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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF GOVERNOR RICHARD  
HOWELL, OF NEW JERSEY.

BY HON. DANIEL AGNEW.

Richard Howell, son of Ebenezer Howell, was born in the year 1754, at Newark, Delaware, and educated there. He moved with his parents to Cumberland County, New Jersey, where he studied law; but, preferring to defend his own against what were deemed the wrongs of the mother country, he entered the revolutionary army in 1775. Previously he had evinced the ardor of his patriotism by joining in the destruction of the tea imported in the "Greyhound." A brief memorandum of this transaction is found among the writings of a daughter.

It states that the cargo of tea was discharged by the East India Company at Greenwich, after the destruction of the tea at Boston, and was deposited in a cellar on the evening of Thursday, November 22, 1774; it was subsequently taken by forty men disguised as Indians (among them her father), who piled it in an adjoining field and burned it in one general conflagration. An account of this affair was given by Governor Parker, of New Jersey, in an interesting address at a Centennial Tea Party, delivered at Trenton in 1874. "Among the brave young men," he says, "who burned the tea at Greenwich were Dr. Ebenezer Elmer, Timothy Elmer, Richard Howell, afterwards Governor of New Jersey, Rev. Andrew Hunter, and James Ewing, father of Chief-Justice Ewing."

In 1775 Richard Howell was made captain of the Fifth Company of the Second Battalion in the first establishment of the "Jersey Line" of Continental troops. In November of that year the First and Second Battalions were ordered to garrison in the Highlands on the Hudson River, and in the following year were directed to join the expedition to

Canada. In the active operations of this campaign Captain Howell took a conspicuous part, and was made brigade major in September, 1776. The following letter, written on the march, gives an inner view of his character. Its date is March 4, 1776 :

“DEAR FATHER:—I am now in Albany after a long and tedious march. One moment must be devoted to your service, tho’ hitherto I have neglected you. But ceremonies do not pronounce affection—though I wrote not, you were not forgotten. I have struggled through the difficulties of my office with a patience that I did not think myself possessed of, and am now able to await whatever may succeed. I expect to assist at the siege of Quebec, and I shall not dishonor my connections. Be you and my ever patient mother content with what may happen me, as I am resigned to my fortune. Do not be distressed if any accident reach my brother. We fight a battle urged by nature’s oldest laws—the preservation of ourselves, our parents, and our Country. I am short—be always happy.

“Your Son,

“RICHARD HOWELL.

“TO EBENEZER HOWELL, Cross Roads.”

The return from this unfortunate expedition, through a wild and rugged country, was marked by terrible hardships. An account of these sufferings was given in one of the lost letters of Major Howell, once read by the writer, in which it was stated that the men were so pinched by famine that some of them attempted to eat the leather of their boots.

The following is a copy of the only other preserved letter written by Major Howell during the Quebec expedition. It is given because of its interesting particulars and as another indication of his character and feelings. It is dated at Trois Rivières, May 20, 1776 :

“MY DEAR FATHER:—I have a moment to write to you ; if my letter may reach you I shall be very happy, but that is *extremely* uncertain. I am now in a town called the Three Rivers, and in circumstances not very eligible, but as happy as possible in adversity. We retreated from before Quebec (as you, I doubt not, have heard) with precipitation, and that three days after our arrival. To be obliged to retreat so soon was discouraging to new troops ; and a number of our men who were dispersed at several posts and on fatigue, who were unacquainted with our route, are lost in the country, or taken prisoners in town. Provision is become

