

A FLAG EPISODE.

BY THOMAS C. MENDENHALL.

THE stirring events of the past six months have created a new interest in anything pertaining to the flag of our country, and current periodicals have contained some account of its origin and early use. It is strange that the history of the emblem of a great nation, both emblem and nation scarcely more than a hundred years old, should be in any degree involved in obscurity, but this is nevertheless true of the flag of the United States of America. As anything likely to lessen this obscurity, even in a very small degree, must needs be of some interest and value, in the future if not at the present, it has seemed to the writer to be worth while to put upon the permanent and widely accessible records of the Society a brief account of an early episode of the flag, together with some remarks upon the individuals most prominently connected therewith and upon the probable accuracy of the narrative. He hopes to be acquitted of any suspicion of pride or satisfaction of personal relationship to one of the prominent actors in this interesting event, when it is remembered how little he is personally responsible for that relationship.

It has long been a family tradition that the first flag of the Union ever displayed in a foreign port was made and hoisted to the masthead by Captain Thomas Mendenhall of Wilmington, Delaware.

The story is, briefly, as follows:—Late in the year 1775 Robert Morris of Philadelphia, the famous financier of the revolutionary period, chartered the brig "Nancy" of Wilmington, for the purpose of quietly and secretly securing arms and ammunition in the West Indies. The brig was

commanded by Captain Hugh Montgomery. At St. Thomas, a neutral port, produce was taken aboard by day and munitions of war by night, and when the cargo was nearly complete news was received that independence was declared together with a description of the colors adopted by the new nation. The "Nancy" had been and was at this time flying English colors, but her patriotic commander resolved to conceal no longer his real attitude on the great question of the day. On board of the brig was young Mendenhall, then not yet seventeen years of age. To him was assigned the task of preparing for the display of the new national ensign, and as it was important that the plan should be kept secret until the last moment, he privately obtained the necessary materials, and with his own hands made the flag. In the meantime Captain Montgomery strengthened his crew, preparing for defence, and, wishing to honor duly the occasion, he arranged for a dinner party on board the "Nancy," inviting the Governor of the Island with his staff and about twenty other gentlemen. When the barges carrying the invited guests approached they were ordered to "lay on their oars," while the brig fired a salute of thirteen guns. During the firing of the salute Captain Montgomery ordered young Mendenhall to haul down the English flag and to hoist the new ensign, believed to be the first American flag ever seen in a foreign port. There was naturally much excitement among the many vessels lying in the harbor, and especially among the invited guests. Cheers were given for the "National Congress," and there were cries of "down with the lion; up with the Stars and Stripes."

This description of the scene is essentially, although much condensed, as found in a volume entitled "Reminiscences of Wilmington," published in 1851, the author of which was Miss Elizabeth Montgomery, daughter of Captain Hugh Montgomery, the Commander of the "Nancy." It is quoted from the same source by Preble in his exhaustive "History of the American Flag," and by Canby, who gives

what has been popularly accepted as the true story of the flag in his paper before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1870.

In further exposition of its weakness, as well as its strength, it is desirable to follow the "Nancy" on her homeward voyage. The entertainment on board was hurried as much as possible, and the brig was soon under full sail. Although chased by the enemy several times she escaped on account of her superior sailing powers. On entering Delaware Bay, however, in a dense fog, she ran into a considerable fleet of the enemy, and it was soon realized that escape was impossible. The courageous Captain determined to run the brig ashore and try to save some of the arms and ammunition, but just at this point a barge from the shore arrived, in command of Lieutenant Weeks or Wicks, who had been sent to warn the "Nancy" of the presence of the enemy. Captain Montgomery assembled all of his men and told them of his desire to save a part, at least, of the cargo, but adding that they could all now escape in safety on the barge. "If there is a man," he said, "fearful and faint-hearted let him go. The boat is ready to take him ashore." There was silence for a moment, and then the young man who had made and hoisted the flag stepped forward and said, "Captain, I will stand by you." The crew cheered, and no man left the brig until their work was done. For about twelve hours they labored under heavy fire from the enemy's fleet, saving the greater part of the munitions of war, although the brig was well-nigh shot entirely away. When further work was impossible Captain Montgomery resolved to blow what was left of the ship out of the water, that she might not fall into the hands of the enemy. Out of 386 barrels of gunpowder he had saved 268, and all of the firelocks on board. Arranging fires that would soon reach the remaining stores of powder he, with his men, left the ship, and it is related that the flag was saved by a sailor who swam

back to the ship from one of the boats and climbed the mast to secure it, reckless of the constant danger of explosion. Men, as many as thirty or forty, came in boats from the English ships-of-war, and boarded the brig after its crew deserted it, cheering for the victory which they imagined they had won. Not one survived the explosion which occurred in a few moments after they reached the vessel.

