



## The story behind what happened in Queenstown in 1813

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Sometimes, in the process of history research work one comes upon a document that simply takes your breath away as you are reading it.

This happened to me several weeks ago in Baltimore at the Maryland Historical Society.

Going through a series of letters in several files, the discoveries were amazing. The finding of these two letters changes almost none of the basic facts about what happened at Queenstown in August of 1813, and certainly clarifies a lot. The one exception is the juxtaposition of the land force and water force arrivals and how that affected the actions.

More importantly, what comes through in the most shining manner is the pride and patriotism, the camaraderie, of the men who stood to defend at Queenstown.

The troops were led by Major William H. Nicholson, the 'little' brother of our famous Judge Joseph Hopper Nicholson. William was 41 years old at the time he commanded the troops at Queenstown, and he died less than two years later in 1815. At the time of his death he was the Register of Wills for Queen Anne's County, but died without his own will!

The Officer in charge of the Artillery mentioned in the letter was 29-year-old Gustavus William Tidmarsh Wright, second son of Robert Wright of Blakeford. The Officer in charge of the Cavalry was Thomas Emory of Poplar Grove.

The Officer in Command of the Maryland Militia, 38th Regiment of Queen Anne's County was Lt. Col. Thomas Wright of Reed's Creek. He was supposed to be in command at Queenstown.

Here is Wright's brief letter written on Aug. 4 at Reed's Creek to Major William H. Nicholson, placing him in charge of the troops and explaining why he could not take command:

*Dear Sir,*

*Enclosed are the communications received by me relative to the movements of the enemy. You*

*will no doubt without loss of time order out such portions of the militia as you may judge necessary to guard those points of our regimental district you may deem most exposed to their depredation. This suggestion I make to you in consequence of my present indisposition which is quite severe. So soon as I may be in a situation to act, I shall be with you.*

*Yours respectfully,*

*Thomas Wright  
Lt. Col. 38th Regiment  
Md. Mil*

Thus the scene was set for Major Nicholson to take charge. Capt. Charles Hobbs' Company was the first called out on that very Aug. 4. All other troops were called and in place by the following day, Aug. 5.

There is much that happened in the ensuing days that is not the subject of this article. Presented here are the words of Major Nicholson describing to Lt. Col Wright in a letter written on Aug. 16, from Centreville (referred to in the letter as "this place") what happened at Queenstown when the British attacked. He presents a geographic view of the county that provides remarkable clarity regarding the lands and marshes at the Narrows as they used to be.

He demonstrates both humor and compassion regarding his men, referring to them as "my little group" and "my little charges." He does not, even once, mention Slippery Hill or anything about a farm.

He provides a timeline that also places a different light on events there. It is also clear from this letter that there was a rendezvous spot a mile and a half outside of town on the Queenstown-Centreville road, and it would appear he had initially intended to stand and fight at that point, until once there, he receives the news about all the troops landing from the barges, at "Mr. Wright's." That would mean Blakeford, on the opposite side of Queenstown Creek, which he clearly saw as a pincer movement from Blakeford around on Tilghman's Neck, cutting the troops from Centreville, while the "land force" he refers to that came on the main Kent Island Road would have come at him from Queenstown.

Given these facts, he felt he had no choice but to safely care for his men by retreat.

Note the words at the end of the letter in which he indicates believing a force greater than there was, based on the intelligence reported to him in the early hours of the morning.

The letter is transcribed as I found it in William H. Nicholson's own handwriting and punctuation. Several words I just could not make out and thus a question mark. Herewith the letter:

*Sir,*

*Having laid before you my letter of the 13th Inst. To Brigadier Gen. Chambers, stating the enemy's movements on Queen's Town, and my retreat from that place in consequence, therefore it now remains for me to give you a detailed statement of the affair, together with the reasons which influenced and determined me to retreat without engaging the enemy.*

*Previous to entering on this detail, it may not be irrelevant for the information of those who have mind enough to comprehend the subject, to give a slight sketch of the geographical position of the county laying between the enemy's force on Kent Island, and my little charges at Queenstown. Kent Island, of which the enemy were in possession and which was surrounded by their vessels of war, is the Southern extremity of Queen Anne's County, its greatest length about twenty one miles, its average breadth about six miles, is watered on its Western side by the Chesapeake Bay, on its Eastern margin by the Eastern Bay, and is separated from the main by what is usually termed the Narrows, which is in fact a Strait of water from the Eastern Bay to the Chester River, and runs nearly North and South, is navigable on full common tides for small shallops, and its breadth varies from about one hundred yards to half a mile or more. This Narrows or Straits is skirted on both sides by extensive marshes intersected with ripples, which are frequently dangerous, more especially the marsh connected with the main. To approach the main you must traverse a narrow causeway, upward of a mile in length, across the marsh. Piney Neck, or the District of County which extends from Queenstown to the Narrows, is watered on the Northwest by Chester River, navigable for ships of large size for an extent of about six miles to the mouth of Queens Town Creek which forms its best head about one fourth of a mile from the Main Road, near which stands the little village in which my force was quartered. The same district of County is watered to the South and East by the Eastern Bay and that Branch of the Wye River called Back Wye for an extent of about twenty miles, navigable in its whole course for Craft and Barges to within a short distance of Queens Town. Into this tract of country the Enemy could penetrate at will, both by land and water. I was destined to defend with the following force, that is to say: six companies of Infantry amounting to two hundred and seventy three, of whom twenty six were sick and three absent on furlough, leaving two hundred and forty four two light six pounders, commanded by Capt Wright, about thirty five strong, and one hundred cavalry, commanded by Major Emory. To this force I had strong reasons to believe the Enemy could oppose a land force of three thousand men and of course all the barges and men belonging to their shipping by water. In this posture I could not but be sensible of the extreme danger of my situation, and felt that there was little for me to do but use great caution and vigilance to avoid a surprise.*

