



Detail of Trumbull's¹ "The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown"
(1797/1820), Capitol Rotunda; with Laurens depicted in the center.

"...YOUR DUTIFUL SON, JOHN LAURENS"

"Nature had adorned him [John Laurens] with a profusion of her choicest gifts, to which a well-conducted education had added its most useful as well as its most elegant improvements. Though his fortune and family entitled him to pre-eminence, yet he was the warm friend of republican equality. Generous and liberal, his heart expanded with genuine philanthropy. Zealous for the rights of humanity, he contended that personal liberty was the birth-right of every human being, however diversified by country, colour or capacity. His insinuating address, won the hearts of all his acquaintances: his sincerity and virtue secured their lasting esteem. Acting from the most honourable principles -- uniting the bravery and other talents of a great officer with the knowledge of a complete scholar, and the engaging manner of a well-bred gentleman, he was the idol of his country -- the glory of the army -- and an ornament of human nature. His abilities shone in the legislature and in the cabinet, as well as in the field, and were equal to the highest stations. His admiring country, sensible of his rising merit, stood prepared to confer on him her most distinguished honours. Cut down in the midst of all these prospects, he has left mankind to deplore the calamities of war, which in the twenty-seventh year of his life, deprived society of so valuable a citizen."

~ David Ramsay, *History of the Revolution of South Carolina* (1785), vol. II, pp. 374-375.

A person who takes the trouble to learn about the life of Col. John Laurens (1754-1782), from South Carolina, in detail will find him a far more remarkable and extraordinary figure than commonly hurried generalizations make him out to be. Had he survived the war, he very well might have attained a Founding Father status similar to that of his fellow Aide-de-camp Alexander Hamilton. For like Hamilton, he was in many ways a far sighted progressive, highly intelligent, outspoken, brave, charming, and personable. But also like Hamilton, Laurens' signal frailty was youthful rashness and impetuosity. And yet, ironically, that same apparent and oft lamented defect, which ultimately cost both men their lives, could be said to have been instrumental in Laurens' case in his² securing from Louis XVI emergency funds and supplies for the American finances and war effort when, in the summer of 1781, they were most desperately required -- a feat, and aside from Lafayette, probably no one else, not even the influential Dr.

¹ Trumbull himself was, early in the war, one of Washington's "family" of aides.

² Accompanied by Thomas Paine.

Franklin, could have accomplished. Likewise who else but the audacious Laurens, accompanied by the Viscount de Noailles, could have demanded harsh surrender terms of the British at Yorktown?

From his own writings and others' accounts of him, Laurens comes across and leaves the impression of having been of those rare souls who believed that if you can't champion and stand up for the weak -- or doggedly stand up for higher principle (which devotion is typically among mortals itself often deemed a form of weakness) -- you must yourself (at bottom) be weak. Not that Laurens was a saint -- he wasn't. And, we might add, when he joined Greene in 1782 to lead in the southern army, he encountered dissatisfaction from fellow officers, including Lee; who distrusted his ability as a military strategist and tactician. Yet in his full-hearted idealism he came almost as close to being a saint as any other of America's revolutionaries. And for the same reason, to come away from learning his life story is, at least for those who feel, a rather sad experience. As with Alexander Scammell and several others, such scarcely matched hope and promise was pointlessly terminated in the fervid flush of youth; and with the end of the war -- and victory -- so breathlessly close at hand. In addition, it is not so very improbable that had he lived the entire course of American history, including the fate of Black Americans, might have been significantly altered. Why this is so you will see presently in some of the following extracts taken from letters written to his father and President of Congress (1777-1778) Henry Laurens and that appear in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens in the Years 1777-8, with a Memoir by William Gilmore Simms* (1867). My choice of subjects which Laurens addresses in these letters is rather un-uniform, but the diversity of selection I hope is helpful in providing a more full portrait of Laurens and his era.

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HEAD QUARTERS - Whitemarsh Camp [outside Philadelphia],  
5<sup>th</sup> November, 1777

My Dear Father:\*

...I could recollect and commit hastily to paper, and what will be a treasure to him as a Newsmonger, Humphrey's *Gazette* of the 25th. I expected to have been able to procure another for you, but have been disappointed.

The light manner in which Count [Carl von] Donop[']s affair is related<sup>3</sup> -- Sr<sup>4</sup> Wm Howe's Kitean harangue to such he would delude into the loyal corps of which he has reserved to himself the Colonelcy and other little anecdotes, may make it acceptable even a day or two hence, if you have not already seen it, and in that time I may get it from some one whose curiosity and that of his circle is satisfied or called off to some thing more recent.

