

First-Hand Evidence

By CHARLES H. P. COPELAND

Curator of Maritime History, The Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

IT is extremely difficult to reconstruct the physical appearance of historical figures who lived before the era of photography. Portraits, sketches and busts sometimes offer a fairly safe guide but their effectiveness may be diluted by the understandable wish of the artist to please his subject, family and friends. A painter may be more concerned with general composition than with likeness. A sculptor may neglect portraiture in stone for similar considerations. There are many portraits of George Washington, for example. Who can say today which of the widely varying treatments presents a reasonable facsimile of the great Virginian?

Nor can written evidence, firsthand though it may be, afford us sure ground. An eighteenth-century British officer may describe an American general, captured in the heat of action, as being "of low stature, mean-looking and slovenly." The same American, seen by one of Rochambeau's staff officers under different conditions, may stand out as a "gentleman of slender elegance, handsome, of fine carriage and wearing well a striking uniform."

Stature, unless given in terms of feet and inches, depends on the norm to which a given observer is accustomed. To Napoleon, Jean Baptiste Kléber was a giant, yet that general who died so tragically in Egypt seems to have been less than six feet tall. Measurements do sometimes exist, as in the case of Washington who was a good six feet two inches.

One piece of evidence has recently come to light at the Peabody Museum

settling quite definitely not the facial characteristics or the height, but the weight of a group of American officers of the Revolution. This is contained in an early nineteenth-century diary, the identity of whose author is so far unknown. He must have lived, to judge from various entries, in the vicinity of Exeter, New Hampshire, and may well have been a lawyer.

In the midst of entries covering the author's placid journeys about New Hampshire, the following items appear without comment.

"Memorandum found in the pocket-book of a deceased officer of the Massachusetts Line [i.e., of a Continental Regiment] in the Revolutionary War. 'August 19, 1782. Weighed at the Scales at West Point

General Washington	209 lbs.
General Lincoln	224 lbs.
General Knox	280 lbs.
General Huntington	131 lbs.
General Greaton	166 lbs.
Colonel Swift	219 lbs.
Colonel Michael Jackson	262 lbs.
Colonel Henry Jackson	230 lbs.
Lt. Colonel Huntington	232 lbs.
Lt. Colonel Cobb	186 lbs.
Lt. Colonel Humphreys	221 lbs.'

The average weight of these distinguished revolutionary officers is 214 lbs."

There is a tantalizing brevity to this entry. Why did this mass weighing take place? Whose idea was it? Was the group handpicked to cover from Huntington's one hundred thirty-one pounds

to Henry Knox's two hundred and eighty? Was it at the breakup of a dinner tendered by New England officers to the Commander-in-Chief? Or had he been dining and wining them?

These weighings took place at a time when supplies were flowing quite freely from New England and the Mohawk Valley to the American Army, but it is likely that the scales would have read about the same in any other war year. It is interesting to note that, barring Generals Huntington and Greaton, all these officers would have passed as big men today. It is even likely that a modern medical board might have ruled some of them unfit for service. Yet, despite Henry Knox's impressive weight, French gunnery officers at Yorktown were surprised by his agility and physical coordination.

Of the lesser-known officers of this last, Jedediah Huntington of Connecticut was a colonel at the time of the Lexington Alarm in 1775, became a brigadier in 1777 and served to the end of the war notwithstanding his mere one hundred thirty-one pounds. John Greaton of Massachusetts had an equally long record. Heman Swift of Connecticut first appears as a colonel of state troops in 1776 and then transferred to the Continental Line. Michael Jackson of Massachusetts commanded a company of Minute Men on the 19th of April, 1775, was wounded at Bunker Hill and again at Montresor's Island in New York's East River. Henry Jackson, of the same state, was made colonel of one of the

confusing "Sixteen Additional Continental Regiments" and stayed in the army after the war, commanding a unit known as The First American Regiment.

Like Michael Jackson, Ebenezer Huntington of Connecticut turned out for the Lexington Alarm, finally retiring as brigadier as late as 1798. David Cobb of Massachusetts began as a surgeon in 1775, but turned to combat service with the 16th Massachusetts. As of 1781 he was appointed aide-de-camp to Washington, which accounts for his presence at the weighing in, if, indeed, with his medical background, he did not suggest it. David Humphreys of Connecticut is first noted as company commander in 1777. Later he served as aide-de-camp to Samuel H. Parsons, Israel Putnam, Nathanael Greene and finally to the Commander-in-Chief himself. By Act of Congress, November 3, 1781, it was "Resolved, that an elegant sword be presented in the name of the United States in Congress assembled to Colonel Humphreys to whose care the standards taken under the capitulation of York [town] were consigned, as a testimony of their opinion of his fidelity and ability. . . ."

So, with a few Revolutionary weights established, we are now waiting for some other diary wherein an unknown someone's intellectual curiosity will have set down heights as carefully as this anonymous recorder has noted the scales of West Point.