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RICHARD MONTGOMERY
NAMESAKE OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND*
by Georgette S. Gleason

Richard Montgomery. Who was he? What did he do? Why did Montgomery County, Maryland, and many other local municipalities^{1**} in the United States honor him by adopting his name? My search for the answers to these questions revealed that many of us are only vaguely aware of who Richard Montgomery was or why Montgomery County is named after him. The search disclosed that, except for a single book in the

* This paper was prepared for the course History 105 at Montgomery College.

1. Joseph Nathan Kane, The American Counties (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1972), pp. 260-261.

** There are counties named after Richard Montgomery in Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North

children's reading section of Montgomery County libraries, there is disappointingly little material available locally on the life of Richard Montgomery. Yet, with more intensive investigation, and as the reasons gradually unfolded that explained why Montgomery County's founding fathers chose to honor him, I came to understand and appreciate why our county bears Richard Montgomery's illustrious name.

The Revolutionary War had already begun when Montgomery County, Maryland was created from part of Frederick County on September 6, 1776. Frederick County, considered too large and unwieldy to govern as a single unit, was divided by the Maryland State Convention of 1776 into three counties: Frederick, Washington, and Montgomery. In keeping with the advancing ideas of the times that honored men for notable civil and military service to their country, Washington County was named for George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, and Montgomery County was named after Major-General Richard Montgomery, hero of the Revolutionary War.²

That the new counties adopted names of non-titled individuals signified a break with the past, for, until then, local Maryland municipalities always had chosen names derived from the mother country or from the early proprietary rulers of Maryland. Thus one found early Maryland counties such as Prince George's named for Prince George of Denmark, Queen Anne's for Queen Anne of England, and Anne Arundel for the wife of Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore. Counties also took the names of family estates, as, for example, Baltimore, which was named after the first Lord Baltimore's estates in Ireland.³ When Montgomery County, Maryland, named itself for Richard Montgomery, it not only earned the distinction of being the first local municipality to disregard the custom of adopting names identified with titled persons;⁴ but it also became the first county in the United States to take the name of the nation's first national war hero of high rank to die in the Revolutionary War.⁵

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Like many Revolutionary War figures, Richard Montgomery descended from aristocratic Anglo-Saxon ancestors, one of whom had commanded a regiment during the wars of Ireland that led to the annexation of the northern Ireland counties to Great Britain. As a result, at the end of the 17th Century, he was rewarded by the grateful King with estates in Ireland.

The first Montgomery to settle in Ireland was Alexander Montgomery of County Donegal, whose later descendant, Thomas, a Member of Parliament, married Mary

Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia. The capital city of Alabama was also named in honor of Richard Montgomery.

2. T.H.S. Boyd, The History of Montgomery County, Maryland (Clarksburg, Maryland: Regional Publishing Company, 1879), p. 52.
3. Beta Kaessmann, My Maryland (Baltimore, Maryland: Maryland Historical Society, 1955), pp. 434-436.
4. Boyd, p. 52.
5. A.L. Todd, Richard Montgomery Rebel of 1775 (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), preface.

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Franklin, and had three sons:⁶ Alexander, the oldest, a cruel and notorious soldier with whom Richard is sometimes confused;⁷ John, a noted Lisbon merchant; and Richard, the youngest, the subject of our study.

Richard Montgomery was born at Swords, County Dublin, Ireland, on December 2, 1738.⁸ He attended St. Andrews School and Trinity College in Dublin before joining the British Army, where, on September 21, 1756, shortly before his eighteenth birthday, he was commissioned an ensign. In less than two years he had distinguished himself in military combat during the French and Indian Wars in Canada. He had a knowledge of military tactics, it was said, "quite unexampled in an officer of his age."⁹ After he served at the successful siege of Louisbourg in 1758, he took part a year later in the Lake Champlain campaign and, with the fall of Montreal to the British, was sent to Martinique and Havana, where he continued to demonstrate military skill as well as a compassion for his men in the tropical climate of his new assignment. For his outstanding service, he was promoted to the rank of captain in May 1762, and returned to England at the close of the Seven Years War in 1763, confidently looking forward to a long career in the British Army.

