

INCIDENTS OF THE REVOLUTION.

Recollections of the Old Sugar House Prison— Interesting Letter.

WALTON, Jan. 16, 1852.

Through the kindness of a friend, I have just been shown an article in your paper of Jan. 1st, over the signature of B., stating that the writer has a cane made from one of the large oak beams of the old Sugar House Prison, lately torn down on Liberty-st., and wishes to find some one of our Revolutionary heroes who was imprisoned therein, that he may present it to him for a support for his declining years. He justly supposes that the associations connected with it, would make it of value to the recipient. I have to state that LEVI HANFORD, now of Walton, Delaware County, New-York, is of that honored number one of the very few who still survive the wasting hand of time. He is now in the 93d year, feeble in body of course, but still able to walk, and still retaining his faculties in a remarkable degree, and the memory of Revolutionary events and the transactions of by-gone days in great perfection—the result no doubt of habits of steady industry, temperance and piety, joined to a good constitution. I will give you a short history of his Revolutionary life and his imprisonment, as I took it down in his own words, some four years since, and which may not be wholly uninteresting.

It is, said he, with feelings of sadness that I view the time fast approaching, when those that were active in that war will have passed away, and those that shall then live will know nothing of the events of that day, only as they read of them as they read the history of other nations. But there are that yet live that do know, that were active in that day, what our independence cost us. History records the most important of its events and transactions; yet there are thousands of scenes of noble daring, of personal sacrifice, suffering and distress, that never have and never will find their way into the pages of history; but will fade out as the old soldiers pass away, till the last page of teeming tradition shall be placed side by side, and buried in the grave, with the last of the old soldiers. I was born, continued he, in the town of Norwalk, in Connecticut, in the great year fifty-nine, as it used to be termed, [the year in which the British took Canada.] They began to fight at Concord and Lexington in the spring of 1775; and in the September following, I was old enough to do duty—that is, I was sixteen, the age then required. During that and the following year, I went occasionally on duty, for short periods, to New-York and other places. I was one of a company sent in the spring of 1776 to Governor's Island, in the night, to break the first ground that was ever broken to fortify that now strong place. In March, 1777, I was called out as a guard on Long Island Sound. On the 13th of March, a very dark and stormy night, I, with twelve others, was stationed as an out-guard. Our officers were negligent, and in the night we were surrounded by Tories from Long Island, and the guard made prisoners, myself among the rest,—an ignorant boy of seventeen. We were then taken in an open boat across the sound, to Huntington; from there to Flushing, and thence to New-York, and incarcerated in the Sugar House Prison, in Liberty-street, near the new Dutch Church, which was at that time converted into a riding school for the British light horse, and is now used for the City Post-Office.

The old Prison, which is now torn down, was a stone building, six stories high; but the stories were very low, which made it dark and confined. It was built for a sugar refinery, and its appearance was dark and gloomy, while its small and deep windows gave it the appearance of a prison, which it really was, with a high board fence inclosing a small yard. We found at this time about forty or fifty prisoners, in an emaciated, starving, wretched condition. Their numbers were constantly being diminished by sickness and death, and as constantly increased by the accession of new prisoners, to the number of 400 or 500. Our allowance of provisions was pork and sea biscuit; it would not keep a well man in strength. The biscuit was such as had been wet with sea water and damaged, was full of worms and mouldy. It was our common practice to put water in our camp kettle, then break up the biscuit into it, skim off the worms, put in the pork, and boil it, if we had fuel; but this was allowed us only part of the time; and when we could get no fuel, we ate our meat raw and our biscuit dry. Starved as we were, there was nothing in the shape of food that was rejected or was unpalatable. Crowded together, in bad air and with such diet, it was not strange that disease and pestilence should prevail. I had not been long there before I was taken with the small pox, and taken to the Small Pox Hospital. I had it light, and soon returned to the prison, but not till I had seen it in its most malignant forms. Some of my companions died in that hospital. When I returned to the prison, others of our company had been taken to the different hospitals, from which few returned; I remained in prison for a time, when, from bad air, confinement, and bad diet, I was taken sick, and conveyed to the Quaker Meeting Hospital, so called from its being a Quaker Meeting.

