

William McMillan to William Clark, ca. October 1828¹

To the honorable the Secretary of the Treasury.²

I am happy to hear of the appointment you have. I had heard that Colonel Savage³ was appointed. I never knew you were appointed till Mr. Joseph Moris came lately and brought his little family with him to Mercer⁴ to [see] my daughter and myself and he informed me of your appointment. I am in hopes lest either of them be appointed that you would be continued as secretary. I have no man in the United States I would wish before your honor. You have [in] several cases showed your friendship. I need not mention any one in particular, but you have done it when ever I required it. We have been acquainted 30 years or more and our friendship has ever remained pure and genuine and I hope will [be] so to the close of life. I am gone in 73 years of age and I always had good state of health but about a year ago I was throwed off my horse and was dead for some time, broke three of my ribs off. Twas a long time before I got well. I was not able scarcely to do anything.

I begun to think about my Revolution services. I joined the Revolution War [in] 1775 in the last of December in Maryland to serve nine months. I was appointed sergeant and Brother of mine was appointed [at the] same time and the British came to New York and part of our regiment lay in Annapolis and part in Baltimore and hand bills was sent in every direction for volunteers and our regiment turned to a man that was fit to march. We had about twelve hundred men in the regiment and we marched for New York. I believe we arrived there about [the] first of August 1776 and the British army consisted of about 40,000 and they had Hessians to the [amount of] 15,000 and on the evening of the 26 August, we left New York and landed on Long Island and the next day was August 27: Battle.⁵ Lord Sterling⁶ commanded [the] right wing and General Sullivan⁷ the left wing.

My captain was killed, first lieutenant was killed, second lieutenant shot through [the] hand, two sergeants were killed, one in front of me. Same time my bayonet was shot off my gun. Two corporals killed, all belonged to our company. Captain's name was Daniel Bowie from Annapolis. General S. Smith,⁸ your oldest senator in Congress, was with us that unfortunate day. He remembered me [from] the day of the Battle and give [me] a certificate⁹ of that afternoon.

My brother and about 50 or 60 of us was taken. We had a pretty severe fight with Jagers¹⁰ and it was a draw battle. There was a good many on each side killed. They retreated and we did not pursue them.

And we were surrounded by Healanders¹¹ [on] one side, Hessians on the other. The Hessians broke the butts of our guns over their cannon and robbed us of everything we had, lit their pipes with our money, carried us into meetings,¹² and gave us nothing to eat for five days and then army biscakes¹³ from [a]board ships, blue as indigo, full [of] bugs, & rotten.

And the British put [us] aboard prison ships and sent us to Halifax,¹⁴ [and] we were [there] till the next spring and ten of us run away from Halifax and had likely to been taken two or three times by the British, once at Saint John¹⁵ [and] at Passamaquoddy¹⁶ and seven times we

had likely to been killed by the Indians if we had not had a man that could speak the Canadian language¹⁷ several times. Once they were baynt¹⁸ their guns at us and this Canadian spoke their language well and kind Providence saved us in that way. We were ten weeks in the wilderness, sometimes nothing to eat for days but dulles¹⁹ that grows on the rocks in the bays, sometimes shellfish and snails. We got so poor we could hardly [make] a trill.²⁰ It would take a quire²¹ of paper to give a correct account of our sufferings that we underwent. We suffered everything but death. I would not undergo the same for the United States, but I could not stand it.

I arrived in Boston some time before General Burgoyne was taken²² and I stayed there until I got hearty and well and in the first [of] June 1778 I acted as a quarter[master] to provide lodgings for troops, 350 men commanded by Major Scot.²³ I had [a] horse to ride from the appointment I was offered²⁴ but I expected to get a good one when I joined the Maryland Line. When Jackson's Regiment²⁵ lay at the Gulf Mills²⁶ and I went with them there and the²⁷ British army was leaving Philadelphia and we got word at night and we marched all night. Got to the city [at] breakday²⁸ and General Scot marched by the sound [of a] horn close to [the] British. I intended to join before we marched so many months but had no chance. The troops I was in marched to Englishtown²⁹ and [the] Britishes [marched] to Monmouth. At morn after we came there, General Lee³⁰ came and chose the regiment and informed Colonel Jackson about this. [We] lay at Monmouth till the officials [came] up for the men to lay with their arms and bayonets were to be ready in a minute. That he had pushed five thousand troops to keep the British in play till our grand army marched up [and] went into field without cannon and commanded battle and [we] had to retreat till our cannon came on. General Washington came into the field. We flogged them and on the second day after the battle we rejoined with the 23,000 troops with laurels in our hats and my brother Samuel, he went on with Jackson.

