

CHAPTER V
BRIGADIER GENERAL

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IF there was to be war, steps must be taken to defend the Highlands of the Hudson, which was perhaps the most important strategic area in the entire thirteen provinces. It was for this purpose that the Continental Congress in November 1775 called upon New York to appoint an officer with power to call out the militia of the Hudson River counties, Ulster, Orange, Dutchess, and New York, if and when the British attack should come. The Committee of Safety, which was acting for the Provincial Congress during one of the many intervals when the Congress was not actually sitting, responded on December 19 by appointing George Clinton brigadier general of the Ulster and Orange militia.

Clinton's appointment was a striking indication of the confidence which New York had already come to have in his ability and loyalty. He was only thirty-six. He had not served in the militia and had had

virtually no military experience since his campaign with Amherst as a mere subaltern, and yet he was preferred to men like his elder brother James¹ and a score of other prominent New Yorkers who had served with more distinction in the French and Indian War and who had more recently been active militia officers. His old friend, Charles De Witt, was to serve under him as colonel of one of the Ulster regiments and brother-in-law Christopher Tappen as major. His sudden elevation was indeed a bitter pill for some of the more ambitious of his compatriots to swallow, and certain of them, including Colonel Hasbrouck of Clinton's own county, curtly informed the New York Congress that if seniority was to be ignored, and Clinton favored, they would not serve. The harassed Congress offered to follow any recommendations the Ulster County Committee might choose to make. With few exceptions, however, Clinton retained the confidence of his colleagues and his commission was never revoked.²

Clinton's primary task at that time and for nearly two years thereafter was the all-important defense of the Highlands. If the thirteen provinces were to conduct the war as a unit, and if there was to be any effective co-operation between the so-called Eastern states of New England and the others of the feeble Union, the British must be kept out of the Hudson Valley. One of the principal objectives in the grand strategy of the Revolution was therefore the Hudson, and it is by no means easy to understand why the British, with their superior forces, did not make a determined effort to seize the entire valley up to Albany and to hold and patrol it. Instead they occupied Philadelphia; Burgoyne, left unsupported, surrendered his army; the French, encouraged, entered the war at a critical moment; and independence was won. Although the outcome was to be attributed much more to British blunders and misunderstandings than to the military genius of George Clinton or any other American officer who commanded on the Hudson, the fact remains that the defense of the Valley, to which Clinton contributed so much, made the winning of the Revolution possible.

Clinton was the first to admit that he did "not understand much of

¹ James Clinton was colonel of the Third (Ulster) Regiment of the New York Line, organized June 28, 1775. He was appointed a brigadier general August 9, 1776. O'Callaghan, *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York*, VIII, 806.

² *American Archives*, Series 4, V, 137-39, 379.

the refined art of war,"³ and historians of the Revolution have not claimed for him any profound knowledge of military science. When giving his reasons against the evacuation of New York City in the fall of 1776 he wrote, "I am not much read in the Art of War."⁴ He never distinguished himself greatly on the field of battle. Yet it could be said of him by his friends "that the exertions made by this State [of New York] during the War are chiefly to be attributed to his influence."⁵ He was not a great field general but he was a great war governor, and the work which he did as governor in recruiting, organizing, disciplining, feeding, and clothing the troops, and arranging for the defense of the Hudson Valley, he began as provincial brigadier general. And the reputation that he made in the field was of inestimable value to him in politics in later years. Democracies are lavish in the honors they bestow upon their war heroes.

With characteristic energy and stubborn insistence he persuaded, cajoled, and threatened the indifferent and unpatriotic. He wrote hundreds of urgent, encouraging letters to colleagues and subordinates, and long reports to his superiors and to the provincial congress. And he wrote what he thought, no matter who the correspondent. He wrote, for instance, on January 9, 1776, to his distinguished kinsman, Colonel DeWitt, who was some dozen years his senior: "It gives me great Concern to hear that (altho' the Congress have appointed you & other Gentlemen Field Officers of a Regim't to be formed in the Northern End of Ulster County) not one company is yet imbodyed . . . You'll therefore not fail to exert yourself in filling up your Regim't with all speed agreeable to the Directions of the Congress."⁶ To one of his officers, Moses Phillips, he wrote: "I have received your letter of yesterday. The Reasons assigned for not furnishing your Quota of Men are by no means satisfactory, & such as I could not have expected from an Officer of whom I have always entertained so good an Opinion."⁷

³ *Public Papers*, I, 399.

