

**Carefully Planned Distractions Create Opportunities for Surprise Victories:
The 3rd "Atlantic County" Battalion and the Famous Battles at Trenton and Princeton**

By Rev. Norman R. Goos,
President – Col. Richard Somers Chapter, New Jersey Society,
Sons of the American Revolution

Sometimes we gather trustworthy facts and come to accurate conclusions. Other times, we gather what we think are trustworthy proofs but are not; and then we come to inaccurate conclusions. The latter is the case with regard to what we have often heard about Col. Richard Somers' 3rd Battalion Gloucester County Militia in the Revolutionary War. We have generally been led to believe that this group of about 250 men from what is now Atlantic County did nothing of consequence for eight years, and so were virtually ignored by historians. Such was not the case. From the very beginning of the conflict in early 1775, these men were: 1) busy preventing continual British attempts to feed their troops by stealing from New Jersey farms, 2) "acquiring" British transport ships whenever they happened to venture too close to our beaches, 3) guarding existing American fortifications, 4) repelling Tory/Refugee/Loyalist attacks on Eastern Gloucester County beaches and towns, and 5) acting in important and integral roles in famous New Jersey battles such as Trenton, Princeton and Red Bank in Gloucester County. The purpose of this essay is to explain the 3rd Battalion's influential and even likely tide-turning assistance to Gen. Washington in the famous Christmas 1776 battle at Trenton, and then at the twin battles of Trenton and Princeton a week later. As this story is told, the reader will be able to examine the actual words the various Atlantic County soldiers wrote or dictated in their pension applications in 1832 [hereinafter called PA]. In understanding this history, the present Atlantic County resident may feel genuine pride in what his patriot ancestors accomplished in earning the freedoms we enjoy today.

In the famous book *Washington's Crossing* by David Hackett Fischer, the author described specifically what was occurring in southern New Jersey in the month or two before Washington's famous battle on December 26, 1776. Hackett wrote (p. 182): "The story was more tangled with under plot than an old Spanish tragedy. It involved three marching American armies (plus a patchwork 4th Army), two quarreling Hessian colonels, one incompetent British commander, and a beautiful widow in the village of Mount Holly. Ordinary people in New Jersey came together to do something about their lost liberty. They were unable to break the grip of the conqueror in their state, but they created an opportunity for the Continental Army.... Bands of New Jersey Militia were roaming the countryside and the Pennsylvania Navy controlled the river itself below Trenton Falls." These three armies were 1) the British Army under Gen. Howe, 2) and American army under Gen. Washington, and 3) an American army under Gen. Lee. The "fourth army" was the New Jersey Militia.

In order to sort this out, we need to start with the fact that the British General Sir William Howe clearly underestimated George Washington, the American troops and the residents of southern New Jersey. In his December 20, 1776 letter from New York to his superior Lord George Germain in London he wrote: "The chain (of substantial British troop encampments), I own, is rather too extensive, but...

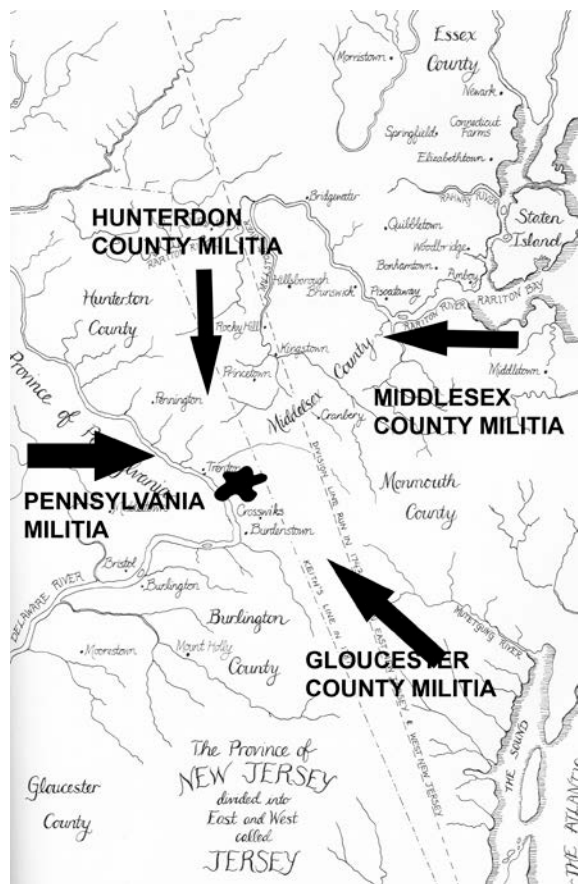
trusting to the general submission of the country to the southward of this chain, and to the strengths of the corps placed in these advanced posts, I conclude the troops will be in perfect security." (Public Records Office, London – Howe-Germain correspondence – 20 Dec. 1776) He was dead wrong. The commanding general of the New Jersey Militia, Maj. Gen. Philemon Dickinson, saw things differently; so did Col. Joseph Reed, a top aide to Washington. To Gen. Washington he wrote: "Many people in New Jersey were growing very angry against the British and German invaders who were attacking their houses and plundering their property." (The Papers of George Washington, Vol. 7, p. 415) This was an understatement. As General Dickinson was writing this, a Virginian, Col. Samuel Griffin, while recovering from wounds, began collecting a few regular troops from Pennsylvania and Virginia along with almost 800 New Jersey militia-men from Gloucester and Cumberland counties. He was determined to do something against the British and his intentions reached George Washington through Col. Joseph Reed. Col. Griffin was instructed to attempt to find a way to harass the British in a diversionary manner and open an opportunity for Washington to attack them decisively. Griffin immediately went to work to accomplish his goal. Among his 800 troops were at least 200 militiamen from eastern Gloucester County townships of Great Egg Harbour and Galloway, comprising all of what is today Atlantic County. This group was known as Col. Richard Somers' 3rd Battalion of the Gloucester County Regiment of the New Jersey Militia. Pvt. Zadock Bowen's PA adds: "the company marched from Egg Harbor to Haddonfield where we joined Col. Joseph Ellis Regiment from Haddonfield (normally the 1st and 2nd Gloucester Battalions); we marched to Mount Holly..."

