

**LETTER FROM THE CHIEF OF ENGINEERS
TO THE SECRETARY OF WAR,
CONTAINING A HISTORICAL
SKETCH OF THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS
AND REMARKS UPON ITS
ORGANIZATION AND DUTIES; PP. 1-41**

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Letter from the chief of engineers to the secretary of war, containing a historical sketch of the Corps of engineers and remarks upon its organization and duties; pp. 1-41 by Various

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U.S. Engineers des. f.

LETTER

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HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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REMARKS UPON ITS ORGANIZATION AND DUTIES,

IN

REPLY TO THE CIRCULAR OF SEPTEMBER 4, 1876, INVITING SUGGESTIONS UPON
THE SUBJECTS BEFORE THE COMMISSION FOR THE REFORM
AND REORGANIZATION OF THE ARMY.

WASHINGTON:
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1876.

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS

AND

REMARKS UPON ITS ORGANIZATION AND DUTIES.

HEADQUARTERS CORPS OF ENGINEERS,

Washington, D. C., October 20, 1876.

SIR: Referring to your indorsement of September 4, 1876, upon the proceedings of the commission for the reform and reorganization of the Army of the United States, in which you state you will be pleased to receive any opinions or suggestions of mine touching the subject before the commission, I have the honor to present the following remarks concerning the organization of the Corps of Engineers, introducing the same with historical sketches of the two corps, compiled by Lieut. Col. Thomas L. Casey, Corps of Engineers.

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS.

Upon the breaking out of the war of the Revolution, the country was singularly deficient in persons acquainted with the duties of military engineers.

With the exception of a few who had seen service at Louisburg, Lake George, Ticonderoga, Crown Point and Quebec, and had thus gained some practical experience in the construction, attack, and defense of fortified places, there was scarcely any engineering skill or talents in the patriot service. Nevertheless it was important that such officers should be appointed for the Continental Army, and on the 16th June, 1775, the Continental Congress—

Resolved, That there be one chief engineer at the grand Army, and that his pay be sixty dollars per month.

That two assistants be employed under him, and that the pay of each of them be twenty dollars per month.

That there be one chief engineer for the Army in a separate department, and two assistants under him; that the pay of the chief engineer be sixty dollars per month, and the pay of his assistants each, twenty dollars per month.

The pay given above to the office of chief engineer, and assistant engineer, was the compensation which attached at that time to the grades of colonel and captain respectively, and the officers appointed in the Army under this resolution were commissioned with those ranks respectively, and this practice continued for the first year of the war, but by April, 1776, assistant engineers were commissioned with as high rank as lieutenant-colonel in the Continental establishment.

On the 27th December, 1776, Congress—

Resolved, That General Washington shall be, and he is hereby, vested with full, ample, and complete powers to raise and collect together, in the most speedy and effectual manner, from any or all of these United States, sixteen battalions of infantry, in addition to those already voted by Congress; to appoint officers for the said battalions of infantry; to raise, officer, and equip three thousand light-horse, three regiments of artillery, and a corps of engineers, and to establish their pay. * * * That the foregoing powers be vested in General Washington for and during the term of six months from the date hereof, unless sooner determined by Congress.

Under this law it is probable, that some organization styled a Corps of Engineers, was established in the Army under the rules and regulations of General Washington.

The news of the conflict of the colonies with Great Britain, together with the efforts of our diplomatic agents abroad, soon brought a crowd of foreign officers, principally French, to our shores, some of whom had been educated as military engineers, and were commissioned in our Army as such, and assigned to the various armies and commands as needed. Among the arrivals in the early part of 1777 were four officers from the royal corps of engineers of the French army, who were commissioned, respectively, in the engineers, with the rank, one, of brigadier-general, two, of colonel, and one of lieutenant-colonel, the brigadier-general, *Figure* Louis le ~~Roy~~ du Portail, taking precedence and rank of all other engineers in the service.

The propriety of establishing by law, a Corps of Engineers in the Army, was one of the subjects which attracted the attention of Congress, and, on the 6th March, 1778, a letter, dated the 3d of the same month, from a congressional committee in the camp, inclosing a plan for the establishment of a Corps of Engineers, was received in Congress, but action on the matter was then postponed. On the 27th May, 1778, the following resolution was passed:

Resolved, That in the Engineering Department three companies be established, each to consist of—

	Pay per month.
1 captain	\$50 00
3 lieutenants, each	33 33½
4 sergeants, each	10 00
4 corporals, each	9 00
60 privates, each	8 33½

These companies to be instructed in the fabrication of field-works, as far as relates to the manual and mechanical part. Their business shall be to instruct the fatigue parties to do their duty with celerity and exactness, to repair injuries done to the works by the enemy's fire, and to prosecute works in the face of it.

