



CONTINENTAL CURRENCY, REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

Original preserved in an old family bible of an ancestor of that period and now in the possession of the author.

THE TOWN OF MILFORD
DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

PRIZE ESSAY*

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"My thoughts go up the long dim path of years,
Back to the earliest days of Liberty."

Milford, settled in the year 1639, had been steadily growing until, in 1775, it presented a very prosperous appearance. The long, green common, the two libraries, the white Congregational meeting-houses and brown-stone Episcopal Church, the Town-House and the Academy were, many of them, situated much the same as we see them to-day. The people lived simply and contentedly; the women doing the housework and spinning, the men working on their farms or otherwise busying themselves. We are told that ship-building was a leading industry in Milford at this time, and also that many of the men followed the sea. The town meetings brought the men together in a social way, and the housewives gathered at the quilting bees and sewing circles to talk over the neighborhood gossip. Altogether, the town of Milford presented the peaceful appearance of a typical New England village of this period, but the war clouds were gathering.

*The writer of this essay received a Bronze Medal of the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution offered by the Connecticut Society, for the encouragement in public schools of the study of local American History during the "struggle for liberty."

Ten dollars in gold was also offered by George Hare Ford as a special prize for the best essay upon the subject of "Milford during the American Revolution."

The following committee were chosen by the donor to select the best essay:—

Hon. George M. Gunn, Rev. Peter McClean and Mr. Simeon J. Lake.

At the commencement of the Revolution, the inhabitants were unanimously opposed to the oppressive measures of the British. A very enthusiastic town meeting was held on the 29th of November, 1774. The people at this meeting "resolved that they highly approved of and would strictly abide by the Delegates assembled in General Continental Congress." A committee of correspondence of seven persons was also appointed. At this meeting it was "unanimously resolved that a subscription should be forthwith opened for the relief and support of such poor inhabitants of Boston as were immediate sufferers by the Boston Port Bill and a committee of twelve persons was appointed to receive donations and contributions for that purpose. These decisive measures show how intensely patriotic the early Milfordites were.

At a town meeting held May 1, 1775, it was "voted that the great guns be mounted," and the selectmen were appointed a committee to see that this was done. Also the selectmen were to provide powder and everything needful respecting the great guns at the expense of the town, and they were to provide guns, bayonets, and provisions for such as were called forth for the defense of liberty, and were unable to provide for themselves. A minute post was established at the town's expense to be continued for one week under Capt. Isaac Miles, and the next week it was voted to continue this minute post for a longer period. John Fowler, Esq., and Ephraim Strong, Esq., were to "represent the town to the General Assembly and petition for liberty to have a company enlisted and commissioned to be stationed in town for its defense, and at the expense of the Colony." It was also voted to allow some gratuity to those who had formed themselves into a company under the command of John Fowler, Jr., and had spent voluntarily much time in acquainting themselves with the military art.

Capt. Samuel Peck commanded the first Milford company raised for the general defense of the country. A little later, a company was raised under Captain Pond. These com-

panies were in several engagements and the officers were commended by Washington for their promptness and intrepidity. The names of the soldiers are too numerous to mention, but we have sufficient records to show that they did their duty nobly and bravely. One of the men, Capt. Peter Perritt, was taken prisoner at Fort Washington; another story says that when Israel Putnam rode down the dangerous steps at Horse Neck to escape some British soldiers, three men rode with him—one of those being Jehiel Stow, one of the four sons of Stephen Stow.

On Monday, Oct. 9, 1775, Maj. Ennion Williams passed through Milford on his journey to the American Camp at Cambridge. He says in his journal: "We passed through Stratford which is a pretty little town near the river Housatonic. We crossed the Ferry in a large boat built in the manner of our long boats. The Sound here is so wide that the view is bounded by water and sky. We arrived a little after sunset. At Milford, we see by candlelight the inside of a church, a frame building with two stories of galleries, is a large house. There is two other meeting-houses near as large, and are generally filled. The people are generally ready to arm and march whenever ordered to support their liberty. Pursued our way and passed over Oyster River and through West Haven."

Meanwhile, the people of Milford were preparing for the conflict. At a town meeting held Feb. 22, 1776, it was "voted that whereas at a time when our Sea Coasts are threatened with invasion by our enemies, a misuse of Powder may prove very prejudicial not only to the publick in general, but to the Town, therefore resolved that no persons or person whatever, shall by sporting or Fowling fire away any of that necessary article, within the limits of s. Town, upon Penalty of one pound lawful money for every offence." On March 27th, it was voted to accept the grant of the assembly with regard to fortifying the harbor, and a committee was appointed to agree upon a place suitable to erect fortifications upon. Later it was decided to place the battery on West Point, and the money for the fortification was raised by a tax.

For further protection, companies of soldiers were stationed at Burwell's Farm and Poconoc Point. The battery at West Point or Fort Trumbull was situated about where the summer home of Colonel Falls now stands. Many a night the people were awakened by the clanging of the bell of the fort, to call the men of the village to arms, for a ship had been sighted which might prove to be one of the enemies', making ready for an attack.

On December 31, 1776, shortly before night, there appeared off the harbor of Milford a British vessel carrying at her fore-top a flag of truce. Darkness increasing, she was not again seen. Near the beach was the home of Capt. Isaac Miles, an earnest patriot, who with his sons, sitting before his fire, heard unusual noises. Opening his door, he found the yard filled with wild, forlorn looking creatures in a most deplorable condition, suffering for want of food and clothing. On that bitter winter night they had been turned ashore and left to shift for themselves. The sympathies of the Miles family and neighbors sheltered these two-hundred released American prisoners for the night. In a day or two they were removed to the town-hall, which was prepared for them. In this building, which is still standing, the work of Death at once commenced among the unfortunate men, who stricken with fever, were so reduced in strength that they easily fell victims to its virulence. Here it was that the heroic work of Stephen Stow was done. Day and night, his sole occupation was to minister to the sick and dying, and to take increasing, constant care of these men, until, becoming physically exhausted, he contracted the fever and died. His work of kindness and self-sacrifice has justly given him the name of Milford's Martyr.