For reasons not entirely clear, Montgomery was not happy in the army after returning to England. He wrote at this time that he had developed a violent passion for farming. He had also become acquainted with the ideas of Burke and Fox and Barre, the liberal spokesmen of the British Parliament, who were friends of the American colonies. Perhaps as one biographer states: "Always an ardent lover of liberty ... (who) had a great admiration for republican institutions ... (Montgomery's) Irish blood may have inclined him to be restive under British rule ..."¹⁰ Thus, disappointed when he was passed over for the promotion to major that had been promised him, Montgomery sold his army commission, resigned from the army on April 2, 1772, and made plans to sail for America. Since Montgomery was the youngest of three sons and thus not in line to inherit his family's estates, he was attracted by the land opportunities in America -- the logical choice for a man who preferred farming and country life and republican institutions. Once in America, Montgomery was to purchase a 67-acre farm at Kingsbridge, New York.

Montgomery had been in America for about a year when he renewed his acquaintance with the family of Judge Robert Livingston, the Squire of Clermont, whom he had met some years before while passing through New York on a military assignment. Now 36 years old, a bachelor, and alone in this country, he must have been particularly pleased to see once more the eldest daughter of the family, Janet Livingston. And,

6. J.P. Brooke-Little, Esquire, in report to Montgomery County, September 23, 1974.
7. Dictionary of American Biography, Volume III (New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 98-99.
8. Ibid. The date of Montgomery's birth is given in some sources as 1736, in others as 1738. The statement that he was sixteen when he matriculated at Dublin on June 15, 1754, in G.D. Burchtaell and T.U. Sadleir, Alumni Dublinenses (1924), substantiates 1738.
9. The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, Volume I (New York, New York: James T. White & Company, 1898), p. 100.
10. Louise Livingston Hunt, General Richard Montgomery Together with Hitherto Unpublished Letters (Poughkeepsie, New York: "News" Book and Job Printing House, 1876), p. 2.

after a brief, formal courtship in the fashion of olden times, Richard "... ventured ... to request ... a union¹¹ with Janet; and Judge Livingston having "made such enquiries as (had) given a great deal of satisfaction,"¹² Richard and Janet were married on July 24, 1773. With Montgomery's acceptance into the large Livingston family came membership in the Protestant aristocracy of Dutchess County in northern New York, where the Livingstons held vast landholdings and enjoyed considerable influence, both political and social.

After their marriage, the newlyweds moved to Rhinebeck, Janet's small estate on the Livingston properties. There Montgomery built a mill and laid the foundations for a house, and settled into a new way of life. Content in the country-gentlemen's world of the library and the farm, he would have preferred to remain there, but it



Home of Janet and Richard Montgomery in Rhinebeck, New York

11. Hunt, p. 3.

12. Ibid.

is not surprising that, after only three years in New York, in April 1775, he was elected a member of the New York Provincial Congress from Dutchess County. His sympathies with the colonial cause were well-known to the politically influential Livingstons, and a man with Montgomery's military background would have much to contribute in view of the clouds that were gathering on the colonial horizon, because of the strained relations with England.

Montgomery accepted his election to the Provincial Congress with some regret because it meant an interruption to his life of quiet domestic happiness. But shortly thereafter, when the Continental Congress determined to raise troops and " ... the appointment of brigadier-general was tendered to Montgomery,"¹³ his reaction was one of despair. Although he had often argued that America must be constantly on guard against treachery and believed that the colonists had good reason to protest British tyranny, there were a number of reasons why he looked with little enthusiasm to a return to military life. For one, he had lost his zest and ambition for things military. Also, he "strongly wished (like many others in the colonies) that attempts at accommodation with Britain might succeed ... he ... had high hopes that the colonies would reach an accord with the mother country."¹⁴ It troubled him too that once he had fought with the British in Canada; now he would fight against them. In the past he had been a captain with the well-trained, disciplined professional British Army; now he would be a brigadier-general leading untrained, non-professional militia-men. Montgomery was uncertain of this army in which he was being asked to serve. "In whose name was it to act? To what civil authority was it to be subordinated?"¹⁵

