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## From the diary of Ebenezer Denny, 1781

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### CARLISLE, May 1st, 1781.-

The Pennsylvania Line, after the revolt and discharge of the men, last winter, were reduced to six regiments; the officers ordered to different towns within the State to recruit. An appointment of ensign in the 7th had been obtained for me in August last; the 7th and 4th were incorporated, and under command of Lt.Col. Comt. William Butler, rendezvoused at this place-companies now about half full. The effective men were formed into four companies, and marched to Little York; I was arranged to one of the marching companies, Samuel Montgomery, captain, and George Bluer, lieutenant. All the recruits fit for service, from the different stations, were brought to York, formed into two regiments of eight companies each, destined for the State of Virginia. A few days spent in equipping, &c., and for the trial of soldiers charged with mutiny, General Anthony Wayne, the commanding officer, influenced, no doubt, by experience of the revolt last winter, expresses a determination to punish, with the utmost rigor, every case of mutiny or disobedience. A general court martial continued sitting several days; twenty odd prisoners brought before them; seven were sentenced to die. The regiments paraded in the evening earlier than usual; orders passed to the officers along the line to put to death Instantly any man who stirred from his rank. In front of the parade the ground rose and descended again, and at the distance of about three hundred yards over this rising ground, the prisoners were escorted by a captain's guard; heard the fire of one platoon and immediately a smaller one, when the regiments wheeled by companies and marched round by the place of execution. This was an awful exhibition. The seven objects were seen by the troops just as they had sunk or fell under the fire. The sight must have made an impression on the men; it was designed with that view.

### YORK, May 15th.-

Provision for transporting baggage, etc., and other necessary preparation. Commenced our march for Virginia; the weather pleasant and roads tolerably good. Passed through Frederick Town (Maryland), where were some British prisoners quartered; they turned out to see us. Next day reached the Potomac; here we were detained for want of craft-boats few and in bad condition. The artillery passed over first (a battalion of artillery accompanied the brigade). The second flat-boat had left the shore about forty yards, when the whole sunk. Several women were on board; but as hundreds of men were on the bank, relief soon reached them; none were lost-got all over. Proceeded a few miles and encamped. Struck our tents every morning before day. About eight or nine o'clock, as we found water, a short halt was made, the water-call beat; parties, six or eight from each company, conducted by a non-commissioned officer, with canteens, fetched water. Seldom

allowed to eat until twelve o'clock, when the arms were stacked, knapsacks taken off, and water sent for by parties as before. Officers of a company generally messed together, sometimes more; one of their servants carried cooked provisions for the day; no cooking until night. Not acquainted with the country on our route, but understood that we were marching much about-very circuitous-keeping off the Blue Ridge close on our right. This to avoid the enemy and secure our junction with the Marquis Lafayette.

#### June 18th.-

Joined the troops under command of Lafayette. The Marquis had marched two or three days to meet us. His men look as if they were fit for business. They are chiefly all light infantry, dressed in frocks and over-alls of linen. One day spent in washing and refreshing- in fixing arms, carriages, &c., and served out ammunition. Move toward Richmond, where Lord Cornwallis with the British army lay. Heard that his lordship was employed burning and destroying warehouses of tobacco, all the public store-houses, &c. Passed through Richmond toward Williamsburg after the enemy-joined by Baron Steuben with some new levies. Near



