

April 2003 lecture by Robert P. Davis to the Sons of the American Revolution – Richmond Chapter. All rights reserved by Robert P. Davis; one time publication granted.

## **The Revolutionary War Battle of Petersburg, Virginia**

### Setting the Stage -

The Revolutionary War Battle of Petersburg, Virginia occurred on April 25, 1781, shortly before the Battle of Yorktown and the end of the war. Until 1780, most all battles and campaigns of the revolution had occurred in the north and to the south of Virginia. Up to this time, Virginia remained almost totally ignored by the British as their conquest to subdue the American patriots was directed more to primary cities and ports. Neither could the King's army bring the Americans to a set-piece battle. General Washington was biding his time to train his army and subsequently ally with the French, and then find some ground that would be ultimately advantageous to the American Army.

In 1779, Sir Henry Clinton, the Commander in Chief of the British Army in America, moved a large army to the south, capturing Charleston, South Carolina. Upon his departure, he left Lord Charles Cornwallis in command of the British southern theater of the war. Following several battles with the remaining American army in the south, which culminated with the disastrous defeat of General Gates, Cornwallis was then confronted by a new American general in the person of Major General Nathanael Greene.

Washington had sent Greene to the south to reconstitute the army after its defeat under Gates. While British forces occupied much of the north and the south, they controlled little while the American army remained elusive. Concurrently, Virginia, which stretched to the Ohio Valley at that time, remained untouched and was essentially a breadbasket of the colonies and a major line of communication between the north and south—a road today known as U.S. Route 1.

Virginia had a tremendous amount of public stores in warehouses, and one of the finest foundries in the colonies, at Westham on the James River near Richmond. Additionally,

Virginia had the vast wealth of several prominent families, and equally important, Virginia had tobacco. At the time of the revolution, it should be remembered, the United States was almost totally broke. Tobacco was relied on as the primary medium of exchange in Europe, and that product, for the most part, was being raised in Virginia and exported out of the Chesapeake Bay.

Clinton eventually recognized that Virginia and its line of communication had to be dealt with. He first sent a raid on the Chesapeake Bay in 1779 under the combined command of Commodore Sir George Collier and Major General Edward Mathew that burned Norfolk. This raid was a hit and run action and no British post was established. In 1780, Clinton sent an small invasion force under Major General Alexander Leslie into the Chesapeake to establish a post at Portsmouth and attempt to interdict Virginia's resources. Leslie was, however, lacking aggressiveness and was suddenly called to the south to reinforce Cornwallis. Therein, until December 1780, the British still had no force in Virginia and the American lines of communication remained open.

In December 1780, Clinton determined that he needed a bolder plan to establish a post in the Chesapeake Bay and make British presence known in Virginia. He had just acquired a new and aggressive field officer who he thought could do the job. That new British Brigadier General was none other than Benedict Arnold.

Arnold was a proven fighter and exceptional field commander, albeit a turncoat from the American army. Arnold alone can be credited by the American side with action that resulted in the major British loss following the two battles of Saratoga. It was he that led the attack which finally resulted in the capture of four thousand British troops under Lieutenant General John Burgoyne in 1778.

On New Years Eve 1780, Arnold arrived in the Chesapeake Bay with a small army which he immediately sailed up the James River and landed at Westover Plantation, on the north side of the river. From there he promptly marched toward Richmond, where he destroyed the foundry and numerous supplies and warehouses—then burned the city in the first week of January 1781. Arnold then returned to Portsmouth where he established a defended British post and, considering his personal danger, ensconced himself to avoid capture by his previous employers and hanging as a traitor.

It should be understood that in early 1781, Virginia had no regular continental army troops in the state—only Virginia militia. There were basically two corps, one under Brigadier General

Thomas Nelson, Jr. operating on the north side of the James River, and a second corps under Brigadier General Peter Muhlenberg operating on the south side of the James River. Overall command of American forces in Virginia had been relegated to Major General the Baron von Steuben. Steuben had been left in Virginia by Greene, on his way to the south, to attempt to ensure that Virginia lived up to its promise to continue supplying the army in the south.

