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WILLIAM DOUGLAS

By

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WILLIAM DOUGLAS

For more than a hundred years before the beginning of the American Revolution the Douglas family had been prominent in the affairs of the eastern part of Connecticut. The first William Douglas of whom we have record was born, perhaps in Scotland, about 1610 and married in 1636 a girl from Ringstead, Northamptonshire, named Ann Mattle (sometimes rendered as Mable). The couple came to Massachusetts with two children in 1640 during the last part of the Great Puritan Migration and settled briefly in Gloucester, then in Boston, then in Ipswich. Two more children were born in Ipswich, then the family returned to Boston in time for the birth there in April 1645 of the fifth child and second son, William. The next year the father was made a freeman of the colony, an action showing that he had been accepted in full communion in the established (Puritan) church of the town.

In December 1659 he moved to New London, Connecticut, with his wife, their two sons, and one of their three daughters; the other two daughters, having married in Massachusetts, remained there With their husbands.

The elder William Douglas held several important public offices: in New London and operated a farm in the western part of the town, within the boundaries of what later became the separate town of Waterford. His son William served as deacon of the New London church for about thirty years. Deacon William's son, also named William, was one of the early settlers of Quinnebaug, later named Plainfield, about twenty-five miles northeast of first New London; he was one of the deacons of the church established there. His children, members of the fourth generation of the family in New England, numbered eleven, of whom one son, John, born in 1703, became in his later years a lieutenant colonel in the militia forces of eastern Connecticut. He

married Olive Spalding the the family that many :years later established the well-known sporting-goods firm), and their fourth son, born in Plainfield, January 27, 1743 (as reckoned by the present calendar), received the name so familiar in the family-William.

Influenced, perhaps, by his father's prominence in the colonial militia, young William seems to have been attracted very early in his life to the idea of military service. In 1759, at the age of sixteen, he enlisted as a clerk in a Connecticut regiment headed by Eleazer Fitch and Israel Putnam, and served as Putnam's orderly sergeant in the successful campaign against the French in Quebec. A few years later the young man moved to New Haven and entered the trade between the mainland colonies and the British West Indies. He is said to have risen to the command of a ship engaged in this trade and to have accumulated a modest fortune.

On July 5, 1767, William Douglas married Hannah Mansfield, aged not quite twenty, eldest child of Stephen and Hannah (Beach) Mansfield and a descendant of Richard Mansfield, one of the early settlers of New Haven. William and Hannah Douglas became the parents of four children: Olive (born 1768), William (1770), Hannah (1772), and John (1775). Of these the youngest, John, died at the age of nine, but the three eldest lived to adulthood, married, and in the course of time presented their mother with a total of twenty-five grandchildren.

It was apparently very early in the 1770s that Douglas decided to give ' up his maritime occupation and to resume the sort of rural life with which he had been familiar as a boy in Plainfield. In December 1772 he bought a dwelling house and barn and four adjoining parcels of land totaling just under one hundred acres in the parish of Northford, the northernmost of the three Parishes in the town of Branford. The property lay on the west side

of what is now known as Village Street, between the later Middletown Turnpike and Clintonville Road, in a section then called "Littleworth." In part the tract reached as far west as the New Haven (now North Haven) town line. In May 1774 he bought another piece of about twenty~eight acres nearby, bounded on the north mostly by Clintonville Road and on the west by the town line.

Altogether, the buildings and approximately 127 acres of land in Northford cost Douglas about £803, a substantial sum in the economy of that perlod.*

Just when the Douglas family moved from New Haven to Northford is not clear. All four of the children (including John, born in March 1775) are recorded as having been born and baptized in New Haven, and the four deeds of December 1772 refer to Douglas as being "of New Haven," but the deed of May 1774 describes him as "of Branford." He certainly was living in Northford in May 1776 when he represented Branford in the Connecticut Assembly. To complicate matters further, he did not sell his New Haven house and some of his other land there until May 12, 1777, just sixteen days before he died. It seems probable that the family made the transfer of residence somewhat gradually; perhaps for a while they spent the colder months in New Haven and the warmer, actively agricultural months in Northford. It is reasonable to suppose that during the final years of his all-too-short life Douglas and his family lived all the year round in Northford and rented out his house and land in New Haven.