Bacon's Bridge the British turned upon us; our advance pressed them too close. The army was formed for a fight-they did not come on. General Wayne very anxious to do something. Colonel Simcoe, who commands the British legion (horse

and mounted infantry), is constantly committing some depredation abroad, and foraging for their army. Wayne hears of him-our brigade leave their tents and baggage, march at dark, with piece of white paper in each man's hat- flints taken out. At day-light reach place called the Bowling Green, where Simcoe had been the evening before. This was a severe march for me-found myself asleep more than once on the route. Returned and met the baggage. A detachment from the brigade put under command of Colonel Richard Butler. After a variety of marching and countermarching, Butler at length intercepts Simcoe; a smart skirmish takes place; Wayne supports Butler, and Simcoe retreats. Here for the first time saw wounded men; feelings not very agreeable; endeavor to conquer this disposition or weakness; the sight sickened me. This little engagement within six miles of Williamsburg, where the enemy were encamped. Pennsylvania troops retreat-advance again. See the Marquis' light troops but seldom-know they are not far off. Kept constantly on the move. Hear that the enemy have decamped and preparing to cross James river at Jamestown. Our brigade move down; lay on arms all night about nine miles from the enemy. At daylight move on; middle of the afternoon of the 6th of July firing ahead. Our advance drove in the enemy's pickets, marching at this time by companies, in open order. My captain (Montgomery) fell behind his company where my place was, talked with me; gives me a lesson useful to me. When perhaps within one hundred and fifty yards of the enemy, we closed column and displayed; advanced in battalion until the firing commenced, and ran along the whole line. A regiment or more of the light infantry and three pieces of artillery were in the line. Saw the British light infantry, distinctly, advancing at arm's-length

distance, and their second line in close order, with shouldered musket, just in front of their camp-their infantry only engaged. The main body were discovered filing off to the right and left, when orders were given us to retreat. My captain, Montgomery, received a shot in his foot and had hopped back in the rear; Lieutenant Bluer being absent, the charge of the company devolved on me; young and inexperienced, exhausted with hunger and fatigue, had like to have disgraced myself-had eat nothing all day but a few blackberries-was faint, and with difficulty kept my place; once or twice was about to throw away my arms (a very heavy espontoon). The company were almost all old soldiers. Kept compact and close to our leading company, and continued running until out of reach of the fire. The enemy advanced no farther than to the ground we left. We could not have been engaged longer than about three or four minutes, but at the distance of sixty yards only. Our loss is said to be upward of one hundred killed and wounded; among the latter twelve officers, one of whom, Lieutenant Herbert, taken prisoner; a few of the wounded not able to get off, were also taken. The artillery horses all killed; two pieces were lost. Retreated two miles to very commanding ground, where we met the Marquis with our main body; halted and had some Indian meal served out, the wounded dressed, &c., and before day changed our ground and encamped about five miles from the field.

**July 7th.-**

An officer, surgeon, and a few men sent with flag to bury the dead, &c. This was done in company with an equal number of the enemy. Our wounded who were prisoners, had been properly treated. The British moved from Jamestown. About a fortnight after the action, visited the field; could trace plainly the ground occupied by both, from the tops of the cartridges which lay in a line; the distance between about sixty paces. The army marched and crossed James river at Westover, the seat of Colonel Bird, said to have been once the most wealthy planter in the State; the improvements superb, saw nothing like them before. Kept at a respectful distance from the enemy; rather between them and the route to North Carolina. Some idea of their design to return to the southward. Report going of a French fleet below. This news confirmed- great joy-army on the alert.

**Sept. 1st. -**

Army encamped on the bank of James river-part of French fleet, with troops on board, in view. Recrossed James river and encamped at Williamsburg. Army in high spirits-reinforcements coming on.

**14th.-**

General Washington arrived; our brigade was paraded to receive him; he rode along the line-quarters in Williamsburg.

**15th.-**

Officers all pay their respects to the Commander-in-chief; go in a body; those who are not personally known, their names given by General Hand and General Wayne. He stands in the door, takes every man by the hand-the officers all pass in, receiving his salute and shake. This the first time I had seen the General. We have an elegant encampment close to town, behind William and Mary College. This building occupied as an hospital. Williamsburg a very handsome place, not so populous as Richmond, but situate on evenly, pretty ground; streets and lots spacious-does not appear to be a place of much business, rather the residence of gentlemen of fortune; formerly it was the seat of government and Dunmore's late residence. A neat public building, called the capitol, fronts the

principal street; upon the first floor is a handsome marble statue of William Pitt.