⁴ Clinton Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵ Reported by Hamilton in the Letters of H. G., February 22, 1789, *Works, Lodge*, ed., I, 544. See also the *New York Advertiser*, April 1, 1789, for letters referring to his military incapacity.

⁶ *Public Papers*, I, 217.

⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 122.

Nor did he hesitate to speak plainly to the New York Convention itself: "I observe by the resolves now sent me," he wrote that body late in 1776, "two of my Colonels, and other Officers, are put under the direction of a Secret Committee of your honorable House. In justice to myself, I beg leave to mention, I must consider this as a suspension of my command, at least as far as it respects the regiments and companies they command. As they cannot be subject to my orders, I can't be answerable for the conduct of my brigade."⁸ Most of Clinton's letters show the same blunt sincerity and decision.

Intensely earnest himself in everything connected with the waging of the war against George III, he could not understand the indifference of others. He became at times especially wrathful over the way the militia conducted themselves. He was, for instance, compelled to instruct his officers to jail any militiamen caught abusing the inhabitants of the country where they were stationed. When sheep disappeared on his own farm, he suspected the militia. The militiamen were constantly demanding leave to go home to tend their crops or they were simply taking leave without permission. During the summer of 1776 he persuaded the Committee of Safety to allow many of the troops in service on the Hudson to return to their farms for a few days to care for their crops; only to find, to his despair, that bad weather had delayed the haying and the return of his men. In September he reported many gaps in his lines as the result of desertion and the failure of men drafted to join their regiments. If he sent parties after the delinquents, he weakened the army still more. The situation was especially serious during the discouraging White Plains campaign in October when in the face of his enemy his brigade was melting away as a result of the ravages of sickness, a few deaths, and much desertion. Perhaps the case of Colonel Hoornbeek's regiment was one of the most serious. Hoornbeek's regiment of 251 men reported at the end of 1776, 50 men on furlough, 2 unfit, and 89 deserted!⁹ That left 110 fit for service. At the same time Clinton was pleading with his officers to hold their men until new troops could be raised: "I am much distressed at the Militia's deserting me in the manner they do; some Regiments are gone off al-

⁸ Letter of December 23, *American Archives*, Series 5, III, 1378.

⁹ *Public Papers*, I, 517.

most to a Man."¹⁰ This was campaigning under difficulties, to say the least.¹¹

The army of the new American democracy was too much of a democracy to function smoothly. Soldiers complained of their officers and officers complained of their commands. Colonel Morris Graham and his officers, for instance, protested to General Clinton that they were unwilling to trust their lives to the medicinal knowledge of the regimental surgeon. The enlisted men at Fort Montgomery in August 1776 complained to Clinton of their officers who were "disagreeable" to them. As the higher officers had been appointed by the Congress, Clinton could do nothing for their men—if he would. His disgust with the whole system of choosing officers—officers up to and including the rank of captain were elected by the men of each company—came to a head in March of 1777 when he wrote the New York Convention of his intention to resign.¹² His purpose in resigning, he declared, was "not founded on any Disgust to the service other than that from fatal Experience I find I am not able to render my Country that Service which they may have Reason to expect of me, considering the importance of the Command they have honored me with." A few days later he admitted that he had entirely lost patience with the method of choosing officers which only elevated those who would stoop to court mean popularity. He stated that he would not withdraw his resignation but that he would serve as a private, believing that he would make an obedient soldier. His resignation was not accepted. He was too much needed.

