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"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

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**Washington's Second
Visit to Rhode Island**

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"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

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Washington's Second Visit to Rhode Island

GEORGE WASHINGTON's second visit to Rhode Island was in 1776, the most eventful year of the century for the Colonies, and twenty years had elapsed since the young Virginia Colonel journeyed through Newport and possibly Providence on his way to Boston to discuss a matter with General William Shirley, then commander-in-chief of His Majesty's forces in America. Many things had transpired in the life of Washington during the two decades between his first and second visit. Through his fifteen years in the House of Burgesses his opinions were solidifying into fixed standards and settled convictions that were to hold him fast, and keep him true to the defense of the principles of representative government for the Colonies. He had felt the spell of Patrick Henry's ringing challenge to the spirit of free-born Englishmen: "If this be treason, make the most of it—Give me liberty or give me death."

He had absorbed the ideals that prompted the protests, petitions, debates, discussions, had a voice in the Resolves, in the denunciations of the Stamp Act and the Port Bill, and the call for a General Congress of the American Colonies to which he was a delegate. George Washington's power and personality must have been marked in this Congress, since Patrick Henry, on being asked to name the greatest man in the Congress,



replied, "If you speak of eloquence, Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina is by far the greatest orator; but if you speak of solid information and sound judgment, Colonel Washington is unquestionably the greatest man on the floor." In the Virginia Convention some time before Washington had expressed his stand on the closing of Boston, thus: "I will raise one thousand men, subsist them at my own expense and march myself at their head for the relief of Boston."

On April 19, 1775, Major Pitcairn of the British army fired upon the American militia assembled on Lexington Common, shouting, "Disperse, ye rebels," and the American Revolution started. One of the first steps of the new Congress was to adopt the army gathered in the vicinity of Boston, calling it the Continental Army to distinguish it from that of England which they called the Ministerial Army. It then became necessary to give that army a leader, a Commander-in-chief to direct it. Several were ambitious for the post, but opinions varied. The name of George Washington was proposed for the honor and the nomination was ably supported by John Adams, who spoke in laudatory terms of the skill and experience of the Virginia Colonel. On June 15, 1775, Washington was elected Commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, and the following day he accepted, delivering a brief address from his place in the assembly.

He set out for Boston immediately, and on the way there learned details of the Battle of Bunker Hill. On July 3, 1775, he

took command of the Continental Army, relieving General Artemas Ward, who temporarily directed the forces. He sent Colonel Henry Knox in mid-winter to Fort Ticonderoga to procure cannon and supplies, and these were transported to Dorchester Heights, near Boston, on oxen-drawn sleds. The fortifications at that point compelled General Howe to evacuate Boston and take his British troops to Halifax. This first score for the Americans in putting the enemy to flight was a bitter blow to British pride and a great encouragement to the patriots, and it placed the war on a different basis.

Leaving behind a valuable supply of cannon, small arms, powder and other military stores, the British departed from Boston on March 17, 1776, and it was generally expected that the American forces would march to New York. The Rhode Island General Assembly, at its March session, sent a communication to General Washington requesting that he dispatch some of his troops to or through Rhode Island, so that there would be armed forces present should the enemy decide to invade by way of the sea, perhaps through Newport. The Colony had an opportunity to discuss this matter and others of equal importance directly with General Washington, for the following month he journeyed from Boston to Providence, where he was received and entertained in a manner befitting his exalted position in the hearts and minds of his countrymen.

Governor Cooke of Rhode Island heard

through General Nathanael Greene that Washington contemplated visiting Providence and, on April 4, 1776, sent a note to the General welcoming him to Rhode Island and advised that accommodations in a private home had been provided for himself and his official party. On the following day, Friday, the whole town turned out *en masse* to welcome the man whom they prayed would lead them to victory in the struggle for independence. General Washington's route from Boston brought him through Dedham, Wrentham, Attleboro and Pawtucket; therefore, a great procession of dignitaries and the general populace went out to meet him and his suite, and they awaited his appearance in the vicinity of the Sayles Tavern which is still standing on the east side of North Main Street near the Providence-Pawtucket city line. This tavern is now called the Pidge House; it was for many years the regular stopping place for the New York to Boston stages, and it is reputed to be the oldest house in Rhode Island.

The colorful assemblage that patiently anticipated the approach of Washington on that pleasant spring day included the local company of cadets under the command of Colonel Nightingale, and the company of light infantry under the command of Colonel Mathewson, both units being in their dress uniforms. Colonel Hitchcock's and Colonel Little's regiments under the command of Brigadier General Nathanael Greene were also ordered to march out and

join the parade of honor, and the latter contingent met General Washington on his way into Providence. Then a procession was formed which lined up in the following order: Colonel Little's regiment, Colonel Hitchcock's regiment, the company of light infantry, the cadets, the Governor of the Colony at whose right hand rode the distinguished visitor. Then followed a number of citizens on horseback, and in this order they proceeded into town and to the residence of Stephen Hopkins where Washington was to be entertained. The Hopkins home is still standing today, although it has been moved from its original site on South Main Street to its present location at the corner of Benefit and Hopkins Streets, in the shadow of the courthouse.

Stephen Hopkins was out of town when Washington came to Rhode Island on this visit. He was then attending, as a delegate from Rhode Island, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, and thus it became the duty of Ruth, the step-daughter and also the daughter-in-law of Hopkins, to entertain the prominent guest. Times have changed but little since then. All the neighbors excitedly offered Ruth their assistance and freely tendered their services in anticipation of the great responsibility with which she was to be confronted. Friends and relatives alike offered the loan of China, glassware, table linen and other household articles, but Ruth appeared the least perturbed of all concerning the hospitality which the Hopkins home could offer. The house was small,

the servants few, and Mr. Hopkins lived in a very plain and humble way. Therefore, Ruth proudly refused all these well-meant proffers with the remark that "What was good enough for her father was good enough for General Washington."

People came from everywhere to catch a glimpse of General Washington. When the procession passed through the streets of the town, crowds of men, women and children cheered him, and all activity ceased in his honor. An old account of the occasion reads, "The houses through the street were full of women, the eminences covered with men." The balance of the day was probably taken up with receptions and private conferences with the Governor, General Greene and others in official capacities, and there is no documentary evidence to disprove the fact that he was thoroughly satisfied with the hospitality and home comforts afforded him under the capable direction of the hostess at the Hopkins house.

On the next day, Saturday, the guest of honor and several other officers of the Continental Army were entertained at an elaborate reception held in Hacker's Hall, where many speeches were made, compliments exchanged, and a number of patriotic toasts were drunk. This entertainment was provided by "The Gentlemen of the Town," and the affair was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant ever arranged in the history of the town up to that time. Hacker's Hall stood on the east side of South Main Street, between what are now Power and Planet

Streets, and the structure was completely destroyed by fire in January, 1801. Two of the actual candlesticks used to illuminate the reception hall on that historic occasion are today priceless treasures in the possession of the Rhode Island Historical Society. Washington remained in Providence until the following day, Sunday, and then departed for New York, visiting Norwich and New London on the way.

While in Providence it is evident that he conferred with Governor Cooke and the Council, since a letter to Washington from the Governor and dated April 23, 1776, says: "When I had the pleasure of seeing you here I laid before you very fully the distressed situation of the colony." Washington wrote to the President of Congress from New York on April 15, 1776, and stated: "On the 4th instant I set out from Cambridge, and arrived here on Saturday last. I came through Providence, Norwich and New London, in order to see and expediate the embarkation of troops."