



*Allan McLane, Jr. (1746–1829), painted in 1818  
by Charles Wilson Peale (1741-1827), Maryland Historical Society.*

## **A SKETCH OF ALLAN MCLANE (1828)** **By Alexander Garden, of Lee's Legion.**

*"...from the time of his joining the Continental army,  
I can testify, that he [McLane] distinguished himself  
highly, as a brave and enterprising officer..."*  
~ Gen. George Washington, 1783.

What is specifically true, or is not quite true, about Delaware's (but Philadelphia born) Captain Allan McLane's (1746–1829) colorful wartime exploits and adventures is not always so easy offhand to conclude. Yet even the most skeptical and jaded observer of human nature will have to concede that the sheer number of daring-do stories pertaining to him attest to their being, on the whole, a substantial plausibility to them. At one time later in his life, McLane seriously contemplated writing and publishing his memoirs, but, regrettably for us, he ultimately decided against it.<sup>1</sup> Although we can't speak to the particulars as to exactly why he declined to do so, it seems not unlikely that the reason was owing to his having done or been a part of so *many* heroic, pivotal events and hair-breadth scrapes, battles,<sup>2</sup> and encounters, that he must have feared being charged with either too much boasting and or else blatant fibbing. His reluctance to record in print his personal history in any case turns out to be very unfortunate in retrospect; since there are a number of details we would have liked to have had filled out for us; such as, *for example*, did he indeed use all or near all of his patrimony, some \$15,000, to raise a company of Delaware light infantry? What other units were with his company in the several famous battles at which he was present? Was he really instrumental in saving Lafayette's corps at Barren Hill? (20 May 1778, for if so he might be said to have spared the Americans a severe and *decisive* defeat in the war.) How enlisted and from where did the 50 Oneida Indians come from who sometimes assisted him and Lee's Legion in their operations around Philadelphia in early 1778 and elsewhere? Who led and what became of them? Why and how were so many of Lee and McLane's men insubordinate in retreating from the Paulus Hook raid so early and soon as they did?<sup>3</sup> What were and how amicable were his relations with other members of Lee's Legion (including Lee himself?)<sup>4</sup> What special and unusual events and activities (if any) transpired when

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<sup>1</sup> About a year after writing this, I learned from Michael Cecere's biography of Henry Lee *Wedded to My Sword* (2012), pp. 140n, 289, that at least some remnants of a memoir by McLane survive and can be found in the McLane Papers housed at the New York Historical Society. There is more information about McLane as well in Watson's *Annals of Philadelphia* (1857), vol. 2, pt. 2, ch, 13.

<sup>2</sup> McLane was present at Long Island, White Plains, Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth.

<sup>3</sup> Thus incurring the scorn and derision of Sir Henry Clinton (See Lord Mahon's *History of England*, vol. VI, 1774-1780 (1851). In the same volume, Mahon quotes Lee writing in a confidential missive to President Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania: "In my report to General Washington, I passed the usual general compliments on the troops under my command. I did not tell the world that near one half of my countrymen left me!" *Life of Reed*, vol. ii, p.126.

<sup>4</sup> Historian Michael Cecere reports (*Wedded to My Sword*, pp. 139-140, 140n) McLane's declaiming bitterly against Lee's obstructing his advancing in rank in the Legion. And yet Washington's response (dated 30 Jan. 1780 Morristown) to a letter of Lee's perhaps suggests that the latter may rather have tried to help secure McLane's promotion. Wrote Washington: "I have received your favor of the 26th. inclosing one from Capn. McLane to you of the 15th. However Capn. McLane[']s services may entitle him to consideration, yet he is neither singular in his sacrifices nor situation. There are numbers in the line, who have been as long Captains and without promotion as himself. This is one of those circumstances incidental to all services. But with regard to his request the formation of new corps rests by no means with me, nor if it did I could not recommend the proposal to Congress at a time when the separate corps now

he served as Speaker of the Delaware State House of Representatives, or as one the Justice Department's very first U.S. Marshals?

