

The Dark Winter of 1776

Christmas, 1776. George Washington and his Continental Army have suffered a string of defeats as they retreat into New Jersey and Pennsylvania from New York. Only through the courageous actions of the fabled Maryland 400 has Washington successfully evacuated the bulk of the Continental Army from New York after its disastrous loss at the Battle of Brooklyn.

The Continental Congress begins to doubt Washington's leadership. The British issue a proclamation offering to pardon any American who pledges loyalty to George III. Troop morale wanes. To further complicate matters, many troop enlistments will end January 1. Washington has an enrollment crisis in the offing. Thomas Paine publishes a famous pamphlet entitled "The American Crisis" containing the opening lines: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." These were indeed cold, dark, winter days.

Washington knew he needed to act boldly and decisively while he still had his army intact. During the course of the next ten days, now known as the Ten Crucial Days, Washington would stage three of the most brilliant military offensives of his career. First, he famously led his army across the Delaware River on a frigid Christmas night, defeating the British, capturing nearly a thousand prisoners, and crossing back over the Delaware. With newfound confidence after that stunning victory at Trenton, he spoke to his troops on December 31, 1776: "My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do, and more than can be reasonably expected; but your country is at stake, your wives, your houses and all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you will consent to stay one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you probably can never do under any other circumstances."

With these words plus the victory, he convinced a large number of his troops to extend their enlistment. He now had the commitment from many of his men to buy precious time. On January 2, the Continental Army would cross the Delaware once more and defeat the British at Assunpink Creek and Princeton. Buoyed by additional wins, and with Cornwallis and the British retreating to northern New Jersey for the winter, Washington and his men settled into their winter headquarters in Morristown, New Jersey, during the early part of 1777.

Anticipating the precipitous drop in his army's enrollment at the beginning of the new year, Washington had already engaged in a furious letter-writing campaign in the fall of 1776 begging for more troops and supplies. He wrote John Hancock and the Continental Congress. He asked New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland to send militia companies as reinforcements while he set about rebuilding the Continental Army. Militias were not typically used in this fashion. They

were often short-term volunteers not as well trained, disciplined, or supplied as the Continental Army. Often many of the regular army officers, Washington included, were dismissive and frustrated by the inexperience of the typical militia soldier. Calling up the militia was a sign, perhaps, of how apprehensive Washington felt.

Washington's friend Brigadier General Thomas Johnson, a Frederick County native and soon to become Maryland's first governor, answered the call by sending three Frederick County battalions of Maryland militia to Philadelphia. One of these battalions was commanded by Colonel Normand Bruce who, just before embarking on his way to Philadelphia, named his nephew, John Ross Key, as captain of one of the companies under his command on December 28. Captain Key previously served as a lieutenant in Captain Thomas Price's Rifle Company in June 1775 – one of the first companies to come to the aid of Washington during the Siege of Boston. Key was now to lead men from the Taneytown area to support Washington and his army in New Jersey. Although an accomplished military officer in his own right, Key is best known today as the father of Francis Scott Key.

While the Frederick battalions prepared to march to Philadelphia and on to New Jersey, General Johnson was on a letter writing campaign of his own to procure supplies for his men. In a letter dated December 24, he asked the Maryland Council of Safety to send blankets, shoes, and stockings to Taneytown. He requested shoes and arms once more in a January 4 letter to the Council. While seeming meager by today's equipment standards, these supplies were critical for the volunteers. Aware that his men were already on the move, this time Johnson asked that the supplies be sent to Philadelphia, but it is unclear whether the troops ever received anything.

The details of these brave men's journey from Taneytown to New Jersey appear in an extraordinary first-hand account left by Private Jacob Zoll in his 1837 pension application written 60 years after he first stepped forward to answer his country's call.

Zoll was born November 30, 1754, outside of Philadelphia. He settled near Taneytown in 1775 where he volunteered to serve in the Maryland militia and joined Captain Key's company at the end of 1776. He filed for a Revolutionary War pension in a Fulton County, Illinois, court on May 24, 1837, with the County Clerk, Stephen Dewey, and described his volunteering as: "The general circumstances of my service were these. There being a general movement amongst the people of my neighborhood to fight for their liberties. I volunteered for three months in a company with the majority of my neighbors who were able to bear arms in Company of the Maryland Militia commanded by John Ross Key at Tawney Town in Frederick County, Maryland."

Not fully knowing where they were headed, the men left Taneytown on January 1, 1777. It was not an easy journey and the militia troops likely had not heard of Washington's success at

Trenton. The victories at Assunpink Creek and Princeton as well as the British retreat back into northern New Jersey occurred while they marched toward Philadelphia. As they set out, a blizzard hit the region and a cold wave brought the temperatures below zero. Under these perilous conditions they headed north up the Monocacy Road (present day Francis Scott Key Highway). Zoll remembered: "Our whole regiment marched through the snow about knee deep via McCollisters Town, Little York & Lancaster to Philadelphia." In McAllister's Town (present day Hanover) they picked up the Great Wagon Road leading to York and Lancaster, eventually arriving in Philadelphia by the middle of January.

