



Trusted Writing on History, Travel, and American Culture Since 1949

HOME / MAGAZINE / 1974 / VOLUME 25, ISSUE 5 / YOU ARE INVITED TO A MISCHIANZA

You Are Invited To A Mischianza

Saluting a departing general, the British dazzled Philadelphians with the grandest party the city had ever seen; the tiny army that had toppled the general bided its time nearby

Morris Bishop

August 1974 | Volume 25, Issue 5

In the spring of 1778 William Howe, commander in chief of His Majesty's forces in North America, received orders to return to London and justify his actions, or rather his inactions, for he had gained no conspicuous victory in three years of war. He was nearly fifty, plump and rosy, a friend of the gentler arts, the gentler sex. Through the winter of 1777–78 he and his troops had reposed comfortably in Philadelphia while Washington's hapless little army, freezing and starving, lay vulnerable twentyfive miles away in Valley Forge. Howe and his staff lived delicately; they were adept at what was known in a later war as scrounging. Merchant ships brought in French wines, English cloth and woolens, green turtles from the Bahamas. Many Philadelphians, never fanatic types, discovered themselves to be Loyalists at heart; many more, with Quaker prudence, evinced a high-minded neutrality, gave no offense, and waited for the outcome. The young ladies of society, famed for their beauty and cultivation, smiled on the British officers, whose scarlet and gold regimentals put to shame the drab dress of their brothers and friends' brothers.

The visitors played the military game of gallantry, for conquest is the soldier's trade. They dined the fair, circumventing civilian scarcities. They organized a weekly ball and horse races and sleighing parties. They improvised a theatre with their own troupe, Howe's Thespians, and produced thirteen plays, some of them, to be sure, merely brief farces. The scenery was painted by John André with the help of Captain Oliver DeLancey of New York.

John André, as yet only a captain, was a marked man in army society. He was nearly thirty, at the apogee of life's curve. His good looks were startling; they deserved to be called beauty. One of his guards in his last days described him as "the handsomest man I ever laid eyes on." He had every permissible grace; he wrote poetry, serious and comic; he sketched memorably well, limned water colors, and brushed the scenery for the dramatic club; he played the flute and pitched a tuneful song; he danced

divinely. Of SwissFrench extraction, he was fluent in French, German, and Italian. But he was burdened by his gifts; they were not bestowed on him free.

He was petted and adored on two continents and in Philadelphia most notably by two Peggys, Peggy Shippen and Peggy Chew. His beauty was matched by that of Peggy Shippen, whom Lord Rawdon called the handsomest woman he had seen in America. At this time she was just seventeen and already well used to adulation. André made a pencil sketch of her, which is now in the Yale University Art Gallery. The artist's interest is evidently centered on the headdress and furbelowed gown, probably his own creation, for among his accomplishments were millinery and dress design. Was love mentioned in their private colloquies on any serious note? I think not. She was an imperious beauty, demanding total devotion; she fell into hysterical rages when crossed] André wanted to be adored, not to adore. And did Peggy Shippen love André? Perhaps. There is no written evidence, but there is no question that a month after her marriage to Benedict Arnold in the following year she initiated negotiations for treason with Major André. At least she trusted André as she did no one else. If trust blended with love, both were too discreet to confess it in written words, or the words were promptly destroyed. But at Peggy Arnold's death there was found among her intimate effects a lock of André's hair. Make what you will of that.

The other Peggy was Peggy Chew, daughter of Benjamin Chew, former chief justice of Pennsylvania but under a cloud in 1778 (he was too broadminded; he could perceive justice on both sides). Peggy was eighteen in this year. Her portrait, by Thomas Sully, shows a lean, dark, intelligent, indeed aristocratic face, of a type now familiar along the Main Line. Evidently André loved her a little, and Peggy loved him more than a little. He wrote for her gay vers d'occasion , such as this lyrical pun:

The Hebrews write (and those who can, Believe) an apple tempted man To touch the tree exempt: Tho' tasted at a vast expense, 'Twos too delicious to the sense, Not mortally to tempt.
But had the tree of knowledge bloomed, Its branches by such fruit perfumed As here enchants my view—
What mortal Adam's taste could blame Who would not die to eat the same When God's might wish a Chew?