* The writer is greatly indebted to Miss Elizabeth Livingston of Old Forest Road, Northford, for supplying all the information in this and the following paragraph on Douglas' real-estate transactions in Northford and New Haven. She searched the Land Records of both communities and the probate records in Wallingford and in January 1971 delivered a most interesting report on her findings, regarding his land transactions and the inventory of his estate following his death, at a meeting of the Northford Historical Society. Her principal citations are: Branford Land Records, IX, 305-6, 308, 391, 446; X86,188; New Haven Land Records, XXXIX, 25, 42, 98; XXX, 302, 303; XXXIII, 41, 285; XXXVI, 197, *198;* Wallingford Probate Records, I 101-9.
Some later real-estate transactions mentioned in Miss Livingston's report are not described above.

In April 1775- the month of Lexington and Concord – a special session of the Connecticut Assembly convened and passed an act for enlisting , assembling, and equipping "a number of inhabitants of this Colony for the Special Defence and Safety thereof." The Assembly appointed officers for the units to be raised and, among others, named William Douglas a captain. He was to lead the 6th. Company of the 1st. Regiment, which was to be commanded by Major General Wooster. During the same session the the Assembly gave Douglas a regular appointment as a captain in the militia and, a month later when a vacancy occurred, advanced him to major in the militia. In the active service on which the newly created special forces set forth, however, Douglas retained his initial rank of captain.

These troops became part of the army commanded by Generals Philip Schuyler and Richard Montgomery as part of a two-pronged attack upon the British in Canada. The scheme was for Benedict Arnold to lead one force northward through the Maine woods with Quebec as his principal objective and for Schuyler and Montgomery, starting at Fort Ticonderoga, to move northward along Lake Champlain, attack and capture Montreal, and then go down the St. Lawrence to join Arnold in the assault on Quebec.

In the Champlain area it was important for the Americans to control the water, protecting the army's flank as it advanced northward along the lake shore. Several small vessels were equipped with cannon for this purpose and, because of his maritime experience, Captain Douglas (who had been made' aide-de-camp to General Wooster in June) was given command of one of these gunboats. On occasion he used his cannon to fire on groups of Canadian Loyalists who tried to interfere with the advance of Schuyler and Montgomery's men. Douglas did not join in the march from the northern end of the lake or

Participate in the capture of Montreal and the ill-fated assault on Quebec, in which Montgomery was killed. Apparently, his effective service on Lake Champlain had led to a decision to retain him there for general protection during the fall. On November 22 Montgomery recognized his usefulness by appointing Douglas "Commodore of Lake Champlain." He probably continued on this duty until the advance of cold weather gave assurance that there would be no water-borne operations before the following spring. Then, we may suppose, Douglas returned to his wife and children at their Northford home. General Schuyler did not forget him, however, for on January 24, 1776, the general wrote to John Hancock of the Continental Congress expressing the hope that Commodore Douglas would remain available for lake service in 1776.

William Douglas was not privileged to spend a quiet winter with his family at home. Almost two weeks before Schuyler had written Hancock about him, Governor Trumbull and the Connecticut Council of Safety had appointed him major of Colonel Andrew Ward's regiment, one of two units of 750 men each to be raised at once by voluntary enlistment and then sent to join Major General Charles Lee in preparing the defences of New York against an expected British attack. These Connecticut volunteers served for three months in and around the City of New York; Douglas and his men helped particularly in the building of Fort Sterling in Brooklyn during what he later told his wife was "cold tedious weather."* The Connecticut troops returned home about the end of March. Some weeks later the Continental Congress followed up Schuyler's suggestion to Hancock by offering Douglas a Congressional commission as commodore with command of the vessels on Lake Champlain. He declined the offer, however, because in May the Connecticut Assembly chose him as major

* In a letter written at this time regarding possible duty on the lake, Douglas hinted vaguely that bad health might prevent his performing any war service in the coming summer. By this remark Douglas unknowingly forecast the situation that developed a year later.

of a new regiment under Colonel Ward to be raised for service in the Continental Army. In the same month he was elected to serve in the General Assembly as one of the two deputies from Branford (of which Northford was a part), but how much time Douglas was able to give to legislative duties at this session is not clear.

