



## Chapter One

# Going Home



It was a remarkable Fourth of July commemoration; remarkable for the fact that thousands of Philadelphians turned out to honor a stranger.

He was not from Philadelphia, nor even from Pennsylvania, but from neighboring Delaware—and from southern Delaware, besides, about 100 miles away. At the time this took place, that was a considerable remove.

Furthermore, he had been dead for more than sixty-four years.

On the other hand, he was a war hero, killed at the battle of Princeton on January 3, 1777.

The year was 1841 and the stranger the Philadelphians were honoring was John Haslet.

Poets and biographers can lift the shroud of obscurity from the names of forgotten heroes. But few of these heroes have that good fortune and certainly not John Haslet of Delaware.

Consider Paul Revere and his famous midnight ride in 1775. It's doubtful many of the people gathered to honor Haslet in 1841 had heard of Revere, since Henry Wadsworth Longfellow didn't write his ode until 1863. Haslet's mentor, Caesar Rodney, made a historic midnight ride too. It was much longer and much more arduous. And it was much more significant because of its effect on the vote for independence on July 2, 1776. There was no bard to celebrate it, however, so it's another almost forgotten deed of the Revolution.

Sure, the people knew about Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and the other founding fathers who were the soul of the American Revolution. They knew almost nothing about people like Haslet who were its spirit.

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Historian Whitefield J. Bell Jr. of the American Philosophical Society commented, “The Franklins and the Jeffersons on the one hand, the scoundrels and the killers on the other, are all well known; they crowd history’s galleries. But [the people] who keep alive the ideas other men conceived and hold together the institutions other men create. They are the ideal trustees, the perfect friends. They are the useful ones . . .”

Such a useful one was John Haslet.

He shared the Delaware stage with Rodney and people like John Dickinson, Thomas McKean, and George Read during those tumultuous years when Britain’s North American colonies went through the paroxysms that led to the ultimate political act of revolution.

These were Delaware’s men of vision. Perhaps it’s appropriate that their words proved enduring. Haslet shared their visions; he worked to implement them in the years leading up to the war. It was his actions in battle, though, that brought this Irish immigrant his greatest acclaim.

Unfortunately, recognition erodes with time; the calendar replaces memory as the recorder of deeds. It leaves no room for the record of Haslet’s life as a husband, father, preacher, physician, political leader—a life useful for the patriot cause in the twenty years from the time he emigrated from Ireland until his death at Princeton on the third day of January in 1777.

At the Fourth of July celebration in 1841 he would have one last flare of public adulation before fading back to the footnotes of history.

Delaware had decided it would commemorate the deeds of this almost forgotten hero as the centerpiece of the state’s Fourth of July celebration in this year 1841, in hopes this might revive the spirit of ’76.

The best remembered Haslet in 1841 was Joseph Haslet, as it had been only some eighteen years since he died, during his second term as governor. Joseph, by the way, was John Haslet’s oldest son.

The decision to honor his memory was forced upon the legislature, prompted by the practical consideration of a permanent resting place for Delaware’s war hero.

His remains had been in a grave in the old First Presbyterian churchyard in Philadelphia nearly all of these years. Now, the commercial interests in a growing city of 95,000 people had overwhelmed the spiritual interests of the dead. The church had yielded to commer-

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cial need long ago. Now, only the cemetery located on Bank Street, just off High (Market) Street between Second and Third, was standing in the path of progress.

Haslet's body had been brought to Philadelphia shortly after a British soldier had shot him dead as he was rushing to the rescue of a fallen general and friend, Hugh Mercer.

In an acceptable practice of the day, their bodies were brought to the city and laid out on the town common, displayed as inspiration to the living.

The living in Philadelphia certainly needed that inspiration and, even more so, courage. A few weeks earlier, when the advancing British army had reached the east shore of the Delaware River, concern among Philadelphians gave way to confusion and panic. Many threw their possessions into wagons and fled the city. Even the *Gazette* and *Journal* newspapers left town.

Having served the purpose, the bodies perforce were buried in the First Presbyterian churchyard in simple caskets provided by the Continental army quartermaster.

In 1783, the Delaware Assembly belatedly voted to place a monument over the site of Haslet's grave.

That would have been the end of the story until commercial development intruded on the supposed eternal resting place of the dead.

Delaware's legislators decided in January of 1841 to bring Haslet's remains back to Dover for reinterment in the Presbyterian churchyard. Obviously it would be necessary to add some ceremonial flair to the event. And why not, they decided, use the occasion to capture the feeling, the sound, the euphoria of those exciting days when the men of vision and the men of action risked their lives and fortunes in the nation's fight for independence from Great Britain. It was a melancholy fact that people had lost interest in that founding generation's ideals, in the cost of independence.

