Washington's Immortals

The Untold Story of an Elite Regiment Who Changed the Course of the Revolution

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WASHINGTON’S IMMORTALS
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WASHINTON’S IMMORTALS

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Patrick K. O’Donnell
To the men and women of the Revolution who sacrificed everything for an idea—the United States. You are the greatest generation.
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Preface

The sign is rusted and scarred. Its aqua-blue surface bears the fading words “MARYLAND HEROES.” Suspended from a piece of corroded iron, it marks a mass grave:

Here lie buried 256 Maryland soldiers
Who fell in the Battle of Brooklyn
August 27, 1776

I encountered that neglected piece of history in September 2010 during a walking tour of the neighborhood where the Battle of Brooklyn, also known as the Battle of Long Island, took place. Today it is a depressed area filled with auto repair shops and warehouses. The bright spot is a well-worn, decades-old American Legion post. Several blocks northeast are the elegant brownstones of Park Slope. Somewhere beneath the surface, perhaps under a garage or below a paved street, are the Marylanders’ undiscovered bodies. Their remains lie intermingled in what should be hallowed ground.

In the revolutionary summer of 1776 these courageous patriots, known as “gentlemen of honour, family, and fortune,” gave their lives in a desperate series of bayonet charges against British troops, who were bunkered in a stone house that was still standing just a few blocks away from where I stood. Their assault on that house arguably remains one of the most important elite small-unit engagements in American history. It bought precious time for the Patriot cause, allowing hundreds of colonial troops to retreat through a gap in British lines.

The lonely weathered placard nestled among the auto-body shops of present-day Brooklyn bears silent witness to the drama that once unfolded in this place and the extraordinary men who changed history.

“Close up! Close up!”

Over the crackle of musket fire and boom of cannon, the indomitable Major Mordecai Gist and many of the founding officers of the Baltimore Independent Cadets ordered their men forward.

Shots tore through the ranks of more than two hundred Marylanders. Undaunted, the men continued to surge toward an old stone house occupied by British General Lord Cornwallis (Charles, Earl Cornwallis) and his Redcoats.
A century earlier, the home’s massive walls had been built to fend off potential Indian attacks. Now, these same barriers that had shielded Americans were called upon to repel them. Cornwallis’s men trained a light cannon and musket fire on the advancing Marylanders, who launched a preemptive strike aimed at protecting their brothers-in-arms.

The British “[continued] pouring the canister and grape upon the Americans like a shower of hail.” In the melee “the flower of some of the finest families of the South [were] cut to atoms.”

Defying the carnage unfolding around them, Gist’s men “closed their ranks over the bodies of their dead comrades, and still turned their faces to the foe.”

The boldness of the Marylanders’ charge initially unhinged Cornwallis’s defenses as his gunners nearly abandoned their artillery, but intense fire from the house and fresh reinforcements compelled the Marylanders to retreat and then mount yet another charge.

From a distant hill, General George Washington watched the gallant display through his spyglass. As the Marylanders began to fall, he cried out, “Good God! What brave fellows I must this day lose!”

Their bravery and sacrifice gave rise to the Maryland nickname, the Old Line State.

Yet not all was lost. Scores of Marylanders, led by Major Gist, held off the British long enough to help save a corps of Washington’s troops and arguably the bulk of the nascent American army from destruction. The Marylanders’ forlorn assaults delayed a British attack on American fortifications at Brooklyn Heights and allowed hundreds of Americans to escape to the temporary safety of their entrenchments. The soldiers who participated in that unorthodox assault would become known as the Immortals or the Maryland 400. With their blood, these men bought, in the words of one American, “an hour, more precious to American liberty than any other in its history.” Gist and several men in his group escaped to fight future battles that changed the fate of a nation.

