

Excerpts from

1776

By David McCullough

Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages -. General George Washington

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Mentions of Thomas Knowlton and the Knowlton Rangers . . .

Boston having no theater, Faneuil Hall, sacred to Boston patriots as “the cradle of liberty,” as converted on General Howe’s wish into a “very elegant playhouse” for amateur productions of Shakespeare and original farces, with officers and favored Loyalists taking parts. Sally Flucker, the sister of Henry Knox’s wife, Lucy Flucker, for example, took a lead part in a production of *Maid of the Oaks*, a satire by General Burgoyne.

On the evening of January 8, uniformed officers and their ladies packed Faneuil Hall for what was expected to be the event of the season, a performance of a musical farce said also to have been written by Burgoyne. Titled *The Blockade*; it was off to a rollicking start from the moment the curtain rose. A ridiculous figure, supposed to be George Washington, stumbled on stage wearing an oversized wig and dragging a rusty sword. At the same moment, across the bay, **Connecticut soldiers led by Major Thomas Knowlton** launched a surprise attack on Charlestown, and the British responded with a thunderous cannon barrage. With the roar of the guns, which the audience at Faneuil Hall took to be part of the show, another comic figure, a Yankee sergeant in farmer garb, rushed on stage to say the rebels were “at it tooth and nail over Charlestown.” The audience roared with laughter and “clapped prodigiously,” sure that this, too, was part of the fun.

But soon finding their mistake [wrote an eyewitness] a general scene of confusion ensued. They immediately hurried out of the house to their alarm posts, some skipping over the orchestra, trampling on the fiddles, and, in short, everyone making his most speedy retreat, the actors (all were all officers) calling out for water to get the paint and smut off their faces, women fainting, etc.

Reportedly, it was General Howe himself who shouted, “Turn out! Turn out!”

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Washington, as usual, was up before dawn, drafting correspondence at his spacious new headquarters, the Palladian style mansion of a departed Loyalist, Colonel Roger Morris, with whom he had once served in the French and Indian War. The house, about a mile south of Fort Washington, commanded the

summit of Harlem heights—indeed, it stood at the highest elevation on all of York Island. From the balcony of its columned portico, one could see the Hudson on the right, and of to the left, three miles down the Harlem River valley, the old Dutch village of Harlem and the waters of Hell Gate. To the south, on the clear days—and they were nearly all clear, dry days that September—one could pick out the distant spires of New York and further still, the hills of Staten Island, twenty miles away.

According to Joseph Reed, who was with Washington, it was it very early when the word came that the enemy was advancing, and Washington sent Reed cantering off to investigate.

Washington had been expecting an attack. “I have sent out some reconnoitering parties to gain intelligence if possible of the disposition of the enemy,” he had already reported in a letter to Congress that morning. More than a hundred **Connecticut Rangers**, some of the best soldiers in the army, had left on the mission before dawn, led by one of the best field officers in the army, a strapping Connecticut farmer and veteran of Bunker Hill, **Colonel Thomas Knowlton**. (It was **Knowlton** at Bunker Hill who, with Colonel John Stark, had famously held the rail fence in the face of the oncoming British lines, and **Knowlton** who, during the siege of Boston, had led the night attack on Charlestown that so upset the British officer’s production of the Burgoyne farce *The Blockade* at Faneuil Hall.)

Knowlton and his Rangers were to probe for the enemy along the wooded ridges to the south, which rose beyond a narrow, intervening valley known as the Hollow Way. And it was there at daybreak, in the woods of the highlands to the south, that Knowlton and his men ran into the British and a “brisk” skirmish ensued.

Reed arrived just as the enemy attacked, with some four hundred light infantry, thus outnumbering the Americans by nearly four to one.

I went down to our most advanced post [he wrote] and while talking there with the officer of the guard, the enemy’s advance guard fired upon us about fifty yards distance. Our men behaved well, stood and returned the fire, till, overpowered by numbers, they were obliged to retreat.

Reed raced off to get help from Washington, who had since ridden to the southern reaches of Harlem Heights, where Nathanael Greene’s brigades were drawn up, overlooking the Hollow Way. By the time Reed arrived, **Knowlton and his men** could be seen retreating swiftly down the slopes on the opposite side.

Then out of the far woods and down the hill came the British in pursuit, sounding their bugles, as if on a fox hunt. “I never felt such a sensation before,” Reed wrote. “It seemed to crown our disgrace.”

What the Virginia fox hunter watching the scene from his saddle may have felt or thought can only be imagined, for he never said. But his response was an immediate decision to make a fight, if only, as he later explained to Patrick Henry, “to recover the military ardor which is to the utmost moment to an army.”