The men of Col. Richard Somers' 3rd Militia Battalion were excited to be part of the War for Independence. In his 1832 PA, Egg Harbor Township resident Pvt. Cornelius McCollum wrote the following: "There was a call for all the militia to go out. The British were overrunning much of the Jerseys. I volunteered for 6 months in a company under the command of Capt. David Weatherby and Lt. Richard Higbee; I was the Sergeant. We were accompanied by Col. Richard Somers. Elijah Clark was Lt. Colonel; Richard Westcott was Major. We went to Mount Holly." Also in his PA, Cornelius' brother Patrick McCollum wrote: "I entered the service in the month of November 1776, about the 20th of the month, as a Private in the company commanded by Capt. Payne in Col. Somers' Regiment [sic]. We paraded at Wrangleboro and marched from there to Blue Anchor and Haddonfield where we remained about a week. From there we marched to Mount Holly." 3rd Battalion Pvt. Simon Lucas wrote in his PA: "He (Private Lucas) volunteered in the company of Capt. Joseph Estell, belonging to the Regiment of Col. Elijah Clark. His brother was a Lieutenant in the same company and was wounded in the skirmish with the enemy at Petticoat Bridge." From a survey of the 30 pension applications that have survived from the men who fought in the Somers' Battalion, the testimony is the same (all quoted PA's are from Atlantic County soldiers and are in the NJ State Archives). The time had come to defend their homes and their country against the depredations and inequities of the British government and its forces.

It is at this point that we see the contrast in attitudes between the British and American forces. General Washington and his staff clearly saw Col. Griffin's activities as a grand opportunity provided by brave patriots. The British spy, Barzella Haines, saw it as an exercise in futility (Donop Papers, 21 Dec. 1776). In his report to the Hessian commander at Bordentown, Col. Carl Von Donop, Barzella said: "They (Griffin's men) were not above 800 (at Mount Holly), near one half boys, and all of them Militia, a very

few from Pennsylvania excepted... He knew many of them who came from Gloucester, Egg Harbor, Penn's Neck and Cohansey. They were commanded by Col. Griffin." The British spy's confidant December 21, 1776 letter would be rendered complete foolishness in five short days.

During the month of December 1776, three separate but cooperating groups of Americans were harassing the British troops bedded down in the Trenton area for the winter (Fisher, p. 194). In the North, the Hunterdon County Militia under Gen. Philemon Dickinson was continually harassing the



British troops posted at Princeton and other places above Trenton. In the West, Gen. James Ewing's Continentals and Pennsylvania Militia were staging cross-river raids to harass the guards and patrols sent out by the 1500 Hessians commanded by Col. Johann Rall stationed at Trenton. Col. Griffin's 800 Gloucester and Cumberland Militiamen in the South moved threateningly toward Mount Holly and drew Col. Von Donop's 2000 Hessian troops out of Bordentown and to the East. Additionally, the Middlesex County Militia was harassing the British supply lines that stretched from Trenton east to New Brunswick. (See Ewald's map for these groups) The British were surrounded by American militia growing angrier by the day. To make matters worse, the most competent British battle commander, Gen. Lord Charles Cornwallis, was in New York packing to leave to go home to London to visit his wife and family until the spring. Maj. Gen. James Grant, who was only a mildly competent leader, to say the least, had taken Cornwallis's place. George Washington's trap for the British was fully baited and ready to be sprung.