The militia were constantly grumbling because their wages were overdue. Often when they grumbled enough, they got money.¹³ Clinton was usually ready to champion their cause against the sluggishness and indifference of the indigent Provincial Congress. Always democratic in his sympathies, he saw that the war was bearing much more heavily upon the lower orders of men who filled the ranks than upon those

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 502.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 216, 290, 315f., 338, 399, and 580; J. R. Simms, *The Frontiersmen of New York* (2 vols., Albany, 1882), I, 620.

¹² *Ibid.*, 281, 643, 654; Marius Schoonmaker, *The History of Kingston* (New York, 1888), 175f.

¹³ *Public Papers*, I, 293, 329, 376.

who for one reason or another stayed home and financed or supplied the fighting. He wrote boldly to the council of safety in 1777 that service in the armed forces was so poorly paid as compared with other occupations that the difference was a virtual tax borne by the "Middle & lower Class of People." This, he believed, the militia fully understood.¹⁴

The war was developing rapidly in the weeks that followed Clinton's appointment as brigadier general in December 1775. Twelve days later the gallant Montgomery, one of the most promising of American officers, was killed before Quebec. In January 1776, Tom Paine published that most effective of all Revolutionary tracts, *Common Sense*, and Sir John Johnson, that staunch Loyalist, was disarmed by Schuyler's men. In February, General Charles Lee and Lord Stirling arrived in New York under orders from Washington to place the province in a condition for defense. More troops arrived in the months that followed, including Washington's forces who came fresh from the victorious outcome of the siege of Boston. The able-bodied part of the population of New York City was put to work building fortifications and the work of obstructing the river above the town was carried on by the population and troops of the upper counties.

The active campaign commenced when British war vessels ran by the American works on Manhattan on July 11 and on the next day landed some 9000 men on Staten Island. The Howes were about to attack the metropolis.

Warned by two river sloops of the appearance of the British at New York, Clinton at once left his New Windsor home, assembled a party of forty neighbors, set up his headquarters at Fort Montgomery on the Hudson, and called out three militia regiments, fresh from the farms, which he stationed at Fort Montgomery, at Fort Constitution six miles up the river opposite the present West Point, and at Newburgh a few miles farther north on the Hudson. By July 18 he had 600 men at Fort Montgomery.

Assisted by his brother James, who was a born soldier if not a dashing one, he pushed forward the construction work on Forts Mont-

¹⁴ Letters of July 31, 1777, *Public Papers*, II, 142-43.

gomery and Clinton; he collected river craft near the forts and made preparations for stretching a chain across the river at Anthony's Nose, just below the forts, which would close the river to the British fleet.¹⁵ He wrote Washington about his preparations and received in reply letters of encouragement and direction from his commander-in-chief.

It was fortunate that precautions were taken so promptly. Some of the British ships pushed up the river from Tarrytown to Haverstraw on the sixteenth where they fired shots at the curious provincials who lined the shore. The next two days the enemy ships, especially the *Rose* and the *Phoenix*, grew bolder, came farther up the river and sent out small landing parties; and one enemy sloop even risked the guns of Fort Montgomery.¹⁶ The countryside was in consternation. General Clinton stationed militia along the banks of the Hudson to greet possible landing parties, caused neighboring livestock and supplies to be moved from the danger zone, and prepared large brush fires on the river bank below the fort to illumine the enemy vessels should they attempt to sail up the river during the night. These precautions, which Washington approved, seem to have been effective, and for a time the *Phoenix* and the *Rose* kept their distance.

The provincial convention, meanwhile, realized the necessity for keeping the King out of the Hudson Valley. It resolved on July 16 to call out a fourth of the militia of Westchester, Dutchess, Ulster, and Orange Counties for service until December, and to allow each man a bounty of twenty dollars with Continental pay and subsistence. Every militiaman was to provide himself with a knapsack and blanket and every group of six with a kettle. Of these levies the men raised in Ulster and Orange were to be stationed in the Highlands on the west side of the Hudson at points to be determined by Clinton, while the Dutchess and Westchester troops were to repair to Peekskill. General Washington was to be requested to name an officer to command the forces on both sides of the river.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Public Papers*, I, 138, 187, 248-49, 251; F. L. Humphreys, *Life and Times of David Humphreys* (2 vols., New York and London, 1917), I, 88; E. M. Ruttenber, *Obstructions to the Navigation of Hudson's River* (Albany, 1869).

