

# THE BATTLE OF ELIZABETH TOWN



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BY

WILLIAM H. CORBIN

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Before the Boudinot Chapter of the Society of the  
Daughters of the American Revolution and visiting  
Delegates from the other Chapters of the State  
of New Jersey and from other States      ❧      ❧



## THE BATTLE OF ELIZABETHTOWN

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**T**HE startling invasion of this Town by the English and Hessian troops, under General Knyphausen, 125 years ago yesterday morning, and the exciting and dramatic action of that day, make up what is often called the Battle of Elizabeth Town; and certainly this Town has never seen, before or since, so large a body of troops in array as composed the British Army of horse, foot and artillery which invaded and completely overwhelmed the little village on that June morning. It outnumbered all the people of the village several times over. A large part were regulars of the British Army, including the Coldstream Guards Regiment, famous then as now.

Captain DeHart says an eye-witness of the passage of the troops through the village describes it as a most beautiful and impressive sight.

At the head of the column marched a squadron of the Dragoon Regiment, known as the Queen's Rangers, with glittering helmets, their swords drawn. They were mounted on large and beautiful horses; then followed the infantry, composed of Hessians and English troops, the whole body amounting to nearly 6,000 men, and every man, horseman and foot, clad in new uniforms, complete in panoply, and gorgeous with burnished brass and polished steel.

There was little to resist this powerful force. Twelve men, to be sure, had been stationed by Colonel Dayton at the Cross Roads to meet the advance, which they did, firing their flint-locks into the face of the invading column as soon as it appeared.

By this first volley they mortally wounded Brigadier-General Stirling, the same who, as Colonel Stirling, had the previous year burned the barracks and the Presbyterian

parsonage on Cherry street, the Academy in Broad street, and Stephen Crane's Ferry House and a blacksmith shop.

There was no serious attempt to resist the enemy here. General Maxwell, who was in command of the Jersey Brigade, wrote very frankly:

"I thought Elizabeth Town would be an improper place for me. I therefore retired toward Connecticut Farms."

The General was a brave man, but he was discreet, too.

The invading army pushed on up Elizabeth avenue, turned up Broad street, then into West Jersey street and the Galloping Hill Road to Connecticut Farms, the alarm meantime preceding them. The militia were gathering from every side and swarming around the advance, and the Continentals were marching forth from Morristown to Short Hills to meet the foe. The head of the English column began to encounter a bush-whacking fire from roads and trees and defiles until they came to a standstill and formed for action at Connecticut Farms.

Colonel Dayton, with his Elizabeth Town regiment, made a stand there and joined forces with the rest of General Maxwell's Brigade, and the real battle began, which continued till nightfall, between the Farms and Springfield, followed by the British retreat to Elizabeth Town.

Of course Knyphausen burned the parsonage, and, indeed, the whole village of Connecticut Farms, as he retired, and, in fact, after pillaging, he also burned the farm-houses on the road back to the Point.

It is difficult for us to understand at this day how it was possible for a well-trained regular army to deliberately pillage and burn churches, schools and the dwellings occupied by helpless and unoffending women and children; but that was the strategy of those days. The poor, humble country side was laid waste.

Governor Livingston, in an address to the General Assembly, said:

"I deplore with you the desolation spread through this part of the State by an unrelenting enemy, who have indeed marked their progress with a devastation unknown to civi-

lized nations, and evincive of the most implacable vengeance.”

The Committee of Congress appointed to inquire into the conduct of the enemy reported, in April, 1777, that “in every place where the enemy has been there are heavy complaints of opprression, insult and injury suffered by the inhabitants. \* \* \* The whole track of the British Army is marked with desolation and a wanton destruction of property, particularly through Westchester County, and the towns of Newark, Elizabeth Town, Woodbridge, Princeton and Trenton, in New Jersey. The fences destroyed, houses deserted, pulled in pieces or consumed by fire, and the general face of waste and devastation spread over a rich and once well-cultivated and well-inhabited country, would affect the most unfeeling with compassion for the unhappy sufferers, and with indignation and resentment against the barbarous ravagers.”

The proud army that invaded Elizabeth Town did not escape without punishment. A harrassing fire was kept up against them until night. Their losses were severe, and the movement was checked and baffled.

