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## GENERAL GREENE'S PLANS FOR THE CAPTURE OF CHARLESTON, 1781-1782 \*

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Naval power played an important role in the War for American Independence from its beginning to the end of active hostilities. The command of the sea by the Royal Navy enabled the British army to move rapidly from one front to another and to make a series of surprise attacks upon several American ports. British warships sometimes sailed far inland by following the channels of such rivers as the Hudson, James, and Rappahannock in spite of shore batteries and underwater obstacles constructed to prevent such incursions.

General George Washington, commander-in-chief of the American army, soon learned that sea power was one of the most important factors affecting the course of the war.<sup>1</sup> He found that England's control of the sea gave her army a marked advantage in mobility over his own hard-pressed troops. He realized, also, that British-held seaports were vulnerable to combined attacks from land and sea if France or Spain should come to the aid of America. France, as it turned out, did come to the aid of the colonies, and a French fleet succeeded in gaining command of American coastal waters during the summer of 1778. Franco-American forces then combined to lay siege to Newport, Rhode Island, and the British garrison there was on the verge of defeat when Richard, Lord Howe, came to its rescue from New York.<sup>2</sup> Howe's fleet was inferior to the French fleet which opposed it, but audacity and superior seamanship enabled the British to save the garrison of Newport from the kind of disaster which later overtook Cornwallis's army at Yorktown.

Victory with the support of French naval power became Washington's fondest hope despite his disappointment at the failure of the siege of Newport. He pleaded repeatedly with the French Court to send a fleet to North American waters to cooperate with his army. Unfortu-

\* Research for this paper was facilitated by a grant-in-aid of the Lehigh University Institute of Research.

<sup>1</sup> Dudley W. Knox, *The Naval Genius of George Washington* (Boston, 1932), 13-15, 24-25, 28. See also Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington, A Biography* (7 vols., New York, 1948-57), IV, 70, 144-145, 171-174.

<sup>2</sup> William M. James, *The British Navy in Adversity, A Study of the War of American Independence* (London, 1926), 102-109.

Vallene, Richard	Wesburey, William
Vanderhorst, John junr	Westbury, Thomas <sup>8</sup>
Van Velsen, Garrat	Westcoat, John
Vertue, Jaque	White, Joseph
Villeponteaux, Peter	White, Nathaniel
Villeponteaux, Zachariah	Whitmarsh, John Junr
Vincet, George	Wild, Samuel
Wadson, John	Wilkins, Willm
Waight, Isaac	Wilkins, John
Walker, George	Wilkinson, Robert
Walker, Henry	Williams, James
Walker, John	Williams, John [H. C.]
Wallis, John	Williams, John
Wallis, Thomas	Williams, Maurice
Walsbe, William	Willman, Benjamin
Wannell, John	Willson, Joseph
Ward, Samuel	Willson, Moses
Waring, Benjamin	Wilson, James
Waring, Thomas [H. C.]	Winborn, Icabod
Warnock, Abraham	Winn, Robert
Warnock, Andrew	Wire, John
Watson, James	Witter, John
Watson, Samuel	Witter, Samuel
Watters, Richard	Witter, Thomas
Wattkins, John	Womsley, John
Way, John	Wood, Benjamin
Way, Samuel	Woodward, John [H. C.]
Way, Samuel	Wright, Jacob
Way, Thomas	Wright, Jacob
Way, William Junr	Wright, Joseph
Webster, David	Wyatt, Robert
Weekley, Richard	
Wells, Edgar	Yarder, Gregory
Wells, William	Yonge, James
Wenborn, Thomas	

<sup>8</sup> In the Transcripts, *Wesbury*.

