

STORIES of New Jersey

fled down into the valley of the Hackensack River by three different routes. Washington, realizing he had no chance of making a stand in the low-lying open country, abandoned his headquarters at Hackensack and on November 21 marched his sorry-looking soldiers down the muddy road that followed the shore of the Passaic River. He crossed the river by a bridge at Belleville and reached Newark. Here he called the guards stationed at Elizabethtown and Perth Amboy and waited in vain for the New Jersey militia to come to his aid. In a few days Cornwallis, slowed by the weather, was at his heels, and Washington, with his ragged troops, took to the road again. The redcoats were in Newark before the Americans had all started on the road to New Brunswick.



Joseph Reed



Charles Lee

Washington probably knew by this time that influential men in Congress and in political circles were conspiring to remove him from full command, but he had yet to learn that his most trusted officers had lost confidence in him. Colonel Joseph Reed, his adjutant-general and close friend, had written to General Charles Lee after the retreat from Fort Lee condemning Washington's "indecisive mind." Reed suggested that Lee should be commander of the American army.

Lee's reply reached Washington's camp at New Brunswick while Reed was at Burlington pleading with Governor Livingston for desperately-needed assistance. Washington, thinking it official correspondence, opened the letter. Lee had written: "I...lament with you that fatal indecision of mind which in war is a much greater disqualification than stupidity or even want of personal courage..."

Washington knew all that Reed had written from what Lee had answered. He forwarded the letter to Reed, explaining that he had "no idea of its being a private letter, much less suspecting the tendency of the correspondence..." Although deeply hurt by the criticism, his official relations with Reed and Lee continued free of resentment or spite, for he rarely allowed his personal feelings to prejudice him against anyone fighting for American victory. When, several months later, friendship between Reed and the commander was patched, Washington admitted: "I was hurt...because I thought...myself...entitled...to your advice upon any point in which I appeared to be wanting."

On November 28, after destroying the bridge over the Raritan River, Washington entered New Brunswick and united his force with Lord Stirling's. Again he waited vainly for reinforcements of New Jersey Militia. Desertions increased. The troops were half-naked and hungry. As it happened, the British were hungry, too, and greatly retarded by their enormous caravan which carried war-time luxuries as well as necessities.

The British were firing their cannon across the Raritan as Washington hastily withdrew from New Brunswick with less than 4,000 men on December 1. Next day found the remnant of the American army moving grimly through Princeton where Stirling remained with 1,200 men, while the others pushed on to Trenton to join 2,000 militiamen from Pennsylvania waiting there. Washington wasted no time at Trenton. He sent 1,200 men under Greene back to reinforce Stirling at Princeton and began at once to ship across the Delaware whatever military equipment and stores he could lay hands on. Several days previous he had decided that the enemy were aiming for Philadelphia and sent word that all craft on the Delaware be collected at Trenton--especially the large Durham boats used for transporting produce.