# 1

# Invasion! 1776



***"One of the best young officers in the army"***

At 6:00 A.M. Saturday, 29 June 1776, following ten days of "very calm weather . . . with light breezes from the east," a British fleet out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, arrived off Sandy Hook, which marks the roadstead of New York Harbor, and by 3:00 P.M. had safely anchored behind the hook. More ships arrived the next day, until the armada numbered 130 ships of war and troop transports carrying 9,300 troops. On 1 July, at 4:40 P.M., Admiral Molyneaux Shuldham signaled his command to get under way. An hour later the ships were "under sail for the Narrows with a fair wind," navigating the tricky passage over the great East Bank sandbar, and at about eight o'clock that evening dropped anchors some two miles off Gravesend. They weighed anchors the next morning at ten o'clock and headed once again for the Narrows, a channel about a mile wide, and safe anchorage in New York City's Upper Bay. But then a law of nature and capricious winds, or lack of them, revealed how in the age of sail the stately passage of tall ships could quickly become a shambles. A captain of Royal Engineers, Archibald Robertson, was there and left a description for us:

> The tide turn'd and becoming allmost Calm and the wind ahead the transports fell into great Confusion all dropping upon one another without steerage way which obliged us to come to Anchor. Some of the ships with in 7 or 800 yards of Long Island. . . . About 12 of the ships

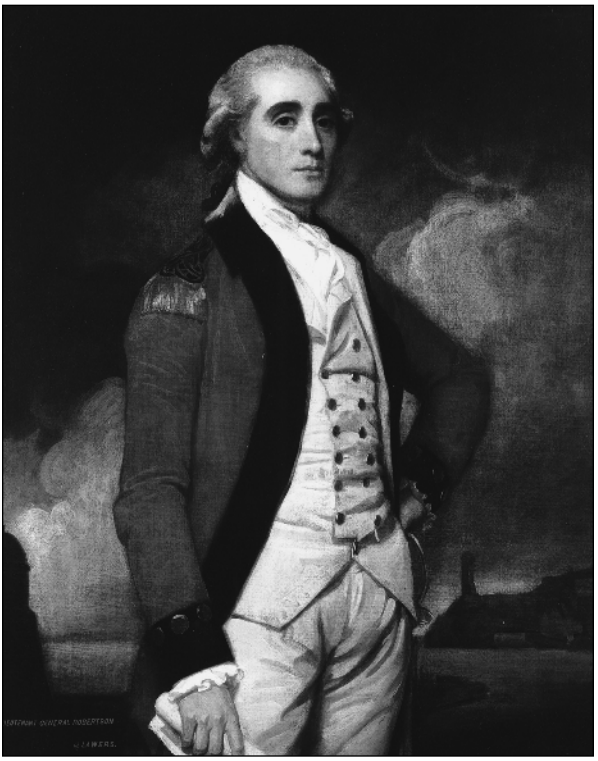
> nearest us were ordered to drop down with the Tide, lucky for us the Rebels had no Cannon here or we must have suffered a good deal.[1]

Thus the awkward arrival of the advance elements of a British expeditionary force that would eventually number about 32,000 troops, the largest army the British government had ever sent overseas. Its commander, General Sir William Howe (1729–1814), was aboard HMS *Greyhound*. Six feet, of swarthy complexion, by nature taciturn, he was described by a Quaker lad, Joseph Townsend, who saw him up close the following year. "The General was a large, portly man, of coarse features. He appeared to have lost his teeth, as his mouth had fallen in. As I stood alongside I had a full opportunity of viewing him as he sat on horseback, and had to observe his large legs and boots, with flourishing spurs thereon."[2]

Howe's appearance in America sent a Tory poet, Joseph Stansbury, into a paroxysm of joy:

> He comes, he comes, the Hero comes:
> Sound, sound your trumpets, beat your drums.
> From port to port let cannon roar
> Howe's welcome to this western shore.[3]

Howe was of that small, privileged class that then ruled England. He was the younger son of the 2nd Viscount Howe and Mary Sophia, eldest daughter of Baron Kielmansegge. His maternal grandfather was rumored to have been the first Hanoverian king of England, George I. Educated by private tutors and at Eton, he had been a soldier for thirty years. Howe was a man of wide military experience and an expert on the training and deployment of light infantry, a type of unit especially suited to North American conditions. As a young officer during the War of the Austrian Succession, he had served in Flanders with his regiment, the prestigious Duke of Cumberland's Light Dragoons. In 1747, at the Battle of Lauffeld, he took part in the famous charge of his regiment, along with Scots Greys and Inniskillings, all under that old warhorse General Sir John Ligonier. After the war, when a Captain in 20th Foot, he became friends with an officer who eventually entered the British pantheon, James Wolfe. Howe first came to America as a lieutenant colonel in 1758, when he brought his regiment, 58th Foot, from Ireland and led it at the siege and capture of Louisburg during the French and



Major Archibald Robertson of Lawers, 1782,
by George Romney

Indian War. Of his performance, his friend Wolfe wrote, "Our old comrade, Howe, is at the head of the best trained battalion in all America, and his conduct in the last campaign corresponded entirely with the opinion we had formed of him."[4]

Howe commanded a light infantry battalion during the Quebec campaign of 1759. Wolfe's confidence in him was displayed at Quebec when Howe was chosen to lead the forlorn hope of two dozen soldiers who preceded Wolfe's entire force on that predawn climb by the narrow path that led up precipitous cliffs from the St. Lawrence River to the Plains of Abraham, the daring maneuver that led to the famous British victory that was a giant step toward France's expulsion from North America.