Col. Griffin had his troops at Mount Holly on December 17. This made the Hessians in Bordentown nervous and so they began moving part of their troops south toward Mount Holly. The Americans moved north from Mount Holly a few miles to the hills overlooking Petticoat Bridge. As the Hessians continued to move south, Col. Griffin and 400 militiamen attacked them at Assiscunk Creek where it is crossed by Petticoat Bridge on December 21. The place where the skirmish occurred is marked today on Petticoat Bridge Road, about a mile west of where Jacksonville Road crosses Route 206 (GPS 40.05320 -74.74262). The temporarily outgunned Hessian troops withdrew about a mile and awaited reinforcements comprised of the rest of Von Donop's soldiers. The next day, on December 22, the full Hessian troop complement attacked the American militia which wisely withdrew to Mount Holly. As far as can be proven, only two militiamen from what we now call Atlantic County were wounded at Petticoat Bridge, Private Stephen Ford and Private Simon Lucas; 2 or 3 others were killed. Lt. Isaac Hickman reported in his PA: "While out this time he was engaged in a skirmish with the Hessians in

which our forces were beaten with a loss of two or three men killed” (Unfortunately, we do not know the names of these two or three brave men.). The Hessian records record that two Hessians and two British soldiers were wounded as well. Pvt. Stephen Ford's PA records: "Sometime after the Battle of



Petticoat Bridge, between the Americans and the Hessians, while stationed at the village of Slabtown (Jacksonville), and at a time when this declarant was standing a sentinel, he was wounded in the knee by a Hessian....Being disabled by his wound from active service." On the 23rd, the American militia withdrew from Mount Holly as the Hessians took over the town. Pvt. David Somers wrote in his PA: "We retreated to the bridge in the town (Mount Holly) where we made a stand but were too weak to encounter the army and retreated to Moorestown..." Interestingly enough, these 2000 Hessian troops had now been drawn far enough east that they could not help Col. Rall's troops in Trenton when Washington would attack. Ewald claims that over 100 men were killed or wounded in total, counting both sides (Ewald, p. 39). If the Hessian troops could only be kept in Mount Holly for a few more days!

As the Hessians moved into Mount Holly, most of the town folks moved out. It seems that only one woman stayed behind, a young widow whose deceased husband may have been a relative of a local physician. Col. Von Donop was invited to stay at the house where she was staying and it seems that love (or a reasonable facsimile) kept him there. In the journal of Mount Holly resident Margaret Morris, it was noted: "All the women removed from the town except one widow of our acquaintance." Col. Griffin kept his troops close by to be sure to keep the Hessians' attention. On December 24 Gen. Washington received the good news about Col. Griffin's successful diversion and completed his plans to cross the Delaware River on Christmas night and attack the Hessian troops stationed at Trenton. One of Col. Von Donop's key officers, a Capt. Ewald, recorded his thoughts in his diary regarding these activities. His diary was only found in the 1970's in Germany and was translated into English by United States Army Maj. Joseph Tustin who was a member of the Gloucester County Historical Society. Here is what Capt. Ewald wrote on p. 42: "The Colonel, who was exceedingly devoted to the fair sex, had found in his quarters the exceedingly beautiful young widow of a doctor (he confused the relationship). He wanted to set up his rest quarters in Mount Holly, which to the misfortune of Col. Rall, he was permitted to do..." Page 44 added: "This great misfortune, which surely caused the utter loss of the 13 splendid provinces of the Crown of England, was due partly to the extension of the cord (widely spread troop placements), partly to the fall of Col. Donop, who was led by the nose to Mount Holly by Col. Griffin and detained there by love." Page 45 concluded: "Thus, the fate of entire kingdoms often depend upon a few blockheads and irresolute men." The translator and publisher of Capt. Ewald's diary researched the matter further and found only one widow in the records of the Middle States whose deceased husband was related to a doctor. Her name was Betsy Ross; her husband, John Ross, was from Gloucester County, and the doctor was Alexander Ross; John Ross died early in 1776 (see Joseph Tustin's article "The Mysterious Widow of the Revolution". GCSHB #17: Dec. 1979. Also see Fisher, pp. 199-200 and McGuire, Vol. II, pp. 153-54). This is an interesting theory, but it is only a theory, one that can probably

neither be definitively proven nor disproven (however, this story is seen as probably true by both respected historians, Fisher and McGuire). Von Donop's embarrassed troops retreated from Mount Holly to Princeton on December 27.

