TENCH TILGHMAN – Aide-de-Camp

By: John Whiteside

George Washington was fond of many of his aides-de-camp, but in Tench Tilghman, he found his trusted favorite. The Tilghman family were early colonial residents in Talbot County, Maryland, in what is now known as Tilghman Island, MD. Tench Tilghman was born on Christmas day, 1744 and was given his first name from the maiden name of his mother. His father, James, was a lawyer and was well connected with George Washington. Tench was sent to Philadelphia by his maternal grandfather to attend college at the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania). Following graduation in 1761, Tench Tilghman began working with his uncle, Tench Francis, Jr., in the mercantile business in Philadelphia.

Despite being raised in a family who had divided loyalties as the Revolutionary War neared, Tench found himself on the side of the patriots. After the 1775 battles at Lexington and Concord, Tilghman resigned his position in his uncle's business and volunteered with a light infantry company in Philadelphia. He was also appointed by the Continental Congress to a commission established to form treaties with the Six Nations of Indian tribes. In 1776 he was commissioned as a captain in the Pennsylvania Battalion of Flying Camp. He would soon find himself at war against the British in New York by August, 1776. While there, he met George Washington, who promptly appointed Tilghman as an aide-de-camp,without pay. Tilghman would be by the general's side throughout the New Jersey campaign of 1776, including the surprise battle at Trenton.

Tench Tilghman would accompany the Continental Army to Philadelphia and would serve at Washington's side during all battles leading up to the winter encampment at Valley Forge. Arriving there on December 19, 1777, Tilghman would see an order for battle in Washington's papers dated December 25, 1777, where the general had composed an extensive plan to attack Philadelphia by surprise, assuming that General Howe and the British would not be expecting it. Washington never did implement his attack plans. However, Tilghman and General Stirling joked that they might ignite a huge bonfire at Valley Forge, just as a reminder to the British that they were still there.

More importantly, Tilghman would become aware of the efforts of generals Thomas Mifflin

and Horatio Gates to replace Washington as Commander-in Chief. He made his knowledge about what has been called the Conway Cabal known to others, taking care to support his general, even though those tacit plans never materialized. In February, 1778, while on a foraging mission to Trenton for the army, Tilghman discovered a quantity of grain and enough cattle to support the feeding of the troops at Valley Forge for a short time. That find, in concert with the grand forage operation led by generals Greene and Wayne that same month, brought great relief to the starving soldiers.

After Washington departed Valley Forge on June 19, 1778, the Continental Army would meet the British in battle at Monmouth, N. J. During a pivotal point in the battle as the British were gaining strength and outmaneuvering the Americans, Tilghman advised Washington that he knew of a soldier with excellent knowledge of the local terrain. Tilghman found the soldier and brought him to Washington, eventually turning the tide of battle in favor of the Continental Army. Tilghman would continue to serve with Washington until the surrender at Yorktown. Washington gave Tilghman the great honor of taking the details of Cornwallis' surrender to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in October, 1781.

Following the war, Tilghman married his first cousin, Anna Maria Tilghman, and they had two daughters. He returned to the mercantile business for a brief time, but began suffering with a recurring liver ailment. He would pass away from his illness on April 18, 1786 in Chestertown, MD. Upon learning of his death, Washington wrote to Tilghman's family saying, "That of all the numerous acquaintances of your lately deceased son, and amidst all the sorrowing's that are mingled on that melancholy occasion, I may venture to assert that none could have felt his death with more regret than I did. No one entertained a higher opinion of his worth, or had imbibed sentiments of greater friendship for him than I had done."

He remains were reinterred from Old St. Paul's Church, Baltimore, MD on November 30, 1971 and reinterred at the historic cemetery in Oxford, MD.

Sources:

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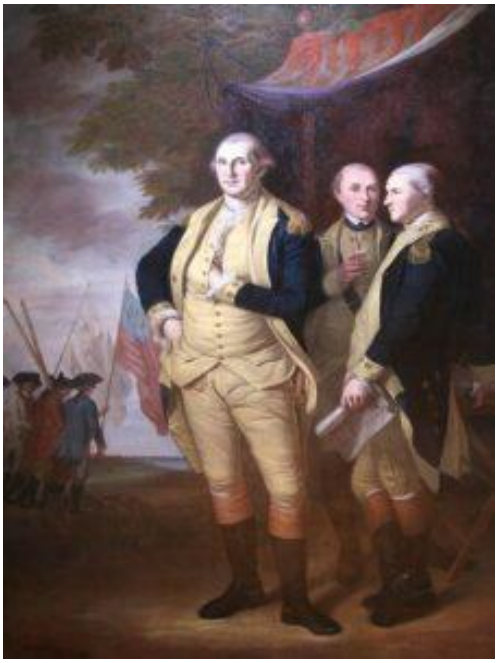

Washington, Lafayette & Tilghman (R), Yorktown. Courtesy Maryland Historical Society

Charles Willson Peale, 1784

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