Douglas never saw active service in Ward's new regiment because in the middle of June the Assembly found a more pressing need for the colony's ablest officers. With a full-scale British assault on New York now virtually certain, the Continental Congress sent out an urgent call for help. In response the Connecticut Assembly voted in the middle of June to raise a new force of eight battalions (or regiments), two of them to join the Northern Army and six, under the command of James Wadsworth, Jr., to form a brigade reenforcing the Continental Army that was positioned to defend New York under the over-all command of General Washington. Men who enlisted in these units were to remain in service until Christmas Day, 1776. Each of the eight battalions was to be commanded by a full colonel. William Douglas was appointed colonel of the 5th Battalion

When the new troops comprising Wadsworth's brigade joined the army in New York they became a part of Major General Joseph Spencer's division. The newly raised units were commonly referred to as the Connecticut "Levies" to distinguish them from the six battalions of the colony's troops, called the "Connecticut Line," that formed a part of the semi-permanent Continental Army.

* In 1971 two direct descendants of Colonel Douglas, Margaret D. Phifer ofl Washington, D.C., and Mary Tolman of Arlington, Va., presented to the Northford Historical Society the original commission for this appointment, signed by Governor Jonathan Trumbull. This document is one of the Society's most treasured possessions It is interesting to record in passing that the colonel of one of the other battalions appointed at this time was John Douglas, an older brother of William. John's battalion was one of the two assigned to the Northern Army, but he resigned his commission within a few weeks. Later in the war, bolding the rank of brigadier general in the militia, he took part in an expedition into Rhode Island.

Later in the campaign, when the crisis became most acute, Connecticut called into service and dispatched to the scene of operations twelve battalions of civilian soldiers regularly enrolled in the militia companies and regiments geographically organized in the colony. Thus in the later stages of the fighting in and around New York City there were three types of battalions from Connecticut on hand: the battalions of the Connecticut Line, the best equipped and trained of the colony's units; those of the Levies, moderately well equipped and partially trained; and those of the militia, very inadequately equipped and with virtually no training for combat. On paper these Connecticut forces under Washington's command totaled about 10,500 men, but absenteeism, illness, and other circumstance had depleted the ranks, so that the number of so-called "effectives" was substantially less than the nominal figure.

The British campaign for the capture of New York began early in July. The first transports bringing the army from Nova Scotia reached the Narrows on the second of the month and within a few weeks the commander, General Sir William Howe, had landed about 25,000 men on Staten Island. Meanwhile the fleet, led by the general's brother, Admiral Lord Howe, had gained control of the harbor and was in a position to dominate, if he wished, both the lower Hudson (or North River as it has long been called in maritime circles) and the East River, which separates Long Island from Manhattan and the mainland. In the last days of August General Howe moved a large part of his army across to Brooklyn, and Washington, with far fewer troops under his command, transferred a substantial part of them across the East River from Manhattan Island to Brooklyn. On August 27 took place the Battle of Long Island.

Howe's forces were distinctly superior to Washington's in numbers, training,

and equipment, and the American commander added to his difficulties by an unwise disposition of his troops. Instead of occupying in force the elevated ground on Brooklyn Heights and forcing Howe's men to fight uphill, he took position on level ground, in the sort of terrain with which the British troops were most.~ami liar in Europe. The outcome was a complete defeat for the Americans, who lost over a thousand men in killed, wounded, and captured.

Colonel Douglas' Fifth Battalion of Connecticut Levies was moved to Long Island only on the morning of August 27 when the fighting; bad begun. It was posted on the extreme right of the American line to help in protecting the army's flank. The unit was actually engaged in only a little Skirmishing, but it acquitted itself well even though it was probably the first combat in which any considerable number of its men had ever engaged.* When, during the night of August 29, Washington stealthily moved his troops back across the East River to Manhattan, Douglas and his men were among those who took part in this successful retreat.

Washington was now faced with the almost hopeless task of preventing the British from occupying New York City, at the southern tip of Manhattan, and the rest of that strategically located island. He would need all the manpower he could assemble. It was at this point that the Connecticut authorities called out and sent to Washington twelve battalions of the colony's militia. Experience throughout the war showed that the militia units of all the colonies were of very doubtful value when called into service on sudden emergencies. In Connecticut, for example, all able-bodied males between the ages of sixteen and sixty, with a few categories of exceptions, were supposed to be enrolled in one or another local company, and the companies

* During this service Douglas had the mortifying experience of seeing the British in occupation of Fort Sterling he had helped to build the previous winter.

of a group of neighboring towns were organized (on paper at least) into a regiment with its proper complement of field officers. The members of each company were called out for training days on the village green or some nearby field a few times a year. The "training" usually consisted of some marching in close-order drill before the admiring eyes of a contingent of feminine onlookers, and perhaps a little target practice, although not all militiamen had met the requirement of providing themselves with serviceable muskets. Units larger than single companies trained together only very seldom and, what was perhaps most important, there was very little of what might be called psychological training and the inculcation of individual and group discipline, so essential to organized combat. When militiamen were led by able officers and were in the field long enough to acquire some training, both tactical and disciplinary, they often proved useful additions to the army, but when brought into a combat situation fresh from their homes and families they seldom proved effective or even reliable.

