

# **Washington's Crossing**

*DAVID HACKETT FISCHER*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

## Washington's Crossing



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*For Anne, with love*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This volume is part of a series called Pivotal Moments in American History. Each book in this series examines a large historical event or process that changed the course of American development. These events were not the products of ineluctable forces outside the boundaries of human choice; they were the results of decisions and actions by people who had opportunities to choose and act otherwise. This element of contingency introduces a dynamic tension into the story of the past. Books in the Pivotal Moments series are written in a narrative format to capture that dynamic tension of contingency and choice.

The design of the series also reflects the current state of historical writing, which shows growing attention to the experiences of ordinary people and increasing sensitivity to issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the context of large structures and processes. We seek to combine this new scholarship with old ideas of history as a narrative art and traditional standards of sound scholarship, mature judgment, and good writing.

No single day in history was more decisive for the creation of the United States than Christmas 1776. On that night a ragged army of 2,400 colonials crossed the ice-choked Delaware River from Pennsylvania to New Jersey in the teeth of a nor'easter that lashed their boats and bodies with sleet and snow. After marching all night, they attacked and defeated a garrison of 1,500 Hessian soldiers at Trenton. A week later the Americans withstood a fierce British counterattack in Trenton and then stole away overnight to march fifteen miles by back roads to Princeton, where they defeated British reinforcements rushing to Trenton.

These victories saved the American Revolution from collapse. Without them there would have been no United States, at least as we know it. Of all the pivotal events in American history, none was more important than what happened on those nine days from December 25, 1776, through January 3, 1777. During the previous five months the American rebels had lost every battle. They had been driven from Long Island to Westchester and across the Hudson and Delaware Rivers to Pennsylvania. George Washington's army had lost 90 percent of its strength. Many of the remaining troops

intended to go home when their enlistments expired at the end of the year. Citizens in New Jersey and elsewhere were taking the oath of allegiance to the king. The bold declaration of July 4, 1776, seemed all but dead. Washington's crossing of the Delaware was an apparent act of desperation. But it paid off in a huge way. The battles of Trenton and Princeton heralded the triumph of independence six years later.

The story is full of twists and turns, of contingent moments when events seemed likely to move in one direction but then swung in another, when leaders made key choices between two or more alternatives. The storm on December 25–26 delayed the crossing so long that Washington almost called off the whole operation. But the same storm masked the Americans' approach to Trenton and curtailed the normal alert patrolling of the Hessians (Fischer disposes of the old canard that the Hessians were sleeping off a Christmas drunk). A hard freeze on the night of January 2–3 made passable the road taken by the Americans from Trenton to Princeton that had been knee-deep in mud the previous day. Many other contingencies large and small await the reader of this dramatic story.

*Washington's Crossing* is a vivid narrative of a military campaign that shaped the future not only of America but also of the world. The Hessians emerge here in sharper, clearer focus than in any previous study. David Fischer has written much more than a military narrative, however. He sets the story in the social and political context of a major transformation in the history of the Western world. The American Revolution pitted an amateur army fighting for a new order of liberty and independence against two professional armies (British and Hessian) defending an old order of hierarchy and discipline. Until Washington crossed the Delaware, the triumph of the old order seemed inevitable. Thereafter, things would never be the same again.

James M. McPherson

## Washington's Crossing



*Washington Crossing the Delaware*, painting by Emmanuel Leutze (1851). Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John S. Kennedy, 1897.

## INTRODUCTION

### ☞ The Painting

That was the residence of the principal citizen, all the way from the suburbs of New Orleans to the edge of St. Louis. . . . Over the middle of the mantel, engraving—Washington Crossing the Delaware; on the wall by the door, copy of it done in thunder-and-lightning crewel by the young ladies—work of art which would have made Washington hesitate about crossing, if he could have foreseen what advantage to be taken of it.

—Mark Twain, 1883<sup>1</sup>

**W**ASHINGTON'S CROSSING!" the stranger said with a bright smile of recognition. Then a dark frown passed across his face. "Was it like the painting?" he said. "Did it really happen that way?"

The image that he had in mind is one of the folk-memories that most Americans share. It represents an event that happened on Christmas night in 1776, when a winter storm was lashing the Delaware Valley with sleet and snow. In our mind's eye, we see a great river choked with ice, and a long line of little boats filled with horses, guns, and soldiers. In the foreground is the heroic figure of George Washington.

The painting is familiar to us in a general way, but when we look again its details take us by surprise. Washington's small boat is crowded with thirteen men. Their dress tells us that they are soldiers from many parts of America, and each of them has a story that is revealed by a few strokes of the artist's brush. One man wears the short tarpaulin jacket of a New England seaman; we look again and discover that he is of African descent. Another is a recent Scottish immigrant, still wearing his Balmoral bonnet. A third is an androgynous

figure in a loose red shirt, maybe a woman in man's clothing, pulling at an oar.

At the bow and stern of the boat are hard-faced western riflemen in hunting shirts and deerskin leggings. Huddled between the thwarts are farmers from Pennsylvania and New Jersey, in blanket coats and broad-brimmed hats. One carries a countryman's double-barreled shotgun. The other looks very ill, and his head is swathed in a bandage. A soldier beside them is in full uniform, a rarity in this army; he wears the blue coat and red facings of Haslet's Delaware Regiment. Another figure wears a boat cloak and an oiled hat that a prosperous Baltimore merchant might have used on a West Indian voyage; his sleeve reveals the facings of Smallwood's silk-stocking Maryland Regiment. Hidden behind them is a mysterious thirteenth man. Only his weapon is visible; one wonders who he might have been.<sup>2</sup>

The dominant figures in the painting are two gentlemen of Virginia who stand tall above the rest. One of them is Lieutenant James Monroe, holding a big American flag upright against the storm. The other is Washington in his Continental uniform of buff and blue. He holds a brass telescope and wears a heavy saber, symbolic of a statesman's vision and a soldier's strength. The artist invites us to see each of these soldiers as an individual, but he also reminds us that they are all in the same boat, working desperately together against the wind and current. He has given them a common sense of mission, and in the stormy sky above he has painted a bright prophetic star, shining through a veil of cloud.

Most Americans recognize this image, and many remember its name. It is *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, painted by Emanuel Leutze in 1850. Today it hangs in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Visitors who are used to seeing it in reproduction are startled by its size, twelve feet high and twenty feet wide.

The painting itself has a history. The artist was a German American immigrant of strong liberal democratic principles, who returned to his native land and strongly supported the Revolutions of 1848. In the midst of that struggle Emanuel Leutze conceived the idea of a painting that would encourage Europe with the example of the American Revolution. His inspiration was a poem by Ferdinand Freiligrath called "Ça Ira," which created the image of a vessel filled with determined men:

“You ask astonished: “What’s her name?”  
To this question there’s but one solution,  
And in Austria and Prussia it’s the same:  
The ship is called: “Revolution!”<sup>3</sup>

In 1848 and 1849, Leutze began to work on the great canvas. An early study survives, complete only for vivid figures of Washington and Monroe and a single soldier. It is painted in strong primary colors, bright with hope and triumph. After he started, the European revolutions failed, but the artist kept working on his project in a different mood. The colors turned somber, and the painting came to center more on struggle than triumph. Leutze recruited American tourists and art students in Europe to serve as models and assistants. Together they finished the painting in 1850.<sup>4</sup>

Just after it was completed, a fire broke out in the artist’s studio, and the canvas was damaged in a curious way. The effect of smoke and flame was to mask the central figures of Washington and Monroe in a white haze, while the other men in the boat remained sharp and clear. The ruined painting became the property of an insurance company, which put it on public display. Even in its damaged state it won a gold medal in Berlin and was much celebrated in Europe. It became part of the permanent collection of the Bremen Art Museum. There it stayed until September 5, 1942, when it was destroyed in a bombing raid by the British Royal Air Force, in what some have seen as a final act of retribution for the American Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Emanuel Leutze painted another full-sized copy, and sent it to America in 1851, where it caused a sensation. In New York more than fifty thousand people came to see it, among them the future novelist Henry James, who was then a child of eight. Many years later he remembered that no impression in his youth “was half so momentous as that of the epoch-making masterpiece of Mr. Leutze, which showed us Washington crossing the Delaware, in a wondrous flare of projected gaslight and with the effect of a revelation.” Henry James recalled that he “gaped responsive at every item, lost in the marvel of wintry light, of the sharpness of the ice-blocks, the sickness of the sick soldier.” Most of all he was inspired by the upright image of Washington, by “the profiled national hero’s purpose, as might be said, of standing *up*, as much as possible, even indeed of doing it almost on one leg, in such difficulties.”<sup>6</sup>

The great painting went to the city of Washington and was exhibited in the Rotunda of the National Capitol. Northerners admired it as a symbol of freedom and union; southerners liked it as an image of liberty and independence. When the Civil War began,



it was used to raise money for the Union Cause and the antislavery movement. The presence of an African American in the boat was not an accident; the artist was a strong abolitionist.

In 1897, private collector John S. Kennedy bought the painting for the extravagant sum of \$16,000, and gave it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There it remained until 1950, when romantic history paintings passed out of fashion among sophisticated New Yorkers. It was sent away to the Dallas Art Museum in Texas, and then to Washington Crossing State Park in Pennsylvania, where it stayed until 1970.

Among the American people the painting never passed out of fashion. Many cherish it as an image of patriotism, and they have reproduced it in icons of wood, metal, ceramics, textiles. It appeared on postage stamps, dinner plates, place mats, key rings, coffee mugs, and tee shirts. By the mid-twentieth century the painting was so familiar that artists quoted its image without explanation, not always in a reverent way. Cartoonists invented angry satires of Nixon Crossing the Delaware, Ronald Reagan Crossing the Caribbean, Feminists Crossing the Rubicon, and Multiculturalists Rocking the Boat.<sup>7</sup>

American iconoclasts made the painting a favorite target. Postmodernists studied it with a skeptical eye and asked, "Is this the way that American history happened? Is it a way that history ever happens? Are any people capable of acting in such a heroic manner?" The iconoclasts answered all of those questions in the negative, and they debunked the painting with high enthusiasm. On National Public Radio in 2002, commentator Ina Jaffe argued at length that Emanuel Leutze's painting bore little resemblance to "historical reality," and she recited a long list of its "historical flaws." As other critics had done, she pointed out correctly that the flag was wrong; the Stars and Stripes was not adopted until 1777. "What's more," Ms. Jaffe added, warming to her work, "the boats used by the Continental army were different, the time of day is wrong (it was actually night), and the jagged chunks of ice floating near the boat would have been smoothed over by the flow of the river." She complained that the painting was not merely inaccurate but absurd. Her favorite example was the same detail that inspired young Henry James: George Washington was not only standing in the boat; he was standing on one leg. Ms. Jaffe declared, "There's no way Washington could have stood up for the journey without losing his footing and being tossed into the freezing water."<sup>8</sup>

The debunkers were right about some of the details in the painting, but they were wrong about others, and they rarely asked about

the accuracy of its major themes. To do so is to discover that the larger ideas in Emanuel Leutze's art are true to the history that inspired it. The artist was right in creating an atmosphere of high drama around the event, and a feeling of desperation among the soldiers in the boats. To search the writings of the men and women who were there (hundreds of firsthand accounts survive) is to find that they believed the American cause was very near collapse on Christmas night in 1776. In five months of heavy fighting after the Declaration of Independence, George Washington's army had suffered many disastrous defeats and gained no major victories. It had lost 90 percent of its strength. The small remnant who crossed the Delaware River were near the end of their resources, and they believed that another defeat could destroy the Cause, as they called it. The artist captured very accurately their sense of urgency, in what was truly a pivotal moment for American history.