*To prevent all intercourse with the Island which was so great as to be highly criminal, on the morning of the 12th I determined to push the two companies (amounting to sixty two men, a part of the two hundred and forty four), commanded by Captns Hobbs and Taylor, into the Neck, if they should be willing to engage in so hazardous an enterprise, and accordingly communicated my wishes to them. They, without a moment's hesitation accepted my offer, and with great alacrity paraded their companies, and entered on a very perilous duty, which they, equally with myself, thought essential to the safety of our whole force. They had my written permission to occupy such grounds as to them might seem most advantageous for the duty assigned to them. They were by no means to invite an attack, and to communicate with me at least once in twelve hours, for which purpose they had four troopers sent with them to be entire subject to their orders; they were not to occupy the same position any two nights successively. With these instructions and the very intimate knowledge which the officers and men possessed of the County, added to their great zeal and activity of the officers, I was satisfied that if they should be attacked by a superior force, they would effect a safe retreat; if by an equal, I had no fears for the result.*

*In the course of the afternoon of the 12th, a variety of circumstances combined to induce me to believe that I should be attacked the next morning.; and that chiefly, if not altogether on the land side; I therefore took my Officers, separately, and pointed out to each of them, the positions their men were to occupy on the land side, in the event of a land attack and the same if attacked from the water. We were unanimously of opinion that the posts selected were of such strength as to enable us to do great execution to a much larger force than our own; and against any thing like our equal force, we felt confident of success. Against an attack from two or three points, I felt the insufficiency of my force to provide, and did not attempt it. Having dispatched Adjutant Tilghman and one or two other officers into the Neck about 11 o'clock, and having finished visiting my Guard about half past 12 o'clock, I retired to my room half past 1 o'clock. The Adjutant returned from reconnoitering, without having gained any information of the Enemy's intention. At ten minutes before 3 o'clock of the 13th I was aroused by the quick approach of horsemen and found them to be my Cavalry Videttes of the outposts, with the intelligence that the Enemy were approaching in great force on the main road from Kent Narrows to Queens Town. I immediately called up my Officers and at 15 minutes past three my Force paraded in order of battle, with the exception of the Cavalry. The want of accommodations for the men and horses compelled me to quarter them about ½ miles from the Village, but this occasioned no delay; for in the course of ten or fifteen minutes Major Emory in person (much to the honor of that Body) reported his Cavalry as formed on the ground I had directed, and ready for action. A few minutes only had elapsed when an express arrived to me from Captns Hobbs and Taylor with the information that the Enemy were advancing in such force as to make it impossible that I could oppose them with mine, and that they expected to effect a retreat. This intelligence created great anxiety for the fate of my Picket Guard which was stationed about two miles in advance of Queens Town, on the main road by which the Enemy were approaching. I immediately mounted my horse and pressed forward toward my Picket. When I had advanced within half a mile of their post the firing commenced between them and the Enemy and the volleys of musketry left me without a hope that an individual of them was alive. I returned immediately to my main body, and found them at their posts, all cheerful and anxious for the onset of the Enemy, not withstanding his numbers. A fresh volley of musketry created feelings which I can never forget, it assured me that my Picket was not annihilated as I had supposed, but to their immortal honor, that they had obeyed my orders of the night before, rallied and a second time attacked the Enemy. I instantly sent the Adjutant on to meet them, and they arrived safe at our line about four hundred yards in advance of the Enemy with the loss of a man and only one very slightly wounded. If anything I could say would add to the reputation of those Gentlemen, how freely would I say it.*

*In giving their names to the publick I do all that I can: It shall be known that a Picket Guard, composed of the following Gentlemen, stood firm at their posts, received the attack, and returned the fire of a Column of British Troops of 2000 strong, supported by four field pieces; retreated, formed again and gave the Enemy their second fire.*

*Picket Guard*

*James Massey Capt. Peter Ross  
Jos. H. Nicholson Jun. Corpor. Sam M. Cosh  
Privates John D. Emory  
Solomon E. Wright John Green*

*James Chairs Thos. Cox  
James Glenn Danl. Sullivan  
Wm. Seward  
Slightly Wounded  
John Hassitt  
Thos. Deroachbroom Jas. Jackson  
Jeremiah Vincent Jacob Price  
John Dodd  
Wm. Emerson  
Arch Roe*

