

COLUMBIA COUNTY'S FIRST POEM?

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I. An Unknown Revolutionary War Poem

General Richard Montgomery was killed in battle early in the Revolution and became an icon of heroic Americanism for the remainder of the War and in the early American Republic. Although he is little remembered today, in the early years of the United States Montgomery was celebrated in song, poem, essay, drama, and public sculpture.

A previously-unknown poem about him has recently come to light in, of all places, the Deeds and Drafts collection of land-transfer records among the Society's collections. The poem was written on the back of a "calculation" paper, a scrap that had been used to figure the acreage of a newly-surveyed tract of land in then-Columbia County (now Northumberland County).

The verses, two four-line stanzas, are anything but elegant; they represent, rather, the rough, boisterous style of a soldier's camp-song. The lines focus on General Montgomery's death, which occurred at the very beginning of his attack on the fortress of Quebec, Canada, before dawn on New Year's Eve, 1775. The incident is represented as if recalled by one of Montgomery's soldiers, witness of his heroism.

The poem, as written, is shown in the photo; the two stanzas are separated by folds which allowed the paper to fit a standard lawyer's document tray, with the label for the document separating the verses: "28 / Calculation / Alexander Gibson / 250^a124." Here is a literal transcription:

Gen¹ Montgomery he march'd his men along
Saying move on my brave boys we'll fight them two to one
We never will be daunted but boldly attack
And pull down the pride & ambitions of Quebec

Their grape shot came on us, our Gen¹ was shot down
He arose on his knees saying my brave boys fight on
Now is the time my boys your fortunes to make
This hero said so tho' his heart soon did break

In a more modern dress, the poem might parade in these measures:

General Montgomery he marched his men along
Saying, "Move on, my brave boys; we'll fight them two to one!
We never will be daunted, but boldly attack,
And pull down the pride and ambitions of Quebec."

Their grape shot came on us, our General was shot down;
He arose on his knees, saying, "My brave boys, fight on!
Now is the time, my boys, your fortunes to make."
This hero said so, though his heart soon did break.

This is hardly Wordsworthian poetry, but it is lively and wholly American. To place it in context, we need to look at two leaders of the Revolutionary War, *both* of whom bore the title “General Montgomery.” One is the subject of the poem, General *Richard* Montgomery, killed at Quebec. The other is the man who later wrote the poem down, General *William* Montgomery. The latter General is important in Columbia County history, for he was the force behind the separation from Northumberland County in 1813 and in the founding of Columbia County’s first county town of Danville (that town was named for his youngest son, Daniel).

I. General Richard Montgomery

As noted above, the tragic hero of Quebec was portrayed widely in American popular art in the earliest years of our country. He was not, however, a native of one of the thirteen colonies. Like many other notables of the Revolution, such as Thomas Paine, Lafayette, and Pulaski, he was born abroad and came to join in the colonists’ struggle for freedom out of disillusion with the Old World or idealistic hope for the New.

Richard Montgomery was an Irishman, born 2 December 1736 the son of a member of the British parliament from Lifford. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and then joined the British army in 1756. His regiment, the 17th of foot, fought against the French in America during the Seven Years War; Montgomery was in battle at Louisburg in Nova Scotia, at Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point in New York, and at Montreal. He was promoted repeatedly, returning to England in 1763 with the rank of captain.

He stayed in England for ten years, where his applications for further promotion were repeatedly neglected. Finally embittered, he sold his commission in the army and returned to America in 1773 to take up “the simple life.” He bought a farm at King’s Bridge, Westchester County, New York, and settled into the life of a country farmer. He wooed and won a young woman from an important New York family, the Livingstons. Janet was daughter of Judge Robert R. and Margaret Livingston, and they sanctioned her marriage to the British exile on 24 July 1773.

The newlyweds settled at Rhinebeck, New York, but in just two years the tumult of tax revolt led to the verge of outright rebellion in the colonies. Surprisingly, though he was a newcomer, Montgomery was chosen a delegate to the Provincial congress in New York City in April 1775. Since he was an experienced military officer in a land that had never had its own army, the next month he was selected as one of eight brigadier-generals in the new Continental army, second in command to General Philip Schuyler.

Schuyler was assigned to lead a very important American invasion force northward to Canada, with the hope of bringing that vast province into the War on the rebels’ side. General Schuyler, however, became ill, so Richard Montgomery took his place in command of the expedition. The Americans succeeded in driving the British from Lake Champlain, then crowned that success when they crossed the St. Lawrence and captured Montreal, which surrendered on 12 November 1775.

