

**GENERAL ORDERS NO. 8; A
SKETCH OF THE ORGANIZATION
OF THE QUARTERMASTER'S
DEPARTMENT, FROM 1774 TO
1868**

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M. C. MEIGS & H. A. ROYCE

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U. S. Department of War

General Orders No. 8.

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A SKETCH



OF THE

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U. S.
1774
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QUARTERMASTER GENERAL'S OFFICE,
Washington, D. C., February 5, 1869.

The following abstract of legislation affecting the organization of the quartermasters' department, prepared under direction of the Quartermaster General, is published for information of officers of the department.

M. C. MEIGS,
Quartermaster General, Bvt. Major General U. S. A.

QUARTERMASTER GENERAL'S OFFICE,
Washington, D. C., August 19, 1868.

GENERAL: I respectfully submit the enclosed sketch of the organization of the quartermasters' department, from the commencement of the war for American independence, in 1774, to the reorganization of the United States army, under acts of Congress following upon the close of the American rebellion of 1861-'65.

This sketch embraces all the changes of any importance affecting the quartermasters' department which have taken place during the period mentioned, and in its preparation the most authentic data and the most reliable authorities have been consulted and quoted from.

To trace in detail the history of the quartermasters' department during the war with Mexico and the late rebellion would have enlarged the work far beyond its intended limits, and would have required much additional time and more extended research.

This sketch has therefore been confined as closely as possible to a simple narration of the changes affecting the department specially during these late conflicts, without special mention of the eminent and signal service which it has so constantly rendered in achieving the final results.

I have the honor to be, general, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

H. A. ROYCE,

Brevet Colonel and Assistant Quartermaster Vols.

Brevet Major General M. C. MEIGS,

- Quartermaster General U. S. A., Washington, D. C.

CHAPTER I.

JUNE, 1775—OCTOBER, 1788.

On the 16th of June, 1775, the Continental Congress, then in session at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, That there be one Quartermaster General for the grand army, and one deputy under him for the separate army.*

This appears to have been the earliest legislation of Congress creating these or any other grades in the quartermasters' department.

The great necessity for establishing in this department an office, to be filled by one person having general control of its affairs and the guidance and superintendence of its operations, was generally felt by those conversant with the wants of the army then organizing. General George Washington gave the matter his special attention immediately after his election as commander-in-chief of the army, and on the 10th of July, 1775, apparently not informed of the passage of the foregoing resolution, wrote to the President of Congress as follows:

In the arrangement of troops collected upon the spur of immediate necessity, several appointments have been omitted which appear to be indispensably necessary for the good government of the army, particularly a Quartermaster General, a commissary of musters, and a commissary of artillery. These I must particularly recommend to the notice and provision of Congress.†

On the 19th of July, 1775, and probably upon the receipt of this letter, Congress resolved that the appointment of a Quartermaster General and certain other officers enumerated be left to General Washington.‡

Acting under this authority, General Washington appointed Major Thomas Mifflin, of Pennsylvania,§ Quartermaster General; writing to the President of Congress on the 21st of September, informing him of the fact, and hoping and believing that such appointment would be universally acceptable.¶

Major Mifflin, immediately after his appointment, entered upon his duties in the quartermasters' department.

Prior to December 22, 1775, no provision had been made for the rank of the person filling the position of Quartermaster General of the army of the United Colonies, but on that date a resolution was passed conferring upon this officer a colonelcy.

* Journals of Congress, 1775. The pay of the Quartermaster General was established by this resolution at \$30 per month; that of the deputy, \$40 per month.

† Sparks's Writings of Washington, vol. 3, p. 21.

‡ Journals of Congress, 1775.

§ Major Mifflin was born in Philadelphia in 1744. In 1772 he was a member of the Colonial Assembly, subsequently of the first Continental Congress. Entering the military service, he was on duty with General Washington in camp at Cambridge, Massachusetts, until August, 1775, when he was selected to fill the position of Quartermaster General. He was a man of great energy and ability. Washington, in his correspondence at the time, speaks in terms of the highest praise of his qualifications and of his integrity of character.