<sup>9</sup> Three signatures are totally illegible. In three others the last name is defaced: Richard . . . . ., William . . . . ., William . . . . .

nately, however, failure of the Franco-American forces at Newport was followed by a failure at Savannah in the fall of 1779. A French fleet and a Franco-American army blockaded and besieged Savannah for a time, but an attempt to take the town by storm before the guns had completed their work of destruction resulted in a costly defeat and abandonment of the siege.<sup>3</sup>

A new opportunity for a Franco-American victory presented itself in January 1781, when several British warships lying at anchor at the eastern end of Long Island were destroyed or dismasted by a hurricane. A French fleet based at Newport rode out the storm successfully and gained temporary command of the sea as a result of the disaster suffered by the British fleet. Washington then requested that the entire French fleet should sail to the Chesapeake to blockade a British detachment which had seized and fortified Portsmouth, Virginia. However, the sailing of the French was delayed until the British had repaired their damaged ships. The two fleets fought a brisk action at the entrance of Chesapeake Bay on March 16, and the French sheered off and returned to Newport without accomplishing their mission.<sup>4</sup>

These repeated failures tried Washington's patience sorely. However, he continued to work and hope for a successful combined operation, and his efforts and hopes yielded a rich reward when a French fleet and a Franco-American army succeeded in trapping and destroying an army of more than 7,000 officers and men at Yorktown, Virginia, in the fall of 1781.

Washington's understanding of the role of sea power in the war was shared by a number of his subordinates, including Major-Generals Nathanael Greene, Benjamin Lincoln, and the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette made important contributions to the success of the Yorktown campaign and anticipated victory when he wrote to Washington at the end of July 1781, "Should a French fleet now come in Hampton Road the British Army would, I think, be ours."<sup>5</sup> Lincoln had learned about the influence of naval power upon the war through bitter experience when he had been forced to surrender Charleston in May 1780, after it had been blockaded and besieged by a British fleet and army from New York.<sup>6</sup> Greene, in his turn, learned some lessons about sea power

<sup>3</sup> Alexander A. Lawrence, *Storm over Savannah, The Story of Count d'Estaing and the Siege of the Town in 1779* (Athens, Georgia, 1951), chapters x-xii.

<sup>4</sup> James, *The British Navy in Adversity*, 270-274.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Gottschalk, ed., *The Letters of Lafayette to Washington, 1777-1799* (New York, 1944), 213.

<sup>6</sup> James, *The British Navy in Adversity*, 227-229; and Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, ed. John R. Alden (2 vols., New York, 1952), II, 700-703.

when he found himself in command of the American army in the Carolinas in 1781 and 1782.

Greene, an erstwhile Quaker from Rhode Island, superseded Major-General Horatio Gates as commanding general of America's Southern Army early in December 1780. The military situation which Greene had to face at the time was desperate. Charleston had fallen to the British in May, as we have already seen, and Gates's army had suffered a severe defeat and heavy losses at Camden in mid-August. Thus, when Greene assumed command of the American army in the South, Georgia and South Carolina were occupied by the British, and the American army in North Carolina was numerically weak and destitute of equipment as a result of the disaster at Camden.

Lord Cornwallis, who commanded the British army in the Carolinas, launched a winter offensive into North Carolina early in January 1781. The American army was outnumbered nearly two to one at the time, and Greene wisely chose to retreat to the Dan River rather than risk a battle against superior forces. However, Cornwallis lost most of his light infantry at the battle of Cowpens on January 17 when a detachment commanded by Brigadier-General Daniel Morgan inflicted a crushing defeat on a British column commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Many of the remainder of Cornwallis's redcoats were lost through the hardships of the winter campaign or were killed or wounded at Guilford Court House in mid-March after Greene had obtained reinforcements from Virginia and had returned southward across the Dan River. The British army was then forced to retreat from the interior of North Carolina to Wilmington at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Greene then took the offensive and invaded the back country of Georgia and South Carolina, where he captured a number of British posts and more than 1,500 British regulars and Tory militia before suspending military operations with the onset of the summer sickly season.

Greene's successes during the spring and early summer of 1781 enabled him to liberate the interior of Georgia and South Carolina from British rule. However, he was unable to undertake siege operations against Charleston and Savannah because he had no siege artillery at his disposal and no naval force with which to prevent reinforcements and supplies from reaching the enemy's garrisons by sea. Thus, he was unable to complete his liberation of the Deep South when the termination of summer enabled him to resume active campaigning.

