

Col. Archibald Steele

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In Archibald Steele, the eldest son of Capt. William Steele, Drumore Township furnished to the Continental Army one of the bravest and one of the most loyal defenders of his country's liberties that went forth from Pennsylvania. A giant athlete, skilled and trained in all the knowledge and art of a frontiersman, an expert rifleman and woodsman, he made a splendid soldier in every sense of the word.

His ardent love of country and liberty impelled him to instant action when the call from Bunker Hill told him that his country needed the help of her soldier son.

He literally left the plow in the furrow, the harvest ungathered, without other clothing or equipment than the clothing he wore he shouldered his trusty rifle and hastily collecting a half dozen of the young men of his neighborhood started afoot on his journey of four hundred miles to Boston to do battle for his country, leaving behind his young bride, whom he had married but three months before.

At Lancaster they were joined by others, principally from the northwestern section of the county, and Matthew Smith was selected as Captain with Archibald Steele as First Lieutenant to command the small company. Arriving in Boston they were quickly enrolled and formed the nucleus of the "Pennsylvania Riflemen," under Col. Thompson in Washington's army, and entered the service at once in front of the British who were then entrenched in and about Boston. They were all expert riflemen and skilled in a high degree in the use of their own Lancaster County made rifles and quickly earned a reputation as marksmen that made them the terror of officers and picket-guards in the British lines. A letter from a British officer written at this time to friends in England said of this Lancaster County company, "their fire is exceedingly accurate and they can hit within a six-inch ring at a distance of three hundred yards."

Steele's soldierly qualities, personal courage and indomitable determination in action quickly impressed Washington and his commanding officer; and when Washington planned the expedition under Montgomery and Arnold to attack Quebec, out of the entire army then surrounding Boston Archibald Steele was chosen to head the pioneer corps which was to seek the route and blaze the way

across the trackless forests of Maine for this invading army under Arnold.

Steele was commissioned to select of his own choice eight men from the army to make up his party. He selected for this hazardous and responsible work the following: Jesse Wheeler, George Merchant and James Clifton, from the company of Capt. Morgan, of Virginia, and Robert Cunningham, Thomas Boyd, John Todd, John McConkey and John Henry, of his own company. On the march McConkey proved unworthy and James Clifton, the oldest of the party, could not stand the terrific strain of the hazardous journey, so that at the end of a hundred miles these two were left behind to rejoin Arnold's army when it came up and but seven men composed Steele's command, including himself.

It took all of Steele's indomitable will, courage and good fellowship to keep his men to their work. They were without map or chart and they had to depend alone on Steele's keen judgment and long experience to lead them true to the line towards Quebec. They carried with them two canoes and followed the general course of the waters of the Kennebec River through or around many lakes and across the divide into the headwaters of the Chaudiere River which flowed into the St. Lawrence. They had many miles of portage, and often descended through rapid falls in which they were wrecked a number of times and lost all of their scanty supplies and finally wrecked their canoes. At times they were almost starved and ready to give up in despair and more than once had divided their supplies down to the last ounce equally among the men, but Steele's courage and patience finally won out and he led the army of invasion into the valley of the St. Lawrence and to the walls of Quebec.

They had been six weeks in the trackless wilderness and in this time suffered terrible hardships and two of them after reaching civilization among the French Canadians, their privations having reduced them by sickness and weakness, they died from the effects, their labors and exposure. Steele rejoined his company and was then selected by Arnold on his staff.

At the final battle of Quebec, which ended in defeat and disaster to the little army of Americans, at the hand of the Quebec garrison, Steele took command of his company of riflemen again, as Capt. Smith for some unaccountable reason was

absent from the battle and final onslaught on the battlements of Quebec.

This battle was fought in a blinding snowstorm by an attack which the Americans made before daylight on morning of December 31, 1775. They hoped to surprise the British garrison. They were in two divisions and attacked from two opposite sides of the city, the one command under General Montgomery and the other under Col. Arnold.

The chronicler of the battle, John Joseph Henry, afterwards a Judge from Lancaster County, but then a private in Steele's company, writes in his history of the expedition the following account of the fight before and over the walls of Quebec:

"Col. Arnold, heading the forlorn hope, advanced perhaps one hundred yards in advance of the main body. After him followed Lamb's Artillerists. Morgan's company (Virginians) led in the secondary part of the column. Smith's followed, led by Steele, the Captain from particular causes being absent."

Further on he says, "confined in a narrow street before the ramparts, hardly more than twenty-five feet in width and on the lower ground, scarcely a ball well-aimed or otherwise but must take effect upon us. Morgan, Hendricks, Steele and Humphreys and a crowd of their men attempting to surmount the barrier, which was about twelve or more feet high and so strongly constructed that nothing but artillery could effectuate its destruction; and cannon over top of this barrier assailed us by grape and shot in abundance."