While there as yet is no full-length biography, possibly the best single, non-contemporary account of McLane's life at the moment is Fred J. Cook's article for *American Heritage Magazine*, October, 1956, Vol. 7, Iss. 6.<sup>5</sup> In supplement to that piece, we present here Alexander Garden's (1757-1829) sketch from *Anecdotes of the American Revolution: Illustrative of the Talents and Virtues of the Heroes of the Revolution, Who Acted the Most Conspicuous Parts Therein* -- Second Series. A.E. Miller, Charleston, 1828; pp. 76-83.

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## ALLEN M'LEAN, OF DELAWARE.

I know of no individual, of his rank in the army, who engaged in such a variety of perilous adventures, or who, so invariably brought them to a happy issue, as Allen M'Lean [sic<sup>6</sup>]. A brief statement of his services, will best demonstrate his merits as a soldier, and claims to public favour as a zealous and inflexible patriot. At the commencement of the Revolution, he possessed a comfortable independency, holding in the city of Philadelphia, in houses and lots, property, equal in value to fifteen thousand dollars, the whole of which he sacrificed in the service of his country.<sup>7</sup> At the very commencement of hostilities, we find him stepping forward as a volunteer. Persuaded, from the ardent temper and strong prejudices of Lord Dunmore, that an appeal to arms would speedily occur in Virginia, he particularly directed his attention to that quarter, and witnessed the repulse of the British at the Great Bridge.<sup>8</sup> This early dawn of success giving increase to his military ardour, his utmost efforts were exerted to fit himself for command, and in 1775, a lieutenant's commission was presented to him, in a Militia Regiment, commanded by the Hon. Caesar Rodney, of Delaware. In 1776, he joined the army under General Washington, near New-York. The battle of Long Island speedily occurring, afforded an opportunity, which lie eagerly embraced, to acquire distinction. Observing the exposed situation of a British party, he obtained from Lord Sterling [Stirling] the aid of a small detachment from the Delaware Regiment, made a lieutenant and eighteen privates, prisoners, and though surrounded by the enemy, led them off in safety. He was present at the battle of the White Plains witnessed the capture of the Hessians at Trenton, and at Princeton, by his good conduct and exemplary gallantry, so particularly attracted the attention of General Washington, to be immediately appointed to a Captaincy in a Continental Regiment. Sent into Delaware to recruit, he speedily rejoined the army with ninety-four men, raised at his own expense, every shilling of the bounty-money being drawn from his pocket. On the march of the British army from the head of Elk, the particular duty assigned him was, to annoy them, which he did with effect, but at the expense of a lieutenant killed, and a considerable number of his men. Philadelphia being possessed by the British, after the battles of Brandywine and Germantown, the important duty was assigned to him by the Commander-in-chief, to watch the movements of the enemy, to protect the whig inhabitants, (as much as practicable) residing near the lines, and to prevent the disaffected from carrying supplies to the city. The results evinced the prudence of the measure. M'Lean was vigilant and active, and remarkably prudent, though possessed of the most dauntless intrepidity. On the very first night of service, he took three spies, fifteen British soldiers who had quitted the city in search of plunder, and twelve tories, carrying in supplies to the enemy. A discovery of the highest importance immediately followed. On the 3d of December, 1777, intelligence was communicated to him by a female, who, under some frivolous pretext, had passed the British lines, "that the enemy were to leave the city on the ensuing night, in hopes to surprise the Camp of General Washington, at White Marsh." Prompt in communicating this information to the Commander-in-chief, his immediate care was to intercept the progress of the foe. A position was accordingly taken near Germantown; when, so well-directed a fire was opened upon their front, that the British, supposing a

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in service experience so many inconveniencies, and are supposed too numerous. Capn. McLane however may be assured that my opinion of his military merits would induce me to do every thing in his favor consistent with propriety."

