The Battle of Guilford Court House

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The Battle of Guilford Court House was not only one of the hardest fought and most deadly conflicts of the American Revolution-creating a profound impression in Europe; but was the decisive engagement of the Southern campaign, contributing no small part to bringing about, almost immediately, the freedom of the Thirteen Colonies. Yet its importance does not seem to be recognized, nor its history well known among people, generally. One reason for that seems to be its geographical location. It is quite likely that, had Guilford been in one of the Northern States with a battle of its kind to its credit, the people there would have much more effectually disseminated its narrative.

Colonel Henry Lee, known as "Light Horse Harry," who, with his celebrated Legion, took part in the battle, says in his memoirs: "It was fought on the fifteenth day of March (1781), a day never to be forgotten by the southern section of the United States.

The atmosphere calm, and illumined with a cloudless sun; the season rather cold than cool; the body braced and the mind high toned by the state of the weather. Great was the stake, willing were the generals to put it to hazard, and their armies seemed to support with ardor the decision of their respective leaders."

Major-General Nathaniel Greene, Commander-in-Chief of the American forces in the Southern department, had put off battle with the British army under Lieutenant-General Earl Cornwallis until the engagement at Guilford, because his troops were not hitherto collected in sufficient numbers to meet the King's soldiers in a pitched field. Greene was placed in command after Gates had been so disastrously defeated. After that rout, there was scarcely a semblance of an American army to dispute with his Lordship the conquest of the Southern States, so completely had he shattered, it between the swamps at Camden.

When everything appeared on the verge of irretrievable ruin for the patriots was the very time that the fires in liberty-loving breasts burned most brightly. Never was there a nobler endeavor than that made by the people of the South, determined at that crisis, as well as other times throughout the Revolution, to make themselves free. Beset on all sides by loyalists and British regulars, it required unusual courage for a citizen to declare himself in favor of Independence. The partisan war, however, frequently presaged death for the unlucky prisoner, be he patriot or loyalist. With the possible exception of the Mohawk Valley, there was no place where the Revolutionary struggle bore such an aspect of fierceness as in many of the Southern campaigns. Nor were even some of the British free from the stain, and the dashing Tarleton tainted his otherwise valorous career. The Continentals could reflect with joy that their hands were white, a notable temptation they withstood being at the Cowpens, where they turned the day on Tarleton, making most of his troops captives at a time when he had been doing bloody work among the patriots.

Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Virginia sent militia, while the last named State, with Maryland and Delaware, furnished regulars. The hardy mountaineers from the West annihilated Ferguson with his light infantry and militia at the Battle of King's

Mountain, striking the first hard blow at Cornwallis; then came Tarleton's misfortune at the Cowpens; while, soon, with the aid of Morgan, Sumpter, Pickens, and Marion, General Greene, assisted by his other brilliant officers, with wonderful fortitude and perseverance, had gathered Continentals and militia, until they offered fight to the British regulars after extraordinary retreating in marches and countermarches across Southern streams and counties that will go down in history as memorable military achievements. Those leaders were often far apart, working quite independently; yet all having the same end in view, and by constant annoyance to the Kin,, s troops, kept steadily on accomplishing the desired result. The climax of all those campaigns was Guilford.

Lord Cornwallis, his efficient officers, and brave followers always performed their tasks wisely and courageously; but difficulties piled up too fast upon them. In their activities they were subjected to trials barely less severe than those endured by Burgoyne and his splendid army in their unfortunate invasion of the North. Both armies suffered the same fate. In this connection it is not too much to say that the British troops that fought at Guilford were not the inferior of any of the royal forces in America; and that they very probably owed their excellence to continuous field work and camp life without tents and customary shelter. Earl Cornwallis was one of the most zealous generals sent out by George the Third. Although he was a magnanimous enemy to the patriots, yet he was ever ready to further his Majesty's cause, never avoiding a flight when it was within his power to get to the field, and ranking favorably with the best British officers of the Revolution in generalship.

Greene and Cornwallis had often met in the North. His Lordship had expressed his opinion of the Rhode Island General in the jerseys, when he wrote: Greene is as dangerous as Washington; he is vigilant, enterprising, and full of resources. With but little hope of gaining an advantage over him, I never feel secure when encamped in his neighborhood." That was a truthful and praiseworthy acknowledgment, reflecting great honor on both men.