"Again within the barrier and close to it, were two ranks of musketeers armed with musket and bayonet, ready to receive those who might venture the dangerous leap to the top of the barrier."

"Humphreys upon a mound which was hastily erected attempted to scale the barrier. "Morgan brave to temerity stormed and raved. Hendricks, Steele, Nickels and Humphreys, equally brave, were calm and sedate under the tremendous fire. Hendricks died of a wound through the heart, Humphreys died by a like kind of wound, many other brave men fell among them; Lieut. Cooper, of Connecticut, and perhaps fifty or sixty other non-commissioned officers and privates, were killed. Capt. Lamb, of the York Artillerists, had nearly one-half of his face carried away by a grape shot. My friend and commander Steele lost three of his fingers as he presented his gun to fire. Capt. Hubbard and Lieut. Fisdle were dangerously wounded." Col. Arnold, the commander in the attack on this side of the citadel, had been earlier wounded and carried back through the lines.

General Montgomery had been killed in leading an attack upon the opposite side of the fortress and his army was in a disorderly retreat from the field. Arnold's wing of the army was thus left

to sustain the entire force of a counter attack by the enemy. With their commander down and most of the captains and officers of the line killed or wounded, Steele withdrew the remnants of Arnold's command into the houses across the narrow street, still fighting desperately. Here, being surrounded by the British and cut off from further retreat, the entire command was forced to surrender as prisoners of war to the British.

After three months or more of captivity Steele with a number of others escaped and returned after a long and trying march through the wilderness to Washington's army which was then in New Jersey.

Whilst crossing the icy waters of the St. Lawrence in mid-winter in an overloaded canoe to save it from sinking he sprang overboard and trailed behind till they all reached shore safely. This feat of self-sacrifice nearly cost him his life as he became unconscious when lifted from the water and with great difficulty he was revived in a near-by house. Finally reaching the Patriot Army, then located in New Jersey, he immediately re-entered service with Washington's Army near Trenton but his terrible privations and exposure throughout the entire expedition, and while in prison, had broken his health to such an extent that Washington assigned him to the commissary department. He served as Deputy Quartermaster General from May, 1777, to October in 1781. He was military storekeeper from that time on to the end of the war. However at one time he had been assigned by Washington to command an expedition against the British and Indians in the then northwest territory, but his broken health would not allow him to further lead an army and another General was assigned to the command. He remained in the Quartermaster's department as Quartermaster in command of the U. S. Arsenal at Philadelphia from the end of the war until April 28, 1816, and was honorably discharged from military service June 1, 1821, at the age of seventy-nine. He died in Philadelphia where he had continuously lived after the end of the war and died October 29, 1832, having served his country in the military service for fifty-one years and was ninety years of age at his death. He is buried in West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia.

Col. Steele married Jane Gibson, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a first cousin of Chief Justice Gibson and General George Gibson. They were married in Hubley's Hotel at Lancaster in 1775, this hotel being then owned by the father of his bride. There was born to them three sons—George, William and Matthias—all of whom served with honors and distinction in the war of 1812 in the U. S. Navy.

They were all three captured aboard their ship during the war and taken to England and became for some time prisoners until after the war was over.

Archibald Steele, the Minute Man

Poem by WILL F. McSPARRAN.

Attuned to pastoral themes, my lyre
Perchance may fail if it aspire
To reach the high heroic key
This day demands,—inspired should be
The one to speak in words that rhyme
Of those whose deeds have been sublime ;
Of men who dare all great men men may,
Whose strength is lent to cut away
The galling chains, what'er they be
That shackle world democracy !

Such men were these that we have come
To honor in their land, their home—
What beauty hath their land today,—
What hills and vales and fields that lay
Their largess here, a glorified,
Beloved land, our countryside,
Where nature's finished works abound—
The smile of God ! 'tis holy ground !

These lands of streams and fields and wood
Were made that here a motherhood
Should bear us sons ordained to be
Our minute-men of destiny !
Behold our Steele ! No ties of home
Could hold him back when there had come
Unto his soul, as came it then,
His country's call for valiant men,
For patriot men, who held the love
Of native land all else above.
No time was there to trim and train
For war, nor pomp, nor show,—a plain,
High call for him,—no accolade,—
He went a warrior readymade !

There is no annal set apart
That tells that somewhere near his heart
He kept a sweetheart's favor, brought
With trembling hands to show she'd wrought
The simple thing her tear drops wet,
That he should wear and not forget ;
Nor how a mother's soul was rent
At thought of warfare's banishment
For one she'd borne ; or her sweet blend
Of pain and joy, that she could send
So much unselfish love, indeed,
To meet her country's vital need.