He continued to excel at his trade, at Quebec City that winter, at Montreal, praised as a brigade commander at the siege of Belle Isle on

the coast of France in the spring of 1761, appointed adjutant general for the British conquest of Havana the following year. Little wonder, then, that at this point in his career a historian described him as "one of the best young officers in the army."

His postwar career continued onward and upward. He obtained the colonelcy of 46th Foot in Ireland in 1764, and four years later was appointed lieutenant governor of the Isle of Wight. In 1772 he was made major general and chosen to train light infantry companies, units of picked men of intelligence, courage, marksmanship, agility, speed afoot, and other attributes that made them roughly equivalent to today's special forces.

Contemplating this distinguished record, and borrowing a phrase from our own time, it would be natural for one to assume that Major General William Howe was among the best and the brightest England had to offer.

While his military career advanced without a hitch, Howe was at the same time a member of the Whig opposition to the Tory government. He entered politics and was elected to Parliament representing Nottinghamshire. He was opposed to the government's American policy, and the voters of his borough recalled that he had told them he would never accept a command in America. Yet in the year 1775 he sailed for Boston, and there on 17 June led the bloody frontal assault on Bunker Hill, where once again he exhibited the personal courage expected of a British officer. He was promoted to lieutenant general that year. On 10 October he succeeded General Thomas Gage as commander in chief, North America. Given Howe's opposition to his government's American policy, that bears looking into. But it can await the arrival on the American scene of Sir William's brother Lord Howe, with whom he would act in tandem.

Sir William Howe would later face accusations of being slow moving and failing to take advantage of opportunities, but on this occasion he intended to strike fast and decisively. According to Major Sir Charles Stuart, a battalion commander in 43rd Foot, "Preparations were made immediately for landing on Long Island and taking possession of a Hill which the enemy had strongly fortified . . . as it commanded Brooklyn's Ferry and the town of New York." But at the last minute Major General James Robertson talked Howe out of this plan, arguing, "if you beat the rebels before the reinforcements arrive, you disgrace the

ministry for sending them; if you are defeated, they will be of no use when they come. Land, therefore, on Staten Island."[5]

On the night of 2 July, in a heavy rain, wrote Captain Archibald Robertson, the "1st division of Transports got under way with the first of the flood Tide, and about 9 we got up to the Watering Place on Staaten Island where the 3 men of war had hauled close inshore" and troops under Major Generals Robertson and Leslie "landed immediately without opposition" and "lay near the landing Place all night."

Meanwhile, at about midnight on the previous day, Captain Ephraim Manning of 20th Continental Regiment had received orders from New York City to help remove livestock from Staten Island. On the 2nd, the day the first British troops landed, on the advice of other officers he began at about 3:00 P.M. to evacuate the island and cross to New Jersey, because, he reported, "the Inhabitants being unfriendly & the Enemy so near & my Party so small, had I staid longer we must have fallen into their Hands, as they were surrounding the Island with their shipping, & not long after we crossed the Ferry there came up two Armd Vessels."[6]

The following day, at about 6:00 A.M., Sir William went ashore. Staten Island had been chosen as an invasion base because it had a dependable water supply, was protected on all sides by water—in effect, a giant moat—and was large enough to hold an army. The 2,300 troops who had landed the previous night began spreading out. The next day the rest of the troops disembarked, the first shots were exchanged with the Rebels, and five sailors were killed or wounded. The British attempt to reconquer the rebellious thirteen states had begun. It was the 4th of July 1776.[7]

## *"The want of experience to move upon a large Scale"*

Across the Upper Harbor, on that long, narrow island called Manhattan, another commander in chief had been informed of the British arrival and had given Captain Manning his orders. Did any man ever look better in the role of commander in chief? Contrasting him to George III, Abigail Adams described his "grace dignity & ease, that leaves Royal George far behind him," and Benjamin Rush wrote at the beginning of the war, "There is not a king in Europe that would not look like a valet de chambre by his side." He had in addition a well-developed

sense of theater, and was aware of the effect he had on his contemporaries. He was a big, strong, enduring man: six-feet-two in his stocking feet, wide-shouldered, narrow-waisted, broad-hipped, with long, muscular arms and legs. His head was somewhat small for his big body, but "gracefully poised on a superb neck," wrote his close friend and old comrade in arms George Mercer. His eyes, observed Mercer, were "blue-grey" and "penetrating" and "widely separated" over "high round cheek bones." Adding to his imposing—to some, overwhelming—presence, in an age of ubiquitous horsemen he was a magnificent rider. Thomas Jefferson called him "the best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback."[8]

It has been commonly said of him that he was fearless in battle, but can that really be said of any man? It seems more likely that he possessed in heroic measure what we call grace under pressure. Certainly all of the evidence presented by his contemporaries convinces us that in battle the big man, conspicuously tall in the saddle, time after time exposed himself to enemy fire and never flinched or gave any sign of fear.

