

**A BRIEF NARRATIVE OF
THE RAVAGES OF THE
BRITISH AND HESSIANS
AT PRINCETON IN 1776-77**

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A Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1776-77 by
Varnum Lansing Collins

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VARNUM LANSING COLLINS

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A

BRIEF NARRATIVE

OF THE

Ravages of the British and Hessians

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

AT PRINCETON IN 1776-77

A CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLES
OF TRENTON AND PRINCETON

EDITED BY

VARNUM LANSING COLLINS

Reference Librarian of Princeton University

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EXCHANGE

M. N. W.

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INTRODUCTION

THE manuscript which is here printed for the first time was purchased in 1901 by the Library of Princeton University at the sale of the late General William Scudder Stryker's collection. It had been given to General Stryker by Governor Charles S. Olden of New Jersey who believed it to have been handed down in his family from the day of its composition a hundred and thirty years ago. It consists of twenty-four folio numbered pages, the final paragraph of which was written on April 18, 1777. The manuscript is brown with age and has suffered severely from exposure and careless handling. It has been folded in the middle and the outer leaves have crumbled along the fold, while the upper right-hand quarters of the first and last leaves are wanting altogether, causing gaps in the first two and last two pages. The handwriting is well formed and regular, and is evidently that of an old man. The document is unsigned.

General Stryker, who in his *History of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton* was the first to note in print the existence of the manuscript, followed the Olden family tradition by referring to it as the "diary of Thomas Olden of Princeton." Mr. Olden lived in the little frame house which is locally well known as the lodge of "Drumthwacket," the residence today of M. Taylor Pyne, Esq., and formerly of Governor Olden.

It is not pleasant to destroy family tradition; but the fact is that the first page of the Narrative—it is not a diary—

contains the proof that Thomas Olden did not write it. For there the author plainly states that in the winter of 1776-77 he was in his eighty-fifth year; and according to indisputable family records Thomas Olden was born in 1735, and therefore could not have been more than forty-one or forty-two at the time in question. This of itself is sufficient to put him out of court as the author. But a second bit of internal evidence also discredits the traditional view. It will be noticed that although a large part of the Narrative is devoted to an account of the damage done to property in and around Princeton, the author does not mention any losses he himself sustained. Now Thomas Olden did suffer at the hands of the British and Hessians and his claim is duly filed in the Middlesex County Book of Damages preserved in the State Library at Trenton, N. J. If he were the author of the Narrative his omission to mention his own losses would be inexplicable.

The impossibility of admitting Mr. Olden's authorship is the more regrettable to me because every effort to supply his place has proved unavailing. The author's allusions to himself are so vague that no clue has been found satisfactory, and I fear that until some well authenticated manuscript turns up in the handwriting of the present document the latter's authorship must remain a mystery.

The Narrative throws no specially new light on the battles of Trenton and Princeton. Its author was not present at the former and witnessed but the beginning of the latter. His account of the Trenton affair is made up from second-hand information. He watched the Princeton fight from his own door until the ubiquitous shot compelled him to take refuge in his cellar. It may be noted that he was not living in the same house when he wrote his story. (Cf. pp. 4, 15, 17 and 21 of his MS.) The Narrative is valuable chiefly as a

firsthand account of the conditions prevailing in Princeton and its vicinity during the "twenty-six days tyranny" of British and Hessian occupation; and its comments on the causes leading to the Revolution and on the methods adopted by Great Britain for suppressing it represent very accurately the views entertained by the majority of the intelligent agricultural population of New Jersey. The author was a man of very fair education and probably was a farmer; he knew his Bible well; he read the newspapers and at least some of the pamphlet literature of the day; and his knowledge of American colonial history was accurate. He was a man of high ideals, honest thinking, grim humor and rugged speech; and he had many friends. His style shows the faults of that of any old man whose profession has not been the scribe's; his thoughts often run away with his pen. But after all he waxes rhetorical only once or twice and in the main his story is told simply and in homely language. That it is a severe arraignment of the conduct of the British and their mercenaries is not surprising, but considering how warmly its author felt its tone is remarkably calm. He has made no effort at fine writing but scattered through his pages are unconscious touches of striking power. For instance, his very casual allusion to the scene at his cottage after the battle is one that sticks in the mind—the house filled and surrounded by American soldiers, some laughing outright, others in their weariness only smiling, all of them hungry and thirsty, Washington himself "on horseback at the door," ".....and not a man among them but showed Joy in his countenance." No wonder the old blood tingled in his veins.

The manuscript is printed as written, spelling and punctuation—or rather the lack of it—being carefully observed.