Further, the painting is true to the scale of that event, which was small by the measure of other great happenings in American history. At Trenton on December 26, 1776, 2,400 Americans fought 1,500 Hessians in a battle that lasted about two hours. By contrast, at Antietam in the American Civil War, 115,000 men fought a great and terrible battle that continued for a day. The Battle of the Bulge, in the Second World War, involved more than a million men in fighting that went on for more than a month. By those comparisons, Washington's Crossing was indeed a very small event, and the artist was true to its dimensions.<sup>9</sup>

But the painting also reminds us that size is not a measure of significance. The little battles of the American Revolution were conflicts between large historical processes, and the artist knew well what was at stake. He understood better than many Americans that their Revolution was truly a world event. We shall see that Washington's Crossing and the events that followed had a surprising impact, not only in America but in Britain and Germany and throughout the world.

Emanuel Leutze also understood that something more was at issue in this event. The small battles near the Delaware were a collision between two discoveries about the human condition that were made in the early modern era. One of them was the discovery that people could organize a society on the basis of liberty and freedom, and could actually make it work. The ideas themselves were not new in the world, but for the first time, entire social and political systems were constructed primarily on that foundation.

Another new discovery was about the capacity of human beings for order and discipline. For many millennia, people had been made

to serve others, but this was something more than that. It was an invention of new methods by which people could be trained to engage their will and creativity in the service of another: by drill and ritual, reward and punishment, persuasion and belief. Further, they could be trained to do so not as slaves or servants or robots, but in an active and willing way.

These two discoveries began as altruisms, and developed rapidly in the age of the Enlightenment, not only in Europe and America but in Ch'ing China and Mughal India and around the world. Together they define a central tension in our modern condition, more so than new technology or growing wealth. As ideas they were not opposites, but they were often opposed, and they collided in the American Revolution. In 1776, a new American army of free men fought two modern European armies of order and discipline. When the conflict began in earnest, during the late summer and fall of 1776, the forces of order won most of the major battles, but an army of free men won the winter campaign that followed. They did so not by imitating a European army of order, a profound error in historical interpretations of the War of Independence, but by developing the strengths of an open system in a more disciplined way.

Emanuel Leutze's painting shows only one side of this great struggle, but the artist clearly understood what it was about. He represented something of its nature in his image of George Washington and the men who soldiered with him. The more we learn about Washington, the greater his contribution becomes, in developing a new idea of leadership during the American Revolution. Emanuel Leutze brings it out in a tension between Washington and the other men in the boat. We see them in their diversity and their stubborn autonomy. These men lived the rights they were defending, often to the fury of their commander-in-chief. The painting gives us some sense of the complex relations that they had with one another, and also with their leader. To study them with their general is to understand what George Washington meant when he wrote, "A people unused to restraint must be led; they will not be drove."<sup>10</sup> All of these things were beginning to happen on Christmas night in 1776, when George Washington crossed the Delaware. Thereby hangs a tale.

## THE REBELS

### ☛ Washington's Dilemma: An Army of Liberty

Men accustomed to unbounded freedom, and no controul, cannot brook the Restraint which is indispensably necessary to the good Order and Government of an Army.

—George Washington, 1776<sup>1</sup>

**I**T WAS MARCH 17, 1776, the mud season in New England. A Continental officer of high rank was guiding his horse through the potholed streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Those who knew horses noticed that he rode with the easy grace of a natural rider, and a complete mastery of himself. He sat “quiet,” as an equestrian would say, with his muscular legs extended on long leathers and toes pointed down in the stirrups, in the old-fashioned way. The animal and the man moved so fluently together that one observer was put in mind of a centaur. Another wrote that he was incomparably “the best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback.”<sup>2</sup>

He was a big man, immaculate in dress, and of such charismatic presence that he filled the street even when he rode alone. A crowd gathered to watch him go by, as if he were a one-man parade. Children bowed and bobbed to him. Soldiers called him “Your Excellency,” a title rare in America. Gentlemen doffed their hats and spoke his name with deep respect: General Washington.

As he came closer, his features grew more distinct. In 1776, we would not have recognized him from the Stuart painting that we know

too well. At the age of forty-two, he looked young, lean, and very fit—more so than we remember him. He had the sunburned, storm-beaten face of a man who lived much of his life in the open. His hair was a light hazel-brown, thinning around the temples. Beneath a high forehead, a broad Roman nose bore a few small scars of smallpox. People remembered his soft blue-gray eyes, set very wide apart and deep in their sockets. The lines around his eyes gave an unexpected hint of laughter. A Cambridge lady remarked on his “appearance of good humor.” A Hessian observed that a “slight smile in his expression when he spoke inspired affection and respect.” Many were impressed by his air of composure and surprised by his modesty.<sup>3</sup>

He had been living in Cambridge for eight months and was a familiar sight in the town, but much about him seemed alien to New England. Riding at his side on most occasions in the war was his closest companion, a tall African slave in an exotic turban and long riding coat, also a superb horseman. Often his aides were with him,



*George Washington with his slave companion, William Lee, painting by John Trumbull (1780). Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Charles Allen Munn.*

mostly young officers from southern Maryland and northern Virginia who shared the easy manners and bearing of Chesapeake gentlemen.<sup>4</sup>

It was Sunday afternoon, March 17, 1776, and George Washington had been to church, as was his custom. At his headquarters the countersign was "Saint Patrick" in honor of the day, but nobody was bothering with countersigns, for that morning the shaky discipline of the Revolutionary army had collapsed in scenes of jubilation. American troops had at last succeeded in driving the British army from Boston, after a long siege of eleven months.<sup>5</sup> The turning point had come a few days earlier when the Americans occupied Dorchester Heights overlooking the town. The British garrison organized a desperate assault to drive them away. As both sides braced for a bloody fight, a sudden storm struck Boston with such violence that the attack was called off on account of the weather. The Americans seized the advantage and greatly strengthened their position. On the night of March 16 they moved their heavy guns forward to Nook's Hill, very close to Boston.<sup>6</sup>

The next morning, March 17, British commanders in Boston awoke to the disagreeable sight of American batteries looming above them and decided that the town was untenable. While Yankee gunners held their fire, the British troops evacuated the town "with the greatest precipitation." Altogether about nine thousand Regulars boarded transports in the harbor, along with 1,200 women and children of the army, 1,100 heartsick Tories, and thirty captive Whigs. The ships paused for a few anxious days in Nantasket Roads, while Americans worried that it might be a ruse. Then the ships stood out to sea, and the largest British army in America disappeared beyond the horizon.<sup>7</sup>

When the British troops sailed away, many Americans thought that the war was over, and the hero of the hour was General Washington. Honors and congratulations poured in. Harvard College awarded him an honorary degree, "in recognition of his civic and military virtue." In Dunstable, Massachusetts, the sixth daughter of Captain Bancroft was baptized Martha Dandridge, "the maiden name of his Excellency General Washington's Lady." The infant wore a gown of Continental buff and blue, with "a sprig of evergreen on its head, emblematic of his Excellency's glory and provincial affection."<sup>8</sup>

As spring approached in 1776, Americans had many things to celebrate. Their Revolution had survived its first year with more success than anyone expected. The fighting had started at Lexington Green in a way that united most Americans in a common cause.

Untrained militia, fighting bravely on their own turf, had dealt heavy blows to British Regulars and Loyalists on many American fields: at Concord and Lexington on April 19, 1775, Ticonderoga in May, Bunker Hill in June, Virginia's Great Bridge in December, and Norfolk in January of 1776. North Carolinians had won another battle at Moore's Creek Bridge in February, and the new Continental army had gained a major victory at Boston in March. Another stunning success would follow at South Carolina in June, when a British invasion fleet was shattered by a small palmetto fort in Charleston harbor.

In fourteen months of fighting the Americans won many victories and suffered only one major defeat, an epic disaster in Canada. By the spring of 1776, royal officials had been removed from power in every capital, and all but a few remnants of "ministerial troops" had left the thirteen colonies. Every province governed itself under congresses, conventions, committees of safety, and ancient charters. A Continental Congress in Philadelphia had assumed the functions of sovereignty. It recruited armies, issued money, made treaties with the Indians, and controlled the frontiers. European states were secretly supplying the colonies, and American privateers ranged the oceans. Commerce and industry were flourishing, despite a British attempt to shut them down.

