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THE BATTLE OF MONMOUTH

MONMOUTH COURT-HOUSE OR FREEHOLD, SUNDAY, 28TH JUNE, 1778

BY

JOHN WATTS DE PEYSTER

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THE ENGAGEMENT AT FREEHOLD,

KNOWN AS THE

BATTLE OF MONMOUTH, N. J.,

MORE PROPERLY OF

MONMOUTH COURT-HOUSE,

28TH JUNE, 1778.

*"C'est la solide pierre où s'assoit le * * * siècle."*

—MICHELET.

"Thus, *on the whole*, it was a pitched battle; the advantage, *if any*, being rather on the side of the British, who had fought only to secure their retreat, and who had succeeded in that object."
—LORD MAHON'S HISTORY OF ENGLAND, VI., 250.

For the Americans the delivery of this battle was a political necessity. Clinton's continued or resumed retreat converted a drawn battle into a decided victory for the Colonies. Frederic the Great pronounced the result disastrous to the British cause, and the verdict of events has confirmed the justice of his opinion.

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THE BATTLE OF MONMOUTH

MONMOUTH COURT-HOUSE, OR FREEHOLD, SUNDAY, 28TH JUNE, 1778

The evacuation of Philadelphia by the British was the first tangible result, in favor of the Americans, of the French treaty of Alliance. This was signed 6th February, reached Falmouth Harbor (Portland, Me.) 13th April, and was communicated to Congress 2d May, and celebrated in the camp at Valley Forge (6th) 7th May, 1778. The bitterest sufferers by the British abandonment of Pennsylvania were the loyalists. To them this revolution was misery, ruin and exile. Sir William Howe, at his own request, had been relieved of his command and superceded by Sir Henry Clinton. This was after the mutual fiasco of "Barren Hill, 18th May," in which both were concerned or present on one side and La Fayette on the other.

Clinton received the command of an army partially disaffected. The German element was no longer thoroughly reliable. As proof of this he had to dispatch at least one German regiment to New York by sea, fearing to trust it by land; he moreover lost, according to different accounts, by desertion, etc., from 1,000 to 2,000 in his twelve days' retreat through the Jerseys. Of these 600, principally Hessians, stole away to rejoin their wives, married during the winter sojourn in the "City of Brotherly Love."

Clinton evacuated Philadelphia on the 18th June, 1778. This operation was so ably conceived and carried out that he experienced no hindrance or even annoyance from Washington, although the latter was expecting and watching it. This movement began at 3 A. M., and by 10 A. M. everything—troops and material—were safely across the Delaware, and ready for the march through New Jersey to the sea.

The Hessian General and military critic, Baron von Ochs, in his "Reflections upon the New Art of War," (*Cassel*, 1817), pronounced Clinton's retreat across Jersey more remarkable than that of Moreau through the Black Forest in October (1st-15th), 1796, which the best judges have considered a masterpiece if not a miracle of soldiership.

The British retreat was impeded much more by heavy rains and more than extraordinary heat of the weather—the worst meteorological alternations for rapid movements—than by any military expedients and im-

pediments. So promptly, indeed, did Clinton move, that the American detachments sent to destroy the bridges, etc., could not complete their work sufficiently well, or in time to arrest his march.

The British moved in two divisions. Nothing is more discordant than the estimate of Clinton's and of Washington's armies, except the accounts of their collision at Monmouth. Irving says (III. 416), the former had "about 9,000 to 10,000, Washington a little more than 12,000 Continentals [regulars, in the best sense of the word] and about 1,300 militia." Washington, from certain strategic reasons, did not always state his numbers accurately; for instance, at White Plains, "and was brought to book for it." The discrepancy, about equal to the number of militia present, was excused on the plea that "no old 'war horse' ever counted his militia as effectives." Marshall, admirable authority, referring to clear contemporaneous corroboration, says: "the British army was computed at 10,000 effectives; that of the Americans amounted to between 10,000 and 11,000." The arguments for and against hazarding an action were founded on some such relative figures. According to the British "Official Returns" of March 26, 1778, Howe's (afterward Clinton's) strength comprised 13,078 English, 5,202 Germans, and 1,250 [Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland Royalist or] Provincials; total 19,350. Any such estimate for Clinton's active force in June would be a gross exaggeration. The American strength, on the other hand is, as a rule, always depreciated. If there is a detailed register of Washington's army it has not been accessible, otherwise how are such discordant enumerations possible? The aggregate usually given is 15,000. Doubtless, including mobilized militia and temporary levies, it was very much greater than the British. Gordon (III. 133) quotes a letter of Washington of the 24th of June (four days before the fight) in which he says: "The enemy's force is between 9,000 and 10,000 *rank and file* [this is vague and like the late rebel returns]; the American army on the ground is 10,648, *rank and file*, besides the advanced brigade under General Maxwell of about 1,200 and 1,200 Militia." Add officers, non-commissioned officers, musicians, details, etc., and this might swell Washington's actual strength to over 18,000 continentals, etc. As to the militia there is no certain reckoning. Marshall says: "The militia had returned to their homes immediately after the action." A corresponding calculation, taking into account the admitted wholesale desertions, would give Clinton, all told, at the very utmost 13,000 fighting men.' An American writer who has paid close attention to this subject, remarks that Washington's "army was