Incidentally, Peter Muhlenberg was a Lutheran minister (his father was instrumental in bringing the Lutheran Church to America) and it was he that stood at the pulpit saying, "There is a time to pray and a time to fight, and that time has come now", while removing his preacher's robe to show his Continental Army colonel's uniform.

Being on the south side of the James River, it fell to Muhlenberg to deal with Arnold's force in Portsmouth. However, Muhlenberg's force was too small to attack, but it was sufficient to temporarily contain the British.

Arnold, seeing that he and his army were in jeopardy, appealed to Clinton, in New York, for reinforcements. Clinton, having an understandable small trust in Arnold, had just obtained another available field commander, recently exchanged from the captivity with the Convention troops of Saratoga. This new, and battlefield proven officer was Major General William Phillips. Clinton quickly dispatched Phillips with reinforcements to the Chesapeake Bay.

Phillips arrived at Portsmouth in late March 1781 with the reinforcements and a small fleet of naval ships. He immediately took command of all British forces in Virginia, with orders from Clinton to break the American line of communication through Virginia, hopefully taking the American pressure off Cornwallis in North Carolina.

On 18 April 1781, Phillips launched his own campaign up the James River. His campaign began with 2,500 seasoned British regulars, twenty-three ships and thirteen gunboats. Phillips first targeted Williamsburg, then marched to Yorktown and captured a large concentration of artillery there. From there they burned the State Naval docks on the Chickahominy River.

At the time of the revolution, the Virginia State Navy was about the largest navy in America. Unfortunately, the state could not get enough sailors on board the ships and get them to sea. Consequently, when it became known that the British were on the

move, the Virginia fleet was moved upriver to Osborne's Landing near Dutch Gap in Chesterfield County.

After burning the docks, Phillips sailed to Westover Plantation stopping there over the night of April 23<sup>rd</sup>, the guest of the notorious loyalist Mary Willing Byrd, the widow of the devout patriot, William Byrd. On April 24<sup>th</sup> all troops re-boarded the ships, moved farther up-river landing at City Point at the confluence of James and Appomattox Rivers.

At this time, General Steuben was having problems raising sufficient militia to defend against the British invasion. Steuben knew that Petersburg would be a British target due to the large stores of supplies in the warehouses and being a military stop-over point for troops moving between the north and south. Petersburg was also exporting more goods at this time than Richmond, being supplied by bateau boats coming down the river from the mountains. With this knowledge, Steuben ordered Muhlenberg's Corps, which had been tailing Phillips' river-borne force up-river, into Petersburg. Muhlenberg's troops arrived there on April 23<sup>rd</sup> and started to establish the battle lines when they heard of Phillips' landing at City Point.

While the history books only mention the Battle of Petersburg as a skirmish, it actually classifies as a full-blown battle by Revolutionary War standards—involving 3,500 men engaged for upward of three hours.

Interestingly, General Steuben had no misapprehensions about winning the upcoming battle. He was well aware that his militia would lose against such an overwhelming adversary. However, according to his later statement, his intent was to put up a reasonable defense of the town and still get out with his army and equipment intact. His reasoning was to prevent the civilian populace from any intimidation by seeing the British taking the town unopposed.

Therefore, Steuben, in concert with Muhlenberg, established the defensive positions for the roughly 1,200 militia of their command. To meet the British first attacks, he placed two of his five regiments on Poor's Creek, nearby the present day Virginia Linen Company. He then placed two more regiments on the west side of Lieutenant Run, along what is now Madison Street.

The fifth, Goode's Regiment, was left to the north of the Appomattox to provide rear security for the ultimate and planned withdrawal from Petersburg, and to guard Pocahontas Bridge. This was the only bridge across the Appomattox River for about

twenty miles and imperative for the army to cross the river. It was, however, only about 15 feet wide and 35 feet long.

### The Battle begins -

On the morning of April 25<sup>th</sup> Phillips put his two-thousand five-hundred troops on the march from City Point to Petersburg, and concurrently brought eleven of his gunboats up the Appomattox River. These gunboats, incidentally, were built similar to the ones Benedict Arnold had constructed on Lake Champlain in 1777, when the American Army was fighting the British invasion that led to the Battle of Saratoga. The boats were large enough to carry about 100 troops or a large amount of supplies and equipment, and mount a small cannon on the bows.

