## THE "FIFTH" MARYLAND AT GUILFORD COURTHOUSE: AN EXERCISE IN HISTORICAL ACCURACY - L. E. Babits, February 1988

Over the years, an error has gradually crept into the history of the Maryland Line. The error involves a case of mistaken regimental identity in which the Fifth Maryland is credited with participation in the battle of Guilford Courthouse at the expense of the Second Maryland. [1] When this error appeared in the Maryland Historical Magazine, [2] it seemed time to set the record straight.

The various errors seem to originate with Mark Boatner. In his <u>Encyclopedia of the American Revolution</u>, Boatner, while describing the fight at Guilford Courthouse, states:

As the 2/Gds prepared to attack without waiting for the three other regiments to arrive,

Otho Williams, "charmed with the late demeanor of the first regiment (I Md), hastened toward the second (5th Md) expecting a similar display...".

But the 5th Maryland was virtually a new regiment.

"The sight of the scarlet and steel was too much for their nerves," says Ward.[3]

In this paragraph Boatner demonstrates an ignorance of the actual command and organizational structure of Greene's Southern Army because he quotes from Ward's 1941 work on the Delaware Line and Henry Lee's recollections of the war, both of which correctly identify the unit in question as the Second Maryland Regiment. [4]

The writer of the Kerrenhappuch Turner article simply referred to Boatner's general reference on the Revolutionary War for the regimental designation. [5] Other writers have done likewise, even to the point of using dual designations for the same unit within the space of two paragraphs. [6] One battle game designer even "corrected" a

nineteenth-century account of the battle which correctly identified the regiment by inserting, "(of the two regiments present, meaning the 5th Marylanders)," something at least one professional historian has also done. [7] Recourse to that nineteenth-century work, Charles Coffin's Boys of 76,[8] shows that Coffin neither meant, nor said, Fifth Maryland in his account of the battle.

Given the large number of designations affixed to the group of men who became the Second Maryland, it is not surprising that historians have made mistakes as to its proper identification. At least ten different, though similar, designations refer to this unit prior to December 1780.[9] Misidentification of the "other" Maryland regiment at Guilford Courthouse seems due to the Maryland Line table of organization effective on 1 January 1781. This document identifies Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Ford as the commanding officer of the Fifth Maryland Regiment.[10] There is no evidence that the Fifth Maryland of 1781 was ever raised.[11] This paper seeks to resolve confusion surrounding the Second Maryland Regiment of 1781 and to explain why the regiment performed as it did.

When the Revolutionary War broke out in 1775, there was no national American army. Colonial militiamen provided the only military opposition to the British until Congress authorized Continental regiments and called on the states to provide them in early 1776.[12] Maryland's first quota called for two companies of riflemen, which other units augmented.[13] The best known of the early Maryland troops and the main force Maryland sent in 1776, the Maryland Battalion or Smallwood's Marylanders, took its name from its commander, William Smallwood.[14] As the war continued into the winter of 1776-1777, enlistments ran out and Congress requested the states to supply more men. Effective 1 December 1776,[15] Maryland was to provide seven regiments. These seven regiments, known as the Maryland Line, served with distinction until August 1780.

In the late spring of 1780, Maryland determined to raise another regiment, the Regiment Extra, so called because it was in addition to those Congress had called for. There was some confusion about where the officers for this unit would come from.[16] The Regiment Extra drew recruits from the entire state of Maryland.[17] Equipment and uniforms arrived from Continental Army stores in September 1780.[18] Alexander Lawson Smith commanded the additional regiment[19] whose most prolific correspondent may have been Major Edward Giles, the second in command. Giles's letters recorded details of uniforms (brown coats faced with red, leather breeches), equipment and personnel.[20]

As the Regiment Extra formed back home, the Maryland and Delaware Division underwest reorganization while encamped along the Rocky River in North Carolina. In July 1780, personnel shortages (individual regiments numbered less than half their authorized strength) forced the consolidation of eight regiments into four: The First Maryland and Seventh Maryland became the new First Maryland; the Second

Maryland and the Delaware Regiment became the Second Maryland; the Third Maryland and Fifth Maryland became the Third Maryland; the Fourth Maryland and Sixth Maryland became the Fourth Maryland.[21]

This merger lowered the number of regiments Maryland had in the field but it improved the firepower and leadership of the units without affecting divisional structure (since there were still two regiments in each of two brigades, the Division continued to exist). The reorganization did not last long; General Horatio Gates countermanded the order on 25 July 1780, immediately after joining the army at Coxe's Mill, North Carolina. [22] At the battle of Camden, South Carolina on 16 August, the Maryland and Delaware division fought organized as its regiments had been since January 1777. Despite the heroic efforts of the division, Camden proved an American disaster. The Maryland Line retreated in small groups to Charlotte, North Carolina [23] before withdrawing to Hillsborough, North Carolina [24] to reorganize. At Hillsborough, the Maryland and Delaware division formally reorganized into the Maryland Regiment of two battalions of four companies each. [25]

It is clear from studying the officers of this composite regiment that its two battalions contained the nucleus of the two old divisional brigades. Each battalion consisted of four companies and the company officers's names show that the companies were designated according to the old regiments within the division. It seems probable that keeping men of long service together was thought to be important and that there was a desire to maintain a cadre for rebuilding the division if sufficient men became available. At any rate, officers continued to receive buttons identifying them as belonging to nonexistent regiments, such as the Fourth Maryland. [26] This use of an ideal, or paper, divisional organization implies some continuity with an ideal conception of the old Maryland Line.

