

A WONDERFUL REVOLUTIONARY WAR LETTER

By Ed & Jean Siskin



(So often we hear the story of the Battle of Trenton from the American point of view. This letter from New Jersey to Scotland in February of 1777, gives us some insight from the British point of view, and makes the Revolutionary War a little more real, to hear it in the words of one who was there... Ed.).

In the Oct-Nov 1988 issue of *La Posta*, Tom Clarke wrote an article about a wonderful Revolutionary War cover he had. Dated February 16, 1777, from New Brunswick, New Jersey, it was from a British officer to his brother, the Earl of Lauderdale in Edinburgh, Scotland and discussed, among other things, the recent Battle of Trenton. Tom kindly let me acquire it and for many years it remained one of my favorite covers. Now that it's moving on to a new owner, it seems appropriate to provide additional documentation of this gem. First let's consider some background.

In July 1776, General Howe with more than 30,000 troops invaded New York. General Washington's force of 18,000 fought bravely but was pushed out of New York and across New Jersey. By Christmas, Washington's remaining 6,000 men had crossed into Pennsylvania. Many of his remaining men would be going home when their enlistments expired at the end of the year. In an historic campaign that revitalized the Revolution, Washington re-crossed the Delaware on Christmas Day Eve and successfully attacked the 1,200 Hessians at Trenton. Then, he successfully outmaneuvered the British, took on two companies of British troops at Princeton and then withdrew to safe winter quarters at Morristown.

By the time Major Maitland wrote this letter, he and his company were comfortably ensconced in their winter quarters in New Brunswick. The cover is shown in *Figure 1*.

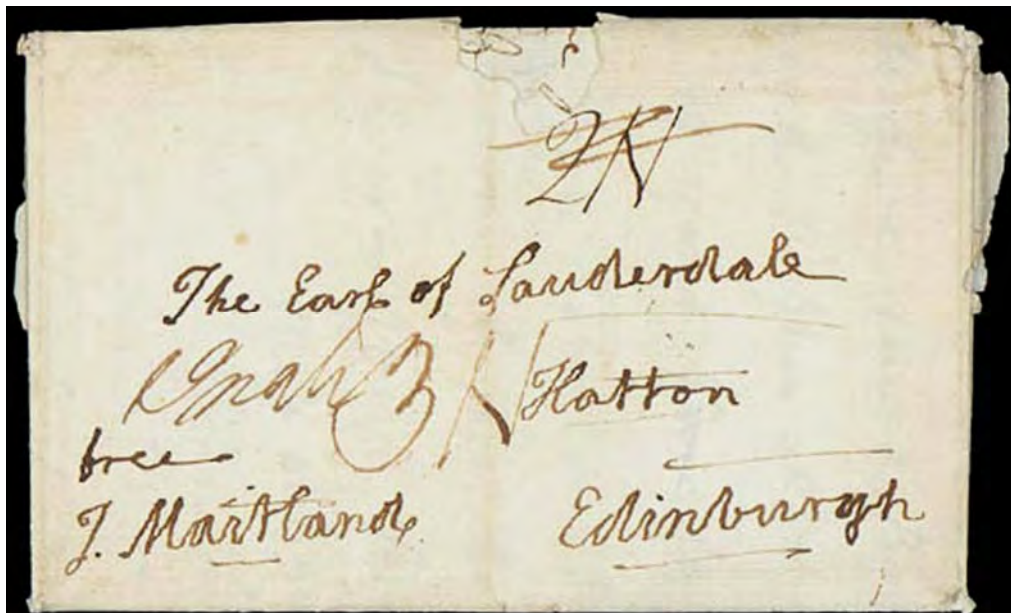


Fig. 1: Note that it is free franked for domestic postage. Unlike the American Post Office, the British soldiers did not have free franking privileges. The Honourable Major Maitland had franking privileges because he was also a member of the British Parliament.

