

From George Washington to John Hancock, 18 September 1776

To John Hancock

Head Qrs at Colo. Roger Morris's House
Sept 18th 1776

Sir

As my Letter of the 16th contained Intelligence of an Important nature, and such as might lead Congress to expect, that the evacuation of New York and retreat to the Heights of Harlem in the manner they were made, would be succeeded by some other Interesting event, I beg leave to inform them, that as yet nothing has been attempted upon a large and general plan of Attack.

About the time of the posts departure with my Letter, the Enemy appeared in several large bodies upon the plains about Two & a half miles from hence. I rode down to our advanced posts to put matters in a proper situation if they should attempt to come on. When I arrived there, I heard a firing which I was informed was between a party of our Rangers under the Command of Lieutt Col. Knolton, and an advanced party of the Enemy. Our Men came in & told me that the body of the Enemy, who kept themselves concealed consisted of about three Hundred as near as they could guess. I immediately ordered three Companies of Colo. Weedons Regiment from Virginia under the command of Major Leitch & Col. Knolton with his Rangers, composed of Volunteers from different New England Regiments, to try to get in their Rear, while a disposition was making as If to attack them in front, and thereby draw their whole attention that way. This took effect as I wished on the part of the Enemy. On the appearance of our party in front, they immediately ran down the Hill, took possession of some fences & Bushes and a Smart firing began, but at too great a distance to do much execution on either side. The parties under Colo. Knolton & Major Leitch unluckily began their attack too soon, as It was rather in flank than in Rear. In a little time Major Leitch was brought off wounded, having received Three Balls thro his side, and in a short time after Colo. Knolton got a wound which proved mortal. Their Men however persevered & continued the Engagement with the greatest resolution.¹ Finding that they wanted a support, I advanced part of Colo. Griffiths and Colo. Richardson's Maryland Regiments with some detachments from the Eastern Regiments who were nearest the place of Action. These Troops charged the Enemy with great Intrepidity and drove them from the Wood into the plain, and were pushing them from thence, (having silenced their fire in a great measure) when I judged It prudent to order a Retreat, fearing the Enemy (as I have since found was really the case) were sending a large Body to support their party.² Major Leitch I am in hopes will recover, But Colo. Knolton's fall is much to be regretted, as that of a brave & good Officer. We had about Forty wounded, the Number of Slain is not yet ascertained, but It is very inconsiderable. By a Serjeant who deserted from the Enemy & came in this Morning, I find that their party was greater than I imagined—It consisted of the 2d Batallion of Light Infantry, a Batallion of the Royal Highlanders & Three Companies of the Hessian Rifle Men, under the command of Brigadr Genl Leslie. The Deserter reports that their loss in Wounded & Missing was Eighty Nine, and Eight killed—In the latter, his Account is too small as Our people discovered and buried double that Number.³ This Affair I am in hopes will be attended with many salutary consequences, as It seems to have greatly inspirited the whole of our Troops. The Serjeant further adds, that a Considerable body of Men are now encamped from the East to the North River, between the Seven & Eight mile Stones under the command of Genl Clinton—Genl

Howe he beleives has his Quarters at Mr Apthorps House.⁴ I have the Honor to be with Sentiments of the highest regard & esteem Sir Yr Most Obedt Sert

Go: Washington

P.S. I should have wrote Congress by Express before now, had I not expected the post every Minute which I flatter myself will be a sufficient Apology for my delaying It.

The late losses we have sustained in our Baggage & Camp necessities have added much to our distress which was very great before, I must therefore take the Liberty of requesting Congress to have forwarded as soon as possible such a supply of Tents, Blankets, camp Kettles and Other Articles as can be collected. We cannot be ovrstocked.

G.W.

LS, in Robert Hanson Harrison's writing, DNA:PCC, item 152; LB, DLC:GW; copy, DNA:PCC, item 169; Varick transcript, DLC:GW. Congress read this letter on 20 Sept. ([JCC](#), 5:787). A somewhat condensed and partially altered version of this letter appears in Dixon and Hunter's edition of the *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) for 4 Oct. 1776 as an "extract of a letter from a General officer, who was present at the time of action."

Although the action of 16 Sept. described in this letter has become known as the Battle of Harlem Heights, it consisted, as [GW wrote Nicholas Cooke on 17 Sept.](#), only of "some smart skirmishes" between detachments of the two contending armies. This indecisive little engagement raised the Americans' morale, however, by reassuring them in the wake of the previous day's debacle at Kip's Bay that many of their soldiers could and would fight bravely and well against British and Hessian regulars in small unit actions. For general accounts of this engagement, see particularly [Johnston, Harlem Heights](#), 44–91; [Blivin, Battle for Manhattan](#), 83–100; [Freeman, Washington](#), 4:197–203; and [Ward, War of the Revolution](#), 1:246–52.

