

A FORGOTTEN PATRIOT.

BY HENRY S. NOURSE.

OF self-sacrificing patriots who in troublous times have proved themselves worthy the lasting gratitude of the commonwealth, very many have found no biographer; but none seem more completely forgotten, even in the towns of which they were once the ruling spirits, than the officers who led the Massachusetts yeomanry during those tedious campaigns of the French and Indian War, which awoke the British colonies to consciousness of their strength and thereby hastened the founding of the Republic. A few incidents in the honorable career of one of these unremembered patriots—one whom perhaps diffidence only, prevented from being a very conspicuous figure in the battles for independence—I have brought together, and offer as faint, unsatisfying outlines of an eventful and useful life.

In "Appleton's Cyclopædia of American Biography," published in 1889, twenty-two lines are given to General John Whitcomb, nearly every date and statement in which is erroneous. It is alleged therein that he was born "about 1720, and died in 1812"; and the brief narrative is embellished with a romantic tale wholly borrowed from the military experience of a younger brother, Colonel Asa Whitcomb. Biographical notes in volumes XII. and XVIII. of the Essex Institute Historical Collections perpetuate like errors of date. Even in the most voluminous histories of the building of the Republic, this general's name is barely, or not at all mentioned.

John Whitcomb, or Whetcomb as the family always

wrote the name until within the present century, was born in that part of Lancaster, Massachusetts, which became Bolton, in 1738, the eldest son of John and Rebecca; being of the fourth generation from John Whetcomb, one of the original proprietors of the township, who came from Dorchester, England, about 1633. The exact date of his birth is not found, but in Rev. John Prentice's register it is set down that he was baptized, February 20, 1714 $\frac{4}{5}$. He was then about two years of age, for the modest slate-stone that marks his grave in the oldest burial-ground of Bolton records that "John Whetcomb, Esq., died November 17, 1785, in the 73 year of his age." Not only does his epitaph ignore the military rank of this soldier of three wars, but it closes with "Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God."

Of the boy John not very much can be learned. Before his seventh birthday he had lost his father by death, and his mother survived her husband but a few years. He was placed in the guardianship of his uncle, Joseph Sawyer, the village blacksmith, and no doubt grew up in the little rural community that had gathered about the old garrison-house which his father's uncle Josiah had built, and of which Josiah's son was yet commandant. From items in the financial account of his stewardship rendered by the guardian, we may infer that John had ailments, and swallowed the usual drastic doses; and that these were mostly administered to him by a relative, Doctress Mary Whetcomb—the first medical practitioner resident in Lancaster—who, as Mary (Hayward) Fairbank, had been widowed in the massacre of 1697, and carried to Canada; and who claimed to have brought from her two years' captivity among the Indians a rare acquaintance with Nature's remedies. He went to school from eight to twelve weeks in the year, and the town's schoolmaster, Edward Broughton, taught him to read, write and cipher passably well; but if spelling was one of the educational exercises of his school, John never much

profited thereby. Every Sabbath he accompanied his elders to the meeting-house, five miles distant, to hear the impressive exhortations of the Reverend John Prentice, and doubtless was well drilled in the catechism. Living upon the verge of English settlement, in an age when extreme frugality was compulsory upon all, and life to the majority an anxious scramble for covering and food, he certainly did not long eat the bread of idleness.

Now and then bands of marauding Indians made their presence felt not far away, and as soon as John was strong enough to handle his musket well, he in his turn was detailed to serve as a ranger in the scouting-parties that were kept constantly scouring the woods at the north and west, in search of the skulking foe. He was not old enough to be accepted as a volunteer by the noted captains Lovewell and White, in their scalping excursions, but he no doubt listened with envious admiration to the thrilling stories of their prowess, told by his neighbors, the local heroes of Indian warfare, when they brought home their bloody spoils of ambush and slaughter. The life with its peculiar restraints and privations, yet large liberty, could but favor expansion of character, and promote hardihood and self-reliance.

