

A REVOLUTIONARY LETTER.

By William Frederic Worner.

In April, 1923, Mr. George S. Franklin presented to the Lancaster County Historical Society a copy of Ellis and Evans' History of Lancaster County, published in 1883. It contains many unusual drawings, rare photographs, valuable manuscripts, old letters, autographs, etc., by his uncle, the later George M. Steinman, president of the Lancaster County Historical Society for twenty years,—from the time of its re-organization in 1896, until the end of 1916.

In this history is an interesting letter, written, by William Augustus Atlee, in June, 1781. The letter describes the crowded conditions of the barracks in Lancaster, at that time; and gives interesting information concerning British prisoners and convention troops confined in the barracks during the Revolutionary war. It is, indeed, a most valuable contribution to our local history, and is, I believe, well worthy of being preserved in our Proceedings.

The letter is as follows:

Lancaster, Pa., 13th of June, 1781.

D. Sir:

Colonel Wood just now honoured me with the perusal of your letter to him of the 9th instant, wherein I observe the Council have had information that the Prisoners of the Convention Troops lately arrived from Virginia, may be accomodated within the Picquets at this place, & direct their continuing here.

I beg leave to represent to Council that before the arrival of the convention Troops, there were near eight hundred Prisoners of Warr at this Post stationed at the Barracks within the Picquets, under my direction, and among them a great number sick of a putrid fever, which gave great uneasiness to the Inhabitants, as there was the greatest probability of its being communicated to the Town.

Upon the arrival of the British of the convention Prisoners, it was expected that the Guard who came with them would have proceeded on with them to the Eastward, but as they were hastily assembled at York Town & were determined to return, I advised Major Bailey (who had charge of them before Col. Wood's arrival) to secure them under the Guard then on duty here. We accordingly turned a number of them into the Barracks, but as they would not contain the whole (there being near five hundred Women & Children among them) the married people were permitted to encamp on the common outside of the Stockade, where they still remain (except a few who have taken shelter in an old continental stable) but badly sheltered from the weather.

As we expected their stay would be short, we apprehended no inconvenience from their being crowded in the Barracks for a few Days; but I can assure Council, that notwithstanding all the care and attention of several of the Physicians and Surgeons of the convention Army, who continued here till within these few Days & were so kind as to advice with and assist Doctor Houston, who attends the Prisoners here under my direction, this fatal disorder has gained ground & there are now at least a hundred & fifty sick in these greatly crowded Barracks, without a prospect of its abating,—the Rooms which we had before set apart for Hospital Rooms, cannot contain them,—they are scattered throughout the Barracks & I know not a House in or near the Town which could be had for a hospital.

I cannot think the Gentleman who gave the information to Council could have had an idea that there were near two thousand Men, Women & Children among the Prisoners of Warr & convention at this place when he gave his opinion to Council that they might be accomodated in the Barracks

here—nor could he have known of their unhealthy situation. I should think half that number of healthy Persons would fill them sufficiently at any time; but in their present sickly state, I could wish even that number reduced.

My duty as Commissary of Prisoners obliges me to trouble Council on this occasion. It is necessary, as well for the safety of the Inhabitants as the security of the Prisoners, that they should be kept compact and as free from disorders as possible, the Barracks here cannot contain the whole of the convention Troops with their Family's, & the Prisoners of Warr before stationed here, the Goal is filled with Sailors & others, & it is very difficult to prevent those from stragling who are encamped outside the Stockades.

Permit me also to mention, Sir, that in expectation of the Convention Troops being removed from hence, I yesterday received from Reading, from Col. Wood's Party, between fifty & sixty Prisoners of Warr (not of the convention Troops, tho' brot. with him from Virginia) in exchange for which I was to have given him about the like number of convention Troops who had stragled from their quarters in Virginia & been confined here before his arrival; and I have this minute Letters by an officer mentioning the approach of another Party from Fishkill, lately taken, & who at the particular request of his Excellency Genl. Washington, are ordered to be kept closely confined, & I hardly know where to place them, tho' the Goal must be their Station.

I am, Sir, with the highest respect,

Your most obedt. Servt.

Will A. Atlee

His Excellency Joseph Reed, Esquire.

William Augustus Atlee, writer of this letter, was born in Philadelphia July 1st, 1735. He moved to Lancaster at an early day, and read law under Edward Shippen, Esq. He was admitted to the bar, August 3rd, 1758, and soon became one of the leading lawyers of his day. He was elected chief burgess of the borough of Lancaster, September 15th, 1770, to which position he was subsequently thrice chosen, and administered the duties of the office up to September, 1774. Upon the breaking out of the American Revolution, he became an active and leading Whig, and in 1776 was chosen chairman of the Committee of Public Safety of Lancaster. He was appointed, August 16th, 1777, by the Supreme Executive Council, second Judge of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, his associates being Thomas McKean and John Evans. For several years during the Revolution he held the position of Commissary of the British prisoners confined at Lancaster. He was re-appointed Judge of the Supreme Court, August 9th, 1784; and on the 17th of August, 1791, he was appointed President Judge of the district, composed of the counties of Chester, Lancaster, York, and Dauphin, which position he filled at the time of his death, September 9th, 1793.

His remains are interred in the old graveyard adjoining Saint James's Protestant Episcopal church, Lancaster.

"His Excellency Joseph Reed, Esquire," to whom the letter was addressed, was the president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania from 1778 to 1781.

The "convention troops," to which Mr. Atlee refers in his letter, differed from the other soldiers confined in the barracks at Lancaster in that they were not held, technically, as prisoners of war. General John Burgoyne and his army surrendered on October 17th, 1777. In his first proposals, General Horatio Gates stipulated that Burgoyne's army could only be allowed to surrender as prisoners of war. Later, however, he agreed to a "convention," instead of a "capitulation," and its thirteen articles made no mention of prisoners of war. The essence of this convention was that all the troops, of

whatever country, under Burgoyne's command, were allowed "to march out of their camp with the honors of war," and lay down their arms "by word of command of their own officers." They were then to march to Boston, from which place, as soon as Howe was able to send transports for them, they were to sail for England, "on condition of not serving again in North America" during the Revolutionary war. As a matter of fact, they were never sent to England. They were kept in Boston for a year; and, later, were sent to Charlottesville, Va., where they remained for several years. They were then sent to Lancaster, Pa., and subsequently were kept at other places. These were the prisoners in the barracks at Lancaster in June, 1781, to which Mr. Atlee referred as the "convention troops."

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