¹⁶ *Public Papers*, I, 286-87.

¹⁷ *American Archives*, series 5, I, 1409; *Public Papers*, I, 255.

Washington, being unable to send "an experienced officer" with adequate knowledge of the countryside to command on the lower reaches of the Hudson, recommended that George Clinton be appointed to that important command. "General Clinton," he wrote the Convention on July 19, "on all Accounts appears to me the most suitable Person, and as the appointment is made dependent on me, I shall nominate him, unless some objections should be made or difficulty arise which I do not now know." Washington later explained to the Convention that "His acquaintance with the Country, abilities and zeal for the Cause are the Motives that induced me to make choice of him."¹⁸

The Convention's emphatic approval of Washington's choice for the command on the Hudson shows how high Clinton had risen in the esteem of his fellow New Yorkers. Washington was told that it gave the Convention "great pleasure to find that [his] Excellency hath chosen for this important post a gentleman whose good sense and tried resolution do honor to the choice, which, united with his intimate knowledge of the country, cannot fail of rendering him useful to the public."¹⁹ A few days later Robert R. Livingston wrote to "Dear George" from Fishkill: "You must lead us out of this labyrinth which God grant you may shortly have it in your power to do by a victory so decisive as will amid only of one construction."²⁰

Although the Convention understood that the Continental commander-in-chief had actually appointed Clinton to the new command, Washington himself promptly set the Convention right; and the Convention itself hastened to place Clinton in command of the levies of Ulster, Orange, and Westchester in the lower Hudson Valley. That was on August 8. Clinton was ordered to leave 200 men at Anthony's Nose and bring the rest of his command to the fort which had just been erected on the north side of Kingsbridge, one of the strongest positions north of New York City. He wasted no time for on August 9, the next day, orders were sent to Brigadier Generals Morris and Ten Broeck to march their brigades at once to Kingsbridge, which then

¹⁸ George Washington, *Writings*, John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. (25 vols., Washington, 1931-), V, 309, 398.

¹⁹ *Journal of the New York Convention*, August 6, 1776.

²⁰ *Public Papers*, I, 312.

became Clinton's headquarters.²¹ Two weeks later the Committee of Safety sent the Convention's records and papers and a chest belonging to the receiver-general to General Clinton's camp for safe keeping.²²

From his headquarters at New York Washington on August 12 issued general orders placing the brigades of Thomas Mifflin and George Clinton under the immediate command of the newly commissioned major general, William Heath. Heath was a substantial New England farmer but an uninspiring and decidedly mediocre soldier. By the same order of August 12 the brigade of James Clinton, who had just received his commission as brigadier general, was placed under Major General Putnam.²³ George Clinton's brigade at about this time consisted of some 1800 men in five regiments commanded by Colonels Isaac Nichol, Thomas Thomas, James Swartwout, Levi Pawling, and Morris Graham; Albert Pawling was Clinton's brigade major. The brigade was, however, like most of the militia brigades of the time, deficient in numbers and, in spite of the polite admonition of a special committee of the convention in September and, in spite of its officers who succeeded in bringing in a few deserters and recruits, the brigade in November still wanted nearly 700 men to complete its ranks.²⁴ In the late summer of 1776 New York was furnishing about one-seventh of Washington's army—no small proportion for one of the smaller states.

Then, late in August, came one of the most disheartening of the American defeats of the war—a defeat that might easily have resulted in the complete elimination of Washington's army. It was the Battle of Long Island. Two American generals and 1100 men were captured and the rest of the army put to rout. It is entirely possible that had there been no fog and rain on the night of August 29 to cover the passage of the Continental Army with its supplies from Long Island to the Manhattan shore, the war might have ended then and there.

