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The Battle of Germantown:
A Forgotten Fight for Philadelphia and Freedom
Tony Giammarco

Throughout the past three years, my teammates and I have crossed streets and fields that have bore witness and stood as seldom noticed monuments to an event that has helped to define our nation's momentous past. As a member of the LaSalle University Cross-Country Team, our daily routine, a brisk nine-mile run, takes us through the heart of historic Germantown. Turning left from Belfield Avenue, we begin our ascent up Church Lane. Reaching its summit, we then make a right onto the cobblestones of Germantown Avenue. After another quick left, we find ourselves on Schoolhouse Lane and on our way to the wooded trails of Valley Green. On the way to our final destination, we cross streets named Greene, Wayne, and Cliveden. Although my teammates and I have made this trek countless times, I wonder if any of them realize the historical significance of their surroundings. Do any of them take into consideration the great sacrifices made by many men their age upon the streets that they now shuffle along? Unfortunately, I fear the answer to this question is no.

The Germantown of today looks little like it did during the late 18th century. Now expanding on both sides of Germantown Avenue for miles, the once small village has grown to a small city within a city. Choked with buses and strangled with decrepit row homes, the image of Washington and Howe's Germantown, with its stately stone mansions, rich farmland, and vast orchards, has been lost forever. More importantly, and perhaps more disturbing, the very events that took place in Germantown, which helped to shape the outcome of the American Revolution, might very well be lost as well, hidden under the trash and blocked from view by the burnt out buildings that cover modern day Germantown.

Although there are few plaques or statues commemorating the events of October 4, 1777, the blood spilt by American patriots on the streets and fields of Germantown is no less significant than that of more heralded places like Bunker Hill or Yorktown. In the early morning hours of October 4, over 200 years ago, American forces, of both the Continental army and militia, valiantly attacked encamped British and Hessian troops. For hours, the American forces struggled against the early morning darkness, fog, and unfamiliar terrain in a courageous attempt to dislodge the British and Hessian troops stationed at Germantown. Ultimately, the outcome of the battle was unfavorable for the Americans. However, even in defeat, the brash and tireless American forces displayed to the world that their farmer led uprising was for real.

Outnumbered and poorly equipped, the American army could have never

defeated the British without foreign assistance. The Battle of Germantown, along with the American victory at Saratoga, secured a Franco-American alliance that proved absolutely crucial for the success of the American Revolution. For this reason, the events leading up to and of the Battle of Germantown must be brought to light. History has proven to be unkind to the soldiers that fought and died at Germantown, little has been written in textbooks and even less has been discussed in schools across the country about the battle. Any individual that takes pride in the actions and sacrifices made by patriotic Americans throughout the centuries on days like October 19, 1781, July 4, 1863, or June 6, 1944, must be properly informed about the events of October 4, 1777.

By 1777, the Americans and British has tasted both victory and defeat. The Americans, under the generalship of George Washington, had been decimated at Brooklyn, but had also scored opportunistic victories at Princeton and Trenton. As for the British, after experiencing early troubles at Lexington and Concord, they had rallied to capture strategically important New York City. Prior to spending the winter of 1776-1777 in the comfort of New York City, the British had devised a plan that they believed would win the war. Their plan called for the isolation of various regions throughout the country. General Burgoyne, commanding the British army of the North, would march down from Canada in an attempt to capture Albany in order to isolate New England. While Burgoyne made his way towards Albany, the British Southern army, under General Howe, would attempt to secure Philadelphia. The British believed that if the capital was under occupation and New England isolated, the Americans would lose their will to fight and surrender. (Jackson, 3)

While the British prepared to implement what they believed to be their war ending campaign of 1777, Washington and his army spent the winter of 1776-1777 in the less hospitable confines of Morristown, New Jersey, vigilantly watching the British forces in New York City. Sensing a British invasion sweeping down from Canada, General Gates and the Northern army prepared to meet Burgoyne in upstate New York. By June of 1777, Howe had not yet departed New York City for Philadelphia. Parliament, becoming increasingly weary of the American rebellion and its costs, desired a hasty conclusion to the conflict. Hoping to fulfill King George III and Parliament's wishes, Howe finally set off for Philadelphia. (Jackson, 5)

