

General and Brother Hugh Mercer:

Scottish Son, Masonic Brother, American Father

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With special thank you, gratitude, and support from:

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Most Americans say that there is almost no man who could be considered the equal to our Illustrious Brother George Washington, and yet there was Brother Hugh Mercer. In build and stature and even in character, demeanor, and integrity, Mercer was Washington's equal, and history reports that their appearance was similar, that the British army believed they had captured George Washington when they cornered Hugh Mercer at Princeton. Born in Pitsligo, and raised in Aberdeenshire, Hugh Mercer completed his schooling in medicine at Marischal College in time for the Jacobite rebellion, where he sided with Bonnie Prince Charles against the Hanoverians. He was present at the Battle of Culloden Moor working as an assistant surgeon and when the Scots were defeated, he was declared a fugitive from British law. After nine months of hiding, he was given passage to America, and he left Scotland behind.¹

He arrived in Philadelphia and made his way to the Pennsylvania frontier becoming a country doctor. He was given a few happy years practicing his trade, but with the beginning of the French and Indian War, he found himself supporting the very army which he earlier fought in Scotland. He became an officer in the Pennsylvania militia and he found himself to have a talent for tactics and logistics, and these skillsets would forever prove his military value. The Pennsylvanian wilderness became dangerous because the Indian tribes working with the French along the frontier were constantly raiding, taking some hostage while killing others as a war party. So, under a military campaign by Colonel Armstrong, Captain Mercer and his men joins in the Battle of Kittanning, which permanently ended these frontier raids while rescuing many hostages. This campaign makes Armstrong and Mercer famous as the "*Heroes of Kittanning*".²

For his heroism, Mercer is promoted to lieutenant colonel and is given charge of the Pennsylvania militia. It was here during the Forbes campaign that Hugh Mercer would meet his Virginia militia counterpart, Lieutenant Colonel George Washington and they developed a strong lifelong bond of friendship.³ Hugh Mercer also meets George Weedon, who at the time was an aide to Washington and they encourage Mercer to begin a medical practice in Fredericksburg.

¹ Undiscovered Scotland. 2000. "Hugh Mercer." Undiscovered Scotland.
<https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/usbiography/m/hughmercer.html#:~:text=At%20the%20age%20of%2015,Culloden%20on%2016%20April%201746>.

² Cecere, Michael. 2015. *Hugh Mercer - Second to no man but the Commander in Chief*. Berwyn Heights, Maryland: Heritage Books Publishing.

³ Ward, Matthew C. 2003. *Breaking the Backcountry: The Seven Years' War in Virginia & Pennsylvania, 1754-1765*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press

Upon his arrival in Fredericksburg, Hugh Mercer is immediately accepted into Washington's social circle and becomes Mary Washington's physician. He also finds happiness in the camaraderie and influence of many Scottish merchants, and he makes this town his home. Mercer becomes a member of Fredericksburg Masonic Lodge in 1760, and he becomes a fixture as a leader of the community.⁴

Shortly upon his arrival, Dr. Mercer leases the old John Jones' tavern and converts it into his office and apothecary. This building is the very same tavern where Fredericksburg Lodge had its first meeting and where a young Washington became a Mason. In 1763, George Weedon arrives from Port Royal and was affiliated with Fredericksburg Lodge. During this time, Hugh Mercer meets Isabel Gordon and George Weedon meets her sister, Catherine Gordon. Both these men marry these sisters and while Weedon takes over running the Gordon family tavern, Mercer purchases Ferry Farm in 1772, Washington's childhood home. With Mercer's medical practice and business ventures prospering, he becomes active in Fredericksburg Lodge activities and the earliest surviving Lodge minutes report Mercer as not only heading up various ad hoc committees to resolve issues but reports him as the last recorded Junior Warden of the Lodge.⁵

But this good living for Mercer would end in the mid-1770s, with colonial dissent being actively used against the British, in the days just before the American Revolution. Dr. John D. F. Smythe, while a tourist in Fredericksburg in 1772, published his memoirs in London in 1784 reporting George Weedon as a firebrand who was "*very active and zealous in blowing the seeds of sedition*". He then reports Hugh Mercer as "*ever the gentleman*" and "*a man of great eminence and possessed of almost every virtue and accomplishment,*" but he could not understand the relationship between the two.⁶ With the beginnings of the American Revolution, Fredericksburg forms an independent militia company and elects Hugh Mercer to be its Captain and they march onto Williamsburg to put a stop to the machinations of the Royal Governor. Arriving in Williamsburg, they are greeted by other independent companies of militia and with

⁴ Walker, J. Travis. 2002. A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752-2002. Fredericksburg: Sheridan Books, Inc.