Reading the solemn words etched on that metal sign made me curious. I wanted to know what really happened to these men, who they were, and why citizen-soldiers—amateurs—fought and sacrificed their lives and fortunes to fight the most formidable army in the world. Over the years, I unearthed a hidden war buried in letters and diaries. Forgotten pension files bore testament to heroism and sacrifice, and even to betrayal by fellow Americans. It wasn’t the Revolution of famous men trapped in the amber of fading oil portraits, but an alive, boots-on-the-ground, brutally long conflict that pitted brother against brother in a war that America wasn’t preordained to win. These sacrifices by a small group of men—in the right place, at the right time—who
were willing to march thousands of miles and endure years of unimaginable hardship, made the difference between victory and defeat.

Their nine-year saga has remained untold for over 239 years and nearly forgotten, much like the mass grave in which their comrades now lie. Gist and hundreds of Marylanders from all walks of life became an elite corps that formed the nucleus of the greatest fighting regiments of the war. They helped to keep the Continental Army intact through the darkest days of the Revolution. It is also a story about close friends whose fellowship in battle kept them together in the most impossible circumstances, enabled their survival, and helped them emerge as some of the most decorated and successful battle captains of the war. This book is the first *Band of Brothers*–style history of the Revolution; rather than providing a regimental history, it focuses on the actions of these men. Facing tremendous adversity, these Americans were often called upon by Washington to play a pivotal role in the war’s decisive battles just as they did that day in Brooklyn.

A pockmarked sign memorializes the beginning of an epic journey that started on a winter day in 1774.

But a metal sign isn’t enough to commemorate a mystery, the unknown resting place of so many Americans who willingly gave their lives for a nation yet to be born.
1774–75
Chapter 1

“Gentlemen of Honour, Family, and Fortune”

Snow gently fell outside a Baltimore tavern on December 3, 1774, as thirty-two-year-old Mordecai Gist addressed the city’s social elite. On his own initiative, Gist had gathered together a group of freemen, merchants, shipbuilders, and businessmen who were interested in forming the first independent military company in Maryland to protect their rights and potentially to break away from Britain.

At the time, Baltimore, one of the primary trading centers in the colonies, was a boomtown with a seedy, rough-and-tumble quality about it. One member of the Continental Congress described it as “infinitely, the dirtiest place I was ever in.” Another piled on the accolades and called it “the Damndest Hole in the World.”

A second-generation Baltimore native, Gist was the son of a prominent surveyor who had helped lay out the city’s streets. His uncle, Christopher Gist, had served with George Washington in the French and Indian War, and on two separate occasions he had saved the future general’s life. The younger Gist had already established himself as a sea captain and merchant, dealing primarily in textiles and firearms, which had earned him a sizable fortune. He was also a widower. Four years earlier, his first wife had died during the birth of their daughter, who then perished in infancy. At six feet tall, he was a man of impressive stature for his day. Others described him as having a “frank and genial manner.” A natural leader known for his forceful opinions, Gist was among the colony’s first agitators for independence and later emerged as one of America’s most powerful Freemasons.

In October he had participated in the burning of the Peggy Stewart. In an incident reminiscent of the Boston Tea Party, a captain had brought a ship loaded with tea into Annapolis harbor despite a colonial boycott. Outraged Marylanders gave the Peggy Stewart’s captain a choice: either burn his ship and all its cargo or be hanged at his front door. The captain chose to run his ship aground and torch it.

The Peggy Stewart incident occurred ten months after the Boston Tea Party, in which American demonstrators, some disguised as American Indians, had dumped an entire shipment of tea from the East India Company into Boston harbor to protest taxes levied by the British on the tea. It echoed the American cry “No taxation without representation.” Many Americans demanded the right to elect the representatives who
imposed taxes and passed regulations. The Crown had responded to the Tea Party swiftly with draconian measures that became known as the Coercive Acts or Intolerable Acts. Among other provisions, they allowed British officials to be tried in Britain for crimes committed in the colonies. Another of these acts required colonists to house and feed British soldiers in their homes.