As the British were boarding ships in Sandy Hook, New Jersey destined for the Chesapeake Bay area, Washington was already aware of their movement, but not their destination. He later received information that the British 256-ship flotilla, the largest ever assembled in America, was sailing south down the Atlantic coast. Maintaining the British within sight for most of their journey, Washington's 11,000-man army humped their way from northern New Jersey to

Wilmington, Delaware, approximately 20 miles south of Philadelphia. After several miserable weeks at sea, Howe and 17,000 British troops landed at Head of Elk, Maryland. In an attempt to save time lost at sea, Howe quickly organized his army for their march north towards Philadelphia. During all this excitement, a nervous Continental Congress, residing in Philadelphia, watched, waited, and listened while Washington scrambled to position his troops between Howe and the city. (Jackson, 7)

For weeks after their landing, the British made their way north from Maryland towards Philadelphia. Small groups of militia confronted the British along their journey and only a few light skirmishes broke out. Easily sweeping past the bands of militia, the British continued their drive towards the American capital. However, on September 11, British and American forces clashed along the Brandywine Creek in Pennsylvania. The plan was to confront and defeat the British before they ever reached Philadelphia. Unfortunately, the Americans were unsuccessful in thwarting the British advance towards the city. After the engagement, the British encamped on the battlefield as the Americans regrouped and fled for Chester, Pennsylvania. Finding little refuge in Chester and in no condition for another battle, Washington and his battered army crossed the Schuylkill River and marched along its east bank to the Falls of Schuylkill near Germantown. Guarding against a British surprise attack, General Wayne and a detachment of 1500 troops remained on the west side of the Schuylkill. With Philadelphia's comforting church steeples in sight and only a few miles down river, Washington's troops begrudgingly followed Washington north along the river. (Gifford, 69)

Washington ordered Wayne and his men to cut off the British baggage train and to harass the British rear guard. By September 20, Wayne, believing his position was undetected by the British, planned an attack for the next day. Unfortunately for Wayne and his troops, his position was given away by the smoke of their campfires and by Tory farmers. (Gifford, 75) British forces, under General Grey, stealthily approached the small group of unsuspecting American troops. General Grey ordered his men to use only swords and bayonets in an attempt not to give away their position with loud volleys of musket fire. The Americans were taken completely by surprise and suffered heavy losses. Although many troops were taken prisoner, the British use of the bayonet, which the Americans considered somewhat barbaric, led the public to perceive the incident as a massacre. (Gifford, 76)

Following what came to be known as the Paoli Massacre, the British were able to move virtually unmolested up and down the banks of the Schuylkill River. On September 26, British and Hessian forces paraded into Philadelphia. Writing in her diary, British Loyalist and Philadelphia resident, Sarah Fisher remarked that she "rose very early this morning in hopes of seeing a most pleasing sight ... First came the light horse, led among by Enoch Story and

Phineas Bond, as the soldiers were unacquainted with the town and the different streets, nearly 200 I imagine in number, clean dress and their bright swords glittering in the sun. After that came the foot, headed by Lord Cornwallis. Before him went a band of music, which played a solemn tune and which I afterward understood was called "God Save great George our King." Then followed the soldiers, who looked very clean and healthy and a remarkable solidity was on their countenances, no wanton levity, or indecent mirth, but a gravity well becoming the occasion seemed on all their faces. After that came the artillery and then the Hessian grenadiers." (Gifford, 85)

Meanwhile, Washington, after receiving several thousand reinforcements, moved his army from Schwenksville, Pennsylvania, down the Skippack Road and encamped sixteen miles from Germantown. Determined to attack the British army at Germantown, Washington called a Council of War on September 28. By a vote of ten to five, Washington's council suggested that the army should move within twelve miles of Germantown to await more reinforcements. (Jackson, 29) Then, on October 2, Washington received very favorable information. He learned that Howe had sent 3000 men to Elkton in an attempt to gather supplies and another 3000 men were in Philadelphia under Cornwallis. In addition, the 10th and 42nd Regiment had been sent into New Jersey in order to capture a fort along the Delaware River. The council, upon receiving this information, decided that it was now time to attack Howe. (Gifford, 86)