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/allan-mclane-unknown-hero-revolution>

<sup>6</sup> [Edit. "M'Lean" is apparently an earlier spelling; later formally changed.]

<sup>7</sup> [Edit. Henry Lee likewise spent not inconsiderable sums forming and equipping his Virginia cavalry that became the 5<sup>th</sup> troop of the 1<sup>st</sup> Continental Light Dragoons; and for which, as with McLane, he never sought nor received remuneration.]

<sup>8</sup> [Edit. Sometimes spoken of as Virginia's "Bunker Hill," 9 Dec. 1775.]

considerable force at hand, desisted in the attempt to proceed further, and immediately formed a line of battle. Recovering, however, from their first surprize, they moved on in three columns, and about day-dawn appeared in front of the American encampment. For two days they occupied this position, when Gen. Morgan, driving in their pickets on the right, and General Washington, making arrangements for a general attack, they struck their tents and precipitately returned to the city.

The service rendered to the Marquis De La Fayette, in the following month of May, was no less important. Entrusted by General Washington with a separate command, that aspiring soldier had taken post at Barren Hill Church. A traitor giving intelligence of his situation to General Howe, the Generals, Grant and Erskine, with five thousand picked men, were ordered to gain his rear, while General Grey, marched forward to attack him in front, and prevent his crossing the Schuylkill. The capture of two Grenadiers brought to M'Lean the first intelligence of the movement, which left no doubt on his mind, but that to strike at the Marquis, was the object of the expedition. Grant, accomplished his object, but finding his troops much fatigued by a night-march of twenty miles in a few hours, thought proper to wait the approach of Grey. M'Lean reached Barren Hill about day-break, and imparted his apprehensions to General La Fayette, who could scarcely credit the report; but it was speedily confirmed from many quarters, and particularly by Captain Stone, of the Militia, who, hearing the British as they passed his dwelling, leaped from a window, and ran naked across the country towards Barren Hill, till perfectly exhausted, he met a friend, who took up the report and speedily conveyed it to the Marquis. There was no time for deliberation. The army was immediately led across the river at Marston's Ford. But, had Grant, in the first instance, pushed forward and occupied the strong grounds at the Ford, it is presumable that the command of the Marquis, not half as numerous as his own, must have surrendered, or been destroyed.

While General Washington lay at Valley Forge, M'Lean passed into the State of Delaware by his order, and rendered essential service by collecting supplies for the army, which could not otherwise have been obtained. Resuming his command before Philadelphia, in 1778, he never failed to vex and harass the enemy, till they evacuated the city, and hanging on their rear at the moment of embarkation, made one captain, a provost-marshal, three sergeants, two corporals, and thirty-four privates, prisoners. During their retreat through the Jerseys, he never ceased to annoy them, and by his activity at Monmouth, gave increase to his well-earned reputation.

He served under Major Lee,<sup>9</sup> both at the reduction of Paulus Hook, at which last named post, fifty prisoners were taken, and a gang of counterfeiters, who had imitated the Continental money, so exactly, that at the treasury the false could not be distinguished from the genuine bills.

His conduct at the reduction of Stoney [Stony] Point, deserves to be more particularly mentioned. Being ordered with a flag of truce, to conduct a Mrs. Smith to the post at Stoney Point, that lady having quitted it for the purpose of carrying some necessaries to her sons in New-York; he assumed the appearance of a simple countryman, and being politely received by the British officers, did not fail, while conversing with them, to examine with a soldier's eye, the strength of the position, and the points at which it would be assailable, with the best prospects of success. His split shirt, and rifle accoutrements, appear to have particularly attracted the attention of a young officer, who said to him "Well Captain, what do you think of our fortress is it strong enough to keep Mister Washington out?" "I know nothing of these matters," replied M Lean, "I am but a woodsman, and can only use my rifle; but, I guess the General (not Mister Washington, if you please) would be likely to think a bit, before he would run his head against such works as these. If I was a General, sure I am that I would not attempt to take it, though I had fifty thousand men." "And if," rejoined the officer, "General Washington, since you insist on his being styled General, should ever have the presumption to attempt it, he will have cause to rue his rashness, for this post is the Gibraltar of America, and defended by British valour, must be deemed impregnable." "No doubt, no doubt," replied

