



BRIGADIER GENERAL
**HUGH
 MERCER**

Physician, Jacobite and Patriot Leader

By Daniel S. Marrone



Hugh Mercer was a Scot immigrant who in his youth supported Charles Edward Stuart in his failed attempt to gain the British throne. Escaping to America, Mercer practiced his trade as a frontier doctor and surgeon only to again become engulfed in combat during the French and Indian War. Wounded and abandoned in the frontier wilderness of Colonial Pennsylvania, he barely escaped death in an epic 100-mile trek to safety.

At the suggestion of George Washington, Mercer relocated to Fredericksburg, Va., where he established a medical practice and physician's apothecary. Later, as a brigadier general,

Mercer was one of George Washington's key military advisors. Mercer performed gallantly at the pivotal battles of Trenton and Princeton. It was at this last battle, facing an onslaught of British Redcoats encircling and bayoneting Mercer, that he sustained fatal wounds.

A Quick Study

Mercer was born on January 17, 1726, to William Mercer and Ann Monro Mercer. As his father was a Presbyterian minister at the Pitsligo Parish Church, Mercer was raised with a strong Protestant reformist mindset. Extremely bright, young Mercer quickly mastered his studies and was admitted at age 15 to the Marischal College of Medicine, a component of the prestigious University of Aberdeen. He graduated in 1744, at 18, as a qualified doctor and surgeon.

A year later, he joined the Jacobite uprising, which sought to overthrow King George II of Hanover, Germany, and place the Catholic Charles Edward Stuart on the throne. The Stuart dynasty had sought to regain the throne since James II was overthrown in 1688 by the Protestant William of Orange in what was called "The Glorious Revolution."

'Will Ye No Come Back Again?'

Although Protestant, the Presbyterian Scots allied themselves with the Stuarts in opposition to the Anglican Church. Known more commonly as "Bonnie Prince Charlie" or the "Young Pretender," Charles Edward Stuart secretly entered Scotland and led an uprising against the Hanovers in 1745–1746. Being a fully qualified doctor, Mercer quickly became indispensable as the rebel leader's personal physician.

At first, the Jacobites were victorious against larger, but disorganized, English armies until the formidable Lord Cumberland was appointed general-in-chief of the Hanoverian army. Cumberland quickly amassed an overwhelming force that crushed the rebels and the Jacobite uprising at the pivotal Battle of Culloden on April 16, 1746.

The Survivor

The victorious Duke of Cumberland ordered the death of anyone who participated in the Jacobite uprising. For several tense weeks, the "Young Pretender" hid among Highlander families loyal to his cause. He then sailed from the British Isles never to return.

Second on the Duke of Cumberland's "most wanted" death list was the Jacobite fugitive Dr. Mercer who was Bonnie Prince Charlie's personal physician. If caught, Mercer would have been "hung, drawn and quartered." After months of narrowly escaping capture, Mercer furtively boarded a ship to the New World. That ship docked in Philadelphia in May 1747.

To further elude capture by the British, Mercer fled to the western frontier of Pennsylvania. He settled in a frontier outpost that would later be named Mercersburg in his honor. The Scottish immigrant practiced medicine in a rustic setting so remote that he was the sole fully trained physician in this region.

After eight years of relative peace, Mercer again became drawn into warfare as the physician tending survivors of British General Edward Braddock's failed campaign against the French-held Fort Duquesne located in today's Pittsburgh. In an ironic twist, the Jacobite rebel who was sought for treason by the British evolved into a captain of the Pennsylvania militia fighting alongside the British Royal Army during the French and Indian War (1754–1763).

As a militia captain, Mercer quickly displayed his mettle in battles with the Shawnee and Delaware American Indian tribes. In particular, the Pennsylvania militia played a major role in the Armstrong Expedition that sought revenge on

Although the Armstrong Expedition was a success, Mercer was severely wounded in the right arm. The unconscious Mercer was presumed to have died and thus was left at the battle site. For two weeks, the stalwart Scot managed to survive serious injuries, starvation, predatory animals and vengeful warriors before eventually reaching safety.

American Indian raiding parties based west of the Allegheny Mountains.

On September 8, 1756, Ireland-born Lieutenant Colonel John Armstrong led a combined Redcoat and Pennsylvania militia attack on the Delaware Kit-Han-Ne (Kittanning) village. Although the Armstrong Expedition was a success, Mercer was severely wounded in the right arm. The unconscious Mercer was presumed to have died and thus was left at the battle site.



Drawing by John Trumbull for his painting of the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777

Remarkably, he regained consciousness but was now abandoned more than 100 miles from the nearest shelter at Fort Shirley. For two weeks, the stalwart Scot managed to survive serious injuries, starvation, predatory animals and vengeful warriors before eventually reaching safety. He recovered and returned to Philadelphia as a hero, where city leaders awarded him a silver medal. He served four more years in combat and left military service with the rank of full colonel.