scarce, even not to be procured, and those, who otherwise had the virtue to stay with their officers, deserted for want of food. Distressing, indeed, are these circumstances, yet all may be surmounted by a constant mind. To be taken prisoner is death to a man accustomed to freedom, but I am equal to either fortune. In the affair before Quebec, I was the only officer who was much exposed to either, and happily both were evaded. I was that day reconnoitering the town from the advanced posts, to inform myself of its situation, as every measure seemed to indicate an approaching retreat. The walls were crowded with men, and they fired incessantly on every object, even at me, a single person. I heard an English voice commanding in the town, the bells rang and drums beat, which induced me to go still further, if possible, to discover their movements, and I went on until I discovered a party of light infantry who were endeavoring to surround and take me prisoner. I then retreated to the centinel, who motioned me to come that way. I desired him to fire, if they approached, and retreat, then returned to get a party to bring him off, but as soon as they saw I had got beyond them, they poured a platoon about my ears as I retreated. When I came to the guard I asked a party to support the centinel, and with three divisions, of ten men each, marched off to the ground. I ordered two divisions to the several posts, and with my own advanced to the pass the enemy would approach by, but did not then observe them. I then changed my course, and discovered the infantry scouting near the centinel. We advanced and they halted, acting as if our friends, by pointing and skulking towards their main body . . . deceived by their dress, and advanced as if deceived, until within shot, when we gave them our compliments and retired. I shot first at the officer, who fell, by the assertion of many—the others, in turn, with good aim, and they say three of the enemy fell. The infantry gave us one fire, the main body another, and the field pieces remembered us a good while with their grapes. Providence protected us from danger, and we returned to join our main line; but when we had reached headquarters, who was there! about one hundred and fifty Jersey Blues, and the enemy just by. The *Yankoes* were run away, and we all ran away. The Blues offered again to fight and were forming, the General *bade* us go on, the *Yankoes* were gone on, and we marched quick time again. Well we went then to Jacartie. The enemy's ships followed, and were landing. We formed to fight, they retired, but the *Yankoes* ran away. At Point De Chambeau we marched to fight them, they retired abroad, but the *Yankoes* did not come up. In short, I am tired of recollecting what is past. Give my respect to my friends, show them, if you please, my letter, and

“Am yours,

“RICHARD HOWELL.

“To EBENEZER HOWELL, Cumberland County.

“To the care of THOS. MCKEAN, Esq.,

“Member of Congress, . . . West New Jersey.”

In September, 1776, Congress made provision for the second establishment of troops, the quota of New Jersey being four battalions or regiments. Richard Howell was commissioned major of the Second. In May, 1777, his battalion was brigaded with the other New Jersey troops, under Brigadier-General Maxwell. This brigade was in the division of the Continental army commanded by Major-General Stephen, of North Carolina, and took part in the battles of Brandywine, September 11, and Germantown, October 4, 1777. The New Jersey troops distinguished themselves in these engagements, Major Howell bearing himself bravely. Copies of several letters referring to his soldierly conduct are still preserved, written by his twin-brother, Dr. Lewis Howell, surgeon of one of the battalions. The following letter of the 13th of September, 1777, written two days after the battle of Brandywine, gives an interesting account of some of its incidents :

“DEAR FATHER :—I am happy in being able to inform you that I still exist, and am not a prisoner—a state I thought from my situation unavoidable. On Thursday, 11th September, we were alarmed by three guns, and every man stood to his post; about thirty minutes afterwards a firing of small arms was heard, which proved to be a party of light troops under General Maxwell, who repulsed the advanced party in three several attempts, killing many, with little loss. Captain Cummins in this action distinguished himself. After this there was a continual cannonade, from a battery erected by us to defend the ford over the Brandywine, 'till near four o'clock, when Lord Sterling's division was ordered about two miles to the right from the first situation, to oppose Lord Cornwallis, who had crossed about that distance higher up. We had been there but a short time when they appeared, and the heaviest firing I ever heard began, continuing a long time, every inch of ground being disputed. Our people at last gave way, not being supported, with the loss of very few—wounded and killed not exceeding twelve. At the same time we were attacked on the right, another attack was made on the left, where our people fought them, retreating in good order. Colonel Shreve in that action was wounded in the thigh, but not mortally. Captain Stout was killed, and one sergeant. These are the only killed in our regiment. I shall inform you of my escape from the enemy, after having been among them, with the loss of my mare, saddle and bridle, and great coat and hat. With all my misfortunes I think myself happy, not to be taken prisoner. Richard is hearty and safe, though in the midst of danger.

“LEWIS HOWELL,”

Shortly after the battle of Germantown, in which Major Howell participated, he had a severe fall from his horse, which disabled him for a while, but he soon rejoined his regiment, and spent the greater part of the winter of 1777-78 with the army at Valley Forge, the New Jersey troops suffering greatly from a want of clothing. On the 28th of June, 1778, Major Howell was in the battle of Monmouth, the New Jersey Line being in the left wing of the army.

