

Part 6: General Lee captured

Washington's second in command is taken prisoner at Basking Ridge

December 15, 1776

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BASKING RIDGE — The patriot army, already staggered by battlefield losses, a numbing retreat across New Jersey and widespread desertions, has been dealt an unexpected blow.

Gen. Charles Lee, 45, the second ranking officer in the American army and widely perceived to be its most capable leader, was captured by British dragoons here two days ago when he lingered too long at the Widow White's tavern.

Lee surrendered after a brief morning gunbattle in which his aides attempted to chase away a patrol of six dragoons.

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The Surrender of General Charles Lee, by an unknown artist (late 18th century). This image of Lee in full uniform and surrendering his sword is at odds with the actual facts. He was captured in his nightshirt.
New Jersey State Museum.

Wearing only a nightshirt, a blanket coat, and slippers and without a hat, Lee was unceremoniously tied to a horse by the jubilant dragoons and hurried 25 miles through the snow-covered countryside to Pennington to be presented to Gen. Charles Cornwallis.

A slave at the tavern said the dragoons cut off Lee's pigtail and tied it to his saddle. Lee's captors are members of the 17th Regiment of Light Dragoons, a unit he commanded before his retirement as a British major 13 years ago. The British consider the general a traitor for joining the American cause.

Cornwallis ordered Lee taken 22 miles to New Brunswick, where he is confined today.

Lee, considered a brilliant officer, last year unsuccessfully lobbied the Continental Congress to appoint him commander in chief instead of Gen. George Washington. Lee is known to have little respect for Washington, and was unusually slow to respond to the commander's pleas for reinforcements as Washington retreated with his tattered army across New Jersey to the west shore of the Delaware River earlier this month.

Lee was at Peekskill, N.Y., with 7,000 of the army's best troops when Fort Lee fell on Nov. 20 and Washington began his retreat. Lee did not move 5,000 of the troops across the Hudson River until Dec. 2, and they did not reach Morristown until the night of Dec. 12. By then, Washington had crossed the Delaware into Pennsylvania.

It was at Morristown that Lee contacted Gen. Horatio Gates, who was marching seven regiments from New York through knee-deep snow near Sussex Courthouse to aid Washington. Lee diverted three of Gates' regiments to his own command and told the general, "I am at hopes here at Morristown to reconquer, if I may so express myself, the Jerseys."

Two accounts have been obtained of Lee's capture — one from Maj. James Wilkinson, an American who escaped the raid by hiding in the tavern fireplace, the other from Coronet Banastre Tarleton, the young commander of the dragoons.

Wilkinson said that after Lee's troops arrived in Morristown, the general decided to spend the night of Dec. 12 at Widow White's. In the morning, Lee lingered in bed until 8 o'clock, and then appeared downstairs half-dressed and lounged about for two hours before sitting down to breakfast.

After eating, Lee wrote a letter to Gates in which he said of Washington, "A certain great man is most damnable deficient."

As Lee finished the letter, Wilkinson said he looked out a window and saw the British dragoons rounding a corner in full charge. "Here, sir, are the British cavalry," Wilkinson shouted to Lee.

"Where?" said Lee.

"Around the house," the major replied.

Tarleton said he learned Lee was a mile away when the dragoons captured two Americans guarding the road to Morristown. As the patrol moved on, it intercepted the American courier carrying the letter to Gates, and Tarleton forced him to lead them to the tavern under the threat of death.

As the dragoons and the Americans exchanged fire, the widow White offered to hide Lee under a mattress, an indignity he declined, Wilkinson said. The woman then ran into the yard, fell to her knees and begged Tarleton not to kill her.

Tarleton said the Americans gave up only after he fired two shots through the door, declared he knew Lee was inside, and warned that if they did not surrender, he would burn the tavern and put everyone to the sword.

"This is one of the luckiest circumstances of my life," Tarleton said. "This is a most miraculous event. It appears like a dream."

Washington learned of the capture today when he received a letter from Gen. John Sullivan.

"Unhappy man," Washington said of Lee. "Taken by his own imprudence."

Published by The Star-Ledger on July 15, 2001.

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