At ten o'clock at night, covered by a thick darkness, the whole army took up its retreat from Connecticut Farms. Lieutenant Mathew, of the Coldstream Guards, gives this account of that retreat:

“It was so exceedingly dark, and there was such strict silence observed, that one regiment could not perceive the adjoining regiment going off. It was the darkest night I can remember in my life, with the most heavy rain, thunder and lightning known in this country for many years. It rained harder, I think, than I ever knew, and thundered and lightened so severely as to frighten the horses, and once or twice the whole army halted, being deprived of sight for a time. Nothing more awful than this retreat can be imagined; the darkness of the night, the houses at Connecticut Farms, which we had set fire to, in a blaze, the dead bodies which the fire or the lightning showed you

now and then on the road, and the dread of an enemy completed the scene of horror."

The retreat continued till the army reached the shore of Staten Island Sound at Elizabethport, where they encamped.

The Americans having been mistakenly informed that the enemy had returned to Staten Island, leaving only 500 men at Elizabeth Town Point, General Hand, with 1,500 men, was sent down to capture the 500, or, in the words of his orders, to "go down and bring up those fellows at the Point."

General Hand formed in three columns and attacked them on the morning of June 8th at the Cross Roads, driving back the English Twenty-second Regiment. But it was soon learned that the enemy's entire force was still there, and General Hand retired. The British Army continued on this ground for two weeks. During this period the Americans kept up a continual firing upon the British pickets. Finally, on June 23d, the British made their second advance to Springfield, were again checked, and again retired, this time continuing their retreat to Staten Island. This ended the affair of June, 1780, the anniversary of which we now celebrate.

But this was not the real Battle of Elizabeth Town. It was but an incident in the bitter strife in which this borderline village was involved for eight long years.

Preparation for the real conflict here began soon after the Boston Tea Party, and war was really declared by the Freeholders of Elizabeth in Town Meeting, held at the Court House, December 6, 1774, with Stephen Crane in the chair, when they elected a committee of thirty-two members to urge matters before Congress and do other needful things. It was designated the "Committee of Observation." It might well have been called the "Committee of Observation, Decision and Execution," for it took matters strongly in hand, and for the next eight years of war the worthy men who composed it formed a beneficent "ring," which ruled the Town firmly and wisely. Seven men were also

elected as members of the Essex County Committee of Correspondence. Upon these committees were: John DeHart, William Livingston, Elias Boudinot, Elias Dayton, Abraham Clark, and other distinguished names.

It is interesting to note how many of the names on these committees survive in the community to the present day: Hampton, Williamson, Woodruff, Spencer, Ross, Thomas, Hetfield, Clark, Ogden, Townley, Miller, Marsh, Potter, Wynants, Halsey and Williams.

That Town Meeting, by solemn vote and immediate action, proceeded to "commit to the flames before the Court House, with the universal approbation of a numerous concourse of people," two certain pernicious pamphlets calculated to sow seeds of disunion, and intended to facilitate the scheme of the British Ministry for enslaving the colonies, and they voted their "detestation and abhorrence of such infamous publications."

And I here remark that the patriotism of Elizabeth was, from the first, led and directed by men of high intelligence and capacity.

The Town (which extended from the Sound to the Passaic River, and from Rahway to Newark, and embraced practically all of the present Union County) contained a notable number of men of ability and learning. Three Governors and scores of generals, colonels, captains and representatives, were afterwards chosen from the men and boys who then lived at Elizabeth Town.

The early Town Meetings of the Freeholders, while Revolutionary to the last degree, were no mobs. They were intense with feeling, but orderly, and their action was taken in admirably framed utterances, drawn up by educated men full of zeal, but not lacking in judgment.

And it is to be noted that the most uncompromising patriots were these same most highly accomplished men.

Livingston, Dayton, Barber, Clark, Boudinot, Caldwell and their associates represented the best intellect and the highest virtue of the community as well as its most aggressive patriotism.

The great majority of the people were in sympathy with the Revolutionary movement, but it was not unanimous. Some stood by the Crown.

Those connected with the Church of England found their church embarrassed. Their clergymen were bound by the oath of conformity and allegiance to support and defend the measures of the Crown, which led many prejudiced partisans of popular government and many of the common people to believe that a churchman and a foe to liberty were synonymous terms.

The worthy Dr. Chandler, Rector of St. John's Church, strongly supported the King. He found his situation so uncomfortable that he retired to England, not to return for ten years. The congregation became scattered. The interior of the church was destroyed, its pews and floors torn up and burned, and the building converted into a stable by the horsemen. The bitterness and divisions engendered by the war were most distressing. As time passed the division became sharper, sundering families and leading to treachery, arson, plunder, and a long train of miseries. The real Battle of Elizabeth Town was a struggle with these conditions.