A day or two ago, Capt [Henry] Lee of the light horse with twelve of his troops, dispersed a foraging party on the other side Schuylkill, took a Captain of the Queen's Rangers (this is the name given to the new levies of provincial troops), and seven privates, two of whom were marines. [p.68]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
7th November, 1777.

...Our anxiety had been raised in camp, by a report that a heavy firing of musquetry had been heard for a considerable time on the evening of the same day -- it turns out to be nothing more than a few single guns which Potter's militia and the enemy's detachment on Province Island make a practice of firing at each other without com[mittin]g to any action. Four deserters from the enemy brought in this morning, say that the militia men call'd to the British soldiers and invited them to go over, promising them beef and flour the red-coats in return ask'd them to come and partake of their salt that from raillery they proceeded

³ [Edit. Note. Donop was mortally wounded in the attack on Fort Mercer, 22 Oct. 1777.]

⁴ [Edit. Note. "Sr" meaning of course "Sir;" with like use of abbreviations for personal titles used in Laurens correspondence generally.]

to abuse -- and at length to discharging their pieces at each other, without any other effect as far as they know than wounding a Hessian yager... [pp. 70-71]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
3d December, 1777.

...If the majority of the people in each state, or only the majority of the states, can be persuaded that it is a religious duty, as was the case of the Greeks with respect to the Amphictyonic League,⁵ or a duty to themselves as most favouring their private and political interests to maintain the confederation, it will be established upon the most permanent basis that human affairs admit of, and the opinion propagated by education will pass to remote posterity. I shall study these laws with the greatest attention in my retirement.

We have received several accounts from outposts within a few days past intimating that an attack upon us was meditated. We have in consequence prepared ourselves, paraded our men so as to make them acquainted with their ground and its advantages; but the enemy have remained within their works. Many are of opinion that Sr Wm Howe will not suffer any thing but mere necessity, or a very tempting prospect of decisive success, to call him from good winter quarters. Others say that from past experience he knows the vicinity of the Continental army to be exceedingly troublesome, and that it is his interest to drive us to a more respectable distance. In the mean time the season advances in which armies in general are forced to repair to more substantial shelter than tents, and whose inclemency is more particularly grievous to our ill-clothed soldiers. The question is whether we are to go into remote winter quarters, and form a chain of cantonments in the interior part of the country; leaving a vast extent of territory exposed to the devastation of an enraged unsparing enemy; leaving inhabitants who will be partly seduced by the expectation of gold, or more generally compell'd to fill the traitorous provincial corps now raising; leaving plentiful granaries and large stocks of cattle, ample means for subsisting the troops and Tory citizens in Philadelphia, and for victualling transports that may carry home Mr. Burgoyne and his army; leaving the well affected to fall a sacrifice, and deplore our abandonment of them and the country; or, whether we shall take a position more honourable, more military, more republican, more consonant to the popular wish -- in a proper situation for covering the country, or at least so much of it as circumstances will permit -- and for distressing and annoying the Enemy?

Winter campaigns it is said are ominous to the best appointed and best disciplined armies. The misery incident to them occasions desertion and sickness which waste their numbers. Our army in particular requires exemption from fatigue in order to compensate for their want of clothing.

Relaxation from the duties of a campaign, in order to allow them an opportunity of being disciplined and instructed; warm quarters, that it may appear in the spring with undiminished numbers and in the full prowess of health, &ca. Besides it is urged that the hardships which our soldiers undergo discourage men from enlisting. The answers that might be given in our particular circumstances to these general objections against winter campaigns are only for your private ear, and not to be trusted in a letter to the possibility of miscarriage; besides, we may take a position which will not absolutely expose us to a winter campaign, but furnish us excellent quarters for men at the same time that it leaves us within distance for taking considerable advantages of the enemy, and cover a valuable and extensive country. [pp. 90-92]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
23d Jan., 1778.

⁵ [*Edit. Note.* Or Amphictyonic League, an alliance or confederation of Hellenic city *states* (rather than mere *cities*), such as Athens, Sparta, Boetia, Thessaly, Locri, Delphi, etc.; established prior to the days of the polis. It was organized in various forms and members from the time after the Trojan war up until the 2nd century A.D.; usually bound by sacred and religious ties to one or more gods and important temples dedicated to such deities.]

... You asked me, my dear father, what bounds I have set to my desire of serving my country in the military line? I answer glorious death, or the triumph of the cause in which we are engaged.