²¹ *American Archives*, Series 5, I, 852-54, 1489; *Journal of the New York Convention*, August 6, 8, 1776; *Public Papers*, I, 298, 304, 312.

²² *American Archives*, Series 5, I, 1546.

²³ Washington, *Writings*, Fitzpatrick, ed., V, 423.

²⁴ "The Campaign of 1776," *Memoirs of Long Island Historical Society*, III (Brooklyn, 1876), 128; New York Secretary of State, *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the . . . Revolution*, II, 478; *American Archives*, Series 5, III, 499.

It seemed to some that Howe allowed "the exact time necessary for his enemy to make his escape."²⁵ Apparently America owes much to Sir William Howe!

Washington's masterly retreat to Manhattan following the battle of Long Island brought Kingsbridge and Clinton's brigade closer than ever to the area of actual conflict. The Committee of Safety ordered him to hold his forces in readiness in case Howe should attempt to force his way up by the island of Manhattan, and Clinton made every preparation, even to the squeezing of £7000 from the niggardly committee to pay his restless militiamen. Following urgent orders received by General Heath from Washington, Clinton kept a sharp watch on the enemy's movements, sending out reconnoitering parties, despatching spies to Long Island, and laying plans to trap Tories who might be made to yield information on the enemy's movements. He himself planned to lead a party on the evening of September 9 across to Long Island, but the enemy's ships prevented the expedition and they got no farther than New Rochelle.²⁶

Clinton found himself in complete disagreement with Washington on the vital question of the evacuation of New York City. General Greene believed that it would be too costly in a military sense to try to hold the city. The city and its suburbs should therefore be burned. Washington, who had already enquired of the Congress what should be done with the place, was inclined to agree with Greene; but the Congress was opposed to the policy of destruction although it was willing to have Washington decide whether the city should be evacuated or held at all cost. The final decision was made in Washington's council of war which met at the quarters of General McDougall on September 12.²⁷

General Clinton attended the council.²⁸ He argued that although

²⁵ [Flick], *New York in the Revolution*, 151-53.

²⁶ Washington, *Writings*, Fitzpatrick, ed., VI, I; *Public Papers*, I, 343; George to Charles Clinton, September 12, 1776, State Museum, Newburgh.

²⁷ For Clinton's reasons against evacuation, see memorandum dated September 12, 1776, in Clinton Papers, Library of Congress. See also George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (10 vols., Boston, 1854-74), IX, 118 and Jones, *New York*, I, notes on pp. 612-14.

²⁸ He also attended the similar council on September 7. Washington, *Writings*, Fitzpatrick, ed., VI, 19.

the city itself was difficult to defend, it could be held by fortifying and holding the adjacent heights. He insisted that Washington's army outnumbered the enemy, although in other respects it might be inferior, and that to retreat, leaving the city for barracks for hostile forces and an asylum for the disaffected, would mean a serious loss of popular confidence in the Continental Army. If the enemy entrenched themselves in the city, so cutting off Long Island from the rest of the state and exposing New Jersey to attack by way of Paulus Hook, it might be very difficult ever to recover the town. It was better to attempt to hold it than meekly to give it up and then face the more difficult task of recapture.

The majority of the council, however, fearing that the British planned to surround the island and cut their lines of communication, decided to abandon the city, "none dissenting," according to George Bancroft, "but Spencer from sheer ignorance and dulness, Heath from dishonesty, and George Clinton from stubborn zeal."²⁹ The other ten members of the council, including Greene, Putnam, McDougall, and Mifflin, were for evacuation. The withdrawal of the troops to the Harlem area began on September 14 and the British entered the town of New York on the fifteenth. Five days later a mysterious fire swept over a quarter of the area of the little city.

