

OCTOBER 1777

In retrospect, the month of October 1777 is easily recognized as the most critical and significant of the entire War for Independence, save, perhaps, the final defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. The Americans mistakenly believed that they had left the field of battle at Germantown on October 4 as victors; on the 17th Gen. John Burgoyne surrendered his entire army to Gen. Horatio Gates at Saratoga. These two battles would soon cause the French government to determine that the Americans had assembled an army that could vanquish their long-time foe, Great Britain, especially if the French openly declared their support of American independence and provided additional financial aid. The Americans' expectation of an early end to the war following Saratoga was premature, but French aid--some of which had already been received covertly--was desperately needed, both in terms of officially espousing the American cause, and more importantly, in increasing the amount of money and materiel required to prosecute the effort to secure independence from Great Britain.

Reviewing the events of October 1777 two hundred years later, it is apparent that America's hope for success in its war against Great Britain had reached a crucial and decisive point. But at the time this fact, of course, was not known. Congressmen forced to flee from Philadelphia to Lancaster, and from there to York, because of the British occupation of the former seat of Congress, were delighted at General Washington's attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to crush Gen. William Howe's army at Germantown, and were ecstatic at the preliminary reports of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga, although they were forced to spend many days in anguish before "Granny" Gates finally confirmed officially what they had learned unofficially over two weeks before. Ft. Mifflin, a vulnerable bastion on Mud Island in the Delaware River, remained the last serious point of American resistance against the British in the vicinity of Philadelphia. Its defense was of major interest to both Congress and Marylanders, because the commander, Gen. Samuel Smith of Maryland, against insurmountable odds had been able to defend and retain possession of the fort while causing enormous losses to the enemy's ships and men in the attempts to eradicate this impediment to their free access up the river.

Maryland officials, while intensely interested in the military affairs in Pennsylvania and New York, were confronted with the usual host of problems that required immediate resolution. Insurrections once again occurred on