I must not conclude without giving you a short account of a brilliant defence lately made by a few of Capt. [Henry] Lee's troop [of the 1st Continental Light Dragoons]. Near two hundred of the enemy's light dragoons made an attempt to surprise the captain in his quarters. They concealed their march by a circuitous road, and arrived at the house a little after day-break conducted by an intelligent guide. Lee had at the time with him only his lieutenant, Mr. [William] Lindsay, a corporal and four privates, and Major [John] Jameson of the same regiment who happen'd to be there on a visit. They posted themselves in the house and made the necessary preparations for defence. Capt. Delancy [James, or possibly Oliver, Delancey], who commanded the enemy's advanced guard, led it on bravely till he arrived under cover of the eves, while the main body kept up a constant fire from a distance on the windows. After repeated efforts had been made to enter the house, the party repulsed made an attempt to seize the horses which were in the stable, but such a well directed constant fire was kept up from the house that the bravest dragoon did not venture to dismount. The loss of the enemy was one commissioned officer and three or four privates. The party in its retreat picked up a quarter-master's serjeant and a couple of videttes. Lieutenant Lindsay was wounded in the hand. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the officers and men who had the honor of forcing such an incomparable superiority of numbers to a shameful retreat. Capt. Nichols was at Lee's quarters in his way from Philadelphia during the action, and gives our little party great applause as I have been told.

We have some as brave individuals among our officers as any that exist. Our men are the best crude materials for soldiers I believe in the world, for they possess a docility and patience which astonish foreigners. With a little more discipline we should drive the haughty Briton to his ships... [pp. 110-112]

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HEAD QUARTERS,  
2d Feb., 1778.

The more I reflect upon the difficulties and delays which are likely to attend the completing our Continental regiments, the more anxiously is my mind bent upon the scheme, which I lately communicated to you. The obstacles to the execution of it had presented themselves to me, but by no means appeared insurmountable. I was aware of having that monstrous popular prejudice, open-mouthed against me, of under taking to transform beings almost irrational, into well disciplined soldiers, of being obliged to combat the arguments, and perhaps the intrigues, of interested persons. But zeal for the public service, and an ardent desire to assert the rights of humanity, determined me to engage in this arduous business, with the sanction of your consent. My own perseverance, aided by the countenance of a few virtuous men, will, I hope, enable me to accomplish it.

You seem to think, my dear father, that men reconciled by long habit to the miseries of their condition, would prefer their ignominious bonds to the untasted sweets of liberty, especially when offer'd upon the terms which I propose.

I confess, indeed, that the minds of this unhappy species must be debased by a servitude, from which they can hope for no relief but death, and that every motive to action but fear, must be nearly extinguished in them. But do you think they are so perfectly moulded to their state as to be insensible that a better exists? Will the galling comparison between them selves and their masters leave them unenlightened in this respect? Can their self love be so totally annihilated as not frequently to induce ardent wishes for a change?

You will accuse me, perhaps, my dearest friend, of consulting my own feelings too much; but I am tempted to believe that this trampled people have so much human left in them, as to be capable of aspiring to the rights of men by noble exertions, if some friend to mankind would point the road, and give them a prospect of success. If I am mistaken in this, I would avail myself, even of their weakness, and, conquering one fear by another, produce equal good to the public. You will ask in this view, how do you consult the

benefit of the slaves? I answer, that like other men, they are the creatures of habit. Their cowardly ideas will be gradually effaced, and they will be modified anew. Their being rescued from a state of perpetual humiliation, and being advanced, as it were, in the scale of being, will compensate the dangers incident to their new state.

The hope that will spring in each man's mind, respecting his own escape, will prevent his being miserable. Those who fall in battle will not lose much; those who survive will obtain their reward. Habits of subordination, patience under fatigues, sufferings and privations of every kind, are soldierly qualifications, which these men possess in an eminent degree.

Upon the whole, my dearest friend and father, I hope that my plan for serving my country and the oppressed negro race will not appear to you the chimera of a young mind, deceived by a false appearance of moral beauty, but a laudable sacrifice of private interest, to justice and the public good.

You say, that my resources would be small, on account of the proportion of women and children. I do not know whether I am right, for I speak from impulse, and have not reasoned upon the matter. I say, altho my plan is at once to give freedom to the negroes, and gain soldiers to the states; in case of concurrence, I sh'd sacrifice the former interest, and therefore w'd change the women and children for able-bodied men. The more of these I could obtain, the better; but forty might be a good foundation to begin upon.

It is a pity that some such plan as I propose could not be more extensively executed by public authority. A well chosen body of 5,000 black men, properly officer'd, to act as light troops, in addition to our present establishment, might give us decisive success in the next campaign.