The presence of so many general officers, and the arrival of new corps, seem to give additional life to everything; discipline the order of the day. In all directions troops seen exercising and manoeuvring. Baron Steuben, our great military oracle. The guards attend the grand parade at an early hour, where the Baron is always found waiting with one or two aids on horseback. These men are exercised and put through various evolutions and military experiments for two hours-many officers and spectators present; excellent school, this. At length the duty of the parade comes on. The guards are told off; officers take their posts, wheel by platoons to the right; fine corps of music detailed for this duty, which strikes up; the whole march off, saluting the Baron and field officer of the day, as they pass. Pennsylvania brigade almost all old soldiers, and well disciplined when compared with those of Maryland and Virginia. But the troops from the eastward far superior to either.

#### **25th.-**

Joined by the last of the troops from the eastward. French encamped a few miles on the right; busy in getting cannon and military stores from on board the vessels.

#### **28th.-**

The whole army moved in three divisions toward the enemy, who were strongly posted at York, about twelve miles distant. Their pickets and light troops retire. We encamped about three miles off-change ground and take a position within one mile of York; rising ground (covered with tall handsome pines) called Pigeon Hill, separates us from a view of the town. Enemy keep possession of Pigeon Hill. York on a high, sandy plain, on a deep navigable river of same name. Americans on the right; French on the left, extending on both sides of the river; preparations for a siege. One-third of the army on fatigue every day, engaged in various duties, making gabions, fascines, saucissons, &c., and great exertions and labor in getting on the heavy artillery. Strong covering parties (whole regiments) moved from camp as soon as dark, and lay all night upon their arms between us and the enemy. Our regiment, when on this duty, were under cover, and secured from the shot by Pigeon Hill; now and then a heavy shot from the enemy's works reached our camp. Our patrols, and those of the British, met occasionally in the dark, sometimes a few shot were exchanged-would generally retire. Colonel Schamel, adjutant-general to the army, with two or three attendants, on a party of observation, ventured rather close; they were seen and intercepted by a few smart horsemen from the British. Schamel forced his way through, and got back to camp, but received a wound, of which he died next day. His death was lamented, and noticed by the Commander-in-chief in his orders. Possession taken of Pigeon Hill, and temporary work erected. Generals and engineers, in viewing and surveying the ground, are always fired upon and sometimes pursued. Escorts and covering parties stationed at convenient distances under cover of wood, rising ground, &c., afford support. This business reminds me of a play among the boys, called Prison-base.

At length, everything in readiness, a division of the army broke ground on the night of the 6th of October, and opened the first parallel about six hundred yards from the works of the enemy. Every exertion to annoy our men, who were necessarily obliged to

be exposed about the works; however, the business went on, and on the 9th our cannon and mortars began to play. The scene viewed from the camp now was grand, particularly after dark-a number of shells from the works of both parties passing high in the air, and descending in a curve, each with a long train of fire, exhibited a brilliant spectacle. Troops in three divisions manned the lines alternately. We were two nights in camp and one in the lines; relieved about ten o'clock. Passed and repassed by a covert way leading to the parallel.