By the victory Montgomery captured for the Americans a large store of supplies and no fewer than eleven ships in the harbor. When news of the success reached the lower colonies, his name instantly became celebrated. The chief object of the expedition, however, still lay ahead, down the St. Lawrence: the fortress city of Quebec. As he wrote in a letter to his father-in-law, Judge Livingston, “until Quebec is taken, Canada is unconquered.”

Montgomery succeeded in meeting up near Quebec with the small force of General Benedict Arnold, who had led his men on an incredibly difficult march northward through the

wilds of Maine in the middle of a bitter winter. Although the combined armies were crippled by illness and desertions, Montgomery plunged ahead with plans to assault the upper fortress at Quebec, which seemed secure on its high rock-walled eminence.

Taking advantage of the cover of a heavy snowstorm, the Americans attacked before dawn on the 31st of December. In the first volley from the defenders' guns, Montgomery was shot through the thigh and head and quickly died. With their leader fallen, the attackers became disorganized and soon retreated. The American attempt to seize Canada had failed.

Despite, or indeed partly because of, this failure, Montgomery was made into the quintessential American hero: brave, unyielding, and one with his men. Part of the pathos of his death came from the fact that he was the third of three commanding generals from three different nations who had died in battle at Quebec: Montcalm of the French and Wolfe of the British in 1759, and now Montgomery of the Americans.

The most famous celebration of Montgomery's death, and one which captured the pathos of the scene, was a painting by aspiring American artist John Trumbull. After the Revolutionary War ended, Trumbull was studying at Benjamin West's studio in London, and there he fashioned an adaptation of West's noted scene of the death of General Wolfe. He shows the fallen hero, Montgomery, surrounded by his soldiers, including frontiersmen in deerskins, and with his two slain aides-de-camp before him.

Long before Trumbull took up the subject, though, Montgomery's death had become iconic. Within a month of the battle the U.S. Congress had ordered a memorial of the general to be cast in bronze. American man of letters Hugh Henry Brackenridge wrote a tragedy in heroic blank verse on "The Death of General Montgomery," and his drama was published at Philadelphia in 1777. Newspapers across the colonies featured poems and essays exalting America's first top-level war casualty.

Almost all of this torrent of praise was, like Trumbull's painting, in a high-flown heroic style. In sharp contrast is the soldiers' poem reproduced above. It successfully suggests in homespun language the on-the-spot experience of a battlefield participant. Filed away in office papers for over two centuries, this little poem now can take its place in the history of American popular culture. The story of its survival is almost as intriguing as the story that the poem celebrates. This story, too, features a General Montgomery—probably a distant cousin of Richard Montgomery.

II. General William Montgomery

The poem is preserved in the handwriting of the Deputy Surveyor for Northumberland and Luzerne counties in Pennsylvania. This was William Montgomery, born in Delaware on 3 August 1736 (just four months before Richard Montgomery), third son of Alexander and Mary Montgomery. As a young adult he developed a large farm in Chester County, Pennsylvania (west of Philadelphia). He became a prominent man in the county and was chosen as a delegate to the provincial convention that met in Philadelphia in January 1775 to prepare for defense against British forces. In June 1776 he was a Colonel in the 4th Battalion Chester County Militia which marched across New Jersey and defended the coast from British troops on Staten Island. He left the army early in the year 1777 and moved his family to the frontier region of Northumberland County. (He was later usually called "General" in recognition of his rank of Major-General in the Pennsylvania militia beginning in 1793.)

Before the War began, Montgomery had visited the frontier area of the Forks of the Susquehanna and was attracted by its opportunities. On 26 November 1774 he bought from John

Simpson “180 acres of land on Mahoning Creek” at its juncture with the North Branch of the Susquehanna, and he moved his household to that tract during the War. His youngest son, Alexander, was born in a log house there on 8 October 1777.

William Montgomery quickly became a leading light among the settlers in this region. In 1779 he was elected a representative from Northumberland County to the state Assembly, where he voted in March 1780 for an act “for the gradual abolition of slavery.” In 1784 he was elected to Congress, but resigned the position soon after in order to accept the post of presiding judge of the courts of Northumberland and Luzerne counties. His standing among the Commonwealth’s leading citizens is suggested by this letter from Benjamin Franklin, who was then President of Pennsylvania’s executive council:

IN COUNCIL
Philadelphia May 27th 1786
Sir

The Council have received your letter of the seventeenth and twentieth instant by General Bull, containing the important intelligence of fresh disturbances at Wyoming, which will be taken into Consideration. We are sensible of your attention to the public welfare manifested in these dispatches; and desire you would continue to send us what farther information you may from time to time obtain of the proceedings in that part of the Country; using in the mean while what influence you have, to quiet the minds of the unhappy settlers there, by assuring them that there is the best disposition in the Government to treat them equitably and even with kindness, and to take them under its protection and to extend to them all the privileges of our free and happy Constitution, on their demonstrating by their peaceable and orderly behaviour that the sentiments expressed in their late petition to the General Assembly are sincere, and that they are truly disposed to become good citizens—We hope they will wisely pursue this Conduct and thereby render all Thought of taking compulsive measures unnecessary.

