The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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The Winter of 1776 - 77, The Trenton and Princeton Battles:

By 2 January 1777 Washington had his 6,000 man army assembled along the banks of Assunpink Creek in Trenton, where he repulsed a strong night-fall attack by Cornwallis's main body of British troops. This was no small feat, because after repeated defeats at the hands of the British and Hessians, Washington's army had now fought that foe to a stand-still and caused its leaders to hold back and rethink the situation. What British General Cornwallis did not know was that General Washington's intelligence had informed him that the British garrison defending Princeton was under manned and not well organized, since General Cornwallis had returned and taken the main army away to Assunpink Creek and Trenton. Washington's plan was to elude and bypass Cornwallis's main army in order to make an attack on Princeton.

Patriot Brigadier General Hugh Mercer led a day-break attack with two regiments of Continental Line troops spear-heading the assault on British Lieutenant Colonel

Charles Mawhood and the British defending Princeton. In the resulting battle, Mercer's Continentals were over run and fell back in disarray, prompting General Washington to send in militia reinforcements under the command of Brigadier General John Cadwalader. When the militia approached the battle line, and saw Mercer's men in retreat, they too joined in the general retreat. At this critical moment in the battle, General Washington appears on the battlefield with reinforcements, and rallies the retreating men in the formation of a new battle line. With General Washington in the lead, the Americans counter attacked the British. General Washington mounted on a horse, hat waving in his hand at the head of his men, led them up to within thirty yards of the British battle line. Washington turned on his horse and facing his men commanded, "Halt" and then "Fire." Both armies fired a simultaneous volley, which completely enveloped both armies in a huge cloud of smoke. Much to everyone's amazement, when the cloud cleared, there sat Washington on his horse, ordering his men forward in a bayonet attack. Still angry from the British fox hunt taunt from his battle at Harlem Heights, Washington shouted to his men, "It's a fine fox chase my boys!" The result was that Mawhood was forced to call a British retreat, which turned into most of his men leaving the battlefield for the protection of General Cornwallis's army. Mawhood and those British soldiers remaining with him retreated into the city of Princeton to be joined with reserve British units in the city. The following battle was a decisive victory for the Americans. At one point several British soldiers sought shelter within the chapel of Nassau Hall. Alexander Hamilton, commander of an artillery unit, directed brisk fire upon the chapel. It is reputed that one such cannon ball penetrated the wall of the chapel and passed through a picture of King George II, decapitating the portrait. After the war a portrait of George Washington would hang in the restored

chapel.

Before the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, the British controlled all of New York and New Jersey. Their plan was to continue their assault in the spring by defeating Washington's army and taking the city of Philadelphia. After the American victories, Washington moved his army into winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey, while General Cornwallis abandoned several of his bases and withdrew his British and Hessian army to winter quarters at New Brunswick, New Jersey. New Jersey was the new battleground.

The winter of 1777 was meteorologically noted for its harshness, while historically little action seems to have occurred. British General Howe formulated his plans for campaigning in the spring of 1777, which included keeping General Cornwallis on the attack in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and keeping American General Washington occupied and on the defensive.

General Washington on the other hand struggled throughout the winter holding the body and soul of the American army together. Completion of enlistments, waning renewals, and outright desertions brought the American army down to a low of 1,000 men, half of which were ill. Spring would bring a dramatic revival of enlistments. Due to Washington's successes at Trenton and Princeton, the Continental Congress moved back from Baltimore, Maryland, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where it busied itself in the coming June of 1777 with the issue of a national symbol, a national flag.

On June 14, 1777, the Second Continental Congress passed the Flag Resolution which stated: "*Be it Resolved,* That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen

stripes, alternate red and white; that the union (upper left corner) be thirteen stars, white on a blue field, representing a new constellation." The new flag was first hoisted in June 1777 by the Continental Army at the Middlebrook encampment.

The first official U. S. flag flown during battle was on August 3, 1777, at Fort Schuyler (Fort Stanwix) during the Siege of Fort Schuyler, Massachusetts. Reinforcements arriving at the fort brought news of Congress' action, and soldiers set about cutting up their shirts to make white stripes; scarlet material to form the red stripes was obtained from the red flannel petticoats of officers' wives, while material for the blue union was donated by Captain Abraham Swartwout's blue cloth long coat. A voucher is preserved today, which verifies that Captain Swartwout of Dutchess County was paid by Congress for his coat.

