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Captain Stephen Olney

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CAPTAIN STEPHEN OLNEY, PATRIOT.

LIPPITT PRIZE ESSAY.

RUTH HORTENSE JAMES, 1901.

CAPTAIN STEPHEN OLNEY, PATRIOT.

In the year 1774, the military forces of Rhode Island consisted of several companies of Train bands and independent chartered organizations. Their object was to learn military tactics and to be prepared to act in defence of their country. If we bear in mind the feelings which His Majesty, King George III, was then provoking among his loyal subjects in Rhode Island by his exasperating and unjust acts, we shall better understand with what enthusiasm men enlisted in these organizations.

At that time we find as a private in the chartered company called the North Providence Rangers, a young farmer, who was destined to become one of the many staunch patriots and valiant soldiers that made Rhode Island famous in the Revolution. Stephen Olney was a descendant in the fifth generation of Thomas Olney, a contemporary of Roger Williams, and one of the thirteen original proprietors of Providence. Major Joseph Olney, the father of Stephen, owned and lived upon the ancestral farm in North Providence, where Stephen, his second son, was born in 1755. Young Olney grew up on the farm and early developed a taste for the study of military science. At the age of twenty, he enlisted in the service of Rhode Island and was given

an ensign's commission in Captain John Angell's Company, Second Rhode Island Regiment, commanded by Colonel Hitchcock. The next year he was promoted to the rank of First Lieutenant in the Eleventh Continental Infantry, one of whose officers was Major Israel Angell.

At Long Island, August 27, 1776, Lieutenant Olney fought and distinguished himself in his first battle. He was with that part of the regiment which was on picket duty, and on the night preceding the battle, he and his men lay on their arms in a wood within a mile of the enemy. At daylight their division was attacked. They could tell by the firing that they were surrounded, but they could not see the British. The platoon to which Olney belonged was ordered to the front to protect the sentries. Then, with twenty men he was detached for this duty. They moved forward in the direction of the fort and the enemy drew up in line, thinking to capture them easily. Olney ordered his men to break through the British ranks or die. Nearly all passed the enemy. When about one hundred yards away, he ordered the men to face about and fire, which they did with good effect. In this manner they kept up a running fight until they reached in safety the fort at Flatbush.

After the battle at Long Island the American army, covered by a dense fog, retreated across the river to New York, where

it rested for a fortnight, when it moved over to New Jersey. At Harlem a sharp engagement with the British took place, in which Lieutenant Olney conducted himself with much bravery. He was present at the battle of White Plains, and was afterwards ordered to Fort Washington but soon returned to the main army at Trenton.

About this time the American soldiers, discouraged by their repeated losses were leaving the army in large numbers, and the remainder became for the most part dejected and hopeless. Not only was the army much reduced in numbers, but the soldiers were scantily clothed and fed. Olney's heroic character asserted itself at this time. An irrepressible longing for home came over him, but he was determined to stick to his post. For his principles he was willing to share the sacrifices, fatigue, perils and poverty of those brave men who stood by our country in her time of trial. In the darkest hours that came to the American army, Olney always expressed his firm faith that the colonies would win.

Aside from this belief he had a strong love for General Washington and was sorely grieved to witness the many troubles which that leader had to encounter. Olney was with the main

army all through Washington's famous retreat in the Jerseys where the Americans were continually harassed by the British, who were less than an hour's march away. He speaks with great enthusiasm of the almost miraculous escape of the army in the famous retreat from Trenton, December 8, 1776. Later after the capture of Trenton by Washington, General Mifflin induced the three Rhode Island regiments, then composing nearly one half of Washington's entire force, to stay for one month longer than their enlistment. Olney and his company remained to a man.

Lieutenant Olney took part in the battle of Princeton where he had the good fortune to save the life of Colonel Monroe, who afterwards became the president of the United States. Monroe was severely wounded, and probably would have been trampled to death, had not Olney borne him to a place of safety. Olney completed his extra month of service at Morristown by going with a scouting-party of about three hundred men, under the command of Colonel Christopher Lippitt. The party often found itself in perilous positions, being more than once surprised by large forces of the enemy, but in due time it returned safely to camp.

In February Olney returned home. The greater part of the Rhode Island regiments disbanded and came home at the same time.

making the journey overland and mostly on foot. While on this visit Olney was married to Miss Dorcas Smith; but this new domestic relation did not long detain him from his military duties. On the eleventh of February, 1777, he was made captain in the second Rhode Island regiment. The following June he returned to the army, then in camp at Courtland Manor, and received the warmest of welcomes and of congratulations from his men and from General Washington. Captain Olney went to Brunswick with the main army but was not present at the battle of the Brandywine, being stationed at that time with his company at an exposed post in New Jersey, which it was thought best not to leave unguarded. From this place, Colonel Angell's regiment with that of Colonel Greene went to Fort Mercer, where they made a most gallant defense against the British. During the fighting a little Irishman belonging to Captain Olney's company was overcome with fear. Olney gave him a few strokes with the butt end of his gun, which he says quickly recalled the man to his senses and his duty. The attack on Fort Mercer was resumed by the British the next day and it was found necessary to remove to Fort Mifflin, and from there to Red Bank. These places were the last strongholds of the patriots in that region and they were held by the Rhode Island regiments.