¶ Sparks's Writings of Washington, vol. 3, p. 104.

On the 16th of May following, Colonel Mifflin was elected by Congress a brigadier general of the army,* whereupon he resigned his office of Quartermaster General, and on the 5th of June, 1776, Stephen Moylan was elected to fill the vacancy.†

The position and duties of Quartermaster General appear to have been distasteful to Colonel Moylan, his preference being for more active military service.‡

Having tendered his resignation to Congress, that body, on the 1st of October, 1776, resolved that General Mifflin be authorized and requested to resume the said office, and that his rank and pay as brigadier general be still continued to him.§

In accordance with this resolution, but with some reluctance, General Mifflin again took charge of the affairs of the quartermasters' department.

On the 26th of December, 1776, Congress empowered General Washington to appoint a clothier general for supplying the army.||

In the following February General Mifflin was elected a major general. On the 8th of October, 1777, he requested leave to resign his commission of major general and office of Quartermaster General, on account of ill health; whereupon Congress resolved that his resignation of the office of Quartermaster General be accepted, but that his rank and commission of major general be continued to him, without the pay annexed to that office, until the further order of Congress.¶

With a view, however, to temporarily retain his services in the quartermasters' department, Congress resolved, on the 8th November, 1777, that he be desired, notwithstanding his resignation of Quartermaster General was accepted, to continue in the exercise of that office, and that he be invested with full powers to act until another Quartermaster General should be appointed and should enter upon the duties of the office.**

It does not appear, however, that he again entered formally upon these duties.††

* Journals of Congress, 1776.

† Prior to his appointment, Colonel Moylan had been connected with the army, and had been appointed to the staff of General Washington for duty as aide-de-camp. (Sparks's Writings of Washington, vol. 3, p. 109.)

‡ On the 22d of January, 1777, General Washington wrote to the President of Congress that Colonel Moylan had remained constantly with the army as a volunteer since leaving the quartermasters' department, and that he was to be placed in command of a regiment of light dragoons then being recruited. (Sparks's Writings of Washington, vol. 4, p. 293.)

§ Journals of Congress, 1776.

¶ The duties of this officer did not then properly pertain to the quartermasters' department, but, in view of subsequent consolidation, this notice of this legislation is taken.

¶¶ Journals of Congress, 1777.

** Journals of Congress, 1777.

†† General Mifflin soon afterwards withdrew entirely from the army, (Hildreth's History of the United States.) In 1783 he was a representative in Congress, and in the autumn of that year was appointed its president. He subsequently served in the Pennsylvania legislature and as governor of that State; by his personal exertions he greatly assisted in quelling

The condition of the quartermasters' department, without any ostensible head, and with an organization to a certain extent defective and incomplete, was regarded with much solicitude by General Washington; the sufferings of the following winter at Valley Forge, arising in part from its inefficiency, increased his disquietude.

Week after week often passed away without a single responsible officer of the department appearing in the camp. Hence the difficulty of following up any extensive plan of operations, and the embarrassments experienced even in the most trifling. The wagons that should have been kept ready to move at a moment's warning, for the transportation of stores and provisions, had been scattered over every route by which the army had passed, and through every position in which it had encamped. The intrenching tools, so often essential for the immediate protection of a camp, had been left in the hands of private individuals, under no other security than the chances of personal honesty.

Although the want of proper materials for constructing tents had been a constant source of complaint and suffering, a large supply of tents and tent cloth had been suffered to lie throughout a whole campaign in a farmer's barn, and was only secured in the end by a special order of the commander-in-chief.

To such a height had this carelessness arisen, that the troops were actually sickening and dying for the want of straw, the most common of materials. Out of camp there were neither wagons nor draught enough for the transportation of supplies; and in the camp everything was drawn by the soldiers, who yoked themselves together to the carts. To complete this picture of confusion and suffering, the military chest was empty, public credit was rapidly sinking to the lowest ebb, and with large arrears for past expenses, and the certainty of a still heavier expenditure for the future, there was hardly money enough, even in the depreciated currency of the country, to meet the most trifling exigencies of the moment. To crown all, a new campaign was approaching, in which the most energetic exertions were to be looked for from an enemy exasperated by the ill success of his former efforts.