This flag resolution of Congress was most likely intended to define a naval ensign, because in 1777 the notion of a national flag did not yet exist. This flag resolution appears among other resolutions appearing on the floor of Congress, and was offered by the Marine Committee. Prior to this time, American vessels had used a flag referred to as the "Grand Union Flag."

This flag appeared to be a modification of the flag used by the British East India Company and differed from the official British Naval Union Jack by having a field of

alternating red and white stripes instead of the solid red of the Union Jack. The British cross barred ensign composed the union of both the Union Jack, the British East India Company flag, as well as the American "Grand Union Flag." The orientation of the union was different for the "Grand Union Flag," being vertical on the American flag, rather that horizontal as it was in the two British versions.

Many "hand-crafted" versions of the American flag sprang into existence in 1777, but the first official, mass produced, flag came from flag designer Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey. Mr. Hopkinson was a signer of the Declaration of Independence as well as a naval flag designer. His design was commissioned by the Naval Board serving under the authority of the Continental Marine Congressional Committee.

Francis Hopkinson's U.S. Naval Flag bearing six-pointed stars arranged in rows.

Hopkinson actually designed two flags. A naval ensign that had seven red stripes and six white ones allowing for greater visibility on open seas. His flag for the United States bore seven white stripes and six red ones. The union of both flags had six-pointed stars arranged in rows of 3,2,3,2,3.

After 1777 several variations of this original Hopkinson Naval Ensign would

appear and most flags were hand-crafted and not mass produced. Some versions bore red, white and blue stripes, while others contained unions bearing eight-pointed stars rather than six-pointed stars. The so-called "Betsy Ross" flag bore a standard of red and white stripes just like the Naval Ensign, but had six-pointed stars arranged on the union in a circle. The apex of each star pointed to the center of the union. By the end of the war, the Hopkinson flag would be recognized worldwide as the Ensign of the United States of American, *a new constellation*.

The "Betsy Ross" Flag

A review is in order here, so we can formulate a better image of the war's big picture. General Washington's army has suffered a series of defeats, being pushed out of New York and into New Jersey, but has stayed intact and is still functioning. The Patriot victories at Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey, clearly demonstrate to the British that the American army is far from beaten, and is a force to be taken seriously.
General Washington's strategy is to keep his army together, stay on the move, attack the British whenever and where ever possible, but avoid at all costs, an engagement, which could result in a total defeat of the American forces. He knows that as long as his army exist in the field, America has a chance for survival.

Up to this point, the British have been over confident, and have sought to break

the American will by crushing Washington's army. During the time since Lexington and Concord, this British pressure has been unrelenting, but the British generals are beginning to be aware of consequences they had not anticipated. Their series of rapid victories had caused the British army to be spread across a vast distance in America, and that territory was mostly filled with people who were hostile to the British. The British supply line was stretched perilously thin and in spite of all their brilliant victories, they had not achieved that one decisive victory. In the coming Spring, it is General Cornwallis' plan to continue pressing General Washington and the American army, and to take the seat of American government, the city of Philadelphia. What British General Cornwallis did not know was that back in England, Major General John Burgoyne was about to collaborate with British Secretary of War, St. Germain, to devise a grand strategy for ending the war with absolute defeat of the American colonies.

John Burgoyne was no stranger to the American colonies, having been present during the siege of Boston, but returned to England, when the British army vacated Boston and moved to Halifax. Back in England, Burgoyne had played politics with Lord St. Germain and convinced Parliament, and the Secretary of War, that his plan to take a large British army from Quebec, Canada, down to Lake Champlain and into Albany, New York, would sever New England away from the rest of the colonies, and would lead to the desired conclusion for the war of rebellion.

General Burgoyne reasoned that the British effort in American should be channeled into a three pronged assault. Burgoyne would lead a strong force down from Canada, take Lake Champlain and Fort Ticonderoga, and penetrate the Hudson Valley by taking Albany, New York. Meanwhile, British General Howe was to bring an equally large force up from southern New York to close a pincer effect, and join Burgoyne at

Albany. The third element of this pincer movement was to have General Barry St. Leger come down the Mohawk Valley with a large Indian force and clamp the middle of the pincer movement trapping any escaping rebels. The result of this perfect plan was, of course, supposed to make John Burgoyne a very famous and popular guy back in England.