New Jersey's Darkest Hour

by Donald Johnstone Peck

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Our story begins with Princeton's most legendary American Revolutionary family, the Stocktons. Their roots there date back to Richard Stockton, known as "The Settler," or "First Immigrant," who purchased a tract of land there in October of 1701 from William Penn, a Proprietor of West Jersey. It was his great-grandson, Richard Stockton III, who built "Morven,", the imposing Georgian style house which still stands on Route 206. He moved in with his wife, Annis Boudinot Stockton. The west wing, the earliest surviving section of the house, was built in 1758 and four successive generations of the Stockton family lived here. In those days, although Princeton was a small village, a constant stream of travelers passed by Morven, conveniently situated on the King's Highway, which ran from Elizabeth Point across the Raritan River at Inian's Ferry (New Brunswick) to the Falls of the Delaware River at Trenton. This main thoroughfare of Princeton, now called Nassau Street, is believed to follow the original Native American trail between the Raritan and Delaware Rivers.

As social leaders of Princeton, the Stocktons' home was a center for activities of the College of New Jersey, the name by which it was known for 150 years - it later became Princeton University. Chartered in 1746 by Presbyterian Jonathan Dickinson, Pastor at Elizabeth, and Aaron Burr, Sr., Pastor at Newark churches, among others, it was the fourth oldest institution of higher education in British North America and remains the oldest in New Jersey.

Nassau Hall, the large stone building emblematic of Princeton's college has a story of its own. Built in 1756, its name comes from the request of Royal Governor Jonathan Belcher to honor the memory of King William III, Prince of Orange-Nassau. He hailed from Nassau, a former duchy in Western Germany now included in Hesse.

The good King might have been chagrined could he know his namesake building would later be the scene of the last stand of some 200 British garrisoned there during the Battle of Princeton. It took an artillery battery, led by young Captain Alexander Hamilton, dislodged them. The story goes that a cannonball fired by Hamilton at Nassau Hall neatly decapitated the painting of King George II, convincing the Redcoats inside to surrender. Hamilton, an illegitimate child born on Nevis in the West Indies, orphaned as a boy, had made his way to New York as a teenager studying law under Elias Boudinot, brother of Stockton's wife, at his law office in Elizabeth. The portrait of George II was replaced by one of George Washington painted by Charles Willson Peale.

The Stocktons were involved with the college early on. When the first six students graduated in 1748, Richard Stockton was among them, though he chose a slightly different path. Where five out of the six became Presbyterian ministers Stockton, became a lawyer. In 1762 Nevertheless, he was a man of the faith and led a group of townspeople to build the First Presbyterian Church (later to become the Nassau Presbyterian Church) on land owned by the College.

When Sir William Howe's forces under Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis arrived in Princeton, December 7, 1776, soldiers stripped the pews and galleries for firewood, which they burned in the sanctuary. After the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777, both the church and nearby Nassau Hall served as barracks and hospital at different times for both the Continental and British troops.

Annis Boudinot Stockton was the sister of Elias Boudinot IV, President of the Continental Congress, who resided at Morven during the Princeton session of the Congress in 1783. Between June and November of that year, Princeton Borough was the *de facto* national capital when the Continental Congress, threatened by unpaid soldiers in Philadelphia, moved its deliberations to Nassau Hall. It was during that session that Congress had thanked General George Washington in person for his conduct of the war.

Annis Stockton was an ardent patriot and friend of Washington. Elias Boudinot and others regularly placed her poems to the valiant Washington in print. Her poem "Addressed to General George Washington, in 1777, after the Battles of Trenton and Princeton" invokes a tone of mythic prophecy still common in military tributes today.

The Stocktons socialized with many of the prominent families of the day such as the Burrs, whose son Aaron Burr, Jr., would become Vice President of the United States, and William Franklin, the last Royal Governor of New Jersey. In 1768 Franklin appointed Richard Stockton to the Governor's Council and in 1774 named him to New Jersey's Provincial Supreme Court. Although a moderate, he would eventually opt for separation from England and be selected as a delegate

to the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The New Jersey legislators convened in Nassau Hall, at the College of New Jersey in Princeton on August 30, 1776 to choose a "chief executive" - a Governor to replace the Loyalist Franklin. Two names came quickly to mind: Richard Stockton of Princeton and William Livingston of Elizabeth. Stockton seemed an ideal choice. Scion of a notable New Jersey family, he was a distinguished young lawyer and was fervently liberal. The vote split evenly on the first ballot but later in the day the legislators chose Livingston as wartime governor. He was descended from a great New York family of Scottish Dissenters. Indeed, almost half of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence were of Scottish ancestry.