At Brandywine, when the tide of the conflict had turned against Washington, it

was to General Greene and his Virginian Division that he turned, to stay the pursuit. Greene, pale with apprehension and determination, lost not a moment. His Lordship could attest to his stand; while posterity is well aware of how he chafed under Washington's orders to finally retreat, so stubbornly and masterly did he, aided by his Brigadiers, Weedon, the innkeeper, and, Muhlenberg, the minister, direct the Virginians against the flower of Sir William Howe's army under the energetic Cornwallis.

In the retreat at Germantown Cornwallis threw himself into the battle against Greene, who retired so securely as not to lose a single cannon. John Fiske, in speaking of Greene's appointment to the command of the Southern department, says: "In every campaign since the beginning of the war Greene had been Washington's right arm; and for indefatigable industry, for strength and breadth of intelligence, and for unselfish devotion to the public service, he was scarcely inferior to the Commander-in-Chief." In the South, Greene's illustrious deeds augmented his reputation as a rare soldier.

Guilford Court House stood, a solitary building, near the northern boundary, in North Carolina. The natural advantages of its surroundings furnished a strong position to oppose the approach of the royal troops. It was accordingly chosen by Greene, who, knowing the greater numerical strength of his own army, the nature of the enemy's troops, as well as the eagerness of Cornwallis, anticipated a front-to-front engagement, It was the grand hope of his Lordship to crush the Americans in a single battle; but he had been skillfully evaded until now, so it was with auspicious readiness that he advanced to attack them.

Stedman, the historian, present with the British on the field, gave a glimpse of his chief's hopes when he wrote: "If Cornwallis had had the troops Tarleton lost at the Cowpens, it is not extravagant to suppose that the American Colonies might have been reunited to the empire of Great Britain." Cornwallis was obliged to fight two hundred miles from his base of supplies, therefore, if the day went against him, he would be exceedingly unlucky; while a victory, unless of the decisive kind of that over Gates, would avail him very little in a territory where the loyalists would be timid and the patriots hostile. Greene, on the other hand, had practically all to gain; and, save a bad beating,

nothing to fear. In other words, his Lordship had been out-generaled in being attracted too far in an unsuccessful pursuit.

In planning for the battle, the American Commander was naturally influenced by General Morgan's advice and experience. That veteran officer had quit the service, after joining Greene with his victors of the Cowpens, on account of rheumatism; but there endured, after his departure, a record of his heroic and well calculated deeds, from the wisdom of which Greene did not decline to profit. He formed his troops in three lines. The first, consisting of the North Carolina militia, numbering one thousand and sixty, besides officers, was commanded by Generals Butler and Eaton, and was posted in the most advantageous position Greene had ever seen. They were protected by a strong :rail fence and small trees, at the edge of a clearing used as fields, and across which the British would have to march in attacking. That clearing was divided by the highroad to Salisbury, and, consequently, Captain Singleton, with two field-pieces, was stationed there to give courage to the militia, as well as to annoy the enemy. On the right of this array of North Carolinians, they were further strengthened by a battalion of Virginia Riflemen under Colonel Lynch; the remnant of the brave Delaware Line, about eighty men, commanded by the "meritorious and unrewarded" Captain Kirkwood; and by Lieutenant-Colonel William Washington's cavalry. The left flank was to be held safe by Virginia Riflemen under Colonel Campbell, and by Lee's Legion.

Guilford was in a wilderness at that time, and the road to Salisbury was the only open way from the clearing and first line to the environs of the Court House. The forest of lofty oaks gave good protection to the second line, made up of Virginia militia, numbering eleven hundred and twenty-three men, rank and file, and directed by Generals Stevens and Lawson. They were on a ridge about three hundred yards in the rear of the advance line. General Stevens placed a few veterans back of his troops with orders to shoot down anyone quitting the ranks from cowardice.

More could naturally be expected of these Virginians than of the North Carolina force, because some of the men, as well as most of the officers, had seen Continental service in the earlier part of the war. Some members of the North Carolina militia were pressed

into service to prove that they were not loyalists. That some of them were disloyal as patriots is probable, but that a portion of the North Carolinians fought with ardor cannot be denied.