fully equal in numbers to that of the enemy, and * * * was not wanting in energy and nerve." It is most likely, counting regulars, mobilized militia and temporary levies, Washington's total was to Clinton's as 3 to 2.

Clinton's line of retreat from Philadelphia to Sandy Hook was about due north-east. Washington, as usual, crossed at Coryell's Ferry,² some thirty (40?) miles directly N. N. E. of Philadelphia, and thence moved almost at right angles forty to fifty miles eastward to the encounter at Monmouth. Thus pursuing on two sides of the triangle, he had to march altogether from eighty to ninety, perhaps one hundred miles, according to the roads; the English, following the hypotenuse, between sixty to seventy miles.

Clinton's train and baggage, including bat or baw-horses, etc., extended 12 to 14 miles. The protection of this long procession was confided to Knyphausen (perhaps on account of the proneness to desert evinced by the Germans). It was compelled to move on a single road, since there was only one then in existence which was practicable for carriages, and even this was heavy from rain and loose deep sand.

As soon as the Americans showed themselves in force on the 27th June, Clinton drew up or deployed the column or division under the immediate command of Cornwallis, and with which he remained along and across the roads, fronting, from S. W. to N. E., Monmouth Court-house or Freehold, as it should be more properly called. His troops, in fact, must have lain all about or around the settlement on the night of the 27th-28th. This village (or hamlet, a century since) is the capital of the alluvial county of Monmouth, which lies south of Raritan Bay and along the Atlantic from Sandy Hook to Manasquam Inlet, just north of the famous "Squam Beach." It is a central point at the intersection of three roads; the first from Princeton and Trenton to the West, passes through Englishtown, some five to six miles distant to the W. or W. N. W., according to different surveys; the second, from (South) Amboy to the north, and the third from Middletown to the N. E., and Shrewsbury to the east. The last two join a little east of the Court-House.

Almost the whole of Clinton's front, and particularly his left wing, was protected by a marsh and thick wood, and in his rear was a difficult defile. In regard to no engagement of the revolution is there less clear, defined or concurrent information than to Monmouth, fought on a brilliant Sunday, 28th June, 1778. It is a *tolu-bohu* of words, very much

like the fighting. The clearest digested statement is by the British General, Hon. Sir Edward Cust, a very impartial annalist, who wrote in 1862.

It would seem as if Washington might have started with the plan to stop Clinton, whose heterogenous force was not as unanimous in spirit as is generally believed, to hold him at the Raritan and its marshes with his disciplined troops, as Burgoyne was impeded between Lake Champlain and the Hudson, and everywhere on this river and its alluents; accumulate militia around him as Schuyler did about Burgoyne, and then swarm him out—the Northern army from the Hudson working in as a part of the machinery—as the British army was disposed of September 13th—October 17th of the previous year. This might have actually occurred if Lee had done his whole duty, if Morgan had struck in on time, always supposing, as was doubtless correct, the Americans (between continentals and militia) outnumbered the enemy, perhaps two to one on the actual scene of the conflict or absolute point of collision.