The Presbyterians, largely of Scots-Irish ancestry, and united against Anglican Loyalists, were in the forefront of the independence movement. Some of the Scots-Irish had emigrated from the North of Ireland in 1730 and had told their children stories of atrocities inflicted in Ireland and Scotland by the government of King Charles I. By 1770, a full third of the churches in New Jersey were Presbyterian.

Stockton was joined in signing the Declaration of Independence by the Reverend John Witherspoon, who had been elected to the Continental Congress in 1776. They certainly knew one another. Witherspoon served both as President of the College of New Jersey and Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church for a quarter of
a century.

Unquestionably the leading Presbyterian statesman in America in the eighteenth century, Witherspoon provided strong leadership to the movement that had organized the national Presbyterian Church. But the greatest impact of his leadership of the Patriot cause was evidenced by the testimony of John Adams, a visitor to Morven on August 24, 1774, who described Witherspoon as being as "high a Son of Liberty as any man in America." His strong advocacy of civil and religious liberty provided the intellectual foundation for his support of American independence.

John Adams could vividly describe the dramatic and rainy Monday of July 1, 1776, at the Pennsylvania State House, about four o'clock in the afternoon. While he was speaking, the door of the hallway flung open and three men entered, booted, spurred, rain dripping from their coats. It was the radical members from Jersey, come to vote for independence.

Though late, Judge Stockton, speaking for New Jersey, asked to hear the affirmative argument before the vote was taken in Committee of the whole. John Adams got up, patiently went through the argument again as briefly as he could. The opposition then brought forth two more speechmakers, both vehement and abusive.

President Witherspoon stepped boldly forward, his coat still streaked with rain and his clergyman's bib lying wilted against his chest. He said, "The distinguished gentleman from Massachusetts remarked as we came in that the colonies are ripe for independence. I would like to add that some colonies [looking pointedly at Alsop of New York] are rotten for the want of it!"

The deliberate, agonizing debate that preceded the decision of the thirteen colonies to declare their independence, however, probably typified the genuine feelings of most people more than the rhetoric of John Witherspoon or Patrick Henry. It was as if all the passionate oratory of Virginia and all the overt rebellion of the New Englanders had merged in the persons of Stockton and Witherspoon.

In a ringing preamble, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence declared it "self-evident" that "all men are created equal," and were endowed with the "unalienable" rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And to this noble end the delegates pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

With the arrival of Admiral Lord Howe's fleet in early July 1776, the war had certainly become a reality for the citizens of New Jersey. The Americans knew that they had to block river access to New England and so constructed Fort Lee and Fort Washington on opposite sides of the Hudson River. Fort Lee was named for General Charles Lee, second in command to Washington, and Fort Washington for George Washington himself.

Great Britain was preparing a military response to put an end the rebellion once and for all. As October turned into November, New Jersey braced for inevitable invasion. The inexperienced Americans were unable to defend these precarious forts against the well-equipped and professionally trained British and Hessian soldiers. Fort Washington in New York fell to British troops on November 16, 1776, as both Washington and Greene agonized over their decision not to have abandoned it earlier. It cost some 2,600 American men and with almost 3,000 Americans surrendering and the British capturing quantities of ammunition, supplies and cannon.

Two days later, Washington evacuated his troops from Fort Lee, located about 300 feet above the Hudson River in New Jersey. The British invasion of New Jersey occurred on November 20 under the command of Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis. He led his 6,000 troops across the Hudson in whaleboats and along a steep, little-used path that

sloped up the rocky Palisades at about a 45-degree angle, scaling the steep cliffs of New Jersey's Bergen County at Closter. It was a daring attack very like the one Howe had led up the steep slopes of Quebec in the French and Indian War. This bold action forced General Nathanael Greene's garrison to abandon Fort Lee and leave behind stores of badly needed tents, cannon and supplies.

Heading west, out-flanked and out-manned, General Greene quickly led the poorly clothed and equipped Continental Army of 2,000 across the strategic Hackensack River, crossing November 21st at historic New Bridge Landing by the Von Steuben House, River Edge. The trip was made all the harder by their having left behind their much needed supplies. Washington hoped to make a stand but the vigilance of the enemy did not allow him time for this. The only escape route was this narrow bridge, and the Americans fled over it. Washington rode at the rear of the column, a fact long remembered by James Monroe, a newly arrived eighteen-year-old lieutenant from Virginia.