An event occurred on that day which caused great sadness to Major Howell, but which displayed his high tone and soldierly character. Dr. Lewis Howell, the twin-brother above alluded to, was lying at the point of death at the Black Horse Tavern, between Trenton and Bordentown, and Major Howell received intelligence that unless he came that day he would not see him alive. He obtained leave of absence, and his place was supplied. The young officer appointed remarked that "Howell was very willing to get leave of absence, for he well knew there would be hot work that day." The major, hearing of the remark and believing it to be a reflection on his courage, threw himself into the ranks as a private, and fought gallantly throughout the battle, nor did he ever afterwards see his much-loved brother. Washington, hearing of the circumstance, sent for him, and on inquiry, the account being confirmed by Major Howell, Washington rebuked him gently and said, "Howell, I admire your bravery, but it was your duty to go to your brother."

In May, 1779, in consequence of the "Massacre of Wyoming," Maxwell's New Jersey Brigade was ordered to march up the Susquehanna. It returned to New Jersey in the following October. On the 23d of June, 1780, this brigade took a prominent part in the fight at Springfield. A reorganization of the New Jersey Continental Line took place in 1780, under resolutions of Congress and an Act of the New Jersey Legislature. Major Howell became major of the Second Regiment. He had, however, in the autumn or winter before resigned his commission at the instance of Washington, in order to execute the delicate and dangerous

mission of visiting New York as a private citizen, to purchase clothing for the troops; this duty he performed with great fidelity and at his own expense, never having been refunded the large sum expended.

The secret mission to New York was the occasion, shortly afterwards, of an interesting event in Major Howell's life, an account of which had the benefit of the testimony of several witnesses, preserving it so late as 1851, when the memorial to Congress was framed.

A short time after the return of Major Howell from his secret mission to New York, suspicions arising out of his venture, he was forcibly taken from his father's house before a court or judge in Burlington, charged with being inimical to his country. He preserved silence throughout the proceeding until, finding it necessary to protect his honor, indeed his life, he drew from his pocket a paper signed by Washington and handed it to the judge for his private inspection. This gentleman, whose name, unfortunately, is not given in the account, with great feeling and an expression more emphatic than polite, ordered all that had been done to be erased from the minutes, and instantly discharged Major Howell.

At the close of the war Major Howell entered into the practice of his profession, and in course of time was elected Governor of New Jersey, and by virtue of his office Chancellor of the State. He was re-elected eight times consecutively; finally refusing a re-election on account of sickness which after a time resulted in his death. While Governor it became his duty to receive General Washington as President elect, when on his road to New York, in the year 1789. This was the occasion of an interesting incident, when the Father of his Country passed under a triumphal arch wreathed with laurels, evergreens, and flowers, and on which were inscribed the words, "The Defender of the Mothers will be the Protector of the Daughters." The arch was erected at a bridge over the Assanpink, at Trenton; some of the remains were in existence as lately as 1868, and in possession of the Armstrong family, at Trenton. Washington

was received by the matrons and daughters and little children, who strewed his pathway with flowers and greeted him with a beautiful song of welcome, written by Governor Howell. Washington's heart was much touched by this display of affection, and before his departure he addressed in writing the "mothers and daughters" who had thus honored him.

In 1794, while Governor, Major Howell obeyed the requisition of President Washington calling into service a quota of the militia of New Jersey to assist in quelling the insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, known as the "Whiskey Insurrection." The Governor, being Commander-in-Chief by virtue of his office, and a soldier, took command in person. The following letter to his mother, dated Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania, September 25, 1794, illustrates his character and his motives :

"MY DEAR MOTHER:—I have been so hurried that I could not write before, but my duty impels me, on the march, to request that you and my brothers and sister would not be troubled with my *again* taking up arms as a duty of my office. You know that the same Providence that so often cared for me in the day of battle can do so again—if I deserve it, and if I do not, I submit. It would ill become an old soldier to sit calmly by and see the ruin of his country; and on that principle I take an active part.

"Thy son,

"RICHARD HOWELL.

"I hope I shall return, but if not, consider this an adieu to thee and all."