He also had two attributes essential to a commanding officer: a strong physical constitution and a temperament that enabled him to meet and surmount the vicissitudes of war. For if either the body or the mind break down, all else mean nothing.

This forty-four-year-old Virginia planter has come down to us as a distant man, reserved and aloof. It was an age of deference, formal manners, and dignified bearing, but this man's remoteness from even his closest friends carried the notions of his time and class to extraordinary lengths and was often remarked upon by his contemporaries. He would never be, as we might say today, one of the boys. The very idea would have left him speechless, and he would have regarded with icy disdain any suggestion that he behave in such a manner.

A story that highlights this character trait took place after the war, during the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Gouverneur Morris of New York, a patrician snob of the first order, told a group of the commander's old friends and comrades that he could be as free and easy with the great Virginian as with any of his friends. Alexander Hamilton immediately bet Morris a dinner and wine for twelve if Morris would approach their old commander, pat his shoulder, and say, "My dear General, how happy I am to see you looking so well." At the next reception given by the great man, Morris walked up to him, bowed

and shook hands, then placed his hand on the Virginian's shoulder and said, "My dear General, I am very happy to see you look so well."

Whereupon George Washington removed Gouverneur Morris's hand from his shoulder and stepped back. He remained silent, fixing Morris with an icy glare. Morris retreated in confusion to the comfort of his friends. There is no evidence that such an incident ever occurred again.[9]

But there was another side to him, tales of laughter, wrote a contemporary, "till the tears ran down his eyes," letters revealing wit, sometimes biting, and subtle humor. One of the best examples of his sense of humor is when, without using the same language, he anticipated Mark Twain's famous quip by 142 years. He wrote to his brother after the Battle of Monongahela (1755), "As I heard . . . a circumstantial account of my death and dying Speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you that I have not, as yet composed the latter." The man who wrote that was not devoid of humor. But he was young then. By the time he became president, Abigail Adams, who saw him often then, would write, "He has a dignity which forbids Familiarity." The tremendous responsibilities he took on, first as commander in chief of a revolutionary army that challenged the world's greatest military power, later as first president of the new nation, setting precedents with almost every act, and his knowledge that he was forever on stage, subject to constant observation and critique by his fellow Americans and the world beyond, all of that certainly led to the public mask that rarely revealed the very human side of the man on the performing side of the footlights.[10]

Yet even during the war there are glimpses of a relaxed, even playful, Washington, who enjoyed informal social occasions and the company of women. Along with other wives of officers, including Martha Washington, twenty-five-year-old Martha Daingerfield Bland visited her husband, the Virginia cavalryman Colonel Theodoric Bland, at the army's 1777 winter encampment in Morristown, New Jersey. She wrote to her sister-in-law that she and her husband visited the Washingtons socially by invitation two or three times a week and "Every day frequently from inclination. He is generally busy in the forenoon, but from dinner till night he is free for all company. His worthy lady seems to be in perfect felicity, while she is by the side of her 'Old Man,' as she calls him. We often make parties on horseback, the general, his lady, Miss Livingston, his aides-de-camp . . . at which time General Washington

throws off the hero and takes on the chatty agreeable companion. He can be downright impudent sometimes, such impudence, Fanny, as you and I like."[11]

Of one thing we can be sure. In 1776, George Washington's military experience came nowhere near his opponents'. He was aware of that, and of the mighty task he had undertaken. Four days after Congress had "Unanimously made its choice of him to be General & Commander in Chief of the American forces," he wrote to his brother-in-law, "I am now Imbarked on a tempestuous Ocean from whence, perhaps, no friendly harbour is to be found."[12]

He was right, of course, but we must note that he did not decline the appointment, and there is evidence that this intensely ambitious man very much wanted to be commander in chief. He silently lobbied for the appointment while a delegate to the Continental Congress by appearing at its sessions resplendent in his Virginia regimentals.

When Washington took command of the Rebel army outside Boston on 2 July 1775, his experience had been limited to wilderness travel and soldiering. In 1753, at age twenty-one, he was sent by Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia, with six companions, on a 900-mile winter journey from Williamsburg, Virginia, to go to the French Fort LeBoeuf (now Waterford, Pennsylvania) and return. He carried a letter to the French commandant in the Ohio Country demanding that the French evacuate the area. He was also instructed to gain the support of the Indians. In neither was he successful. His performance on that 2½-month expedition, in which he suffered deep snows, numbing cold, and drenching in the icy waters of the Allegheny River, revealed his physical toughness and determination, but it also highlighted his inexperience.[13]