After an eight-day stay in the city, they marched north through eastern Pennsylvania and crossed the Delaware River about 40 miles from Philadelphia. "We then marched into the state of New Jersey near Quibbletown where from the severity of the cold and the want of provisions our regiment was scattered out in parcels of Ten & Twenty men amongst the neighboring farmers."

The early part of 1777 following the Ten Crucial Days is known as the Forage War. British and American soldiers plundered that area of New Jersey so heavily that all provisions became scarce. Washington himself ordered American troops to seize food and supplies to complicate the British movements as both armies settled down for the winter. There would not be any significant battles fought, but there would be many encounters as the armies occasionally bumped into each other while foraging.

An encounter occurred in Quibbletown on February 8, 1777. Zoll described the event: "...whilst in this situation the Brittish approached and attacked some of our men near Trenton and they retreated back on us near Quibbletown where the regiment to which I belonged (having been called together) and a regiment under General Putnam had a general battle with the said party of Brittish which battle was closely fought for about ½ of an hour when the brittish made a retreat leaving the field of Battle in our possession leaving none of our men either killed or wounded." Military historians might describe this as a skirmish rather than a battle, but the pride in Zoll's recounting 60 years later that they suffered no casualties shows how deeply the fighting affected him.

In early 1777, an epidemic of smallpox ran rampant through the American army. Washington had personally dealt with this before. In 1751 he survived a mild case at the age of 19 while in Barbados. Even a mild case left him in bed for a month. Thankful to survive, he knew firsthand the seriousness of the illness. In July 1775, during an outbreak at the Siege of Boston, he issued a strict quarantine of his soldiers as well as local civilians. Smallpox was endemic among the British giving them a natural herd immunity to the illness. Americans had no such advantage. Smallpox was a scourge that followed the Continental Army throughout the war. By some estimates more American soldiers died of smallpox than in battle.

While Zoll was quartered in Quibbletown, twelve men in his company alone died from smallpox. Given that a company typically numbered 60 to 100 men, losing twelve of them was significant. In a letter dated February 5, 1777, Washington wrote to John Hancock that he had made the difficult decision to inoculate not only his army in the field but also all recruits coming into Philadelphia.

Performing an inoculation on this scale had never been done before. The typical inoculation process at the time was called variolation and had a fatality rate of 5 to 10 percent. Inoculated patients still needed a month to recover and ran the risk of infecting those around them if they were not properly isolated. Not only was it risky, it was very controversial. Many colonies banned the practice. Further complicating the matter was the need for total secrecy. Washington wrote: "I need not mention the necessity of as much secrecy as the nature of the Subject will admit of it being beyond doubt, that the Enemy will avail themselves of the event as far as they can." Washington worried that the British might attack a weakened American army or even send infected soldiers or civilians into their ranks to further spread infection. However, by the end of 1777, an estimated 40,000 soldiers were inoculated and the overall smallpox infection rates dropped dramatically from 20% to 1%. This forced a once skeptical Congress to repeal previous bans on variolation.

After experiencing so much in such a short time, Zoll and his company returned to Philadelphia about 4 weeks after the February Quibbletown skirmish. From there they were discharged around the first of April and headed back down the long road home to Maryland forever changed. During a desperate time for Washington's army, with their fate uncertain, the Taneytown militiamen marched north through a blizzard and survived a smallpox outbreak that took the lives of twelve men. They returned home having faced the British at Quibbletown. These men suffered and endured for this noble experiment in democracy. While much of the attention around the Revolutionary War is focused on men like Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin; the sacrifices of lesser known men like Jacob Zoll should be recognized.

Leaving war, snow, and disease behind, Jacob returned home to marry Elizabeth Birely. They had six children together and lived in the Taneytown area until moving to Mt Pleasant, Ohio, around 1805. Elizabeth passed away there in 1827. Jacob moved on to Illinois in 1835 where his sons, Jacob and Henry, lived with their families and where he applied for his pension. Zoll died in Illinois on Valentine's Day 1841 at age 86 and was buried in the Zoll Family Cemetery in Fulton County, Illinois. Sadly, given all the hardships he endured, Private Zoll's application for a pension was rejected as he had not served the required six months.

Guest columnist John Laycock is a member of the Westminster Chapter, SAR, and the Historical Society of Carroll County. In his free time he enjoys researching local Revolutionary War history.

Image 1: Wikimedia

Image 2: Wikimedia

*Image 3: Wikimedia
readable)*

Image 4: Wikimedia

Washington Crossing the Delaware

Washington's Headquarters in Morristown

Battle of Quibbletown (blown up large so the words are easily

Arnold Tavern sketch