These soldiers, forty-six in number, were buried in a common grave near the south corner of the graveyard. In 1852, a monument was erected in their memory, "by the joint liberality of the General Assembly, the people of Milford, and other contributing friends." The names of the soldiers are inscribed on the monument, and because of the devotion of Stephen Stow to his country and to humanity, "the Legisla-

ture of Connecticut resolved that his name should be inscribed on this monument."

So the year 1777 brought in sickness and death. The people of Milford were having their share of the miseries of the war, although no real fighting had taken place in their locality. The town meetings chronicle the events in an interesting manner. We find that on February 17th, it was voted that the selectmen be a committee to provide for the soldiers' families. It was also agreed that the town would give ten pounds a head for all those who would enlist for three years or for the war. The number required of the town that year, by the governor's proclamation, was seventy-two.

On the east side of the Wepawaug stands a substantial house painted red. In the time of the Revolution it was owned by Captain Bryan who had been commissioned a first lieutenant in the army, had served in the battle of White Plains and other engagements with the enemy, and who was now on patrol duty in the town. Captain Bryan and Orlando Beach were in charge of the coast to watch for tory raids from Long Island. A British officer on Long Island thought it would be a fine thing to capture Captain Bryan and carry him off to the British ships which lay off the coast. Captain Bryan was prepared for the attack, however, and gave the officer an uncomfortable reception. Without waiting to capture the brave Captain, the officer turned and fled with his men, dropping his sword in his hurry. Captain Bryan kept the sword, and it is now in the possession of Mrs. B. D. Merriman, one of his descendants.

In September, the selectmen were appointed a committee to provide clothing for the Continental Soldiers. In December, it was voted to provide for the soldiers' families, and to recompense the soldiers who had enlisted previous to the town vote, giving ten pounds for an encouragement.

During those stirring times all was not confusion and warfare. Tradition has it that Mistress Frelove Stow, widow of Stephen Stow, had a chest of tea in her cellar. Tea, being a very scarce beverage at this time, was treasured highly by

those who were fortunate enough to possess it and Mistress Stow decided to share her good fortune with the other good housewives of the village. Once a week, at unseasonable hours, the housewives might be seen stealing into Mistress Stow's cellar, where they indulged in a cup of good old English tea.

In January, 1778, "the articles of confederation of the United States, sent by the governor, being read, it was voted by the town that they fully approved of said articles." On the 14th of December, it was voted "that no person or persons whatever who have heretofore voluntarily gone over to join with, and screened themselves under the protection of the enemies of the United States of America, or who shall hereafter go over, join with, or screen themselves under said enemy, shall be suffered or allowed to reside or dwell in this town, on any pretense whatever." Tories were compelled to keep close to their houses. There is a tradition that a certain Milford brook received its name at this time from the people who lived near it, and has ever afterward been called "Tory Brook."

In 1779, the British burned Fairfield. At this time much uneasiness was felt among the people, for the whole western sky glowed a brilliant red for a number of nights, reminding our own villagers that at any hour such a fate might be theirs. Many of the people, especially the women and children, left the town, seeking refuge with relatives or friends away from the coast.

Indeed, Milford might have met the same fate as Fairfield. In a letter written by Sir Henry Clinton to Major-General Tyron, July 2, 1779, these directions are given: "Once in possession of the Black Rock Battery near Bridgeport, at the head of the harbor, all becomes easy and you can always retire by Fair Weather Island, which has deep water on the south side, but not above six-foot within. You may likewise land at Stratford Point, drive the cattle of that district and embark them from thence at your leisure from Charles Island, Milford. You may do the same with those you find at Milford."

But the Milford cattle would not have been very easily found. At Pond Point, there was a meadow sheltered by rising ground and overhanging trees. This place, Calf-Pen meadow, was the resort of Milford cattle. The cattle were driven here, a strong guard placed over the meadow, and safety assured.

In 1779, twenty transport ships lay off against the town for a number of days, occasioning constant alarm, for the people hourly expected an attack. But only a few soldiers landed at Pond Point. A serving maid, seeing the red-coats coming in a small boat, gave the alarm. Consternation reigned, for the men were away. But a plucky young woman, a Mistress Merwin, seized her copper kettle and rolling pin, took her baby, and drove with great haste to Milford center. As soon as she reached the first house she gave the alarm by beating upon the kettle with the rolling pin. So all through the principal streets she rode, giving her unique alarm. By the time relief could be summoned, the few British soldiers had left. One house was plundered, that of Mr. Miles Merwin.

In July, 1780, more money was offered by the town to those who would enlist. War taxes were levied, "payable in money or provisions, to be put up for the use of the state." In October, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered, and the war was ended.

In all accounts we find these eloquent words: "Milford furnished her full quota of men and money." There were no attacks made, no battles fought here. All her patriots received their wounds on the battle fields, yet the men who stayed at home to guard the town were just as patriotic and served their country just as truly as did those who won distinction under great generals. The story of "The Town of Milford During the American Revolution," is simply an account of the daily fulfillment of duties which may seem insignificant when contrasted with the deeds on the battle fields; yet let us remember that just such towns as Milford made brave armies possible; they furnished the money and men.