By this time, 15 October 1780, Maryland's Regiment Extra was commencing its march south through Virginia to Hillsborough, North Carolina. [27] When the Continental troops, including the Maryland Regiment, marched to South Carolina in December 1780, the Regiment Extra did not join forces with the main army. During January 1781, the Regiment Extra refused to join the army and remained at Haley's Ferry, North Carolina, upstream from the main camp at Hick's Creek, South Carolina. [28] The reason for not joining the main force centered around a dispute in rank between the new officers and the veterans. [29]

The dispute over rank was not petty jockeying for position. Continental officers, like contemporary civilians, were jealous of their rank and constantly sought to confirm their position in terms of seniority.[30] Thus, when the Regiment Extra arrived in North Carolina, there were problems with veteran officers who already had several years prior service but were without commands. The veterans felt that, on the basis of their seniority, they should be given commands commensurate with their rank as had been done after Camden.[31] The veteran officers without sufficient seniority had been placed all over North Carolina in charge of magazines, militia units and town garrisons, or had been sent back home to recruit men.[32]

In truth, the matter may be even more complicated because at least one writer during the raising of the Regiment Extra stated that the command of the "new regiment was to go to officers in the Line."[33] The officers of the Regiment Extra were upset because they had raised, trained and commanded the men for at least six months. If veteran officers were to be given commands in the Regiment Extra, the new officers would be without command themselves.

Fed up with the squabble, General Nathanael Greene sought the Maryland Council's permission to re-staff the Regiment Extra with veteran Continental officers[34] entitled to the positions on the basis of the table of organization, a formal, reckoning of seniority and assignment to regimental positions drawn up effective 1 January 1781. Even before permission could reach him,[35] Greene sent the Regiment Extra officers home.[36] He then assigned veteran supernumery officers in the south to the unit.[37] Under the provisions of their dismissal, officers of the Regiment Extra were to receive one year's pay and expenses, but no pension. Alexander Lawson Smith, ex-commander of the Regiment Extra, received special consideration. Smith was retained as a Lieutenant Colonel in the table of organization because he held that rank before accepting command of the Regiment Extra.[38]

The Regiment Extra became the Second Maryland Regiment. Some of the noncommissioned officers, and perhaps some privates as well, were transferred into the First Maryland. [39] Even though the Second Maryland had more men than the first, it had fewer officers. [40] Within the next week, the newly designated Second Maryland would be fighting its first battle at Guilford Courthouse.

As commander, Greene chose Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Ford because he was the senior officer available. Ford was on the table of organization as the Lieutenant Colonel Commandant of the Fifth Maryland Regiment because of seniority, although this regiment never existed in the field after Camden and Fishing Creek. Any reliance on the table of organization, without attention to actual details of the fluid field situation, could create confusion about the numerical designation of the "other" Maryland Regiment.

From approximately 10 March 1781, and certainly from 16 March, Greene and other officers referred to the Regiment Extra as the Second Maryland.[41] It was designated the second regiment because it was the less senior Maryland Regiment in existence. After October 1780, Maryland was obligated to have five regiments and with only two in the field, this new designation emphasized the point.[42]

Most secondary accounts relating to the performance of the Americans at Guilford Courthouse seem content with reporting that the Second Maryland broke and ran.[43] None of the accounts give any rationale for the collapse of the unit. Yet there are good reasons relating to the reorganization and to their battlefield position at Guilford Courthouse. The men were no longer led by officers they had served with for some seven to nine months and there was also a shortage of officers. The new officers had been in command less than ten days. Some of their noncommissioned officers had been

transferred to the First Maryland Regiment as part of the reorganization. [44]

Another reason for the flight might be seen as social. Papenfuse and Stiverson have analyzed the origin and economic standing of the Maryland troops raised for the Yorktown Campaign and found that they were generally of the lower sort. This examiation reflects troops raised in 1781 but it should be seen as a generally useful interpretation of the personnel of the year before. [45] In actual fact, most of the enlisted personnel raised in European armies of that time were of the "lower sort." [46] If British and French troops stood their ground except in special circumstances, even though they were raised from the bottom levels of society, then reasons for the collapse of the 2nd Maryland must be sought in other than social status.