I have long deplored the wretched state of these men, and considered in their history, the bloody wars excited in Africa, to furnish America with slaves the groans of despairing multitudes, toiling for the luxuries of merciless tyrants.

I have had the pleasure of conversing with you, sometimes, upon the means of restoring them to their rights. When can it be better done, than when their enfranchisement may be made conducive to the public good, and be modified, as not to overpower their weak minds?

You ask, what is the general's opinion, upon this subject? He is convinced, that the numerous tribes of blacks in the southern parts of the continent, offer a resource to us that should not be neglected. With respect to my particular plan, he only objects to it, with the arguments of pity for a man who would be less rich than he might be...<sup>6</sup> [pp. 114-118]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
17th Feb., 1778.

...We have lately been in a most alarming situation for want of provisions. The soldiers were scarcely restrained from mutiny by the eloquence and management of our officers. Those who are employed to feed us, either for want of knowledge or for want of activity or both, never furnish supplies adequate to our wants.

⁶ [Edit. Note. Such was wealthy S.C. plantation owner Henry Laurens' closeness to his son, combined with rising misgivings of his own respecting the institution of slavery, that in the face of much conventional wisdom, he took John's proposal quite in earnest. Raising the point of enlisting Blacks in large numbers with Washington, the latter, from Middle brook, N.J. on March 20, 1779, replied: "...The policy of our arming Slaves is, in my opinion, a moot point, unless the enemy set the example; for should we begin to form battalions of them, I have not the smallest doubt (if the War is to be prosecuted) of their following us in it, and justifying the measure upon our own ground; the upshot then must be, who can arm fastest, and where are our Arms? Besides, I am not clear that a discrimination will not render Slavery more irksome to those who remain in it; most of the good and evil things of this life are judged of by comparison; and I fear a comparison in this case will be productive of much discontent in those who are held in servitude; but as this is a subject that has never employed much of my thoughts, these are no more than the first crude Ideas that have struck me upon the occasion..."]

I have more than once mentioned to you that we have been obliged to renounce the most important enterprises, delay the most critical marches, by the delinquency of commissaries. Here of late it has reduced us almost to the point of disbanding. The head of the department is a stationary attendant on Congress; what he might do if he had views sufficiently extensive, by a proper employment of agents, I know not; but as the case is at present, he seems to be almost useless. I have heard it asserted by more than one sensible, disinterested man, that the removal of Mr. [Joseph] Trumbull from that office has been the source of all our misfortunes. He had considerable connections and influence in a great meat country, and had laid such a train for supplying the army, as in all probability would have put us out of the reach of bad weather, difficult roads and other common accidents. Certain it is that the want of providence, or want of ability in the present managers, has brought us to the brink of ruin. By extraordinary exertions, by scraping from distant scanty magazines and collecting with parties, we have obtained a temporary relief; and have hopes that the representation of our late distress to several persons of influence and authority in different states, will procure us such farther supplies as will save us from the disagreeable necessity of dividing the army into cantonments.

To the ill offices of Trumbull's friends we may attribute perhaps a part of our distress. The increasing number of privateers in the New England states, the subsistence of the convention troops, and an expedition now on foot, will greatly diminish the meat resources of the country on which we principally depend. The carcasses of horses about the camp, and the deplorable leanness of those which still crawl in existence, speak the want of forage equal to that of human food. General Greene with a party of two thousand, is now foraging, but will be able to collect only the gleanings of a country over which an unsparing enemy has passed.

A small detachment from his party under the command of Major Billiard, made an attempt to surprise the enemy's picket near their bridge. The design was discovered and the picket had time to post itself in a stone house, at the distance of 500 yards. Our men were saluted with a general discharge; they marched forward and returned the lire, and would have proceeded to storming the house, but it was thought more advisable to retire. Our party had five men slightly wounded; the enemy's loss was one Hessian killed, and another mortally wounded.

Gen'l. Wayne is detached by Gen'l Greene to cross the Delaware at Wilmington, for the purpose of destroying all the hay on the Jersey shore which we cannot secure for our own use, and which may fall into the enemy's hands, and with a view of driving all the cattle from the neighborhood of the river, by a circuitous road to camp. If he finds it practicable to cross the river and carry that plan into execution, he is to make a large sweep and return here with what ever he can collect by the way of Gorshen.

The disaffected inhabitants find means to conceal their teams and cattle, so that the country appears more naked than it really is.

Deserters from the enemy inform us that they are preparing for a grand forage, and that they will probably make it in Bucks county. We have the same business in contemplation in the same place.