The story of Washington's crossing of the Delaware and the attack on Trenton is famous. 22 Hessians were killed, 83 seriously wounded, and 896 were taken prisoner. The Americans lost none with only four wounded. America had a victory that would renew its confidence and which many have said was the turning point in our War for Independence. Col. Somers' Battalion of the Gloucester County Militia, the men from what we now know as Atlantic County, were obviously instrumental in helping provide the diversion needed to keep the Hessian reinforcements from turning Washington's victorious attack into a war-ending defeat. Although the Battle of Trenton was over, another battle would occur in a week that would send the British and Hessians running back for the security of New Brunswick and New York. The State of New Jersey would essentially be liberated.

Excitement is contagious. Events began to move quickly. One victory gave the American Army courage to seek a second victory. We see this in the words of Philadelphia Col. John Cadwallader to George Washington on December 26, 1776 after receiving the news of Washington's victory. He wrote: "Gen. Putnam was to cross Philadelphia today if the weather permitted, with 1000 men; 300 went over yesterday and 500 Jersey Militia are now there, as Col. Griffin informs me today. These corps compose a formidable force. The plan would be more complete if Gen. Putnam was one day's March advanced. This would cause a diversion that would favor any attempt you may design in the future and would expose their baggage and stores, if they attempt to cross. The Militia will be easier to hold together by being in motion, and we shall have some service from Col. Hitchcock's brigade, whose time of enlistment will be up in a few days. I am, Sir, with great respect, your most obedient very humble servant." (The Papers of George Washington, Vol. 7, pp. 444-45) Washington took this to heart.

On December 29 the American Continentals re-crossed the Delaware and retook Trenton. Col. Griffin and the Gloucester County Militia were ordered to perform a night march and join Gen. Washington there; they reached Trenton after Washington had successfully captured it again. Later that day, the 7000 British and Hessian soldiers from Princeton and beyond, again under the command of Gen. Cornwallis, attacked the fortified American positions at Trenton. The PA of 1st Lt. Jeremiah Leeds of Galloway Township (this article's author's 5th great-grandfather) recalls: "We retreated back to Haddonfield, staying one night in Moorestown, and remained at Haddonfield but a short time. We then marched to Bordentown, remaining all the morning of the Battle of Trenton; that morning we marched to Trenton and were in the battle there on January 2, 1777." Pvt. John Tilton's PA says: "We reached Trenton early in the morning; the engagement began in the afternoon and continued on till dark. I was in it the whole time." Pvt. Patrick McCollum wrote in his PA: "During the battle, a man from the neighborhood (Atlantic County) named (Pvt.) Forrest Bellangy had his leg shot off, while he was standing between Richard Steelman and me." Pvt. Zadock Bowen's PA adds: "We were in the battle and a man named Forrest Bellangy belonging to our company was mortally wounded and died the night after the battle..." Lt. Robert Leeds' PA reported: "At Trenton a scouting party had been out and the British followed them in upon which an engagement between that British and the Americans at Trenton took

place. It began pretty soon in the morning just after the group to which deponent belonged had got their breakfast and lasted 'till night". Pvt. Cornelius McCollum's PA said: "We marched to Trenton and joined General Washington's army in the morning of the day after, having marched all night from Bordentown and took part in the engagement with the British. The Americans had 14 field pieces on that occasion, 6-pounders and 9-pounders that Gen. Washington had taken from the Hessians. The British tried 3 times to force the bridge on Assunpink Creek that day and also tried to cross the creek below the village. Capt. Weatherby's company was stationed there to cover the artillery staying alongside the pond (the creek was probably dammed at the bridge, making a pond to the East side)."