His next assignment ended in disaster when he returned to the Ohio Country in May 1754, with orders to evict the French, and was obliged to surrender hastily built Fort Necessity to the enemy. He and his command of Virginia militia were allowed to march out with the honors of war and return home unmolested by either the French or their Indian allies, but the generous terms could not bely that inexperience, imprudence, and a numerically superior enemy had led to total failure. The great Pennsylvania Indian agent Conrad Weiser wrote that the Seneca chief Half King "complained very much of the Behaviour of Coll. Washington to him (though in a very Moderate way Saying the Coll. was a good-natured man but had no Experience) saying that he took upon him to Command the Indians as his Slaves . . . that he would

by no Means take advise from the Indians . . . that he (the Half King) had carryed off his Wife and Children, so did the other Indians, before the Battle begun, because Coll. Washington would never listen to them, but always driving them on to fight by his directions." This apt characterization also helps to reveal a part of Washington that we must always keep in mind when studying him. He had the instincts of a fighter. From the raw lad in over his head in the Pennsylvania woods to the mature commander in chief of a revolutionary army, George Washington was a fighting soldier. He grew wiser, he learned prudence, but he remained a fighter, and that instinct sometimes led him astray. It got him into big trouble in the Ohio Country. It would get him into bigger trouble in New York.[14]

He got out of it whole in 1754, and in that regard fortune continued to smile on him during the ensuing French and Indian War (1754–1763). He was the ranking provincial officer with Major General Edward Braddock's expedition that ended with a British catastrophe on 9 July 1755 along the Monongahela River in the deep forests of southwestern Pennsylvania. The fault was not his, and he behaved with great coolness during the rout of the British regulars by a mixed force of French, Canadians, and Indians. It was on that bloody field that his personal luck in battle first occurred, for "I luckily escapd witht a wound, tho' I had four Bullets through my Coat, and two Horses shot under me."[15]

Washington commanded militia, but he did not consider himself a militia officer. His model, despite Braddock's debacle, was the regular British army, and during those years of colonial twilight he yearned and lobbied for a commission as an officer in that army. But such commissions were few and far between, and the provincial colonel from Virginia was not among the chosen. Nor was the regiment he commanded on the Virginia frontier taken into the British service as a regular unit, as he fervently wished. But between 1755 and 1758, by dint of his own knowledge gained through experience, wide reading in military treatises, and devotion to high standards of discipline and honor, Washington raised the Virginia Regiment to a level of professionalism that he regarded as equal to that of regulars. He learned much during the Braddock campaign, and even more serving under that fine field commander and military administrator Brigadier General John Forbes. Forbes had a low opinion of provincial officers, labeling them a "bad Collection of broken Innkeepers, Horse Jockeys, & Indian traders," but he had a high regard for Washington. He may in fact have used in part Washington's

plan, drawn up at the request of Forbes's regimental commanders, for an army of 4,000 men to march and fight in a country of deep forests. Although the British advance through the rugged western Pennsylvania wilderness against the outnumbered French at Fort Duquesne (modern Pittsburgh) offered no fighting, all the myriad of administrative details necessary to maintain an army in the field were not lost on the young Virginian. By the end of the war he was in many respects a professional officer.[16]

Nevertheless, on the eve of the British invasion of New York in 1776, Washington remained on the basis of experience a frontier commander, and, despite all the nonsense written about American riflemen winning the war by hiding behind trees and picking off blundering Redcoats, overall the tactics of frontier warfare would not decide the test of arms between the thirteen states and the mother country. He had, to be sure, conducted a successful siege of Boston, which ended with a humiliating British evacuation. But the cards had been all his: a countryside swarming with Rebels, a commanding position on Dorchester Heights overlooking the city, and the captured guns of Ticonderoga to bombard the enemy. And for an inexperienced commander and his equally inexperienced army, static siege warfare could not be compared with the deployment and maneuvering of large bodies of troops in open country, or with the test of formal battles, regiments against regiments, armies against armies, when in the eighteenth-century manner men advanced in formation and delivered volleys upon command before charging with fixed bayonets. Those were the moments of truth separating trained, disciplined regulars from rabble.

To his credit, Washington was quite aware of his shortcomings and admitted them. In a letter assessing the abilities of General John Sullivan of New Hampshire, Washington approached the matter with candor. "His wants are common to us all; the want of experience to move upon a large Scale." He admitted to a "limited, and contracted knowledge . . . in military matters." But he defended Sullivan, and in effect himself and other subordinates, by maintaining that the limitations were "greatly overbalanced by sound judgement of Men and Books; especially when accompanied by an enterprizing genius, which I must do gen'l Sullivan the justice to say, I think he possesses."[17]

But were these abilities, which he and others did possess (although not Sullivan), enough to carry out the most difficult mission attempted by Washington and his army during the War of the Revolution: the

defense of New York City? Which brings us immediately to another question. Why New York? Why did Washington send the highly regarded but exceedingly eccentric Major General Charles Lee to New York in January 1776 with orders to occupy the city and plan and build a system of defensive works? Why did Washington leave Boston on 4 April 1776 with two aides, William Palfrey and Stephen Moylan, and his adjutant general, the self-deluded Horatio Gates, and arrive in New York City on 13 April? Why did General Sir William Howe sail from Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 10 June, destination, New York? Why were all the proud regiments on their way from the British Isles and Germany to join him?[18]