Washington designed a plan that called for a four-pronged attack against Howe's position in Germantown. Although impressive on paper, his plan was extremely complicated and a bit naive. Washington's plan called for: "The Divisions of Sullivan and Wayne, flanked by Conway's Brigade, were to enter the Town by way of Chestnut Hill, while General Armstrong, with the Pennsylvania Militia should fall down the Manatawny Road by Vanderings Mill and get upon the Enemy's left and rear. The Divisions of Greene and Stephen, flanked by McDougal's Brigade, were to enter by taking a circuit by way of the Lime Kiln Road at the Market House and to attack their Right wing, and the Militia of Maryland and Jersey under Generals Smallwood and Foreman were to march by the Old York road and fall upon the rear of their right. Lord Stirling with Nash and Maxwell's Brigades was to form a Corps de Reserve. (Jackson, 31) In order for the plan to be successful, Washington's four columns had to travel great distances in darkness and over unfamiliar territory, separated by miles, with no form of communication, and arrive at their destinations simultaneously within two miles of the British pickets. Due to the inexperience of the American troops and officers, successfully implementing this plan was virtually impossible. (Gifford, 87) At seven o'clock in the evening on October 3, the American forces began to march

along their various routes towards Germantown. For days prior to the battle, Washington has sent out mounted patrols to harass British outposts. Washington hoped that because of these mounted patrols, the appearance of American forces on October 3 would not create undue alarm within the British ranks. Unfortunately, before the first shots were even fired, the Americans suffered a huge setback. The Maryland and New Jersey militias, under Smallwood and Foreman, perhaps confused by the unfamiliar terrain, wandered aimlessly along Old York Road. Their meandering cost so much time that their arrival at Germantown was too late to be a factor in the battle. (Jackson, 32)

Despite this setback, the Americans were able to capture the upper hand during the early stages of the battle. General Conway's brigade was the first to engage the British at Mt. Airy. Their attack forced the British back, but not before their field guns alarmed the remainder of the British forces in Germantown. (Gifford, 88) After a brief British counterattack, Wayne's division, eager to avenge the Paoli Massacre, began to cut down scores of British troops. The British began to retreat while Wayne's men gave chase. Later, Wayne wrote: "Our people, remembering the action of the night of the 20th of September, pushed on with their bayonets, and took ample vengeance for that night's work. Our officers exerted themselves to save an many of the poor wretches, but to little purpose; the rage and fury of the soldiers were not to be restrained for some time, at least not until great numbers of the enemy fell by their bayonets. (Gifford, 89)

As the frightened and confused British scampered back towards Germantown, Colonel Musgrave, along with 120 British troops barricaded themselves in Benjamin Chew's country house, Cliveden. The events that followed proved to be the turning point of the battle. Musgrave and his men closed the heavy wooden shutters and gathered every available piece of furniture in front of the house's doorways. A few British troops were posted by the doorway on the first floor while the remainder of the men crouched below windows on the upper floors. After Musgrave delivered an impassioned speech, the British troops prepared to defend their "castle" against an impending American siege. (Gifford, 90)

Re-enactment of the battle of Germantown



At this point during the battle, a heavy fog descended upon the low-lying village of Germantown and the surrounding area. Stumbling their way through the thick mixture of fog and smoke, General Sullivan's division made their way past the virtual British fortress at Cliveden and began firing at every moving apparition that appeared or was believed to have appeared. Angered by this wasteful use of precious ammunition, Washington sent Timothy Pickering to settle down Sullivan and his men. After meeting with Sullivan, Pickering made his way back to Washington and discovered Musgrave and his men inside the Chew house. Pickering delivered the information of his discovery to Washington and advised him to leave a small detachment behind to deal with Musgrave and his men. On the contrary, General Henry Knox told Washington "It would be unmilitary to leave a castle in our rear." (Gifford, 91)

Despite Pickering's pleas, Washington was persuaded by Knox. Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Smith of Virginia volunteered to deliver the summons of surrender to Musgrave. Unfortunately, while carrying a flag of truce, Smith was cut down by a British musket ball. Enraged, the Americans quickly surrounded Cliveden while Knox positioned artillery pieces directly in front of the house. A hail of musket balls and grape pounded Cliveden's formidable stonewalls and blasted through its wooden shutters and doors. However, the British remained inside. While British blood splattered the interior walls and spilt on the floor, the blood of Americans painted the lawn surrounding the house a deep red. Whether attempting to enter the house or trying to light it on fire, courageous Americans were cut down by British troops raining fire down from Cliveden's upper floors. (Gifford, 94)