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<sup>9</sup> [Edit. Before being assigned by Congress to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Partisan Corps on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1779, McLane's Delaware company had been a component of Patton's Additional Regiment; the latter comprised of soldiers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. Additional and Extra regiments were units formed, on the proposal of Washington and approved by Congress, in late 1776 and mustered (typically headed by and named after wealthy, influential, and or prominent citizens) in early 1777 to compensate for insufficiently filled state quotas. The Additional and Extra regiments, of which there were six, were the solely the responsibility of Congress, and, unlike most regular Continentals, received no administrative supervision by, or pay from, a particular state.]

M'Lean, "but, trust me, we are not such dolts as to attempt impossibilities, so that, as far as we are concerned, you may sleep in security." On the night subsequent to this conversation, the post was attacked and carried. Colonel M'Lean assured me, that when recognized by the officer, it would have been impossible to give a just idea of his surprise and confusion. The folly of his former boasting, appeared to rush on his mind with a peculiarly distressing effect, and he hastily retired, overwhelmed with shame and mortification.

In June, 1781, entrusted with despatches of the highest importance by General Washington, to the Count de Grasse, he took the command of the Marines on board of the ship *Congress*, mounting twenty guns, and one hundred and forty men, and arrived at Cape Francois [Francois, Haiti] in July; there he found the Count holding a Council of War, the object of which was, to fix on proper measures for an immediate attack on the Island of Jamaica. But, before any definite arrangements could be made, the presence of M'Lean was called for, that he might be examined relative to the preparations made in America, for a combined attack by the Allies and American army, on the British force in the Chesapeake. To the interrogatories proposed, he gave such satisfactory answers, and developed such cheering prospects of success, that he was informed by the Count, soon as the Council broke up, that he would immediately proceed to America, and act as circumstances might require, until the hurricane months should have passed over. Returning home with this pleasing intelligence, the *Congress* [24 guns] fell in with the British sloop of war *Savage*, of twenty guns [or 16 guns according to other sources], and one hundred and forty men, engaged her, and after a desperate action of five glasses, succeeded in capturing her. The *Congress* lost her boatswain, carpenter, two masters mates, and fifteen of her crew; the *Savage*, her sailing master, two midshipmen, and twenty-five of her crew. The victory, so honourable to the flag of the United States, was attributed, in a great degree, to the constant and well-directed fire of the marines.<sup>10</sup>

He was next ordered to take post near Sandy Hook, and being furnished with a barge to visit Long Island, was directed to communicate with persons from New-York, and having received from them the private signals of the British fleet sailing for the Chesapeake, for the relief of Lord Cornwallis, returned to the Jersey shore, embarked in a pilot-boat, and delivered them safely to the Count de Grasse. He then took his station on the lines before York, till the garrison surrendered.

I could detail many other anecdotes relative to M'Lean, but what I have already written, is, in my estimation, amply sufficient to prove, that he was much relied on for his judgment, courage and integrity; that he retained the confidence of the Commander-in-chief, the Board of War, and the General officers he acted with, to the end; that he was in all the principal battles fought in the States of New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia; that he served his country faithfully on water as well as land; and, that although frequently contending with superior numbers, and exposed to every peril, he still extricated himself from difficulty, by the superiority of his courage and presence of mind, with distinguished eclat.