In placing his troops for defence Washington guessed - rightly as it turned out - that the Howe brothers would make their principal assault

across the East River rather than send the soldiers and supporting warships around the tip of Manhattan to undertake a landing on the west side of the island. Hence the American commander established *his* main line of defence along the shore of the East River, stringing the units out from the southern extremity of the island to an indentation in the shore line known as Kip's

Bay which (though since filled in) coincides with the end of the present East 34th Street. Here he placed Douglas' battalion of Levies and three battalions of Connecticut militia, uniting these four units as a brigade under the command of Colonel Douglas. To these troops' right (that is, to the south)

was most of Brigadier General James Wadsworth's original brigade of Levies, but to the left (the north) there was only a series of sentry stations for

a mile and a half between Kip's Bay and the battalion of Colonel Chester

of Wethersfield, Conn. In effect, therefore, Douglas and his command

formed the left flank of the main defensive line. Theoretically his brigade numbered about 1500 men, but it seems probable that not more than 1,000 effectives were available and certainly most of these were men wholly inexperienced in combat. While they awaited the British attack Douglas arranged that at anyone time half his men should be on duty at the line

and the other hand should be "in camp" to the rear, getting their meals, sleeping, or otherwise refreshing themselves and preparing for future combat.

Thus everything remained quiet until Sunday, September 15. Early that morning the men on duty at Kip's Bay saw five British frigates come sailing up the East River. When they were even with the bay or just to the north they came to anchor a little to the left of Douglas and his brigade and so close to the shore that the name "Phoenix" could be read on the stern of one of the frigates as it swung at anchor. At once Douglas sent some of his militiamen to dig a trench near the shore directly abreast of the ships, telling the men to throw the excavated dirt onto the river side of the trench so as to provide a little additional cover.

How lightly some of the inexperienced, undisciplined militiamen had

been taking their guard duties is illustrated by the behavior of one young private, James Martin, who described his experiences later. Bored by the inaction of the past few days and unable to recognize the possible significance of the British ships coming up the channel, he had wandered off from his post. In a field not far away was an isolated warehouse which aroused Martin's curiosity. The building had obviously been deserted in something of a hurry

for he gained easy access and discovered on the floor a mass of scattered mercantile records and other business papers. He sat down on a convenient stool and began to examine the papers. Considerable time had passed "when all of a sudden, there came such a peal of thunder from the British shipping that I thought my head would go off with the sound."

In his preoccupation with the unknown merchant's papers Martin had failed to observe that the tidal current had brought the anchored British frigates around parallel to the shore. At a given signal all five of them had discharged full broadsides at the American defensive positions. The range was probably not much greater than the distance a good golfer today can drive his ball from the tee. Douglas had no artillery with which he might have responded, and, of course, even the best of the small arms in the hands of his men were completely ineffective against the British frigates. The initial salvo was the beginning of a three-hour bombardment. Writing to his wife three days later Douglas described the hail of fire that assailed his men: "Then very suddenly," he wrote, "began as heavy a cannonade perhaps, as ever was from no more ships, as they had nothing to molest them, but to fire on us at their pleasure, from the tops* and everywhere."

Few if any of the American militiamen on the left flank had ever been under fire before, and two weeks or less before this day all of them had been peaceably engaged in harvesting their crops or otherwise attending to their own affairs. It is regrettable but not surprising that, subjected to this murderous fire, the men on this wing soon gave way and ran back in disarray. Douglas and the right wing (that included mostly members of his

* The fighting tops, high on the masts, where the marines or soldiers who occupied them had a great advantage of height and could direct musket fire at enemy personnel on the decks of vessels or in nearby shore entrenchments.