I am, with much Esteem
Sir, Your most humble servant
B. FRANKLIN Presidt.

William Montgomery Esquire
President of the Courts of Common pleas, Quarter Sessions and Orphans Court—of
the County of Northumberland

Even before he became a judge, Montgomery had become involved in trying to settle the long-standing disputes of rival claimants to the lands in the Wyoming Valley. Before the Revolution, both Pennsylvania and Connecticut claimed that territory by right of their (overlapping) charters from English monarchs, and settlers from the two colonies struggled against one another for possession of the fertile valley—a struggle that rose to armed conflict, with fatalities, in the bitter “Pennamite War.” As President Judge, William Montgomery continued to mediate, as the above letter shows, and in 1787 he was appointed a commissioner to carry out an Assembly act to settle the Connecticut claims.

In 1783 Montgomery had been named a Deputy Surveyor for part of Northumberland County, responsible for certifying surveys of claims for land awards from the Commonwealth. It is in his function as Deputy Surveyor that he comes into the story of the poem about General

Richard Montgomery, for the poem is preserved in William Montgomery's handwriting on a survey document. The manuscript scrap is related to his surveying of a tract of land owned by Alexander Gibson. On the front of the sheet (the inside when folded) the Deputy Surveyor constructed a table of calculation for the area of a surveyed land tract, set out in the usual format. The table includes courses and distances, or "metes and bounds," for eleven sides of a 250-acre tract. The survey was completed for Alexander Gibson, who bought the farmland along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River in 1786.

The land parcel had been originally surveyed 31 July 1776 for John Morrison, who sold the property to John Nelson and he in turn to Gibson. The surviving calculation must have been written in connection with a *resurvey* of the tract for Gibson's purchase, so that it should be dated to about 1786.

What does the manuscript tell us about the date, author, and occasion of the poem? Not much that is certain. It does establish that the poem was *written down* by William Montgomery in about 1786. Since there are no crossed-out words, insertions or erasures, it is unlikely that Montgomery was the *author* of the poem. (A rough draft would hardly be so "clean" and a finished copy wouldn't be written on scrap paper.) But for answers to other questions we have to make educated guesses.

Here's what I think may have happened. During the Revolution, probably not long after the Battle of Quebec, an ordinary Continental soldier composed a song about the fall of General Montgomery. The song probably was known to lots of soldiers, but was too "unliterary" to find its way into print in a newspaper. Four years after the War, far from Quebec, another General Montgomery, by then a District Surveyor in Northumberland County, heard the song while he was in the field surveying a client's new land. The source was either the landowner, Alexander Gibson, or one of his workers or one of the Surveyor's assistants. The General, intrigued by this song about a man of the same surname as his own, wrote it out on the only scrap of blank paper he had handy— the unused back flaps of the folded calculation.

The survey paper was filed away with the surveyor's other office papers and the poem forgotten. After the General's death in 1816, some of the office files went to other local surveyors, and this one (marked number "28") wound up in the office of Columbia County surveyor Samuel Neyhard. Eventually, along with Neyhard's papers it came into the collections of the Historical Society

III. The New Americans

Whether or not the above scenario is correct, what we have is a poem from then-Columbia County land during or shortly after the Revolution. This doggerel verse is important to our understanding of the origins of an *American* identity apart from things British.

At the time, versifiers and cartoonists often depicted this struggle for a separate American identity as a family quarrel, a spat between Mother England and her rebellious daughter America. But the poets and artists recognized that more than just nationality was involved; there was the sense in the colonies on this side of the Atlantic that as a free people they could grasp at a whole new mode of existence. They saw, too, that the enormous expanse of land stretching westward from their coastal colonies offered immense opportunities for wealth and expansion. Thus the versifier in the Montgomery poem depicts the General crying out to his men just before he is fatally wounded:

Now is the time, my brave boys, your fortunes to make!

These, his last words, may strike us as a peculiar battle cry, unless for a pirate captain to his men. But the line captures the nascent American idea that with political independence would come liberty for the pursuit of both life and prosperity. (The reported actual last words of General Montgomery were much more ironic but no less optimistic of rising American fortunes; he exclaimed to his aides just before the British cannon spewed its fatal grape shot: “We’ll be in Quebec before dawn!”)

So here’s to the unknown poet who left us as his legacy – preserved on the edges of a spare scrap of paper – a poem celebrating Americanism and America’s destiny. It may be rough poetry, but its homespun patriotism is truly American.

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