Under such circumstances not a moment was to be lost in placing at the head of the department a man of approved and extensive capacity, whose energy might relieve present wants, while his provident care extended itself to those of the future.*

Major General Nathaniel Greene,† an able, gallant officer, and a personal friend of General Washington, was selected by him to fill the vacancy, and was elected by Congress on March 2, 1778. That body gave him authority to employ two assistants who should be acceptable to him, and power to appoint all other officers of his department,‡ and specially provided that he should retain the army rank which he then held.§

the "whiskey insurrection" in 1794. Governor Mifflin retired from office in December, 1799, and on the 20th June, 1800, died at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, at the age of 56 years. (Lossing's Pictorial History of the Revolution.)

* Sparks's American Biography, second series, vol. 10, pp. 61, 62, 63.

† Major General Nathaniel Greene was born in Rhode Island, May 27, 1742. In 1775 the assembly of the colony of Rhode Island voted a force of 1,600 men; its officers were to be appointed by the same body, and with a common consent Nathaniel Greene was raised to its command with the rank of major general. In May, 1775, he took command of the army of Rhode Island, and in June of that year his command was engaged in the leaguer of Boston. The American army, very soon after the arrival of Washington in July, was placed on the continental establishment. The effect of this arrangement was to reduce the rank of Greene from that of a major general to that of a brigadier. In the engagements with the British forces in Long Island the same year he was raised to the rank of major general, (Simms's Life of General Greene.)

‡ Bancroft's History of the United States, vol. 9, p. 169.

§ Journals of Congress, 1778.

General Greene unwillingly accepted this office. He disliked any appointment which required the keeping and expenditure of public funds, and was unwilling to forego any of the opportunities which might arise for active service in the regular line of the army.

It was only at the earnest entreaty of Washington that he finally consented, stipulating meanwhile that he should not lose his right of command in action.*

Entering, however, upon his new duties he executed them with great zeal and ability, encountering obstacles of no ordinary kind, and rendering services of the utmost importance to the army. He considered, however, that Congress did not promptly second his views in relation to the business of the department, and he became disinclined to remain at its head. On the 22d April, 1779, he wrote to General Washington that he would be happy to obtain the command in the south, if General Lincoln's physical condition rendered him incapable of continuing in command.

General Washington replied April 24, 1779, as follows :

I am sorry for the difficulties you have to encounter in the department of quartermaster, especially as I was in some degree instrumental in bringing you into it. If your judgment points to a resignation of your present office, and inclination leads to the southward, my wishes shall accompany it.†

It does not appear, however, that this point was pressed by General Greene at the time. He rendered active services in the field in 1779 whilst Quartermaster General. The question having been raised as to his proper command under such circumstances, he wrote to General Washington on the subject, and received a reply dated September 3, 1779, stating that when General Greene accepted office as Quartermaster General and made a reservation of his rank, General Washington did not consider that he was to retain thereby an actual permanent command. He further wrote :

The military reason which prevents a Quartermaster General from exercising command in ordinary cases I take to be this, that whatever may be the fact, the presumption is that both in action and out of action he has, generally speaking, sufficient employment in the duties of his office, and circumstances alone can decide when these are compatible with actual command.‡

At this time the attention of Congress had been attracted to the organization of the staff departments as they then existed, and radical changes were contemplated.

On the 20th January, 1780, a committee of three officers, consisting of General Schuyler, General Mifflin, and Colonel Pickering, were chosen to make inquiry into the expenses of these departments.§

In view of this inquiry a draught of plan of reorganization of the quartermasters' department, considered practicable both by General Washington and General Greene, was submitted by the latter to this committee.

* Simms's Life of Greene.

† Sparks's Writings of Washington, vol. 6, pp. 229, 230.

‡ Sparks's Writings of Washington, vol. 6, pp. 337, 338.

§ Journals of Congress, 1780.