



Eyewitness of the American Revolution

*Captain William Leslie in John
Trumbull's The Death of General
Mercer at the Battle of Princeton
– Yale University Art Gallery*



Princeton
Battlefield
Society
www.pbs1777.org

Captain William Leslie

17th Regiment of Foot



The morning of January 3, 1777, my company formed in the line of march of the 17th Regiment of Foot under our commander Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood as we proceeded toward Trenton where we expected to join General Cornwallis. I was originally from Scotland and had been an ensign in the 42nd Regiment of Foot made up of Scotsmen before I took my commission in the 17th Regiment in 1773. We came to America from Ireland in late 1775, and I had come to Princeton the previous day with my regiment to help guard the town and supplies that General Cornwallis had left there. I traveled lightly on campaign with an extra shirt, pair of shoes, and a handkerchief carried in my blanket, “like a pedlars pack.” I found Princeton in a badly damaged condition, like the other parts of New Jersey we passed through. In a letter to my mother, I told her that “the Desolation that this unhappy Country has suffered must distress every feeling heart, altho the Inhabitants deserve it as much as any sort of people who ever rebelled against their Sovereign; they lived in plenty even to Luxury, every man was equal to his neighbour & not one beggar in the whole country; but now too late they feel the ravages of war.” I kept in my pocket a letter from American Patriot Dr. Benjamin Rush, who had spent time in Scotland with my family. If I fell prisoner to the Americans, this letter was to be given to either General Washington or Lee. Rush offered me his house in Philadelphia as the place where I could spend my time on parole as a prisoner.

That letter was in my pocket when my regiment reversed course towards Princeton after we sighted the American army. My regiment was the leading regiment to engage a force of rebels near the orchard on a farm, and I commanded the right side of the regiment as we advanced. My company took the heavy casualties, and I was hit twice from the first American volley, and musket balls ripped through my left breast and side. My servant, Peter McDonald, reached me, but I was unable to speak to him, so I gestured to him to take my pocket-watch, which he did just minutes before I died.

For additional information go to www.pbs1777.org