The Town was intensely enlisted in the patriot cause. Finding Staten Island to sympathize with the Crown, they cut off dealings with Staten Islanders, and when one of them, James Johnson, came up the creek with his oyster boat and attempted to sell his freight at the Broad street bridge, they promptly attached a span of horses to the craft and hauled it up the street to the Court House. They warned all Tories, erected a gallows and fixed up a liberty pole in the middle of the Town. When news of bloodshed at Lexington came, the Town was ablaze and the young men were eager for the fray. As the Massachusetts delegation to Congress passed through New Jersey, the gentlemen and militia of the Town met them three miles out of Town and escorted them on their way with great enthusiasm. Gunpowder was scarce. This Town began to make it and forward it to New England, where the war was on,



the committee offering large prizes to hasten the deliveries of gunpowder and saltpetre.

As early as October, 1775, sixteen companies of foot and one of horse, belonging to this Borough, were reviewed here on parade "and made a very handsome appearance." Two months later "the Lady of His Excellency, General Washington," with others, passed through on their way to Cambridge, and were escorted by the Elizabeth Town Light Horse and a great number of gentlemen and ladies. Mrs. Washington traveled the whole distance from Virginia to Cambridge in her own conveyance—"a chariot and four, with black postillions in scarlet and white liveries."

Congress established a recruiting agency and the headquarters of a regiment of regulars at Elizabeth Town. Colonel William Alexander (Lord Stirling) was in command. Active hostilities soon began. The Committee of Observation, Stirling assisting, with boats, put out to sea, bombarded and took a transport heavily loaded with supplies for the British troops, and brought her to Elizabeth Town.

A powder mill was built, and Colonel Dayton's regiment was organized.

When the Declaration of Independence was drawn up, Abraham Clark, of Elizabeth Town, was on hand as one of the signers. He was a religious and also a plucky man. He wrote: "As to my title I know not yet whether it will be honorable or dishonorable. \* \* \* Perhaps our Congress will be exalted on a high gallows. Nothing short of the Almighty power of God can save us." But he signed it.

The very time of the Declaration of Independence was one of serious alarm in Elizabeth Town. General Howe was landing troops on Staten Island. The Staten Islanders, militia and all, turned Tories, and welcomed the British troops, and the Island became a nest of Tories and a resort for Loyalists thenceforward. The English approached Elizabethport, but were met and driven back. On the night of July 4th, 1776, two young men of this city crossed the Kills in a canoe and fired on the British regulars, but were,

of course, immediately driven back. This is probably the first skirmish after the Declaration of Independence.

An immediate attack was at this time expected, and every one who could bear arms was summoned to the defense. As Staten Island became a British camp, so Elizabethtown soon became a point of observation and defense for the Americans. A chain of strong works was thrown up at Elizabeth Town Point. Troops were collected here, and afterwards this village became the point for exchange of prisoners of war. The Hessians, captured at Trenton and its vicinity, were brought here for exchange.

It was finally provided by law that one-half of the inhabitants were to be always on duty to guard Elizabeth Town, Newark, and other towns. Nothing could better illustrate the serious condition of the State's affairs and the great strain put upon its resources than this draft of one-half of all the able-bodied men to be always on guard.

But the forces were not continuously kept here. They were, after a time, reduced to a mere company of guards. Then began a series of forays from Staten Island to seize cattle and other plunder, and to capture and carry off citizens as prisoners and hostages, followed by reprisals, fights, burnings and murders. Property was insecure, life in danger and fears were constant. Many people removed their families and effects beyond the Short Hills.

In the dark days of the war, after the fall of Fort Washington and Fort Lee, General Washington fell back to New Brunswick, passing through this town with the remnant of his army, consisting of hardly 3,500 men. He was closely followed by Lord Cornwallis.

The British took formal occupation of the Town November 30, 1776. Then, indeed, the people were in despair. The cause seemed hopeless. As one shrewd man afterwards observed:

“When the British Army overran the State of New Jersey in the closing part of the year 1776, the whole population could have been bought for eighteen pence a head.”

It did look so, but the witty gentleman was mistaken. There was a lot of fight left in the rebels. Within six weeks Washington had won the battles of Trenton and Princeton, and strengthened and consolidated his army at Morristown and put an entirely new face on the situation.

The Jersey militia had made a respectable fight between Springfield and Chatham, and had learned that to meet British regulars was not necessarily to be whipped.

The enemy soon abandoned the Town, and it was again garrisoned by the militia and resumed its experience of forays, alarms, skirmishes and fights. Its militia were frequently called out to help their neighbors. They fought at Woodbridge, at Scotch Plains, at Westfield and wherever called.