⁵ Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 AF&AM. 1752-1773. "Minutes of the Masonic Lodge at Fredericksburgh." Fredericksburg.

⁶ Wilson, James Grant, and John Fiske. 1889. Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography. Edited by D Appleton. Vol. VI. New York: D. Appleton & Company.

the Royal Governor in flight, the colonial government proceeds to establish new military regiments.

While Hugh Mercer's name was always at the top of the list to command, many Virginians dismissed him as he was a "northern Briton", so in building the first regiment, Patrick Henry was instead elected, followed by William Woodford for the second regiment. When one of Mercer's allies pushes Mercer to promote himself, Mercer is reported to say, "*I am willing to serve my adopted country in any capacity she may need me.*"⁷ For the eloquence of his words, Hugh Mercer is finally elected to command the third regiment. It is during this time in Williamsburg that he continues to make a name for himself, peacefully ending a rebellion by frontiersmen while bringing them back into the fold. For these frontiersmen, Hugh Mercer is remembered for his actions at Kittanning, and he is well-loved by these rugged frontiersmen, who consider Mercer as one of their own.

When Congress orders Washington to hold and defend New York City against the British Army and Navy, Washington demands that Congress gives him Hugh Mercer, to command his "*Flying Camp*", a fast-moving regiment, that can quickly reinforce any unit and can run intelligence along the New Jersey shoreline watching for any British activity. Congress agrees and Hugh Mercer is promoted to Brigadier General with orders to join Washington.⁸ Despite all preparations, New York City is not defensible, and American forces suffer heavy casualties and flees to Pennsylvania. It is during this time of the "Crisis of the Revolution", where men are on the verge of leaving the army that America still needs a victory that will gain them French support and boost morale. It is at this very moment when the colonials are at their weakest that Hugh Mercer convinces George Washington to go on the offensive.

Major John Armstrong, who one day becomes the future Secretary of War during the War of 1812, reports in his diary that while present at a war council, General Mercer reveals his plan to gain a victory by crossing the Delaware River into New Jersey to attack the Hessians at Trenton on Christmas night.⁹ It is further reported that this is the reason why General Mercer is given the honor of leading the attack down one of the two main streets of Trenton. With the

⁷ Goolrick, John T. 1906. *The Life of General Hugh Mercer*. Washington, DC: Neale Publishing Company.

⁸ General Hugh Mercer, 16 July 1776, "National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Philander D. Chase. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-05-02-0252>.

⁹ Skeen, Carl Edward. 1982. *John Armstrong, Jr., 1758-1843: A Biography*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

American victory at Trenton, morale was improved, the soldiers renewed their enlistment, and the French agreed to begin sending supplies and support to the Americans. The British are stunned by this victory and sent General Cornwallis to deal with the Americans once and for all. Upon Cornwallis' arrival, Washington manages to outwit him and heads north to capture Princeton while Cornwallis mistakenly pursues Washington southward.

With General Mercer at the vanguard of the American army with his two hundred men, they come across British Colonel Mawhood's two regiments racing southward to reinforce Cornwallis.¹⁰ With the fog heavy, Mercer and Mawhood's men are practically upon each other and at such proximity, Mawhood notices that of all of Mercer's men, most had fragile but accurate long rifles and only twenty of Mercer's men have muskets, and bayonets for melee. So, Colonel Mawhood orders a bayonet charge and successfully overwhelms Mercer's men who retreat from the fray. Mercer's horse is shot from under him and in surrounding him the British believe him to be George Washington and order Mercer to surrender. Outnumbered and surrounded, Mercer chooses to arise, draw his sword, and fights an unequalled contest, receiving nine wounds total from the sword, bayonet, and musket butt.

