

"This Detachment on That Day Deserved Well of Their Country"

REMARKS AT THE 2018 COMMEMORATIVE EVENT, 1 SEPTEMBER

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(Remarks presented at the Pencader Heritage Area Museum, September 1, 2018)

- I want to first thank the Pencader Heritage Area Association for asking me to speak today, and to remember the Americans who fought here on September 3, 1777.
- I also want to thank the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, who are the owners of the Cooch-Dayett Mill and the Pencader Museum building, for their efforts to preserve and commemorate this unique historic place – the site of the only principal battle fought during the American War for Independence in Delaware.
- And finally, but by no means least, I want to thank the Cooch family for their tireless and successful stewardship and preservation of this portion of the battlefield. Because of their efforts, a unique part of our Revolutionary heritage is preserved for today's generation, and Delawareans owe the family a debt of gratitude.
- Today, as we remember the soldiers who fought here 241 years ago (on Monday), I would like us to briefly consider not only the people but also the setting or 18th-century landscape that witnessed the battle, and to summarize the battle itself. To do that, I would like to use some of the contemporary descriptions and accounts – principally some of the pensions, diaries, and letters of the participants, British and Hessian, as well as American.
- British grenadier **Lieutenant William Hale** of the 45th Regiment of Foot wrote home in October 1777: "on our march toward the Schuylkill, we had several skirmishes with their scouting and advanced parties, **none of them considerable enough to deserve mentioning except one at Iron Hill....**"

- Why, here, why at Cooch's Bridge or Iron Hill? On August 25, a British fleet bearing Sir William Howe's army landed at Elk Neck in Cecil County. General George Washington and the main American army immediately moved south to Wilmington from above Philadelphia to intercept the invading forces. On August 26, Washington, Lafayette and American light cavalry scouted the Crown forces landing, from the only high ground around – Gray's Hill, Chestnut Hill, and Iron Hill.
- Rising 334 feet above sea level, Iron Hill was a key topographic feature in the Upper Coastal Plain. The viewing platform that Iron Hill afforded is perhaps best noted by the way an unidentified writer in *The Pennsylvania Evening Post* denigrated its significance in print on 30 August. Likely having little knowledge of the ground, the writer derided "it is laughable...to hear some people talk about Iron Hill. What have we [in Philadelphia] to do with Iron Hill? It commands no pass into the country, and is no other use to an army than a church steeple to make observations from." Subsequent military action prior to the battle proved that Iron Hill functioned precisely in the way the anonymous writer denied. Further, the movement of the Crown Forces on the morning of 3 September was intended to avoid the direct route over the hill and to instead skirt Iron Hill from the south.
- The region in which the Crown forces found themselves was not like the central New Jersey coastal plain they had just left. Compared to the area around New Brunswick and Perth Amboy, settlement here was sparse and infrequent. Passing through two years earlier in 1775, Dr. Robert Honyman reported that "...this part of the Country is called the Welsh Tract; & is very barren and poor, & consequently little cleared." Hessian officer Heinrich Carl Philipp von Feilitzsch was also unimpressed, lamenting that "...this region...does not appeal to me. Compared with other provinces where we have been, this region is not well-

developed. A bare woods, here and there a small place with a house and field....” Passing through this region and linking the Chesapeake Bay with the Delaware River was the main road to Philadelphia – the King’s Highway – extended from the village of the Head of Elk, to Christiana Bridge, Newport, Wilmington, and Chester. And of course, the place to cross that creek was at the bridge known as Cooch’s Bridge. British Engineer **John Montross** was wary of the terrain through which the roads passed, observing that the woods were “within shot of the road, frequently in front and flank and in projecting points toward the Road....”

- While Crown Forces officers viewed these as negative landscape characteristics, some American officers liked what they saw. **Captain Walter Stewart** of the 13th Pennsylvania wrote of the area around Iron Hill as “...formed by Nature for defence (sic), having a great quantity of woods, large morasses... and many commanding hills, which the Militia (sic) may take post upon.” Reportedly, Major General Nathanael Greene, one of Washington’s trusted officers and advisors, strongly urged that the area around Cooch’s Bridge be the location to give battle to Howe’s army but his recommendation did not reach headquarters until after events on the ground changed the tactical situation.
- The Battle of Cooch’s Bridge was fought on September 3, 1777. As Lt. Hale’s statement makes clear, it was the first significant engagement of the Philadelphia Campaign. Described by participants as “heavy,” “severe,” “sharp,” and “bloody,” the battle represents a small unit action that in many ways was typical of the American War for Independence. Ironically, the “British” unit most heavily engaged was not British at all but instead was the Hessian Field Jäger Corps. Their opponents at Cooch’s Bridge were an *ad hoc*

formation of American “light infantry,” composed of Continentals, militia, and volunteers under the command of New Jersey Brigadier General William Maxwell.