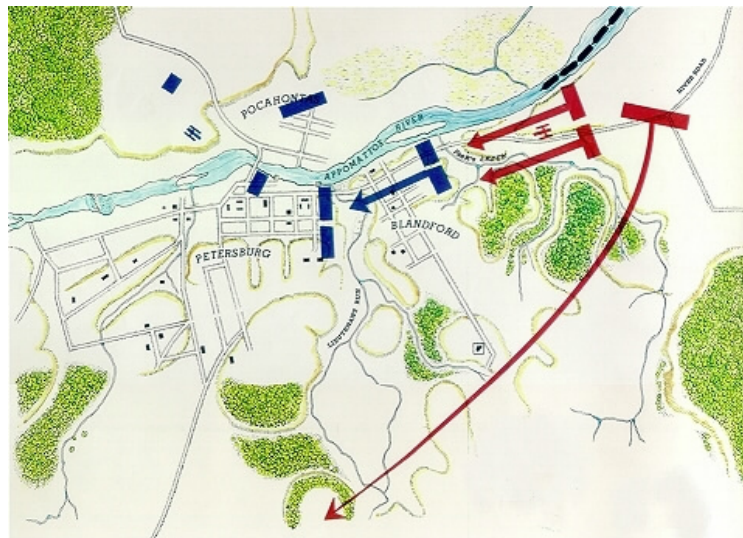
The British marched up the River Road (now known mostly as Puddledock Road) to the road junction, today known as Route 36 or East Washington Street, toward the town of Blandford (now east Petersburg). As they reached this point, Phillips saw the Virginia Militia drawn up on the east edge of Blandford, on the opposite bank of Poor's Creek. While it had been proven through past experience that the Virginia militia would frequently "fire two volleys and run like hell," Phillips was not about to take this defensive line for granted. They had the appearance of standing fast, and looked "prepared to fight."



Map 1, Battle of Petersburg, 25 April 1781. Robert P. Davis

The British launched their first attack and, as Phillips had guessed, the Americans stood fast, giving forth a heavy volley of firing. In fact, the Americans were so inspired, they gave several cheers across their line as the British retreated under their heavy firing.

It was only after Phillips launched his counter-attack, bringing his artillery into action (two three-pounders and two light six-pounders,) did Steuben order a withdrawal of the militia from the first line. He ordered those two regiments to fall back across Lieutenant Run onto the second line of defense. The militia executed the withdrawal in a considerably orderly fashion—by the book, with each unit covering the other’s retreat. The Virginia militia had held their overwhelming opponents for somewhat over one-half of an hour.



Map 2, Battle of Petersburg, 25 April 1781. Robert P. Davis

As the British pressed the Americans through Blandford, Steuben’s two pieces of artillery were finally able to join the fray. After considering the limitations of his planned avenue of retreat, Steuben had placed his artillery on the “Heights” (now Colonial Heights), on the north side of the Appomattox River. From this position they could assist in the battle, and not be in danger of loss when the retreat occurred. The guns had a range of about one mile and could fire rounds into the town of Blandford itself.

Just prior to forcing the American withdrawal from its first line, Phillips sent the Queen’s Rangers and a battalion of the light infantry on a wide sweep around behind the American’s right

flank. The effort was to hopefully get behind the American lines and cut off their retreat across the river. Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe march this division around Well's Hill, crossing Lieutenant Run nearby the Southside Regional Medical Center and then northward along the present South Sycamore Street. This attempt proved to little avail, since the march was quite time consuming and by the time they got close enough to the American's rear, the militia was already in full retreat to the river.

As the American first line reconstituted itself with the second line, along the western hill-crest above Lieutenant Run valley, the British army regrouped itself on a new line along the present North Crater Road. Phillips then ordered an assault against the (now) four regiments of militia across the valley. Several attacks were repelled by a withering fire from the Virginians.



Map 3, Battle of Petersburg, 25 April 1781. Robert P. Davis

By this time, Phillips had moved his artillery forward and emplaced them on a high point overlooking the valley, at a point where Washington Street now crosses Interstate 95. This gave the British an unrestricted enfilading fire across the entire American lines.

It was at this point that Steuben determined that his small army had done all that it could to defend the city and, at least, prove to the invaders that they would gain no ground for free. Steuben then ordered a general retreat across the Appomattox River and northward into Chesterfield County.