I must not omit informing you of a gallant defence made by a justice of the peace in Philadelphia county (on the other side of the Schuylkill), known by the appellation of Squire Knox. This gentleman's house was surrounded early in the morning some days ago by a party of traitors, lately distinguished by the title of royal refugees; he was in bed in a lower room, and upon their demanding admittance, was going to open to them, when his son who was above, and perceiving from the window fixed bayonets, call'd to him to keep his door shut and warned him of danger. The villains in the mean time pressed against the door; the old man armed himself with his cutlass, and his son descended with a gun. The door was at length forced half open by one of the most enterprising; the father kept it in that position with his left hand, and employed his right in defending the passage. After some vigorous strokes, his cutlass broke; the bad condition of the son's fusil had prevented his tiring till this moment. He was now prepared to salute the assailants, but the old man thinking all was lost by the failure of his weapon, called to him not to fire; upon farther examination, however, he says he found that by being shortened, it was only better adapted to close quarters, and renewed the fight.

The villains fired seven shots through the door, one of which grazed the squire's knee, which was all the damage done. They then threw down their arms and took to their heels; they were pursued by the Knoxes and a family of militia, and one of them who was concealed in a cellar was taken.

The besetting Mr. Knox's house is a matter of civil cognizance, but it appears that the prisoner has held correspondence with the enemy, and supplied them with provisions, and he will probably suffer death for those offences by sentence of court-martial... [pp. 125-129]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
9th March, 1778.

...The number of men unfit for duty by reason of their nakedness, the number sick in hospitals, and present under inoculation [sic], certainly emaciate the effective column in our returns.

Similar causes, added to the severity of the season, have prevented our completing the works of the camp, in such a manner as would have been indispensably necessary if we had been engaged with a more alert and enterprising antagonist...

It is a very bad principle, to trust to the usual sluggishness and inactivity of the enemy. But when I reflect upon the great indulgence of Gen'l Howe, I draw some consolation from hoping that he will not do violence to his nature by any extraordinary exertions at the present moment, but postpone his visit till we be better prepared for receiving him. These truths are deposited in the breasts of a few, and must be deplored in silence. But every prudent method and general argument should be used to stimulate the different states to the immediate completion of their regiments.

I am truly sensible of your kindness on the subject of my black battalion. Nothing would tempt me to quit my present station, but a prospect of being more useful in another.

The ambition of serving my country, and desire of gaining fame, leads me to wish for the command of men. I would cherish those dear, ragged Continentals, whose patience will be the admiration of future ages, and glory in bleeding with them... [pp. 135-136]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
11th April, 1778.

...If we were as virtuous as we ought to be, we should have those who are enriching themselves by commerce, privateering and farming, supplying the army with every necessary convenience at a moderate rate; but as experience proves that it is in vain to expect this, all I would demand of Congress, is that they would contrive some means of furnishing us with articles which nature cannot forego, and which are useful in giving respectability to the military state, at such prices as bear some proportion to our pay.

I would wish to see the military state rendered honorable, and all odious distinctions of jealousy laid aside, for we are all citizens, and have no separate interests. If mediocrity could be established generally, by any means, it would be well; it would ensure us virtue and render our independency permanent. But there never will be virtue in the poor, when there are rich in the same community. By imperceptible and indirect methods, we should labour to establish and maintain equality of fortunes as much as possible, if we would continue to be free.

It is a fact that our officers cannot satisfy the simple wants of nature, much less make that appearance which is annexed to the military state, with their pay. It is no less a fact that in every town on the continent, luxury nourishes as it would among a people who had conquered the world, and were about to pay for their victories, by their decline. This I hope Congress will take seriously into consideration.

I would by no means wish our pay to be increased, but I would wish to see temptations to speculation in weak men removed, and the honest man delivered from the necessity of reducing himself to beggary. This will best be effected by a public establishment for supplying wants at a moderate price... [pp. 157-158]

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HEAD QUARTERS,  
27th April, 1778.

...And if our men in power, and men of influence, will redouble their exertions instead of being lulled into security, the new and artful attack of the British minister, will be foiled and expose him to contempt. He will be obliged to withdraw his troops -- I mean as many of them as we suffer to escape -- and tacitly to acknowledge what he will be afterwards forced explicitly to ratify -- our independence. At the same time, if no secret alliance has been entered into on our part with France, our agents at that court need not represent it as an impossible event, that a treaty should take place between Great Britain and America, from the degree of affection which may still remain between the two nations and the propensity to a connexion which arises from the identity of habits and language.

I have been informed that the tone of our ambassadors was infinitely too modest to produce the effects which we had a right to expect... [p. 163]

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HEAD QUARTERS,
1st May, 1778.

