

The Salem Raid, February 26th, 1775

Though General Gage never expressed himself contemptuously toward the Americans, he did in the end adopt a contemptuous view: "They will be lions whilst we are lambs, but if we take the resolute part they will undoubtedly prove very meek" As if to try out this theory, on February 26 he ordered Colonel Leslie to Salem to seize some stores and cannon which the Patriots had collected there. This Salem expedition, which might have been the opening battle of the war, turned out to be an opera bouffe. Early on the morning of the twenty-sixth Leslie sailed with 240 men for Marblehead; after disembarking there, he marched on the ancient town of Salem, only to be denied passage over the drawbridge by the unterrified townspeople.

What happened is told in the accounts by Mrs. Story and William Gavett, and celebrated in the mock heroics of John Trumbull. what is fascinating is that we hear, in this first episode of the war, the notes of "The World Turned Upside Down," and that we hear, too, in the shrill voice of nurse Sarah Tarrant the original version of what was much later to emerge as the story of Barbara Frietchie.

1. COLONEL LESLIE IS TURNED BACK AT SALEM BRIDGE

William Gavett's account.

February 1775

On Sunday, 26 Feb'y, 1775, my father came home from church rather sooner than usual, which attracted my notice, and said to my mother, "The reg'lars arc come and are marching as fast as they can towards the Northfields bridge"; and looking towards her with a very solemn face, remarked, "I don't know what will be the consequence but something very serious, and I wish you to keep the



"Leslie's retreat at North Bridge, Salem, on February 26, 1775." Watercolor by Lewis Jesse Bridgman (1857-1931) Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

children home." I looked out of the window just at this time and saw the troops passing the house. My father then stepped out and stood at the foot of the yard looking into the street. While there our minister Mr. Barnard came along and took my father by the arm, and they walked down towards the bridge beside the troops. My father was very intimate with Mr. Barnard, but was not a deacon of his church.

Colonel David Mason had received tidings of the approach of the British troops and ran into the North Church, which was contiguous to his dwelling, during service in the afternoon, and cried out, at the top of his voice, "The regulars are coming after the guns and are now near Malloon's Mills!" One David Boyce, a Quaker who lived near the church, was instantly out with his team to assist in carrying the guns out of the reach of the troops, and they were conveyed to the neighborhood of what was then called Buffum's Hill, to the northwest of the road leading to Danvers. . . . My father looked in between the platoons . . . to see if he could recognize any of the soldiers who had been stationed at Fort William on the Neck, many of whom were known to him, but he could discover no familiar faces—was blackguarded by the soldiers for his inquisitiveness, who asked him, with oaths, what he was looking after. The northern leaf of the draw was hoisted when the troops approached the bridge, which prevented them from going any further.

Their commander, Col. Leslie. . . then remarked to Capt. [John] Felt, or in his hearing, that he should be obliged to fire upon the people on the northern side of the bridge if they did not lower the leaf. Captain Felt told him if the troops did fire they would all be dead men, or words to that effect. It was understood afterwards that if the troops fired upon the people, Felt intended to grapple with Col. Leslie and jump into the river, for, said he, "I would willingly be drowned myself to be the death of one Englishman." . . .

The people soon began scuttling two gondolas which lay on the western side of the bridge, and the troops also got into them to prevent it. One Joseph Whicher, the foreman in Col. Sprague's distillery, was at work scuttling the colonel's gondola, and the soldiers ordered him to desist, and threatened to stab him with their bayonets if he did not—whereupon he opened his breast and dared them to strike. They pricked his breast so as to draw blood.