Cornwallis led his army from North Carolina into Virginia while Greene and his tattered troops were engaged in their effort to drive the

British from the interior of South Carolina. Lord Rawdon, who commanded the British forces in South Carolina and Georgia, offered stiff resistance to Greene's army but was eventually forced to abandon the back country of the two states and to retire into the lowlands. Illness, resulting from the hardships of the campaign, forced him to relinquish his command to Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Stewart, who was encamped at Eutaw Springs, some fifty miles northwest of Charleston, when Greene resumed his offensive operations at the end of August. Greene and his troops attacked the British camp on September 8, 1781, and a bloody battle was fought near the banks of the sluggish Santee River until the American army fell into disorder and was forced to withdraw from the field.<sup>7</sup> However, the British had suffered heavy losses, and they abandoned their camp at Eutaw Springs a few days after the battle and retired to the immediate vicinity of Charleston. Thereafter, a military stalemate developed; the British were pinned down in the Charleston and Savannah areas, and the American army was too weak to attack them or to besiege their fortified seaports.

This stalemate was very frustrating to Greene. Active and resourceful, he was eager to follow up his successes of the spring and early summer by expelling the British from Charleston and Savannah. However, he was able to do no more than send flying columns to raid some of the enemy's outposts. He had no prospects of attacking either town unless large reinforcements were sent to him. A reinforcement of infantry and field artillery of the Pennsylvania Continental Line marched overland to join his army after the fall of Yorktown, but it was too small to enable him to attack the enemy's bases. Thus the stalemate in the South continued, and it appeared that it would last indefinitely unless a French fleet intervened by blockading one of the British-held cities and by conveying troops and siege artillery to the support of Greene's army.

The means to capture Charleston were available if only Admiral de Grasse, who had commanded the French fleet at Yorktown, could be persuaded to bring his ships to the coast of South Carolina. There were siege guns and more than 3,000 regular troops on board the fleet, and additional troops and guns could have been embarked as needed.

Greene had grasped the potentialities of the French fleet as soon as he had learned that De Grasse was expected in North American waters during the summer of 1781. The news had been communicated to him by Governor John Rutledge of South Carolina upon the latter's return

<sup>7</sup> Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, II, 828,834.

from a trip to Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> Greene then wrote to Washington early in August to express the hope that the Allies would be able to capture New York. He suggested, further, that the French fleet should sail to the Chesapeake to blockade Cornwallis's army as soon as operations against New York were completed. He sized up his old adversary shrewdly when he added that Cornwallis had probably failed to foresee the possibility of being attacked both by land and sea and had, therefore, neglected to fortify his position properly.<sup>9</sup>

New York, with its immense concentration of military stores, was the richest prize in America. Greene believed that top priority should be given to an attack upon it if sufficient forces were available. He regarded Charleston as a more important secondary objective than the British army in Virginia. He pointed out, however, that a siege of Charleston would be a difficult enterprise because all the heavy artillery and most of the ammunition and entrenching tools would have to be brought to South Carolina by sea. Moreover, Charleston had been strongly fortified and large quantities of provisions had been stored in its magazines. Under these circumstances, an attack on the city might become a long and costly operation, and Greene estimated that it would take an army of 10,000 men to carry it out successfully. He estimated that his army could be increased to 4,000 officers and men, or about double its usual strength, for the duration of a siege, but some 6,000 troops and sailors, together with a train of siege artillery, would have to be landed from the French fleet.<sup>10</sup>

Greene waited anxiously during the summer for word of the arrival of the French fleet and the commencement of the siege of New York. He hoped for good news, but he was apprehensive that something would go amiss.<sup>11</sup> He feared that a junction of the British North American and West Indies fleets might deprive the French of the naval superiority necessary to insure the success of the campaign. He feared, also, that Lord Cornwallis might escape from Virginia before the Allies could shift their forces from New York to the Chesapeake.

