

party of the enemy's dragoons; but his force kept on their march and joined Washington.

Washington's army, all told, now did not exceed 6000 men, but with this small force he resolved to strike a blow that, if successful, would check the enemy's victorious course, and hearten the despondent soldiery. On Christmas night he recrossed the Delaware, and at early morning surprised and captured a party of about a thousand Hessians posted at Trenton, where he entrenched himself. With this brilliant exploit, of no great moment, it is true, from a strategic point of view, but which by restoring confidence in the cause, and the abilities of the Commander-in-Chief, really proved the turning-point of the war, the year 1776 closed.

In these letters we note the first appearance of a question which afterwards became of high importance—that of the public lands. The case was this: Virginia, by her Constitution adopted in June, 1776, asserted a right to all the territory to the north and west included in her charter of 1609, as modified by the treaty of Paris in 1763; renouncing, however, all claim on the chartered territories of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas. This extraordinary claim, if allowed, would have given her a vast domain extending to the Pacific Ocean, according to the charter of 1609, or to the Mississippi, according to the treaty. Of course, to this she had no title whatever. The charter of 1609 had been revoked by due process of law in 1624, to the great satisfaction of the whole colony, except the patentees, and no new charter had been granted. Charter boundaries she had none. A claim resting on victories over the Indians in 1774 was quite as nugatory, for the Virginians at that time being subjects of Great Britain, all lands they might acquire by conquest inured, not to themselves, but to the crown. Nor could they claim by possession, for the lands had not been occupied.

What brought the matter into prominence at this early stage of the war was the question of bounty-lands. As the terms of enlistments were expiring, and the late reverses had much discouraged the people, Congress resolved to offer a bounty of twenty dollars and one hundred acres of land to every soldier that would enlist for the war. But where were these bounty-lands to be obtained? Maryland, with a strictly limited boundary, and no vast domains west of the Alleghanies, had no such lands to offer. The Convention, in October, protested against these extravagant claims of Virginia, not only as unfounded, but as unjust to the other States, and as constituting a standing menace to them. If this western territory should be wrested from Great Britain, this could only be done by the exertion of the States conjointly, and it should therefore be held as the common property of all. As matters now stood, if the resolutions of Congress bound Maryland to provide bounty-lands for her soldiers, she, and other States in similar circumstances, would be compelled to buy of Virginia, at her own price, lands