Upon attaining manhood, John Whetcomb received a moiety of his father's estate, coming into possession of the homestead in Bolton, then described as one hundred and thirty acres of land, with buildings. Limestone had been discovered upon or near this land, and the manufacture of lime became, in after time, the source of a generous income to him; the product of his kiln exceeding that from any other quarry in Eastern Massachusetts. He was married to Mary Carter, June 12, 1735. She died in February, 1744, at the age of twenty-six, leaving three daughters. The following year he took a second wife, Becky Whetcomb, a girl of eighteen, who, in due time, made him father of six more daughters and three sons. The twelve children all lived to a ripe age, surviving their father.

In the absence of all muster-rolls of the two companies that enlisted from Lancaster and vicinity in 1745, to serve with Colonel Samuel Willard at the siege of Louisburg, it cannot be told whether John Whetcomb volunteered in that popular and brilliantly successful expedition. If in the service, it was not as an officer; but three years later his name appears with the title lieutenant, in the pay-roll of the Lancaster troop sent in pursuit of a party of savages fleeing for Canada with the trophies of a murderous raid. He had become the foremost citizen of Bolton. As regularly as the March town-meeting came he was chosen one of the selectmen, and usually held one or two other town offices. When, in May, 1748, he was first elected a member of the General Court, he could not be persuaded to accept the honor, and Bolton was unrepresented; but thereafter, until called to a higher civil office in 1773, he was nearly always the town's representative, when any was chosen, holding that office for at least twenty years. In 1754, he was appointed justice of the peace. He had gained recognition in all the country around as an able man of affairs, whose word was an ample bond.

Whatever his previous military experience may have been, he had won fair repute by it, for, upon the breaking out of the French and Indian War, he was commissioned lieutenant-colonel in the regiment raised by Colonel Samuel Willard, jr., for the first Crown Point expedition. He was with his command in the desperate battle of September 8, 1755, at Lake George, and at the close of the campaign led the regiment home, having been promoted to the colonelcy, October 27, at the death of Willard.

In the spring of 1756, the Council, when organizing a second expedition against Crown Point, resolved to establish a Committee of War, with headquarters at Albany, "to take care for the transportation of provisions and other stores for the use of the forces of the Province." Colonel Whetcomb was one of the three finally appointed upon this committee,

and is found busy with his official cares during the summer and autumn. Though onerous, his duties were not complicated by any grand strategic movement, for, owing to the lethargy of Abercrombie and Loudoun, the army did not leave its original base of supplies.

In 1758, the vigorous policy of Pitt, and the payment of the Provincial claims for military expenditures aroused Massachusetts to enthusiastic preparation for a renewal of the struggle with the traditional foe. John Whetcomb went to the frontier, again as lieutenant-colonel, his brother serving under him as captain. It was his regiment, led by its colonel—Jonathan Bagley, another forgotten hero of this war—that made the victorious charge upon the French advance guard near Ticonderoga, on July 5, in which Lord Howe, the inspiring genius of the army, was slain. For so brief an engagement—it lasted but an hour—the regiment's loss was quite heavy. Reverend John Cleaveland, chaplain of the command, was the intimate friend of Colonel Whetcomb and occupied the same log-hut with him in the encampment at Lake George. From Cleaveland's diary, and that of the regimental surgeon, Caleb Rea, many interesting particulars respecting the conduct of the camps can be gleaned, but they contain nothing that pictures the personality of their lieutenant-colonel, or discloses what part he had in the foolhardy assault upon Ticonderoga, which ended the dismal record of Abercrombie's blundering.