In case the French fleet might sail directly from New York to South Carolina, Greene sent a memorandum to General Washington on the availability of landing-places in the vicinity of Charleston, giving an

<sup>8</sup> Jared Sparks, ed., *Correspondence of the American Revolution . . .* (4 vols., Boston, 1853) III, 368.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 369-370.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 370-372.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 371-374.



accurate account of its harbors, navigable rivers, and obstacles to navigation.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that a similar document was sent to General Washington almost simultaneously by General Lincoln.<sup>13</sup>

Generals Greene and Lincoln both hoped that the French fleet would stay in North American waters long enough to participate in the sieges of New York and Charleston. However, Greene was fearful that Admiral de Grasse would sail away to the West Indies too soon. "Indeed," he wrote to General Washington, "I am so apprehensive of this, that I am afraid to make the least dependence upon them for the relief of this Country; and can flatter myself that their stay will be long enough to complete the reduction of New York."<sup>14</sup>

Greene hoped against hope that the French fleet would arrive in North American waters in time to make a major effort against New York, but, by the end of August, he had concluded that there was no longer any chance that De Grasse's ships would find time to come to Charleston. He decided, therefore, to make an attack upon the British army in order to try to destroy it or drive it to the gates of Charleston. Thus, as we have already seen, he attacked the enemy in their camp at Eutaw Springs on September 8, 1781. His bold bid for a decisive victory led to a bloody battle, but his army fell into disorder and was forced to withdraw from the field after nearly three hours of desperate fighting.<sup>15</sup> Thus his effort to crush the British without waiting for French aid resulted in a costly but indecisive clash of arms.

The American army lost 522 officers and men killed, wounded, or missing from a total of about 2,400 who fought at Eutaw Springs.<sup>16</sup> The British lost some 800 officers and men killed, wounded, or captured from an army that was nearly equal in numbers to General Greene's. Although most of the officers of the opposing armies were either killed or wounded, Greene was fortunate enough to escape even a slight injury.

<sup>12</sup> [Greene to Washington, August 6, 1781?], Papers of George Washington, Library of Congress, Vol. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln to Washington, August 3, 1781, Papers of George Washington, Vol. 181. A map of Charleston and vicinity is enclosed with the memorandum.

<sup>14</sup> Greene to Washington, August 7, 1781, Papers of George Washington, Vol. 181.

<sup>15</sup> Greene to the President of Congress, September 11, 1781, Letters of General Greene, II, 317-328, in Papers of Continental Congress, No. 155, the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, II, 834. For a return of Greene's casualties see Walter Clark and others, eds., *The State Records of North Carolina* (Goldboro, N. C., 1886-1907), XV, 637-638.

The heavy losses suffered by his army forced Greene to retire to a rest camp on the High Hills of Santee. While his troops cared for their wounded, he wrote to the governors of Virginia and North Carolina for recruits to bring their Continental regiments up to the strength which they had had before Eutaw Springs. Although his own campaign had gone badly, he closed one of his letters on a note of optimism inspired by his hopes that Cornwallis's army would soon be captured as result of the arrival of a French fleet in the Chesapeake. "Permit me to congratulate you," he wrote to Governor Thomas Nelson of Virginia, "on the arrival of the French Fleet . . . and the promising prospect of finishing a glorious Campaign."<sup>17</sup>

Greene was encamped too far from Yorktown to be able to participate in the siege of Cornwallis's army, but he was determined to play an active part in the campaign if the British army should escape from Virginia into the Carolinas. Consequently, he sent Brigadier-General Jethro Sumner, a North Carolinian who had distinguished himself at Eutaw Springs, to his native state to make every possible preparation to oppose the escape of Lord Cornwallis by the overland routes from Yorktown to Charleston. Sumner was to impede the enemy's march by seizing and holding advantageous defensive positions, and, if necessary, to remove public stores to places of safety so that they would not fall into the enemy's hands.<sup>18</sup>

After sending General Sumner to North Carolina, Greene was forced to become a mere spectator of the struggle on the shores of the Chesapeake. He waited impatiently for news of victory or failure at Yorktown, but his knowledge of the strength of De Grasse's fleet made him optimistic about the outcome of the campaign. "Your prospects," he wrote to one of the officers in Washington's army, "are truly great and God grant you compleat success. The honor of taking the Modern Hannibal [Lord Cornwallis] and obliging his Army to pile their Arms is a sight that would feast the eyes of a king. . . . This will be one of those strokes which will tell in history, and happy the Man who shares in the laurels."<sup>19</sup>