### *"No Effort to secure it ought to be omitted"*

A look at a map of eastern North America helps provide the answer to our question. Lying along the Atlantic seacoast, only some 200 miles north of the divide between the northern and southern states, the city provided one of the world's great natural harbors, one that was generally ice-free. From here a British fleet lying in protected waters had access northward via the East River and Long Island Sound to New England and the Maritime Provinces of Canada. To the south, once clearing Sandy Hook, it was a straight run down the coast to Delaware Bay and the water route to Philadelphia, or on to Chesapeake Bay and Virginia, a hotbed of rebellion. Farther south, once the rightly feared waters off Cape Hatteras were cleared, the way was open to the Carolinas, where Charleston, South Carolina, then the richest city in America, would lure the British in this second year of the war and later tempt them even more. But that is another story.[19]

Another look at our map reveals more proof of New York's strategic position in those days, when overland travel was more often than not an extreme form of physical punishment, especially when travelers, or an army, entered the American Back Country, which then was not far from the coast. Thus travel by water was prized, and of all the cities in North America only Quebec, Montreal, and New Orleans could rival New York's water route into the interior. On the map follow the Hudson River—or North River, as it was called in early times—from where it empties into Upper New York Bay northward about 150 miles to Albany. From there follow the Mohawk River west. It was navigable to within about 20 miles of Fort Oswego, New York, on the shores of Lake


Eastern North America, 1776

Ontario. The short portage opened up great possibilities to eighteenth-century traders, explorers, and soldiers. Northward via Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River lay Canada. Westward by way of Ontario and the other Great Lakes lay an immense interior and a network of rivers connecting with the mightiest of them all, the Mississippi. Contemporaries saw it clearly. In his orders to General Charles Lee, Washington wrote, "it is a matter of the utmost Importance to prevent the Enemy from taking possession of the City of New York & the North

River as they will thereby Command the country, & the Communication with Canada, it is of too much consequence . . . to hazard such a Post at so alarming a crisis." To another of his generals he drove the point home: "my feelings upon this Subject are so Strong that I woud not wish to give the enemy a Chance of Succeeding." One of the key revolutionary politicians, John Adams, was as one with Washington on the "vast importance of that City, Province, and the North River which is in it, in the Progress of this War, as it is the Nexus of the Northern and Southern Colonies, as a Kind of Key to the whole Continent, as it is a Passage to Canada and to the Great Lakes and to all the Indian Nations. No Effort to secure it ought to be omitted."[20]

We can agree with Washington and Adams on the strategic location of New York City and the Hudson Highlands flanking the Hudson River to the north, but can we agree that securing the city, and holding it, against a British attack was in the best strategic interests of the Rebels? More to the immediate point, could New York City be successfully defended? These are questions we shall be returning to in our narrative.

Meanwhile, for our story we should return to Albany and look directly north. Stretching before us is the classic invasion route between the United States and Canada. With relatively easy portages, the way is clear via the Richelieu River in Quebec, Lake Champlain, Lake George, and a portage to the Hudson at Albany. Contesting forces had been using that route since early in the seventeenth century, and both American and British leaders had their eyes on it in 1776. And New York City and its hinterland were the keys. The British thought that if they controlled them, they could cut off New England, which they considered the seat of rebellion, from the rest of the country. That this was a dubious proposition is irrelevant, for both the British and the Americans believed it.

For the Americans, securing New York City was easy. In the absence of British ground forces, they simply marched in and took control. Its defense, however, presented a serious problem. In January 1776, prior to being ordered by Washington to New York to take over the city and prepare its defenses, General Charles Lee claimed to be losing sleep over the thought of the British taking New York. "The consequence of the Enemy's possessing themselves of New York have appeared to me so terrible that I have scarcely been able to sleep from apprehensions on the subject—these apprehensions daily increase." Given the ambitious Lee's subsequent history, we can be excused our suspicion that his hyperbole

masked an itch to put distance between himself and Washington, whom he considered his inferior as a general, and operate without his chief in the immediate vicinity. Whatever Lee thought, once he arrived in the city and reconnoitered its land and waters, he saw the problem clearly and changed his tune:

> What to do with the city, I own puzzles me, it is so encircle'd with deep, navigable water, that whoever commands the Sea must command the Town.

In the same letter he also strongly implied that New York City could not be held:

> I shall begin to dismantle that part of the Fort next the Town to prevent it's being converted into a Citadel. I shall barrier the principal Streets, and at least if I cannot make it a Continental Garrison, it shall be a disputable field of battle.[21]

How that battle turned out Lee would learn at long distance, for on 1 March he was ordered by Congress to take command of the Southern Department, encompassing Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, where his turbulent nature and brutal candor would vex the proud Rice Kings of the South Carolina Low Country. He will return to our story, however, to also vex his long-suffering commander in chief.[22]

Lee left New York on 7 March for Philadelphia and the South. He was succeeded by the hard-drinking, high-living, bogus Scottish nobleman Brigadier General William Alexander (1726–1783), traditionally known as Lord Stirling, who was a brave and active officer and dedicated to the cause. Stirling took up what Lee had ably planned but hardly begun during his short tenure, and he faced the same problem described by Lee: what to do with the city.