I soon became insensible, and the time passed unconsciously till I began slowly to recover health and strength, and was again permitted to exchange these scenes of disease and death, for the prison. On my return, I found the number of our companions still further reduced by sickness and death. During all this time, an influence was exerted to induce the prisoners to enlist in the Tory regiments. Although our sufferings were intolerable, and the men were urged by those that had been their own townsmen and neighbors, who had joined the British, yet the instances were rare that they could be influenced to enlist. So weeded were they to their principles, that they chose honorable death rather than sacrifice them. I remained in the prison till the 24th of October, when the names of a company of prisoners were taken down, and mine among the rest. It was told us that were going home. We drew our week's provision, which by solicitation we cheerfully divided among our starving associates, whom we were to leave in prison. But whether it was to torment and aggravate our feelings, I know not; but this I do know, that instead of going home, we were taken from the prison, and put on board one of the prison ships (the Good Intent) lying in the North River, and reported there with one week's provision. The scene of starvation and suffering that followed cannot be described; everything was eaten that could appease hunger. From this and other causes, and crowded as we were, with over two hundred in the hold of one ship, enfeebled as we had become, and now reduced by famine, pestilence began to sweep us down, till in less than two months we were reduced by death to scarcely one hundred. In addition to all this, we were treated with the utmost severity and cruelty. In December, when the river began to freeze, our ship was taken round into the Wallabout, where lay the Jersey, another prison ship of horrific memory, whose rotted hulk recently remained to mark the spot where thousands yielded up their lives a sacrifice to British cruelty.

The dead from these ships were thrown into the trenches of our fortifications; and their bones after the war, were collected and decently buried. It was here that EPHRAIM ALLEN exhausted his fund of curses and bitter invectives against the British, as he passed among the prisoners and viewed the loathsome dens of suffering, after his return from his shameful imprisonment in England. Here, again, I was taken sick, and my name taken down to the Hospital. The day before New Year's, the sick were placed in a boat for the city; she had lost a piece of plank from her bottom; but it was filled up with ice, and we were taken in tow. From the motion, the ice soon loosened, and the boat began to leak; and before we had gone far, the sailors inquired if we leaked. Our men, from pride, and not to show fear, replied, but a mere trifle; but they soon perceived our increased heft, pulled hard for a time, and then lay to, until we came up. Our boat was half filled with water. When they saw it, they cursed us, and pulled for the nearest dock, shouting for help. When the boat touched the dock, she struck level with the water, and we held on with our hands to the dock and a small boat by our side to keep from sinking. It was low water, and the sailors reached down from the dock, clenched hold of our hands, and drew us up. I remember that I was drawn up with much violence, that the skin was taken from my chest and stomach. One poor fellow, that could not sit up, we had to haul on the gunnel of the boat, to keep his head out of the water; but he got wet, and died in a few minutes after he was got on shore. We were taken to the Hospital, in Dr. ROGER'S Brick Meeting House, (now Dr. SPRING'S, near the foot of the Park.) From the yard, I carried one end of a bank, from which some person had just died, into the Church, and got into it exhausted and overcome. The head nurse saw my condition. She made me some tea, and pulled the blankets from the sick Irish, regardless of their complaints or curses, and piled them on me, till I sweat profusely, and fell asleep. When I awoke in the morning, they gave me some mulled wine

and water. Wine and some other things were sent in by our Government for the sick; the British furnished nothing. I then lay perfectly easy and free from pain, and it appeared to me that I never was so happy in my life, and yet so weak that I could not get out of my bunk, had it been to save the Union. The Doctor (who was an American Surgeon and a prisoner, had been taken out of the prison, and served in the hospital,) told me that my blood was breaking down and turning to water, from the effect of the small-pox. He said I must have some bitters. I gave him what money I had, and he prepared some for me; and when that was gone, he had the kindness to prepare some for me once or twice at his own expense. I began slowly to gain, and finally to walk about. While standing one day, in March, by the side of the church, in the warm sun, my toes began to sting and pain me excessively. I showed them to the Surgeon when he came in; he laid them open; they had been frozen, and the flesh wasted till only the bone and the tough skin remained. I had now to remain here for a long time on account of my feet. And of all places, that was the last to be coveted; disease and death reigned there in all its terror. I have had men die by the side of me in the night, and have seen fifteen dead bodies sewed up in their blankets, and laid in the corner of the yard, at one time, the product of one twenty-four hours. Every morning at 8 o'clock the dead-cart came, the bodies were put in, the men drew their rum, and the cart was driven off to the trenches of the fortifications that our people had made. Once I was permitted to go with the guard to the place of interment, and never shall I forget the scene that I there beheld; they tumbled them into the ditch, just as it happened, threw on a little dirt, and then away. I could see a hand, a foot, or a part of a head, washed bare by the rains, swollen, blubbery, and falling to decay.