On the right of the highroad, near where it was joined by the one from Reedy Fork, and over three hundred yards in the rear of the Virginians, the Continentals were drawn up, following the rather curved formation of the hill on which the Court House stood. It is more than half a mile from that point down to the foot of the hill, near where a small stream winds through a broken ravine. The enemy would have to fight the first two lines and climb that long hill before he could get at the Continentals; therefore, General Greene and his officers naturally expected that the British troops would spend a great deal of their force and be badly crippled by the time they reached the American regulars.

During the battle Greene kept with the Continentals. The right of this line comprised Brigadier-General Huger's Virginian brigade, his two regiments being commanded by Colonels Greene and Hewes. The left wing was commanded by Colonel Otho H. Williams, consisting of the Maryland Brigade, Colonel Gunby commanding the First, and Lieutenant-Colonel Ford the Second Regiment. Between these wings were placed the other two pieces of artillery. On the left and in front of the Maryland Brigade there were some old fields and open space, while a deep ravine in front of the Virginian Brigade afforded them a natural advantage.

The aggregate strength of the American army was four thousand, four hundred, and four men. It is not to be overlooked that the only veteran troops were the First Maryland Regiment, The Delawares, Lee's Legion, and Washington's Cavalry; far the greater portion of the army being raw troops on which a great deal could not be depended when charged by regulars. Not only did the militia lack experience under fire, but they were without bayonets. Greene had sent Lee and Campbell to skirmish. Quite early in the morning they had an encounter with light infantry and cavalry tinder Lieutenant-Colonel Tarleton, which brought out the superiority of the horses used, by the Americans. A front section of British cavalry met a shock from Lee, with the result

that the dragoons, to a man, were dismounted and most of their horses knocked down. The small horses -used by Tarleton were taken, in large part, from South Carolina plantations, while the much larger and stronger ones used by Lee came from Virginia and Pennsylvania. Tarleton hastily drew off his cavalry. His infantry fought with fine spirit; and when he was about to be supported by Cornwallis, who was advancing, the Americans withdrew, taking their places in the first line of battle.

When the van of the royal army appeared, Captain Singleton opened fire upon them with his two guns, The British artillery replied and, under cover of the smoke of their cannon, the Kings troops marched through a defile along the Salisbury road and deployed for the conflict. Trevelyan says: "No man alive could set a battle in array more artistically and impressively than Lord Cornwallis." Here is what he did.
Fraser's Highlanders-that is to say the Seventy-first Foot-and the German Regiment of Bose composed his right wing under Major-General Leslie, with the First Battalion of the Guards in reserve, Lieutenant-Colonel Norton commanding. His left wing was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Webster and comprised the Twenty-third and Thirty-third Foot, the latter being Cornwallis' own Regiment. The Grenadiers and Second Battalion of the Guards were in reserve behind Webster and commanded by Brigadier-General O'Hara. The Royal artillery, under Lieutenant McLeod, like Singleton, occupied the road and exchanged fire with him. The Yagers and light infantry of the Guards kept to the left and rear of the artillery,. Tarleton's cavalry was in column on the road in the rear. This entire British force did not much, if any, exceed two thousand men.

As the splendid little army, with scarlet coats and shining bayonets, moved from their cramped position near the brook and began treading steadily toward the American first line, they were animated with all the enthusiasm that inspirited the grand advance at Fontenoy. When in the open ground, and while still about one hundred and forty yards from the North Carolinians, they received from that Militia a feeble volley. The British then, on then part, delivered a fire that did not take any effect; but, following it with the bayonet, a lively cheering, and a rush, they took away the wits of most of the militiamen, who, beginning a wild flight, threw aside everything that would impede them.

The mad action of those unhappy men has been the subject of much censure. George Washington Greene relates, in his Life of the General, that, as a tradition, it was told to him of Greene's riding along this first line, after it bad been formed for the action, and saying to the men: "Three rounds, my boys, and then you may fall back." He well knew that those practiced marksmen, with three rounds, could cause death and destruction in the British ranks. He and many more were bitterly disappointed by knowing that many of those men threw away their loaded guns, not even waiting to fire.

John Frost, in his History, attributes the cause of their panic to "The misconduct of a Colonel, who, on the advance of the enemy, called out to an officer at some distance, that he would be surrounded." Frost adds that "The alarm was sufficient," and, continues in a praiseworthy way to condemn the Colonel. But in this age, when we reflect that the Colonel in question did not lose our Independence, his concern for his fellow officer provokes in the reader as much laughter as just anger.