I snatch a minute to congratulate my dear father, upon the important intelligence from France. As the matter is represented she seems to have acted with politic generosity towards us, and to have timed her declaration in our favour most admirably for her own interests, and the abasement of her ancient rival. If the general languor can be shaken off, and that this event instead of increasing our supineness stimulates us to vigorous exertions, we may close the war with great éclat, provided General Howe does not receive timely orders to collect his force and secure a retreat. France might give a mortal blow to the English naval force in its present scattered state... [pp. 165-166]

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HEAD QUARTERS, ENGLISH TOWN,  
30th June, 1778.

I was exceedingly chagrined that public business prevented my writing to you from the field of battle, when the General sent his dispatches to Congress. The delay, however, will be attended with this advantage, that I shall be better able to give you an account of the enemy's loss; tho' I must now content myself with a very succinct relation of this affair. The situation of the two armies on Sunday was as follows: Gen'l Washington, with the main body of our army, was at 4 miles distance from English Town. Gen'l [Charles] Lee, with a chosen advanced corps, was at that town. The enemy were retreating down the road which leads to Middle Town; their flying army composed (as it was said), of 2 battalions of British grenadiers, 1 Hessian gren'd'rs, 1 battallion of light infantry, 1 regiment of guards, 2 brigades of foot, 1 regt. of dragoons and a number of mounted and dismounted Jagers. The enemy's rear was preparing to leave Monmouth village, which is 6 miles from this place, when our advanced corps was marching towards them. The militia of the country kept up a random running fire with the Hessian Jagers; no mischief was done on either side. I was with a small party of horse, reconnoitering the enemy, in an open space before Monmouth, when I perceived two parties of the enemy advancing by files in the woods on our right and left, with a view, as I imagined, of enveloping our small party, or preparing a way for a skirmish of their horse. I immediately wrote an account of what I had seen to the General, and expressed my anxiety on account of the languid appearance of the Continental troops under Gen'l Lee.



Some person in the mean time reported to Gen'l Lee that the enemy were advancing upon us in two columns, and I was informed that he had, in consequence, ordered Varnum's brigade, which was in front, to repass a bridge which it had passed. I went myself, and assured him of the real state of the case; his reply to me was, that his accounts had been so contradictory, that he was utterly at a loss what part to take. I repeated my account to him in positive distinct terms, and returned to make farther discoveries. I found that the two parties had been withdrawn from the wood, and that the enemy were preparing to leave Monmouth. I wrote a second time to Gen'l Washington. Gen'l Lee at length gave orders to advance. The enemy were forming themselves on the Middle Town road, with their light infantry in front, and cavalry on the left flank, while a scattering, distant fire was commenced between our flanking parties and theirs. I was impatient and uneasy at seeing that no disposition was made, and endeavoured to find out Gen'l Lee to inform him of what was doing, and know what was his disposition. He told me that he was going to order some troops to march below the enemy and cut off their retreat. Two pieces of artillery were posted on our right without a single foot soldier to support them. Our men were formed piecemeal in front of the enemy, and there appeared to be no general plan or disposition calculated on that of the enemy; the nature of the ground, or any of the other principles which generally govern in these cases.

