

This letter, dated November 8, 1777, from General George Washington to General Nelson, was written at a time when the course of the Revolutionary War seemed to be taking a turn for the better, at least in some fronts.

British General William Howe had just taken Philadelphia for his winter quarters, but Washington, camped with his army just twelve miles out of the city at a place called White Marsh, Pennsylvania, had plans to force Howe out, or at least make him “greatly distressed in his Quarters.” Washington was encouraged in his plans by news of the surrender of British General John Burgoyne at Saratoga “in the Northward,” and the colonial army had the Delaware River - Howe’s line of supply - partly blocked by a *chevaux de frise* (stakes driven in the river bottom and other obstacles), and by Forts Mercer and Mifflin.

Several days before Washington’s letter to Nelson, Hessian mercenaries fighting for the British had attempted to take Fort Mercer at the Battle of Redbank, with disastrous result - “Count Donop & about 4 or 500 Hessians were killed and wounded.” About the same time, a fleet of British warships tried to force its way up the Delaware River, but in the attempt to skirt the *chevaux de frise*, two of the British ships were grounded and “the Augusta of 64 & Merlin of 18 Guns were destroyed.”

Encouraged by these victories, Washington put aside the memory of his own recent defeat at Germantown and was preparing for an assault on Howe in Philadelphia when this letter was written. A few days later, Howe attacked him instead. Washington’s troops were forced from their positions at White Marsh but fell back in good order and moved several miles farther out to a place called Valley Forge. Much of the letter is concerned with the lack of supplies and clothing for “our poor ragged and half naked soldiers.” Washington was also distressed by the lack of troops for the Continental Army and the “pernicious” recruiting methods. Washington was reluctant to use militia, apparently suggested by General Nelson, because they were poorly trained and unreliable. At the time Washington wrote the letter, the various states were not very supportive of the Army.

In spite of the condition of the Army, Washington was optimistic, saying, “We must endeavor to deserve better of Providence & I am persuaded she will smile upon us.” He was right, of course, but first Washington had to endure the bitter winter of Valley Forge, almost upon him.

*Camp at White Marsh
12 Miles from Phil 8 Nov 77*

My dear Sir,

Your favor of the 26th ult came to my hand yesterday, & merits my warmest acknowledgements. — The ideas you entertained of our force was. Unhappily, but too well founded; and I now wish I had given more into your generous proposal but the distances and uncertainty of keeping Militia in service any length of time were obstacles which seemed too great to be counterbalanced by the advantages of their coming but the glorious turn which our affairs to the Northward have since taken makes a new plan, and winter campaigns (if we can get our poor ragged & half naked soldiers clothed) indispensably necessary; as I think General Howe may be forced out of Phil or greatly distressed in his quarters there, if we could draw a large body of troops around the City.

The mode by which men have lately been recruited is hurtful in the extreme, and unless a more effectual and less pernicious one can be adopted I do not know where the mischief is to end. — As the Assembly of Virginia is now sitting, I hope some vigorous exertions will be used to compleat the Regiments of the State — and that I add my wishes that it would also contribute its aid towards clothing of them, being well persuaded that unless the several states give their assistance, we shall be in a very unhappy situation shortly. — If our Regiments were once completed & tolerably well armed and clothed, the calls upon Militia afterwards would be rare, and till these measures are accomplished, our expenses will be enormous.

It is in vain to look back at our disappointment on the 4th ult at Germantown — we must endeavour to deserve better of Providence & I am persuaded He will smile upon us. — The rebuff which the enemy met with at Redbank (in which County Donop & about 4 or 500 Hessians were killed & wounded & the Augusta of 64 & Merlin of 18 guns were destroyed, has I dare say, been fully related to you, & renders any acct. of it from me, unnecessary. — The enemy are using every effort for the reduction of those forts & me (are), under present circumstances doing all we can to save them. — The event is left to Heaven. — With compliments to your Lady — in Secretary & etc. I am with sincerest regard & affection

Sir your most obedient servant

G. Washington

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