original "Levy" battalion) at first stood firm. Then some 84 arge, flat-bottomed boats, carrying altogether at least 4,000 British and Hessian soldiers, put out from Newtown Creek on the Long Island side, rowed across the East River under cover of gunsmoke , and landed to the north or where Douglas and his remaining men were holding out. Most of these Americans then joined in the retreat; finally Douglas and the ten men who had remained loyally with him recognized the hopelessness of their position and left their now indefensible lines.*

The retreat soon turned into a rout and the rout became a panic. Reenforcements carne up to the rear area from other units, but many of these fresh troops also became infected with the panic. Douglas, other officers, and Washington himself did everything they could to stem the flight, but the British were able to land in full strength and virtually unopposed. It was fortunate for the Americans that Howe had failed to send a force to land simultaneously on the western shore of Manhattan Island and that the troops landing at Kip's Bay could not move fast enough to cut off the retreat of the American units stationed to the south. These British failures allowed General Israel Putnam and the American troops in New York City at the southern tip of the island to march rapidly north through Greenwich Village in good order and get to safety in the northern part of Manhattan. In time most of the scattered men in Douglas' brigade joined him and the rest of the army at Harlem, well to the northern part of the island.

* It has sometimes been stated incorrect~ that Colonel Douglas was wounded in this engagement; there has also been a traditional story that he had his horse shot out from under him and his jacket riddled with bullet holes. According to his own account he was without a horse that d~ until, during the retreat, he found one in a field abandoned by its owner. By this time, he wrote, he was so exhausted that if he had not found this mount he would surel:y have been taken prisoner by the British. Actually, it would have been a foolish thing to have exposed himself to the enemy as conspicuously as riding horseback would have 'done, during such&close-range fusillade as he and his men experienced that morning.

Some officers from other states, particularly a few from Virginia, were highly critical of the Connecticut troops for their behavior in this action and specifically of Douglas for his apparent failure of leadership and for his own ultimate flight to the rear. The general feeling in the army, however, was that even seasoned troops would have given way under the conditions that confronted the men from Connecticut, and that William Douglas had done all that he could do as an officer and had personally demonstrated true gallantry and courage. George Washington, the Virginian and commander-in-chief, certainly felt that way about Douglas, and to show his satisfaction he conspicuously invited the colonel and another officer of the Connecticut Levies, Colonel Gold Selleck Silliman of Fairfield, to dinner at his headquarters a few days later.

During the rest of that day, September 15, and on through the following night the American units were falling back into new positions in the western part of Harlem. Here there was (and still is) a considerable valley between areas of high ground to the northeast and the southwest, a tract called at that time the "Hollow Way," bounded roughly by the present West 125th and West 130th Streets and by Ninth and Eleventh Avenues. With most of his forces stationed on the northern height Washington felt in a position to repulse the advance units of the British army coming north in pursuit. The engagement that followed on September 16 is usually called the Battle of Harlem Heights. Douglas had the satisfaction of reporting to his wife that his men had redeemed their record. They had fought well and had charged the enemy "with great intrepidity." In short, "we gave them a good drubbing." The improvement in the morale of the men from Connecticut is especially impressive in the light of Private James Martin's statement that most of

these men had been without food of any kind for forty-eight hours and that it rained most of that afternoon. After the battle, according to Martin, the well-soaked men had to endure an unseasonably cold night. At Harlem Heights Washington at least gained a temporary respite and he was able to withdraw to the mainland. But a successful retreat seldom wins a campaign. The British had New York City securely in their hands and soon added the rest of Manhattan Island. This strategically important location remained under British occupation until the end of the war; it was perhaps their greatest territorial asset as long as the fighting continued.

Washington was not yet ready to admit that recovery of Manhattan Island was out of the question, and he spent the next six weeks maneuvering about in Westchester County, sometimes looking for some vulnerable point at which he could do damage to the British, but more often himself trying to evade any dangerous attack. At White Plains on October 28 a British force assaulted his left flank, but the Americans succeeded in beating off the enemy. Colonel Douglas told his wife three days later that in this encounter his men were outnumbered ten to one, and, being outflanked, had at last to retreat, but he reported proudly that "my regiment has the honor of behaving most nobly."

This battle was the last engagement with the British in which Douglas took part. The enlistment of his battalion expired on Christmas Day of 1776 and the unit marched back to Connecticut. Hence it did not participate in Washington's march in the opposite direction across New Jersey, his crossing of the Delaware on that same Christmas Day, nor the successful engagements at Trenton and Princeton that followed.