I annex a copy of the Certificate of Service, presented to him at the conclusion of the war, by General Washington:

"Allen M'Lean, Esq., was appointed a Captain, in one of the additional Continental Regiments of foot, in 1777, and by activity and industry, soon joined the army, with a Free Company. He commanded a party of observation, under my instructions, until July, 1779, when he was annexed, by a resolution of the Honourable Continental Congress, to Major Lee's Legion, to command the Infantry. From the certificate, which Major M'Lean is possessed of, it appears that he was early active in the cause of his country, and from the time of his joining the Continental army, I can testify, that he distinguished himself highly, as a brave and enterprising officer. Previously to the siege of York, he was employed to watch the motions of the British army, near New-York, as well as in Virginia, and was entrusted with despatches of the first importance to His Excellency, Count De Grasse, which commission he executed with great celerity, and was afterwards very serviceable in reconnoitering and bringing intelligence of the strength and disposition of the British army and fleet in the Chesapeake.

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<sup>10</sup> [Edit. Regarding this action between the *Congress* and the *Savage*, see James Fenimore Cooper's *History of the Navy of the United States* (1839), Vol. 1, ch. 11, pp. 255-257.]

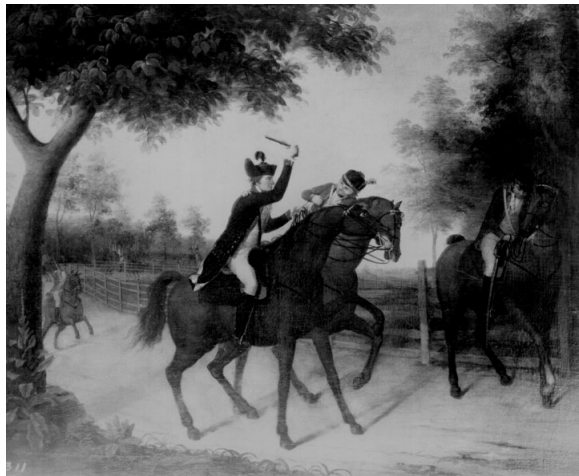
“Given under my hand and seal, at Rocky Hill, near Princeton, November 4th, 1783.

GEORGE WASHINGTON.”

On one occasion, doing duty near the British lines, finding his horse greatly fatigued, and himself much in want of rest and refreshment, he was retiring towards Germantown, when the enemy’s cavalry appeared in view, and advancing with a rapidity that threatened to cut off the possibility of a retreat. The Commander of the British forces, perceiving that pursuit as a body would impede the celerity of movement, essential to success, selected two of his best mounted troopers, and ordered them to continue the chase [sic], and use every possible exertion to make him their prisoner. The first of these approaching very near, called to M Lean by name, and ordered him to surrender, but he, preserving his presence of mind, drew forth the only pistol he possessed, and leveling it with effect, laid his adversary prostrate in the dust. The second now coming up, was, in turn, eagerly charged, and being struck from his horse by the butt-end of the pistol that had disabled his companion, was incapacitated from using any further exertion, M’Lean, continuing his route, sought shelter in a swamp, where he remained in security, till the evening afforded him an opportunity of rejoining his command.

My wish on the present occasion is, to speak only of the occurrences of the Revolutionary war, but I have in my possession, an interesting memoir from the pen of Colonel M’Lean, relative to the proceeding of the Army before Washington [during the War of 1812], when taken and pillaged by Ross, the British General, that fills me both with grief and astonishment. Briefly to notice it, the Colonel says: --

“All was confusion nothing like spirit nothing like subordination universal complaint for the want of food, the Militia going off in every direction to seek it. Men, badly armed, being, in many instances, without flints in their muskets, and so completely without discipline, as to exhibit a far greater resemblance to an armed mob, than an organized army. I most religiously believe, that if I had been at the head of three hundred men, such as I led on to the attack of Paulas [sic] Hook, or such as I had under my command, during the war of our Independence, I should have defeated General Ross, when he pressed General Winder over the Eastern Branch. Confident I am, that the enemy would never have reached Washington, and America been spared the disgrace of beholding the British triumphantly possessing the Capital.”



*“The Ambush of Allan McLane” and “Encounter between Capt. Allan McLane and a British dragoon at Frankfort, near Philadelphia;” both circa 1803 by James Peale (1749-1831).*

William Thomas Sherman

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