

BICENTENNIAL VIGNETTE NO. 1

Reading time: 5 minutes

Colonial Troops Fail To Halt British At Cooch's Bridge

COOCH FAMILY FORCED TO FLEE AND BRITISH
GENERAL CORNWALLIS USES HOME AS HEADQUARTERS

By C. A. Weslager/ Thirty years ago a young man, head bent forward, eyes glued to the furrows, was searching in a plowed field along the banks of the Christina River near Cooch's Bridge. Suddenly a car screeched to a stop raising a cloud of dust, and the grey-haired driver jumped out and strode into the field.

"Who are you? What are you looking for? Who gave you permission to trespass in my fields?" It was an embarrassing moment for the flustered young man. I know, because I was the trespasser.

I explained that I was writing a book about Delaware's buried past, and was mapping out former Indian camp and village sites. I protested that I wasn't doing any harm, and I showed my inquisitor some of the quartz and jasper flakes, and several broken arrowheads I had picked up. He calmed down, smiled, and introduced himself as Edward W. Cooch, and gave me permission to continue with my search.

I was familiar with the Cooch name, and I learned later that Mr. Cooch was a lawyer, historian, horticulturist, and a former Lieutenant Governor of the State of Delaware. He and his family occupied an old colonial house at Cooch's Bridge. Incidentally, this

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venerable brick manse, built in 1760, and later enlarged, is still standing.

Edward W. Cooch died in 1964 at the age of 88, the best informed scholar on the details of the battle and author of a book published in 1940 entitled **The Battle of Cooch's Bridge**. This battle was the first and only Revolutionary engagement fought on Delaware soil.

On the hot, humid morning of August 25, 1777, Sir William Howe, the British commander, landed his army of 18,000 English and Hessian soldiers at Oldfields Point on the western shore of Elk River opposite Court House Point. The troops and their horses had been transported from New York by a fleet of 250 sailing vessels, and General Howe's objective was to seize Philadelphia where the Continental Congress was holding its meeting in Independence Hall. He was certain that the rebel resistance would collapse if his army captured the colonial capital, and he would hang Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock, John and Samuel Adams, Caesar Rodney, Thomas McKean, George Read and the other traitors who had signed the Declaration of Independence.

After debarking, Howe's troops camped at Oldfields Point for several days, and then marched to present Elkton, then known as the Head of Elk. From there they continued in a northerly direction crossing the Maryland line into Delaware with the intention of getting on the main road that ran through Christiana, Stanton, and Newport to Wilmington. From there the road continued on to Philadelphia via

Marcus Hook and Chester. This road crossed the headwaters of the Christina over the narrow wooden span called Cooch's Bridge, and Howe planned to make his first camp at this crossing.

While the English army was debarking at Oldfields Point, General Washington on August 26, accompanied by General Green and the 20-year-old Marquis de Lafayette, rode on horseback to the summit of Iron Hill to reconnoiter. A youthful desire for glory and adventure brought Lafayette to America to offer his services in the struggle for Independence, and Congress made him a major general without pay or command. Washington was impressed with the young Frenchman and invited him to join his staff. Looking down from Iron Hill the three officers saw that the enemy had landed in full force, and they made plans to repel the attack.

Washington ordered his poorly equipped army of 16,000 continental troops to march from Philadelphia to Wilmington. Then he deployed them in the environs of Newport, Stanton, and Marshallton along White Clay and Red Clay Creeks, with the intention of engaging the English in a major battle after they crossed Cooch's Bridge. He fortified a ridge on the main road at Stanton near present Delaware Park and a contemporary wrote that "cannon were placed on this rise of ground for half a mile as thick as they could stand."

Colonel Caesar Rodney in command of the militia from Kent County was encamped behind the British at Middletown. Once the British crossed Cooch's Bridge, Washington intended the Delaware militiamen to attack from the rear while his troops repulsed the British advance.

An elderly patriot, Thomas Cooch, and his family then owned the manse at Cooch's Bridge and a grist mill a stone's throw from the house. Cooch held a colonel's commission as commander of the Lower Division of the New Castle County militia.