The commissioned officers to be skilled in the necessary branches of mathematics; the non-commissioned officers to write a good hand.

These were the first companies of engineer troops organized in our service; and although the law for the creation of a Corps of Engineers was still delayed, the fact that at this time the engineers in service

must have had some organization in the form of a corps is apparent from the resolution of April 18, 1778, as follows :

Resolved, That General Washington be authorized and directed forthwith to convene a council, to consist of the major-generals in the State of Pennsylvania and the general officer commanding the Corps of Engineers, and with the advice of the said council to form such a plan for the general operations of the campaign as he shall deem consistent with the welfare of these States.

And also from the resolution of June 13, 1778, namely :

Resolved, That Mons. du Cambray be annexed to the Corps of Engineers commanded by Brigadier du Portail, with the rank and pay of a lieutenant-colonel.

On the 11th March, 1779, the following resolutions constituting a Corps of Engineers were passed in Congress :

Resolved, That the engineers in the service of the United States shall be formed in a corps and styled the "Corps of Engineers," and shall take rank and enjoy the same rights, honors, and privileges with the other troops in the Continental establishment.

That a commandant of the Corps of Engineers shall be appointed by Congress, to whom their orders or those of the Commander-in-Chief shall be addressed, and such commandant shall render to the Commander-in-Chief, and to the Board of War, an account of every matter relative to his department.

That the engineers shall rank in their own corps according to the dates of their respective commissions.

That every year, previous to the opening of the campaign, the commandant of the corps shall propose to the Commander-in-Chief, and to the Board of War, such a disposition of the engineers as he shall judge most advantageous, according to the knowledge which he is supposed to have of their talents and capacity.

Resolved, That the Board of War be empowered and directed to form such regulations for the Corps of Engineers and companies of sappers and miners as they judge most conducive to the public service, and that this board report such allowances as they judge adequate and reasonable to be made to the officers of the Corps of Engineers for traveling charges, and when on command at a distance from camp, or in places where they cannot draw rations.

On the 11th of May, 1779, the following resolutions concerning the engineers were passed :

Resolved, That the pay and subsistence of the engineers, and of the officers and men of the companies of sappers and miners, shall be the same with those of officers of the like rank, and of the men, in the artillery of these States.

That Brig. Gen. du Portail be appointed commandant of the Corps of Engineers and companies of sappers and miners.

Under the operations of these laws, the Corps of Engineers, with its companies of sappers and miners, served in the armies during the war of the Revolution, with efficiency and distinction, and numbers of its officers were brevetted by Congress for their distinguished services. The commandant of the corps was especially rewarded, as appears from the resolution of November 16, 1781, as follows :

Resolved, That Brig. Gen. du Portail, commanding officer of the Corps of Engineers, in consideration of his meritorious services, and particularly of his distinguished conduct in the siege of York, in the State of Virginia, be, and he is hereby, promoted to the rank of major-general.

It is difficult to enumerate the officers composing the Corps of Engineers in the Army of the Revolution, but it is believed that it did not

contain, outside of the companies of sappers and miners, any officer of a lower grade than captain. The names of one brigadier-general and commandant of the corps, of six colonels, of eight lieutenant-colonels, of three majors, and of ten captains, have been recovered. There is no question but that the corps was larger than the numbers given above.

In November of 1783, this Corps of Engineers and its companies of sappers and miners, were disbanded, and mustered out of service, having agreed to accept the commutation of five years' pay in lieu of the half-pay for life; and while many of the foreign officers returned to their homes in Europe, a number remained in the United States and became citizens of the country.

During the period which elapsed between the close of the revolutionary war, and the inauguration of the Government in 1789 under the present Constitution, nothing occurred which required the employment of military engineers.

As early, however, as 1789, in the plan submitted by the Secretary of War, General Henry Knox, to the President, for the general arrangement of the military forces of the country, there was recommended, as a part of the military establishment of the United States, "a small corps of well-disciplined and well-informed artillerists and engineers."

Under pressure of the relations existing between this country and the principal European countries, and the message of President Washington of December 3, 1793, Congress, on the 20th March, 1794, authorized the President to fortify certain harbors along the coast, and the next day appropriated funds for the same. There were no engineers in the Army to carry on these works, and so the President directed the temporary appointment of a number of engineers, to design and superintend the construction of the works, dividing the coast up into districts, and appointing one or more engineers for each district.

The gentlemen appointed to these positions were foreign-born, and a number of them had been in the Corps of Engineers of the revolutionary army. Among those appointed may be mentioned—

Stephen Rochefontaine,
 Charles Vincent,
 Peter Charles L'Enfant,
 John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi,
 John Vermonet,
 Nicholas Francis Martinon,
 Paul Hyacinthe Perrault,

who were appointed for, and entered upon, the discharge of this duty, between the 25th of March and 12th of May of the year 1794.

