

A Christmas Surprise

Presented at William O. Ware Lodge of Research by Edwin L. Vardiman
December 11, 1986

At our December meeting, it is only natural that we are thinking of the Christmas Season and all of the joys and gifts that this wonderful time of year will bring our way. Of course, part of the fun of Christmas is the anticipation of opening the gifts under the tree and seeing the surprise appear on each face. Surprises are fun, most of them at least, especially at this time of year.

But sometimes things don't work out as well as we would like, and life has its share of disappointing surprises too. So, it was with those who had written and approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. It was a time of bell ringing, high hopes and celebration. However, the good spirits and optimism did not last long. Less than two months later, the main American Army under the command of General George Washington was soundly defeated by the British on Long Island and the British occupied New York City. Washington managed to hang on to the north end of Manhattan Island, but at the Battle of Harlem Heights on September 16th, Washington was again forced to retreat, this time north to White Plains. On October 28th the British attacked again, and Washington was forced to retreat south across the Hudson River into New Jersey before the British troops under the command of Lord Cornwallis. From a high of about 25,000 men in his army in August, Washington's force had dropped to about 5,000 due to casualties, sickness and desertion. It was now December, the weather was getting bad, so Washington withdrew all the way across New Jersey and crossed to the west bank of the Delaware River which forms the boundary between New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Here he hoped to hold a force of over 25,000 British troops with a force of, now, only about 4,000 men. His men were safely across the wide Delaware River, and they had gathered every boat for miles in both directions. But what was to happen to this Revolution for a new and free country?

As we have seen, in the first five months after the Declaration of Independence was signed, there was not one significant victory gained by American armed forces. Besides Washington's reverses, American forces under General Benedict Arnold had met defeat that fall of 1776 from British troops and their Indian allies moving south out of Canada. Doubts began to overtake

even the most fervent supporters of the Revolutionary cause. There was talk that the whole idea was a big mistake, that efforts should be made to get in the good graces of the King and everybody should go home. The people of New Jersey, seeing the problems Washington was facing, declined to come to his aid as he retreated south, and instead waited to see who would win before committing themselves. The British, who were now under the command of General Howe, offered British protection papers to all who would come in and take an oath of allegiance to the King. So many did that the blanks gave out.

Brethren, it was a cold, dark time in the life of the new American Republic and not only caused by the weather. The general pessimism was never so strong again, not even during the time of suffering the next winter at Valley Forge. General Howe believed the Americans would see that Britain was invincible and that their army would just melt away. Washington recognized the danger to his cause and was faced with two choices. He could sit on the Delaware River bank and watch the ice chunks flow past, or he could try to take some sort of offensive action to renew the spirit of his men and nation.

General Howe, in occupying New Jersey, has stationed the Hessian mercenaries at Trenton, New Jersey across the river from Washington's army. Washington knew that if he was going to do anything, he had to do it soon for the enlistments of many of his troops were set to expire at the end of 1776. Thus, the daring attack was planned that was to give new life and vigor to the faltering American cause.

Washington knew, through spies, that the Hessians had not dug in at Trenton, but were just living in the homes of the townsfolk. He also knew that the Hessians were having a large party and celebration on Christmas Day. Seeing his chance, Washington took the offensive. With 2,400 men he moved upriver nine miles to where most the boats were assembled. Pan ice was floating down the river and it was bitterly cold with a biting wind. For landing craft Washington had a fleet of what was called Durham boats, 30 to 40 feet long, whose peacetime use was to carry freight on the Delaware River.

The crossing started at 7:00 P. M. on Christmas Day. By 3:00 A. M. on the 26th all the men and 18 fieldpieces of artillery were across. It took an hour to form the regiments on the east bank and then they started moving south through the snow toward Trenton. They arrived at Trenton at sunrise and found the Hessians sleeping off their Christmas party. The Hessians were completely surprised, their retreat cut off, and when the American artillery fired briskly down the two main streets of the village, the German officers decided to surrender. At the cost of none killed by enemy fire, four wounded,

but two frozen to death, Washington captured over 900 prisoners, 1,200 small arms, 6 cannons and the colors of the Hessian brigade.

What a shot in the arm for the spirits of the Americans! Now they had a victory. The mighty British Army with their German mercenaries had been given a bloody nose. Perhaps there was a chance that this Revolution might come off after all. Of course, we know it did succeed, but only after five more years of war and suffering, but the immediate effect was that American enlistments at once increased. Pennsylvania militia swarmed into Washington's camp, delighted at an opportunity to invade New Jersey. Even the people of New Jersey had come over to the American side, for the British, by wintering in New Jersey, had succeeded in curing the Jerseymen of their neutralist attitude. About half the forces occupying the area were German mercenaries, and Germans have been notorious looters from the days of the Roman, Tacitus, to those of Hitler. Protection papers issued to loyal Jerseymen did them no good because the Germans couldn't read English, even so, they stole books from the Princeton library and ransacked shops and homes indiscriminately. The citizens of New Jersey were outraged, and Washington found a much friendlier reception than when he was retreating before the victorious British. Washington moved up to Morristown, New Jersey where he spent the rest of the winter. Thus, in a campaign lasting only three weeks after the Battle of Trenton, at a time of year when gentlemen were not supposed to fight, the military genius of America's greatest gentleman, and the fortitude of some 5,000 of his men, had undone everything General Howe had accomplished. What a result that all started from a Christmas surprise!

But what of our situation as Masons today? As we discouraged with the present state of our fraternity today? We could be as were so many of the patriots of the fall of 1776 and see nothing but the dark and the disappointments that often come our way as we work in the best interests of our beloved Lodge. We may not have the genius of another of the stripe of Brother Washington, but we have good, true and faithful Brothers who are dedicated to the welfare and future of this organization.

In the December 1986 issue of the "New Age" magazine, there is an article by the Rev. Lansing Harmon, 33°, who has a fine discussion of "The Future of Freemasonry." I quote only a short passage from this article in which Brother Harmon says, "I believe in the future of Freemasonry, and because I do, I do not fear to address some of the problems we face today if we are to assure the future."

“I do not fear for the future of Freemasonry as a philosophy, for its teachings have eternal values. I am concerned, however, about Freemasonry as an institution. What happens tomorrow in the life of our Craft depends in a large measure on what we do with today. The hour has arrived when we must take a good look at where we are and where we are headed. Our Craft is under attack. It is true that our Craft has survived other struggles, and I believe we will survive this one, but we will not survive the attacks upon our institution if we ignore our responsibility today to strengthen Freemasonry from within. Our Craft cannot be weakened from attacks without, but from weakness within.”

Brother Washington gave his army and his countrymen a Christmas surprise. It was one that changed the course of the Revolution and world history. If we can show the same dedication and resourcefulness in our lives, what an impact we could have as citizens of this great country and as members of this great fraternity. This is the challenge. What is to be our Christmas surprise?