The legislature appointed a three-man committee to work out details with church and city officials in Philadelphia. Notices were sent to appropriate organizations in Delaware and Pennsylvania.

The Haslet notice came before the Hibernian Society in Philadelphia at its April 16 meeting. The meeting's priority was consideration of the society's participation in the city's April 20 tribute to the recently deceased President William Henry Harrison. It turned out there was

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little interest in Harrison but a lot of interest in John Haslet. Participation in the April 20 ceremonies was left to the individual member's discretion. But John Haslet was a son of Ireland. Obviously, members felt, something special was needed to honor "a son of the old sod."

From that point the Hibernian Society took charge. By its June 17 meeting, the society had developed plans for a grand commemoration. Philadelphia's tribute would exceed even that planned by his home state.

And so it was that on Friday, July 2, 1841, two brigades of the Pennsylvania militia and assorted leading citizens gathered on the warm, sunlit morning to escort the remains of Colonel John Haslet, commanding officer of the First Delaware Continentals, to the Arch Street wharf on the Delaware River where the steamship *Kent* would then take them to Dover.

His remains had been exhumed from the old churchyard the day before, transferred to a new casket—the decay of years made this a very delicate task—and moved to the church's new site on Washington Square.

The Hibernian Society had provided a beautiful, new, mahogany casket. It was lined with salmon-colored silk held in place by silver-headed nails. Silver ornaments added a splendid finish. Over the coffin was placed a black drape and the national flag with its twenty-six stars.

Philadelphians were given one last opportunity to pay their respects as the casket waited in the new Presbyterian church for the commemoration to begin. Then, at eight o'clock, the pallbearers from the Hibernian Society gently lifted it from its pedestal. Somberly the entourage walked from the church to the waiting hearse and lifted the casket into place.

The pallbearers took their places beside the carriage, flanked by members of the elite First City Troop. This unit's presence was a singular honor. It had become tradition for the First City Troop to take a conspicuous place in parades, major funerals, and any major ceremony where a display of military splendor would add cachet. It dated back to that time in 1775 when an earlier detachment of the First City Troop escorted George Washington from Philadelphia when he left to take command of the new Continental army at Boston.

The First City Troop also had fought at Princeton. Their unit flag was placed beside the Stars and Stripes on Haslet's casket.

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The casket in place, the escorts ready, Major General Robert Patterson, commander of the Pennsylvania militia, himself Irish born and a member of the Hibernian Society, called his troops to attention.

Two cannons on the square fired a salute, the signal for the march to begin.

The cortege began its slow, steady march. Grooms led each of the four horses pulling the hearse. Clattering hoofbeats and muffled drums set the cadence for the procession. Bells pealed softly, their clappers also muffled. The military bands began playing solemn airs.

The general provost and his staff took the lead, followed by the first military band. Next came two companies of the Washington Guards, then the German Washington Artillery, followed by a second band, the Washington Greys, the Philadelphia Greys, another band, the 102nd Regiment and seven more militia companies. The remainder of the First City Troop fell in behind. Then came General Patterson and his staff, preceding the hearse.

As the hearse moved from the square, a line of carriages fell in behind, with the clergy and local judges in the first followed by the carriage with Hibernian Society President Joseph Tagert and the three members of the Delaware committee: Representatives William Huffington and Gardner Wright and Senator Charles DuPont.

After that came the federal judges, the officers of the army, navy and marines.

The members of the Hibernian Society followed on foot, green sashes over their mourning clothes.

Next in line were the citizens of Delaware living in Philadelphia, led by Colonel Thomas Robinson.

Robinson's role added a particular irony to the honors.

At the time of the Revolution, a prediction that someday a member of the Robinson family would serve as chief marshal in a tribute to John Haslet would have been dismissed as nonsense. Robinson's grandfather, also Thomas, had been Haslet's most daunting adversary in the turbulent times of the '70s. Like most American political leaders of the time, the elder Robinson had opposed the acts of Parliament that led to the disaffection of the colonists. However, he remained steadfastly loyal to King George III. As disaffection grew into rebellion, the conflict of loyalties was irreconcilable. Robinson chose the side of loyalty to the king and organized opposition to the patriots and independence.

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There were many, often violent, confrontations in those tumultuous times. Ultimately the elder Robinson had been forced to flee to a British warship, then to Nova Scotia. He returned to Delaware after the war and died quietly. His son Peter and grandson Thomas, however, became prominent lawyers in Delaware.