Probably the most compelling reason for Montgomery's misgivings on return to military life was the prospect of having to leave the quiet and peace of Rhinebeck and his beloved Janet. And yet he was well aware that the colonies had grievances and that the sores of dissatisfaction with the mother country, which had been festering for many years, were now coming to a head. Too, the Livingstons in their upstate New York pastoral home were not isolated from the ominous clouds that were hovering over all the colonies. To the north, the British had cleverly neutralized French-Canadian support of the colonies by their passage of the Quebec Act of 1774. It had infuriated the colonies because it showed a spirit of accommodation toward the French that was entirely lacking in Great Britain's treatment of the American colonists. Not only had England disregarded the western land claims of the colonies but it had extended the boundaries of Quebec to include the territory north of the Ohio River where Connecticut, Virginia and Massachusetts had claims.¹⁶ Most bothersome to colonists, though, was that the British had assured to the French-Canadians their Roman Catholic Church.¹⁷ It was a plot to pit the Roman Catholic French-Canadians against the colonies' Protestant-Puritans, the colonists declared.¹⁸

13. Hunt, p. 5.

14. Todd, p. 46.

15. George Dangerfield, Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York 1746-1813 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), p. 62.

16. John D. Hicks, A Short History of American Democracy (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), pp. 83-84.

17. Anne Merriman Peck, The Pageant of Canadian History (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1963), p. 156.

18. George M. Wrong, Washington and His Comrades in Arms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), p. 39.

In spite of his misgivings about returning to military life, Montgomery had never been one to shrink from responsibility. He could make only one decision - to join the colonies in their struggle for independence. To his wife he said, "My honor is engaged ... you shall never blush for your Montgomery."¹⁹ His wife tells of the sadness with which he left their home at Rhinebeck. She says, "In passing his own villa, he said: 'I must not suffer myself to look that way!'"²⁰

That the Continental Congress, when it convened in June of 1775, should appoint Richard Montgomery one of only eight brigadier generals chosen was inevitable. All signs pointed toward an imminent invasion of Canada. Richard Montgomery was not only an experienced professional soldier, he also had knowledge of fighting in Canada. At the age of thirty-six, he had more military experience than almost any other man in the province of New York.²¹ Except for Montgomery, Charles Lee from Virginia and Horatio Gates, who were former British officers and who had also adopted the colonies as their home, all the other appointed generals were officers



Richard Montgomery

19. Hunt, p. 6.

20. Ibid.

21. Todd, p. 14.

of the colonial militia. They were men of influence in their own provinces, patriotic, and with initiative, but they had to learn quickly how to command an army. Military art through the years was not theirs.²² "One hesitates to think what might have been the fate of the Revolution had the direction of its military operations devolved upon officers trained solely in the colonial militia," remarks one observer.²³

With the passage of the Quebec Act and with the growing fears of the Northern leaders that Britain, with her great naval power, had eyes on the Hudson River as a desirable water route to carry soldiers and supplies, the invasion of Canada was deemed a necessity by the Continental Army leaders. The British, in the past, had used the St. Lawrence Valley as a base for attacks upon New York. Now that the British held Canada, if they could take New York, might they not gain control from the mouth of the Hudson to the St. Lawrence and thus cut off New England from the other colonies?²⁴ When it became evident that the British general, Guy Carleton, was making signs that he would proceed to recover the recently captured Ticonderoga and that British intrigues with the Iroquois were taking place, the revolutionary leaders decided there was no time to lose.

Spurred on by the mistaken belief that the French-Canadians would rise to throw off the British yoke, these leaders decided to strike a swift blow at the famous citadel on the St. Lawrence - the Fortress of Quebec.²⁵ Major-General Philip Schuyler, a great landlord of the Hudson Valley, would be in charge of the invasion, with the young Brigadier-General Richard Montgomery second in command. It was Montgomery's assignment to supply a force of 3000 New York men and officers.

Preparation for war by a country without a standing army was a hurried, makeshift operation. One had to move quickly and improvise. Towns and farms and homes and barns were scoured for the supplies of war. If Montgomery, accustomed to the finest military equipment, viewed with alarm the makeshift troops and materiel he would be taking into battle, his naturally optimistic nature would not allow him to become discouraged.

The plan for the invasion of Canada called for two routes of attack - one by way of Lake Champlain under Montgomery and the other overland through the Maine woods to be commanded by Benedict Arnold. Arnold, who had boasted to Connecticut that he could "take Canada,"²⁶ left Cambridge, Massachusetts, on September 13, 1775, with a thousand volunteers. In hastily built bateaux, Arnold and his men made their way up the treacherous waters of the Kennebec River, down the Chaudiere River, and then proceeded to the St. Lawrence. After suffering appalling hardships, they arrived at Quebec two months later on November 13th with only 675 men left. Arnold and his men, sick, ragged, and shivering with the approach of the northern winter, had performed a noble feat.

