Long Island* (Long Island Historical Society, *Memoirs*, II).



EARL CORNWALLIS

(1738-1805)

From an engraving by C. Knight of a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Published in 1783. After a copy in the Charles S. Mann Collection, New York City.



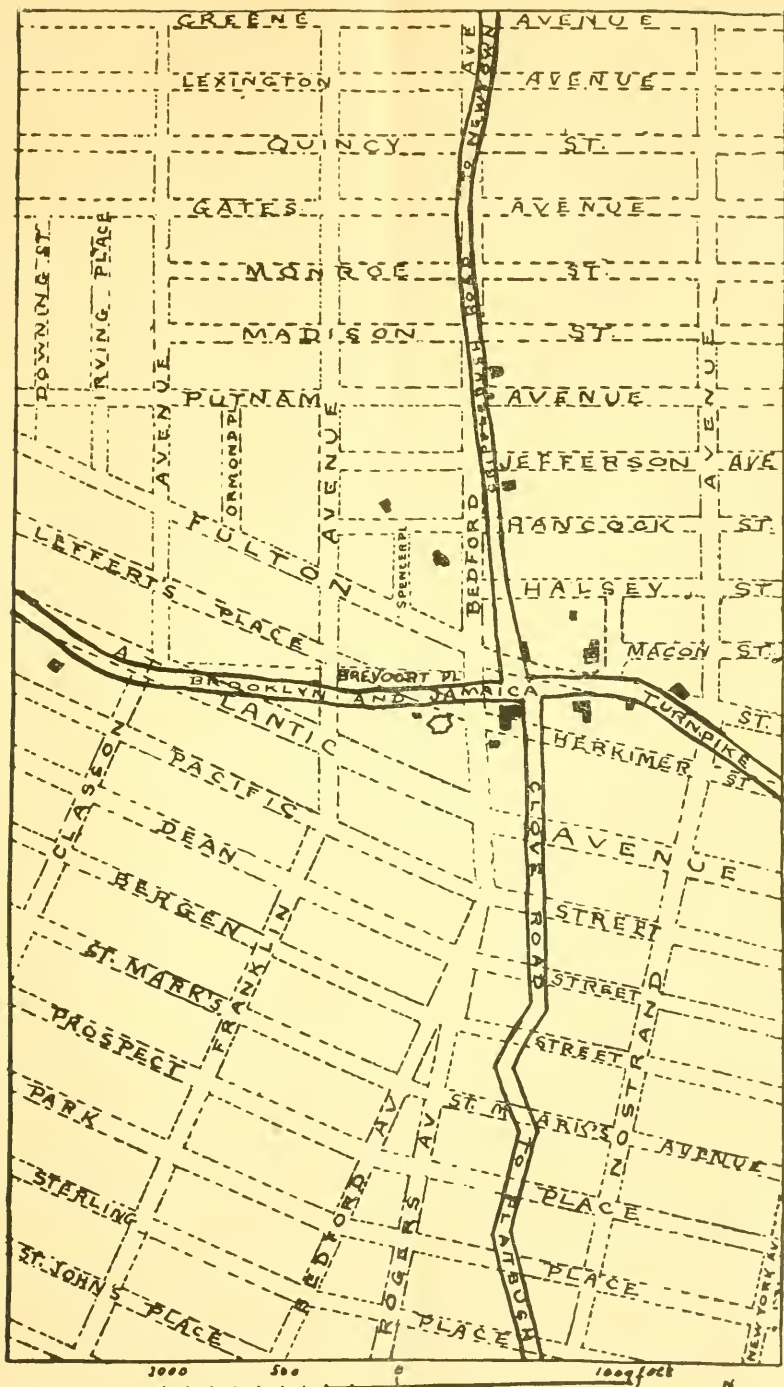
SIR HENRY CLINTON

(c. 1738-1795)

From an engraving by Bartolozzi (?) of a painting by John Smart, 1780. After a copy in the Magazine of American History 10:327.

At the time of the Bedford Corners episode both of these men were major generals and were thirty-eight years of age.

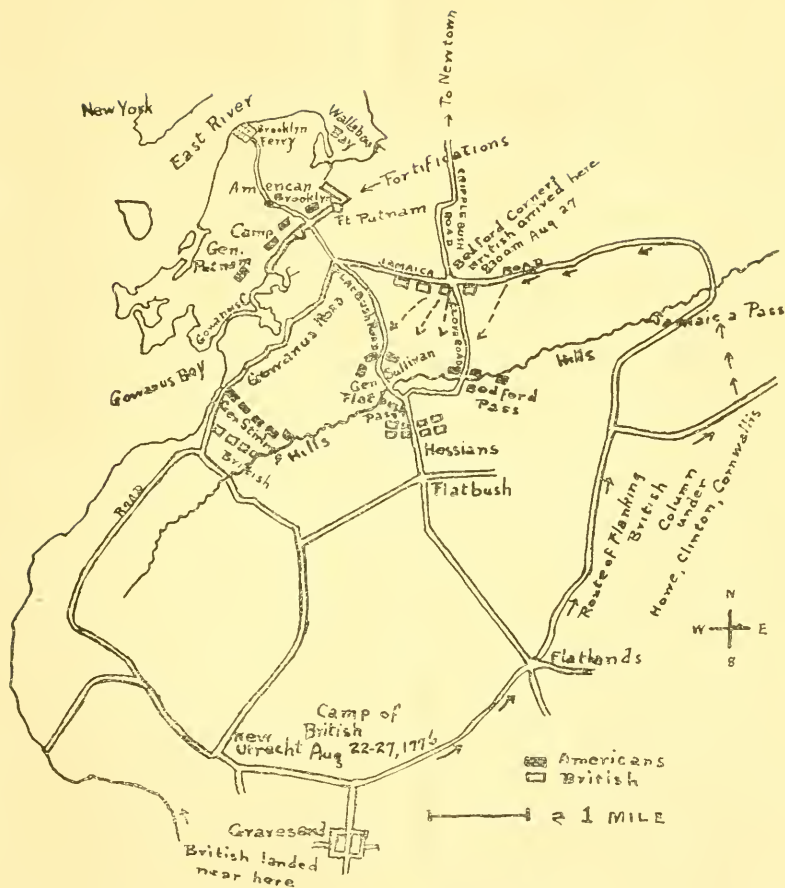
Map 1



MAP OF BEDFORD CORNERS IN 1776-77 AND 1916
(Based on Stiles, *History of Brooklyn*, 1:266)

The heavy black lines represent the old roads, the dotted lines the present streets, and the black figures the houses in the hamlet.

Map 2

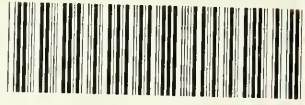


VICINITY OF BEDFORD IN 1776

After the maps in Stiles, *History of the County of Kings*; Johnston, *Battle of Long Island*; Field, *Battle of Long Island*.



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