Lee, in reality, in action, commanded the American advance, 5,000 strong, which was at first assigned to La Fayette, who is relieved of all or any blame through his actual, if not nominal, supersedure by Lee. The right wing, main body, was commanded by Greene and the left by Lord Stirling. [Washington was with the former, and Steuben was at first with La Fayette, and afterwards, with Stirling.] While Lee made a partial demonstration, not an actual attack, on Clinton near the Court-house, Morgan, just as in the Burgoyne battles, was to operate with his riflemen on the British left, while Maxwell and others, with Dickinson's militia regiments, threatened the British right and even right rear. Morgan did not get into action at all. He remained at Richmond Mills, three miles south of Freehold or Monmouth Court-house, in full hearing of the firing, and for some inexplicable reason did nothing. If all the forces, flanking and holding, had done their duty as Wayne discharged his, Clinton might actually have been "Burgoyned."

The skirmishing began between 7 and 8 A. M., and continued, through four distinct phases, until noon.

Clinton, perfectly aware that it would not do to allow any confusion to affect his twelve-mile-long baggage train, made a brisk return on Lee, with picked troops ["which could not easily be equalled," as was remarked by a contemporary] belonging to the division of Cornwallis. Lee gave way at once; and it is charged that the consequent disadvantages sustained by the Americans were due to his bad behavior, founded on

the intention to limit, if not frustrate a decided victory in favor of Washington. The Americans were driven back full two miles and a half. At the most critical moment Washington arrived, and all was disorder, if not even positive dismay; his presence gradually, if not immediately, restored the confidence which the troops under Lee had lost, in a great measure, through the fault or mismanagement of their commander. Checked in turn, Clinton assailed the American columns moving to flank him. The American left was roughly handled by the British cavalry and infantry; but ever reliable Wayne finally held the Royal troops in check, and with the cooperation of Greene to their left finally repulsed them, even after they were reinforced from Knyphausen's division. Here, in front of Wayne, the gallant British Lieutenant-Colonel (Brevet General?) Honorable H. Monckton fell. This spot is about two miles west from the Court-House.

Steuben first restored matters on the American left, and it is said that such was the confidence reposed in him by the soldiers "that they, although severely pressed by the enemy, wheeled into line with as much precision as on an ordinary parade, and with the coolness and intrepidity of veteran troops. Alexander Hamilton was struck with this change, and was afterwards heard to say that he had never known or conceived the value of military discipline till that day." Farther than this there is no use of endeavoring to solve what appears a military conundrum. Suffice it to add that, with fluctuating fortunes, both Generals fed the fight with fresh troops until Clinton fell back in good order *behind* a defile similar to that in *front* of which he made his first stand. By this time it was night; the firing and fighting, desultory, unsatisfactory, had lasted—through four other phases—seven or eight hours; a terrible ordeal in such an overpowering heat, and on such a soil.

This battle, "pitched" or "drawn," whatever it is styled by historians, was scarcely regulated and was not terminated by valor or by soldiership, but by the unbearable sultriness of the day. "Both sides, however, record that the extreme heat of this day was seldom equalled, and that the British and American soldiers alike felt their energies so oppressed by the unusual sultriness that they contented themselves with removing their wounded, and desisted altogether from active hostilities. On the side of the English fifty-nine soldiers are said to have perished in this action without a wound, merely through the excessive heat and fatigue." "A number of the Americans likewise died from the same cause, and it is said that in very many cases the tongues were so

swollen from heat and thirst that officers and men were rendered speechless." "The horses fell dead in troops." One Major-General lost three horses in succession from the same cause.

It is justly claimed that the vicissitudes and discipline of Valley Forge manufactured the American military personnel into an army, and the four phases of Monmouth proper, not the four preliminary skirmishes, developed the maneuvering capabilities of this army under fire, and thoroughly demonstrated its new fighting power. The word "victory" is so generally missapplied that as usual this title is claimed by both sides for Monmouth. If to frustrate the intention of an opponent, and carry out one's own purpose constitutes a triumph, the palm undoubtedly belongs to Clinton. He secured his retreat. If, however, to relinquish a field to which a rebel army has been drawn, and on which it should have been fought to the bitter end, and was not, is *not* a failure in the performance of the duty expected from a royal commander, it is difficult to understand what such a duty on his part can be construed to mean. *Escape* in this exigency was *certainly not victory*. An impartial examination leads to the conclusion that Clinton was too greatly outnumbered to justify a prosecution or renewal of the engagement on his part. To secure his train he was reduced to making a return or counter blow—a rear-guard fight—encountering the bulk of the American army with at most two-thirds of his own forces. Perhaps he did not bring over half his troops into actual collision with his opponents. Clinton's determination at Monmouth was a type of "Mad Anthony's" return upon Cornwallis at Green Springs, near Jamestown, Va., 6 July, 1781; of Longstreet, upon McClellan, at Williamsburg, 5th May, 1862. The fighting hero of the American army at Monmouth was Wayne; Washington must, in some degree, share even his marvelous influential strength with Steuben.