Washington worried about the health of his men and about the rumors circulating of a British invasion at Perth Amboy. British General Sir Henry Clinton had in fact argued that he and his forces land at Perth Amboy and thus outflank, destroy and cripple the rebels before the onset of snow. Heading southeastward to Newark in a driving cold rainstorm, pursued by the enemy, the Americans arrived there on November 23rd, remaining there until the 28th. They continued their two-and-a- half-week "Long Retreat" through Elizabeth, New Jersey's first English settlement, to Rahway and then Woodbridge. Continuing via the present Route 514, (the King's Highway) they crossed the Raritan River at Piscataway's river port, called "Raritan Landing," into New Brunswick on the morning of November 29th, clattering across the 1772 wooden Landing Lane Bridge (New Jersey's first covered bridge, and one of the earliest in the nation).

At the foot of Hamilton Street townspeople grimly watched as flames partially destroyed that structure to slow down the British pursuit. A site marker on Rutgers' Queen's College campus by Kirkpatrick Chapel describes how Washington spent three days and two nights at Cochrane's Tavern, New Brunswick, while an unheralded young nineteen-year-old Captain of New York artillery, Alexander Hamilton and his artillery company cannoned British and Hessian soldiers, who had arrived by late Sunday afternoon of December 1st, on the opposite side of the Raritan River. The cannon fire fended off the approaching enemy long enough for Washington to mount his New Brunswick strategy.

Here Washington sent troops ahead to scour the Delaware River for boats, especially the big Durham boats from as far north as Coryell's Ferry (present day Lambertville) and as far south as Burlington, to bring them to Trenton, twenty-six miles southeast of New Brunswick, for his strategic withdrawal crossing of the Delaware. All other boats were to be removed to the far side away from the British. When the British troops pressed into New Brunswick the next morning, the Americans had already gone. Washington and the main body of the army had marched through the night reaching Trenton by December 2nd. The ragged army, stopped by the cold waters of the wide, swift Delaware, crossed over, causing Washington's foes to label him a master of "defeat and retreat."

Thomas Paine, an immigrant corset-maker from England who had joined Washington's little army, limped along on the journey across New Jersey and scribbled at every stop. His words, written under extreme duress, became "The Crisis," whose stirring paragraphs begin: "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 the country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

Paine's cry proved all too true. On the last day of November when the enlistments expired, General Greene declared the Jerseymen acted "scurrily," ignoring the fact that New Englanders and Southerners had also left the army as their enlistments had expired. With Washington and what was left of the Continental Army having crossed the Delaware River at Trenton into Pennsylvania, the invasion was complete. The crossing was as grim as the more famous one of Christmas, 1776, but safe from further chase because every boat for miles around had been moved to the west side of the river at Washington's direction.

New Jersey was now at the mercy of the British with Washington and his troops on the western shore of the Delaware facing Trenton. Fearing the British would seize Philadelphia, the Continental Congress fled to Baltimore where it would remain until March. American troop morale was very low and troop desertion was a major concern.

On December 13, at Trenton, Sir William Howe made one of the fateful decisions of the war. He decided he and his army would retire to winter headquarters in Perth Amboy and New York, leaving only a string of outposts in New Jersey. By December 20th, Howe and Cornwallis stationed Hessians at Burlington, Bordentown and Trenton, moving the main British army back to New Brunswick and Perth Amboy, with an outpost at Princeton.

Reports on December 22 showed only 4,707 American soldiers fit for duty at the Pennsylvania encampment, a drop

of more than 1,000 men in two weeks. Washington reported many of his men were "entirely naked and most so thinly clad as to be unfit for service." By December 19th, the first of Tom Paine's "Crisis" essays appeared. Washington ordered it to be read to every regiment camped along the Delaware.

Returning to Morven on November 29, with the British pursuing the retreating Americans down the King's Highway in Princeton on December 3, the Stocktons fled to Tory Monmouth County. In early December, Richard Stockton was taken prisoner there and handed over to the British in Perth Amboy and where he received brutal treatment. Coincidental with Stockton's arrest, on November 30, as peace negotiators as well as military commanders, Admiral Lord Richard Howe and General Sir William Howe issued a proclamation offering pardon to all who would submit to British rule and take an oath of allegiance to the King within 60 days. Thousands in New Jersey flocked to the British camps to declare their loyalty. Richard Stockton was later released by accepting a pardon from British Commander General Sir William Howe as he gave his "word of honour that he would not meddle in the least in American affairs during the war." Richard Stockton thus became the only Signer to recant, marking, arguably, the lowest point of the American Revolution.