Citizens from Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania filled the final ranks of the long column.

It was a truly splendid sight, the colors of the uniformed soldiers and of the sashes, banners, flags, and other paraphernalia of the participants flashing along the procession as it moved along the two-mile route, up Walnut, over Thirteenth, down Arch to the wharf.

Thousands upon thousands of Philadelphians leaned from the windows of their homes and gathered on the sidewalks to witness the spectacle.

They had learned from the newspapers that Haslet was born and reared in Ireland, emigrating to Delaware about 1757. There he became a practicing physician. The stories said he also was a leader of the patriot movement, that he had organized, trained, and led one of the elite regiments in the Continental army, and that he had been killed in battle.

That was enough to justify the citizens' participation. And, after all, this was a Fourth of July celebration and this was a magnificent pageant. It renewed a sense of pride in all those patriots who created this wonderful new nation, bursting with the hubris of its youth.

At last the column arrived at the Arch Street wharf, where the SS *Kent* awaited its honored passenger and his escorts. Whiffs of steam from its engines floated over the crowd in the still July air, the noise of the engines a reminder that the journey was only half completed.

A stage had been set up at the wharf and when the last of the marchers arrived and settled into place, Philadelphia Alderman John Binns walked to the front to deliver the eulogy.

The crowd grew silent and attentive as the alderman began.

"We are assembled to pay the homage of our high consideration to the memory of one, who, in the darkest days of our perilous struggles, took up arms in defense of Independence; one who bravely fought and gloriously died."

Binns dwelt briefly on another fallen hero recently honored, President Harrison. Then Binns went on, his voice expertly measuring his phrases and playing the crowd.

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Service in the Continental army, he said, “has been a passport to honors and emoluments in every state of our proud Republic.”

Then he invoked the name of George Washington, “the one pure, one peerless, priceless patriot, that glorious patriot who commanded when Haslet fell and who, even in the hour of victory, watered with his tears the corpse of the gallant soldier.”

Mention of the revered Washington stirred the first show of emotion in the crowd. In the years since Washington’s death, his life had been so sterilized by writers and politicians that his personality had become barren, lifeless, even trite. The image of a tearful George Washington was startlingly human. At the same time, his feelings for John Haslet certified for the crowd that Haslet was worth all this adulation being bestowed by their city on an out-of-town hero.

Binns went on to invoke the martial spirit indigenous to the holiday, his voice rising:

“To do honor to these remains we are here surrounded with all ‘the pride, pomp and circumstance of war;’ the officers of the army and of the navy, and volunteers, prompt to do homage to their departed fellow soldier, and equally prompt to emulate his example.”

His voice rose higher:

“Soldiers, elevate on high your eagles; give to the breeze your Stars and Stripes and if your country calls, bear your ‘star-spangled banner’ to the battlefield, where it was borne and upheld by Haslet, and if you cannot bear it victorious as he did, die nobly in its defense.”

Almost as if it had been rehearsed, the militia flag bearers raised their banners.

This was stirring Fourth of July oratory, conjuring images of brave soldiers carrying tattered battle flags into the ranks of a suddenly fearful enemy amidst the roar of cannons and muskets, routing the foe in the name of the United States of America.

It was time now for Binns to pay respect to his sponsors.

“The deceased, Colonel John Haslet, was a native of Ireland, a gentleman of talents, who had received a liberal education, and was by profession a physician. An association of his countrymen, the Hibernian Society, are among those now gathered ’round his remains—clods of the valley—which once were animated by as daring and patriotic a spirit as ever gave life to the image of his Creator. That society have appointed me to discharge the duty I am now performing—and which would indeed be but indifferently performed if I did not take occasion

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to say that the members of this society, their countrymen, and all Irishmen are proud on proper occasions, to make known that their Montgomerys, their Haslets, and their Irvines, best blood of Ireland, has been freely shed to serve the good cause of 'The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.'"

And, finally, Binns turned to the object of today's honors, speaking now in reverential tones:

"The state of Delaware, the near and much respected sister of Pennsylvania, adopted John Haslet. Before the Declaration of Independence, he raised and mustered a regiment at Dover, at the head of which a few days after the declaration, as its commanding officer, he marched to headquarters and placed it under the orders of Washington. The people of Delaware had marked the ardent patriotism, the fearless courage, the devotion to the public weal which characterized every act of Colonel Haslet, and they selected him to take command of as brave a regiment as ever fought for Independence. He proved altogether worthy of their confidence; he led her sons where honor and fame were to be achieved; he set them a glorious example and at the battle of Princeton, poured forth his life's blood. The state of Delaware, having enrolled the name of Haslet with her Reads and her Rodneys, will no longer permit his remains to be entombed in another state, even though that state be Pennsylvania. The constituted authorities of Delaware on the twenty-second day of February last, made arrangements to take all that remains of her heroic son to her own bosom, to deposit his relics in their own soil, and to raise over them a monument to her own glory, to cherish the remembrance of his virtues and to stimulate others to great and glorious deeds."