Dunswick N.J. febr^y 18th
1777

My Lord

It is a Long while since I wrot to you
which is owing to my hardly ever having
time and very seldome Paper &c. we
Ended our Campaign Nobly and went
into a sort of winter Quarters and would
have been very comfortable had it ^{not} been for
the too much security of a Hessian Colonel
his name was Raul, he was quartered at
Trentown on Delawar with three Regiments
of Hessians, he was informed from all
sides that he was to be attacked the
next morning

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Fig. 2: The first page of the enclosed letter. John Maitland had lost his right hand, and thus wrote, with some difficulty, with his left hand.

him to believe that they would come, however the rebels crossed the river in the Night in Extreme bad weather and in the morning about Nine they drove in his Piquets and Entered the town along with them, the Hessians who were quartered in a Hollow had not time to get well formed, Raul was killed & about six Hundred of his People taken I had sent a small detachment of Light Infantry there the night before which was to return to me next day. They got off without loss as did a small detachment Light dragoons between four and five Hundred Hessians also got off but the rest were taken, this happened on 26^t Decemr. Since which we have brought our Quarters nearer to each other...

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Fig. 3: Page two of this letter – several more pages followed.

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The transcript of the full letter is as follows: (*breaks added for easier reading – not in original text*)

Brunswick NJ febr 16th 1777

My Lord

It is a Long while since I wrot to you which is owing to my hardly ever having time and very seldome Paper &c.

We Ended our campaign Nobly and went into a Sort of winter Quarters and would have been very comfortable had it not been for the too much security of a Hessian Colonel, his name was Raul, he was quartered at Trentown on Delawar with three Regiments of Hessians,

he was informed from all sides that he was to be attacked the Next Morning but nothing could bring him to believe that they would come, however the rebels crossed the river in the Night in Extreme bad weather and in the morning about Nine, they drove in his Piquets and Enter'd the town along with them

the Hessians who were quartered in a Hollow had not time to get well formed, Raul was killed and about six Hundred of his People taken I had sent a small detachment of Light Infantry there the night before which was to return to me next day. They got off without loss as did a small detachment Light dragoons between four and five Hundred Hessians also got off but the rest were taken,

this happened on 26t Decemr. Since which we have brought our quarters nearer to Each other so as to be in force everywhere. there has been some Scirmishing since but of no great Consequence, except at Prince Town where a body of Eight or Nine Thouson rebels fell in with 17th & 55th on their march when the 17th and part of the 55 attacked then beat their first Line back killed a great many officers and men and wounded one of their General officers and Retreated to a different part of our army,

they have in this Province a body of about ten thousand men a purpose to disturbe our quarters and convoys &c. but if they dont take very good care they may get Cursed knock.

I was at first quartered at Prince Town but now at this place. We are greatly Crowded but I dont mind it. I have gone thro: a great deal of fatigue this year and thank God with good health I have not had my cloths off since the month of June

General Howe I find, without my knowing it wrot home to Lord George Germagne in my favour and I find he Expects me to get a company in the Guards. I wrot last Packet to Lord George G- requesting his good offices and telling him that Sir William Howe had wrot in my favor I believe though he had never told me of it, in Short I feel they must give me something we are so crowded that I sleep 11 in a Room and we ar obliged to feight for Hay and Corn very often, which is a Dear way of buying it.

There are fourteen shirts of Mine Ready made at Mr Robertsons I wish they would make them up to two Dozen and send them to Hog and Kinlock to be forwarded by the Portsmouth Waggon directed to me to the care Lieut. Archbald Marines I shall be sure to get them or any, sent in that way as it comes by a man of war. A cask of the very best ale or any thing of that sort, might be sent by Glasgow Murthon Hams a good thing, if John Robertson could get me a good Jedburgh Cheese, old, it would convince our army that Tiviotdale beats Chesshire, I was happy in having it in my power to make a Sergant of 22d an officer recommended by the good town Jedburgh the day after got their letter.

I beg to be remembered all our frinds in Hoddington Jedburgh & Larrder. if the war lasts another year I intend Please God to come home to attend Parliament in the meantime they ought to give me a Bonny thing

my most sincere good wishes attend My Lady and every one of your family God Blis you all Pray desire John Robertson to buy a Lottery Ticket for me if there be a Lottery this year, I ever am

*Your Most Affect &
Most obliged Brother
John Maitland*



Fig. 4: John Maitland

The author of this letter, John Maitland, pictured in *Figure 4*, was a fascinating person.