The enemy began a cannonade from two parts of their line; their whole body of horse made a furious charge upon a small party of our cavalry and dissipated them, and drove them till the appearance of our infantry, and a judicious discharge or two of artillery made them retire precipitately. Three regiments of ours that had advanced in a plain open country towards the enemy's left flank, were ordered by Gen'l Lee to retire and occupy the village of Monmouth. They were no sooner formed there, than they were ordered to quit that post and gain the woods. One order succeeded another with a rapidity and indecision calculated to ruin us. The enemy had changed their front and were advancing in full march towards us; our men were fatigued with the excessive heat. The artillery horses were not in condition to make a brisk retreat. A new position was ordered, but not generally communicated, for part of the troops were forming on the right of the ground, while others were marching away, and all the artillery driving off. The enemy, after a short halt, resumed their pursuit; no cannon was left to check their progress. A regiment was ordered to form behind a fence, and as speedily commanded to retire. All this disgraceful retreating, passed without the firing of a musket, over ground which might have been disputed inch by inch. We passed a defile and arrived at an eminence beyond, which was defended on one hand by an impracticable fen, on the other by thick woods where our men would have fought to advantage. Here, fortunately for the honour of the army, and the welfare of America, Gen'l Washington met the troops retreating in disorder, and without any plan to make an opposition. He ordered some pieces of artillery to be brought up to defend the pass, and some troops to form and defend the pieces. The artillery was too distant to be brought up readily, so that there was but little opposition given here. A few shot though, and a little skirmishing in the wood checked the enemy's career. The Gen'l expressed his astonishment at this unaccountable retreat. Mr. Lee indecently replied that the attack was contrary to his advice and opinion in council. We were obliged to retire to a position, which, though hastily reconnoitered, proved an excellent one. Two regiments were formed behind a fence in front of the position. The enemy's horse advanced in full charge with admirable bravery to the distance of forty paces, when a general discharge from these two regiments did great execution among them, and made them fly with the greatest precipitation. The grenadiers succeeded to the attack. At this time my horse was killed under me. In this spot the action was hottest, and there was considerable slaughter of British grenadiers. The General ordered Woodford's brigade with some artillery to take possession of an eminence on the enemy's left, and cannonade from thence. This produced an excellent effect. The enemy were prevented from advancing on us, and confined themselves to cannonade with a show of turning our left flank. Our artillery answered theirs with the greatest vigour. The General seeing that our left flank was secure, as the ground was open and commanded by it, so that the enemy could not attempt to turn it without exposing their own flank to a heavy fire from our artillery, and causing to pass in review before us, the force employed for turning us. In the mean time, Gen'l Lee continued retreating. Baron Steuben was order'd to form the broken troops in the rear. The cannonade was incessant and the General ordered parties to advance from time to time and engage the British grenadiers and guards. The horse shewed themselves no more. The grenadiers showed their backs and retreated every where with precipitation. They returned, however, again to the charge, and were again repulsed. They finally retreated and got over the strong pass, where, as I mentioned before, Gen'l Washington first rallied the troops. We advanced in force and continued masters of the ground; the standards of liberty were planted in triumph on the field of battle. We remained looking

at each other, with the defile between us, till dark, and they stole off in silence at midnight. We have buried of the enemy's slain, 233, principally grenadiers; forty odd of their wounded whom they left at Monmouth, fell into our hands. Several officers are our prisoners. Among their killed are Co'l Moncton, a captain of the guards, and several captains of grenadiers. We have taken but a very inconsiderable number of prisoners, for want of a good body of horse. Deserters are coming in as usual. Our officers and men behaved with that bravery which becomes freemen, and have convinced the world that they can beat British grenadiers. To name any one in particular w'd be a kind of injustice to the rest. There are some, however, who came more immediately under my view, whom I will mention that you may know them. B. Gen'l Wayne, Col. Barber, Col. Stewart, Col. Livingston, Col. Oswald of the artillery, Capt. Doughty deserve well of their country, and distinguished themselves nobly.

The enemy buried many of their dead that are not accounted for above, and carried off a great number of wounded. I have written diffusely, and yet I have not told you all. Gen'l Lee, I think, must be tried for misconduct. However, as this is a matter not generally known, tho' it seems almost universally wished for, I would beg you, my dear father, to say nothing of it.... [pp. 193-199]

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HEAD QUARTERS (on the lovely banks of the Raritan, opposite New Brunswick),
2d July, 1778.

I had the pleasure of writing to you the day before yesterday, from English Town, but through some mistake my letter was not delivered to the express, altho' it was written in a hurry. I recollect no circumstance in it relative to our late engagement, which farther inquiry and consideration do not confirm. From a second view of the ground, as well as the accounts I have since had of the enemy's strength and designs, it is evident to me that Mr. Clinton's whole flying army would have fallen into our hands, but for a defect of abilities or good will in the commanding officer of our advanced corps. His precipitate retreat spread a baneful influence every where. The most sanguine hope scarcely extended farther, when the Commander in chief rallied his troops, than to an orderly retreat; but by his intrepidity and presence of mind, a firm line of troops was formed on a good position, from whence he cannonaded with advantage, and detached light parties in front, who drove the enemy from the field. Gen'l Clinton and Lord Cornwallis were both present at the action.

The reason for not pursuing them farther with the main body of our army was, that people well acquainted with the country said, that the strength of the ground would render it impracticable for us to injure them essentially; and that the sandy, parched soil, together with the heat of the sun, would probably occasion us considerable loss. From the specimen of yesterday's march we have reason to think it fortunate that we took the part we have done; the heat of the weather, thirsty soil, and heavy sand, reduced us to the necessity of bringing on many of our weaker men in waggons.

We are now arrived in a delightful country where we shall halt and refresh ourselves. Bathing in the Raritan, and the good living of the country will speedily refresh us. I wish, my dear father, that you could ride along the banks of this delightful river. Your zeal for the public service will not at this time permit it. But the inward satisfaction which you must feel from a patriotic discharge of your duty, is infinitely superior to the delights of retirement and ease. I admire your constant virtue, and will imitate your example...

