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PLUNDERING BY THE BRITISH ARMY DURING THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

CONTRIBUTED BY WILLIAM BROOKE RAWLE, ESQ.

[The following is taken from the Common-Place Book of William Rawle (the elder), dated October 12, 1781, and written while he was a student-at-law in the Inner Temple, London. As a boy he had remained in Philadelphia during its occupation by the British forces from September, 1777, to June, 1778. On June 18, prior to the evacuation of the city, he sailed for New York, and remained there until June 15, 1781, when he sailed for Europe for the purpose of pursuing his legal studies and travelling.]

A writer in one of the English newspapers under the signature of Fabricius had the confidence to assert that in the march from the head of the Elk to Philadelphia Sir W. Howe stopped the plunder by one single example.

The fact is that not less than five soldiers were executed before the arrival of the British army at Philadelphia, and that they abstained from plunder at no part of the march. The enemies of Sir W. Howe have unjustly compared his marches thro' the country to the track of a ship thro' the sea, or a bird in the air, which was immediately closed up and left no vestiges behind. It might with more justice be likened to the path of one of those tornados which, between the tropics, traverse the country in dreadful fury, and leave a mournful picture of devastation and destruction.

When the British camp was pitched at Germantown, and was afterwards contracted to Philadelphia, the vicinities of the city and the city itself constantly exhibited a dreary picture of want and desolation; houses empty and abandoned with windows taken out and floors pulled up; en-

closures levelled to the ground; gardens ravaged and destroyed; forests cut down, opening an extensive prospect of a silent and deserted country. Such was the change from what, a few weeks before, were the most beautiful, the best cultivated and the most fertile environs of any city in America.

Of these enormities the Hessian soldiers were chiefly accused.

To mitigate the reluctance with which these people embarked from Germany on being taken into the British service, a report was circulated amongst them that the Americans, having rebelled against their King, had forfeited all the rich and fertile country they held, which was ready to be divided among the soldiery on taking the trifling trouble to drive out the possessors. It is easy to imagine how this persuasion operated amongst them. When they landed on Staten Island in 1776, they were for a time patient and quiet, for they considered their post as a kind of preliminary to the property they were assumed to take possession of; their hopes therefore ensured their obedience, and they remained in the peaceful expectation of unbounded wealth. When it was supposed they were sufficiently recovered from the fatigues of the voyage they were called off to a scene of warfare and of labor. They were led in pursuit of a flying enemy thro' many miles of a hostile country, where they had first to experience, for they were mostly new troops, the dangers, the troubles and the distresses of an American campaign. They soon discovered how much they had been mistaken, and they were disgusted at their disappointment. To remonstrate was ineffectual; to be clamorous was dangerous; the resentment which could not be exerted against those who had deceived them was turned against the country they were in. Stimulated at once by avarice and by anger, they began, not without the connivance of their officers, who in point of knowledge and humanity are few degrees superior to the men, a system of depredation and barbarity which was universally pur-

sued with a savage eagerness and inhumanity the most disgraceful to Great Britain, the most detrimental to her cause. They had then penetrated into the Jerseys and were in possession of New York. In these places no principles, conduct or character, no age, sex or condition were security for property or a protection from insult. The very seats of learning which Genl. Washington had taken pains to preserve were pillaged without remorse. The Library of the College at New York which it had long been the employment and the pleasure of the citizens to encrease and embellish, was plundered, and the books hawked about at low prices. When a purchaser could not be found, as few would purchase what the same licentious hands might soon deprive them of again, they were consigned to the offices of the guard room, of which lighting fires was the most honorable. The philosophical apparatus were destroyed for the sake of the brass. These circumstances deserve more to be remembered because it must be a passion more brutal and degrading than mere avarice that could prompt soldiery to enter the walls of a college, where whatever is valuable is too bulky to be the proper object of a soldier's rapine, and because this conduct of the Hessians bears so great a resemblance to their illustrious predecessors who, under the conduct of Alaric, ravaged Rome in the fifth century. The Hessians too had their Alaric, and the man complained as a hardship that he was not allowed to sell the house in New York of which he had taken possession, and transmit the money to Germany.

In a little time the Hessian soldiers became individually rich and well provided with those little comforts and conveniences that constitute the luxury of a soldier. The British, while they remarked the inferiority of their own condition, were naturally led to imitate the conduct which appeared so beneficial, and, encouraged by the laxity of discipline prevalent in the army, a kind of rivalry ensued between the two nations which should most distress the country, that with a ridiculous inconsistency their masters

affected the strongest desires to reconcile. Whether it was owing to a savage ferocity peculiar to the people, or to longer habits of villainy, it is remarked that the Hessians constantly maintained a superiority in cruelty of treatment and avidity of plunder, that a mixture of generosity, a tinge of compassion sometimes attended the Englishman in his outrages, but that the ravages of a Hessian were always known by his meanness, rapacity and brutality.