On the 9th May, 1794, Congress passed an act providing for raising and organizing, for a term of three years, a corps of artillerists and engineers, to be incorporated with the corps of artillery in service, the entire number to consist of 992 rank and file.

The organization to be as follows:

1 lieutenant-colonel, commandant.

1 adjutant.

1 surgeon.

4 battalions.

4 majors.

4 adjutants and paymasters.

4 surgeon's mates.

16 companies, each to consist of—

1 captain.

2 lieutenants.

2 cadets; 4 sergeants; 4 corporals; 42 privates, sappers and miners; 10 artificers; and 2 musicians.

The Secretary at War was to provide the necessary books, instruments, and apparatus for the use and benefit of the corps, and the President was authorized to employ such proportions of said corps, in the field, on the frontiers, or in the fortification of the sea-coasts, as he might deem consistent with the public service.

The filling up, and organization of the corps was at once commenced. It was stationed at West Point, and at the same time a military school at that place was organized; but the apparatus and books were burned in 1796, and the school suspended until 1801, when it was revived and placed under the direction of Major Jonathan Williams, of the 2d Regiment of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers. The organization of the corps was completed by the spring of 1795, Stephen Rochefontaine being appointed the lieutenant-colonel and commandant, and Henry Burbeck, Louis Tousard, J. J. U. Rivardi, and Constant Freeman the majors. It will be seen from this list, that several of the temporary engineers engaged upon the fortification of the coast, were commissioned in the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers, and as long as this corps existed, there were always a number of its officers engaged exclusively upon the construction and repair of the sea-coast works. Some of the companies were in garrison in the fortifications, but the main body was at West Point.

By the act of March 3, 1795, the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers was continued indefinitely, and its completion authorized.

By the act of May 30, 1796, to ascertain and fix the military establishment of the United States, the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers was to form part of the same, and it was to be completed in conformity to the organic act of 1794.

Laincourt, who visited West Point in 1796, states, that he found at that place four battalions of artillerists and engineers, composed of about two hundred and fifty men each, mostly made up of foreigners. But ten officers were present, representing "all nations."

The threatened disturbances with France continuing, a second regiment of artillerists and engineers was authorized by the act of April 27, 1798. By its terms, the regiment was to consist of—

1 lieutenant-colonel, commandant.

1 adjutant.

1 surgeon.

3 battalions.

3 majors.

3 adjutants and paymasters.

3 surgeon's mates.

12 companies, each to consist of—

1 captain.

2 lieutenants.

2 cadets; 4 sergeants; 4 corporals; 42 privates, sappers and miners; 10 artificers; and 2 musicians.

It was placed upon the same footing precisely as the first regiment raised, and was to be supplied with the same books and apparatus, and to do duty in the same places, and times, as were prescribed for the former.

The officers were appointed to rank from June 1, 1798, and John Doughty, was appointed the lieutenant-colonel and commandant of the regiment; Benjamin Brooks, Adam Hoops, and Daniel Jackson, being the majors.

By the act of July 16, 1798, to augment the Army of the United States, the President was authorized to appoint a number not exceeding four teachers of the arts and sciences, necessary for the instruction of the artillerists and engineers.

There was also authorized by this act an inspector of artillery, to be taken from the line of artillerists and engineers.

The recommendations leading to the above legislation will be found in an extract of a letter from the Secretary of War (James McHenry) to the Hon. Samuel Sewell, chairman of the Committee of Defense, &c., dated War Department, June 28, 1798, as follows:

3d. The act providing for raising and organizing a corps of artillerists and engineers, and the act to provide an additional regiment of the same, both enjoin the procurement at the public expense of all necessary books, instruments, and apparatus, for the benefit of the said respective regiments.

The Secretary, without designing to derogate from the merits of the officers appointed to the corps established by the acts cited, feels it his duty to suggest, that other and supplementary means of instruction to the books and instruments to be provided, appear to be absolutely indispensable to enable them to acquire a due degree of knowledge in the objects of their corps. It is certain that the best faculties and inclinations for the arts and sciences cannot be unfolded, and applied to useful purposes, when proper encouragement and assistance have been denied or neglected.

The art of fortification is connected with so many others, is of such extent, and its operations dependent on, and affected by circumstances so infinitely varied, that it is impossible any man can be rendered master of it by experience alone. Besides, the knowledge acquired by experience is often the result of our own faults, and acquired by a heavy, and it may be, in this art, disastrous expense to the public.

It is certainly to be wished that more attention had been paid to this subject, and that past recommendations had found a favorable access to the ear of Congress.

If the present moment does not admit of carrying into effect all that is desirable, and ought, under different circumstances, to be done, to create a body of qualified and