That night, Washington set up a brilliant diversion, marched his troops through the country and swamps around the South end of the British and Hessian troops, and attacked the smaller British troop contingent left at Princeton. The diversion consisted of campfires kept ablaze all night, an occasional canon ball lobbed into the British camp, and typical camp noises – the entire ruse being kept together by a small group of Americans left behind. Pvt. Cornelius McCollum's PA reported: "The Pennsylvania Line was ahead of the Jersey line and the British drove them back. Gen. Washington took command of the New Jersey Line and drove the British. They (the British) retreated to the college (now Princeton University) and they were not able to make their retreat farther and gave up. The action lasted about two hours. New Jersey Gen. Mercer was killed on this occasion..." The march to and the battle at Princeton are described thus in the PA of Pvt. Cornelius McCollum also said: "The Americans marched off in the night and went to Princeton and had a battle there that day. The American army under Washington got to Princeton about sunrise. General Washington took command of the New Jersey Line and drove the British. The action lasted about 2 hours. General Mercer was killed on this occasion. The Americans took about 450 prisoners beside the wounded there and sent them and the Hessians to Pennsylvania." Galloway Township resident Lt. Robert Leeds wrote in his PA: "At Trenton, after the skirmish was over, the Americans had orders to make themselves up fires and at the same time in the night, they were ordered to Princeton. We had engagement at Princeton. The company to which I belonged was in the rear during the engagement....Fred Bellangy was shot down by his side." Pvt. Enoch Gandy wrote in his PA: "A short time after we joined the Army, the British cannonaded Trenton, also in the State of New Jersey. I was not immediately engaged but was one of the reserve units. Immediately after the battle of Trenton, we marched for Princeton, 10 or 12 miles above Trenton." It is clear that the Atlantic County militiamen were intimately involved in a great part of the battles at Trenton and Princeton that essentially turned around the American War for Independence. Atlantic County lost its third or fourth soldier of the campaign, Pvt. Fred Bellangy.

Immediately after Princeton, Washington moved his troops north to Morristown and the Watchung Mountains for the winter. As previously stated, the British had retreated to New Brunswick and New York. The militia men from Eastern Gloucester County went in three directions. First, the soldiers under Capt. George Payne and Capt. David Weatherby spent the winter with Washington and the Continentals in Morristown. Pvt. Enoch Gandy's PA reported: "After the Battle of Princeton they went into winter quarters at Morristown. They did not cease Morristown until late in the spring of 1777, being engaged in chastising the Refugees whenever they could have an opportunity." Pvt. Levi Price's PA report of these events concurs. Second, the soldiers under Capt. Joseph Estell and Capt.

Zephaniah Steelman returned to Egg Harbor to continue guarding the New Jersey coast against British and Tory raids. Third, the soldiers under Capt. Richard Higbee went to Burlington to guard that area against a return of the British and against further Loyalist reprisal activities after the Patriot victories. It is presumed that the rest of Col. Richard Somers' 3rd Battalion returned with Captains Estell and Steelman to their farmsteads in the future Atlantic County to prepare for planting in the spring. 1st Lt. Jeremiah Leeds' PA reports: "After the battle, we remained a few days at Princeton, and then marched back by Trenton and Burlington to Haddonfield where we were discharged after having served at least one month and a half."

This article began by stating: "We have generally been led to believe that this group of about 250 men from what is now Atlantic County did nothing of consequence for eight years, and so were virtually ignored by historians. Such was not the case." In the recorded words of British soldiers, Hessian soldiers, American officers, and the Pension Applications of our patriot ancestors from Eastern Gloucester County (Atlantic County today), we have heard that the men who comprised Col. Richard Somers' 3rd Gloucester Militia Battalion were called to leave their families and farms and to bear arms for their country. We have clearly seen that they responded enthusiastically to the call. Two were wounded and at least three were killed. While there were undoubtedly men from some Quaker families in the county who, for religious reasons, did not respond to the call to serve in the military, history seems to tell us that these were in the minority. Additionally, the only record of Atlantic County containing any Tories, Loyalists or Refugees refers to the English family (John Sr. and John Jr.) whose property was confiscated after a trial. It is possible that other Tory families will come to light in the future. It seems that over half of the 3rd Battalion (as many as were called up for the particular campaign) responded to the call and fought at Petticoat Bridge, Mount Holly, Trenton and Princeton. Possibly the main point of this article for today's readers is that, rather than staying at home and leaving the soldiering to others, our patriot ancestors provided part of the highly successful diversion that opened the door for Washington's Christmas victory in 1776 over the Hessians at Trenton; and then on January 1 and 2, 1777, they assisted in the victory over the combined British and Hessian Armies at Trenton and Princeton. Our Atlantic County ancestors would continue to display this attitude of willing sacrifice and bravery throughout the War for Independence. You and I live in freedom today because they did so! Our proper response should be remembrance and thankfulness.

Postscript

No better compliment can be paid to the men of the Jersey militias than that given in his diary by Captain Johann Ewald, who commanded the detachment of Jaegers in von Donop's force: "What can you not achieve with such small bands who have learned to fight dispersed, who know how to use every molehill for their defense, and who retreat as quickly when attacked as they advance again, and who always find space to hide. Never have I seen these maeuvres (sic) performed better than by the American Militia, and especially that of the Province of New Jersey. If you were forced to retreat against these people you could certainly count on constantly having them around you."

Note: source information and the author's explanatory comments are enclosed in parentheses.

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