

Sir Billy, Mrs. Loring and the Battle of the Kegs:

A light hearted look at the Pennsylvania Campaign

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Phil Weaver

It was the winter of 1778. The weather was bitter cold. General George Washington's army was encamped at a place called Valley Forge. The small wooden huts they had built were of little comfort to men who had only threadbare blankets to keep warm, and little else. Many a soldier upon considering this predicament chose to terminate his enlistment rather than remain in the army and freeze his you know what. To almost die of smallpox the previous winter at Morristown and then slowly freeze to death in Pennsylvania was not very practical. To say the least, the morale of the Continental Army was at an all-time low.

Meanwhile the British main army had taken up residence in the city of Philadelphia (the Continental Congress had decided it was better to hold their sessions in York, PA.). They were aware the Americans were catching frostbite only a few miles away. They also knew of the constant raids being performed to get needed provisions, but no matter. Any trouble of this sort could be handled by the few pickets around the city. As far as the Redcoats were concerned, it was far better to be quartered in a wealthy Loyalist's house, in one of the finest colonial cities, than be bothered with such trifling problems, especially if that loyalist had a pretty daughter.

Among those who felt that way was General Sir William Howe, the supreme commander of all the British forces and their allies. He had decided it would be much better to winter in beautiful downtown



Philly, than to go and take on the shivering Americans in one final battle. You see, Howe, known jeeringly as "Sir Billy," liked the Americans. General George Howe, his older brother, was killed during the French and Indian War. Many New Englanders contributed funds to help raise a statue in his honor in the motherland. They treated Billy as a hero for his part in the same conflict. It was in poor taste to fight such wonderful people. He and his other brother, Lord Admiral Richard Howe, better known as "Black Dick," both pleaded with Ben Franklin to have the colonists stop the insurrection before it got out of hand. Franklin refused, of course.

While in Boston, Billy led the troops in the assault on Bunker (actually Breed's)

Hill and ever since that carnage; he never again would attack the Americans if he thought they were *dug in*. This time was no exception. His officers and men liked the comfort of Philadelphia; their morale was flying high (probably because they were). Besides, he had left General Henry Clinton to perform his part of the fabled “*Three Pronged Attack*” to split New York, in order to occupy Philadelphia. He might as well enjoy it—and did he!

The reason for Billy’s contentment was a handsome young woman named Elizabeth Loring. Mrs. Loring and the General had met in Boston just after Bunker Hill. Their torrid affair lasted throughout his service in *the “American War.”* Her husband, Joshua, naturally wasn’t keen on the idea, but his reservations about the happy couple’s carrying on were soon put to rest.

Joshua was a gambler and at one point actually left Betsy to seek his fortune. As part of a gambling debt, he obtained a job as High Sheriff. In the tradition of the Sheriff of Nottingham his new position allowed him free claim to the possessions and property of the unfortunate, especially in a civil war like the American Revolution. In order to keep Joshua quiet, Billy, reportedly at Betsy’s insistence, put him in charge of all prisoners of war. This gave him *carte blanche* to a virtual fortune. Joshua could milk every shilling and pound allotted for their care and stuff his already bulging pockets. All he had to do was turn aside and let his wife and Billy Howe have their fun. He’d ignore all the scandalous talk; he was getting filthy rich.

In the spring of 1777, Washington and Billy Howe began a “*cat and mouse game*” that was to continue until Billy’s departure from the North American

continent. Following numerous attempts to coax Washington into a full-scale battle, Howe set sail from New York City late in July. Washington made several false starts trying to guess where the floating Howe was. By the time he learned the truth, it was too late — Billy’s army and mistress landed at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay and began their push to the north.

The Battle of Brandywine Creek occurred on September 11 at Chads Ford, PA. It was a bloody day for the Americans. Despite heavy casualties, Washington’s army was not crushed. This engagement allowed Billy to send half his army, unmolested, into Philadelphia (Betsy went ahead to make the bed) while the rest went to meet a complicated attack at Germantown. The Battle of Germantown was a fiasco for the “*good guys.*” It included bad weather, confusion, bad timing, poor planning and a panic-driven retreat. Naturally the Americans claimed a near victory, showing the world how effective the Continental Army could be (well, at least we won the war!).