Soon after the battle at Red Bank the Rhode Island forces joined Washington's army and went into winter quarters at Valley Forge. We all know something of the sufferings our soldiers had to endure that winter. One is reminded of the remark made by General Washington, "Naked and starving as they are, we can never sufficiently admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of our soldiers, patriots and heroes." Olney says, "While at Valley Forge we drew rations of salt pork and hard bread and for the first time, I relished such food without the process of cooking and even thought it delicious." But the want of clothing was greater than any other among the Rhode Island troops, many of whom were half naked and only a few had shoes and stockings. The first of January, 1778, Captain Olney went to his home for a short time. On his return he found the soldiers much cheered by the news of the alliance with France. At the battle of Monmouth, the Rhode Island regiments were commanded by Generals Lee and Lafayette. Captain Olney's division was in a very critical position, but behaved with much bravery.

Soon after the French fleet arrived in New York, it was decided that the Rhode Island regiments should return home and assist in driving out the British, who had a strong hold in that state. It was during this journey to Rhode Island that an

intimacy sprang up between Lafayette and Olney, each admiring the bravery of the other. Captain Olney was not present at the battle of Rhode Island, but a little anecdote about his father who was there is of interest. Major Olney was a skirmisher and on his return home in answer to a question as to where he had been, replied that he "had been picking cherries". Some of the inherited self-possession which enabled the father to speak of the "Red Coats" as cherries, we find serving the son to good purpose.

On June 23, 1780, Captain Olney's regiment was back at Springfield, New Jersey, where a bloody encounter with the British occurred. It developed in the Rhode Island line where Captain Olney was defending the pass of a narrow bridge against fearful odds. Olney gives the following account of the battle: "I asked Colonel Jeremiah Olney to let me take my platoon and engage them as I saw fit. This meeting his earnest approbation, I marched them into an orchard of large trees, and thought it prudent to place several men behind each tree, believing they would fire more accurately and be less exposed. The British came on firing regularly. I soon observed that the right of our main regiment was in retreat and that the enemy's flank had boldly advanced to within twenty yards. Notwithstanding the

fire from my corps. I ordered my men to take possession of a small hill covered with wood. The enemy's sharpshooters now advanced rapidly, and one of their rifle balls passed through my left arm. I bound up the wound with my handkerchief, and soon thought it best for my men to retreat. The only troops taking part in the Springfield engagement were the Rhode Islanders, and they numbered only about one hundred and sixty, forty of whom were among the killed and wounded.

Captain Olney's wound proved serious, and the weakness which succeeded the healing of it, kept him from the army for some time. During this interval, many interesting events in the history of the Revolution occurred. In January, 1781, Colonel Angell resigned, and the two Rhode Island regiments were consolidated and placed under the command of Colonel Greene, Lieutenant-Colonel Jeremiah Olney and Major Flagg. Captain Olney was retained.

Time passed and the American forces laid siege to Yorktown where Olney was to perform his crowning act of bravery. Lord Cornwallis' forces were in the city which was well fortified. For nine days after the beginning of the siege, shot and shell were fired into Yorktown almost without intermission, but the

lines of the enemy were very effectually defended by one hundred pieces of cannon. This rendered an assault necessary. Two of the strongest redoubts had to be taken to gain a foothold. Washington ordered the American troops to storm these. The one on the right was assigned to that part of the army under the command of Lafayette and Hamilton. Soon after daylight, the soldiers detailed for this perilous service advanced to the assault. A detachment of the Rhode Island regiment commanded by Captain Stephen Olney, who was chosen on account of the honorable reputation he had earned for coolness, daring, and military insight, headed the storming column of what was perhaps the most hazardous enterprise of the war. The redoubts of the enemy were well manned and their palisades were thick. The company of the forlorn hope marched slowly, silently, silently, and solemnly, with unloaded guns, determined to carry the works at the point of the bayonet. When within two hundred yards of the redoubt the column halted and one man from each division was detailed to go forward. The British discharged their musketry at the advancing assailants. With a wild huzzah, the American commanders with their swords in hand, broke through the first obstruction, and the column followed where the breach was made.

Captain Olney climbed through the abatis and entered the ditch. As soon as his men had collected, he forced his way through the palisades and leaping upon the parapet, called out in a loud voice. "Captain Olney's company form here". A gunshot wound in the arm, a thrust from a bayonet in the thigh, and another still more severe in the abdomen, were the reception which answered that first shout, which proclaimed the defeat of Cornwallis, the fall of Yorktown, and the triumph of the American cause. Captain Olney was carried from the field, but not until most of his men had entered the redoubt and he had directed them to form in order. Ten minutes after the first fire of the enemy the fort was taken, and this victory virtually ended the war. Owing to a mistake, Captain Olney's name was not mentioned in the orders of the day with its due share of honor, and this he as a military man never forgave, although he was extremely modest. After the battle he was taken to a hospital, where he recovered from his wounds. He then retired from the army, being twenty-seven years of age, and returned to his farm, where he lived until his death in 1832.

In the summer of 1824, when Lafayette visited Rhode Island, for the second time, Captain Olney, who was then an old man,

stood by the State House door at Providence. He was instantly recognized and Lafayette sprang to him and embraced him warmly with tears of joy.

Not only did our little colony of Rhode Island strike the first blow for freedom from English tyranny, but she also led in the gallant charge which ended in the victory of Yorktown: and the first sword to be raised above its captured heights was that of a Rhode Islander,- Captain Stephen Olney,- as brave a man as ever fought for the rights of his country.