

THE MUTINIES OF 1781

Two mutinies of Continental Line troops occurred in January 1781 as a consequence of a lack of food, spirits, clothing, and pay for at least a year. While these harsh conditions were not unique for that time, the first mutiny led to but only a second that was dramatically quelled in short order.

Six regiments of the Pennsylvania Line were winter-quartered south of Morristown, New Jersey, under the command of General Anthony Wayne. On New Year's Day, January 1, 1781, soldiers from the regiments of the Line mutinied to seek redress for their suffering state. During the initial uprising, two officers, a Lieutenant White and Captain Samuel Tolbert, were seriously wounded, with a third, Captain Alan Bitting/Bettin of the 4th Regiment, killed. After taking a cannon, the mutineers marched directly to Princeton to air their grievances. There, a board of sergeants was selected, headed by Sergeant William Bouzar, which then met with the President of the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Joseph Reed. Following the initial meeting, Reed met with delegates of the Continental Congress at Trenton. Reed seems to have found their demands compelling. Subsequently, the troop marched to Trenton for a continuation of the negotiations. There, a Commission was created to consider mainly their one complaint concerning bounties paid out to enlistees in 1776 and 1777. Following the Commission's review, immediate discharges were granted to those three-year men whose enlistments were over. Each was promised partial payment of back pay in addition to items of need. Some 1,317 men were discharged, leaving about 1,150 remaining in their respective ranks. From this then, the Pennsylvania Line underwent a total reorganization, disbanding the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th Regiments. An unknown number re-enlisted in order to receive a bounty payment. By February the outcome had been satisfactorily ameliorated, apparently to the satisfaction of most involved, with the exception of perhaps the Commander in Chief, General Washington. (Note: There does not appear to be any disciplinary evidence regarding the wounding and killing of the officers.)

Following immediately on the heels of the Pennsylvania Line Mutiny, on January 20, 1781, several hundred men from two or three regiments of the New Jersey Line, commanded by Colonel Israel Shreve and quartered at Pompton, New Jersey, mutinied. This is commonly referred to as the Pompton Mutiny. By January 21st, Washington had placed Major General Robert Howe in command to quell the mutiny for the purpose of enforcing unconditional submission. On January 27th, Howe's forces surrounded the camp of the mutineers, demanding that they disarm and assemble to which they complied. Officers of the New Jersey Brigade then named the most egregious leaders of the uprising from each regiment. Of those named, Sergeants David Gilmore and John Tuttle were tried and executed by a firing squad of twelve other mutineers. A third man named was Sergeant George Grant who was pardoned. Two other Sergeants, Jonathan Nichols and John Minthorn, had been named as leaders initially, but their involvement appears not to have been a factor in the executions. Needless to say, the outcome of the unsuccessful Pompton Mutiny curtailed any subsequent uprisings. Afterwards, while the New Jersey troop seemingly continued in their enlistments, it remains uncertain as to whether this should be considered as the last act for any or all of the several hundred mutineers of the New Jersey Line without further evidence. Given that, when considering New Jersey Line service under Colonel Israel Shreve after January 1781, caution must be taken to determine whether an individual was one of the mutineers.

References:

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2. Pennsylvania Line Mutiny, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania_Line_Mutiny
3. Mutiny of The New Jersey Line, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history>
4. Pompton Mutiny, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pompton_Mutiny