British troops led by General Thomas Gage disbanded the elected colonial government in Massachusetts and shut down the port of Boston, throwing thousands of men out of work. The crisis in Boston escalated and fomented discord throughout the thirteen colonies, resonating strongly in Baltimore, where trade was the lifeblood of the community.

On that December night in the tavern, like-minded Patriots had gathered to hear Gist, whom they elected as captain of their company, read aloud the articles of incorporation for the Baltimore Independent Cadets. The charter called for sixty men—“a company composed of gentlemen of honour, family, and fortune, and tho’ of different countries animated by a zeal and reverence for rights of humanity”—to voluntarily join and tie themselves together “by all the Sacred ties of Honour and the Love and Justice due to ourselves and Country.”

Gist’s gravitas and presence reverberated through the room as he read the articles:

We, the Baltimore Independent Cadets, Impress’d with a sense of the unhappy [state] of our Suffering Brethren in Boston, the Alarming conduct of General Gage, and the oppressive Unconstitutional acts of Parliament to deprive us of Liberty and enforce Slavery on His Majesties Loyal Liege Subjects of America in General,

For the better security of our lives, liberties, and Properties under such Alarming Circumstances, we think it highly advisable and necessary, that we form ourselves into a Body, or Company in order to [learn] the military discipline; to act in defence of our Country agreeable to the Resolves of the Continental Congress.

The cadets promised to march within forty-eight hours to the aid of any sister colonies that needed their help, to obey their elected commander, to purchase their own uniforms and equipment, and to submit to a court-martial for any default “contrary to the true Intent and Meaning of this Engagement.” However, as true gentlemen, they would not submit themselves to corporal punishment.

The young merchant and the other newly inducted members of the company made history that day. Gist’s independent company was the first of its kind in Maryland, but similar companies soon sprang up across the colonies. Unbeknownst to them at the time, the men in that tavern would become one of only a few core units crucial to the
continued existence of the entire Continental Army throughout the Revolutionary War. At key points, their participation made a difference that allowed the army to survive—often at an enormous price. Sickness and privation of the most severe kind (including marching barefoot for thousands of miles over many years), British bullets, and the hazards of imprisonment would take their toll. Very few of the men who gathered that night at the tavern or those who joined them later would survive eight years of war, multiple campaigns, and dozens of battles unscathed.

The cadets, later quietly renamed the Baltimore Independent Company, formed a cadre that was incorporated into multiple companies and regiments that played a key role in many battles of importance during the American Revolution and fought in both the North and the South. Built on personal relationships with deep family ties that spanned decades, the Baltimore Independent Company was a tight-knit group of close friends who forged one of the most legendary units of the American Revolution.

One of those men crucial to the company was twenty-three-year-old Samuel Smith. A born leader, Smith was first elected sergeant within the company and quickly rose through the ranks as an officer. Like many of the cadets, he had been trained in the classics, studying Latin and Greek at school. As a young man, he had worked in his father’s countinghouse and traveled to Europe on one of his father’s merchant ships. He proved to be charismatic and a natural battle commander. Eventually, he would assume command of the Baltimore Independent Company and many other units. In time, he became one of the finest regimental commanders of the war.

Like Gist and Smith, many of the company’s members were prosperous merchants. For them, the decision to join the company meant sacrificing their livelihood—the ability to trade with Great Britain. For years they had been on the sharp end of onerous taxes and restrictions that required the colonies to trade exclusively with Britain. Responding to the spiraling crisis in Boston, delegates from the American colonies met in the First Continental Congress. Formed at the urging of Benjamin Franklin and first organized in 1774 in Philadelphia, Congress comprised representatives from twelve of the thirteen colonies (initially Georgia didn’t participate, since it felt that it needed British protection from hostile Indians). The Congress remained undecided on the issue of declaring independence from Great Britain, but its members firmly believed that King George III owed the people of the colonies better treatment. The representatives wanted their voices heard in London. On September 5, 1774, Congress adopted the Articles of Association, which declared that if the Intolerable Acts were not repealed by December 1, 1774, the colonies would boycott British goods. A provision in the articles also called for an embargo of British goods by September 1775 if the acts weren’t abolished. It was a bold move: Americans struck at the heart of British trade, which heavily relied on the North American economy. The
Continental Congress’s actions were a serious challenge to imperial rule, essentially amounting to a declaration of economic war against the Crown.