Washington certainly did not succeed in accomplishing what he set out to do. But he slept on the battle-field and buried the dead. Consequently, as in so many other instances, although militarily it was a drawn battle, nationally, it is recognized as a victory.

When the morning of Monday, 29th June, 1778, broke, and the Americans arose to renew the struggle, the English had gone, and had even carried off the majority of their wounded.

"Clinton marched without further opposition to Navisink [or Neversink], a highland in the neighborhood of Sandy Hook, where he arrived on the 30th, and found [Admiral] Lord Howe, who had got there the day before with the fleet from the Delaware. This was a more opportune occurrence than could have been

anticipated, for it had so happened that in the preceding winter a violent breach of the sea had cut off the peninsula of Sandy Hook from the Continent, and converted it into an island, so that it was necessary to throw a bridge of boats across the intervening water. This was now speedily and skillfully executed by extraordinary efforts on behalf of the seamen, and the whole army was thus passed over the new channel on the 5th of July, and were afterwards conveyed by sea to New York. Soon after this the Provincial army took up its position at White Plains [Westchester Co., N. Y.], * * where it remained till late in the autumn."

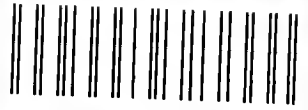
Monmouth was the last field in America whereon ten thousand men on *each* side contended for victory, or were even present. After this date the war was made up of comparative skirmishes or actions, whose *objectives* alone gave to them the dignity of battles. In one respect, however, it was THE Battle of the Revolution, for upon its parched, deep, sandy field occurred the "new birth" of the American regular soldier. Hereon he showed himself the first-class maneuvering as well as fighting power, substantiated subsequently on a thousand fields—in Canada, in Florida, in Mexico, at the West, and on the gory checker-boards of the "great American conflict" waged to crush or to sustain the mightiest Rebellion which ever convulsed a nation."

JOHN WATTS DE PEYSTER

¹ The writer arrived at these figures—13,000 for Clinton and 20,000 for Washington—by a careful but curious calculation. Since this article was in print chance threw in his way Von Eelking's "Hulfstruppen," in which a Hessian officer present corroborates these estimates. This German says that Clinton "had scarcely 13,000 men"; "3,000 [cavalry and infantry] went off with [Admiral Howe's] ships"; that "Washington's strength was held to be about 20,000 men"; and that "the cannonade on both sides at Monmouth was heavier than was heard elsewhere during the war." His description of the fourteen-mile long baggage train is amusing. The affluent British officers dragged along with them masses of baggage, carriages, draft and saddle-horses, all sorts of servants, *mistresses*, and every kind of other useless stuff. If Clinton's traps had fallen into the hands of some of Washington's primitive or puritan regiments from the back settlements, these would have aroused in them as much astonishment as the surprise excited among Frederick of Prussia's "Monks of the Flag," at the composition of the *impedimenta* of the French officers, captured after Rosbach. [Washington's 20,000; see Lossing's F. B. A. R., ii., 146-147 (1).]

² It is worthy of remark that the route followed by Washington, was the one almost invariably adhered to by him in all his movements in and through the Jerseys. On this occasion it was doubtless taken with a view to intercept Clinton at Brunswick. This route bore the same relation to the stereotyped line pursued by the British in the Jerseys, that the Shenandoah valley held to the usual line of the Union advance southwards, from the Potomac east of the Blue Ridge, and afforded the same relative advantages. It had water courses to block the enemy's way and serve as wet ditches to positions; passes as sally-ports; a mountain range as a line of permanent entrenchments, and opportune spurs as bastions or detached works. All the territorial or physical advantages were in favor of the Americans; all the *material*, of the British. During the Revolutionary War, New Jersey was a more difficult country for the Royalists to fight over than even Virginia proved to the Unionists during the "Slaveholder's Rebellion." It afforded the best defensive positions, defiles, marshes, miry streams, and beyond these and rising from them, gentle slopes—the very best disposition of land for the most effective play of artillery—stone houses for detached parties, and all the peculiarities which a weaker force could desire to hold or harass a stronger invader.

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