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The Home on the Hackensack

A Story of General Washington's Secret Service

By **WILLIAM T. HANCOCK**

There still stands on the Hackensack river, in New Jersey, after weathering the political and atmospheric storms of nearly two centuries, a fine specimen of the homesteads built by the early Dutch settlers in America. It was forty years old when the Revolutionary war opened, and its original owner had then long passed away.

When it was built the country round about it was infested by Indians. They stole a son of the owner, and so long as he lived there he and his family were in terror of other depredations. A recent investigation of a historical society has revealed an ingenious contrivance whereby if besieged by savages those who lived in the house might make their escape.

When Washington was called to the chief command of the American armies his first duties were at Boston, then New York city, then New Jersey. While operating in the latter field the old Dutch house on the Hackensack lay between him and Manhattan Island on ground belonging to neither British nor Americans. The homestead was at the time occupied by John Oldershaw, an aristocratic Englishman who had turned what means he had into cash and emigrated to America. His family consisted of a wife and two children, the latter having been born in America. The mother was ill suited to the rude life of a new country and lived in the hope of some day returning to England. Both she and her husband were bitter Tories, but their children, who had never been in the mother country, sympathized secretly with the patriot cause. They were a young man, Edgar, aged twenty-two, and a daughter, Anne, aged nineteen.

One evening General Howe, commanding at New York, with certain members of his staff, rode out over the Jersey flats between the city and the rising ground beyond on a tour of reconnaissance and at nightfall stopped at the Oldershaw mansion. Too late in the day to return to his headquarters, he suffered himself to be persuaded to remain all night, with his attendants, and was entertained by Mr. Oldershaw.

During the evening he and his host sat over a bottle of port wine, and the general, warmed by the juice of the grape, became confidential as to his plans for gaining an advantage over General Washington. Above the apartment in which they sat was Anne Oldershaw's bedroom. Though the timber with which houses were built in those days was far more durable than now, it was rough hewn and not so carefully selected. In the floor of Anne's room was a knothole, and in the wooden ceiling of the room below was a crack. Anne, who had gone to bed, but not to sleep, hearing voices below, was desirous of learning what the general might have to say to her father. So she arose from her bed and, slipping on a warm wrapper, put her ear to the hole in the floor. She was enabled to hear a plan the general was stating to her father for capturing a large American force then located near Trenton. Indeed, the Britisher's reconnaissance was on business connected with the projected exploit.

The next morning Anne related what she had heard to her brother. He took a very different view of the matter from that of his sister. He was desirous that General Washington should be warned, but was deterred from betraying his father's guest by giving the information. Love of country, however, triumphed over other considerations, and he determined to carry it to General Washington, whose headquarters at the time were in the Ford mansion at Morristown. Letting his sister into the secret of his intended move and telling his parents that he was going to New York to see a friend, he set out on foot. On reaching the town he ascended the incline west of it and arrived at a tavern in Orange, which was then a stopping place for postboys traveling between Morristown and Hoboken. There he secured a horse, passed over the heights lying west of the town and in a couple of hours rode up to Washington's headquarters. He was received by Colonel Alexander Hamilton of the staff and immediately introduced to the commander in chief.

Upon receipt of the information he brought Washington gave orders which would block his enemy's game and asked Edgar Oldershaw what he could do to reciprocate the favor he had received at his hands. The young man, feeling loath to return to his father's roof, begged the general to secure him

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Winnipeg, Jan. 6th.

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a commission in the army, and, his request having been granted, he openly took sides with the patriots.

It was not long after this that Washington, being desirous of information as to the enemy's forces in New York, sent a young man, Lieutenant Harold Travers, who had done some secret work for him, to obtain it. Travers was to proceed in citizen's dress to New York, learn what he could and return. Before he departed the general called upon Lieutenant Oldershaw to instruct Travers as to the routes by which he might travel. Among other things Oldershaw told Travers that if he needed aid and comfort to apply—secretly, of course—to his sister Anne, giving him a bit of paper on which was written an introduction.