The following year, Colonel Whetcomb was probably not in the service, but in 1760 he commanded one of the five Massachusetts regiments in General Amherst's army assigned to the right wing, which, under Colonel William Haviland, moved out from Crown Point, August 10, in batteaux, for the invasion of Canada. His orderly-book for this, the closing campaign of the long war, is preserved in the Lancaster Library. It contains rosters of the eighteen companies of his command—which numbered about eight

hundred men—and the general orders received between August 11 and November 9. Nearly forty deaths are noted in the rosters, mostly chargeable, it is to be presumed, to small-pox, and camp disorders, engendered by toil and exposure; for no very resolute opposition from the enemy was encountered during the month spent in the advance upon Montreal. The victory speedily won and its fruits secure, the Provincials, both officers and men, hoped to be dismissed and return to farms and families needing their care; but for two months more the grumbling, discontented yeomen were kept delving at fortifications and winter barracks for the battalions of regulars that were to garrison Crown Point. When these were at last completed, arms and tents were turned over to the ordnance officer, and Colonel Whetcomb led his men across Vermont, then an unbroken wilderness, to the Connecticut river at Charlestown, and thence homeward through the New Hampshire woodlands.

Ten years passed in which the Colonel's sword rusted, but his flocks and lands increased, and his services as magistrate were in constant request. Suddenly, in that green valley which slumbers in the evening shadows of the Wataquodock hills, there arose a fierce conflict concerning church polity, familiarly known as the Goss and Walley war,—so named from the two clergymen forced to become rivals in the contest. It was born of the temper of the times, and John and Asa Whetcomb were the prime exponents of that temper in the eastern part of Worcester county. The revolt against the autocratic claims of the clergy, in which the Whetcombs were leaders, was but an episode, a bubbling over of the boiling wrath against political tyranny. The radicals took up the Puritan cry “no bishops,” because they dared not yet shout their war-cry “no king.” The overturn of the humble Bolton pulpit jarred, as with an earthquake shock, all the churches round about it. The controversy was ostensibly concerned only

with the powers of ecclesiastical councils and the arrogated right of the minister to negative the vote of the brethren ; but it is noticeable that when a too patriarchal shepherd was pushed from his pulpit throne to make way for the instalment of one less insistent upon dignities, the registers show that the tories all continued to present their babes for baptism to the old incumbent, while the radicals all patronized the new one.

A young and angry clerical pamphleteer, during the wrangle, once sneeringly referred to our colonel as "a justice of a very slender capacity" ; but an able respondent dedicated *his* pamphlet to Whetcomb, as a well-known champion of civil and religious liberty, and stigmatized the sneer of his assailant as impudence, sufficiently answered by the long service of the colonel as the town's honored representative. Whetcomb was one of the ninety-two who, in 1768, voted not to rescind, at royal dictation, the Massachusetts Representatives' circular-letter to the Colonial Assemblies. The public estimation of his capacity and character was further shown in 1773, by his election to a seat in the Council. He was, however, so distrustful of his qualifications for the higher office, that he modestly begged to be allowed to remain in the lower branch of the legislature.

When the spirit of republicanism in the province of Massachusetts had been, by various causes, wrought up to the rash venture of rebellion against the acts of Parliament, her shrewd political managers saw the necessity of a thorough re-organization of the militia, and promptly set about the work. Military leaders of ability, tested in actual campaigning, there were in abundance. The younger of the heroes who took part in the capture of Louisburg, in 1745, were hardly past the prime of life, and colonels and captains who had earned their titles in the conquest of Canada, were to be found in every town. Though mostly clad in homespun, often uncourtly in manners, and far from masters in the in-

tricate science of tactics, these officers had not forgotten the many practical lessons taught them during five years of war, — they had fresh in mind the costly blunders of the martinetts sent from England to take command over them — they yet smarted under the supercilious treatment they had always experienced from those holding the King's commission. The majority of them were active in the democratic ferment of the times, although two of the most conspicuous for their military attainments and gallant services in the field, Brigadier-General Timothy Ruggles and Colonel Abijah Willard, belonged to the conservative party; the former being an avowed royalist, the latter, luke-warm, perhaps, in his allegiance, but bound by many ties to the friends of monarchy.