The efforts of Butler, Eaton, and Colonel Davie, the Commissary-General, to rally them were futile. Lieutenant-Colonel Lee threatened to cut them down with his cavalry, but all endeavor was of no avail. Lossing, quoting Dr. Caruthers, says, however, that many of the Highlanders fell before the Carolinians, who took post with Lee and Campbell on the left. They were of Eaton's command, and it is quite likely that most if not all of these men were also Scotch. Their part in the battle was brave and honorable, like that of Campbell's Riflemen and Lee's Legion. Those troops were out-flanked by the superior numbers of the enemy when the militia gave way. The Americans left, consequently, fell slowly back, but not without giving the Germans and Highlanders a steady and galling fire. On the American right, Lynch, Kirkwood, and Washington gave great annoyance to the British onset. The King's troops followed the militia, making for the Virginians in the second line with the bayonet. Captain Singleton, according to previous orders, had safely retired up the road with his artillery to the second line.

It became expedient for Cornwallis to lengthen his line of battle: accordingly, Norton, with the First Battalion of the Guards, moved to the extreme right to aid the Hessians and the Highlanders, while the light infantry of the Guards and the Yagers

supported Cornwallis' Regiment, the Thirty-third, on the left. As for O'Hara's reserve, the Grenadiers and the Second Battalion of the Guards, they moved forward in the middle to drive in the second line of Americans. The British met a terrible fire from the Virginian militia under Stevens and Lawson; their ranks suffered greatly; the density of timber and under-growth, in a great many places, prevented or interfered with the use of the bayonet; besides, too, the unevenness of the ground hindered their advance. Their left kept steadily moving onward, led by the capable Webster against veteran Americans, whose policy in the action, however, was to fall back for a final stand with the Continentals, if the militia of the two advance lines gave away. The right of the American second line gave way before him; so Webster, proceeding with rapid attack, got out on the open space before the array of Continentals. There he was met by the First Maryland and the left of Brigadier-General Huger's command, as well as by Kirkwood's men 'who took stand with the other regulars. After both sides had poured in deadly volleys, the First Maryland, under Gunby, seconded by Lieutenant-Colonel John Eager Howard, advanced to the charge. They were tried and true, the heroes of the line at the Cowpens. At the point of the bayonet, they compelled Webster's command to cross the deep ravine in front of the Virginian regulars, and to retire to a hill, as a place of safety.

In the meantime, the British, in other parts of the field of battle, had been fighting bravely, and assailing with great energy all the Americans that confronted them. Owing to the greater resistance on the left of the Virginian militia, as well as to the stubbornness of Lee and Campbell, who were now engaged in a separate encounter with the Hessians and the First Battalion of the Guards, to the extreme left of the American line, the King's troops were longer delayed on their right. Their artillery had kept pace with them, moving up the Salisbury road. Tarleton, as be afterwards wrote, thought that either army had an equal chance of victory. He sat uneasily in his saddle, as he always did, wishing to be in the battle; for his cavalry had advanced up the Great road to act as a reserve, or to be ready for a vital blow.

The British were hemmed in by the forest, and were not in complete touch with each other; but, be it said, greatly to their renown, they kept on charging the enemy

wherever they saw him, or heard the rattle of his musketry, ultimately gathering for a grand assault upon him. Cornwallis, mounted oil his splendid horse, rode with the troops, receiving reports and giving orders. When his animal was shot under him he used one belonging to a dragoon, not noticing, in his busy thought, that the saddle-bags had turned tinder the horse's belly, and were catching in the brush, as he urged it on toward the enemy without realizing his danger of capture. Sergeant Lamb, who relates this incident, says that he turned the horse around for the General; and they retired to the edge of a wood, where his Lordship saw a bewildering sight.