On September 16, the day on which the Battle of Harlem Heights took place, Congress asked Connecticut to raise a number of Continental regiments to serve

for the duration of the war. In the October session the Connecticut Assembly voted to raise eight such battalions, enlisting the men out of the troops then in service. As might be expected, the Assembly named William Douglas to be colonel of one of the new units. Presumably, as soon as his old Fifth Battalion of Connecticut Levies was released from Washington's army; and sent home to be disbanded, Douglas set about the task of raising his new command , How much progress he actually made in this undertaking is not recorded, but on February 21, 1777, the Connecticut Council of Safety approved the delivery of 300 uniform coats for the new Douglas battalion. They were to be made of blue cloth trimmed with ash-colored lapels.

William Douglas was not destined to lead this battalion into the field, for his health failed him. A week before the Kip's Bay engagement he wrote his wife that he had been taking "unwearied pains" with the militiamen brigaded under his command and he was afraid the, task had involved "too much fatigue for me, as my cough is a little increased." Mention of his "cough" suggests the possibility of incipient tuberculosis, but no further evidence on this point has been found. Whatever his ailment may have been, his loss of sleep and food, and his extreme exhaustion during and after the British assault at Kip's Bay, followed by a soaking rain and a cold night in the open, must have been a heavy drain on his physical reserves. In any case, his health gave way . He was elected to the May session of the Connecticut Assembly, but it seems unlikely that he was able to attend at Hartford.

During February and March he carried through two real-estate transactions in Northford, buying four acres of useful meadow land, and exchanging with a neighbor two small pieces of land, probably to provide direct intercommunication between his house and all his working fields. These actions would clearly

benefit himself if he lived or his wife and children if they should inherit his estate. As mentioned on an earlier page, just over two weeks before he died, he sold his remaining New Haven real estate, thereby simplifying, whether by conscious intent or not, the task his wife would have as executrix of his estate. Then, two days after he executed his will, his life came to its end, May 28, 1777.

William Douglas was clearly a casualty of war. Whatever the precise medical cause of death may have been, it is certain that his services in the field, especially the exertions and fatigues he underwent during August, September, and October, 1776, were primarily responsible for the ending of his life in the following May. It is equally clear that his death was an unfortunate loss for the American army. He never wrote much about his inner feelings, but there can be no doubt that he was unselfishly devoted to the cause for which that army fought. In the period of his service he displayed soldierly qualities of a high order and his record does honor to his community and

to his state.

On his gravestone in the Northford Cemetery simple but eloquent words pay tribute to his character; we his fellow townsmen two centuries later are privileged to join the associates of his own life in doing him honor and in renewing that tribute:

A Gentleman of good Abilities generous mind and
easy Manners faithful in Business and Friendship
active and brave in Defence
of the Rights of his Country
and Mankind.

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Henry P. Johnston, The Campaign of 1776 around New York and Brooklyn, published as vol. III of Memoirs of The Long Island Historical Society (1878). Part II of this work contains a group of letters from Douglas to his wife written during the campaign; other letters in this series were published in the N.-Y. Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin, Jan. 1929- Jan. 1930. His military appointments by the Connecticut Assembly and Council of Safety are found in The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, XIV and XV (Hartford, 1887, 1890), and The Public Records of the State of Connecticut, I (Hartford, 1894), all three volumes edited by Charles J. Hoadley; and in Henry F. Johnston, ed., The Record of Connecticut Men in The Military and Naval Service During The War of The Revolution, 1775-1783 (Hartford, 1889. Documents relating to Douglas' service on Lake Champlain are found in William Bell Clark, ed, Naval Documents of The American Revolution, II, III, and IV (Washington, 1966-69). Genealogical data on the Douglas and related families can be found in Charles H. J. Douglas, A Collection of Family Records .... of Various Families and Individuals Bearing the Name Douglas (1879); Charles Warren Spalding, The Spalding Memorial: A Genealogical History of Edward Spalding of Virginia and Massachusetts Bay and His descendants (Chicago, 1897); H. Mansfield, compiler, The Descendants of Richard and Gillian Mansfield Who Settled in New Haven, 1639 (New Haven, 1885); and Donald Lines Jacobus, Families of Ancient New Haven, I-VIII, published in separate numbers as The New England Genealogical Magazine (1922-32), especially under "Douglas" (III, 572) and under "Mansfield" (V, 1137-47).