Brigadier-General Jedediah Preble, a member of the Council, who, in date of commission and soldierly reputation, ranked second only to Ruggles, was selected by the second Provincial Congress as commander-in-chief of the Massachusetts forces, and four others, all members of the same elective body, were chosen general officers. They were: Honorable Artemas Ward, Colonel Seth Pomeroy, Colonel John Thomas and Colonel William Heath, taking rank in the order named. These appointments created some heart-burnings, for General Ward's reputation was chiefly political, his rank in service never having been higher than lieutenant-colonel, and General Heath had never seen service. General Preble, who was nearly seventy years of age, declined his commission, and on February 15, 1775, Colonel John Whetcomb's name was added to the list of generals, the member of the Congress from Bolton being desired "to wait upon Hon. John Whetcomb, Esq., with a copy of his being elected a general officer, and desire his answer whether he will accept that trust, as soon as may be." He had already been chosen their colonel by the line officers of the Lancaster regiment of minute-men. He accepted the duties of both offices. Of the five Massachusetts generals thus appointed, Seth Pomeroy was the

oldest by seven years, but Whetcomb had earliest won the rank of colonel in service, and could claim the most varied experience in military affairs; while the three younger officers much surpassed both, in the advantages which a liberal education gives.

The morning of the nineteenth of April, 1775, found General Whetcomb at his home, which was, by several miles, nearer Concord than were those of his company commanders. When, therefore, the courier dashed up to his door announcing the long-expected raid of the British soldiers from Boston, after despatching the necessary orders to his field-officers, he no doubt galloped towards the scene of conflict with such escort as hastily assembled,—for he came upon the bloody field and took part in the fighting that day, as attested by General Heath in his Memoirs. General Ward did not reach Cambridge until the next afternoon, when a council of war was held, at which Whetcomb was one of the three generals present. May 6, the Provincial Congress passed a resolve appointing General Whetcomb and Colonel Benjamin Lincoln muster-masters of the State's army. In declining the position, the General excused himself by pleading the engrossing demands upon his time of "various avocations," and his brother was then chosen to be Colonel Lincoln's associate.

The third Provincial Congress, on June 13, elected John Whetcomb "first major-general of the Massachusetts army," Artemas Ward having been made commander-in-chief, and John Thomas lieutenant-general, the previous month. The next day Joseph Warren was chosen "second major-general," and committees were appointed to wait upon the two officers-elect and report their response. Whetcomb, either from modesty, or, feeling the weight of years and increasing cares, hesitated formally to accept the commission, whereupon, the Congress, on June 16, "ordered, that Col. Richmond, Doct. Taylor and Mr. Partridge be a committee to draw a complaisant letter to General

Whetcomb, to desire a more explicit answer respecting his acceptance of the post of first major-general." The letter and reply were as follows:—

WATERTOWN, June 16, 1775.

Sir:—Your letter wherein you express yourself willing to continue in the service of this Colony, until the army is regulated and properly encamped, and then rely on a discharge was read with much concern by this Congress, who earnestly hope you will continue in office till the conclusion of the campaign, and must beg your further and more explicit answer. * * *

To the Hon^{ble} Congress.

Whereas you Desirè of me to Give a more Explicit Answer as to my Opintment, as the Surcumstances of the army is so Deficult and the Enemy so ner, I excep the Servis to Do my Duty, as far as I shall Be Able.

JOHN WHETCOMB Col^o.

Cambridge, June y^e 22^d, 1775.