The map bears Lee out. New York City and its environs are laced with waterways that are key to both defending and attacking the city. To completely control the Hudson River one had to control Manhattan Island, the opposite New Jersey shore, and the Hudson Highlands north of Tappan Zee. But to hold Manhattan one had to control the western shores of Long Island, which comprised Kings County (modern Brooklyn) and Queens County (modern Queens). Jutting out from Kings County, on the southern side of Wallabout Bay, is Brooklyn Heights, where the

well heeled now live and play. Brooklyn Heights overlooks the lower tip of Manhattan, which was the city in 1776, with a population of some 25,000. Artillery mounted on Brooklyn Heights could destroy the city and its docks, as well as ships in the East River anchorage, for the seaport in 1776 was on the east side. On the west side, cliffs then rose from the waters of the Hudson, making access to the streets difficult.

Other important reasons why New York's seaport was on the east side are the prevailing winds and the nature of the waters surrounding Manhattan. The winds, westerly and northwesterly, made it much easier in the age of sail to go up the East River instead of beating to windward up the Hudson. The Hudson River is a stratified estuary, with fresh water on top and salt water below. Thus the Hudson can and sometimes does freeze over, and the climate then was much colder than now, being at the tail end of the Little Ice Age that prevailed in the Northern Hemisphere from about 1300 to 1850. The East River, on the other hand, is not a river but a tidal estuary of salt water that normally does not freeze over. In addition, Lower New York Bay south of the Narrows was clogged by sand, through which a narrow channel flowed toward Sandy Hook, so it was faster getting out of port by sailing about sixteen miles up the East River and out through Hell Gate to Long Island Sound. It also was thirty-one miles closer to England; and the sound, between the southern New England coast and Long Island, was a protected body of water.[23]

But all of this was for naught unless it could be held, and to hold Manhattan the Americans had to hold Brooklyn Heights. Washington assigned that mission to a man he liked and respected, a portly, thirty-four-year-old ironmonger and merchant from Rhode Island even more inexperienced than Washington, "to move upon a large Scale." It remains a mystery why on 8 May 1775 the Rhode Island legislature promoted Nathanael Greene from private to brigadier general, probably the biggest leap in rank in American military history. The records are silent. Greene's sole military experience had been the militia parade ground. When Washington placed him in command of the troops on Long Island, Greene had never led men in battle. In fact, he had never seen a battle. But he was highly intelligent and an avid student of the art of war, widely read in the subject. Upon receiving his new command Nathanael Greene immediately did what any commander in such a situation should do: ride the ground, study the lay of the land, try to anticipate by firsthand reconnaissance from which direction the enemy might come.

***"I think we shall fight to-day. Black Dick has been smiling."***

On 12 July 1776, HMS *Eagle* (64 guns), Captain Henry Duncan commanding, bearing the flag of the admiral of the British fleet on the North American station, passed Sandy Hook, navigated the Narrows, and dropped anchor off the eastern side of Staten Island. In the armada were 150 ships of war and troop transports. Ambrose Serle, a civilian secretary aboard *Eagle*, confided to his journal, "We were saluted by all the Ships of War in the Harbour, by the cheers of the Sailors all along the Ships, and by those of the Soldiers on the Shore." Also aboard *Eagle* was Serle's employer, a man whom officers and men of the navy fondly referred to as Black Dick. He was Sir William Howe's elder brother, Vice Admiral Richard, 4th Viscount Howe (1726–1799).[24]

The appointments of the Howe brothers to sea and ground command in America has intrigued historians for more than two hundred years. They were Whigs, opposed to the Tories who controlled the government. They were sympathetic to the Americans. The memory of their older brother, George Augustus, 3rd Viscount Howe, who was killed in action near Fort Ticonderoga in 1758, was revered by colonists. He had been so popular among Massachusetts troops that the province erected a monument to George Augustus in Westminster Abbey. Despite all this, and despite Lord Howe's well-known conviction that conciliation, not force, was the answer to American rebellion, the admiral was chosen not only to command in North American waters but also authorized to extend a limited olive branch to the Rebels. This, I think the reader will agree, bears examination. First, however, let us take a brief look at Sir William's elder brother.