Washington ordered a counterattack across the Hollow Way, and sent **Knowlton** and his men, plus three companies of Virginians led by Major Andrew Leitch, on the encircling move to the left, with Reed as guide. They were to get behind the redcoats and entrap them in the Hollow Way. Greene and Putnam led the main attack, and both were soon in the thick of it.

The enemy had “rushed down the hill with all speed to a plain spot of ground,” wrote Joseph Hodgkins, who was back in action with Greene’s troops for the first time since Brooklyn. “Then our brigade marched out of the woods. Then a very hot fire began on both sides.”

But **Knowlton’s** encircling move ran into trouble when some of his men opened fire too soon, attacking the enemy’s flank, instead of getting behind and cutting off their retreat. The fighting grew fierce. Within minutes **Knowlton** and Major Leitch both fell, mortally wounded.

With the chance to encircle and capture the British gone, Washington threw more of his forces into the main attack, and the British, too, rushed to reinforcements. In little time the British had committed 5,000 men.

The struggle went on for hours, the Americans, for once, holding their own. Slowly the British began to give way. Then the British turned and ran, and the Americans took after them. “[We] drove the dogs near three miles,” wrote one of the Connecticut men.

Fearing the enemy might bring up still more strength, and that his men might be running into a trap, Washington called off the attack, which was not easily done. “The pursuit of a flying enemy was so new a scene, that it was with difficulty our men could be brought to retreat,” wrote Joseph Reed.

From all that Joseph Hodgkins had seen, and from what others had told him, he reckoned they had killed no fewer than 500 of the enemy and wounded that many or more. “They were seen to carry off several wagon loads. Besides our people buried a good many as they left.”

Probably the British and Hessian losses were 90 killed and about 300 wounded. The number of American casualties was far lower, fewer than 100 wounded and 30 killed, but these included Major Leitch and **Colonel Knowlton**, whose deaths were a heavy blow to the army. To Reed, who had carried the wounded **Knowlton** from the field, and to Washington, **Thomas Knowlton** was the “greatest loss.”

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On Nathan Hale.

By several accounts, Hale’s capture took place in New York. A report in the *New York Gazette*, a Tory paper, said an unnamed “New England man who had a captain’s commission” was seized in the city with “dreadful implements of ruin [firebrands]” and, when searched, “the sum of 600 [pounds] was found upon him.” This could refer to Hale, although Frederick Mackenzie noted that a “person name Nathan Hales” was apprehended on Long Island on the night of September 21.

Whatever the circumstances of his capture, Hale admitted to being a spy, and General Howe ordered him hanged without trial.

Hale was twenty-one years old, a handsome, athletic graduate of Yale, a schoolmaster and wholehearted patriot. Raised on a Connecticut farm, he was one of the six brothers who served in the war. He had signed up more than a year before, taken part in the Siege of Boston, and lately joined **Colonel Knowlton's Rangers**. Yet thus far he felt he had rendered no real service to the country, and when **Knowlton**, on orders from Washington, called for a volunteer to cross the lines and bring back desperately needed intelligence, he had bravely offered to go.

A fellow Connecticut officer, Captain William Hull, who had known Hale in college, tried to talk him out of it, warning that he was by nature "too frank and open for deceit and disguise," and that no one respected the character of a spy. Hale had said only that he would "reflect, and do nothing but what duty demands.." The next thing Hull knew, his friend had disappeared.

The mission was doomed from the start, ill-planned and pathetically amateurish, and Hale was a poor choice. He knew nothing of spying. The scars from a powder burn on his face made him readily identifiable, and a Loyalist cousin who knew him well was serving as General Howe's deputy commissary of prisoners.

Hale went under the guise of a Dutch schoolmaster in search of work. Apparently it was from naively confiding the truth of his mission to the wrong people that led to his capture.

He was hanged on the morning of September 21, in an artillery park near the Beekman house, a country estate not far from the East River that served as Howe's headquarters.

It was Captain John Montresor, who, only hours afterwards, under a white flag, brought word of Hale's fate to the Americans and described what had happened to Hale his friend Captain Hull. And it was Hull, later, who reported Montresor's account of Hale's last words as he was about to be executed: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," which was a variation on another then-famous line from the play *Cato*. (One imagines that in delivering the line to his British executioners, Hale, knowing that it was as familiar to them as to him, put the emphasis on the second-to-last word: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for *my* country.")

On September 26, a British officer wrote in a letter,

We hung up a rebel spy the other day, and some soldiers got out of a rebel gentleman's garden a painted soldier on a board, and hung it along with the rebel, and wrote upon it, General Washington, and I saw it yesterday beyond headquarters, by the roadside.

Hale's place in the pantheon of American heroes, as the martyr spy of the Revolution, was not to come until years later. For now very little was known or said of his story. Washington, angry or saddened as he may have been, is not known to have mentioned the subject.