...I have seen the General much embarrassed this day, on the subject of those who distinguished them selves in the battle of Monmouth. To name a few, and be silent with regard to many of equal-merit w'd be an injustice to the latter; to pass the whole over unnoticed w'd be an unpardonable slight; indiscriminate praise of the whole w'd be an unfair distribution of rewards; and yet, when men generally conducted themselves so well as our officers did, this matter is allowable and is eligible, because least liable to give offence.

The merit of restoring the day, is due to the General; and his conduct was such throughout the affair as has greatly increased my love and esteem for him. My three brother aid[e]s [to Gen. Washington]

gained themselves great applause by their activity and bravery, while the three secretaries acted as military men on this occasion, and proved themselves as worthy to wield the sword as the pen.

Gen'l Steuben, his aids and your son, narrowly escaped being surrounded by the British horse, early on the morning of the action. We reconnoitered them rather too nearly, and L'd Cornwallis sent the dragoons of his guard to make us prisoners. Gen'l Clinton saw⁷ the Baron's star,⁸ and the whole pursuit was directed at him; but we all escaped, the dragoons fearing an ambushade of infantry.

We have buried Col. Moncton with the honours of war.⁹ [pp. 200-203]



*Laurens' own gravestone
at Monck's Corner, S.C. and which reads:*

**Sacred to the Memory of
John Laurens
Son of
Henry and Eleanor
Laurens
Born 28th October 1754
Died 27th August 1782
"Dulce et decorum est
pro patria mori"**

Some other topics mentioned or discussed in Laurens' 1777-78 letters to his father:

- * Battle of Red Bank (Fort Mercer), 22 Oct. 1777: pp. 70, 73-74, 78
- * Chevalier Capt. Thomas-Antoine de Mauduit du Plessis (also given as "Plessis-Mauduit"), hero of Red Bank: pp. 106-, 233-234
- * Controversial promotion of James Wilkinson to Brig. Gen. following Saratoga: p. 83
- * Valley Forge: pp. 91-92, 97-98, 182
- * Thomas Conway and the "Conway Cabal," pp. 100-102, 137, 180
- * Projected invasion of Canada. This was scrapped due largely to Lafayette's objection to Conway's involvement in the plan, but also owing in part to Laurens advisement and dissuasion of Lafayette: pp. 112-113
- * Foraging by Howe's and Washington's forces: pp. 126-128
- * Baron Von Steuben: pp. 131-133, 137, 146-147, 160, 186-187, 202-203
- * Capt. John Barry: pp. 139, 232-233
- * Count Brig. Gen. Casimir Pulaski, also his legion: pp. 141-142
- * News of France's alliance with the Americans: pp. 167-170, 171-172
- * Relations and protocol between Congress and Washington: p. 170

⁷ [Laurens' note.] "A dragoon deserter from the enemy just informs us of this. He says three others came off with him, and that the Hessians are deserting amazingly."

⁸ [Edit. Note. The Star of the Order of Fidelity, often seen in portraits of Von Steuben, was an honorary knighthood bestowed on him in 1769 by William, Margrave of Baden-Durlach.]

⁹ [Edit. Note. Lieut. Col. Henry Monckton (1740-1778) of the British 45th Regt. of Foot.]

- * Battle of Barren Hill, 20 May 1778: pp. 174-175, 187-189
- * Evacuation of Philadelphia by the British: pp. 176-178, 180, 183-184, 187, 191-192
- * British peace Commissioners in Philadelphia: pp. 178-179, 181-182, 184-185, 187
- * Prospect of reforming and reorganizing the Cont. army; which John Laurens advocates: pp. 186, 190-191
- * Arrival of Admiral D'Estaing: pp. 207-208, 210-211
- * Aborted Franco-American assault on Newport, Rhode Island, July-Aug. 1778: pp. 210-223
- * Laurens on France, Britain, and the greater strategic picture: pp. 225-229
- * Lafayette, somewhat strangely, revives idea of taking Canada, which Laurens dissuades him from: pp. 230-231

For the complete text of *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens in the Years 1777-8, with a Memoir by William Gilmore Simms* (1867), see: <http://www.archive.org/details/armylaurensyear00johnrich>

While for further reading:

- *The Life of Henry Laurens* (1915) by David Duncan Wallace (with an appendix on John's life on pages 463-494.)
- *George Washington's Indispensable Men: The 32 Aides-de-Camp Who Helped Win American Independence* by Arthur S. Lefkowitz.

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