The Doctor Becomes General

Mercer moved to Fredericksburg, Va., in 1760. With the British Colonies now at peace with the French, Mercer resumed practicing medicine and opened a physician's apothecary. His growing list of patients included George Washington's mother, Mary Ball Washington. Fredericksburg also included a sizable number of fellow Scottish immigrants. One of these families, named Gordon, owned a popular tavern in the heart of the city. Mercer married the tavern owner's daughter, Isabella Gordon, and they had five children: Ann Mercer Patton, John Mercer, William Mercer, George Weedon Mercer and Hugh Tennant Mercer.

On April 19, 1775, the Redcoats clashed with the Minutemen at Lexington and Concord, Mass. That year, Mercer was appointed to the Fredericksburg Committee of Safety. When Mercer was denied the leadership of the Virginia regiment, he formed the "Minute Men of Spotsylvania, King George, Stafford, and Caroline Counties" in November 1775.

With his obvious leadership skills and reputation for bravery, Mercer soon overcame any reservations on the part of the Committee of Safety and was commissioned Colonel of the 3rd Virginia Regiment on January 11, 1776. Under his command were many future American leaders, including Chief Justice John Marshall and the fifth American president, James Monroe. When he was commissioned brigadier general in June 1776, his first task was to construct Fort Lee along the New Jersey Palisades of the Hudson River.



General Hugh Mercer lies mortally wounded by British troops at the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777.

On November 16, 1776, the British Royal Army and Hessian mercenaries easily conquered Fort Mifflin, the last holdout American stronghold in New York City. All 2,800 Continental soldiers in the fort were either killed in action or became prisoners of war held in the notorious British prison ships anchored in New York harbor. Fort Mifflin was abandoned four days later.

With no American forts to impede the British/Hessian juggernaut, most areas of New Jersey soon came under the control of the British Crown. At the same time, the



Continental Army was in flight, desperately trying to avoid contact with British General William Howe's much larger pursuing army.

In December 1776, Mercer and his regiment crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania to await orders from General Washington. By this time, the Continental Army was perhaps at its lowest ebb, with barely 3,000 men fit to fight and many of the enlistments due to expire on December 31, 1776. The American cause for independence was rapidly nearing its end.

In desperation, Washington envisioned a plan to cross the partially frozen Delaware River into New Jersey and attack a Hessian garrison in Trenton. Similar in age and close friends for years, Mercer and Washington were of like mind and mutually supportive. Washington sorely needed this support

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because several of his high-ranking officers, fearing little or no possibility for success, opposed the plan.

On Christmas Day, 1776, Washington ordered Dunham cargo boats launched from McKonkey's Ferry to bring the beleaguered Continental Army across the icy Delaware. The last of the forces did not reach New Jersey soil until the next morning, December 26, and a major contingent of Continental soldiers never made it across the Delaware at all, due to the severe weather.

The Hessians at Trenton were commanded by Colonel Johann Rahl, who was dismissive of the Continental Army's ability and willingness to fight. The Americans boldly attacked and defeated the Hessians while sustaining only two casualties—George Washington's cousin, Artillery Captain William Washington, and Lieutenant James Monroe. As well as scoring a much-needed military victory, the capture of Trenton spurred new enlistments in the nearly exhausted Continental Army.

In the days that followed, the Americans crossed back and forth between Pennsylvania and New Jersey. General

Washington was eager to follow up the victory at Trenton. On January 2, 1777, he ordered his men to attack what was assumed to be the rear guard of Howe's army at Princeton, a village 13 miles north of Trenton. Unfortunately, Washington's information was wrong—they actually encountered crack troops under the command of the formidable British Lieutenant General Charles Lord Cornwallis.

Fatal Injuries

The 1777 Battle of Princeton, although relatively small in the number of combatants, was nevertheless significant. On the second day of battle, the 1,200-man Continental brigade under the command of Brigadier General Mercer encountered fierce fighting with an 800-Redcoat contingent of Cornwallis' army. In the melee, Mercer's horse was shot out from under

him, and Mercer began to fight on foot. The Redcoats may have mistaken Mercer for Washington and surrounded him. Ordered to surrender, Mercer instead drew his sword and slashed at the Redcoats, who beat him over the head with rifle butts and stabbed him with bayonets.

With their commander severely wounded, Mercer's troops began retreating. Washington brought in reinforcements and personally led a charge against the British. The tide of battle reversed, with the British now fleeing the battlefield. However, Mercer had sustained grievous wounds. He was brought to the Thomas Clarke house for medical treatment and was attended by another illustrious American physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush.

As an experienced doctor who tended to many wounded soldiers, Mercer knew his wounds were fatal, but he lasted nine days before finally dying on January 12, 1777. His body was brought to the Christ Church Burial Ground in Philadelphia for interment with full military honors.

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Mercer's Legacy

Hundreds of American cities, counties, townships, forts and streets carry Mercer's name. Some of his descendants were famous generals in subsequent American wars, including four-star World War II Army General George S. Patton Jr. and his son, Major General George Smith Patton III, who served in the U.S. Army in Korea and Vietnam. For his bravery under fire, Major General Patton was awarded two Distinguished Service Crosses as well as the Purple Heart. Another descendant was the prolific singer, songwriter, lyricist and record company executive John Herndon "Johnny" Mercer. 🎵