The troops broke camp at Trenton, and began their march September 22, 1794, crossing the Delaware and passing through Newtown, Norristown, Reading, Hummelstown, crossing the "Sweet Array" (Swatara), and reaching Harrisburg October 3. President Washington met them here, and accompanied the Pennsylvania and New Jersey troops on their march thence, passing through "Carlisle, Shippensburg, and Strasburg, and crossing the Blue or North Mountain, Horse Valley, Cattertona Mountain, Path Valley, and Tuscarora;" thence through "a wilderness called the



Shadows of Death, a deep valley between two mountains, so nearly joining, and so amazing steep and high, that the valley only affords a narrow wagon path between them." They reached the Juniata and came to Bedford October 17, where they encamped until October 23. Leaving that place by slow and toilsome marches, through storm and rain, and mud and mire so deep that they made sometimes only from seven to ten miles a day, they arrived finally, on Sunday, November 15, at Colonel McNair's, within seven miles of Pittsburgh. By this time the flight of Bradford and other leaders of the insurrection and the dispersion of the citizens to their homes ended the campaign. General orders for the return of all the troops were issued, "Pittsburgh Headquarters, November 17, 1794." The New Jersey Line was directed to move on Thursday, November 20, "under the command of His Excellency, Governor Howell, who will be pleased to pursue from Bedford such routes as he may find most convenient." While on the westward march over the mountains to Pittsburgh, after leaving Bedford, an interesting event took place, characteristic of the genius of Governor Howell. On reaching the mountains the Jersey troops began to murmur at the terrible hardships endured, owing to the inclemency of the season and great privation of comfort. Their discontent was fomented by a few designing men, who painted in dark colors the inhumanity of crossing the mountains to fire upon fellow-citizens who, as they alleged, were only defending themselves against an unjust and oppressive tax upon whiskey, the only product of that section which brought them cash. The discontent seemed likely to break out into open insubordination. Governor Howell, being possessed of a poetic vein, and knowing the effect of a sentiment, united with simple melody, to fire the feelings and give impulse to the heart, composed a patriotic song, "Jersey Blues," sung to a popular air. It was set afloat in the camp, and the troops, catching its inspiration, marched forward with renewed life.

Besides the songs mentioned, Governor Howell was the writer of other patriotic songs suited to the popular heart

of the times; but they have suffered the fate of fugitive verse and are beyond recall. After the return of Governor Howell to Trenton, the writer is not informed of any important event occurring before his death, on the 28th of April, 1802, at the rather early age of forty-eight. He was emphatically a soldier and a patriot, as well as a man of culture and elevated character. A leading trait was military precision, a quality seen in his terse style of writing. Kindred to this trait was his abhorrence of any breach of genteel deportment or infraction of etiquette. His traditional habit was to sit upright in his chair, never crossing his limbs, a posture he considered unbecoming.

An obituary notice and sketch of his life is found in the *Federalist and New Jersey Gazette* of May 4, 1802. Its preface is extracted as evidence of the estimation in which he was held, together with a summary of his chief traits.

“Among the many instances of mortality we have occasion to record, none which has lately occurred will excite public sensibility in a higher degree, than that of our beloved Governor, RICHARD HOWELL, who expired on Wednesday morning last in the forty-eighth year of his age. To portray the character of this worthy and useful man would far exceed the limits we are necessarily restricted to.

“With a highly cultivated and improved understanding, Governor Howell displayed a heart of unbounded benevolence, a temper easy and agreeable, and manners polite and engaging. As a soldier and a statesman, if not the first, he bore a part which procured distinction and applause.”

Governor Howell left a widow, Keziah Howell (*née* Burr), who died August 9, 1835, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He left also five sons and three daughters. The sons inherited his military spirit and patriotism, three of them participating in the war of 1812,—viz., Major Richard Howell, Jr., afterwards for a quarter of a century an indispensable officer, throughout different administrations, in the Custom-House at Philadelphia. William Howell was a lieutenant in the command of General Macomb. He with his company, acting as marines, participated in the naval engagement off

Plattsburg. He emigrated to Mississippi soon after the war, married there, and was the father of several sons distinguished in the naval service in the Southern rebellion. His daughter Varina is the widow of Jefferson Davis. Franklin, the youngest son of Governor Howell, was killed at the age of eighteen, on board of the United States frigate "President," in her unfortunate engagement off New York Bay. Sarah Burr, the eldest daughter, married James Agnew, a native of Princeton, and a graduate of the College of New Jersey, in the class of 1795. Beulah, the second daughter, married John L. Glaser, a Hamburg merchant, at one time resident in Philadelphia, afterwards engaged in the iron business in Western Pennsylvania, and then in the commission business in Pittsburgh; in all of which he sunk a large fortune, and finally returned to Hamburg.