**Oct. 11th.-**

Second parallel thrown up within three hundred yards of the main works of the enemy; new batteries erected, and additional number of cannon brought forward-some twenty-four pounders and heavy mortars and howitzers. A tremendous fire now opened from all the new works, French and American. The heavy cannon directed against the embrasures and guns of the enemy. Their pieces were soon silenced, broke and dismantled. Shells from behind their works still kept up. Two redoubts advanced of their lines, and within rifle shot of our second parallel, much in the way. These forts or redoubts were well secured by a ditch and picket, sufficiently high parapet, and within were divisions made by rows of casks ranged upon end and filled with earth and sand. On tops of parapet were ranged bags filled with sand-a deep narrow ditch communicating with their main lines. On the night of the 14th, shortly after dark, these redoubts were taken by storm; the one on our right, by the Marquis, with part of his light infantry-the other, more to our left, but partly opposite the centre of the British lines, by the French. Our batteries had kept a constant fire upon the redoubts through the day. Belonged this evening to a command detailed for the purpose of supporting the Marquis. The night was dark and favorable. Our batteries had ceased-there appeared to be a dead calm; we followed the infantry and halted about half way-kept a few minutes in suspense, when we were ordered to advance. The business was over, not a gun was fired by the assailants; the bayonet only was used; ten or twelve of the infantry were killed. French had to contend with a post of more force-their loss was considerable. Colonel Hamilton led the Marquis' advance; the British sentries hailed them-no answer made. They also hailed the French, "Who comes there?" were answered, "French grenadiers." Colonel Walter Stewart commanded the regiment of reserve which accompanied the Marquis; they were immediately employed in connecting, by a ditch and parapet, the two redoubts, and completing and connecting the same with our second parallel. The British were soon alarmed; some from each of the redoubts made their escape. The whole enemy were under arms-much firing round all their lines, but particularly toward our regiment, where the men were at work; the shot passed over. In about three quarters of an hour we were under cover. Easy digging; light sandy ground.

**15th.-**

Heavy fire from our batteries all day. A shell from one of the French mortars set fire to a British frigate; she burnt to the water's edge, and blew up-made the earth shake. Shot and shell raked the town in every direction. Bomb-proofs the only place of safety.

**16th.-**

Just before day the enemy made a sortie, spiked the guns in two batteries and retired. Our troops in the parallel scarcely knew of their approach until they were off; the thing was done silently and in an instant. The batteries stood in advance of the lines, and none

within but artillery. This day, the 16th, our division manned the lines-firing continued without intermission. Pretty strong detachments posted in each battery over night.

#### 17th.-

In the morning, before relief came, had the pleasure of seeing a drummer mount the enemy's parapet, and beat a parley, and immediately an officer, holding up a white handkerchief, made his appearance outside their works; the drummer accompanied him, beating. Our batteries ceased. An officer from our lines ran and met the other, and tied the handkerchief over his eyes. The drummer sent back, and the British officer conducted to a house in rear of our lines. Firing ceased totally.

#### 18th.-

Several flags pass and repass now even without the drum. Had we not seen the drummer in his red coat when he first mounted, he might have beat away till doomsday. The constant firing was too much for the sound of a single drum; but when the firing ceased, I thought I never heard a drum equal to it-the most delightful music to us all.

#### 19th.-

Our division man the lines again. All is quiet. Articles of capitulation signed; detachments of French and Americans take possession of British forts. Major Hamilton commanded a battalion which took possession of a fort immediately opposite our right and on the bank of York river. I carried the standard of our regiment on this occasion. On entering the fort, Baron Steuben, who accompanied us, took the standard from me and planted it himself. The British army parade and march out with their colors furled; drums beat as if they did not care how. Grounded their arms and returned to town. Much confusion and riot among the British through the day; many of the soldiers were intoxicated; several attempts in course of the night to break open stores; an American sentinel killed by a British soldier with a bayonet; our patrols kept busy. Glad to be relieved from this disagreeable station. Negroes lie about, sick and dying, in every stage of the small pox. Never was in so filthy a place-some handsome houses, but prodigiously shattered. Vast heaps of shot and shells lying about in every quarter, which came from our works. The shells did not burst, as was expected. Returns of British soldiers, prisoners six thousand, and seamen about one thousand. Lord Cornwallis excused himself from marching out with the troops; they were conducted by General O'Hara. Our loss said to be about three hundred; that of the enemy said not more than five hundred and fifty. Fine supply of stores and merchandise had; articles suitable for clothing were taken for the use of the army. A portion furnished each officer to the amount of sixty dollars.

\*\*\* [Quote](#) \* [Context](#) \*\*\*

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