I was now returned to the prison, and from this time forward I enjoyed comfortable health to the close of my imprisonment, which took place in the May following. One day, as I was standing in the yard near the high board fence, a man passed in the street close to the fence, and without stopping or turning his head, said in a low voice: "Gen. BURGOYNE is taken, with all his army; it is a truth, you may depend upon it." Shut out from all information, as we had been, the news was grateful indeed, and cheered us in our wretched prison. Knowing nothing of what was taking place beyond the confines of our miserable abode, we had been left to dark forebodings and fears as to the result of our cause, and the probabilities of our Government being able to exchange or release us. We knew not whether our cause was progressing, or whether resistance was still continued. Our information was obtained only through the exaggerations of British soldiery. But this gave us the sweet consolation that our cause was yet triumphant, and the hope of final liberation. Had our informant been discovered, he might have had to run the gauntlet, or lose his life for his kindness. One day, about the first of May, two officers came into the prison. One of them was a serjeant with the name of WALLY, who had from some cause, and what I never knew, taken a dislike to me; the other was an officer by the name of BLACKGROVE. They told us there was to be an exchange of the oldest prisoners. They began to call the roll. A great many names were called, but no answer given; they had been exchanged by that Being who has power to set the captive free. Here and there was one to step forward. At length my name was called. I attempted to step forward to answer, when Serjeant WALLY turned and frowned upon me with a look of demoniac fury and motioned me back. I dared not answer. All was still. Then other names were called. I felt that live or die, that was the time to speak. I told officer BLACKGROVE that there were but eleven men in prison older than myself. He looked at me, and asked why I did not answer. I told him that I attempted to answer, but Serjeant WALLY stopped me. He turned and looked at him with contempt and then put down my name. But of the twelve taken with me, only two now remained; myself and one other were the only ones to be exchanged. On the 8th of May, we were released from our wretched abode. They, as if to trouble and torment us, took the southern prisoners off toward Boston to be discharged, while the Eastern prisoners were taken to Elizabethtown in the Jersey. From there we went to Newark. Here everything was clad in the beauty of Spring, and appeared so delightful that we could not forbear going out and rolling on the green grass, the luxury appeared so great after a confinement of 14 months in a loathsome prison, clothed in rags and filth, and with associates too numerous and offensive to admit of description. From here we traveled on as fast as our enfeebled powers would permit. We crossed the Hudson at Dobb's Ferry. Here we began to separate, each for his own home. The officers pressed horses and went on. My companion and myself were soon wending our way slowly and alone. As we passed on we saw in the distance two men riding towards us, with each a led horse. It did not take me long to discover the man on a well known horse to be my father, and the other the father of my comrade. The meeting I will not attempt to describe here; but from the nature of the case you may imagine it was an affecting one. And peculiarly so, as my friends had been informed some time before that I had died in prison. They had had prayers offered up, according to the custom of the times, and the family had gone into mourning. They, therefore, felt as if they had received me from the dead. The officers had carried the news of our return, and our friends had ridden all night to meet us. We proceeded on our way, and ere the shades of evening closed around us, we were once more in the bosom of friends, and enjoying the society of those we loved, and the sweets of home. And may my heart ever rise in gratitude to that Being whose preserving care has been over me, and has never forsaken me.

LEVI HANFORD continued in frequent and active service to the close of the war.

Respectfully yours, WM. H. HANFORD.