Clinton had a taste of real fighting on September 16 when General Howe attacked the center of Washington's line at Harlem Heights in an effort to clear Manhattan entirely of American troops. The Battle of Harlem was the culmination of several days of vigorous and active campaigning. It was also what the weary American forces so much needed to raise their morale, a decisive repulse for Howe's victorious army. Clinton came down from Kingsbridge with a portion of Heath's command. He spent several nights in the open, observing, but probably taking no part in the hurried retreat from New York City on Sunday and actually participating in more creditable operations at Harlem Heights on Monday. He saw the British advance, which had overwhelmed Colonel Knowlton's force at about ten in the morning, checked by an American attack in the hollow near

²⁹ *United States*, IX, 118. The statement is paraphrased from Alexander McDougall. Cf. J. C. Fitzpatrick, *George Washington Himself*, 253.

Martje Davit's Fly; he saw fresh American troops push back the enemy again early in the afternoon to the Buckwheat Field; and he saw the final British retreat later in the afternoon. He accompanied the troops during most of the action, encouraging and directing.³⁰ He afterwards wrote Dr. Peter Tappen that he wished he had had a pair of pistols with which he could, he believed, "have shot a Rascal or two." He thought it a pity that Peter's pistols should be lying idle. "I am sure I would at least have shot a puppy of an officer I found slinking off in the heat of the Action."³¹

Clinton wrote enthusiastically of the battle of Harlem Heights to the Convention: ". . . it has animated our Troops & gave them new spirits & erased every bad impression the Retreat from Long Island &c. had left on their minds. They find they are able with inferior Numbers to drive their Enemy & think of nothing now but Conquest."³² The night after the battle his brigade formed on the extreme right between Scott's brigade and the Hudson on the ground where the action had commenced that morning.³³ Within a mile of the enemy, Clinton heard them working vigorously and, he thought, fearfully to prepare themselves against another attack in the morning. There was no attack, however, and on the evening of the sixteenth, the day after the battle, Clinton was back at Kingsbridge.

The fall of 1776 was a hectic one for the young brigadier general. Washington's confidence in him, which may well have been strengthened by his record at Harlem Heights, was responsible for several difficult assignments. The first of these was another abortive raid on Long Island. Washington wrote on September 30 to Major General Lincoln of the Massachusetts militia and to General George Clinton, requesting the former and ordering the latter to go at once to Fairfield, Connecticut, to plan a secret expedition to Long Island for the purpose of destroying stock and supplies that were in danger of falling into the hands of the enemy. Clinton spent several days in Connecticut, chiefly at New Haven, with General Lincoln, Colonel Henry B. Living-

³⁰ H. P. Johnston, *Battle of Harlem Heights* (New York, 1897), *passim*; George Clinton to the New York Convention, September 18, *Public Papers*, I, 351-54.

³¹ Letter to Peter Tappen, September 21, printed in H. P. Johnston, *op. cit.*, 142-45.

³² *Public Papers*, I, 353.

³³ General orders for September 16 in Washington, *Writings*, Fitzpatrick, ed., VI, 56.

ston, and John Sloss Hobart; but the expedition to Long Island hung fire. Late in October, with the enemy threatening a further advance in Westchester, Washington decided that Clinton could not be spared for the Long Island project,⁸⁴ and he returned to headquarters at Kingsbridge.

The next two weeks at Kingsbridge were filled with activity, rumors of British advances on land and river, removal of stores from threatened Kingsbridge to Dobbs Ferry, and, as always, letter writing. Peter Tappen, thinking it prudent to ignore Clinton's hint to lend his brace of pistols, sent down Clinton's sword with a letter of reassurance on the point of the health of Mrs. Clinton who had but recently been very poorly.⁸⁵

After the removal of Clinton's camp to White Plains on the twenty-third, the fever of preparation continued. His headquarters was the center of activity for all business connected with the militia of the state as Washington's headquarters was the focal point from which the Continental forces were directed. It was said of Clinton that "judged by the volume of his mail, the number of his callers and the variety of duties entrusted to him by General Washington, General Clinton is one of the busiest men in America. His headquarters hourly presents a scene of the greatest activity and from his many callers, an interesting insight is gained . . ." into the whole exciting business of conducting the war.⁸⁶

Reports of the enemy's advance reached White Plains on the night of Clinton's arrival when he was the only general officer in camp. He expected a battle at any time but asked John McKesson to reassure Mrs. Clinton for "it would be too much honor to die in such a cause."⁸⁷ Not until the twenty-eighth did General Howe, moving north, make his direct attack on Washington's army. The battle of White Plains was a disheartening affair for both sides. A providential rain put Howe's muskets out of commission and in the night Washington

⁸⁴ Clinton seems to have been at New Haven October 2 to 5; *Public Papers*, I, 372-73. Washington, *Writings*, Fitzpatrick, ed., VI, 141, 148, 222; *American Archives*, Series 5, II, 607-09.

