

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

Introduction

When twenty-six-year-old Henry Knox, the Continental Army's artillery commander, penned this letter to his wife, Lucy, on July 8, 1776, patriot morale was at a low point. The summer of 1776 was a particularly hard time as word of Congress's Declaration of Independence had not yet reached George Washington's headquarters, while just five days earlier, the British had orchestrated the largest amphibious landing of the eighteenth century when they put a powerful force on Staten Island. Knox understood the critical nature of the Continental Army's situation when he said, "The eyes of all America are upon us, the matters which we are to act are of infinitely high import as we play our part posterity will bless or curse us." Knox told his wife of a little more than two years that 10,000 redcoats occupied the other side of New York harbor; by the middle of August there would be 32,000 redcoats to face-off against the 7,000 rag-tag troops the Americans had assembled. In the midst of this military showdown, Knox's letter allows us to see the human element of warfare. During the Revolutionary War, wives were known to accompany their husbands in their service to the nation. In a previous letter, Lucy expressed great desire to join her husband in New York, citing the travels of other officers' wives. With great emotion, Henry told her not to follow the example of another military couple as the officer is merely a man and "wants to see her because she is a Woman." Knox wrote that his love for her was too great to risk her capture at this grave time. He was right; the Americans suffered serious setbacks in New York and retreated through New Jersey and into Pennsylvania in the coming months.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and the transcript and then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. What reasons does Henry Knox give his wife Lucy to discourage her from joining him?
2. Based upon the information in Knox's letter and in the introduction, how would you describe the military situation facing Knox and his troops?

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

3. Explain what Knox meant when he wrote that “the matters which we are to act are of high import” and “as we play our part posterity will bless or curse us.”

Additional research: Examine the role Henry Knox played in the Revolutionary War and why he came to be a most trusted associate of George Washington.

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

Image

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New York July 8th 1776
of York and Albany

To Mrs K
at Norwich or Fairfield

My dear Lucy
(1745)

Received yours of last ^{July 6} Saturday by Mr
Kelfer. Mr. General Putnam to save a vast quantity of
as to miss Lucy I conjure her to remain in another
sent these gentlemen up after her. My dear
acted herself and acted right in not returning to this
place — it is shocking and the greatest happiness
for me to trouble you, but to be under a continual
inconvenience on account of your safety is what I
would not wish — as to Mr. J. husband being
happy to be here in all times and in all
places a true mistake if it would not
have disabled him from the service which
he had not have taken but his own true name
been here here at this time — he was once here
at this time the arrival and would not believe
he was coming until he saw her — Genl
Putnam and Mrs. J. she had ever read Betty
Thoughtful — ~~at J. J.~~ The people
may miss the light in a different manner from
me — But we must stand and fall by our own
opinion and not by thing — The peace of this
Town and the safety of the people of the ladies is
upon the most precarious terror imaginable —
The enemy is farther not more than three quarters
of an hour sail from us, and if they should come
of a dark night not more possible than ten

P.S. To Mrs K

Henry Knox to Lucy Knox, July 8, 1776. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02437.00363), p 1.

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

minutes before we must be in action — Should any dear
 Lucy of ten minutes to get your carriage tucked to get on
 and drop yourself and get out of Town in a short
 whilst not knowing whether to go not knowing the road
 the Carriage is likely to be overturned if my dear girl brings
 to death — add my heavenly Gift the sweet babe
 to it if the very view would be insupportable, the angels
 would pity me — You say the enemy are landed
 on Staten Island waiting a reinforcement, what security
 have we of this? by the best accounts they are 10,000
 and the reinforcements may be said to any — The eyes of
 all America are upon us the matter which we are to
 act are of infinitely high importance we play our parts
 posterity will bless or curse us — and my dear old
 wife be no common blessing or cursing — it will
 be in the most divine gratitude or the keenest
 execrations of the heart — As to what your
 mentions of heaven my dear little pledge of ~~affection~~
 I am very certain you could not be wrong — Remember
 what I have said to parliament I think it must be
 difficult where you are, it is possible I will send you one
 by the return of ~~some~~ ~~some~~ ~~some~~ I think cannot be
 long — the ladies tell several times of your being you
 did not go where you were told to — but here were some
 of you who think you know more than your country
 do — advice when it comes from ~~Disinterested~~ ~~Disinterested~~ ~~Disinterested~~
 ought to be followed — I am easily afraid of
 one thing Paddy tells me he has wrote for her ~~the~~
 & she is at Fairfield — take not her advice and the

Henry Knox to Lucy Knox, July 8, 1776. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02437.00363), p 2.