The militia again retreated in the greatest of order, despite the fact that the British troops pressed hard on them. The narrow Pocahontas Bridge, located in the present area of the old

Petersburg train station, proved to be the singular obstacle to the retreat—threatening any type of rapid withdrawal. Nonetheless, militia units provided each other with covering fire, while units still south of the bridge became entangled in much hand-to-hand combat.

As the militia got to the north of the river, they marched through Pocahontas and then onto the heights into Chesterfield County. The retreat remained orderly until the British artillery found the range to the road over which the militia was marching. Once the enemy guns were brought to bear on the backs of the escaping Americans, pandemonium set in and the retreat turned into a rout—the fleeing soldiers dispersed in all directions, not to be reorganized until one-to-two days later.

It is worthy of a few notes here: first, the area of Pocahontas, while being a part of Petersburg, was one of the first free Black communities in the United States; second, at the time of the American Revolution, free Blacks were enlisted in the army and permitted to fight right along-side whites in most any unit, and slaves were also permitted to enlist with the permission and agreement from their owners for their freedom on fulfillment of their enlistment (there are at least three known Black soldiers who fought in the battle); and a last note to those observing the area today, the north channel of the Appomattox River flows, did not exist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was only emplaced in the 1930's for flood control.

Once the whole of the American force had crossed the Pocahontas Bridge, they took up the bridge planks of the bridge to prevent the enemy from any immediate following of them. The Virginia militia held two-and-one-half times their number for nearly three hours. General Phillips had been right in not underestimating the steadfastness of the American soldier.

### The Aftermath –

The British had no desire to immediately follow Steuben's army, as they next had to secure and search the city. Therefore they remained overnight and the following day. Phillips had previously issued orders to his army the civilian populace and their property was under the protection of the army, and that none were to be seized except those under arms or property of military value. Steuben, however, had managed to remove most all the military stores from Petersburg, with the exception of a large volume of



tobacco stored in local warehouses. Most of these warehouses were owned by the widow Bowling, whose son commanded a company of cavalry during the battle, north of the Appomattox River.

Phillips established his headquarters in Bollingbrook, the Bolling home on East Hill. Upon moving into the house, General Arnold warned the widow about Phillip's quick temper and not to upset him. During her appeal to Phillips, not to destroy her warehouses or the tobacco, she managed to upset the general and get herself and her daughters locked up in one wing of her own home.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, Phillips got the city leaders together and told them he would spare the warehouses from the torch only if they would move all of the tobacco into the streets. Reluctantly, the city obliged, and all of the tobacco was burned. His sparing the warehouse was an theoretically an appeal to the those "fence-sitters" who might remain loyal to the British crown. However, as happens with many military operations, one British soldier did not get the word, and he set fire to one warehouse near the present Farmer's Market.

On April 27<sup>th</sup> Phillips marched north with his whole army. He sent Arnold to Osborne's Landing on the James River, with half the men to take care of the Virginia navy ships they knew were anchored there. Phillips, himself, marched to Chesterfield County Courthouse. He burned a lot of stores and a range of one-hundred and sixty barracks in the area being used for militia training. Phillips then marched to Osborne's to regroup the whole army later in the day.

When Arnold's force arrived at Osborne's, they found the Virginia ships anchored in the river, but only two or three could be manned with crews. In an effort to prevent a heavy battle, Arnold sent a message to the American commander, across the river, offering a deal in which the Americans would give up half the ships and British would take their half and be on their way. The deal was turned down and a battle ensued. After considerable firing and maneuvering, Arnold's troops managed to capture a couple of the ships. Seeing they could not save their ships, the American commander ordered the remaining ships to be set-a-fire or scuttled. This turned out mostly unsuccessful and Arnold wound up capturing the majority of the ships with their valuable cargoes.

With his army re-constituted, Phillips then marched his army toward Richmond on the 28<sup>th</sup>. They attacked and burned many warehouses and the Westham foundry, capturing many more supplies and equipment. Unknown to Phillips, who was planning to attack Richmond the following morning, General Lafayette, was on the march to Richmond, bringing 1,500 American regulars from Annapolis to join with Steuben's army.