In the spring of 1776, the goal of the American Congress was not yet independence but restoration of rights within the empire. They still called themselves the United Colonies and flew the Grand Union Flag, which combined thirteen American stripes with the British Union Jack. Many hoped that Parliament would come to its senses and allow self-government within the empire. More than a few thought that the evacuation of the British army from Boston would end a war that nobody wanted. The members of the Massachusetts General Court were thinking that way on March 28, 1776, when they thanked George Washington for his military services and wished that he might "in retirement, enjoy that Peace and Satisfaction of mind, which always attends the Good and Great." The implication was that his military work was done.<sup>9</sup>

Tories persisted in every state, but they were not thought to be a serious threat. Americans laughed about a Tory in Kinderhook, New York, who invaded a quilting frolic of young women and "began his aspersions on Congress." He kept at it until they "stripped him naked to the waist, and instead of tar, covered him with molasses and for feathers took the downy tops of flags, which grow in the meadow and coated him well, and then let him go." For the young women of Kinderhook, the Revolution itself had become a frolic.<sup>10</sup>

In that happy moment, one might expect that George Washington would have shared the general mood. Outwardly he did so, but in private letters his thoughts were deeply troubled. To his brother he confided on March 31, 1776, “No man perhaps since the first Institution of Armys ever commanded one under more difficult Circumstances than I have done. To enumerate the particulars would fill a volume—many of my difficulties and distresses were of so peculiar a cast that in order to conceal them from the enemy, I was obliged to conceal them from my friends, indeed from my own Army.”<sup>11</sup>

Washington understood that every American success deepened the resolve of British leaders to break the colonial rebellion, as they had broken other rebellions in Scotland, Ireland, and England. He was sure that the Regulars would soon return, and he was very clear about their next move. As early as March 13, 1776, four days before the British left Boston, Washington advised Congress that the enemy would strike next at New York and warned that if they succeeded in “making a Lodgement,” it would not be easy to evict them.<sup>12</sup>

The next day, while most of his troops were still engaged around Boston, George Washington began to shift his regiments to Manhattan. He informed Congress that when the last British troops left Boston he would “immediately repair to New York with the remainder of the army.” To save his men the exhaustion of marching on the “mirey roads” of New England, he ordered his staff to plan transport by sea.<sup>13</sup>

The defense of New York was a daunting prospect. Since January, Washington and his officers had discussed the supreme difficulty of protecting an island city against a maritime enemy who commanded the waters around it. They knew the power of the Royal Navy and respected the professional skill of the British army. But Washington was more concerned about his own army than that of the enemy. The problem was not a shortage of men or munitions. Half a million free Americans were of military age. Most were ready to fight for their rights, and many were doing so. The great majority owned their own weapons, and Europeans were happy to supply whatever they lacked.

Washington’s dilemma was mainly about something else. He did not know how he could lead an amateur American army against highly skilled Regular troops. After a year in command, Washington wrote “licentiousness & every kind of disorder triumphantly reign.”<sup>14</sup> The problem was compounded in his mind by the diversity of his army. He wrote, “the little discipline I have been labouring to



establish in the army, is in a manner done away by having such a mixture of troops." They came from many parts of America. They joined in the common cause but understood it in very different ways. This great "mixture of troops" who were used to no control presented George Washington with a double dilemma. One part of his problem was about how to lead an army of free men. Another was about how to lead men in the common cause when they thought and acted differently from one another, and from their commander-in-chief.<sup>15</sup>

Part of George Washington's difficulty rose from his own origins and upbringing, in a very special American place called the Northern Neck of Virginia. It was a huge tract of five million acres between the Potomac and the Rappahannock rivers, so large that it spanned three degrees of longitude from the Chesapeake Bay to the mountains of western Virginia.<sup>16</sup> In 1649, the Northern Neck was created by England's Charles II as a reward to some of his most faithful royalist supporters. One of them, Thomas Lord Culpepper, bought out the rest and passed the land by inheritance to the Fairfax family, an interesting and eccentric clan who combined Cavalier manners with Roundhead principles in the English Civil War. After much litigation, a British court ruled in 1745 that the entire Northern Neck belonged to one man, Thomas Fairfax, sixth Baron Fairfax (1693–1781). He liked it so well that he moved there from England and built a rural retreat called Greenway Court in the Shenandoah country at the western end of his domain.<sup>17</sup>

The family interests were managed by Lord Fairfax's cousin Colonel William Fairfax, who built a great house at Belvoir next to Mount Vernon. The gentry of the Northern Neck became agents of the Fairfaxes and great landholders in their own right. These families of Carters, Lees, Marshalls, Custises, Washingtons, and Fairfaxes intermarried, as George Washington's older stepbrother Lawrence married Colonel Fairfax's daughter Anne Fairfax Washington. They looked after one another, and when young George Washington lost his father, Lord Fairfax and Colonel Fairfax took a fostering interest in the young man. They became his mentors, and their houses were his schools. They were quick to recognize his promise and watched over his development, not always with an approving eye.<sup>18</sup>

From these men George Washington learned the creed he followed all his life. It valued self-government, discipline, virtue, reason, and restraint. Historians have called it a stoic philosophy, but it was far removed from the ancient Stoicism of the slave Epictetus, who sought a renunciation of the world, or the emperor Marcus

Aurelius, who wished to be in the world but not of it. The philosophy that Washington learned among the ruling families of the Northern Neck was a modern idea. It was a philosophy of moral striving through virtuous action and right conduct, by powerful men who believed that their duty was to lead others in a changing world. Most of all, it was a way of combining power with responsibility, and liberty with discipline.

Much of this creed was about honor: not “primal honor,” not the honor of the duel, not a hair-trigger revenge against insult, or a pride of aggressive masculinity. This was honor as an emblem of virtue. These gentlemen of the Northern Neck lived for honor in that sense. The only fear that George Washington ever acknowledged in his life was a fear that his actions would “reflect eternal dishonour upon me.”<sup>19</sup>

A major part of this code of honor was an idea of courage. The men around young George Washington assumed that a gentleman would act with physical courage in the face of danger, pain, suffering, and death. They gave equal weight to moral courage in adversity, prosperity, trial, and temptation. For them, a vital part of leadership was the ability to persist in what one believed to be the right way. This form of courage was an idea of moral stamina, which Washington held all his life. Stamina in turn was about strength and endurance as both a moral and a physical idea.

These men of the Northern Neck believed that people were not born to these qualities but learned them by discipline and exercise. Washington himself was a sickly youth, and he suffered much from illness. He was taught to strengthen himself by equestrian exercise and spent much of his life outdoors on the back of a horse. Whenever he had the time, he went hunting three times a week. Even in his last years, he walked several miles every night to keep fit. By exercise Washington acquired extraordinary stamina and strength. The painter Charles Willson Peale remembered a moment at Mount Vernon in 1772 when he and other men were pitching a heavy iron bar, a popular sport in the Chesapeake. Washington appeared and, “without taking off his coat, held out his hand for the missile, and hurled it into the air.” Peale remembered that “it lost the power of gravitation, and whizzed through the air, striking the ground far, very far beyond our utmost efforts.” Washington said, “When you beat my pitch, young gentlemen, I’ll try again.”<sup>20</sup>

Even as commander-in-chief, Washington joined his men in games of strength and skill, always developing his stamina in a disciplined way. In times of great stress he could keep going when others

failed. His brother officer John Armstrong wrote that he “maintains full possession of himself, is indefatigable by day and night.”<sup>21</sup>

This modern creed of the Fairfaxes and Washingtons was linked to an idea of liberty. Washington thought of liberty in the Stoic way, as independence from what he called “involuntary passion.” He was a man of strong passions, which he struggled to keep in check. For him the worst slavery was to be in bondage to unbridled passion and not in “full possession of himself.”

George Washington also thought of liberty as a condition of autonomy from external dominion, but not as we do today. He believed that only a gentleman of independent means could be truly free. This way of thinking was widely shared by the gentry of the Northern Neck, and it made liberty into a system of stratification. Gentlemen of honor and independence such as the Fairfaxes and Washingtons had great liberty; small freeholders had not so much of it. Tenants had little liberty, servants less, and slaves none at all. This was a hierarchical world where liberty and slavery coexisted—to us a contradiction because we do not share the assumption of inequality on which it rested.

Washington grew up among many inequalities, and he accepted most of them. He was very conscious of social rank. Washington was a very sociable man among his peers, at his ease with others of his class, and often in their company. From 1768 to 1775 he entertained two thousand people at Mount Vernon, mostly “people of rank,” as he called them.<sup>22</sup> He deliberately kept others at a distance and advised his manager at Mount Vernon always to deal that way with inferiors. “To treat them civilly is no more than what all men are entitled to,” Washington wrote, “but my advice to you is, to keep them at a proper distance; for they will grow upon familiarity, in proportion as you sink in authority.”<sup>23</sup> Washington had been taught to treat people of every rank with civility and “condescension,” a word that has changed its meaning in the modern era. In Washington’s world, to condescend was to treat inferiors with decency and respect while maintaining a system of inequality.

His world was also a hierarchy of wealth, and Washington acquired a large share of it. When his brother died, he became the master of Mount Vernon at the age of twenty-two, leasing it from his sister-in-law, then owning it outright. At thirty-six he married Martha Parke Custis, a very beautiful and gracious woman, and one of the richest widows in Virginia. By skillful management and good luck his property increased rapidly before the Revolution. Public service diminished his wealth, and he was forced to sell large tracts of land

to pay the expenses of his presidency. Even with that burden he built one of the largest family fortunes in America, with a net worth of more than a million dollars. In 1799, his estate with that of his wife included many thousands of acres and 331 slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Part of his world was a hierarchy of race. In his early years Washington owned many slaves and actively bought and sold them. Before the Revolution he shared the attitudes of his time and place and fully accepted slavery, but after 1775 his thoughts changed rapidly. He began to speak of slavery as a great evil, and by 1777 he wrote of his determination to “get clear” of it. After much thought and careful preparation, he emancipated all his slaves in his will.<sup>25</sup>

Even as Washington was a farmer and slaveowner, he also decided to follow a profession of arms. In his youth he bought books on military subjects. His military career started at high rank in 1752, when by virtue of his social standing he was commissioned a major in the Virginia militia at the age of twenty. In 1753, he volunteered to lead a party deep into the Ohio country through mountainous terrain in wintry weather to deliver an ultimatum from the governor of Virginia to a French commander who was thought to be trespassing on Virginia land. Washington and a frontier guide were nearly murdered by an Indian, whom they overpowered. The guide wanted to kill the Indian, but Washington refused. After many adventures he got home again and submitted a report that made him a world figure, “the talk of two hemispheres.”<sup>26</sup>

The French and Indian Wars were a hard school for a young soldier. Washington experienced a humiliating defeat at Fort Necessity, then a disaster with General Braddock, where the young Virginian had two horses shot from under him and four bullets through his coats and survived without a scratch. Through it all his reputation kept growing. In 1755, he was promoted to colonel and appointed commander-in-chief of Virginia forces. At the age of twenty-three, young Colonel Washington was something of a martinet, with a deep concern for order and discipline. To the governor of Virginia, he complained of “insolent soldiers” and “indolent officers.” He raged against the undisciplined militia, demanded more rigorous military laws, and tried to organize a new First Virginia Regiment on the model of British Regulars. Washington wrote to his captains in 1757, “Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.”<sup>27</sup> His American troops did not respond with enthusiasm. In one draft of 400 recruits, 114 deserted. Washington clapped his men in irons, locked them in a “dark room,” and made heavy

use of the lash. When that failed, he hanged some of them on a special gibbet that he raised forty feet high. It was a monument to his concern for discipline, and also to his frustration.<sup>28</sup>