¹. Joseph Reed says in a letter to his wife, Esther De Berdt Reed, of 17 Sept. that on the morning of 16 Sept. "an Acct. came that the Enemy were advancing upon us in three large Columns—we have so many false Reports that I desired the General [GW] to permit me to go & discover what Truth there was in the Acct. I accordingly went down to our most advanced Guard [Knowlton's rangers] & while I was talking with the Officer, the Enemy's advanced Guard fired upon us at a small Distance, our men behaved well stood & return'd the Fire till overpowered by numbers they were obliged to retreat. . . . Finding how things were going I went over to the General to get some support for the brave Fellows who had behaved so well—by the Time I got to him the Enemy appeared in open view & in the most insulting manner sounded their Bugle Horns as is usual after a Fox Chase. I never felt such a sensation before, it seem'd to crown our Disgrace. The General was prevailed on to order over a Party to attack them & as I had been upon the Ground which no one else had it fell to me to conduct them—an unhappy Movement was made by a Regt. of ours which had been ordered to amuse

them [the British] while those I was with expected to take them in the Rear—but being diverted by this the Virginia Regimt. with which I was went another course; finding there was no stopping them I went with them the new Way—& in a few Minutes our brave Fellows mounted up the Rocks & attacked them; then they ran in Turn—each Party sent in more Succours so that at last it became a very considerable Engagement & Men fell on every side” ([Johnston, *Harlem Heights*](#), 134–36). Reed’s letter to his wife of 22 Sept., contains a somewhat different version of these events, in which he says that Knowlton’s and Leitch’s attempt to cut off the British detachment “was unhappily thwarted . . . by some Persons calling to the Troops & taking them out of the Road I intended” (ibid., 136–39).

The first skirmish of the day occurred near the British advanced posts in the vicinity of present-day West 107th Street about dawn when two or three companies of British light infantry discovered and attacked Knowlton’s rangers, a force of about one hundred and twenty New England volunteers whom GW had sent out to obtain intelligence about the dispositions of Howe’s army. After firing eight or nine rounds and suffering ten casualties, Knowlton’s men retreated north about two-and-a-half miles to the American advanced posts on the heights overlooking the “Hollow Way,” where GW had positioned himself (see letter attributed to [Capt. Stephen Brown](#), 21 Sept., ibid., 154–55; Oliver Burnham’s recollections, ibid., 178–80; William Howe to George Germain, 21 Sept., in [Davies, *Documents of the American Revolution*](#), 12:227–29; [Tatum, *Serle’s Journal*](#), 107–8; [Mackenzie, *Diary*](#), 1:51; [Kemble Papers](#), 1:89; and [Lydenberg, *Robertson Diaries*](#), 99).

The American counterattack was launched about eleven o’clock across the “Hollow Way” from the American-held heights on the valley’s north side toward Vandewater’s (now Morningside) Heights on its south side, where British troops had taken up positions a short time earlier. Leitch and Knowlton fell as the Americans fought their way up Vandewater’s Heights. The British made a stand at the top of the heights in a buckwheat field near present-day 120th Street where the heaviest fighting of the day occurred from about noon to about one o’clock.

Leitch’s detachment consisted of captains Charles West’s, John Thornton’s, and John Ashby’s companies. The decoying force that drew the British troops down from Vandewater’s Heights included the rest of Weedon’s regiment, a detachment of one hundred and fifty volunteers commanded by Lt. Col. Archibald Crary from Gen. John Nixon’s brigade, and some Maryland troops, probably Maj. Thomas Price’s three companies (see John Chilton to an unknown correspondent, 17 Sept., in [“Old Virginia Line,”](#) 92–94, and John Gooch to Thomas Fayerweather, 23 Sept., in [“Revolutionary Actors,”](#) 334–35).

2. The British retreated to their advanced posts near present-day 106th Street, where the Americans broke off the engagement. GW sent Tench

Tilghman to recall the troops, who, Tilghman says, "gave a Hurra and left the Field in good Order" (Tench Tilghman to James Tilghman, Sr., 19 Sept., in [Tilghman, Memoir](#), 138–39; see also Joseph Reed to Esther De Berdt Reed, 17 and 22 Sept., in [Johnston, Harlem Heights](#), 134–39).