John Whetcomb was in active service at Cambridge before and during the battle of Bunker's Hill. Having received official notice that he had been made first major-general,—and Lieutenant-general Thomas being in command of the right wing, and General Putnam of the left,—he was of course next in rank to the commander-in-chief at the centre of the patriot lines investing Boston. We accordingly find in a newspaper of the period this question asked: "as there was no general officer that commanded on Bunker's Hill, was it not his duty to have been there?" The author of the query—who was a colonel, and on June 17, near enough the battle-ground with his regiment to have two men wounded,—was not sufficiently endowed with the spirit of *prophecy* to suspect that General Putnam was the "Commander at Bunker's Hill"; and, moreover, ignored the fact, which Whetcomb doubtless knew, that Generals Pomeroy and Warren were at the front, and could

have assumed command there. The whole testimony in the court-martial for trial of Colonel Scammons goes to show that General Whetcomb was in his place, guarding, with some forces now unknown, that important strategic position, Lechmere Point. Whether stationed there by orders of his superior is not recorded, and is not material, since it was wise military prevision to expect attack in that quarter and prepare for it. Indeed, the British generals were criticised severely at the time, and have been censured since by high authority, for not making their main assault there. Whetcomb, when the arena of the conflict was determined, —if we may judge from the only act of his, on that day, which has been recorded for us,—was engaged at his post of duty in ordering such bodies of troops as he found available to the re-enforcement of Prescott.

The selection of general officers announced by the Continental Congress in June, 1775, was made with a careless disregard of previous commissions or claims for services rendered, and caused great dissatisfaction, not only to the veteran colonels of the last war, but among the soldiers by whom they were almost idolized. It might well be, that Whetcomb would feel aggrieved by the omission of his name from the list of Continental brigadiers, as did Pomeroy and Thomas by the rank assigned them in the list. There at once arose a clamor for revision of the appointments, so general and wrathful, that Washington withheld the commissions and notified Congress of the fact. The Provincial Assembly sent the following letter to Whetcomb and other slighted officers :—

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, July 22, 1775.

Sir: This house approving of your services in the station you were appointed in the army by the Congress of this Colony, embrace this opportunity to express their sense of them, and at the same time to desire your Continuance with the army, if you judge you can do it without impropriety, till the final determination of the Continental Con-

gress shall be known in regard to the appointment of General officers. We assure you that the Justice of this House will be engaged to make you an adequate compensation for your services. We have such intelligence as affords us confidence to suppose, that a few days will determine whether any such provision shall be made for you as is consistent with your honor to accept, and shall give you encouragement to remain in the service.

By Order of the House.

The Continental appointments superseding the Provincial, John Whetcomb had no further part in the siege of Boston. June 5, 1776, he was commissioned a brigadier-general in the Continental army, and Washington then declared his intention to assign him at once to the command of the forces in Massachusetts, relieving General Ward who had tendered his resignation because physically disqualified for active duty. But Whetcomb, following the example of Seth Pomeroy, chose not to accept the recognition of his services and ability which had come so late. In returning the commission he asked "to be excused on account of age, and a diffidence of not being able to answer the expectation of Congress." The next month he was again elected a member of the Council, in which body he served with credit during four years, and then passed from public view to the quiet of his rural home.

In the town which his whole life honored, no traditions are rife that tell us of his form or personal traits. His sons are remembered as men of ordinary stature and mould, good citizens of fair abilities. John Whetcomb obviously owed his great and lasting popularity to such qualities as made Prescott, Pomeroy and Stark historic names. He was a republicanized Puritan, a zealous, unselfish patriot, a man of action, ignorant of rhetoric, not given to bluster. Uneducated, and not disposed to over-rate his own powers, he rose to command by native force of character. He must have been brave in battle, and gifted with personal magnetism and tact, for volunteer soldiers followed him with love

and respect through campaign after campaign ;—exemplary in life, for he was looked up to in the church, and his enemy spoke nothing ill of him ;—impartial in judgment, for in his day and limited sphere his name stands oftenest in the records as moderator, arbitrator and magistrate ;—energetic in administration, for those high in authority sought his aid ;—judicious in legislation and council, for electors did not tire of honoring him with their unsought suffrages.

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