On the morning of April 29<sup>th</sup> the British awoke to find the glistening of American bayonets on Shockhoe Hill. Rather than risk an unnecessary slaughter of his, thus-far, victorious army, Phillips determined that his successful campaign had accomplished its mission. He then ordered the whole army and its ships back down the James River toward their base at Portsmouth.

About that same day Phillips started feeling sick. By the time that his flotilla reached the confluence with the Chickahominy River with the James River, he had become bedridden with a high fever. While anchored at that point, Phillips received orders from General Cornwallis, in North Carolina, to meet him in Petersburg.

Cornwallis had spent several months trying to destroy Greene's army in the Carolinas, but had been unsuccessful—even after the large battle at Guilford Court House in North Carolina. Rather than further expend his rapidly depleting army, he decided on a different tack.

Cornwallis and Phillips were close friends, as well as being two brilliant military minds. In what could be construed as a type of conspiracy, the two had concluded that the overall British strategy in America was lacking deliberate aims and goals to bring the war to a decisive end. It was their feeling that merging their two armies would provide a strong enough force to ultimately split the American colonies, and as a minimum give Great Britain total control of the south. Therefore, Cornwallis began moving his army north to join Phillips. In his last order to his army, Phillips order its return to Petersburg, where they arrived on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May.

At this same time, Lafayette and Steuben had a secondary mission to accomplish. Steuben had been safeguarding 200,000 rounds of ammunition destined for General Greene. In order to get this ammunition into North Carolina, past the British armies of Phillips and Cornwallis, a diversion was necessary. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Lafayette sent a battalion of troops with two artillery pieces back to the Heights, overlooking Petersburg. From the Heights, they began a bombardment of the city. The intent was to keep British heads down while Steuben's troops did an "end-run" across

Goode's Bridge (twenty miles west of Petersburg) with the ammunition. The diversion worked.

During the barrage, Phillips lay dying in Bollingbrook, his previous headquarters after the battle. He was moved to the basement of the house during the bombardment, just as a cannon ball struck the house.

On the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> General Phillips died of the fever, which has subsequently been diagnosed as probably either malaria or typhus. On the orders of General Benedict Arnold, Phillips' body was secretly buried in Blandford Church graveyard later that evening.

Cornwallis arrived in Petersburg two days later to find his old friend had died, and from there, as history has shown, Cornwallis would eventually maneuver through Virginia and end up in Yorktown where he was forced to capitulate his army in the following October.

In conclusion let me state: we all must constantly seek the full truth of history—a task which is endless. The truth of history needs to get out, unblemished of personal interests and mythical interpretation. We need to perpetuate this history, particularly that of the American Revolution, for the education and interest of our people. There are many battlefields and other sites of the Revolutionary War that are still laying unprotected, un-researched, and un-interpreted that need help from organizations such as yours. It is my feeling that, while you do perpetuate the honor and memory of our Revolutionary War ancestors, it should be a mandated mission to also get involved to assist where possible with identifying and protecting any and all Revolutionary War sites in or near your local areas.

Here in Virginia, one could observe that no other war was ever fought on our soil other than the Civil War. That is not so—as we all know. I urge you to join with your communities and local historical groups to lend what assistance that you can.

*Robert P. Davis is the author of, "Where a Man Can Go, Major General William Phillips, British Royal Artillery 1731-1781," Greenwood Press, Westport, C, 1999. He also serves as consultant to the City of Petersburg on Revolutionary War history and the Battle of Petersburg, and as an authoritative lecturer on Revolutionary War history. Mr. Davis recommends for those interested, Petersburg's Revolutionary War website:*

<http://www.petersburg-va.org/revwar/index.htm>

*Mr. Davis has developed a list of 450 American participants in the Battle of Petersburg, the majority of whom were from Chesterfield, Prince George, Suffolk, Culpepper, Surry, Suffolk and Dinwiddie Counties of Virginia. Davis may be contacted at: Robert P. Davis, 3204 Gordon Drive, Petersburg, VA 23805.*



Virginia Militia defending Petersburg during the city's annual reenactment of the Battle of Petersburg, Virginia. City of Petersburg.



British forces advance on Petersburg during the city's annual reenactment of the Battle of Petersburg, Virginia. City of Petersburg.