22. Ibid., p. 55.

23. Ralph Henry Gabriel and William Wood, The Pageant of America, Volume I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), p. 117.

24. Wrong, p. 36.

25. Gabriel and Wood, p. 130.

26. Todd, p. 52.

Montgomery, for his part, would achieve a series of brilliant victories on his road to Quebec. There were three steps he had to take en route - St. John's, Chamblay, and Montreal. And luck was with him in that Montgomery and his men took all three. Of his victory, his wife writes in her memoirs: "the fort at Chamblay surrendered soon after Montgomery landed there." "It was remarkable," she continues, "that the Commander of St. John's was the very Major who had superseded General Montgomery in purchasing the majority,"²⁷ i.e., the promotion to major which had been denied Montgomery years ago by the British Army. When Montgomery entered Montreal in triumph on November 12, 1775, he confidently issued instructions to the people of Canada to choose delegates to attend the Continental Congress, thinking they were friendly to the invaders, but he might have spared himself the trouble. The French-Canadians were indifferent to the colonial cause.

George Washington mistakenly thought that the Canadians would welcome the Americans in their desire for liberty from their tyrant ruler. But the British tyranny which Washington pictured was not very real. The Quebec Act had neutralized the French-Canadians. They had nothing to gain if they helped the revolutionists. In addition, ill will had been aroused between the Catholics in Canada and the Protestants in the colonies. When the First Continental Congress in 1774 denounced the Quebec Act and accused the Catholic Church of "bigotry, and persecution,"²⁸ it was "... no way to gain the sympathies of the Canadians."²⁹

While Montgomery's Canadian victories gave cause for rejoicing in the colonies and inspired the soldier-patriots fighting elsewhere, Montgomery had to pretend an optimism he did not feel about the forthcoming advance on Quebec. Besides the recalcitrant French-Canadians, he faced the problem of the rapidly approaching and treacherous Canadian winter. The attack on Quebec would have to be carried out now, for with spring the rivers would thaw, making it easier for the British to get troop reinforcements from overseas to Quebec.

Another problem he faced was that many of the men would be through with their enlistments at the end of the year, and he knew it would be difficult to get many of them to remain in the army beyond their enlistment date. There was talk of mutiny among the young officers, sick of the campaign as they ploughed through the cold, damp Canadian swamps.³⁰ The inexperience, ignorance of military behavior and cowardice of his troops caused Montgomery infinite grief.³¹ "... the privates are all generals but not soldiers ..."³² he wrote, and "Such a set of pusillanimous wretches never were collected."³³ Montgomery understood his commander-in-chief's

27. Hunt, p. 8.

28. Wrong, p. 41.

29. Ibid., p. 42.

30. Todd, p. 105.

31. Ibid., p. 88.

32. Hunt, p. 17.

33. Ibid.

description of the troops: "the sweeping of the streets" with morals "infamous" and many of the officers not much better.³⁴ Disheartened and weary with his men, he wrote, "I am, my dear Janet, so exceedingly out of spirits and so chagrined with the behaviour of the troops, that I most heartily repent having undertaken to lead them."³⁵ In the last letter his wife was to receive from him, dated December 5, 1775, Montgomery said, "I wish it were well over with all my heart, and sigh for home like a New Englander!"³⁶ But in the face of the invasion of Quebec, Montgomery could not let his soldiers know how he felt. He had to convince them there was a fair prospect of success and that "his hopes ran high and his soul was undaunted."³⁷

At the dawn of the new year in the dark morning hours of December 31, 1775, Richard Montgomery prepared to lead his troops against his former allies on the Heights of Abraham from his position on the Lower Town Barricades of Quebec. Heavy blizzards, three days before the attack, had left high banks of drifted snow, now encrusted with ice from the freezing temperatures. Montgomery and his men could barely move through the frozen snow. In spite of protests from his officers, Montgomery led the attack on Quebec.³⁸ When he had taken his place at the head of the assault column, he called to his men, "Men of New York ... you will not fear to follow where your General leads; march on!"³⁹ "Then, placing himself in the front, he almost immediately received the mortal wound which suddenly closed his career."⁴⁰ Richard Montgomery died at the early age of 37 years. It was a sad ending to the year. Montgomery had been killed at Quebec after a series of brilliant victories in Canada.