He saw the outcome of the unsupported attack of O'Hara's command, the Grenadiers and Second Battalion of the Guards, on the Maryland Brigade. They had penetrated the forest along the highroad, dissipating the militia before them, and marching across the clearing, unnoticed by Colonel Williams of the Marylanders, "on account of an intervening clump of trees." They fell intrepidly upon Ford's Second Maryland and Singleton's two guns, now with the third line, with the result that the raw troops, making up nearly the whole of Ford's Regiment, fled, losing the cannon. Their triumph was of a few minutes only, for Colonel Williams wheeled the First Maryland to the left upon these brave men, The Marylanders, like their antagonists, covered none the less with glory than with blood and. smoke, charged, first under Colonel Gunby, who was quickly dismounted by the shooting of his horse, and then under the brave Howard; while, at the same time, Washington and his cavalry, hearing the heavy firing, clattered to the scene and crashed into the British ranks, badly breaking them, and cutting down men wherever they rode. Such handling could not be endured by the Guards, who for a time obstinately stood under Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart against the bayonets of the Marylanders, until further resistance was not possible. The fieldpieces were retaken, the ill-fated Stewart was killed in a hand-to-hand encounter with Captain Smith of the First Maryland, while the entire force was pushed back in irreparable disorder. The fighting was exceedingly fierce, "It was at this tin-le," says Lossing, speaking of Washington's finishing stroke, "that Francisco, a brave Virginian, cut down eleven men in succession with his broad-sword. One of the Guards pinned Francisco's leg to his horse with a

bayonet. Forbearing to strike, lie assisted the assailant to draw his bayonet forth, when, with terrible force, he brought clown his broadsword, and cleft the poor fellow's head to his shoulders. Horrible, indeed, were many of the events of that battle; the recital will do no good, and I will forbear." Another remarkable performance is accredited to Francisco in a subsequent action, related by John Fiske in the latest illustrated edition of his "American Revolution."

John Marshall wrote that, about this time, Washington saw, not far away, an officer, surrounded by aides, whom he guessed to be Cornwallis. He flushed with the thought of taking him, which might have been possible, had, not an accident happened, causing the retirement of his cavalry at that point of the action. Cornwallis knew that the danger was supreme. Indeed, there was grave risk that, not only would he lose the day, which would destroy all respect for the Royal arms in North Carolina, but that his army would now be cut to pieces, if he could not stay the tide of the struggle. McLeod took post with his guns on an eminence, actually the key to the field, but which Greene, because of the rawness of a large portion of his troops, dared not occupy. His Lordship ordered McLeod to open upon them-friend and foe alike. O'Hara, dangerously wounded, protested for his Guards. Cornwallis replied: "It is a necessary evil which we must endure to avert impending destruction." The grape-shot from the smoking artillery of McLeod strewed the open ground with more bodies of the Guards, though it checked Howard and Washington, and saved the King's army. Greene, too, knew the day was being decided; and, about the time Cornwallis was riding into danger of being taken, was also nearly taken by the British because, lost in his plans and concern, he was equally as unmindful as his Lordship, when Major Burnet apprized him of his peril. He had ridden out to get a nearer view of the conflict. He had not heard from Lee. He could plainly see, as he could have as easily foretold, that the few veterans were his only troops upon which he could depend. The ammunition was giving out. He would not risk his army to destruction. He had crippled his enemy, severely; and now the British were gathering around McLeod, as a nucleus, preparing for a desperate, concentrated assault on his Continentals.

The collection of the royal troops near the small hill on which McLeod's artillery was stationed came about in this way. The Virginian militia, being hard pressed on their centre and left, after Webster had prevailed on their right, gave way altogether, when General Stevens, a great, animating leader in their ranks, received a ball in his right thigh. Although they were slowly retreating, up to that time they had done so with their faces toward their foe. This left O'Hara free to send Stewart and the Guards against the Marylanders. Then, after the Guards were repulsed, O'Hara, notwithstanding his bad wound, rallied, them to the Seventy-first and Twenty-third Regiments, which, in the meantime, had come up in the vicinity of McLeod's cannon. Webster, eagerly waiting for a favorable occasion to join the others or cooperate with them, marched down from his refuge on the height. The First Battalion of the Guards, leaving the Hessians to contend with Lee and Campbell, came through the woods on the right, completing a line of regulars against which Greene could not have relished to stand.

As for the hard fight that went on between the Hessians and the Americans in the woods to the right and rear of the British, it had begun to ease, for Lee had left with his cavalry, and Tarleton, luckily escaping him, charged the riflemen and militia, until they withdrew into a dense part of the wood where his horse was no longer dreaded. Tarleton then returned to the neighborhood of the Court House, on the right of the newly formed line of Cornwallis. Lee and his cavalry, by a timely arrival at the scene of the main action, might have easilv turned the day on the King's army; as it was they did not join Greene until the next morning.