It was about a week after this that a young man rode up to the Oldershaw mansion and asked if he might beg a meal. The request was not unusual, for taverns were not plentiful along the route, and hospitality was the rule of the country. Oldershaw asked the traveler whence he had come and was told that he had left New York a few hours before; that he was traveling on business for General Howe and was on his way to Trenton. Being left for a few minutes alone with Anne Oldershaw, his expression changed to one of terror, and, handing her a slip of paper, he begged her to hide him. Anne glanced at the paper, saw that it bore an introduction from her brother and beckoned Travers to follow her.

The meal for the traveler had been prepared and Mr. Oldershaw was opening a bottle of wine with which to regale his guest when a clatter of horses' hoofs was heard without, and a dozen British troopers rode up to the house. An officer dismounted, came in and asked Mr. Oldershaw if a citizen, describing Travers, had stopped at the house. Oldershaw said that he had and thought he had gone to make a toilet; he was expecting him to come in at any moment. The officer asked if Oldershaw was a loyal subject of the king or a rebel and when assured that he was the former told him that he was harboring a spy of General Washington's who had been to New York and was carrying information of the British forces.

The house was at once surrounded, that the spy might not escape, and

Oldershaw went through the interior looking for him. Neither Travers nor Anne could for some time be found, but presently Oldershaw met the latter coming through a hall on the ground floor.

"Where is the stranger?" he asked. "The stranger! Why, isn't he with you?"

"No. We must find him. He's a spy of the rebel, Washington."

It was with difficulty that Anne was able to maintain her equanimity, but her father was so eager to catch Travers that he was not as observant as he would have been otherwise. Directing her to help hunt for the spy, he ran back to report to the officer that the young man had disappeared.

Anne Oldershaw had at times wondered at a certain part of the flooring in the basement, or cellar, the wood of which seemed to have taken on a different color from the rest. She had spoken to her brother of it, and one day they had examined it together. Edgar found a way to lift this bit of flooring. The two descended into a subcellar and entered a passageway, at the end of which they came to two wooden gates, like those of a canal lock, though but five or six feet in height and two or three in width. Through seams in these gates water trickled.

This tunnel had been built by the original owner of the house, after he had lost his son, as a means of escape from Indians.

The discovery occurred after the family had become divided on the subject of loyalty to King George, and it occurred to Edgar that this passage might afford means of escape, for he had heard the stories of troubles with the Indians that the former occupants had suffered. He told his sister to say nothing about it, for the present at any rate, till he could explore it further. But before he could do so the episode that had taken him to Morristown had occurred and the matter remained as he had left it.

When young Travers asked Anne to hide him she at once thought of this place, known only to herself and her brother. She led him down a pair of stairs. Together they lifted the trap, and he went into the passageway.

There could be nothing better calculated to draw two young persons of opposite sex together with magnetic rapidity than this situation. Before the trap was lowered a look passed between them that annulled their individual natures and made them one. After a pressure of hands the trap was permitted to fall, and a few moments later Anne met her father in the hall.

It was manifest to the troopers that the spy was hiding somewhere in the house, so they maintained their watch without and hunted within. Fortunately for Travers, Anne was not suspected. As soon as she left him he threaded his way through the passage to the gates. Seeing a chink above through which a ray of sunlight came, he managed to raise himself to it and saw the river, its surface about a foot and a half below the roof of the tunnel. If he could open the gates he might get out and escape. The tunnel would only be filled to within eighteen inches of its top, and he need not be drowned. He tried to open the gates, but could not do so.

It was not till the next morning that Anne dared visit the captive, when she slipped away with some food. Travers asked her if she could get him a crowbar or a large iron poker, or better still, a saw. She brought him a saw and after a brief interview left him, and he went to work on the gates, sawing through a wooden bar that held them shut. When nearly finished he decided to wait till dark, when he opened the gates and the water flowed in, and after it had found its level he swam out under a starlit sky. By morning he was at Washington's headquarters.

The Britishers never solved the mystery of Travers' disappearance. Indeed, it had never been solved until recent explorations led to the discovery of the tunnel. After the war Oldershaw and his wife went to England, Anne married Travers, and they occupied the mansion on the Hackensack for many years.

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