From Dictionary of American Biography, V, 403-4

DOUGLAS, WILLIAM (Jan. 27, 1742/3- May 28, 1777), Connecticut sailor and soldier, was born' in Plainfield, Conn., the fourth son of John and Olive (Spaulding') Douglas, of a family long' prominent in the eastern part of the colony In 1759, although only sixteen years of age, lie enrolled as a clerk in a regiment led by Eleazer Fitch and Israel Putnam in the campaign against Quebec (*Connecticut Historical Society Collections*, vol. X, 1905, p. 170) and served, it is said, as Putnam's orderly sergeant. In early manhood Douglas removed to New Haven, from which port he engaged successfully in the West-Indian trade, building' up thereby a modest fortune. On July 5, 1767 he married Hannah Mansfield of New Haven, who bore him four children. He retired from active commercial enterprise about 1774 and established a new home in Northford, about eight miles from New Haven. From the outbreak of the Revolution he was an active supporter of the colonial cause.

In April 17751 the Assembly appointed him a major in the militia, but a month later he accepted a captaincy in David Wooster's regiment, raised for service in the Canadian expedition. With this regiment he took part in Gen. Richard Montgomery's advance along Lake Champlain. Because of his nautical experience, Montgomery assigned Douglas to boat service on the lake. He returned to Connecticut in the early winter with his regiment which did not accompany Montgomery down the St. Lawrence to Quebec. During the first three months of 1776 he served as major in a volunteer regiment commanded by Andrew Ward which assisted in preparing .the defenses of New York and Brooklyn. At this time the Continental Congress appointed him commodore of the vessels on Lake Champlain in view of his excellent service. during the previous year.

(Journal of the Continental Congress, Mar 26, 1776; Arerican Archives 4 ser. V, 389, 437-38, I, 378). Douglas declined this, command, however, as he preferred to organize and lead a battalion in Gen. James Wadsworth's brigade of Connecticut troops in the New York campaign. Douglas's men were stationed on the extreme right of the American line at the battle of Brooklyn, and he had the mortification of seeing the British in occupation of Fort Sterling, which he had himself helped to erect "in cold, tedious weather." At Kip's Bay, on the Manhattan side of the East River, he commanded a brigade of Connecticut militia on Sept. 15. Under heavy fire from the British war-ships, his raw troops gave way in confusion in spite of strenuous efforts to rally them by Douglas and later by Washington himself. This retreat enabled the British to land on Manhattan, but the incident increased rather than diminished Douglas's reputation for gallantry and coolness under fire. With his battalion he took an active part in the remainder of the autumn campaign, although the necessary hardships and exposure seriously aggravated in him symptoms of tuberculosis which were already well developed. Upon the expiration of the battalion's term of enlistment in December, Douglas at once set about the raising of a new regiment to serve in the Continental Army for the duration *of* the war, but he was destined never again to take the field: He was elected to the Connecticut Assembly which met on May 12, 1777, but probably was unable to attend since he died at Northford before the month was out., His loss was unfortunate for the Continental Army; he had been unselfishly devoted , to the cause and had displayed soldierly qualities of a high order. His portrait shows him to have been tall and slender with an erect carriage and strong features. An older brother, John Douglas (Apr. 12, 1734-Sept. 22, 1809), also served , during the Revolution. As lieutenant-colonel and later colonel of Connecticut troops, he took a not very conspicuous part in the siege of Boston and the campaign around New York. From 1777 until the end of the war he held the rank of brigadier-general of militia, in command of the 5th Brigade, but participated personally only in one minor expedition into Rhode Island in the autumn of 1777.

[*Some* of William Douglas's letters fro~ the field have been printed in Henry P. Johnston. "The Campaign of 1776 around New York and Brooklyn" in Memoirs of The Long Island Historical Soc. vol III (1878), and others in the J. N. *Y. His. Soc. Quart. Bull.*, Jan. 1929-Jan, 1930, Information on the military careers of both brothers is to be found in *The Public Records of the Colony of Conn. 1636-1776*, (1850-90); *The Public Records of the State of Conn.* (1894-1922), and *Record of Service of Conn. Men in the: Revolution*. Genealogical data, portraits of Wm. Douglas and his wife, and an entirely reliable sketch of his career are included in Chas. H. J. Douglas, *A Collection of Family, Records, with Biog. Sketches, and Other Memoranda , of Various Families and Individuals Bearing the Name Douglas (1878)*