It was a very cold day, and the soldiers were without any overcoats, and shivered excessively and shewed signs of being cold. Many of the inhabitants climbed upon the leaf of the draw and blackguarded the troops. Among them was a man who cried out as loud as possible, "Soldiers, red-jackets, lobster-coats, cowards, *damnation to your government!*" The inhabitants rebuked him for it and requested nothing should be done to irritate the troops. Colonel Leslie now spoke to Mr. Barnard, probably observing by his canonical dress that he was a clergyman, and said, "I will get over this bridge before I return to Boston, if I stay here till next autumn." Mr. Barnard replied, he prayed to Heaven there might be no collision, or words of a similar import. Then the colonel remarked, he should burst into the stores of William West and Eben Bickford and make barracks of them for his troops until he could obtain a passage; and turning to Captain Felt, said, "By God! I will not be defeated"; to which Captain Felt replied, "You must acknowledge you have already been baffled."

In the course of the debate between Colonel Leslie and the inhabitants, the colonel remarked that he was upon the King's Highway and would not be prevented passing over the bridge.

Old Mr. James Barr, an Englishman and a man of much nerve, then replied to him: "It is *not* the King's Highway; it is a road built by the owners of the lots on the other side, and no king, country or town has anything to do with it"

The colonel replied, "There may be two words to that."

And Mr. Barr rejoined, "Egad, I think that will be the best way for you to conclude the King has nothing to do with it."

Then the colonel asked Captain Felt if he had any authority to order the leaf of the draw to be lowered, and Captain Felt replied there was no authority in the case, but there might be some influence. Colonel Leslie then promised, if they would allow him to pass over the bridge, he would march but fifty rods and return immediately, without troubling or disturbing anything. Captain Felt was at first unwilling to allow the troops to pass over on any terms, but at length consented, and requested to have the leaf lowered. In this he was joined by Mr. Barnard and Colonel Pickering, and the leaf was lowered down. The troops then passed over and marched the distance agreed upon without violating their pledge, then wheeled and marched back again, and continued their march through North Street in the direction of Marblehead.

A nurse named Sarah Tarrant, in one of the houses near the termination of their route, in Northfields, placed herself at the open window and called out to them: "Go home and tell your master he has sent you on a fool's errand and broken the peace of our Sabbath. What," said she, "do you think we were born in the woods, to be frightened by owls?" One of the soldiers pointed his musket at her, and she exclaimed, "Fire if you have the courage, but I doubt it."

—GAVETT, *Account of the Affair at North Bridge*, Essex Institute Proc., I, 126-128.

2. COLONEL LESLIE RETREATS: "THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN"

Account dictated by the mother of Justice Joseph Story.

In the year 1774 some of the most influential men in the colonies received information that Gov. Gage had received orders and was determined to disarm the colonists by seizing their arms and ammunition. Many persons who were friendly to Great Britain were determined to resist all acts of usurpation and tyranny on the part of the Crown. They did not believe the Governor would attempt to enforce this order, but were very watchful and jealous of every movement made by him.

Some Tories in Salem gave Coy. Gage notice that there were some cannon and military stores in a certain place in Salem which they pointed out and described. On the 26 February, 1775, the Governor ordered from Castle William Lieut.-Col. Leslie with the 64th Regiment in a transport, to land at Marblehead, and from thence to march to Salem and seize the cannon and munitions of war. His orders were peremptory—he landed his troops upon Marblehead Neck in a very quiet manner, expecting not to be discovered or his movements suspected in such an obscure spot; but he little knew the jealous watchfulness of the Americans. By the time their feet touched the land, a man went into the town of Marblehead who saw them land, and the alarm was immediately given by a dozen men running to the door of the new meeting house and beating the alarm signal agreed upon, and crying out, “To arms, to arms!” A person on the watch saw the soldiers come out of the Neck lane in single file, form upon Burbier’s plain anti then march to Salem, playing “Yankee Doodle”. . . After the draw was lowered, Col. Leslie and his men passed over and advanced upon the road the number of paces agreed upon, wheeled about, the music playing the old-fashioned tune of “The World’s Turned Upside Down,” and marched to Marblehead Neck, whence they embarked.

—Story, “Account Dictated,” *Essex Institute Proc.*, I, 134-135.