The Regiment Extra had been raised from all of Maryland rather than a single community. Thus, most of its members probably did not know one another prior to enlisting. Many of them were almost certainly "surplus" members of the population without permanent ties of the community. Many, as Papenfuse and Stiverson point out, may have been recently freed servants. They were not, initially, a tightly bound group with common ties to bind them together in the face of adversity. What little discipline had been instilled in the nine months of service had probably been badly shaken by the changes in leadership just before the battle. [47]

The command and morale explanations do not account for the dismaying performance of the Second Maryland in themselves. Lieutenant Colonel John Eager Howard, second in command of the First Maryland, provides something of an explanation, when he remarks that the:

...second regiment was at some distance to the left of the first, in the cleared ground, with its left flank thrown back so as to form a line almost at right angles with the 1. regt. The guards, after they had defeated Genl. Stephens pushed into the cleared ground and run at the 2d regiment, which immediately gave way, owing I believe to the want of officers & having so many new recruits. [48]

Howard does not relate whether or not the regiment was also under fire while waiting to engage the British. If they were, in fact, at right angles to the rest of the American battle line, it seems likely that scattering fire was falling around them at times prior to their actual engagement. British accounts suggest that the Second Battalion of the Guards ran to the attack, a fact confirmed by Howard. [49] If the Second Maryland had been under fire, then the reason for their breaking in the face of the Guard's attack may well have been mental fatigue of the sort reported by S. L. A. Marshall during the Pacific Campaigns of World War II:

...if a skirmish line was halted two or three times during an attack by sudden enemy fire, it became impossible to get any further action from the men, even though none had been hurt. ... The explanation, though not sensed clearly at the time, was that the

attacking companies were being drained of their muscle power by the repeated impact of sudden fear. The store of glycogen in the muscles of the men was being burned up from this cause, just as surely, though less efficiently, than if than if they were exhausting themselves in digging a line of entrenchments.[50]

William R. Davie, Quartermaster of the Southern Army, reported virtually these conditions as applying to the Second Maryland at Guilford Courthouse. Davie stated, in commenting about the battle, that:

I have always understood that the disgrace of the 2d Regiment that day was owen to the mistaken conduct of Colo Ford and Colo Williams--that Ford ordered a charge, that proceeded some distance, and were halted by Colo Williams, and perhaps ordered again to fall back and dress wt the line. The British (The Guards) continued to advance (at the run). This manouvre (reforming and dressing with the line) was performed under a heavy fire--when the men were again ordered to advance they all faced about, except a single company on the left which I think was Capt Oldhams. [51]

Even if the Second Maryland was not brought to the charge and halted several times, the mental stress involved in being under fire and doing nothing, must have been tremendous. Since they were positioned at an angle, any British projectiles would enfilade the Second Maryland. Thus, any stray bullets would be more likely to hit someone than if the regiment had been arrayed in two ranks facing the enemy. The effect of at least six hours of waiting, with stray rounds hitting men up and down the lines during the last hour would have been similar to that mentioned by Marshall. The precise effect on waiting troops can be seen in the behavior of a private in the Texas Brigade of the Army of Northern Virginia:

I soon saw that we were the reserve, which is a dreaded position when kept up for you will hear the roar of the battling front; and if advancing, as we were in this instance, passing the dead and dying, and being exposed to shell, grape or canister shot; and as one has ample time for reflection, they can well feel the seriousness of the surroundings with all its horrors and to see the little regard for human life and property....[52]

The source of this observation was in one of the best Confederate units of the Civil War. His experience during the Seven Days battle in 1862 applies to the Second Maryland since the Texas Brigade was also new to combat at the time. The Second Maryland had certainly seen North Carolina militia as they withdrew from their positions on the New Garden Road. After heavy fighting between the Virginia militia and the British, many Virginians also passed around and through the Marylanders. [53] Since both groups of militia had numerous wounded, ranging from generals to privates, the effect on green troops reported by Fletcher must have been felt by the Second

## Maryland.

Fletcher makes another comment about fear in battle which is relevant. During the Battle of Gettysburg on 2 July 1863:

...We were halted and lined and ordered in again. We advanced this time, knowing what was ahead of us if we went far, for the acts of the men soon showed that we were of one mind. We forwarded without a murmur, until we struck the danger point. The men aboutfaced, near as if ordered and marched back.[54]

Fletcher's terminology about turning around closely approximates ("faced about," "aboutfaced") that used by Davie in describing the Second Maryland Regiment's behavior at Guilford Courthouse. Both the First Texas and the Second Maryland had been halted and reformed before being ordered forward again. Since Davie pointed out that the Second Maryland dressed the line under heavy fire, conditions described by Fletcher and Marshall were met, thus offering a physical, or biological, reason for the flight.

Whatever the reasons for the collapse of the Second Maryland, it was <u>not</u> the Fifth Maryland. The Fifth Maryland of 1781 has been laid to rest and the Second should continue to receive the attention they are due.

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<sup>[2].</sup> Curtis Carroll Davis, "The Tribulations of Mrs. Turner: An Episode after Guilford Courthouse," Maryland Historical

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<sup>[5].</sup> Davis, "Mrs. Turner," pp. 376, 379.

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