Greene hoped for more than the taking of "the Modern Hannibal" and his army during the fall of 1781. He and General Washington recog-

<sup>17</sup> Greene to Nelson, September 16, 1781, Greene Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>18</sup> Greene to Sumner, September 25, 1781, Nathanael Greene Collection, Henry Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>19</sup> Greene to Wayne, September 29, 1781, Wayne MSS., XIV, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

nized the British base at Charleston to be the most important objective in the Deep South, and they both hoped that Admiral de Grasse could be persuaded to order his fleet to blockade it after the completion of the siege of Yorktown. Governor John Rutledge of South Carolina, in full agreement with Greene and Washington, wrote to the latter early in October to ask that every effort should be made to prevail upon Admiral de Grasse to participate in a siege of Charleston. The siege "cannot fail," he wrote in a burst of enthusiasm, "if the French fleet and army would come southward to take part in it. Victory at Charleston, he added, "would probably occasion an immediate Offer, to America . . . of her Independence, and of an acceptable Peace."<sup>20</sup>

Governor Rutledge was probably too optimistic in stating that French intervention at Charleston "cannot fail," but his ideas on strategy were basically sound. Moreover, he and Greene were in full agreement that, if the French fleet departed for the West Indies without an attempt upon Charleston, there would be a collapse of civilian and military morale in the Deep South. There was danger that the people of Georgia and the Carolinas would begin to believe British propaganda that France and a majority of the members of Congress were prepared to sacrifice the three southernmost states in order to obtain immediate peace.

Unfortunately, however, Admiral de Grasse was under orders to return to the West Indies and had so informed Washington at the beginning of the Yorktown campaign. Washington pleaded with him to stay long enough to take part in an attack upon Charleston, but the admiral's instructions obliged him to hasten to the defense of the French islands in the Antilles. Washington then wrote to Greene early in September that De Grasse would "commence his Operations against the Enemy in Virginia, and that he could not continue a long Time on the Coasts [of North America]. . . ." <sup>21</sup>

Washington repeated this intelligence when he sent Lieutenant-Colonel Lewis Morris, Jr., riding southward early in October with instructions headed: "To be communicated to no person but to Major General Greene." ". . . the stay of Count de Grasse upon this coast is limited," he wrote, ". . . should the present operation [at Yorktown] prove lengthy he will exceed the instructions of his Court by staying to the end of it. . . ." Washington then added the discourag-

<sup>20</sup> Rutledge to Washington, October 5, 1781, Papers of George Washington, Vol. 185.

<sup>21</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, D. C., 1931-1944), XXIII, 84.

ing news: "it appears that we cannot flatter ourselves with a combined operation against Charles Town however the thing is to be wished."<sup>22</sup>

Though disappointed, Greene was optimistic about the prospects of victory at Yorktown and congratulated Washington upon them in a letter of October 7. Then, unable to hide his disappointment, he added, "One thing . . . which gives me pain . . . is [that] the stay of our Ally upon this coast can be but short. After your success . . . in Virginia it will be a pity not to improve the opportunity for the recovery of Charles Town."<sup>23</sup>

The British flag still flew over the ramparts of Yorktown on October 7, but Greene was so confident that the massed military and naval forces of the Allies would be victorious that he wrote to General Wayne on that day, "Before this [reaches you] I hope Lord Cornwallis and his Army are your prisoners [;] the old fox has got into the trap at last."<sup>24</sup> The "old fox" had, indeed, "got into the trap" and there was no way he could escape from it. Thus the Allies finally gained at Yorktown the kind of victory which they had hoped to gain at Newport in 1778 and at Savannah in 1779.

The British, realizing that Charleston and Savannah were vulnerable to the kind of disaster which had overtaken the garrison of Yorktown, evacuated their small base at Wilmington, North Carolina, in November in order to concentrate all their forces in the South at Charleston and Savannah. With the arrival of cool weather General Greene then led his army from the High Hills of Santee into the lowlands; however, without the aid of a French fleet, the American army was able to do no more than launch raids against British outposts in the vicinity of Charleston.