The Maryland flying camp troops that GW sent forward included three companies commanded by Maj. Peter Mantz from Col. Charles Greenberry Griffith's 1st Regiment and apparently three companies commanded by Maj. James Eden from Col. Thomas Ewing's 3d Regiment (see Extract of a Letter to a Gentleman in Annapolis, 17 Sept., in [Force, American Archives](#), 5th ser., 2:370–71; William Beatty, Jr., to William Beatty, Sr., 18 Sept., in the *Historical Magazine*, 2d ser., 1 [1867], 147; and [Johnston, Harlem Heights](#), 82, and note 1). There is no evidence that any troops from Col. William Richardson's 4th Regiment fought on 16 September. The New England reinforcements included the remainder of Nixon's brigade and Col. William Douglas's and Col. Paul Dudley Sargent's regiments (see John Gooch to Thomas Fayerweather, 23 Sept., in ["Revolutionary Actors,"](#) 334–35; Joseph Hodgkins to Sarah Perkins Hodgkins, 30 Sept., in Wade and [Lively, This Glorious Cause](#), 221–23; [Martin, Private Yankee Doodle](#), 42–43; and the returns of Nixon's, Sargent's, and Douglas's brigades, in [Force, American Archives](#), 5th ser., 3:721–28).

William Richardson (1735–1825), a merchant from Caroline County, Md., was a member of the general assembly from 1771 to 1774 and the convention from 1774 to 17 Aug. 1776 when he was named colonel of the 4th Regiment of the state's flying camp troops. Richardson did not arrive at Harlem Heights until sometime after 5 Oct. (see returns of officers of the Maryland flying camp, that date, in [Force, American Archives](#), 5th ser., 2:897, 900). He became colonel of the 5th Maryland Regiment in December and served until 22 Oct. 1779 when he resigned his commission.

3. American losses on 16 Sept. included at least thirty-five officers and men killed, sixteen men missing, and five officers and men captured (see the casualty returns for Nixon's, Sargent's, Fellows's, and Douglas's brigades, and the 10th, 14th, 19th, and 23d Continental regiments, 18–23 Nov. 1776, in [Force, American Archives](#), 5th ser., 3:719–30; Extract of a Letter to a Gentleman in Annapolis, 17 Sept., *ibid.*, 2:370–71; and Gustavus B. Wallace to his brother, 18 Sept., in ["Old Virginia Line,"](#) 94–95). The number of American wounded probably was about one hundred (see [Johnston, Harlem Heights](#), 87–88).

British losses in the engagement, General Howe says, were fourteen men killed and eight officers and about seventy men wounded (Howe to George Germain, 21 Sept., in [Davies, Documents of the American Revolution](#), 12:227–29). Col. Stephen Kemble agrees that fourteen British soldiers were killed, but says that eleven officers and 146 men were wounded ([Kemble Papers](#), 1:89). Hessian Captain Baurmeister says that twenty British were

killed and 210 British and five Hessians were wounded ([Baurmeister, *Revolution in America*](#), 50). Gen. George Clinton, who sent out parties to bury the American dead on the morning of 17 Sept., wrote his brother-in-law, Dr. Peter Tappen, on 21 Sept. that “the Enemy removed theirs in the Night[.] we found above 60 Places where dead Men had lay from Pudles of Blood & other appearances & at other Places fragments of Bandages & Lint” ([Johnston, *Harlem Heights*](#), 142–45).

Alexander Leslie (1731–1794), who had served as lieutenant colonel of the 64th Regiment at Boston for several years before the war and during the siege of 1775–76, was brevetted a brigadier general in America by General Howe on 3 April 1776 and commanded the light infantry brigade during the New York and New Jersey campaigns. Leslie became a major general in the spring of 1779, and in October 1780 he led an expedition to Virginia before joining Cornwallis in South Carolina in December. Leslie was promoted to lieutenant general in July 1781, and that fall he succeeded Cornwallis as commander of the southern theater.

4. The main lines of Howe’s army ran from Horn’s Hook on the East River at present-day East 89th Street to the Hudson River near Bloomingdale with advanced posts a short distance north between McGown’s Pass near the northeast corner of present-day Central Park and the Hudson in the vicinity of present-day West 106th Street (see William Howe to George Germain, 21 Sept., in [Davies, *Documents of the American Revolution*](#), 12:227–29, and [Mackenzie, *Diary*](#), 1:56–57). After the landing at Kip’s Bay on 15 Sept., Frederick Mackenzie says Howe “took up his quarters at Mr Elliott’s house, about 2 miles from New York” (ibid., 50). By 23 Sept. Howe’s headquarters was about four miles from the city “at Lt. Col. James Beekman’s House on the East River near Turtle Bay” (Letter from New York, 23 Sept., in [Johnston, *Harlem Heights*](#), 210). Apthorp’s mansion at Bloomingdale near the present-day intersection of 91st Street and 10th Avenue probably was Gen. Henry Clinton’s headquarters (see ibid., 51–52). Charles Ward Apthorp (d. 1797), a member of the king’s council for New York, fled to Governor Tryon’s ship, the *Dutchess of Gordon*, in June 1776 when he was summoned to appear before the provincial congress as a suspected Loyalist. In 1779 Apthorp was indicted for treason, and the following year his Bloomingdale estate was confiscated and offered for sale. He returned to New York after the war, however, and was acquitted of the charges against him.