I went shortly after to where the Maryland Line lay in White Plains³¹ and I went to General Smallwood³² to [know] what appointment he would give me. I told him I had suffered a great [deal] in prison and out of prison and lost nearly three years [of the] prime of [my] life, and that there was privates that commanded companies.³³ He said there was several that did and I joined first as [a] sergeant. He said the officers would be taken out of the line and I would have no duty to do. When the weather got cold, they would move to Bound Brook³⁴ and the men would build barracks.

I told him I would want a discretionary furlough if I joined the Line April next and [I wanted] my appointment before I went as I meant to be away four months and when I returned I was to go [to] Baltimore to recruit there, and in December³⁵ would make four years I had been [away] from home. General Smallwood said he would get for me the appointment of Lieutenant when he gave me the discretionary furlough and I joined the Third Maryland Regiment for three years, or during [the] war. In the Spring, he performed his word for me and I recruited in Baltimore and the Maryland Line was away in South Carolina and I stayed and recruited till the surrender of Lord Cornwallis³⁶ and I quit and [illegible]. The war was over after [it] was established [that the] King acknowledged us Independent.

Yours very respectfully and sincere friend, I have to trouble your honor if you please—

— in regard of the election I wish to know your mind perhaps I might, send me a few lines at all.

Wm. McMillan

¹ William McMillan pension, National Archives and Records Administration, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, NARA M804, S 2806, p. 33-35.

² William Clark, treasurer of the United States from June 4, 1828, to November 1829, not the secretary of the treasury as McMillan mistakenly identified him.

³ John Savage was appointed treasurer but declined the position.

⁴ McMillan lived in the town of Mercer in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, when he wrote this letter.

⁵ The Battle of Brooklyn.

⁶ Major General William Alexander, Lord Stirling.

⁷ John Sullivan, a general who was captured during the battle and later went on to become governor of New Hampshire.

⁸ Samuel Smith, captain of the Eighth Company during the Battle of Brooklyn, who served in the U.S House of Representatives, 1793–1803 and 1816–1822, and the U.S. Senate, 1803–1815 and 1821–1822.

⁹ That is, a document attesting to McMillan's service at the battle.

¹⁰ A Hessian light infantry unit.

¹¹ Scottish Highlanders.

¹² That is, Quaker meetinghouses or churches. The British used many houses of worship as prisons, except for Anglican churches.

¹³ A Scottish rendering of "biscuits."

¹⁴ Halifax, Nova Scotia.

¹⁵ Saint John, New Brunswick.

¹⁶ Passamaquoddy Bay, which lies between New Brunswick and Maine.

¹⁷ Probably referring to French.

¹⁸ The meaning of this word is unclear but likely means they pointed or brandished their guns.

¹⁹ Likely a phonetic rendering of "dulce," an edible aquatic plant that grows on rocks. It is found throughout the North Atlantic region, including the Bay of Fundy and McMillan's native Scotland.

²⁰ A weak quivering or warbling sound.

²¹ A unit of measurement for paper, typically 25 sheets.

²² British General John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga on October 17, 1777.

²³ Probably General (not Major) Charles Scott, a Continental Army general from Virginia, mentioned also below.

²⁴ William McMillan may have been offered an officer's appointment by the Massachusetts Line but declined.

²⁵ Henry Jackson's Sixteenth Massachusetts Regiment.

²⁶ Gulph Mills, Pennsylvania, where an American supply depot had been set up.

²⁷ McMillan repeats himself here in the original text, writing "and the and the and and the British."

²⁸ Daybreak or break of day.

²⁹ Englishtown, New Jersey. American General Charles Lee stationed his headquarters here prior to the Battle of Monmouth, and George Washington set up his own headquarters there following the battle.

³⁰ Charles Lee.

³¹ White Plains, New York.

³² William Smallwood.

³³ That is, privates who had been promoted through the ranks to captain.

³⁴ Bound Brook, New Jersey, where part of the Maryland Line camped in 1779.

³⁵ December 1779.

³⁶ The surrender of British General Charles, Lord Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown on October 17, 1781.