The independent spirit that gave rise to this decision to rebel against Britain had been fomenting in Maryland since its founding. In 1632 the king granted the ownership of the colony to George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, a Catholic, who was designated the “proprietary.” Unlike most of the colonies, which answered to the king or to locally elected governments, Maryland answered to the proprietary, who set up the government as he saw fit. The arrangement essentially created “an empire within an empire” and made it easy for the people who lived in Maryland to see themselves as independent of the Crown. This unusual form of government persisted until 1691, when Britain appointed a royal governor for the colony.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the French and Indian War planted seeds of discontent in America and had an impact on many of the Maryland officers. Also known as the Seven Years’ War, the war was a worldwide conflict between Britain and France that began in 1754. Both countries had extensive holdings in the New World, and disagreements arose over disputed territory and trading rights in the Ohio Valley. The governor of Virginia sent twenty-one-year-old Major George Washington and a small group of men to evict the French from the area, but the French refused to leave, pushing the two countries on the path toward war. On May 28, 1754, Washington led the British troops to victory in the Battle of Jumonville Glen, which is generally regarded as the first battle in the French and Indian War.

In the early days of the conflict, both sides developed irregular warfare techniques, such as the use of proxies and the use of ranging forces. The proxies included Rogers’ Rangers, Americans who fought for Britain. The British and the French also developed light infantry, which were lightly armed forces known for their quickness, speed, and flexibility. More importantly, the colonists learned to train, organize, and move large numbers of men through untamed wilderness. Americans fighting for the British—including George Washington, William Smallwood, and Daniel Morgan, along with future Americans and British officers Edward Hand, Horatio Gates, and Charles Lee—gained invaluable battle experience in the conflict. They also learned Indian tactics. Many Native American tribes fought on the side of the French during the conflict. Unlike the Europeans, the tribes often struck in surprise attacks with small raiding parties that hit the enemy hard and then retreated before casualties could mount, and they fired from behind trees and other natural obstructions rather than out in the open.

The seeds of an American way of waging war were planted.

By 1760 most of the fighting in North America had come to end, although battles continued to rage in the West Indies and Europe for some time. The North American
portion of the war officially came to a close on February 10, 1763, when the two sides signed the Treaty of Paris. Five days later, they ended the European war with the Treaty of Hubertusburg. Under the terms of surrender, France gave up all rights to the mainland of North America but held on to its island colonies in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Spain, which had entered the war on France’s side, agreed to cede Florida to Britain in exchange for regaining control of Cuba and gaining control of Louisiana. Britain was left as the primary power in control of Canada and the thirteen colonies that would become the United States.

While the British were victorious, the cost was exorbitant. The war had nearly doubled the empire’s debt. To offset this enormous financial burden, the Crown began raising taxes on its colonies so that they would pay for their own administration and defense, allowing the government in London to put more money toward its war debts. When Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765, the colonists were primed to revolt. Extremely unpopular in the American colonies, the onerous act required that all printed materials, including legal documents and newspapers, use specially stamped paper produced in Britain. The colonists objected to this regulation on the grounds that they shouldn’t be taxed without their consent. Although Parliament eventually repealed the Stamp Act, it passed a series of other laws and taxes that the Americans found objectionable, including a law that forbade the colonies from issuing currency and a fateful tax on tea.