At the gigantic farewell party of the British officers, the mischianza , he chose Peggy Chew to be his honored lady, fobbing off the other Peggy on a companion officer. And for Peggy Chew also he wrote and illustrated a souvenir booklet descriptive the mischianza , signing himself her most devoted Knight and Servant.' The booklet is still in the Chew house, Cliveden, in Germantown. Thanks to André and to other recorders we may watch again the mischianza, that splendid and rather touching absurdity.

When news reached Philadelphia of General Howe's recall and his replacement by Sir Henry Clinton, commandant at New York, a group of higher officers proposed to mount a farewell party of a magnificence unexampled in North America. It would be called a mischianza , or medley, a denomination lending itself to many a mispronunciation and misspelling. While a party needs no other justification than itself, this party was intended to imply to Howe's critics that the general had the respect and confidence of his officers. In pursuance of this purpose one of them, perhaps André, wrote a description of the festivities, which appeared in the London Gentleman's Magazine for August, 1778, well in time for the official examination of General Howe.

The first step, obviously, was to take up a collection for preliminary costs. Twenty-two field officers

joined in, with pleasure genuine or feigned, putting 3,312 guineas in the kitty. This sum would have supported the entire American army for a week at least. Then elaborate tickets of admission were designed and engraved, no doubt by that Philadelphia engraver who had printed Continental paper money until the city fell, whereupon he turned out counterfeit Continentals to speed depreciation. The tickets of admission show a setting sun, a not very tactful symbolism, but with the encouraging motto *Luceo discedens, aucto splendore resurgam* ("I shine in setting; I shall rise again in greater splendor"). The rest of the ticket includes a seacoast, wreaths, the general's crest, swords, flags, fasces, field guns, shells, ramrods, drums, and the adjuration *Vive; vale* ("Long life and farewell").

The preparations must have occupied the officers through the spring. But there was leisure enough; Howe had no idea of embarking on an offensive that would just make trouble, whether successful or not. The promoters had to locate, adapt, and improvise materials for costumes and properties, raiding enemy attics and borrowing from lady friends. It was surely great fun; André was in his element.

Related stories

Gentleman Johnny's Wandering Army

by Thomas Fleming

Defeated at Saratoga, Burgoyne's troops faced nearly five years of enforced exile in a hostile countryside

Encounter at the Brandywine

by Richard F. Snow

"The damn rebels form well"

The Philadelphia Ladies Association

by Mary Beth Norton

Although it has been disparaged as "General Washington's Sewing Circle," this venture was the first nationwide female organization in America

Men of the Revolution: 12. Richard And William Howe

by Richard M. Ketchum

The brothers were expected to perform an almost impossible task, subduing a people of the same flesh and blood and heritage.

Three Forgotten Heroes

by Richard C. Brown

Who today remembers John Paulding, Isaac Van Wert, or David Williams? Yet for a century they were renowned as the rustic militiamen who captured Major John André

Roofs Over Rivers

by Richard Sanders Allen

Time is taking its toll of the romantic covered bridge, where once you could exchange gossip, argue politics, or court your lady fair.

The Signer Who Recanted

by Frederick Bernays Wiener

Under duress in a British prison, Richard Stockton of New Jersey had the singular misfortune to become

Men of the Revolution: 15. Frederick Mackenzie

by Richard M. Ketchum

With Little Less Than Savage Fury

by Thomas B. Allen

America's first civil war took place during the Revolution, an ultra violent, family-splitting, and often vindictive conflict between patriots and loyalists

Men of the Revolution: 16. Daniel Morgan

by Richard M. Ketchum

© Copyright 1949-2022 American Heritage Publishing Co. All Rights Reserved. To license content, please contact
licenses [at] americanheritage.com.

AMERICAN HERITAGE

Trusted Writing on History, Travel, and American Culture Since 1949