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The Fight That Failed

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All of which I should have written to you earlier, but one of your adopted countrymen, calling himself a “Zahn­artzt” lately filled me a tooth so vilely and abominably that for ten days he also filled me with acute neuralgia of the face and head, and I, never having been to any dentist before, knew nothing of the cause, until Dr. Von Kohlvelter discovered it. Consequently, during that ten days I had no voice left but for general imprecation. The filling taken out, I am better now and quite sane again, but I have lost so much time that I shall not go to America this season—or indeed further than Paris or London. Italy is doubtful in this stress of weather. So our “good bye” may be “auf wiedersehen.”

Pray make my best compliments to your brother-in-law, and do not let the Herr Consul engage himself to too many young German ladies, for the sake of our common country. I do not yet despair of your liking Hardy. I wish I had another volume to send you.

Very sincerely yours,

BRET HARTE

Three weeks later, Harte was in England and at the Rabelais Club, in London, he met Thomas Hardy, whom he described (writing to Mrs. Harte, in America) as “a singularly unpretending-looking man, and indeed resembling anything but an author in manner and speech.”

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THE FIGHT THAT FAILED

In these days of frequent reports of successful attempts by American forces to wrest territory from the hands of an enemy—at Guadalcanal, at Tunis, in Sicily and Italy—it may be of interest to read of a similar American attempt years ago, but one with a far-from-successful outcome. We refer to a battle fought at Castine, Maine, August
12-14, 1779. The history books do not tell very much about it—many make no mention at all of what the historian George Bancroft calls “this signal disaster.” C. H. Van Tyne’s *The American Revolution* (N. Y., Harpers, 1905) has nothing to say about the battle at Castine; neither has Edward Channing’s *The American Revolution* (Volume III of *A History of the United States*: N. Y., Macmillan, 1912); nor is there a word about naval operations in the Penobscot in H. and M. Sprout’s *The Rise of American Naval Power* (Princeton University Press, 1939), even though Chapter II is devoted to “Naval Operations 1776-1783.”

The article on Maine in the fourteenth (1929) edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is by Dr. Kenneth C. M. Sills, President of Bowdoin College. He explains (pp. 689-690) that, down to the beginning of the eighteenth century, “the French claimed all territory east of the Penobscot, and so Maine was not only an exposed frontier but a battleground during the long struggle of the English against the French. . . . During the War of Independence Portland was bombarded and burned, in 1775, . . . and from 1779 to 1783 a British force was established at Castine.” But not a word about the attempt by an overwhelmingly superior American expedition to dislodge this British force.

George Bancroft’s *History of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown; revised edition, 1879; Vol. VI, p. 214) gives the most easily accessible account of the operations of 1779. “In June, the British general Maclean, who commanded in Nova Scotia, established a British post of 600 men at what is now Castine, on Penobscot Bay. To dislodge the intruders, the Massachusetts legislature sent forth nineteen armed ships, sloops, and brigs, two of them continental vessels, the rest privateers or belonging to the state. The flotilla carried more than three hundred guns, and was attended by twenty-four transports, having on board nearly a thousand men. So large an American armament had never put to sea. A noble public spirit roused all the towns on the coast, and they spared no sacrifice to in-
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sure a victory. But the troops were commanded by an unskilled militia general; the chief naval officer was self-willed and incapable. Not till the twenty-fifth of July did the expedition enter Penobscot Bay. The troops, who on the twenty-eighth gallantly effected their landing, were too weak to carry the works of the British by storm; the commodore knew not how to use his mastery of the water; and, while a re-inforcement was on the way, on the fourteenth of August Sir George Collier arrived in a sixty-four gun ship, attended by five frigates. Two vessels of war fell into his hands; the rest and all the transports fled up the river, and were burnt by the Americans themselves, who escaped through the woods. The British were left masters of the country east of the Penobscot.”

Bancroft talks about “twenty-four transports, having on board nearly a thousand men.” If each transport carried no more than fifty men, there would have been well over a thousand. Documents have recently been discovered that speak of an American “army” of “three thousand five hundred men.” These contemporary records, now in the William L. Clements Library of American History in the University of Michigan, will call for the correction of Bancroft’s story on a number of points. The eye-witness report is here made public for the first time, and the Colby Library Quarterly is fortunate in being able to present an authentic first-hand account of this Maine fight that failed.

THE RELIEF OF FORT GEORGE
By Colton Storm
Curator of Maps, William L. Clements Library
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The discovery of documents relating to the siege of Fort George, at Castine, Maine, deserves first announcement in a Maine journal. Among the Sir Henry