

DECEMBER 1777

The month of December 1777 was one of reassessment by both the British and American armies and by the citizens of Maryland. The commanders of the British forces in America--Lord Richard and Gen. William Howe--had succeeded in capturing the rebel capital of Philadelphia, but Gen. John Burgoyne's surrender of his entire army at Saratoga had bolstered flagging American morale and had dealt a serious blow to British efforts to sever New England from the remainder of the United States. General Washington, under increasing criticism for his actions as commander in chief from members of Congress and high-ranking officers under his command, was daily faced with resignations by officers and desertions and threats of mutiny by his miserably clad and ill-fed soldiers. Rampant inflation, plus a virtually nonfunctional Commissary Department, rendered providing assistance to Washington's army difficult, at the same time the British were well supplied by neighboring farmers who preferred payment in British sterling to depreciated Continental currency or promissory notes. Maryland, which had contributed much in terms of men and supplies for the army, was plagued by the same shortage of funds embarrassing Congress, and in addition dissidents loyal to the king impeded recruitment of soldiers and necessitated allocation of men and funds that could better have been expended on providing clothing, tents, and other essentials for the Marylanders under Washington's command.

But the overriding consideration for everyone during December 1777 was the weather. Winter had settled on the east coast of the United States, and even though it was to prove milder than other years, the frigid rain, sleet, and snow of December imparted an urgency to the need of not only providing for soldiers in the field, but also for citizens at home who required salt for curing their winter's supply of pork--a staple in the diet of the majority of Marylanders. Congress had repeatedly assured General Washington that ample supplies of clothing for his men would arrive from France. These did not. Congress had spent thousands of pounds in an effort to stimulate domestic manufacture of salt, cloth, and other essential articles, but largely to no avail. Maryland offered bounties and cash advances to persons who proposed to undertake the manufacture of guns, flints, cloth, salt, shoes, and a variety of other articles, but inflation, combined with an abysmal lack of knowledge concerning manufacturing such products, resulted in a poor return for the investment.

Profiteering, not patriotism, seemed to motivate as many