He was born in 1732, the 10th son of Charles Maitland, the 6th Earl of Lauderdale. Lauderdale was one of the ranking noblemen of Scotland. Typically, younger sons of nobility considered the military as a career. John Maitland's older brother James succeeded to the title in 1744. John Maitland was appointed a Captain of Marines in 1755 and fought throughout the Seven Years War (known in North America as the French and Indian War) and lost his right arm in action in the East Indies. The fact that he had to write with his left hand can be seen in the appearance of his handwriting. In 1763, he was retired on half pay. In 1773, he was elected to the British Parliament and was re-elected in 1777. In 1775, he was recalled to active duty and sailed for Boston. Shortly after he arrived, he led one of the lead companies at the Battle of Bunker Hill. He was promoted to Major two months later and was temporarily transferred to the Savannah campaign.

In July 1776, Major Maitland landed with General Howe's force invading New York. *Figure 5* shows a cover Maitland sent his brother, the 7th Earl of Lauderdale, from Staten Island, dated July 8, 1776. A quick examination of this letter shows that it was actually hand-written by someone else, but signed and addressed by Maitland. The letter mentions his raids on Long Island.



Fig. 5: An earlier cover from Maitland, sent from Staten Island to his brother in Scotland.

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Major Maitland fought throughout the New York and New Jersey campaigns, and led the detachment sent to recover Trenton after General Washington's raid.

In October 1778, Maitland transferred to the army. He was appointed Lieutenant Colonel of the 1st Battalion of the 71st Foot (Fraser's Highlanders). He served with distinction in South Carolina and Georgia. In October 1779, while he was in command at Beaufort, South Carolina, Savannah was surrounded by French and American troops. Maitland brought 800 men from Beaufort by a march through the swamps to successfully reinforce the British garrison. Shortly thereafter, he succumbed to malaria. The exact date of his death is uncertain. We've seen dates ranging from October 9 to October 25, 1779.

Stedman's contemporary book on the American War reports:

“One circumstance alone served to cloud the joy of the garrison on their recent success. This was the success of the highly-esteemed and much beloved officer the honourable lieutenant-colonel Maitland, who fell a martyr to a bilious disorder contracted from the pestilential vapours which arise from the marshes during the hot and sultry season in that unwholesome climate. He was attacked by it before he left Beaufort. It gathered strength in his route through the marshes to Savannah, and preying upon him during the siege, soon afterward put a period to the existence of this gallant officer; whose memory will be dear to Britons, so long as manly fortitude, unstained honour, and highly-improved military talents, are held in estimation.”

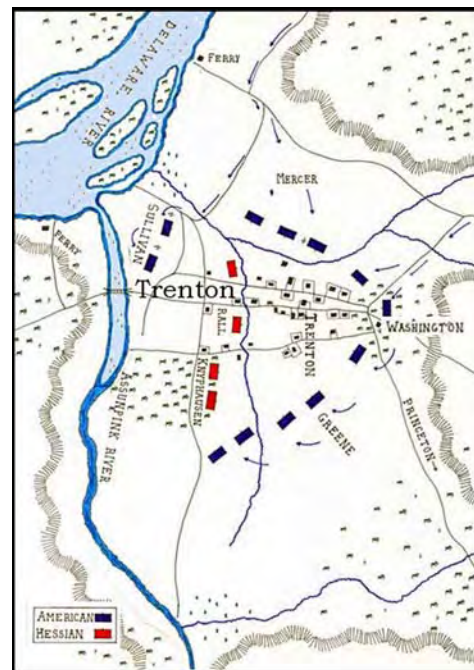
Maitland was originally interred in Savannah but many years later his remains were returned to Scotland. Maitland and Major John André, executed for his involvement with Benedict Arnold, were the only British casualties of the Revolutionary War whose remains were repatriated.

REFERENCES:

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- Stedman, Colonel Charles, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War*,” Colonel Stedman served under Sir W. Howe, Sir H. Clinton and the Marquis Cornwallis, London 1794, also on Google books at <http://books.google.com/>.

For George Washington's account of the Battle of Trenton, see <http://americanrevolution.org/delxing.html>.

Map at right from <http://www.britishbattles.com/battle-trenton.htm>. (2/9/2012)



Map of the Battle of Trenton, Dec. 26, 1776. Washington's troops crossed above Trenton.