⁸⁵ *Public Papers*, I, 378.

⁸⁶ Jonathan Rawson, 1766: *A Day-by-Day Story* (New York), 1927), 335.

⁸⁷ *Public Papers*, I, 392.

retreated to a stronger position in the hills in the rear, leaving Howe, after some desultory maneuvering, to fall back to Dobbs Ferry. For several days, however, the Americans expected another general attack. General Clinton wrote McKesson on the thirty-first that for four days he had been closely confined to his post on the left flank, living in a soldier's tent and exposed to rain and weather. "We had reason to apprehend an attack last night, or by day-break this morning . . . Our lines were manned all night in consequence of this, and a most horrid night it was to lie in cold trenches. Uncovered as we are, drawn on fatigue, making redoubts, flashes, abatis and lines, and retreating from them and the little temporary huts made for our comfort before they are well finished, I fear will ultimately destroy our army without fighting."⁸⁸ His spirits were many degrees lower than after the more glorious clash at Harlem Heights.

Possibly the despondency of the battlefields of White Plains had something to do with Clinton's mysterious decision on the day following the battle to offer his resignation. The faithful McKesson, who was charged with the delicate task of communicating the general's message to the committee of safety, found the committee entirely unwilling to consider it. Clinton would give them no reasons. Some suspected he wished to evade the Continental articles against dueling through resignation. They thought the whole business most unlike him. The committee was willing to grant a leave of absence, if that was what the general wanted, but it could not consent to even the shortest resignation of his command. Abraham Yates especially was insistent that Clinton could not be spared, "even for an hour."⁸⁹ The committee did not alter its determination and Clinton remained in the field where he was so much needed.

During the next few weeks the American commanders were busy with their plans for the defense of the Hudson Valley. On the eleventh of November George Clinton, together with his brother James, Stirling, Mifflin, and Heath, accompanied Washington on a hurried visit to Peekskill and the posts in the Highlands.⁴⁰ Clinton's headquarters

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁸⁹ *Public Papers*, I, 408, 410-11. McKesson apparently knew Clinton's reasons.

⁴⁰ Humphreys, *Life and Times of David Humphreys*, I, 89. Washington left White Plains on November 10. *Writings*, VI, 272.

were then moved to Peekskill where he remained until the end of the month, attending Heath's numerous councils of war, including a meeting with General Charles Lee, surveying the countryside and the river, and suggesting to the Convention his plan for obstructing the Hudson at Polopel's Island, a plan that, much to Clinton's indignation, Gilbert Livingston carried about with him for some days before it received the attention and the approval of the committee of safety.⁴¹

He must have been somewhat assuaged by the committee's wholehearted adoption of his Polopel's Island project. It resolved at Fishkill on November 30 that the work was to start immediately. Three hundred axes were to be delivered to Clinton at New Windsor; boats and scows were to be assembled there; Gilbert Livingston was to provide Clinton with three tons of iron and with spars and timber, and a special committee was named to provide other necessities. Reinforcements were to be sent to Clinton at Constitution Island, and he on his part was to hold the Ulster and Orange militia in readiness to defend the west shore of the Hudson.⁴² Major General Schuyler was asked to confer with him. The latter arrived at Constitution Island with 500 men promptly on the same day he received his orders. There followed the inevitable appeals for essential provisions and men, teams, anchors, rope and especially axes. There was flour enough at New Windsor; but salt and rum were just as essential, the latter because the men were working in the icy water and the weather was "so extream bad."⁴³ Clinton himself was sometimes at Fort Constitution supervising the work; at other times he was directing operations from his home at New Windsor just above Polopel's Island, or superintending the procurement of equipment at such points as Murderers' Creek close to Newburgh.

