

The Rev. John D. Woodhull, D.D.

"THE FIGHTING CHAPLAIN"

By REV. WILLIAM BUCHANAN BUYERS

John Woodhull was born in Suffolk County, Long Island, January 26, 1744. Of him a distinguished Presbyterian minister of a former generation wrote: "He was descended from a long line of illustrious ancestors. I have seen in the family Bible a list from William the Conqueror. His great ancestors at the head of it was a nobleman, a baron, created I think by William." A member of this ancient family of Flanders crossed the channel with the Conqueror in 1066 A. D. From this Walterus de Flanderus, who held as feudal lord estates in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, England, the family of de Wahul, now Woodhull, is descended. Richard Woodhull, the founder of the American branch of the family, was born in Northampton, England, in 1620; came to Long Island in 1648, and died in 1690.

He was a Colonial judge and held other high positions. The old Woodhull homestead on Long Island was still in the possession of a Richard Woodhull at the opening of the present century, and it was here that the original painting of the coat of arms was kept. Dr. J. D. Woodhull was an intense Revolutionary patriot and if ever a chaplain deserved the sobriquet of "Fighting Chaplain," he did. In being descended from such a distinguished family he always ran true to form.

As a youth he prepared for college at a grammar school conducted by Rev. Caleb Smith at a place called Newark Mountains, now Orange, N. J. He was graduated at Princeton College in 1766. From there he went to Fagg's Manor, Chester County, Pa., and received his theological training under the famous preacher and teacher, Rev. John Blair.

In 1772 he married Miss Sara Spofford of Philadelphia, a step-daughter of the renowned Gilbert Tennant, D. D., by whom he had six children, five sons and a daughter. One who knew her wrote of her as "a lady of great excellence and well fitted for the station she occupied."

In 1769 a call was extended to John Woodhull jointly by the Leacock and Lancaster Presbyterian churches. The latter is the same as The First Presbyterian Church. At this time Lancaster County's most distinguished son was a little boy four years old and probably often dreamed of painting pictures and inventing boats propelled by their own power while attending this church with his father, Robert Fulton, Sr., who was one of the founders.

By this arrangement, the Leacock church was to pay ninety pounds for two-thirds of his time and Lancaster forty pounds for one-third of his time. The Leacock congregation has moved to the town of Paradise but the old church and cemetery may still be found on the Old Philadelphia Road in

excellent repair. John Woodhull evidently had considerable private means because his meager salary of slightly over \$600 per year could not have permitted him to build the mansion which he erected while a pastor in Lancaster County.

This large edifice still stands just south of the Pennsylvania railroad, a little east of Ronks, and can be seen from the train and easily recognized by its large chimneys. There he entertained Whitefield and later it became known as "Harmony Hall," the hospitable home of the Porters and Steeles, well-known colonial families.

It is the services of Dr. John D. Woodhull, chaplain during the Revolutionary War, that we will now observe. His devotion to the cause of freedom began before the Battle of Lexington took place. Historian Lossing says of him that he took from his Leacock congregation every man that could bear arms. Another writes of him: "In the early part of the Revolutionary War, inspired by the patriotic fervor of their young pastor, all the able bodied men of Leacock church went into the field, accompanied by their pastor as chaplain. It is supposed that John Woodhull was with Washington's army at the bitter bivouac at Valley Forge. It is known that he took an active part at the Battle of Monmouth. On that memorable occasion, when a cannoneer fell not far from where he stood, he assisted in serving this cannon himself." The authority for this statement was Colonel William C. Alexander, whose father, the Rev. Archibald Alexander, D. D., of Princeton, was a personal friend of Dr. Woodhull.

How good men differed in those critical days as to just what course to pursue and what momentous issues hung upon their decision!

Two nearby contemporaries of Dr. Woodhull took another course. The story of Rev. Colin McFarquhar of Donegal church may or may not be true. It is said that when an express messenger arrived during the services, with the news of Howe's advances, the congregation did not wait for the benediction but rushed out of the service, formed a circle around the witness tree, put their pastor in the center and compelled him to shout for the cause of Independence. Even if the story is not true, we have no documentary evidence of the Rev. Mr. McFarquhar's sponsoring the cause of Independence.

John Woodhull enlisted enthusiastically in the Fifth Battalion commanded by Colonel James Crawford. The writer has been unable to find a complete list of the companies of that battalion. Two are certain, however. One is that of Captain James Mercer and raised in Leacock Township; the other is the First Company, raised in Salisbury Township. It seems that Captain Mercer's company was composed largely from the officers and members of the Leacock church while Captain Robert Buyers' company consisted largely of the officers and members of the Pequea Presbyterian Church, of which Dr. Robert Smith, a friend of Woodhull, was pastor. To quote from the late Samuel Evans: "This company was composed of the flower of Salisbury's citizens, many of whom were freeholders and professional men. I recall the names of Dr. Samuel Humes, the ancestor of the Lancaster family of that

name; James Fleming, who owned a farm near the White Horse Tavern, along the Old Philadelphia Road, whose daughter, Isabella, married the late Honorable Amos Slaymaker, and another daughter married William Fullerton, of the same company, whose descendants are prominent in western Pennsylvania."