During all this time the people suffered in their homes and persons. A letter from Governor Livingston gives a glimpse of what the ladies had to put up with:

“Kate has been to Elizabeth Town, found our house in a most ruinous state. General Dickinson had stationed a captain with his artillery company in it. \* \* \* Everything is carried off that mamma had collected for her accommodation, so that it is impossible for her to go down to have the grapes and other things secured. The very hinges, locks and panes of glass are taken away.” The house thus bemoaned by the Governor is Liberty Hall, the present residence of Senator Kean, which Livingston had built for his home in 1772. What a graphic picture. Not pots and pans and kettles enough left to put up the fall preserves, to say nothing of a supply of sugar.

The burnings, which so embittered the people of this place, began in the early part of 1779, when the baffling of an attempt of Colonel Stirling to capture Governor Livingston so enraged his force that they burned the Academy, the Parsonage, the barracks, the Ferry House and a blacksmith's shop. As is well known, the First Church and the Court House were burned the following year by an invading party of soldiers and Tories.

One writer has remarked that the wonder is that anybody remained or attempted to live in Elizabeth Town during the perils of that war. The Town was under a real reign of terror in the winter of 1779 and '80, and the culmination of all their fears was the appalling advance of Knyphausen on this day one hundred and twenty-five years ago. How their hearts must have failed them as the mothers, who had survived five years of fears and alarms, looked out upon the passing by of this great and powerful army. Their husbands and sons were gone—some to distant armies, some among the militia hastily gathering in the hills, some fallen in battle. As they gazed out over the blackened ruins of their church and their homes, what wonder if they despaired. But they were not utterly cast down; they soon saw that army in retreat, baffled. They suffered a year or two more of trouble and poverty, which, alas, had become their daily food, and then all was peace.

Dr. Johnson once said that a man was not on his oath when he was writing epitaphs or uttering words of panegyric. So I suppose we are not exactly on the witness stand in characterizing the men and women of those days. We shall be allowed some patriotic license in telling the facts. But we will not claim it. The simple, true story is more impressive.

There is not lacking evidence that the patriots of those days suffered the same human weaknesses that we see in ourselves and our neighbors to-day. But their virtues were very real. They had been trained to do things for themselves. They were, therefore, self-reliant and brave. They were trained to work and to do the humble duties of every day without question and because they were duties. They were, therefore, ready for anything that bore the stamp of duty upon it.

They did not all see so clearly at first what the rebellion meant and whereunto it would grow, but they learned. Their knowledge grew with the passing years and their patriotism grew with their knowledge. They understood more clearly; they committed themselves more irrevocably

to the great revolution. The meaning of the freedom they were gaining became more plain and its value more essential in their eyes.

They had no thirst for military spoils or glory. They disliked military service, and much preferred to be at home plowing, sowing and reaping. They coveted no man's land, no new possessions.

Beware of that man of peace who does not like war, but when it comes, takes part in it to defend his home. Look out for the man who does not belong to the militia company in time of peace, but is a volunteer when the war breaks out. Whether he is an American, or a Boer, or a Japanese, watch him.

Our country has given remarkable evidence of the dangerous character of that kind of man as a fighter.

General Grant once remarked while in this Town, that he would not cross Broad street to see the greatest military parade ever formed; that he never had fancied military display, and disliked all that it stood for. And yet that man, fighting battles without a sash or sword, driving upon the battlefield in a buggy when he was too lame to ride a horse, campaigning, if we can trust the photographs, with no better coat than a soldier's blouse, and that neither buttoned nor belted; that man was intensely patriotic; he had a love for and a simple faith in his country that was his most marked characteristic. In peace, unostentatious, quiet and kindly, and busied with everyday duties; in war, he was terrible as an army with banners.

The same spirit of peace provoked to war, was shown quite as notably by the volunteers in our Civil War as by their grandfathers of the Revolution.

It is the spirit of the aroused, virtuous citizen who thinks and reasons for himself. When he fights, it is not for love of strife or hope of fame, but for the righteous cause which his judgment approves and his faith holds sacred. He fights for home, for State, for his religious beliefs.

Shakespeare has given us this idea: "He is not great who is not greatly good."

Looking back from this length of view, we can see that our forefathers, who won Independence and Liberty for us, were God-fearing, faithful, steadfast and dutiful. And these are the qualities that mark them as truly great, and make them worthy to be had in perpetual veneration.