Benedict Arnold, who made his attack from the Lower Town Barricades opposite Montgomery, was unsuccessful also. He was severely wounded by a shot from the walls of the city heights, when his gun stuck fast to the snow.⁴¹ More than 400 Americans were obliged to surrender to the British.⁴² The attack on Quebec had failed! And with the defeat passed the opportunity for taking Canada. Thus ended a campaign ... which is "deservedly famous for the heroism and skill with which it was conducted."⁴³ "It was a bold undertaking that almost succeeded in the capture of Quebec, but it only confirmed that whoever held command of the sea and could send fleets up the St. Lawrence would hold Quebec permanently, no matter which side won on land."⁴⁴

34. Wrong, p. 43.

35. Hunt, p. 11.

36. Ibid., p. 16.

37. Ibid., p. 18.

38. Wrong, p. 46.

39. Hunt, p. 18.

40. Ibid.

41. Gabriel and Wood, p. 133.

42. Ibid.

43. John Fiske, The American Revolution, Volume I (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1921), p. 197.

44. Gabriel and Wood, p. 130.

When George Washington received word of Montgomery's death he wrote: "I ... am heartily sorry and most sincerely condole ... the Fall of the brave and worthy Montgomery. ... America has sustained a heavy Loss ... the Loss of the brave Montgomery will ever be remembered."⁴⁵ "When news of his death reached England, eulogies upon him came from the Whig benches in Parliament which could not have been stronger had he died fighting for the King."⁴⁶ Thomas Paine wrote an elegy that called on patriots to follow Montgomery into battle. Soldiers were told to emulate Montgomery when the struggle seemed hopeless. Edmund Burke was to say: "He was brave, he was able, he was humane. What's more, Montgomery before death conquered two-thirds of Canada in one campaign."⁴⁷ At the turn of 1776 the name of Richard Montgomery was more widely known and genuinely revered than any other in the United Colonies except for George Washington.⁴⁸

Although it appeared at the time that the invasion of Canada had failed, in later years it was looked on as a success, because it played a major role in the securing of New England during the Revolutionary War.⁴⁹ As the result of Montgomery's offensive, the British were prevented from using the chain of forts and the Sorel-Champlain-Hudson waterways as a route for an invasion of New York and the isolation of the Continental forces in New England. With General Carleton forced to remain in Quebec, he was unable to come to the aid of the British in Boston; if he had, General Howe, in the spring of 1776, may not have been obliged to evacuate Boston.

Today, if one were to visit the downtown financial district of New York City where Broadway comes together with Fulton, Church and Vesey Streets, one would see a monument with words inscribed on it that were chosen by Benjamin Franklin:⁵⁰

This monument is erected by order of Congress, 25th January 1776, to transmit to posterity a grateful remembrance of the patriotic conduct, enterprise and perseverance of Major-General Richard Montgomery, who after a series of successes, amidst the most discouraging difficulties, fell in the attack on Quebec, 31st December 1775, aged 37 years.

45. John C. Fitzpatrick, The Writings of George Washington, October 1775 - April 1776, Volume 4 (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1931), pp. 254-256.

46. Wrong, p. 47.

47. Todd, p. 202.

48. Ibid., p. 200.

49. Ibid., p. 204.

50. Ibid., p. 209



Monument to Richard Montgomery in New York City

Some years ago, when I worked in the downtown area of New York City, I used to pass that statue daily and, like thousands of other New Yorkers, I paid little attention to it. Now, after studying the life of Richard Montgomery, I would make a point of going to look at it because of the appreciation I have developed for the man whose achievement it symbolizes. At the same time I have developed a far greater appreciation for the beginnings of our own county. To know that Montgomery County, Maryland, was named for a man who was willing to fight for and give his life for this country's struggle for freedom is to be reminded of the noble achievements of those who came before us. As the year of our country's and our county's 200th birthday approaches, it is hoped more people of Montgomery County will reacquaint themselves with their uniquely proud heritage and thus gain the perspective and inspiration that come from one's reexamination of the past.