A photographic copy of the original muster roll of this company may be seen with the name of "J. D. Woodhull, Chaplain." These were not the only companies from the two townships. Captain John Brisban's company of the Second Battalion had also men from Leacock Township while Captain Thomas Herbert's company of Colonel Samuel J. Atlee's battalion was raised from both townships.

It might be said in passing that the recently organized Pequea Society has identified something like twenty graves of these patriots. Four have been found in St. John's Episcopal Churchyard at Compass; two of these were officers.

Dr. Woodhull preached to thousands of soldiers during the war, and no one can estimate the measure of his services in keeping up the morale and spirits of those Mighty Men of '76. In some ways these qualities in an army are more essential than physical equipment.

With other gallant Lancaster County battalions, Colonel Crawford's battalion had an active part in the northern Jersey Campaign, including the battles of Long Island and King's Bridge. In this connection the following letters to his wife, written at that time, are interesting:

Newark, August 20th, 1776.

My Dear Sally:

Last Thursday I left Philadelphia, and set off for the camp. On my way in Princeton I visited my cousins, and had the satisfaction of seeing all the children of dear and good Uncle Caleb Smith. They were all well and in prosperity. On Saturday I parted with Captains Mercer and Buyers, with their companies, in Brunswick, with a view to preach with Colonel Ross's battalion at Elizabeth Town Point on Sabbath, but by means of a storm could get no farther than Woodbridge, where I preached to a number of soldiers in Mr. Proe's church—on Monday went to Elizabeth Town Point; found that Colonel Ross's battalion had furnished their quota for the flying camp, and the remainder expect to return home in a few days. From the Point a large body of Hessians marched down opposite us. Their uniform is blue, faced with red, and some is brown, faced with buff. General Washington has refused as yet to settle a cartel with the Hessians, telling them he has no war with them, and if they will interfere they must abide by the consequences, and it is said they as yet refuse to fight on that account.

Your affectionate husband,

J. Woodhull.

Wednesday, 11 o'clock at night.

Newark, August 27th.

My Dear Sally:

The solemn day is come at last—Long Island is made a field of blood. Now the cannon and small arms make a continued roar even at this time of night. Day before yesterday the battle began, and with some intermission

has continued till now—yea, now is roaring in my ears, and God only knows when it will end.

As yet we have no account which may be fully depended on, only that General Howe has landed with most of his men upon Long Island. Generals Sullivan and Sterling are missing. 'Tis also said we made great havoc amongst them, but I can tell but very little for certainty as yet, except that there is a mighty battle which is continuing. May a good God grant that it end in our favor, and for the glory of His name.

Good-night.

Camp at Bargain, September 9th, 1776.

My Dear Sally:

I have nothing new to write, but as I have an opportunity must say something. We hear cannon bellow night and day, but very little execution is done—no attack made upon New York—the enemy lay about it on Long Island, intending, I suppose, if possible, to come down upon the backs of our people, and if they should attack them behind, suppose the fleet will engage the city in front; but the ships seem wonderfully afraid of our batteries, and we have about 20,000 men to keep off the enemy behind. I think under Providence we are pretty secure, except that the enemy, I believe, can destroy the city.

Am your affectionate,
John Woodhull.

Among the relatives on Long Island of whose fate John Woodhull was apprehensive was General Nathaniel Woodhull, who was taken prisoner at Jamaica by a detachment of the Seventeenth Regiment, British Dragoons, and the Seventy-first Regiment of Infantry. Woodhull gave up his sword in token of surrender, but, refusing to say, "God save the king," the British officer struck him severely over the head with a sword, and from the effects of the wound the brave Revolutionary officer died. It was this same hero, who, with Richard Hewlett, of Long Island, and with six hundred and sixty-eight men under Captain Bradstreet, captured Fort Frontenac, June, 1758. He was then a Major.

Chaplain Woodhull carried in his mind a rich fund of interesting incidents that happened during the war. He was a man of strong faith and believed that the "God of Battles" was with General Washington and his army. On Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1789, he preached a notable sermon in which he made many comparisons of our success in the War for Independence with the success of Israel in the Old Testament.