Greene was thinking fast during the pause after the artillery play of McLeod; and decided to retreat, accordingly ordering Colonel Greene with his Virginia regiment to cover the rear. The Colonel with his men had been stationed to hold safe the right of the third line; and since they had not an opportunity to exhibit their courage, despite their Colonel's burning desires, he became irritated when he learned General Greene's order, for he claimed, they would have no hot fighting when retreating. He was dejected on the following day, and only his Chief's promise, that his regiment would have the first fighting in the next battle, consoled him.

The retreat began near 3:30 in the afternoon, the battle lasting an hour and a half by Cornwallis' watch. He, no doubt, timed the battle proper, for he does not seem to have included the opening cannonade. A rather feeble pursuit was begun by the Seventy-first and Twenty-third Regiments, and Tarleton's cavalry. They were the freshest of his Lordship's troops; but they soon returned, for the orderly retreat of the Americans, as well' no doubt, as the uncertainty of Lee's whereabouts, made the movement appear unpropitious to Earl Cornwallis. Since the horses were killed, Greene was obliged to leave his four fieldpieces and two ammunition wagons, like the honors of the field, behind him. Lossing says two of those pieces of artillery were taken from Burgoyne at Saratoga; lost by Gates at Camden; retaken by the Americans at the Cowpens; and lost again to the British on the field at Guilford. He states, too, that they were of the small variety called "Grasshoppers."

Greene's army retreated about ten miles to Speedwell's iron-works, on Troublesome Creek. Cornwallis remained on the battle-ground. He did everything possible for the wounded of both sides, but destitute of tents and buildings was helpless to shelter the poor fellows. Some, however, were brought to nearby farm houses.

The list of the killed and wounded of the King's army at Guilford, is on an historic tablet, honoring immeasurably the bravery of the British and Hessian soldier. Historians, scanning the pages of English history, come upon no instance where British valor excels the courage displayed by the royal troops in the forest and openings on the well-earned hill in North Carolina.

The Earl's kind heart was deeply touched when he learned the losses he had suffered,. Tarleton says: "One-third of the British army was killed or wounded." The actual report gives the lose, as five hundred and forty-four.

"The deeply loved Webster" was fatally wounded. Stewart was killed, as was Lieutenant O'Hara, brother to the General. The younger O'Hara fell by his cannon during the opening cannonade with Singleton. His brother was wounded, and also General Howard, a volunteer with the army. Among others were Tarleton, Talbot of the Thirty-third, Grant of the Seventy-first, and Maynard. Cornwallis did not mention that he,

himself, was slightly wounded and had two horses killed under him. Leslie was the only general officer not wounded.

With the Americans, the deserving Major Anderson of the First Maryland was killed. General Huger was slightly, and General Stevens severely, wounded; while seventy-seven others were killed. One hundred and eighty-two were wounded, and about ten hundred and fifty missing, bringing the total tip to a little more than thirteen hundred. Of course, the great portion of the missing was the militia, the members of that organization simply going off home.

As evening came over the battle-field, the clouds began to gather. March's chill winds intensified the pains and distress of the wounded and dying soldiers, lying beneath the bare oaks or in the clearings; then night, with darkness and heavy rain, increased the gloom, sadness, and extreme suffering. It is not always easy for one with an ardent and inflexible nature-such as Cornwallis happily possessed-to recognize a frustration of his designs. The facts were: his Lordship claimed the fame; though his actions conceded the gain of the battle to Greene. Notwithstanding that, his expressions in public, in a barren effort to allure the North Carolinians to his cause, and in his letter to Lord George Germaine, did not convey his weakness. Yet, confidentially, he wrote General Phillips, in part: "The fate of it was long doubtful. We had not a regiment or corps that did not at some time give way." In short, four days after the sanguinary contest, leaving many of his own wounded and all of the Americans under a flag, he began his retrograde march; while, seven months from that day, a war lasting that number of years practically ceased, and the liberty of the people of the United States of North America was conclusively wrought out, "in the trenches before Yorktown, in Virginia."