Washington led his men in hard campaigning along the western frontier. In ten months his Virginia regiment fought twenty battles against the Indians and lost a third of its strength, but the civil population suffered less on the Virginia frontier than in other colonies. Washington was often in extreme peril, riding fearlessly with a few men through deep woods controlled by hostile Indians. Again he emerged unscathed.<sup>29</sup>

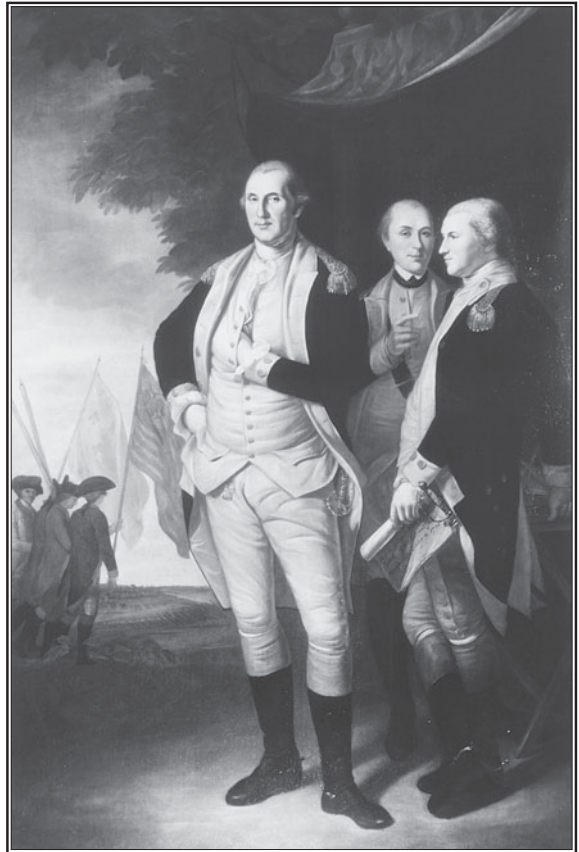
When the Revolution began, some of Washington's closest connections were Loyalists. He had large investments in the empire, with assets in Bank of England securities. But when he heard the news of the bloodshed on Lexington Green, he joined the Revolution and sent a letter of explanation to George William Fairfax. "Unhappy it is though to reflect," he wrote, "that a Brother's Sword has been sheathed in a Brother's Breast, and that the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with blood, or Inhabited by Slaves. Sad alternative! But can a virtuous man hesitate in his choice?"<sup>30</sup>

These were his alternatives in 1775: liberty or slavery, virtue or corruption, honor or disgrace, courage or cowardice. In his own way this gentleman of the Northern Neck was as radical as any Revolutionist in the country. He was ready to "shake off all connections with a state so unjust and unnatural," nearly four months before the Continental Congress was prepared to do so.<sup>31</sup>

When the Congress searched for a commander-in-chief of the army on June 15, 1775, Washington was not everyone's first choice. High-toned Whigs such as Elbridge Gerry and Joseph Warren preferred Charles Lee, the former British officer whose radical rhetoric was more to their taste. Other New Englanders thought that the commander should be one of their own, and half a dozen Yankees were eager for the job. But Samuel Adams counted the votes and told his friends that "southern" delegates would support a Continental army only if a Virginian were to lead it. Washington was the available man: the only Virginian with experience of command and young enough to take the field. He was the only member of Congress who wore a uniform, and it suited him. One congressman wrote of his "easy soldier-like air." His "modesty" and "independent fortune" were mentioned in his favor, a reassuring combination to these gentleman Whigs. Perhaps the decisive element was his air of Stoic calm; he was a man Whigs could trust with power. The Adams cous-

ins proposed and seconded the nomination. Congress made it unanimous. Everyone was happy except George Washington, who turned to Patrick Henry and said, “Remember, Mr. Henry what I now tell you: from the day I enter upon the command of the American armies, I date my fall, and the ruin of my reputation.”<sup>32</sup>

Washington surrounded himself with a staff who shared his values. Most were bright and able young gentlemen of his own rank and region. Of twenty-two aides-de-camp and military secretaries who served him from July 1775 to July 1777, twelve were Virginians and Marylanders. They were chosen for character, manners, efficiency, and courage under fire, where they had a major function. Washington called them his “military family.” They formed bonds of intimacy and affection with one another and their chief.<sup>33</sup> His military secretary was Robert Hanson Harrison, a hunting companion before the war and a member of the Fairfax County militia. He was recruited through other members of the Washington family and



*George Washington, Lafayette, and Tench Tilghman* by Charles Willson Peale (1784). Maryland Commission on Artistic Property, Maryland State House.

became “the indispensable headquarters secretary” from 1775 to 1781.<sup>34</sup> His closest aide was Tench Tilghman, a bright young Maryland gentleman of a family close to the Washingtons. He had made his fortune as a Philadelphia merchant and served without salary. Washington was very fond of him and wrote later, “In August [1776] he joined my family and has been in every action in which the main Army was concerned. He has been a zealous servant and slave to the public and faithful assistant to me for near five years.”<sup>35</sup>

Often with the general was his wife, Martha, who traveled back and forth in high style between Mount Vernon and the army’s headquarters, with slave coachmen and postilions in the brilliant scarlet and white livery of the Washington family. In winter she sometimes traveled in an elegant sleigh. She was a canny manager of land and slaves and became her husband’s best friend and most intimate advisor. In the army’s headquarters she pitched in with the paperwork, and he came to rely on her support.

Another close companion was Washington’s slave William Lee. Washington bought him in 1767 and made him his manservant, but he was more than that. Washington called him “my fellow.” He was a comrade, a friend, and a brilliant rider in a class with Washington himself. Before the war they hunted together across the Northern Neck. William Lee was said to be as fearless as Washington himself,



*Martha Washington*, by James Peale (1796), watercolor miniature on ivory, 1-9/16 x 1-1/4 inches. Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

and the two men “would rush, at full speed, through brake or tangled wood, in a style at which modern huntsmen would stand aghast.” William Lee rode with Washington through the war, and early paintings showed the two men together in battle. Washington later emancipated him “as a testimony for his attachment to me and for his faithful service during the revolutionary war.”

Throughout the war, Washington’s “military family” surrounded him with the culture in which he was raised. Male and female, slave and free, they reinforced his values and beliefs, which were very different from those of others in the American army.<sup>36</sup>

Those differences began to emerge when Washington took command in Massachusetts. As he rode into New England he wrote of the landscape as if it were a foreign country. In camp he was appalled by New England soldiers. “The officers generally speaking are the most indifferent kind of people I ever saw,” he confided to Lund Washington. “They are an exceeding dirty and nasty people.” He often complained of the “levelling spirit” of New England, where “the principles of democracy so universally prevail.”<sup>37</sup>

New England was more fluid in its society than the Northern Neck of Virginia. In 1776, officers often rose from the ranks and sometimes returned to them. An example was William Bostwick, who enlisted in the Seventh Connecticut Regiment as a company clerk and was commissioned as first lieutenant in October 1776, then went home when his enlistment expired, enlisted in the Connecticut militia, and served as a captain in “all alarms to the close of the war.”<sup>38</sup>

Another example was Joseph White, who joined the army as a private at the age of eighteen. He acquired an officer’s coat and wangled an appointment as “assistant adjutant” in a regiment of artillery, a rank and office of his own invention. One day he was sent to pick up orders from General Washington, who was surprised by White’s youth and asked, “Pray sir, what officer are you?” White answered that he was assistant adjutant of the regiment of artillery. “Indeed,” said the general, “you are very young to do that duty.” White replied, “I told him I was young, but was growing older every day.” He remembered that Washington “turned his face to his wife, and both smiled.”<sup>39</sup>

Men such as Joseph White and William Bostwick became the core of the New England army. To Washington, the “levelling spirit” of New England appeared as indiscipline and disorder. New Englanders in turn did not like his hierarchical attitudes, and Washington



began to feel that he could not do his job without rendering himself “very obnoxious to a gre[at] part of these People.”

This difference was a problem in the army, for as late as June 1776 two-thirds of Continental regiments under Washington’s command were New Englanders. Yankee farmers and mechanics turned out in large numbers. In the town of Concord in Massachusetts, nearly all able-bodied men of military age served willingly in the years from 1775 to 1777, and more than 75 percent saw combat at



*New England Troops* (1775), frontispiece for H. H. Brackenridge, *The Battle of Bunkers-Hill*, Philadelphia (1776), one of very few original contemporary American images of American soldiers early in the Revolution. The kneeling figure in the foreground wears small clothes and a gentleman’s riding coat with dragoon sleeves. The soldiers behind him are wearing hunting shirts and leggings. Their broad-brimmed hats are cocked in ways that represent the individuality of these men. Library of Congress.

Bunker Hill and subsequent battles. It was much the same in most New England towns, which strongly supported the war at heavy cost.<sup>40</sup>

Most of these New England soldiers came from yeoman families with land and property. They were expected to equip themselves with the help of their families. When Joseph Plumb Martin of Milford, Connecticut, joined the state levies for six months, his grandfather said, "Well you are going a soldiering then, are you? . . . I suppose you must be fitted out for the expedition." Private Martin was equipped by his grandparents with "arms and accouterments, clothing, and cake, and cheese in plenty, not forgetting to put my pocket Bible into my knapsack."<sup>41</sup>

In 1776, these Yankee regiments may have been the most literate army in the world. Nearly all New England privates could read and write. Even young recruits such as Martin, who was just sixteen, were caught up in the great public questions that were debated in kitchens, taverns, and town meetings. "During the winter of 1775–76, by hearing the conversation and disputes of the good old farmer politicians of the times, I collected pretty correct ideas of the contest between this country and the mother country, (as it was then called)," he wrote. "I thought I was as warm a patriot as the best of them."<sup>42</sup> These New England men were raised to a unique idea of liberty as independence, freedom as the right of belonging to a community, and rights as entailing a sense of mutual obligation.

George Washington and the New England men slowly found a way to work together. Washington learned to listen, to reason, and to work through councils of war in which a majority of officers were Yankees. New Englanders learned that an army was not a town meeting, that somebody had to give orders, and that orders had to be obeyed. The result was an untidy and unstable compromise, which allowed an army of cantankerous Yankees to operate under a gentleman of Virginia.