Permit me to quote briefly from that sermon: "It is said in the song of Deborah and Barak that the 'stars in their courses fought against Sisera.' The elements have been on our side; a thick fog covered our retreat from Long Island; the snow covered our attack upon the Hessians at Trenton, and the winds and the waves conspired to bring the fleet and army of our allies before Yorktown at the very juncture they were needed, in order to complete the capture of Cornwallis and the British army; and did thus perform a very important part, in that great concluding scene of the war, which exhibited to admiring millions, Britain and Tyranny humbled. America and Liberty

triumphant; and Empire! which had for ages been travelling East, serenely arrived in the Western World"

In the year 1779 Dr. Woodhull accepted a call to the Old Tennent Presbyterian Church near Freehold, N. J. He served with distinction for forty-five years, in this pastorate, where he remained until his death. Quoting again from a recent historian:

"In 1798 he received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Yale College, which to quote another, 'was a distinction rarely conferred at that day, and more rarely perhaps by Yale than any other college in the country'."

Dr. Woodhull was a trustee of Princeton College for forty-four years, and upon one occasion, during the absence of Dr. Witherspoon, was acting president for a short time. He was a director of the Theological Seminary almost from its commencement until his death.

He is said to have been so popular a preacher that some pulpits in the vicinity of Freehold continued vacant for years, the congregations being satisfied with quarterly or half-yearly visits from him. Also, "that he was a man of fine appearance, about six feet in height, erect to the last, very dignified and of an attractive benignity in countenance and manners." "He was an able extempore preacher, whose matter was plain and instructive, while voice and manner were attractive and winning."

Amidst the varied duties as preacher, pastor, classical teacher and theological instructor, with the spirit of a true patriotic citizen, Dr. Woodhull kept up a deep and lively interest in affairs of State and Union. He was nearly eighty-one when he died, on December 22, 1824, having retained his vigor of body and mind to the last.

On his tombstone is found the following:

"SACRED

to the memory of the Rev. John D. Woodhull, D.D., who died Nov. 22nd, 1824, aged 80 years.

An able, faithful, and beloved Minister of Jesus Christ. He preached the Gospel 56 years. He was settled first in Leacock in Penna. and in 1779 removed to this congregation which he served as pastor with great diligence and success for 45 years. Eminent as an instructor of youth, zealous for the Glory of God, fervent and active in the discharge of all his public and private duties, the labors of a long life have ended in a large reward."

The spring previous to his death he attended the anniversary of the American Bible Society, and was one of the speakers. The Rev. Dr. McDowell, who heard him, said: "He attracted the marked attention of the audience, and his was the most popular speech made upon that occasion."

He became very wealthy and it is thought that he owned about 50,000 acres of land in different localities in New Jersey, Mississippi, Tennessee and Maryland. It is told of him that when his only daughter, Sara, was married to Major Forman of Mississippi, he gave her a dowry of \$80,000.

Dr. McDowell, who lived with Dr. Woodhull for two years, also wrote this of him: "He had a fine, tall, well-proportioned frame, and his motions were easy and graceful. His countenance was expressive of vigor and intelligence, as well as honesty and strength of purpose. His manners were free and agreeable, but never lacking in dignity. He had fine powers of conversation, and could accommodate himself with great facility to any circle into which he might be thrown.

"You could not have been in his company, without feeling that you were in the presence of a gentleman of the old school."

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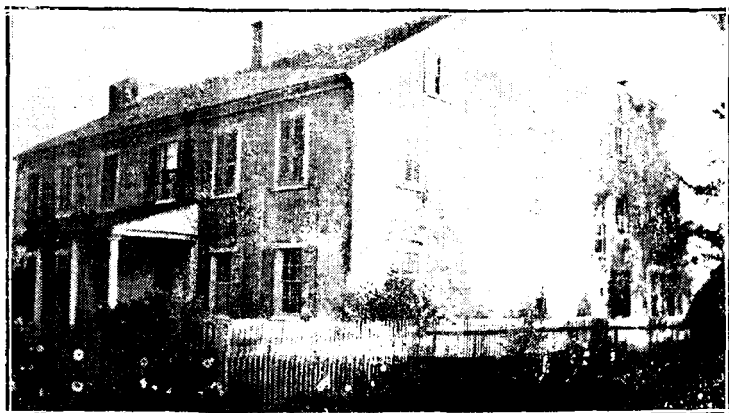
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(Captain Robert Buyers, mentioned in this sketch, is the great-great-grandfather of the writer, Rev. William Buchanan Buyers. The pioneer of the family, John Buyers, father of Captain Buyers, settled at Buyerstown, Lancaster County, in 1735. The muster roll of Captain Buyers' company, and several other relics, are in possession of descendants of the captain.—Editor's Note.)



"HARMONY HALL"

Home of the Woodhulls, Porters and Steeles.