

The Battle Of Cooch's Bridge



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On September 3, 1777, the biggest battle ever fought in Delaware took place in and around Cooch's Bridge on the road from Glasgow to Newark. It was not the most crucial battle, for its result was never in doubt; the capture of Dutch New Castle by the English in 1664 or the seizure of Swedish Fort Christina by the Dutch in 1655 were more important in their consequences. But these affairs involved very little fighting; the Swedes surrendered peacefully in 1655, and the Dutch had only a handful of men defending New Castle in 1664.

In 1777, on the other hand, about 13,000 British and German troops marched up the old road from Aiken's Tavern (at what is now Glasgow) to Cooch's Bridge and beyond. Only a small portion of these men (perhaps a thousand) got into the fight against approximately 750 Americans who were stationed along the road, but the engagement was a hot one, leaving several dozen soldiers killed or wounded.

The Americans who fought at Cooch's Bridge were picked men, chosen from each brigade of an American army of about 10,000 that was near at hand. Their mission was not to defeat the enemy (they were too few for this purpose), but to harass the advance of the British, to make General Howe's invasion of America difficult, just as other bands of Americans at this very moment were harassing the advance of British General John Burgoyne from Montreal toward Albany.

General Sir William Howe, the British commander, was on his way to Philadelphia. He wanted to capture this city for the sake of

prestige; it was the colonial capital, where Congress met and executive departments like the treasury and foreign offices were located. In July 1776 the British had taken New York and crossed New Jersey in an effort to take Philadelphia, but they turned back after being defeated by Washington at Trenton on the morning after Christmas, 1776.

Now in 1777 the British were again advancing on Philadelphia, this time across northern Delaware. They had transported an army by sea from New York to the Elk River, at the head of Chesapeake Bay, landing on the peninsula called Elk Neck on August 25.

The trip by sea had been far longer than expected. A storm on the ocean that separated the fleet of over two hundred vessels, a calm on the Chesapeake, and the necessity of delaying the entire fleet to wait for the slowest vessels had caused the British to spend almost five weeks on a voyage that normally would have taken only one.

Had General Howe chosen to come up the Delaware, he would have cut his time by more than half. But he feared the lower Delaware offered few good landing places, while higher on the river were strong defenses and any landing he attempted might have been met by force. By using the Chesapeake, on the other hand, Howe assured his army of an uncontested landing. If an American army advanced to any one of the peninsulas, or necks, extending into the Chesapeake, Howe could sail on past it to another peninsula.

George Washington, as American commander,



could hardly believe the stories his scouts, like Henry Fisher, at Lewes, told him of the movements of the British. It seemed unbelievable that Howe was taking his army so far from New York at a time when Burgoyne was cutting his way with difficulty through the wilderness east of Lake George and might need the help of a relief force sent up the Hudson to meet him.

Once Howe's purpose became clear, Washington set his army (then outside New York City) into motion across New Jersey and through Philadelphia to Delaware. Washington, himself, reached Wilmington on Monday, August 25, a day ahead of the bulk of his troops. On the next day, along with the young (20-year-old) Marquis de Lafayette and General Nathanael Greene, he was at Iron Hill and at Elkton, examining the lay of the land and trying to see what the British were up to.

A rainstorm forced Washington to take refuge for the night in a farmhouse, but when he returned to his army, he ordered it to take a defensive position beside Red Clay Creek from the Marshallton area to near Newport. Lacking the advance force, Daniel Morgan's riflemen (who had been sent to fight Burgoyne), that he would otherwise have stationed ahead of the army, Washington formed a corps of light infantry (that is, men lightly equipped so they could move fast) under the command of an experienced soldier, William Maxwell, called "Scotch Willie," a New Jerseyman born in Ulster, who had served under Braddock and other commanders in the French and Indian War.