As was the custom then, he went to sea early, in his case at age fourteen, and steadily climbed in rank through many situations and climes. He first saw combat at sixteen, was wounded at twenty, and made flag captain at twenty-two. Like his brother, he saw extensive action in the Seven Years' War. Lord Howe was a solid professional: a careful naval tactician, a close student of soundings, currents, tides, and signals. If anything, he was more taciturn than his brother. Horace Walpole related an incident that occurred in 1758 at Cancale Bay, during an amphibious action on the French coast, when Howe formed a poor opinion of the generalship of Lord George Sackville—later Lord George Germain, to whom Howe would report as peace commissioner to the colonies. Sack-

Richard, Earl Howe by Thomas Gainsborough

ville put several questions to Howe, who silently ignored him, whereupon an exasperated Sackville asked, "Mr. Howe, don't you hear me?" Howe replied, "I don't love questions."[25]

In a 1758 amphibious operation against Cherbourg, Howe played an important role in the destruction of the port, and in the failed attack on St. Malo he saved many of the landing force through his own gallant efforts. In 1759 he was in the thick of the action at the great English naval victory at Quiberon Bay, Brittany. He became a rear admiral and commander in chief, Mediterranean, in 1770. In 1775 he was appointed vice admiral, and in December of that year made commander in chief of

naval forces, North America, where he would join Sir William as warrior and diplomat.

Richard, 4th Viscount Howe, was a man of high character and courage, but temperamentally disinclined to talk, as Germain had discovered at Cancale Bay. Walpole wrote that he was as "undaunted as a rock, and as silent." At first thought, one might wonder about the choice of such a man as a peace envoy, for whom speech is the chief tool of the trade; but only if one also assumes that the king and his ministers were truly interested in that aspect of Lord Howe's dual appointment. His contemporaries disagreed sharply on his personality. He was either "liberal, kind, and gentle," or "haughty, morose, hard-hearted, and inflexible." But of his popularity in the navy there can be no doubt, for in such matters we should always trust the opinion of the other ranks. Despite strong, harsh features, the grim and forbidding figure he cut, Lord Howe was a good commander, solicitous of his men's well-being, and they repaid him and took to his peculiar nature and expression. One sailor said before an action, "I think we shall fight to-day. Black Dick has been smiling."

Now that we have been introduced to our chief protagonists and the general lay of the land and waters they would initially contest, it is time to examine the choice of Black Dick and his brother to command in America and the curious nature of their assignment.

## *"We must either master them or totally leave them to themselves"*

The American Revolution was very much about power and who would wield it in America. In 1774 Lord Dartmouth, at the time secretary of state for the American colonies, wrote to the then commander in chief in America, General Thomas Gage:

> the Sovereignty of the King in His Parliament, over the Colonies requires a full and absolute submission.[26]

The colonists, on the other hand, had made quite clear their contention that in all domestic matters colonial legislatures, not the British Parliament, should prevail. Consider this statement from the First Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774:

> That the foundation of English liberty, and of all free government is a right in the people to participate in their legislative council: and as the English colonists are not represented, and from their local and other circumstances, cannot properly be represented in the British parliament, they are entitled to a free and exclusive power of legislation in their several provincial legislatures, where their right of representation can alone be preserved, in all cases of taxation and internal polity, subject only to the negative of their sovereign, in such manner as has been heretofore used and accustomed.[27]

Could the delegates have been clearer? Parliament in London rules on external affairs, but on domestic matters, including taxation, their own legislatures govern. For the colonists, Parliament was the problem, not their sovereign, the king. But neither the king nor his ministers bought that argument, and the king did not separate his authority from that of Parliament's. The idea of colonial self-government was almost a century ahead of its time. Not until 1867 would Britain, under the British North America Act, grant home rule to Canada. George III, his ministers and Parliament, believed to the very cores of their beings that in all legislative matters, whether at home or in the overseas colonies, Parliament was supreme. The king wrote, "I do not want to drive them to despair but to Submission, which nothing but feeling the inconvenience of their situation can bring their pride to submit to." The operative word, of course, was "Submission." This theme appears again and again in his correspondence; for example, "we must either master them or totally leave them to themselves and treat them as Aliens." The rigid, unbending nature of George III would be an important factor in the coming struggle, and he was equally clear in that regard, too. As events moved inexorably toward the point of no return, he wrote to his chief minister, "I entirely place my security in the protection of the Divine Disposer of All Things, and shall never look to the right or left but steadily pursue the Track which my Conscience dictates to be the right one." He was supported by his ministers and Parliament, who were insulted by the challenge to parliamentary authority, and the colonial belief that their liberties were at stake was to them a notion to be scoffed at. The king, his ministers, and Parliament would have agreed with an English traveler who found himself trapped in revolutionary America that the "sweet enjoyment of real and happy liberty was already theirs."[28]

That much was clear to London. What was not at all clear was how to deal with the rebellious Americans. What would it be: coercion or compromise? It is not our purpose to delve into the intricacies of this argument, which consumed official and unofficial Britain. Nobody, even the most hawkish, wanted a war, but once London decided on coercion, a shooting war awaited only the tinder to set the blaze. That came at Lexington and Concord on 19 April 1775, and for the men in London wrestling with the problem, the bloody encounter between the New England militia and British regulars at Bunker Hill on 17 June sealed the issue.[29]

But who would command? General Thomas Gage, in command in America, had fallen out of favor, largely because of his preference for conciliation. This is ironic, because the Howe brothers, especially the admiral, also favored conciliation. Yet Sir William was chosen to succeed Gage, while Lord Howe, in addition to his combat command, was commissioned within a very narrow scope to bring the Rebels back into the fold. Let us briefly consider how this came about.[30]