Cliveden (Cliveden of the National Trust)

Washington's decision to attempt to dislodge the British from Cliveden cost precious time and valuable American lives. Meanwhile, Sullivan and his men made their way towards the British center on the west side of Germantown

Road (now Germantown Avenue) as Wayne and his men traveled down the eastside. Due to the heavy fog, both Sullivan and Wayne made their way past Cliveden without noticing the battle that raged around it. At the same time, General Greene, along with two-thirds of the American army, had already reached the British center at Market House. (Gifford, 95) Unfortunately, General Adam Stephen, who was reported to have been drunk at the time of the battle, diverted his force away from Greene's right wing and started towards the noise coming from Cliveden. Amidst the thick fog, Stephen's men encountered Wayne's force and began to fire upon them, mistaking them for the British.

Believing to be under heavy enemy fire, Wayne's division broke ranks and began to flee. Pushing their way forward, Sullivan's men battled their way towards the British center to meet up with Greene. Unfortunately, Sullivan and his men ran out of ammunition and were forced to join Wayne in retreat. Instead of chasing after the retreating Americans, the British decided to focus their attention on Greene. (Gifford, 96) Despite many setbacks, Greene and his men were fighting very well. If Sullivan and Wayne remained in the fight, the Americans would have been able to pin the British against the banks of the Schuylkill River. Instead, with Sullivan and Wayne being forced to retreat, the British were able to muster their full force against Greene. Hungry, tired, and short of ammunition, Greene and his men began a fighting retreat. (Gifford, 97) Despite encouraging pleas from Washington, the inexperienced American forces were unable to reorganize for a counterattack. At this point, realizing defeat, Washington reluctantly sent out couriers to all commands ordering a general withdrawal. (Gifford, 101)

After the battle, the British remained in Germantown while the Americans retreated towards Schwenksville. The victorious British reported 4 officers and 66 men killed, 30 officers, and 396 men wounded, and 1 officer and 13 men missing. The defeated Americans reported 30 officers and 122 men killed, 117 officers and 404 men wounded, and approximately 400 missing. Although the British were victorious, the battle proved to be an ultimate success for the Americans. News of the battle spread to Europe and more importantly France. The French, covertly supporting the Americans with supplies throughout the war, were now leaning towards openly supporting the weary Americans. (Jackson, 50)

By late 1777, the French had received news about both Germantown and Saratoga and they were very pleased with what they heard. French diplomats learned that in the north, General Gates had surrounded General Burgoyne and forced his surrender. They believed that this victory had raised American spirits throughout the continent and had disheartened the British. (Murphy, 58) The French also believed that Washington scored a near victory at Germantown.

French diplomats were told that if the smoke and fog had not created disorder amongst the American forces, the British would have been defeated. More important to the French, the Battle of Germantown demonstrated that the British attempt to crush the Americans during the campaign of 1777 was a failure in the northern as well as the central theaters of the war. The battle also displayed that the Americans would be a welcomed addition to the French who were preparing to make the Revolutionary War a world war. (Murphy, 64)

A young British officer, Wilfred Owen, once penned these poetic words shortly before his death in the First World War:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace /
Behind the wagon that we flung him in, /
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, /
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; /
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood /
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, /
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud /
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues- /
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest /
To children ardent for some desperate glory, /
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est /
Pro patria mori. (Kennedy and Gioia, 41)

This old line that Owen refers to in Latin at the closing of his poem is "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." The Americans that fell and bled the ground red along the streets of Germantown believed in this ancient Latin axiom. They felt that the ultimate sacrifice they were laying before the altar of freedom would make their home a better place to live in for the one they loved. What they did not realize was the fact that their sacrifices would help to create a country that would become a beacon for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

October 4, 1777 was a huge milestone in the life of young America. Throughout the colonies, there was a belief that the revolution would be a success. Many Americans believed that they could fight toe to toe with the British, however, most of Europe did not. The Battle of Germantown changed the opinions of many Europeans and the Americans quickly garnered the respect and admiration of many foreign nations. If the events of October 4 had never taken place, the Americans might have found themselves fighting a war against a world power by themselves, hopelessly outnumbered and under supplied. Fortunately, the Battle of Germantown was fought and the heroic sacrifices made by many Americans on that day changed the course of the war and American history forever.

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