George Washington had a special problem with a Yankee regiment that was by all accounts one of the best in the army. The Fourteenth Massachusetts Continentals were raised in Marblehead and recruited from fishing towns on the north shore of Massachusetts, especially Beverly, Salem, Lynn, and Marblehead.<sup>43</sup> Their colonel was John Glover, prosperous owner of sloops and schooners in the Atlantic trade and member of the tight "codfish aristocracy" who dominated the north shore of New England. He was not a radical by nature, but he and his townsmen felt the sting of tyranny in writs of assistance, corrupt customs officers, and illegal impressments of Marblehead crews

by the Royal Navy. These repeated acts turned a conservative ship captain into a revolutionary.

Many of his men were seamen and fishermen. One was described as wearing “a blue coat, with leather buttons, and tarred trousers.” They were very well armed, and many had bayonets. John Glover ran his regiment like a taut ship with the same system of command that prevailed at sea. A Pennsylvania officer observed that “there was an appearance of discipline in this corps; the officers seemed to have mixed with the world, and to understand what belonged to their stations.”<sup>44</sup>

The regiment also reflected the ethnic composition of New England maritime towns. Indians and Africans sailed in Yankee ships and settled in the seaport villages. They also enlisted in Glover’s regiment. He knew these men as shipmates and welcomed them to his command. Others in the army did not approve. An officer from the middle states, Alexander Graydon, wrote of Glover’s men, “In this regiment there were a number of negroes, which to persons unaccustomed to such associations, had a disagreeable, degrading effect.”<sup>45</sup>

At first George Washington was not happy about the enlistment of African Americans, but after much discussion he worked out a sequence of compromises. The first was to allow African Americans to continue in the ranks but to prohibit new enlistments. The second was to tolerate new enlistments but not to approve them. By the end of the war, African Americans were actively recruited, and some rose to the rank of colonel in New England. Washington’s attitudes were different from those of Colonel Glover, but here again he worked out a dynamic compromise that developed through time. It also kept the peace within the army, allowed men of different views to fight the war together, and encompassed another idea of freedom in the American Revolution. In that process the Continental army, beginning with the Marblehead regiment, became the first integrated national institution in the United States.<sup>46</sup>

George Washington had another problem with regiments of riflemen who came from the backcountry of western Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Of all the units in the American army, none were more fascinating to their opponents. In the summer of 1776, British troops captured a rifleman and took him aboard the flagship of Admiral William Howe. British officers gathered to study the man, his clothing, and especially his weapon. They took a keen professional interest in the American long rifles that fired a small but le-

thal half-ounce ball with astonishing accuracy over great distances. Admiral Howe's secretary Ambrose Serle noted that his weapon was "a handsome construction, and entirely manufactured in America."<sup>47</sup>

Many tales were told about the accuracy of these weapons in the hands of backcountry marksmen. American riflemen loved to give demonstrations, aiming at a small mark the size of a man's eye or the tip of his nose, and hitting it repeatedly from a distance of 250 yards. British and Hessian officers lived in fear of American riflemen. Lieutenant Johann Heinrich von Bardeleben noted that "most of our officers must cut the rank insignia from their uniforms, supposedly because the rebel riflemen had their greatest interest in officers."<sup>48</sup>

One of the most formidable units was a regiment of Pennsylvania riflemen, famous for their black hunting shirts. Their leader was Colonel Edward Hand (1744–1802), an Irish immigrant, trained in medicine at Trinity College Dublin. He came to America in 1767



*A Backcountry Infantryman, ca. 1776, an "accurate representation by a German officer in British service." This backsettler carries a musket and bayonet. Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.*

as surgeon's mate in the Eighteenth Royal Irish Regiment and settled as a physician in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He strongly supported the Revolution and was elected colonel of the regiment.<sup>49</sup>

Backcountry regiments from western Virginia were called "shirt men," from their homespun backcountry hunting shirts made of sturdy tow cloth that had been "steeped in a tan vat until it became the color of a dry leaf." In woods or high grass they were nearly invisible. Congress recommended on November 4, 1775, that their hunting shirts and leggings be adopted for the entire army.<sup>50</sup>

One backcountry company came from Culpeper County, in western Virginia on the east slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They called themselves the Culpeper Minutemen and mustered three hundred men with bucktails in their hats and tomahawks or scalping knives in their belts. One of its members wrote that they wore "strong brown linen hunting-shirts, dyed with leaves and the words 'Liberty or Death,' worked in large white letters on the breast." They armed themselves with "fowling pieces and squirrel guns" and marched to Williamsburg, where tidewater Virginians were not thrilled to see them. One Culpeper man remembered, "the people hearing that we came from the backwoods, and seeing our savage-looking equipments, seemed as much afraid of us as if we had been Indians."<sup>51</sup>

Part of their "savage-looking equipments" may have been their flag. A sketch of it by a historian in the mid-nineteenth century shows the dark image of a timber rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike, and the words "Don't Tread on Me." The same symbol was adopted at the same time by the backcountry militia of Westmoreland County in Pennsylvania and by other western units.<sup>52</sup> Here was another idea of liberty, different from the collective consciousness of New England towns, and the liberty-as-hierarchy among the Fairfax men, and liberty for African Americans among the Marblehead mariners. The backsettlers spoke of liberty in the first person singular: "Don't Tread on *Me*."

When the backcountry regiments joined the Continental army outside Boston, they made much trouble for George Washington. He wrote that "some of them especially from Pennsylvania, know no more of a Rifle than my horse." They were difficult men to lead. The social attitudes of a Fairfax gentleman did not sit well with them, and they were utterly defiant of discipline and order. Washington grew so angry with them that he ordered some to be tried for mutiny and threatened them with capital punishment. The backcountrymen responded by coming close to a full-blown insurrection.<sup>53</sup>

They also started more serious trouble with New Englanders. It happened in Cambridge when a regiment of Virginia riflemen in “white linen frocks, ruffled and fringed,” met Glover’s Marblehead regiment in “round jackets and fisher’s trousers.” There were mutual shouts of derision, and then something worse. Many of the Virginians were slaveowners, and some of the Marblehead men were former African slaves. Insults gave way to blows, and blows to a “fierce struggle” with “biting and gouging.” One spectator wrote that “in less than five minutes more than a thousand combatants were on the field.” Americans from one region began to fight Americans from another part of the country, on a larger scale than the battles at Lexington and Concord.

Washington acted quickly. A soldier from Massachusetts named Israel Trask watched him go about it. As the fighting spread through the camp, Washington appeared with his “colored servant, both on horseback.” Together the general and William Lee rode straight into the middle of the riot. Trask watched Washington with awe as “with the spring of a deer he leaped from his saddle, threw the reins of his bridle into the hands of his servant, and rushed into the thickest of the melees, with an iron grip seized two tall, brawny, athletic, savage-looking riflemen by the throat, keeping them at arm’s length, alternately shaking and talking to them.”

Talking was probably not the right word. The rioters stopped fighting, turned in amazement to watch Washington in action, then fled at “the top of their speed in all directions.” The trouble ended without courts, irons, or whips that were more terrible than death to a proud backsettler. In a few moments George Washington and William Lee had restored order in the army. Trask remarked that “hostile feelings between two of its best regiments” were “extinguished by one man.”<sup>54</sup>

Washington had some of his deepest and most persistent differences with yet another unit, called the Philadelphia Associators. They were a volunteer militia that had begun as another of Benjamin Franklin’s many inventions in 1747, when Britain was at war with France and Spain. Quaker Pennsylvania had no militia and was unable to defend itself from privateers that cruised the coast. The Quakers in the legislature were faithful to their testimony of peace and refused to act. In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin proposed to defend the town with a voluntary association, which men could freely join or not as they pleased. They were to supply their own weapons, elect their own officers, and choose a military council for short terms.

Costs would be borne by voluntary subscription. Discipline would be done without corporal punishment, but only by “little fines . . . to be apply’d to the purchasing of drums, colours, etc.,” or “to refresh their weary spirits after exercise.” Incredibly, it worked. Franklin recruited ten companies of one hundred men in Philadelphia, then a hundred companies in the counties. He raised a subscription for artillery, established a lottery to pay for fortifications, sold muskets and bayonets in his shop, and even designed the colors.<sup>55</sup>

The Associators, as they were called, functioned in time of war and faded away. In 1775, Pennsylvania still had no militia and most Quakers remained true to their testimony of peace. In an hour of need, Philadelphians turned out in huge mass meetings and agreed to revive Franklin’s organization as the “Associators of the City and

*Pennsylvania Associators* in plain brown and gray uniforms intended to “level all distinctions.” Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.



Liberties of Philadelphia.” In the city itself, they raised five battalions of infantry and two batteries of artillery. Many other battalions were organized in the rural counties of Pennsylvania.

The Philadelphia Associators were a cross-section of the city’s diverse population. Alexander Graydon remembered that his company included men from five nations and many religions. Even a few “Free Quakers” enlisted.<sup>56</sup> Many members were mechanics, artisans, shopkeepers, and laborers who were radical Whigs and democrats. They agreed to elect their officers by secret ballot and adopted an egalitarian dress. In May 1775, a “considerable number of the Associators” called for a uniform that would “level all distinctions” and cost no more than ten shillings.<sup>57</sup>

These men applied a revolutionary idea of direct democracy to military units. On September 15, 1775, they organized a Committee of Privates in every battalion: five or seven men elected for six-month terms, to meet with representatives from every company, perhaps a hundred men in all. The Committees of Privates convened in the city’s schoolhouses and met regularly through 1776. Most of the committeemen were of middling social rank: schoolmasters, shopkeepers, artisans, one college professor. They discussed the organization of their units, supported families of men on active service, and debated political questions such as the Constitution of Pennsylvania. They had a major impact on the design of the Pennsylvania government, which in 1776 was the most radical in the world, with a unicameral legislature and more democracy than any other instrument of government.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, it is interesting that the Associators chose their highest leaders from the city’s wealthiest and most powerful men. Their senior officer was Colonel John Cadwalader of the Third Battalion, who became their brigadier. Some thought he was the richest merchant in Philadelphia. His portrait shows a man of extraordinary dignity and refinement, far from the egalitarian spirit of the Committees of Privates. Washington offered him a commission as general in the Continental army, but Cadwalader turned it down and remained an officer in the Associators. Company commanders were also men of high prominence. One of them was the artist Charles Willson Peale, who helped to equip and uniform some of his men and to provide for their families out of his own pocket. There were tensions here, and much strife later in the Revolution, but in 1776 Philadelphians of different classes worked together in a common cause that belonged neither to the rich nor the poor. Here was yet another way of thinking about liberty and freedom, in a



manner that was true to the founding principles of Pennsylvania and to an idea of liberty that was inscribed on the Great Quaker Bell of Liberty in 1751. It bore a verse from Leviticus: "Proclaim Liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof." This was an idea of liberty as reciprocal rights that belonged to all the people, a thought very different from the exclusive rights of New England towns, or the hierarchical rights of Virginia, or the individual autonomy of the backsettlers.<sup>59</sup> George Washington was dubious about the Associators. Their version of liberty was more radical in thought and act than any other unit's in the army. But these men were devoted to the American cause and willing to fight in its defense. Later they would prove themselves to be excellent troops, and they would play a major part in campaigns that followed.

