

The "Bee Line" March

When news of the battle of Lexington reached the town, most of its able-bodied men sprang to arms. They drilled on a vacant lot behind the old Entler Tavern. The request of the Continental Congress for two companies of riflemen from Virginia found a ready response and they were soon being organized. General Washington recommended as heads of the Virginia soldiers Hugh Stephenson and Daniel Morgan, both of whom had commanded groups in Dunsmorc's War. Stephenson lived along Bullskin Creek within the limits of present Jefferson County, whereas Morgan hailed from Frederick County, Virginia.*¹

Much rivalry developed between the two companies. Each commander wanted to complete his group first and thus obtain the honor of leading the way. Stephenson organized his company at Shepherdstown and his rival chose Winchester. In spite of the fact that the volunteers were required to furnish their own equipment, recruits poured into both towns. Each man had to provide himself with an approved rifle, shot pouch, powder-horn, blanket, knapsack, and clothing. All recruits were required to be ???of character. Both bodies were enrolled within a week.⁴ Difficulty in obtaining rifles of the desired quality delayed both companies almost six weeks. In this interval the Shepherdstown Committee of Safety appointed the following assistants to Captain Stephenson : William Henshaw, first lieutenant; George Scott, second lieutenant; and Thomas Hite, third lieutenant. Abraham Shepherd succeeded Hite when the latter declined serve. The riflemen themselves selected Samuel Finiey, William Kelly, Josiah Flagg, and Henry Bedinger as sergeants.

Finally, everything was ready for the long march to Boston. The groups were anxious to get into the fray. It was agreed Stephenson, who was the senior officer, would cross the Potomac at Shepherdstown and that Morgan would cross it at Harpers Ferry. They were to meet at Frederick, Maryland, and proceed together to Boston.

Prior to their marching, Stephenson's men enjoyed a barbeque given by Colonel William Morgan at his home on June 10, .1775. The riflemen met at a large spring on Morgan's place and lged??? in a patriotic song. In addition, they agreed that the survivors of their company would meet on the same spot, on the same date, fifty years later. When the appointed time came only five of the original ninety-seven were living. Of these only two, '?? Henry Bedinger of Virginia and Major Michael Bedinger of Kentucky, were able to keep their pledge. The other three, ??? Robert White of Winchester, General Samuel Finley and ??? Hulse, both of Ohio, wished to attend but were too feeble to do so. Nevertheless, the two survivors and many friends enjoyed an elegant dinner served by their host, Daniel Morgan. Afterwards they witnessed a military display.⁵

Stephenson's company set out from Shepherdstown on July 16 but failed to find Morgan's men at Frederick, as had been expected. The reason is that Morgan stole a march on his rivals, for he crossed the Potomac River on July 15 and hastened to Boston. According to the Draper Manuscript, he asked Stephenson to wait a few days in order that the two groups might march together. Stephenson did so only to learn later that Morgan had already left so as to have the honor of being the first arrive at Washington's side. Although Stephenson's men often covered 30 to 36 miles a day in an effort to overtake their rivals, they were unable to do so. They reached Cambridge on August 11 and learned that Morgan's men had arrived just before them. In a "bee line" march they covered almost six hundred miles in twenty-four days. These companies were the first from the South to join Washington .⁶

The appearance of these frontiersmen at Cambridge is said to have caused a sensation among those already on hand. Washington galloped to meet his fellow-Virginians and with tears of joy grasped the hand of every man.

The newcomers were in sharp contrast with their surroundings. Dressed in homespun hunting shirts, in leather leggings and moccasins, and with a buck-tail in their hats, they were a

strange-looking lot. No less curious were their weapons, which consisted of tomahawk, scalping-knife, and rifle. Each of Stephenson's men was further adorned with the immortal words of Patrick Henry, "Liberty or Death," embroidered upon the breast of the hunting-shirt.

In spite of their unprepossessing appearance, the Virginians proved themselves to be among the best marksmen in Washington's camp. Many persons marvelled at their ability to hit a mark seven inches in diameter at a distance of 250 yards, even while they were advancing. Other demonstrations of expert shooting were equally sensational.⁷

Both of the Virginia companies, along with the two from Maryland which arrived a few days later, were ordered to Roxbury. This position, about six miles from Cambridge, faced Boston Neck. The British troops remained in Boston and after the battle of Bunker Hill no important engagements took place in the colonies for more than a year.

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