Greene continued to hope that French naval forces would come to his support. Unfortunately, however, his vision of a victory with the aid of sea power was destined to be shattered early in 1782 by the action of the British West Indies fleet under the command of Vice-Admiral George Brydges Rodney. On April 12, 1782, Rodney's fleet encountered and defeated De Grasse at the Saintes' Passage between the islands of Dominica and Guadeloupe. Five French ships-of-the-line were cap-

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIII, 193-194.

<sup>23</sup> Greene to Washington, October 7, 1781, Papers of George Washington, Vol. 185. See also Theodore Thayer, *Nathanael Greene, Strategist of the Revolution* (New York, 1960), 385.

<sup>24</sup> Greene to Wayne, October 7, 1781, Wayne MSS, XIV.

tured by the victors, including the flagship, the *Ville de Paris*, 104 guns, with Admiral de Grasse on board.<sup>25</sup>

The outcome of the battle was of the greatest importance to General Greene, but as late as May 18 he was uncertain of what had taken place. On that day he wrote to the Count de Rochambeau, commanding general of the French army in North America: "We have a report from Charles Town that Count de Grasse and Admiral Rodney have had a most bloody engagement in the West India seas. Many circumstances are mentioned, but none by which we are authorized to determine the event, which we are awaiting with great anxiety."<sup>26</sup> The report from Charleston contained the disturbing news that the British had won and had taken De Grasse and several of his capital ships. Suspecting that the news was probably true, Greene wrote a gloomy letter to General Washington on May 19 indicating that all his hopes of French naval aid were at an end if the French fleet had been beaten badly.<sup>27</sup>

Greene's last hopes of a "Yorktown" victory at Charleston went glimmering as soon as he received confirmation of the report of Rodney's victory. He and his troops had no choice left but to carry on a long and tiring land campaign against Charleston and Savannah. The fact that no reinforcements or supplies were able to reach them by sea forced them to depend upon the arrival of troops and wagon trains after long and difficult treks over the trails and treacherous river crossings of the Carolinas. No siege artillery could be brought southward under the circumstances, and Greene was able to do no more than carry on a blockade of Charleston from a distance. General Wayne, whose Pennsylvania Continentals had marched southward from Virginia after Yorktown, carried out a blockade of Savannah under conditions similar to those at Charleston. Both operations had to be carried out cautiously by forces which were inferior in numbers and in the quality and quantity of their arms and equipment to the garrisons which they were attempting to blockade.

The American army suffered severely from the cold and rain of winter and the heat, humidity, and "fevers" (principally malaria) of summer.<sup>28</sup> Their sacrifices were rewarded, however, when the British

<sup>25</sup> James, *The British Navy in Adversity*, 340-344.

<sup>26</sup> Greene to Rochambeau, May 18, 1782, Rochambeau Papers, Vol. IV, Library of Congress.

<sup>27</sup> Greene to Washington, May 19, 1782, Papers of George Washington, Vol. 198.

<sup>28</sup> Greene to Washington, May 9, 1782, and July 11, 1782, Papers of George Washington, Vols. 192 and 201.

evacuated Savannah on July 11, 1782.<sup>29</sup> They reaped an additional reward when Charleston was evacuated by December 14 of the same year.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Greene and his army finally attained their goal of liberating the Carolinas and Georgia from British rule. Unfortunately the price they had had to pay for final victory had been a high one in terms of suffering, broken health, and death from heat, malaria, hardships, and occasional skirmishes with British regulars and Tory militia. Much of the suffering and many of the casualties might have been avoided if Greene had received French naval support after the siege of Yorktown.

We can do no more than speculate about the outcome of a siege of Charleston, or of Savannah, had De Grasse been able to participate in such an operation. It is clear, however, that Nathanael Greene had a real understanding of the role of sea power in the war and that he was ready to cooperate closely with the French fleet if it had come to his aid at any time between Cornwallis's surrender and Rodney's victory over De Grasse at the Saintes' Passage.

<sup>29</sup> Wayne to Greene, July 12, 1782, Letters of General Greene, II, 503-505, in Papers of the Continental Congress, No. 155.

<sup>30</sup> Greene to the President of Congress, December 19, 1782, Letters of General Greene, II, 603-606, in Papers of the Continental Congress, No. 155.