Yet another problem for Washington appeared in the silk-stocking regiments that joined the army. One of them came from Maryland. It was called Smallwood's regiment after Colonel William Smallwood, a wealthy planter's son and a strong Whig, who recruited the regiment from the sons of planters, lawyers, and merchants in Baltimore and Annapolis. First to form was a company called the Baltimore Independent Cadets. The names on its muster roll were English, Irish, Scottish, French, German, and Dutch, but most were men of wealth. Their leader, Captain Mordecai Gist, wrote that the company was "composed of gentlemen of honour, family and fortune, and tho' of different countries animated by a zeal and reverence for the rights of humanity."<sup>60</sup> Every member signed a contract, swearing to resist "the oppressive unconstitutional acts of Parliament to deprive us of liberty." They agreed to elect their officers, to be bound by "sacred ties of Honour and love and justice due to ourselves and our country," and to submit to martial discipline, but "not to extend to corporal punishment." Here was another idea of liberty as a voluntary agreement, much like the commercial contracts these men made routinely in Baltimore and Annapolis. The Baltimore Cadets equipped themselves lavishly, with "a scarlet uniform coat with buff facings, trimmed with gold or yellow metal buttons, half boots, a good gun, cartouche pouch, a brace of pistols, a cutlass, four pounds of powder and sixteen pounds of lead." They promised to be ready to march to "the assistance of our sister colonies on 48 hours notice."<sup>61</sup>

The entire regiment marched to Philadelphia on July 17, 1776, and John Hancock described them "upwards of a thousand strong . . . an exceeding fine body of men."<sup>62</sup> They made a strong impression in the camp. A Pennsylvania militiaman described them as "city bred

Marylanders” who were “distinguished by the most fashionably cut coat, the most macaroni cocked hat, and the hottest blood in the union.” Other Americans remarked on their dress uniforms of scarlet and buff, which were thought to be “not fully according with the independence we had assumed.”<sup>63</sup>

These gentleman Whigs of Maryland were deadly serious about their soldiering. When they joined George Washington’s army, they put aside their scarlet coats, and every man “from the colonel to the private all were attired in *hunting shirts*.” But even privates in the Batimore Cadets expected to be treated as gentlemen, with privileges of their rank such as immunity from corporal punishment and the right to resign from the army if the terms of their contract were not honored. George Washington learned that he could work with these men, but only with extreme care. They became one of the great fighting regiments in the army.<sup>64</sup>

On July 6, 1776, the Continental Congress sent George Washington one of the first copies of the Declaration of Independence and ordered him to “have it proclaimed at the Head of the Army in the way you shall think it most proper.”<sup>65</sup> Washington was quick to obey. On July 9, he ordered that “the several brigades are to be drawn up this evening in their respective parades, at six o’clock, when the declaration of Congress, shewing the grounds and reasons of this measure is to be read with an audible voice.”<sup>66</sup> Washington’s aide Colonel Samuel Blachley Webb wrote in his diary, “The Declaration was read at the head of each brigade, and was received with three Huzzas by the Troops—every one seemed highly pleased that we were separated from a King who was endeavoring to enslave his once loyal subjects. God grant us success in this our new Character.”<sup>67</sup>

That evening a jubilant mob of troops and townsmen removed the royal arms from New York’s public buildings. They pulled down a handsome equestrian statue of George III on New York’s Bowling Green, cut off its head, and carried the body through the town, “among many Spectators, Fifes and Drums all the way, beating the Rogues march.” George Washington was appalled. He issued an order approving “zeal in the public cause” but reprimanded the entire army for “want of order.”<sup>68</sup>

Washington ordered that “in future these things shall be avoided by the Soldiery, and left to be executed by proper authority.” The Soldiery were unrepentant. When they discovered that the statue was made of lead, they broke it into pieces and sent it to the women of Litchfield, Connecticut, to be melted into musket balls. A small

fragment of the horse's tail survives in the collections of the New-York Historical Society.<sup>69</sup> There was little malice in these republican rituals. Captain Alexander Graydon observed, "had even George [III] himself been among us, he would have been in no great danger of personal injury, at least from the army. We were, indeed, beginning to grow angry with him; and were not displeased with Paine for calling him a royal brute, but we had not yet acquired the true taste for cutting throats."<sup>70</sup>

In 1776, Americans were less interested in pulling down a monarchy than in raising up a new republic. Washington's leadership was becoming a major part of that process within the army. Men who came from different parts of the continent were beginning to understand each other. And Washington was learning how to lead them. He learned that the discipline of a European regular army became the enemy of order in an open society. To impose the heavy flogging and capital punishments that were routine in European armies would destroy an army in America. The men would not stand for that abuse. When the backcountry riflemen were convicted for mutiny, Washington did not impose the death penalty that was customary in the British service. He fined the guilty riflemen twenty shillings each and appealed to honor, reason, pride, and conscience. They in turn declared themselves "heartily sorry" and promised to reform, at least a little. Slowly this army of free men was learning to work together. They were also coming to respect this extraordinary man who was their leader, if not quite their commander-in-chief. They had come a long way toward forming an army, but was it enough? George Washington knew that they were about to meet some of the most formidable troops in the world, and the outcome was very much in doubt.<sup>71</sup>

## THE REGULARS

### ☛ The Kings Own: An Army of Order and Discipline

The more confident a man is of his own capacity, with so much the greater resolution he will act. . . . Hence then it is that discipline becomes necessary . . . as well to encourage them to a due discharge of their duty, as to prevent their being intimidated.

—Captain Bennet Cuthbertson, Fifth Foot,  
*A New System of Military Discipline*, 1768<sup>1</sup>

PRIVATE DANIEL McCURTIN of the Maryland Line was there when the Regulars arrived. It was June 29, 1776, a quiet summer Saturday in New York. He had just received his discharge from the army and was sitting in a house overlooking the lower harbor, getting ready to go home. About nine o'clock in the morning he looked out and admired the view across an empty sheet of water. A few minutes later he looked again. To his amazement, the bay had filled with ships. "I could not believe my eyes," Private McCurtin wrote. "Keeping my eyes fixed at the very spot, judge you of my surprise when in about ten minutes, the whole bay was full of shipping as ever it could be. I declare that I thought all London was afloat."<sup>2</sup>

In the van were big British ships of the line, cleared for action with red gunports open, batteries run out, and huge white battle ensigns streaming in the breeze. Behind them came transports crowded with troops. They advanced at a majestic pace, as if nothing in the world could stop them. Inside Sandy Hook they dropped



*A View of the Narrows between Long Island and Staten Island, with Our Fleet at Anchor and Lord Howe Coming In.* The ship in the distance is Admiral Howe's HMS *Eagle*, which arrived on July 12, 1776. The drawing is attributed to Captain Lieutenant Archibald Robertson, Royal Engineers. It may be the work of another British officer, Captain Thomas Davies, Royal Artillery. Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

anchor so close together that they reminded Private McCurtin of “something resembling a wood of pine trees trimmed.”

For two days the ships continued to arrive, more than a hundred full-rigged vessels and a swarm of smaller craft, all gathering inside the Hook. Then, on July 1, 1776, bright signal flags blossomed from British halyards, and gray canvas billowed beneath black yardarms. The great armada sailed slowly up the bay, anchored near the low coast of Long Island, and made preparations for landing.<sup>3</sup> American troops rushed from New York City to Brooklyn. When the defenders were in place the British ships moved again, this time very quickly across the harbor to Staten Island. Three nimble British frigates slipped inshore, and a flotilla of small boats splashed into the water. Thousands of British Regulars swarmed ashore with scarcely a shot fired. It was a brilliant maneuver. The Royal Navy and British army had carried out a complex amphibious operation with harmony and high professional skill. The Americans were made to feel like helpless amateurs in the complex art of modern war.<sup>4</sup>

The landing on Staten Island was only the beginning. In the next six weeks, five hundred transports and victualing ships arrived

in New York's lower harbor. They brought twenty-three thousand British Regulars, plus ten thousand German troops, many civilian workers, and several thousand women of the army. Another thirteen thousand troops were sent to Canada. By late August two-thirds of the British army were in the colonies. Supporting these troops were seventy British warships in American waters, half the fighting strength of the Royal Navy. In 1776, it was the largest projection of seaborne power ever attempted by a European state.<sup>5</sup>

Still more remarkable was the quality of this great force. A military observer thought that the British army on Staten Island was "for its numbers one of the finest ever seen." Every man was a long-serving volunteer. This was a modern professional army, with much experience of war. Its fifteen generals were on the average forty-eight years old in 1776, with thirty years of military service. By comparison, the twenty-one American generals who opposed them in New York were forty-three years old, with two years of military service. In British infantry regiments, even privates had an average of nine years' service in 1776. Most American troops had only a few months of active duty.<sup>6</sup>

Except for the late unpleasantness in the colonies, the recent service of the British army was an experience of victory without equal in the world. Its senior officers and sergeants were seasoned veterans of a great world conflict called the Seven Years' War in Europe and the French and Indian War in America. From 1755 to 1764, the British army fought on five continents and defeated every power that stood against it. Regimental honors told the story: Minden and Emsdorf in Europe, Plassey and Pondicherry in India, Louisbourg and Quebec in North America, Guadeloupe and Martinique in the West Indies, Moro and Havana in Cuba, Minorca in the Mediterranean, Manila in the Philippines, Senegal in Africa. In 1776, the British army was full of pride and confidence. An American who knew it well thought it was "the most arrogant army in the world," and it had much to be arrogant about.<sup>7</sup>

As a social institution, the British army in 1776 was a bundle of paradoxes. Regimental badges and colors proclaimed that it served the king, but it was entirely the creature of Parliament. The army cherished its traditions but operated under a law called the Mutiny Act that expired every twelve months. The British people took pride in its achievements but deeply feared the power of a standing army and kept it on a short leash.