Sir William's appointment to serve under Gage and, as he hoped and expected, to eventually succeed him, was relatively simple, in contrast to the protracted negotiations that led to his brother's dual appointment as commander in chief of the North American station and peace commissioner. Sir William was firmly opposed to American independence, but he believed that negotiation was the correct road to ironing out differences between the colonies and London. He also realized, however, that the threat of force was a necessary backdrop to conciliation, and he was an ambitious soldier, thirsting for fame and glory in his chosen profession. Thus he dissembled, never revealing to the ministers responsible for his appointment his true aim in America, although his ties to the colonies, especially Massachusetts, through his dead brother, George Augustus, and his zeal for conciliation were not unknown to both official and unofficial London and were commented upon at the time. Yet on two occasions, in writing, he stated unequivocally to Lord Germain that the Rebel army had to be destroyed: first, in late April 1776, "A decisive Action, that which nothing is more to be desired or sought for by us as the most effective Means to terminate this expensive War"; and in early July, shortly after he had landed on Staten Island, he was "still of the opinion that peace will not be restored in America until the Rebel Army is defeated."[31]

His brother Richard, Lord Howe, also attempted to conceal his intentions, but both the king and his ministers were not unaware of Lord Howe's feelings, which is highlighted by an amusing story that also reveals that the king, rigid as he might be, was not the one-dimensional character who has come down in popular opinion. The incident occurred when General Sir Charles Hotham Thompson was traveling from Bath to London in the company of Lord Howe and another gentleman not named. They stopped on the way to dine, and their conversation centered on the troubles in America. According to Sir Charles, Howe "became very warm upon the subject." He said that Lord North deserved to be impeached, convicted, and hanged. But even worse, said Howe, was the "persevering and invincible obstinancy of the King." Now it so happened that Sir Charles was also groom of the bedchamber to George III, and the next time he was at court waiting upon His Majesty, the king asked him point-blank whether on his recent journey from Bath a certain conversation had taken place. Sir Charles, horrified and embarrassed, admitted it had and waited for the ax to fall. But the king laughed loudly and said, "Well, well, every man has a right to his own opinion in public affairs; but I have too high an esteem for Lord Howe not to advise him, through you, at any future time, before he brings his Minister to the scaffold, and inveighs against my '*persevering and invincible obstinancy*,' to take the precaution of sending the common waiters of an inn out of the room first."[32]

So the king, it appeared, would not be an impediment to the admiral's appointment. But because Lord Howe was actually being appointed peace commissioner, and because the moderate Lord Dartmouth was replaced as colonial secretary by the belligerent Lord George Germain, negotiations between Lord Howe and the ministry with regard to his instructions as commissioner dragged on for months and at times seemed to break down. But Lord Howe campaigned assiduously and cleverly for the assignment. It is too long and tangled a tale for us to follow its many paths and byways, but we must consider its highlights to understand what followed in America.

Lord Germain was suspicious of Lord Howe from the beginning, but overcame his doubts. And he had convinced himself in the case of Sir William that the soldier would not allow his preference for conciliation to deter him from applying necessary force. How much force was necessary, of course, was another question, and one that apparently did not

figure much in the discussions leading to Sir William's appointment. In similar fashion, Germain decided that the admiral also would do his duty.

But Germain also tried to stack the deck by adding to the commission somebody who opposed conciliation, and especially concessions. Lord Howe balked, declaring that the first minister, Lord North, had promised that he would be the only commissioner. By that time, however, Lord Howe's younger brother Sir William had replaced General Gage as commander in chief in America, and Lord Howe agreed to serve with another commissioner, provided it was his brother. Germain reluctantly conceded, believing that Sir William would act as a brake on the admiral. Did he not realize, however, that Lord Howe was the more serious-minded of the brothers, and the stronger in character of the two? Lord Howe was also head of the family, to whom Sir William had written upon the elder's accession to the title, "live and be a Comfort to us all. Remember how much our dependence is on you. If we lose your only support left to us we shall fall never to rise again. Excuse me and think of a Family whose only hope now is your safety."[33]

Lord Howe's campaign for the appointment, which began early in 1775, did not end until 27 April 1776, when he and his brother were appointed peace commissioners. His written instructions were detailed and stringent, as Germain attempted to hamstring him. The key word to describe Howe's instructions was *Submission*. Lord Howe could offer pardons to Rebels who took an oath of allegiance to the king. The Rebels must submit and dissolve illegal representative bodies and royal government must be restored and parliamentary supremacy acknowledged before any discussions of a modified relationship between the colonies and the mother country could take place. And everything Lord Howe did in his role as peace commissioner was subject to ratification by London.

Germain and most of the ministry assumed that Lord Howe would follow his instructions to the letter, that he would not enter into any talks with the Rebels until they had submitted, until force had crushed the rebellion. The sword was to take precedence over diplomacy.

The question was: Could Lord Howe, a strong-minded man who shrank from the thought of civil war, who firmly believed that conciliation was the realistic answer to the rebellion—could he be trusted not to deviate from his instructions?