

The Enterprise Against New York
November 1780

by William H. Richardson

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ONE OF WASHINGTON'S burning projects in the fall of 1780 was a blow at the British center. Just before the withdrawal of the army to Morristown, on November 27, he had consummated his plans for an "enterprise against New York" that, it is quite conceivable, would have gone a long way toward making that comfortable and hospitable city untenable to the British. When we assemble the file of military correspondence now available it will be seen that the affair, which many historical writers dismiss with the record of its "failure," was really a gesture of the first magnitude. The letters from Washington, and to him, and the correspondence between the interested military commanders, set up by Dr. John C. Fitzpatrick in his monumental "Calendar" of Washingtoniana, in the nine days between November 16 and 24, are amazingly rich in references to the affair. "Sparks," Volume 7, pages 293 to 306, contain a few of these Washington letters, commencing with the discussion of its organization with Brigadier-General Heath on November 16th.

Washington wrote his final letters on the subject from Passaic Falls on November 24, advising the leaders of the units in various phases of the enterprise of its "postponement"; and no one could guess from them that there was any bitterness of disappointment over the event that came so close to having been a crowning military achievement.

Twenty-five hundred men were involved. Brigadier-General Wayne's Pennsylvanians were to start at sunrise on Friday, November 24th, toward Newark; Colonel Moylan was to parade his Regiment ready to move from Totowa at 9 o'clock that morning with two days' provisions; General Knox was to have artillery in readiness that day to annoy the shipping, while the troops were crossing the river. Lafayette was to have led the attack on Fort Washington - that seems to have been the real objective. Colonel Gouvion had been instructed on the list to report on the state of the roads from the encampment of the Light Corps to Fort Lee, and particularly to ascertain the practicability of moving the boats, either in wagons or on the shoulders of men; Washington promised to have a patrol at the Three Pigeons while his survey was going on. The whole thing looked so like real warfare that Colonel Hamilton begged his Excellency for an opportunity to take part in it; he desired "to attain more than a mediocre military reputation," and he wanted to make the attempt to capture Bayard's Hill (a place he had occasion to remember, since he helped build a fort on it in 1776).

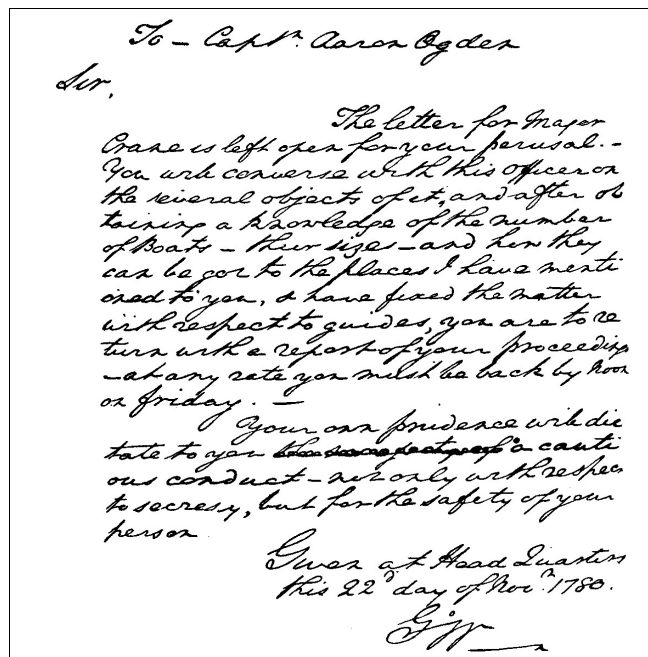
Washington's letter of November list to Q.M.G. Colonel Timothy Pickering is filled with the most careful and minute directions about the supplies for the expedition, even to the rations for the horses, the cloth for muffling the oars of the tiny

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armada, the thin plank and nails for patching the boats in case of punctures on the unwelcoming shores of Manhattan. Washington had found out from Samuel Darby how many men would be needed to carry the boats by handpikes from Totowa, and Major William Crane was collecting the craft there for an expected attack "on Staten Island." "Alert Jersey boatmen," who were to remain with the boats until the expedition was over, were provided for.

Captain Aaron Ogden, of Elizabeth Town, already repeatedly distinguished by the approbation and appreciation of Washington, was in charge of the boats. He had arranged for their transportation to the places of rendezvous, each on its own wheeled carriage or cart. It might seem curious to the average reader today that the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the United States of America should have taken his quill in hand to indite the following 21-line letter of instructions:



To - Capt'n Aaron Ogden
Sir,
The letter for Major Crane is left open for your perusal. - You will converse with this officer on the several objects of it, and after obtaining a knowledge of the number of boats - their size - and how they can be got to the places I have mentioned to you, and have fixed the matter with respect to guides, you are to return with a report of your proceedings - at any rate you must be back by noon on Friday. -
Your own prudence will dictate to you a cautious conduct - not only with respect to secrecy, but for the safety of your person.
Given at Head Quarters
this 22^d day of Nov^r 1780.
G. W.

This letter, in print, is as follows:

"To Capt'n Aaron Ogden,

"SIR:

The letter for Major Crane is left open for your perusal. You will converse with this officer on the several objects in it, and, after obtaining a knowledge of the number of boats, their sizes, and how they can be got to the places I have mentioned to you, and have fixed the matter with respect to guides, you are to return with a report of your proceedings - at any rate you must be back by noon on Friday.

"Your own prudence will dictate to you a cautious conduct, not only with respect to secrecy, but for the safety of your person.

"Given at Head Quarters, [Passaic Falls]

this 22d day of November 1780.

"Go. W--n."

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It must be remembered that the British secret service in the American lines then was a very thoroughgoing institution, and when Washington so honored a 23-year old New Jersey Captain in that most unusual testimonial, it must be understood that he did so because the business of the moment required a man who could be trusted, and Washington did not often make mistakes in men.

So carefully did Washington organize and conceal the preparations for this attack, that, it is said, "never was a plan better arranged and never did circumstances promise more sure of complete success." The enemy was entirely unalarmed, as, whatever unusual activities were reported to the British headquarters in New York were associated with the transfer of the soldiers to the new camp at Morristown; even the men themselves who participated in the movement on the New Jersey side were as misguided as the British.

On the night of the expected attack some of the enemy's ships in the river were moved, for entirely inoffensive reasons, and the risk was too great for the materialization of Washington's dream then.

The Marquis de Chastellux and his suite were guests of Washington in the Dey house at Breakneck on November 23 and 24. There was nothing in the demeanor of his Excellency that betrayed the stress under which he was laboring. At dinner on the 24th, after visiting the different camps, the Marquis said: "We found a good dinner ready and about twenty guests," and, he added, "the weather was so bad on the 25th that it was impossible for me to stir, even to wait on the Generals, to whom M. de la Fayette was to conduct me. The intelligence received this day occasioned the proposed attack on Staten Island to be laid aside."