Now his voice rose again to bring the crowd's attention to his closing remarks:

"To you, gentlemen, who, on this interesting occasion represent the state of Delaware, are about to be surrendered the precious relics of one of your many distinguished sons; your legislature have wisely determined to take them home and to bury them deep in the soil which he had cultivated and in defense of which he nobly died."

Then he spoke softly, solemnly:

"To you gentlemen, they are now committed; deposit and reverence them, and teach your children to reverence them as the remains of him who was patriotic, great and good; thus shall you, and they, be an honor to your country."

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The assemblage applauded warmly. The strings of patriotism had been expertly plucked by a master orator. He had made Haslet one with the crowd.

Now it was Assemblyman William Huffington's duty to acknowledge the favors Philadelphia had bestowed on Delaware's hero. Huffington was co-chair of the committee appointed by the Delaware Assembly to arrange Haslet's return.

He complimented Binns on his remarks, thanked the Hibernian Society, General Patterson and his militia brigades, the other distinguished citizens and the ordinary citizens of Philadelphia for the splendid tribute.

Some embellishments of the achievements of Haslet and his men were in order.

"The Delaware Continentals fought bravely and proudly from Long Island to Camden, South Carolina," Huffington said. "Their immortal journey into the annals of military history, to fame and glory began in July 1776 when John Haslet led 800 stalwart patriots of Delaware off to join the Continental army.

"More patriotic Delawareans would follow that original regiment of heroes. And five years later, barely fifty straggled home."

Huffington paused to allow time for that awesome statistic to have impact.

"Its soldiers defended their new country, the cause of independence, of freedom, in some twenty to thirty battles. They shed their blood in all of them. Few commands gave as much to this country as did the Delaware Continentals."

He credited John Haslet with creating this remarkable regiment, training it and leading it into battle. He mentioned the day in July, 1776, when Haslet addressed his assembled soldiers and instilled in this group of uncertain volunteers a sense of mission.

"John Haslet stood before them," explained Huffington, "and spoke to them in words electric and persuasive. He told them he had neither gold nor power to offer them. But he promised them eternal fame and the eternal gratitude of the nation. He reminded them of the circumstances that had led to the separation of the young colonies from the mother country, of the many grievances that had persuaded the Continental Congress independence was the only recourse.

"He spoke of the coming conflict as a crusade for man's right to worship God according to his own conscience, to enjoy the fruits of his

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labor in the fields and businesses without worrying about a confiscatory government thousands of miles away, to be free from an arbitrary power that would cut off his commerce as punishment, station foreign soldiers in his villages and even his homes to enforce its will. He drew a vision of a free, bountiful, happy America should this crusade succeed.

“By the time he finished, determination replaced doubt on the faces of his soldiers.

“They then marched smartly off to Philadelphia, on the road to glory, this heroic Irishman leading the way.

“Delaware has not seen John Haslet since he left. For, after fighting bravely in several campaigns from Long Island to Trenton, he fell in his last battle, one of only a handful of soldiers still left among the hundreds of the First Delaware Continentals who marched off that July day sixty-five years ago.

“The new Delaware Continentals raised after Princeton carried the spirit of the First Continentals and the soul of John Haslet to the very last battle of that glorious fight for independence.

“It is a sad footnote to the life of this heroic soldier that his widow barely survived him, dying of a broken heart shortly after she learned of his sacrifice. We understand Jemima Haslet’s grief because Delaware felt it, too.”

That romantic, emotional footnote to this noble life they were honoring once again stirred the crowd. Huffington continued:

“In taking him back home, we know you who have honored his memory will miss him, too. But you could not have done more honor to this hero, to Delaware, to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, indeed, to the United States, than the tributes poured from the hearts of your citizens today. Thank you.”

The dignitaries on the stage stood up. The militia came to attention.

The hearse was moved carefully onto the deck of the *Kent*. A delegation from the Hibernian Society boarded, followed by the militia units that would accompany the casket to Dover. General Patterson joined them, as did the Delaware delegation and representatives of the other states.

The lines were freed and the *SS Kent* moved away from the wharf and headed down the Delaware River. In 1757 John Haslet had sailed up that same river to his new homeland in North America.