The British Army was safe in Philadelphia, but the Navy was bottled up in Delaware Bay. *Chevaux-de-frise* (spiked barriers) were set across the entrance to the river and were guarded by two occupied forts: Fort Mifflin on Mud Island and Fort Mercer on the Jersey side, at Red Bank. Billy and his fellow officers had to get the supplies on the ships upriver to the soldiers. No one wanted to deal with mutinous soldiers, especially mutinous British soldiers. The solution was to knock out the American defenses by land and sea.

In late October of 1777 the British initially probed Fort Mercer with a contingent of Hessians (why waste any of His Majesty’s troops?). They took part of

the works, but were beaten back. Confusion reigned for the next few weeks as both forts were sacked. The brave Colonists who occupied them and the handful of sloops and galleys afloat in the river were finally overwhelmed.

In all practicality the only thing that was going right for the Rebels was the two victories at Freeman's Farm (Saratoga), New York, and Washington wasn't even there. The commanding general, Horatio Gates, was gaining popularity among his fellow officers like a winning football coach at an alumni picnic. Though he actually did very little to win the battle (Benedict Arnold's heroism turned the tide), many felt he should be the new Commander-in-Chief. This *conspiracy* was known as the *Conway Cabal*, named after its leader Thomas Conway. How far this plan reached, beyond the corner table at the inn, is not well known and many a legend surrounds it. In any case, Washington found out about it and reprimanded Conway in a letter dated early in 1778—but I digress.

In the early hours of December 5, 1777, Howe set out to finish off the Continentals who were camped at a place called Whitmarsh. For once, Washington got lucky. His scouts spotted the advancing army and he countered with about a hundred dragoons. They played Geronimo and harassed the "Brits" long enough to allow Washington to stoke up the fires. When the enemy got close enough to see the rebel camp, they saw an abundance of campfires, more than what was needed for an army of 50,000 or more.¹ Howe chickened out, and he and Washington went back to "fencing" with each other. Billy got tired after a few days and headed back to Philly and Betsy. One month later, on Monday the fifth of January, 1780, there occurred one final incident that epitomized this tragedy, if not

comedy, of errors that occurred around Philadelphia. A young inventor named David Bushnell (*Black Powder Times*, April, 1981), who had devised a way to explode black powder underwater, sent a number of explosive kegs down the Delaware River toward the unsuspecting British ships. The kegs were designed to explode upon impact with a floating object, but a number of miscalculations occurred and the British saw them. One small boat got too close and exploded, killing the occupants. The startled British *opened up* on the floating enemy. It was described in a local gazette:


"Both officers and men exhibited the most unparalleled skill and bravery on the occasion...whole broadsides were poured into the Delaware. In short, not a wandering ship, stick or drift log but felt the rigor of the British arms."

Francis Hopkinson, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, further satirized the furious action, known as the Battle of the Kegs, in a long ballad. One stanza that delighted America the most was modified and applied to the tune of *Yankee Doodle*:

*"Sir William he Snug as a flea
Lay in bed a-snoring
He does no harm As he lays warm
In bed with Mrs. Loring."*

That spring, a party to end all parties was given in Philadelphia to honor Sir William's departure as Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's forces in North America. He was replaced by Sir Henry Clinton (who would not fare much better). The celebration included a regatta, fireworks, a ball, saluting guns and an elaborate, expensive pageant. Loyalists dressed in all sorts of costumes. "Knights" staged

tournaments. Thoroughly ossified, the hundreds of guests staggered home well after sunrise. They really had little to celebrate, however. The British Army and their allies, on orders from London would soon be leaving Philadelphia and retreating across New Jersey, back toward New York City.

The old cat and mouse game was starting all over again, except you might call it “the fox and the geese.” 

1. This ruse was used once before when the Americans left fires burning outside Trenton and marched on to attack Princeton, New Jersey early in January of the same year.