Captain Hugh Montgomery, the hero of this exploit, was a resident of Wilmington, Delaware. He was an ardent patriot during the revolutionary war. He escaped capture by the British just after the battle of Brandywine by a bit of fine strategy; his services did not go unrecognized by those in authority, but he met with an untimely death at sea in 1780, his vessel being attacked by a greatly superior force of the enemy. He left a widow and an infant daughter, the author of the "Reminiscences" from which quotations have been freely made.

Thomas Mendenhall, the maker of the flag, was the son of Philip, who was the son of Robert, the son of Benjamin Mendenhall who came from the village of Mildenhall, in Wiltshire, England, with the Penn emigration, about 1683 or '84, settling in Concord, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. Following his ancestry, Thomas was a member of the Society of Friends, which fact, however, did not prevent an active display of patriotic courage. He was born August 11, 1759, married in 1786, and died on June 2, 1843, at Philadelphia. During most of his life he resided at Wilmington, Delaware, where, according to the good fashion of his time, there were born to him thirteen children.

The principal interest in the flag episode, the main incidents of which are entirely trustworthy, is, of course, in the date of the occurrence and the character of the ensign raised, concerning both of which there is some uncertainty. As related by Miss Montgomery, the daughter of the ship's Captain, the incident must have occurred some days later

than July 4, 1776, and the flag raised was the ensign now in use, the "Stars and Stripes." Against her date must be put an account of the destruction of the brig "Nancy" quoted by Preble from volume VI. of the American Archives differing from that of Miss Montgomery in no essential particular, except that it is said to have occurred on June 29, 1776, five days before the declaration of Independence. This account is itself open to criticism, however, owing to the fact that the date of its apparent publication in Philadelphia is identical with that of the occurrence. As at least twelve hours were spent by the crew of the brig in removing stores and several more hours in the attack, defence and final beaching of the ship, and in view of the very imperfect news-gathering agencies in those days, it seems almost certain that there is an error in one or the other, or possibly both, of these dates. On the other hand, in considering Miss Montgomery's account it must be remembered that she was an infant at the time of her father's death and that she could never have heard the account from him; that her reminiscences were written, or at least first published in 1851, when she must have been between seventy and eighty years of age. Furthermore, although they are extremely interesting and doubtless for the most part reliable, there is an entire absence of grouping of the topics, and continual wandering from one to another in a manner characteristic of old age, so that skepticism as to details is naturally created. As to the kind of flag displayed at the masthead of the "Nancy" there is also room for doubt. It was not until June 14, 1777, nearly a year after the declaration of independence, that Congress passed the resolution defining the flag of the nation, the flag of thirteen stripes with a union of thirteen white stars in a blue field. Before this date the flag with thirteen stripes had become nearly universal, but a variety of emblems for the union had been used. In Canby's paper, already referred to, he contends that the flag with

stars was made, and at the suggestion of General Washington, at least as early as June, 1776, and he farther maintains that contemporary evidence proves that it had been in use some time before that date. If his detailed account of incidents connected with Washington's visit to Philadelphia in June, 1776, be fully credited, it may well be that the "Nancy" displayed the emblem of the new constellation, and that the flag was really in use some time before it was legally defined by Congress.

There is some collateral evidence worth mentioning in the fact that the young flag-maker of the brig, when he had become an old man appeared before a Congressional Committee in an effort to secure something in the way of a pecuniary award to Captain Montgomery's daughter, as a recognition of the value of his services on the occasion of the raising of the flag, the loss of the ship and the saving of the cargo. He there related the whole occurrence, but in spite of the fact that so eminent a man as Robert Morris had favored this claim Congress again decided to give nothing. The reason for this was quaintly, but perhaps not altogether innocently expressed by the old lady who had hoped to be the beneficiary of a nation's gratitude, when she said the "honorable body were too conscientious to squander public money, and feared" (the exact debt due the heirs not being ascertainable) "to pay one dollar more than was due."

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