The officers of the army made another paradox. Many were highly skilled professional soldiers who studied war as a science and

followed it as a career, but they cultivated the casual air of a country gentleman, and in most regiments they acquired their commissions by purchase. The cost was high: in a line regiment 500 pounds sterling for a lieutenant, 1,500 for a captain, 2,600 for a major, and 3,500 for a lieutenant colonel. Cavalry and guards were even more expensive. Later generations condemned this “purchase system” as organized incompetence and institutionalized corruption, but its purpose was to ensure that British officers had a stake in their society and were not dangerous to its institutions. The purchase system kept the army firmly in the hands of Britain’s governing elite, mainly its small aristocracy, who controlled much of the wealth and power in the nation. Of 102 regimental colonels in 1769, more than half came from an aristocracy of two hundred families in a nation of seven million people.<sup>8</sup>

Yet another paradox appeared in the structure of the British army, which was both bureaucratized and decentralized. It was one of the first global bureaucracies, with specialized departments for barracks, boatmen, commissaries, engineers, hospitals, ordnance, and quartermasters. Around the world, officers toiled long hours at field desks, filling out the statistical reports that still survive in rebound elephant folios at the Public Record Office near Kew Gardens. But the army was also deliberately decentralized. Even in the late twentieth century a British brigadier described it as “a collection of semi-nomadic tribes” and explained the reason why. “There’s no such thing as *the* British Army,” he wrote. “. . . That’s why there could never be a coup in this country.”<sup>9</sup>

The army’s tribes were its many regiments and special battalions. More than forty of these tribal units came ashore on Staten Island. Every one of them was encouraged to believe that it was absolutely the best in the army at what it did. That feeling was especially strong among the first units that landed on the beaches of lower New York.

In the first wave at Staten Island were battalions of British grenadiers, the storm troops of the army. They were tall, heavy-set men and were made to appear even taller by grenadier caps that were designed to add an extra foot to their height. Every British infantry regiment had a company of grenadiers, specially selected for size and strength. On active service, British generals combined these companies into composite battalions and used them to lead assaults on fortifications, to break an enemy line, or to make landings on hostile beaches. Casualties were heavy in grenadier companies, but numbers were kept up by a steady flow of replacements. Altogether the four



*A British Grenadier and British Light Infantry*, pencil sketches by De Louthembourg. (1778). Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

battalions of grenadiers who came to Staten Island were one of the largest concentrations of these units in the history of the army.<sup>10</sup>

Landing with the grenadiers at Staten Island was the light infantry, another proud elite, called the “Light Bobs” in the army. This was a new invention by British officers who had served in the French and Indian War. General Thomas Gage formed an entire regiment of light infantry in America, dressed it in drab uniforms, and trained it to fight in open order. After the war General William Howe persuaded the king to authorize separate light infantry companies in every regiment.<sup>11</sup> They also were chosen men, selected not for size but for intelligence, energy, and marksmanship. They were trained in “leaping, running, climbing precipices, swimming,



skirmishing through woods, loading and firing in different attitudes, and marching with remarkable rapidity.” In 1774, General Howe organized a camp at Salisbury where light infantry companies learned to work together in composite battalions of special forces.<sup>12</sup>

Every light infantry company wore the badges and facings of its parent regiment, with distinctive short jackets, light equipment, and a small helmet or cap in place of the usual broad-brimmed cocked hat. As emblems of their special role, some companies added jaunty green feathers, which gave the Light Bobs another nickname. The Green Feathers of 1776 were the ancestors of Green Jackets in the nineteenth century and Green Berets in the twentieth, all highly mobile light troops.<sup>13</sup> British commanders made frequent use of these men, and by 1776 they were already hardened by heavy service in America. The first wave included the same units who had marched to Lexington and Concord and led the assault on Bunker Hill. In New England they had taken heavy losses from an enemy they despised, and they were in no mood for gentle measures. The four battalions of light infantry at New York were the largest deployment of these light troops to that date.<sup>14</sup>

While General Gage and General Howe were developing light infantry in this modern army, other British officers invented new units of light horse. The central figure was Colonel John Burgoyne. In 1757, he raised a new regiment called the Sixteenth Light Dragoons. They were meant to be highly mobile and heavily armed. Every trooper carried two pistols, a short-barreled carbine, and a long cavalry sword.<sup>15</sup>

Burgoyne was a top-down reformer who despised equality, insisted that his officers must be of high social standing, and opposed promotion from the ranks. He demanded that his officers think of themselves as professional soldiers, required them to write English with “swiftness and accuracy,” ordered them to learn French, and compelled them to make time for “reading every day.” He expected them to become highly skilled in tactics, weapons, and horsemanship down to “each strap and buckle.” They were required not to abuse their horses or “swear at their men.” His troopers welcomed Burgoyne’s reforms and called him “Gentleman Johnny,” partly for his extravagant personal tastes, but mostly for the courtesy that he showed to inferiors in a hierarchical world.<sup>16</sup>

In 1762, Burgoyne’s light horse saw heavy service in Portugal and won a reputation for slashing attacks on larger Spanish forces. They came home in triumph, and George III ordered six regiments of light dragoons to be formed on their example. They proved use-



*Officers of Heavy Cavalry and Light Dragoons (ca. 1780). The Trustees of the National Museum of Scotland.*

ful in keeping restless civil populations in order, a major task of the British army in a world without professional police.<sup>17</sup>

Another proud elite who came to Staten Island was the Royal Regiment of Artillery, in dark blue uniforms that contrasted with the red of the British infantry. Three battalions of Royal Artillery landed on Staten Island, with a strength of seventy-two guns. Even their enemies acknowledged them as the best and most modern field artillery in the world. Officers were appointed not by purchase but merit and trained as “gentlemen cadets” at the Woolwich Military Academy, which the army called “the Shop.” They studied algebra, trigonometry, quadratic equations, chemistry, engineering, and logistics and became an intellectual elite in the army.<sup>18</sup>

Woolwich-trained officers were highly innovative and drew upon the flow of invention in Britain’s early Industrial Revolution. In the early 1770s, William Congreve and James Pattison developed a new generation of mobile brass field guns with light but sturdy carriages and interchangeable parts. Some of these new weapons, called “grass-hoppers,” could be moved on pack horses or carried by eight men.

They were designed for mobility on American terrain.<sup>19</sup> Congreve also ran the Royal Powder Factory and developed munitions in great variety: hollow shells with bursting charges, incendiary “carcasses” for use against buildings, canister and grapeshot against infantry, illuminating rounds and smoke shells. From the experience of the American war, Lieutenant Henry Shrapnel would invent in 1784 an exploding shell that still bears his name.<sup>20</sup>

Other British gunners developed new ways of using artillery in battle. Among them was William Phillips, who would be prominent in the American War of Independence. He was commissioned lieutenant-fireworker in 1747 and made his reputation at Minden, moving his guns with speed and concentration that turned the battle. When the French infantry fell back, the British artillery pursued them, driving their big battery horses into a trot, and turned a retreat into a rout.<sup>21</sup> Phillips took a leading role in the American war. The development of mobile artillery on a large scale was a shock to the Americans, and had a major impact on the campaigns that followed.

Most British troops who landed on Staten Island were infantry of the line, in twenty-six “marching regiments.” Some of these units had existed for more than a century, others for only a few years. All cherished their traditions, and most were recognized as having a distinct regimental character. The Fifth Foot were called “the Shiners,” from the money that their patrons, the opulent dukes of Northumberland, lavished on their turnout. The Tenth Foot were known as “the Springers,” from their “readiness for action.” These characteristics were imposed on all men in a regiment. In the Shiners, all men must shine. Among the Springers, every man must spring. Other British regiments gained nicknames from American events. The Twenty-ninth Foot became “the Ever Sworded” after an unarmed party was massacred in America in 1746; for two hundred years the regiment carried swords in the mess. The Fifty-fourth Foot were called “the Flamers,” for the American houses they put to the torch.<sup>22</sup>

Each British regiment reinforced its character by doing its own recruiting. In 1776, this was an army of volunteers, but some of its methods gave new meaning to volunteering. More than a few felons were given a free choice between prison and the army, or occasionally (and illegally) between a rope and a red coat. Many enlisted in the face of poverty and even starvation. In the Thirty-third Foot, recruiters attracted men by raising oatcakes on their swords. The regiment was known as “the Havercake Lads.”<sup>23</sup>

Most soldiers were in the army because they wanted to be there. Recruits were drawn by the promise of adventure and the attractions of a martial life. Regiments were able to select men with discrimination, and officers' manuals offered much advice on that subject. "Country lads" of sixteen to nineteen were favored as "more tractable." Young men of pleasure, "bred up amidst the corruption and vices of a metropolis," were "not to be desired." Army recruiters believed that "seamen and colliers never make good soldiers," and they refused to take men who had been discharged for misbehavior, or even those who had served in another regiment. Contrary to persistent myth, British soldiers were not an army of outcasts, criminals, and psychopaths. Most were farmers, weavers, and laborers with clean records.<sup>24</sup>

Before the American Revolution, British soldiers enlisted for life. In 1776, most were veterans of long service. The regiment became their home, and they were fiercely proud of it. Later in the war, recruiting became more difficult, and the army took on a different character. It reduced the term of service to three years, and some regiments increased the bounty from the obligatory king's shilling to a golden guinea or more. By 1778, the supply of recruits ran so low that Parliament passed an Army Press Act, carefully exempting all parliamentary voters from the draft. The law was intended mainly to stimulate voluntary enlistment. Always it was thought that British soldiers should enlist as an act of choice.<sup>25</sup>

When British regiments came to America in 1776, recruiting parties remained at home and sent a flow of new soldiers across the Atlantic throughout the war. To read the muster rolls in the Public Record Office is to be amazed at the complex global system that kept British regiments throughout the world strong enough to function, if rarely at full strength.