This task of obstructing the Hudson received a serious setback the second week in December. Washington had been some days in New Jersey pursued by the victorious but dilatory Howe. The New York committee of safety, uneasy at the lack of news from the commander-in-chief and alarmed by the progress of the enemy, sent a special

⁴¹ *Public Papers*, I, 430-33; *American Archives*, Series 5, III, 663, 751, 842, 860.

⁴² *Public Papers*, I, 435-38.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 446.



committee of three, General Scott and Messrs. William Duer and Robert R. Livingston, to confer with George Clinton at New Windsor. They met on the eighth and, in all probability, concocted the plan for an expedition into New Jersey to relieve the pressure on Washington through an attack on the enemy's rear, a plan which was formally adopted by the committee of safety at Fishkill the next day.

Clinton was to assemble an army of New York troops at Kakiate in Orange County, and this force, together with such New Jersey, Connecticut, or other New England militia as might be induced to come, was to join Major General Gates or Major General Lee, provided the forces of either were to operate against the enemy's rear in such a position as to make it possible for Clinton to coöperate with them and still protect the Highlands of the Hudson.⁴⁴ If those two officers were to join Washington's main army, then Clinton was to march into New Jersey alone, raising the spirits of the Jersey militia and overawing the disaffected in that state. As it happened it was not possible for Clinton to join either Gates or Lee.

Preparations took some days and it was not until the fourteenth that Clinton was at Fort Constitution hurrying on to the rendezvous at Kakiate where several militia regiments, already gathered, were protesting the general lack of food and shelter. The next day he was near Kakiate with 1200 militia, and a day later he rode to Hackensack with a small detachment of light horse to see Heath and offer him any assistance that he might need. Heath, however, had put the enemy to rout and needed no assistance. On the evening of the nineteenth Clinton and General Samuel H. Parsons, with 500 men, conducted a successful raid into enemy territory near Bergen, New Jersey, where Clinton had gone surveying some fifteen years before. Although the enemy discovered the movement before Colonel Woodhull, with a force of 200 men, was ready to cut off their retreat at Bergen Woods, 23 prisoners were taken with some supplies and the enemy cleared out of the district.⁴⁵

Clinton, returning to Pyramus to prepare his report for the convention,

⁴⁴ *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the Revolution*, I, 547-54; *American Archives*, series 5, III, 362-73; *Public Papers*, I, 454-57.

⁴⁵ Charles S. Hall, *Life and Letters of Samuel Holden Parsons* (Binghamton, N.Y., 1905), 79; *Public Papers*, I, 477-78.

was now in high spirits. The expedition had apparently accomplished its purpose⁴⁶ and two days later Clinton was ordered back to the east shore of the Hudson to secure the position at North Castle against an expected attack. There he was set to act in conjunction with General Alexander McDougall whom Washington was placing in command of the Continental forces in that Department with headquarters at Peekskill. Heath was to join Washington who thought that the British would not attack the Highlands at that season of the year.⁴⁷

It was the end of a disastrous year for the American forces in New York. They had lost Long Island, Staten Island, New York City, and much of Westchester County, and only the half-heartedness of Howe's campaigning had spared them from additional losses. The state found itself shut off from the sea and from its greatest center of trade and population, seriously handicapped at the very commencement of the war. And its peripatetic convention, occupied when it did meet with the problems of war, had not yet been able to devise a state government worthy of the name. All in all, the situation was not an enviable one and it is unlikely that Clinton's small successes on the New Jersey frontier or even the glad news of Washington's Christmas success at Trenton dispelled any considerable proportion of the gloom that hung over the state of New York.

⁴⁶ *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the Revolution*, I, 559, 573.

⁴⁷ Washington, *Writings*, Fitzpatrick, ed., VI, 417-19, 442.