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

Transcript

Henry Knox to Lucy Knox, July 8, 1776. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02437.00363)

New York July 8. 6^o Clock in the Mornng.

My dear Lucy

I received yours of last Saturday by M^f Belford, M.^{rs} Greene Return to was a vast surprize to us as to miss Airey I conjecture he whimsical mother sent these Gentlemen up after her. – my Lucy acted herself and acted right in not returning to this place – It is a happiness and the greatest happiness for me to be with you, but to be under a continued uneasiness on account of your safety is what You would not wish – as to M.^{rs} G. husband being happy to see her in all times and in all places [&] much mistaken if it would not have Disabled him from the service whether he had not have rather lost his arm than have seen her here at this time – he was over here at this time she arriv'd and would not beleive she was coming untill he saw her – Gen^l Putnam ask'd her if she had ever read Betsey Thoutghtely [*sic: Betsy Thoughtless*], – [*struck: other Gentlemen*] other people may view the light in a different manner from me – But we must stand and fall by our own opinion and not by theirs – The peace of this Town and [*inserted: &*] the safety [*strikeout*] Safety of the Ladies is upon the most precarious tenor imaginable – The enemy at farthest not more than three quarters of an hours sail from us, and if they should come of a dark night not more possibly than ten [2] minutes before we must be in action – Think my dear Lucy of ten minutes to get your carriage tuck'd to get [on] and dress yourself and get out of Town in a dark night not knowing whether to go not knowing the road the Carrige [*sic*] as likely as not oversetting & my dear Girl fright'd to death – add her heavenly Gift the sweet babe to it & the very view would be insupportable, the reality would kill me – You say the enemy are landed on Staten Island waiting a reinforcement, what security have we of this? by the best accounts they are 10,000, and the reinforcement may be in to day – The eyes of all America are upon us, – the matters which we are to act are of infinitely high importance as we play our part posterity will bless or curse us – and my dear it will be no common blessing or cursing – it will be In the most divine gratitude or the keenest execrations of the heart – As to what you mention of Leaving our dear little pledge at Fairfield I am very certain you could not be serious. – I know not what You will do for a servant I think it must be difficult where you are, if possible I will send you one by the return of M.^{rs}. Green which I think cannot be long – the Ladies tell dismal

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

stories of your Living – you did not go where you were told to – but there were some of you who think you know more than you surly do – advice when it comes from Disinterested parties ought to be followed – I am really afraid of one thing. Palfrey tells me he has wrote for his Wife & she is at Fairfield – take not her advice in the [3] present circumstances of things it must be certained she wants to see her husband and he wants to see her because she is a Woman – I don't mean to say that is solely the reason – besides M^r Palfrey is in very different department from me – he must fly & shall as M^{rs} Palfrey – they are at a distance from where the action must commence – we are at advanc'd post he is two miles in the rear – a peice of News. a party of [*struck*: men] [*inserted*: Artillery] with 2–12 pounders last thursday morning shatter'd one of his majestys sloops or tenders so much that the people quitted her – she mounted 14. Guns mostly six pounders – it is reported the enemy have since burnt her – we kill'd a few and wounded some more – the enemy were so surpriz'd they [Descern'd] very little spirit – we also have had another shooting match at the ships as they come [*text loss*] narrows we like to have killd [*inserted*: a] Capt [*inserted*: of one of] [*text loss*] shot away his bed from under him and kill'd a number of his people – write me my love as often as lays in Your power and beleive me to have no other Earthly love but you

Harry Knox

Kiss and bless your babe for me –
remember me to M^{rs} Pollard

I live at the house – I don't like M^{rs}. A.
I have turn'd packard away – I think he must have cheated you in his market accounts
most egregiously.

[*address leaf*]

M.^{rs} Knox

Norwalk

or

Fairfield

[*docket*]

Col to Mrs K

Henry Knox on the British invasion of New York, 1776

[*struck: 75*] 76

[*docket*]

Coll Henry