Maxwell's men were placed near Cooch's Bridge in the woods along the road from Glasgow and took their position at the end of August. Meanwhile the British army was split in two for a short time. One part of the troops under Charles, the second Earl Cornwallis, accompanied by General Howe, marched through Elkton into Delaware. Another part, commanded by the German veteran, the 61-year-old Baron Wilhelm von Knyphausen, who had once fought under Frederick the Great, crossed the Elk from the original landing place and marched into Delaware just north of Middletown, sweeping the country as they came and gathering over 500 sheep, over 200 cattle, and about 100 horses. After spending the night of September 2 at Lum's Pond, these troops started north toward Aiken's, where they were to rejoin Howe and Cornwallis.

When the first British army reached Glasgow at nine in the morning of Wednesday, September 3, they turned north on the road where Maxwell's men were posted. Woods bordered the road then as now (though not necessarily the same woods or the same road) at various points, and the invaders had moved only one-half mile from Aiken's when the first shot rang out.

In the van of the British army was a very fine corps of men, the Hessian and Anspach jaegers, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig Johann Adolph von Wurmb. Jaeger means huntsman and that is just the sort of man

recruited into this corps; they were expert riflemen (like Morgan's missing American riflemen) accustomed to scouting and patrolling. When the Americans began shooting, the jaegers also took to the woods. Soon they were supported by British light infantry and a small cannon or two.

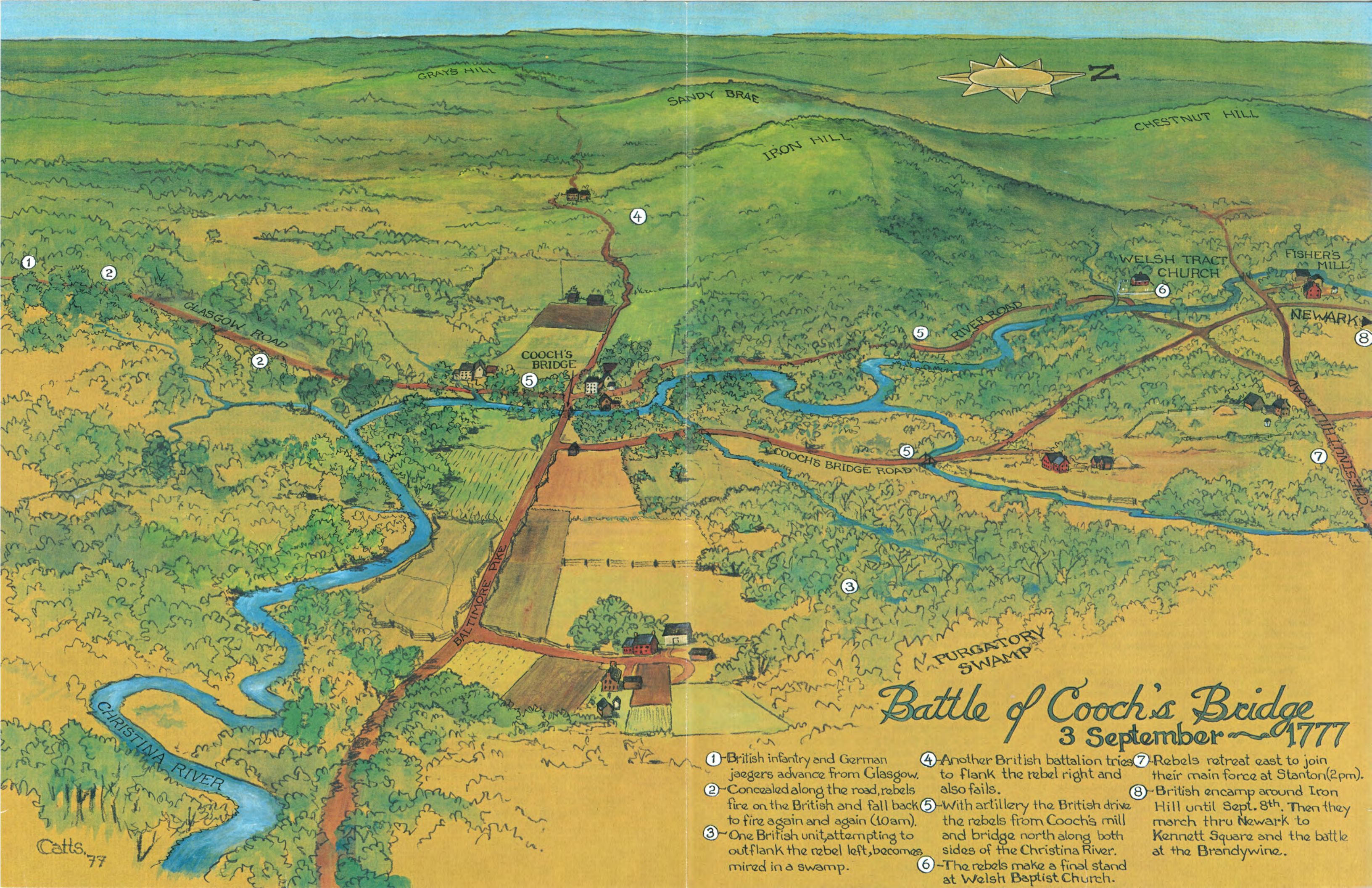
The Americans began giving ground, as they were supposed to do; after all, Maxwell's force could not take on the whole of Howe's army. On one side, the west, rugged Iron Hill, afforded the Americans' protection. The east was the critical flank for the Americans, and the British sent troops to this side in an attempt to surround Maxwell's men. Not knowing the ground, however, the British blundered into a morass called Purgatory Swamp that stopped their flanking threat long enough to allow Maxwell's men to escape. Gradually the Americans were forced back for over two miles, past Cooch's Bridge and Cooch's mill, where the firing was heavy, and to the neighborhood of the Welsh Tract Baptist Church, which still survives in its quiet churchyard off Route 896.