Outraged by the new and oppressive laws, Massachusetts appealed to its sister colonies for support. In a show of solidarity, the Continental Congress agreed to ban the import of British goods. It went one step further, by placing an export ban on American commodities that were valued by the Crown, such as tobacco, rice, and a long list of naval products. The men in Maryland who joined the cadets certainly objected to the taxes, but for them the Revolution wasn’t only about money. They were motivated by ideals of freedom and liberty, and they didn’t want their daily lives and business decisions at the mercy of the bureaucracy in London.

While war seemed inevitable in hindsight, it was not a foregone conclusion, even as the various independent companies throughout the colonies began to organize. In fact, many of the colonies hoped for a diplomatic solution to the crisis that would keep them as part of the British Empire. The act of rebellion—if it came to that—would be a last resort.

With the clouds of war gathering on an uncertain horizon, the Baltimore cadets began to arm and outfit themselves with the best weapons and uniforms money could buy. This company of wealthy Baltimoreans went into battle carrying a “good gun” with a bayonet plus a brace of pistols and a sword. However, most of the other American
units could not afford such expensive guns and supplies; many of their brothers-in-arms would fight with old hunting rifles or makeshift weapons. And while many Americans marched in the leather or homespun clothing they wore every day, Marylanders of this company wore “a Uniform Suit of Cloathes turn’d up with Buff, and trim’d with Yellow Metal, or Gold Buttons, White Stockings and Black Cloth half Boote.” Emboldened by their example, numerous independent companies formed across Maryland for the defense of the state.

Shortly after the signing of the company’s articles of incorporation, training began. Drilling occupied the bulk of each day. Cadets learned how to march and create battle formations. They also practiced loading and firing their muskets as a group and possibly engaged in target practice. Gist’s men had their own drillmaster, a cadet named Richard Cary. Cary had previously served as a member of the Ancient and Honourable Artillery Company of Boston, which was commanded by John Hancock. Cary’s high-quality training and the company’s expensive equipment set Maryland’s troops apart from those of other colonies as war unfolded and turned them into, arguably, the first elite infantry unit in the Continental Army.

Voluntary enlistment in these independent companies violated British imperial law. Doing so represented open defiance of Crown rule and constituted an act of treason potentially punishable by death. The sixty Patriots who first signed the articles of incorporation for the Baltimore Independent Cadets were effectively signing their own death warrants. That threat was quite real. When the British had put down an insurrection in Ireland around the same time, a judge decreed to the captured revolutionaries, “You are to be drawn on hurdles to the place of execution, where you are to be hanged by the neck, but not until you are dead, for while you are still living your bodies are to be taken down, your bowels torn out and burned before your faces, your heads then cut off, and your bodies divided each into four quarters.”

Elite warriors throughout history have believed that willpower and determination can overcome all odds. This thoughtful, independent company of men ardently embraced their ideals, making a purposeful decision to sacrifice their fortunes, their livelihood, and possibly their lives for the promise of an idea with the risk of an unknown future. Gist, like many Patriots, believed that his men’s fervor would help them overcome the much larger, better-equipped, and highly trained British army.

Gist was not alone in his belief. Among Gist’s papers is a letter addressed to the Baltimore Independent Company. Full of classical allusions, the letter was signed by an admirer of the company who called himself Agamemnon, the name of the Greek king who united his countrymen to fight against the Trojans. After asking that his
letter be read aloud to the group, he refers to Xerxes’s army of Immortals and compares the Marylanders to the Spartans who stood against a much larger force at the Battle of Thermopylae. The letter explains, “About three hundred men who’s hearts were warmed with patriotism, [held off] an Army of Twenty thousand.” The letter writer believed that Gist’s men, like the Spartans and other elite units throughout history, could play a crucial role in shaping the future of the new nation.

3. The original letter used the Latin spelling of Agamemnon.

The comparison would prove eerily accurate. In a little over a year, Washington would call upon the Marylanders to make an epic stand of their own against overwhelming odds.