



The Papers of George Washington: 1 January-9 March 1780 (Revolutionary War Series)

George Washington

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With volume 24 of the Revolutionary War Series, the conflict enters a new decade. New Year's Day 1780 finds Washington in winter quarters at Morristown, N.J., having established his headquarters at the Ford mansion there one month earlier.

During the weeks covered by this volume, the Continental army experienced the harshest winter of the war. But the severity of the winter did not prevent Washington from mounting an offensive against British forces. Ice had formed a natural bridge to Staten Island, and Washington decided to use the situation to launch a major attack on the enemy's forts there. He assigned Major General Stirling to command the strike and assigned him 2,600 troops. Stirling launched the assault as planned in the early morning of 15 January, but the next day he had to report to Washington that the operation had failed. Although the attack was fruitless, it provides evidence of Washington's aggressive generalship: a major winter attack designed to cut off and capture enemy garrisons.

Washington's enemy was not idle either. In addition to several raids on New Jersey towns and surprise attacks on outlying detachments, the British launched one operation with a far more ambitious goal: to seize Washington at the Ford mansion and carry him into New York City as a prisoner. The attack failed, but it was the deep snow--and not American bullets--that stopped the cavalry force sent to capture Washington.

Enemy operations, however, were not the greatest threat to the survival of Washington's army. The harshness of the winter, the precarious state of Continental finances, and the resulting lack of provisions threatened his forces with starvation. To feed his troops, Washington implemented an emergency "requisition" of provisions throughout New Jersey.

As usual, administration of the army consumed much of Washington's time. In addition to obtaining supplies, he had to oversee recruiting the army, obtaining clothing for his men, negotiating for the exchange of prisoners, and conducting inspections, as well as attending to the professionalism and discipline of the army. His burden became so heavy that in February he felt it would be "impossible" for him to execute the duties of commander in chief unless he received more support from his senior officers.

Several letters to or from well-known figures of the Revolution appear in this volume, including Benedict Arnold, Benjamin Franklin, and Robert Morris. Washington's letter to Morris gives rare insight into the general's personal life. The commander in chief expressed his inclination to accept Morris's invitation to spend some of the winter with him, but he lamented that "public duty" necessitated remaining with the army at Morristown. He would, he explained to Morris, have to forgo such "social enjoyments" until the end of the war.

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