Long, long the miles for human feet
From Drumore's hills to Boston's street,
But light the haversack and purse—
Ah me, if I could catch in verse
And sound in rhyme the laugh, the jest,
The spoken word, the sigh repressed,
The banter, moods, the lilt of song,—
The things their hearts could take along,—
And make for us a clear account
Of how their patriot souls could mount,
And find the bitter hardships sweet.
From Drumore hills to Boston street,—
If I could tell in fitting words,
Of morning call of twittering birds,
The rise of sun, the scanty meal,
The march resumed, the high-wrought zeal,
The hearts as light as purse and sack,
The rifle slung across the back,
The thirsty lip at way-side spring,
The firm, strong step, the body swing
That added traveled mile to mile,
And limped to bivouac with a smile,
To find in gathered brush a bed,—
Earth's first light's stars still overhead !

If I could tell how came the rain
And wind and chill and muddy plain,
Of dragging steps and hearts that sank,
Of days so dull and nights so dank

And dark that ardor failed, of one
Who cheered and helped the lagging on,
With ready hand and winning will,
Imparting strength with valor's thrill,—
Our Steele, the brave, the strong, inspired,—
The stalwart youth that never tired
When duty asked for yeoman aid,—
The always true and unafraid !

How Arnold's soldier instinct knew
'Twas Steele could lead the chosen few
O'er stream and mountainside, to blaze
The untrod forest's chartless maze,
Through which that hapless army went
To storm at Quebec's battlement.
Four hundred miles the way, nor less,
By lake and stream, through wilderness,
With dangers strown on every hand
But scorned for love of native land.
From Boston town to old Quebec,
Who goes today, ye little reck,
In limousine or palace car,
Where wondrous landscape beauties are,
Of what I'd vision unto you,—
The road that Steele was sent to hew !
If I could show his woodcraft skill,
Or voice the great, exalted thrill
Of that tremendous fortitude
That filled his soul, 'twould be so good
For poet's ear,—the loud acclaim
You'd give the mention of his name.

When Watson failed 'twas Steele who led
The fighting at his Company's head—
Again his call to duty clear,
Down through his soul's rare atmosphere ;
Each time his rifle spoke, 'twas said,
A British coat bore newer red,
And when for him came deadly brand
He turned it backward with his hand !
But vain the effort—lost the day,—
The gallant Steele in prison lay
With many more who fought with him,
Their wounds undressed, and dim
In death grew eyes that shining bright
Came bravely to the losing fight.

But lived our Steele. Months later he
Could lead a little band to liberty,
But who shall venture to recite
The perils and hardships of that flight ?
Their wasting wounds in prison pen,
And cruel fare, had made the men,
Unarmed, in rags, in sore distress,
Too spent to face the wilderness ;
But Steele inspired and led them on,—
He spoke of battles to be won,
Of homes and loves and better days,
Of happy lives down peaceful ways,
Of all the good that victory
Would bring their land forever free.
With his prescience he could give
Them new heart hope, desire to live,
And will to try the trackless way,
Where untold dangers ambushed lay.

So came they to a river's flood,
Swift rushing through the solitude.
The icy waters must be crossed,
Or all their hopes of safety lost.
Their need was great—with ready hand
They gathered driftwood from the strand,
And quickly fashioned such a float
They hoped would serve them as a boat,
The flotsam held in place and bound
By twigs and vines and tied around

With ropes they'd carried in their flight
Against the need of such a plight.

But ere they reached mid-stream they knew
Their craft could never take them through—
'Twould founder from the very weight,
The overload of human freight,
But Steele relieved the overload
By jumping in the freezing flood,
A rope around his body tied
To tow him while he bravely cried
To those aboard to steady stand
And row them quickly to the land.
So strongly to their poles they bent,
Such effort to their paddles lent,
That soon they touched the landing shore.
Exhausted dropped the pole and oar,
But hastened to their leader's aid,—
Their brave of heart, the unafraid.

At last had death o'er taken him,—
The clear of eye, the strong of limb?
Could he withstand that awful chill,

This bravest man of iron will?
A fiery pillar built they then,
To guide his life to them again;
They made the place so warm and bright
No soul could miss it in the night;
Such love, such tenderness they give
The warrior sighs, resigned to live

Thus came they back, and Steele again
Went out with Red Rose fighting men,—
He asked no leave to nurse his wound,
Nor any time to sit around
And tell to those that stayed at home
Of dangerous ways that he had come.

Such men could venture all that we
Might be their heirs to liberty;
Such men could build a glorious state
For us to love and keep as great—
God grant that we forevermore
May fail them not in Old Drumore!

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