Colonel Cooch learned that the British were on the march from the Head of Elk, having stolen 500 steer, 1,000 sheep, and 100 horses from farms along their route, as well as 60 barrels of flour from a grist mill. The steer and sheep were intended to provide fresh meat for the British troops, the flour to bake bread, and the horses to pull their wagons and cannon. Cooch knew that it was not safe for his family to remain at their home, and he decided they should go to Lancaster County for safety. Members of the family hastily gathered together articles of clothing,

jewelry, and other prized possessions that could be carried on horseback. Elizabeth Cooch, a 13-year-old granddaughter, insisted on taking with her a large framed mirror that she valued. Mirrors at the time were very scarce. According to a story handed down in the Cooch family she held the mirror in front of her on the saddle, saying defiantly, "The British shan't have this." This mirror, a prized heirloom, is still preserved by a member of the family.

The Cooch household contained sterling silver knives, spoons, forks, candlesticks, and other articles which would represent a small fortune today to antique collectors. The silver was too heavy to carry on horseback, and Colonel Cooch knew if the British found it they would melt down the articles into bullion. He cached the silver in a large iron chest, and his faithful colored slave dug a hole in the orchard under a blazed tree where the chest was buried.

Colonel Cooch also had a substantial sum of money in gold coins, and he put the gold in a container known as a "toll dish" and buried it under a second tree in the orchard.

When the British arrived at Cooch's Bridge, Lord Cornwallis who took the best for himself, moved into the Cooch House and used it as his headquarters. The engagement that ensued involved approximately 720 continental troops under command of Brigadier General William Maxwell who crossed Cooch's Bridge on Washington's orders in an attempt to annoy and delay the enemy's advance. The battle, or "skirmish" more aptly describes the clash, took place on September 3, and it was an English victory. Maxwell's outnumbered forces retreated and fell back to rejoin Washington's main army encamped along the main road at Stanton. American casualties in the encounter consisted of 40 killed and wounded. An English account of the engagement stated the redcoats had three men killed and 19 wounded.

By this time, Washington's men were well entrenched, and he continued to strengthen his position in preparation for the main battle to come. But General Howe was too smart an old fox to fall into the trap. On the night of September 8, the British took their leave of Cooch's Bridge. Knowing that the continental troops were awaiting him on the main road, and that Colonel Rodney's militia would attack his unprotected rear, Howe moved westerly instead of going north. He quietly moved his army cross country to what is now Route 1, then a narrow country road, which led to Philadelphia via Kennett Square and Chadds Ford.

Washington learned the next day that the enemy had vanished, and he was forced to change his position and revise his tactics. With as much speed as possible he withdrew his army and issued orders that the troops should march to Chadds Ford and set up their defenses along the north bank of the Brandywine. There the Battle of the Brandywine was fought on September 11, and Washington's army went down in defeat. He was forced to retreat, and shortly thereafter Philadelphia was taken by the victorious British, following a second defeat of Washington's troops at Germantown. While Howe and his officers spent a comfortable winter in Philadelphia, Washington's troops suffered cold and hunger at Valley Forge.

When the Cooch family returned to Delaware from Lancaster County, they found their property had been plundered. Cornwallis and his officers had stabled their horses in the parlor of the Cooch house and the oak flooring was scarred by hoof prints. All of the bottles of wine were empty, and a hog's head of rum in the cellar was bashed in and drained dry. The livestock was gone and the chickens had all been killed to feed the troops. The vegetable garden, the lawn, and the shrubbery had been trampled over by men and horses. The greatest tragedy was in finding the Cooch mill in ashes. Cornwallis had ordered it burnt to the ground to prevent the mill from being used to supply flour to Washington's army.

The fire from the mill had spread to the orchard, and the fruit trees were in charred ruins, including the two blazed trees under which Colonel Cooch had buried his silver and gold!

After much searching and digging, the iron chest containing the silver was found, and the contents were intact. This battered old chest is among the family relics owned today by Edward W. Cooch's son and namesake.

Despite much searching, Colonel Thomas Cooch's gold coins have never been found, and although some persons have been inclined to discount the story, I'm certain that the late Edward W. Cooch believed that the money remained somewhere on the property. That's why he became excited when he saw me picking up objects in the field which was formerly the site of Colonel Thomas Cooch's orchard. He later told me with a twinkle in his eye that as he saw me stooping (and gathering up stone chips and flakes), that he thought I had found the place where the missing money was buried and was filling my pockets with gold coins. □