Confronted by overwhelming numbers and threatened by a bayonet charge in their front and a flanking movement on their side, the Americans finally broke off contact with the enemy and retreated toward Christiana. The British followed for a short distance and then returned to the scene of the battle where they encamped for the next five days. Lord Cornwallis took the Cooch house for his headquarters, General Howe established himself at Aiken's Tavern, and Knyphausen, whose troops had arrived while the battle was in progress, also made his headquarters in the vicinity.

The Americans had carried their wounded off as they retreated. The British sent their wounded to the Elk River, where the fleet was about to sail away, out of the Chesapeake and into the Delaware, hoping eventually to meet the army there. When all his supplies were at hand, Howe left the Iron Hill area on September 8, marching north through Newark to Kennett Square, so as to avoid the defensive position Washington had prepared on Red Clay Creek. The two armies finally clashed on September 11 on the Brandywine, where a British victory opened the way for the capture of Philadelphia—and, for a month, the occupation of Wilmington.

Despite the fact that it was the American troops who retreated from Cooch's Bridge, the battle there should not be viewed as an American defeat. Maxwell's men had no intention of challenging the entire British army; their mission was only to harass the British, to delay the invasion, to sting the enemy and then run away.

This is what they did. The American tactics at Cooch's Bridge resemble those used in upstate New York at the same time. The object was to impede the enemy's advance, to make invasion difficult. Unfortunately for the American defenders, the country, itself, was not difficult to cross, and the British succeeded in winning the great



Battle of Cooch's Bridge 3 September ~ 1777

- ① British infantry and German jaegers advance from Glasgow.
- ② Concealed along the road, rebels fire on the British and fall back to fire again and again (10am).
- ③ One British unit, attempting to outflank the rebel left, becomes mired in a swamp.
- ④ Another British battalion tries to flank the rebel right and also fails.
- ⑤ With artillery the British drive the rebels from Cooch's mill and bridge north along both sides of the Christina River.
- ⑥ The rebels make a final stand at Welsh Baptist Church.
- ⑦ Rebels retreat east to join their main force at Stanton (2pm).
- ⑧ British encamp around Iron Hill until Sept. 8th. Then they march thru Newark to Kennett Square and the battle at the Brandywine.