*About four o'clock my Cavalry Videttes stationed on the Chester River came in bringing the painful intelligence that a large number of barges were entering Queens Town Creek. In a few moments after a signal rocket from the barges told me the news was too true, at the same moment one of my Guards (Infantry), stationed on the Creek, came with the information that they had formed their line across the mouth of Queens Town Creek. The signal rocket was answered from the landside, and I instantly called in all my Guards except three, out of twenty, stationed at Mr. Hall's landing on the Creek, who I left for the purpose of conveying intelligence to me of the Enemy's approach; for I was firmly resolved to engage the Enemy in my Front, if it could be done without subjecting the force I commanded to certain capture. I had sent Major Blake to take a view of the Enemy on the water, who returned with the information that they had landed, and that he was fired on by them; the force in my front were about one hundred and fifty yards from us, and was plainly seen from both my left and my right flanks. In this situation, I concluded that nothing but a silent retreat could affect my escape; this I ordered, and dispatched the Surgeon of the Regt. to Major Emory of the Cavalry with the Order, but from some misconception of the Surgeon, Major Emory did not consider the order as official, and of course did not commence his retreat with that prompting of movement for which his command is remarkable: I discovered the delay and as soon as possible sent the Adjutant with orders for the Cavalry to press their retreat; this was done under a heavy fire of Rockets, round and grape shot equally upon the Cavalry, Infantry and Artillery from the Enemy's land force, and from a fire of rockets, round and grape shot upon the Infantry and Artillery from the force on the water side. There was no confusion among any of the troops; all retreated in perfect order, and the column was well formed (for militia) during the whole retreat; indeed it became absolutely necessary to give a positive order to quicken their pace, before I could effect it. Early in the retreat I discovered that my column occupied more ground than was necessary for it, and apprehensive that some irregularity existed in the advance, I rode up to the front to discover the cause and found Capts. Massey and McConniken's Command in single file; this order of companies had been necessary in the first instance, in consequence of these companies original retreat being intercepted by the Enemy's force on the water side. I therefore found it necessary to change the disposition of their retreat, and immediately upon giving the order for the formation of the column by those two Companies, it was executed on the march with a ? and ? that does equal honor to the Officers and the Men. During the whole of the time that we waited in order of battle the Enemy's approach, the most perfect order and subordination pervaded my little command, frequently enlivened with observations and wit that bespoke minds perfectly at ease, and to discharge their duty to their country. Capt. Wright of Artillery in particular, addressed his command in a very spirited and handsome stile exhorting by everything that was sacred and*

*dear to them as free men, to discharge their duty which was received with the most cordial appearances of support from the whole force.*

*Having thus detailed the objects of my first retreat, it becomes necessary that I should account for my continuing the retreat to this place.*

*The head of the column having reached the appointed place of rendezvous, about one and a half miles from the Town, I was riding very leisurely alone at the rear with the Adjutant, and had just ordered him to ride forward and halt the column, when information was sent to me by a person who had been on the water's edge during the whole time, that the Enemy was landing a large force from twenty barges on a point of Mr. Wright's. I was well aware that the landing of a force at that place could have no other object in view other than intercepting of my retreat, and I instantly ordered the head of the column to advance and continue the retreat to this place, where everyman arrived in safety. The firing of my Picket Guard killed two of the enemy, and wounded five; and their Commander in Chief, Sir Sydney Beckwith, had his horse killed. The deserters who were with the land force, state their numbers to have been one Company of Marine Artillery, four pieces, one hundred strong, the 102 Regiment three hundred strong, two Battalions of Marines sixteen hundred, and one Rocket Company fifty strong.\* This*

*was the force in my front, to which I had determined to give battle, but the appearance of the Enemy attacking my rear compelled me to give up my intention. His numbers by water not known, but was contained in 45 barges, and by those who had the best opportunity of examining, is stated to have been thirteen hundred and fifty. It affords me great pleasure to add that Capts. Hobbs and Taylor made good their retreat across Wye River in Batteaux and canoes; and the Troopers who were under their command affected theirs by swimming their horses across.*

*I will now only observe that not a breath of censure can in any wise attach to a single individual of my command the ready and cheerful obedience which I experienced from every officer, noncommissioned and private, gave me full confidence that I could rely on the execution of my orders, and I was not disappointed: on me alone therefore must rest the responsibility of the retreat. May I again, Sir, Solicit, that a court of inquiry be directed to sit on me.*

*1813 Centreville 16th August I am Sir*

*\*See my letter to Brig General Chambers, I gave Wm. H. Nicholson the best view we could obtain in the night but Major 38th Regt. now find we had only a small part of his force. Md. Mil*

I thank the Maryland Historical Society for allowing me permission to bring this precious, incredible and important letter to my fellow Queen Anne's County citizens. This is our vitally important history. This letter presents the finest of American military tradition in the care, camaraderie, and concern for the men by their commanding officer and one another. The pride Major Nicholson had for his Picket Guard is enormous, but it is his references to the problems of militia to march in column and to "his little group" and "his little command" that has really touched me. When did you ever hear a commanding officer show such affection for his troops written down for history? What a privilege that almost 200 years later we have the honor to share his report.