It is George Washington himself who leads the counterattack to rescue Mercer, but by the time they reached him, he is mortally wounded, and Mercer would die nine days later on January 12, 1777. In General James Wilkinson's Memoirs, several interesting particulars of the life and services of General Mercer are related, and in alluding to his death, that writer remarks:

*"In General Mercer we lost at Princeton a chief who for his education, talents, disposition, integrity and patriotism, he was second to no man but the commander-in-chief, and was qualified to fill the highest trusts of the country."*¹¹

General Wilkinson also noted that the evening before the battle of Princeton, Mercer was in a tent with General St. Clair and more than several young officers who were boasting about their

¹⁰ RevolutionaryWar.us. 2017. "The Battle of Princeton." American Revolutionary War - From 1775 to 1783. <https://revolutionarywar.us/year-1777/battle-of-princeton/>.

¹¹ Wilkinson, James. 1816. Memoirs of My Own Time. Philadelphia: Abraham Small .

recent promotions and that they worked hard for and earned in service, to which Hugh Mercer admonished:

"We are not engaged in a war of ambition, or I should not have been here. Every man should be content to serve in that station in which he can be most useful."

Brother Mercer continues during this gathering of young officers that he had only one objective:

"I have but one object in view...the success of the cause; and God can witness how cheerfully I would lay down my life to secure it!"

Little did Hugh Mercer or any of those officers know that a few hours later this pact with God would be kept. The Virginia Gazette reports in the April 4, 1777, edition:

*"The 26th ult. The members of the Fredericksburg lodge, accompanied by a number of visiting brethren, met by appointment at the lodge room, in honour to their late worthy brother, brigadier general HUGH MERCER, from whence they went in procession to church, and heard a sermon suitable to the occasion preached by their chaplain, from the 14th verse of the 13th chapter of Hebrews, 'For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come'."*¹²

Upon the final visit of the Marquis de Lafayette to the United States in 1824, it was reported that while attending a meeting at Fredericksburg Lodge, a Lodge member asked Lafayette about his memory of Hugh Mercer, to which Lafayette reported:

*"Oh!, no, you well know that Mercer fell in January of 1777 and I reached the United States that spring; but on my arrival, I found that the army and the whole country had his name on their lips and he was so well praised and adored that I felt as if I knew him personally!"*¹³

¹² Virginia Gazette. 1777. The Virginia Gazette, April 4: 2.

¹³ Benjamin, Park, and Horace Greeley. 1838. "General Hugh Mercer." The New Yorker, March 24: 71.

GENERAL AND BROTHER HUGH MERCER

Mercer's family remains part of American history, two of note are the famous songwriter, Johnny Mercer, and from Hugh Mercer's daughter, Ann Mercer Patton, we are given General George Patton, of World War II fame. In a letter from General George Patton to Capt. Kinloch Goolrick (whose grandfather wrote a book on Hugh Mercer), Patton reported the following:

My dear Goolrick:

The Life of my great-grandfather by one of your ancestors just arrived, and I cannot tell you how pleased I am to have it because, except for the statue at Fredericksburg and Princeton and a picture I have of him getting bayoneted, he is more or less an unknown character to me.

I trust that your wounds have healed and that you are in good shape again.

If you want to get even for any nastiness I did to you go in the church-yard of the Episcopal Church and you can stomp on the tombstones of a number of Pattons, Mercers, Thompsons, etc.

G.S. Patton Jr.

General, 15th U.S. Army¹⁴

Had General Hugh Mercer not fallen so early in the war, he would have likely been better remembered. But history is clear that during those days, he was most loved, well-remembered, and clearly a man of the same quality and mettle as Washington. Yet in the end, it was George Washington who was given the honor of raising up his working tools to build a new nation and Hugh Mercer who made the ultimate sacrifice in laying down his working tools in defense of the same. For this alone, must we take time to honor the brave legacy of this beloved Brother.

Scottish Son, Masonic Brother, American Father. Hugh Mercer.

¹⁴ The Freelance-Star. 2019. "Famous WWII general descended from Hugh Mercer." The Freelance-Star . April 11. Date of Letter: October 24, 1945. https://fredericksburg.com/famous-wwii-general-descended-from-hugh-mercero/article_1e605d26-2efe-5dca-b085-d1d4b26504da.html.

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