While the army assembled on Staten Island, training went on at an urgent pace. It was a process vital to this modern army. Every British regiment did its own training, each in its own way, but most British units shared a similar approach that set them apart from European armies. Colonel John Burgoyne observed that the Prussian method was to train men "like spaniels by the stick," and the French method "substituted honour instead of severity." He thought "a just medium between the two extremes to be the surest means to bring English soldiers to perfection."<sup>26</sup>

British officers studied the process of training with great care and analyzed it in many manuals and treatises. Captain Bennet Cuthbertson

of the Fifth Foot wrote one of the most widely read works, *A System for the Compleat Interior Management and Economy of a Battalion of Infantry*. First published in 1768, it was reprinted in 1776 and purchased in bulk by regimental agents. Another important work was the anonymous *A New System of Military Discipline, Founded upon Principle by a General Officer*, attributed to Richard Lambert, the Sixth Earl of Cavan, also reprinted in 1776.<sup>27</sup>

The ideas in these British military books were very far from the values of the American Revolution, but in their own way they were also part of the Enlightenment. Most were written in a spirit of improvement and humanitarian reform. Instead of centering on liberty, they were mainly a search for order and regularity through discipline. They thought of disciplined soldiers not as “robots” or “human machines” or “automatons,” as writers such as Michel Foucault mistakenly believed, but as men who actively engaged their minds and wills in the performance of their duty. This was particularly the case in the British army.<sup>28</sup>

British treatises on military discipline began by reflecting on the purposes of military training. They agreed that its end was “to enforce obedience, and to preserve good order.” The object was to create a spirit of “subordination,” on the assumption that “no authority can exist where there is not a proper submission.” In the British army this was not to be done primarily by the stick or the lash but in more constructive ways. The goal was to train a soldier to think of himself as part of a tightly integrated unit. It was also to teach him to act willingly and even creatively in support of others. To those ends, the soldier’s will was not broken but bent or guided in the direction of his duty. One of the most commonly used praise-words in British (and later American) armed forces was and still is “presence of mind.” Men were encouraged to have presence of mind and to use it on a battlefield in a disciplined way.<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting to see how this was achieved. Basic training in the British army took a new recruit through a sequence of instructors. All of them taught specific skills and a general attitude. First came the corporal, who trained new-caught men to stand and walk with “a military bearing.” The object was to make the recruit the “master of his person,” which meant learning to “carry himself” with “self-possession,” which was an idea of internal discipline. He was trained to do these things with pride and strength and confidence, as a member of his regiment. Unlike some other methods of training, it did not begin by trying to break a man down but from the start worked to build him up, and to make him stronger.<sup>30</sup>



*The Twenty-fifth Foot at Minorca, 1771*, by an unknown artist. At the far right is Lord George Lennox, colonel of the regiment, talking with the sergeant major. The drummer, fifer, infantry and grenadiers (to the left) are marching with the Prussian step. National Army Museum, London.

After learning to stand and walk like a soldier, a recruit was taught to march: first alone, then in a file with others. In 1776, most British soldiers learned the “Prussian step,” with stiff knees and straight legs. Each foot was extended horizontally to fall flat on the ground, toes out, arms straight at one’s side, chest out, stomach in, head up, spine stiffened, chin straight, and face frozen—while a corporal was shouting in one’s ear. The Prussian step seemed at first an unnatural gait, but it was comfortable when learned, and most men could do it with order and regularity. British recruits were taught to do this “soldier’s step” with short paces and long paces, in “slow step” and “quick step.” They practiced until they could do it without thinking. Slow learners were called “the awkward men” and made to practice in extra hours until they got it right.<sup>31</sup>

After mastering this movement, a recruit was trained to march in step, to the beat of the drum. Marching in time was a recent re-invention, inspired by the ancient memory of Roman legions and

by the modern example of the Prussian army under Frederick William I. For more than a century British troops had been doing some movements in step. Pikemen had long done so. As early as 1662, British infantry were trained to advance on the battlefield by starting on their left foot and counting paces. During the mid-eighteenth century, marching in time spread very rapidly through European armies. In 1763, a manual observed that “marching in cadence” was “now practised by some of the British troops,” though not by all of them. Old soldiers did not like it, and some complained that it was “too much like dancing,” but it was found to be useful on the battlefield and important for the mastery of discipline. By 1776, marching in step and cadence had become general throughout the British army.<sup>32</sup>

Every marching movement was elaborately studied and taught until men could move together in close order under any conditions, especially on a field of battle. Here again the object was to engage a soldier’s will in this process of discipline and control and to make the “motions of the will” as regular as those of a disciplined body. It was observed that many recruits found pleasure in mastering these movements, responding instantly to commands, and choosing to become one with others in the regiment.

Recruits also learned to respond willingly to the beat of a drum, which in the eighteenth century was made without muffles so that it could be heard over the noise of battle. In 1768, Thomas Simes’s *The Military Medley* listed many drum signals that every British soldier had to learn. Some established daily routines such as reveille and taptoo (ten o’clock in summer and nine o’clock on winter nights). Other drum-calls assembled an entire command, or summoned sergeants or officers. Many signals were for maneuvers on the battlefield. One stroke with a flam (made by striking the drumhead with both drumsticks almost but not quite simultaneously) meant turn or face right. Two strokes and a flam meant turn left. Three strokes were the signal for turn right about; four meant left about. Altogether British regiments used 170 drum signals, and soldiers were drilled to move instantly on hearing them. It was discovered that in moments of stress men were more responsive to drum signals than to voice commands. “Military musick” also had another function: It welded men into units. Drummers and fifers had a broad repertoire of marching tunes, regimental songs, and popular ditties that men sang together to the beat of the drum, creating a strong sense of regimental identity and a spirit of belonging.<sup>33</sup>

After a corporal taught the recruits to march in time, a sergeant took over and instructed them “in the use and management

of arms.” They were trained to follow a set of rules called the Manual Exercise, “ordered by His Majesty” in 1764 for the “handling of firelocks.” There were thirty-five different commands, and each command was analyzed into many separate motions. The simple command “Ground your firelocks!” required a sequence of fourteen motions, which had to be done with perfect precision so that men could perform them together in close formation.<sup>34</sup>

After recruits mastered the manual exercise, they learned volley firing, first by “snapping” unloaded weapons, then by using “squibs,” or blank cartridges, and finally by firing powder and ball. Where supplies of ammunition allowed, men were taught to load and fire very rapidly, which was the key to the success of British infantry. Then they learned to fire in formation, first in a single line, then in two ranks, and finally in the three ranks that were often used by British infantry in 1776 and not easy to master. Soldiers had to learn to fire and reload very quickly while standing very close to one another. Their



*A Perspective View of an Encampment for a British Regiment, ca. 1777.* In the right foreground recruits are being trained in the Manual Exercise and Close Order Drill. Note the many women and children in the camp. Some are cooking (right foreground), returning laundry (far left), and officers’ ladies are visiting (in the center). A senior officer’s marquee appears in the background. The camp displays the high standard of cleanliness and order which existed in the British army. Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.



movements had to be controlled and synchronized with great care, for an entire formation could be disrupted by one clumsy soldier. They also learned to “lock” their formation, so that “the front rank knelt down, the second rank shifted slightly to the right, and the third moved a half-pace” to the right. The object was to concentrate the largest volume of fire on the smallest possible front.<sup>35</sup>

Some regiments and commanders trained their men in aimed fire, though there was no command for “Take aim” in the Manual Exercise and no effective sights on standard-issue muskets. A special effort was made to control the elevation of the weapon, which was the key to effective volley firing. In 1779, a test was made of volley firing by a battalion of Norfolk militia. At a distance of seventy yards, only 20 percent of the shots struck a target that was eighty feet wide and two feet high. The problem was to train men to level their weapons and not to fire high, which even trained troops tended to do under stress. At Boston in 1775, General Thomas Gage had his men firing at marks in the Charles River.<sup>36</sup>

The last part of basic training was in the hands of the regimental adjutant, who taught the men to form a line, a column, and a square. Incessant drilling continued through a soldier’s entire term of service, in “manual exercise, platoon exercise, evolutions, firing and manœuvres.” This was followed by frequent inspections, culminating in an annual inspection of the entire regiment, with a written critique by a higher authority.<sup>37</sup>

Another part of a recruit’s basic training was to maintain his uniform and equipment, a complex and difficult task. Much attention was given to meticulous regulation of the smallest details of dress. The rules were unimaginably elaborate. “It is impossible to be too exact and particular,” one manual advised. Close attention to neatness and uniformity was thought important “for the support of discipline.” The theory was that “small lapses should be corrected and punished quickly to prevent larger ones” and to accustom men to working with others in a willing way.<sup>38</sup>

Soldiers were also taught to keep a high standard of cleanliness, a vital factor for the health and safety of the army. The British army was very well trained that way, with a high standard of camp sanitation, which was literally a matter of life and death. An historian writes that “by comparison with some eighteenth-century armies and with contemporary civilian populations, the British Army in the War for American Independence seems to have enjoyed exceptionally good health.” This was so on Staten Island, even in a long, hot American summer that made field sanitation very difficult.<sup>39</sup>

Training and drill were reinforced by discipline, which varied broadly from one unit to another. In some regiments much use was made of flogging, and discipline was brutal beyond imagining. The Forty-eighth, Fifty-fifth, and Fifty-seventh Regiments of Foot were all called “steelbacks” from the heavy floggings that they endured. Others were called “bloody backs.” But most regiments were moving toward different methods of discipline and used flogging with moderation. In the Thirty-third Foot it was said of Lord Cornwallis, the colonel of the regiment, that “he never used the lash to break a man’s spirit, but he never hesitated to use it to instill discipline.”<sup>40</sup>

Yet another approach prevailed in the Fifth Foot, where Lord Percy and the officers made little use of flogging and preferred rewards to punishments. As early as 1769, the Fifth Foot introduced regimental medals of merit. A soldier who stayed out of trouble for seven years received a medal with the inscription “seven years military merit” in a circle of laurel leaves, to be displayed by a ribbon from his lapel. For fourteen years of meritorious service, a soldier received a silver medal. In the Fifth Foot, much use was also made of shame. Cuthbertson recommended that a “slovenly soldier” should be dealt with by “disgracing him before his brother soldiers and exposing him in a publick manner to their derision.”<sup>41</sup>

In the British army as a whole, discipline was regulated by a code of military law called the Articles of War. Commanders worried mainly about two offenses: desertion and mutiny. When desertion increased, higher authorities made examples by punishments of extreme brutality. Men who deserted repeatedly were sometimes sentenced to a thousand lashes, administered in many floggings, which destroyed the flesh on a man’s back and broke his will. Other deserters were sentenced to death by firing squad, with comrades as executioners and the regiment looking on. The most dreaded punishment was to be sentenced to “perpetual banishment in the corps of infantry stationed on the coast of Africa,” a death sentence by another name.<sup>42</sup>

Even more severely punished than desertion was mutiny, which included any act of “sedition,” any hint of violence against a superior, or any knowledge of such a thing. The penalty for mutiny was death. The two articles on desertion and mutiny were required to be read to every recruit on enlistment, in solemn ceremonies where each soldier was instructed in his duties and also in his rights. But the Articles of War also had another purpose. They established the rights of British soldiers, who could not be arrested or imprisoned for more than eight days without due process of law. Officers were