- On August 28, 1777, Washington ordered that “A Corps of light infantry is to be formed,” consisting of “one field officer, two captains, six subalterns, eight sergeants, and 100 rank and file from each brigade.” The Light Infantry Corps should have numbered a little over 1,000 officers and men, but probably did not exceed 800. From the day it was formed, the composition and strength of the Corps was in a state of flux, with units – particularly militia companies – being added frequently. The Corps was intended to replace Daniel Morgan’s Rifle Battalion that Washington had detached from the Main army to reinforce the Northern army under General Gates as he faced the advance of Lt. General John Burgoyne’s army in the Hudson Valley. The nine brigades forming the Main army were ordered to furnish “...men that are good marksmen ...as this is meant only for a temporary establishment & as the utility will depend upon the goodness of the men and Officers for such a Service, the Genl. desires...to send none but such as may be depended upon.”
- The Light Corps was formed only one week prior to the battle. Thus, the fight at Cooch’s Bridge was the first action of a military formation that was composed of many soldiers who had no prior experience serving together, or that had any sense of military cohesion.
- While the Light Corps was itself brand new, many of the individual officers and men had previous combat experience. Some of the Corps’ Continental officers had seen service during the French and Indian War, including Maxwell and **Major Francis Gurney** of Philadelphia (of whom you’ll hear more about). Others had been involved in the War for Independence for at least one year, including Virginians **Lieutenant John Marshall** (later

Chief Justice of the United States) and **Colonel William Heth**, New Jersey Lieutenant **Derek Lane**, and future governor of **North Carolina Alexander Martin**.

- The role of the Light Infantry Corps was to gather intelligence, harass the British in their movements, and act as an advanced guard for the Americans. On the day of the battle, Maxwell was to engage the enemy, force them to deploy, fall back to another defensive position and delay the enemy again. The American light infantry had no intention of fighting a pitched battle against the advancing British army, but sought only to delay.
- At 5AM on the morning of September 3, the British army vanguard advanced from the Head of Elk towards Aiken's Tavern. The advance guard was under the command of **Captain Johann Ewald**, an outstanding Hessian officer who excelled at small unit combat and light infantry fighting. Ewald moved from Aiken's Tavern northwards on the Newark Road towards Cooch's Bridge with six mounted jäger. Around 8AM at about half mile north along the road, Ewald's command was ambushed by point-blank musket or rifle fire from a hedge, and all six of his men were either killed or wounded.
- Ewald attacked this American force with his company but encountered a second American light infantry detachment in a woods. Supported by the rest of the Field Jäger Corps, Ewald deployed his three companies in line, perpendicular to the Glasgow-Newark road. No sooner were the Hessians deployed than the American light infantry attacked. The battle here between the jäger and the light infantry was spirited, but the Americans eventually quit this position, or were driven from it according to Hessian accounts. General Howe's Hessian aide, Friedrich von Muenchhausen observed American light infantry at this time

as “behind trees, firing at our advancing jägers, then retreating...behind the next tree, then firing again.” The Americans fell back and formed a second line in the woods and faced the Hessians again.

- **Lt. Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb**, commanding officer of the Hessian Field Jäger Corps, reported that the Americans in the second line “defended themselves obstinately,” but were outflanked in hand-to-hand fighting with the Hessians. It appears from the accounts that the American troops not only defended themselves but may have seriously pressured the jäger and nearly forced them to give way.
- Posted in a woods, the second American line held for a time and the firing was reported as intense with casualties mounting. The action here seems to have been heated. Lt. Colonel von Wurmb was described as “continuously in front of the jäger, encouraging them in every way, both by actions and by words.” Outflanked to their left by the Hessian attack and engaged in hand-to-hand combat, the American light infantry in the second line finally shot themselves out of ammunition and were forced to withdraw.
- By this time, the sound and intensity of the firing was increasing, so that Howe determined to send in two battalions of British light infantry in an attempt to outflank Maxwell’s line. The 1st Light Infantry Battalion moved to the right (or east) to cut off the American line of retreat but, as one British officer complained, the movement of the battalion was “prevented by an impassable morass, which the guide was not acquainted with.” It is likely that the “impassable morass” is in the present location of Sunset Lake, a body of water created as a mill pond in the nineteenth century, and not present at the time of the battle.
- The 2nd Light Infantry Battalion moved to the left or west. It too encountered a swampy area but continue its advance. The battalion apparently became engaged with the New

Castle County Militia under Major Thomas Duff. According to von Muenchhausen, the militia fired only one round then left the field in haste and disorder.

- The Americans withdrew and formed a third defensive line, this time to the east, across Christiana Creek at Cooch's Bridge. Further south, Howe, concerned that the firing was still heavy and that his two flanking light infantry battalions were not yet engaged, sent forward two battalions of British grenadiers and canon to support the jäger. In the combined force of Hessian jäger, British light infantry and British grenadiers, Howe was prepared to commit approximately 3,000 men to the fight; a force several times larger than Maxwell's entire corps.
- The third American line at Cooch's Bridge held for a time, but the jäger, now reinforced by the 2nd British Light Infantry, forced the Continentals back from the bridge. The jäger's small 1-lbs. and 3-lbs. guns apparently came into play during the fight at the bridge. These guns were loaded with grape shot which was used to deadly effect. **Royal artilleryman Francis Downman** noted that he saw "a corporal and five men lying near together, killed by grape shot." The British light infantry stormed across the bridge, taking a few casualties in the process.
- Maxwell's troops, their ammunition exhausted, facing a large enemy force with artillery, and unsupported by the rest of the American army, withdrew, moving to the east and into thick woods, then toward the village of Christiana Bridge, about six miles away. Most participants agree that the engagement had lasted about two or three hours. The British controlled the field, holding the bridge and the main road to Philadelphia. They would be camped in the area for five days, until September 8.

- The battle was termed many things by the Americans who fought here. Many pensioners remembered the place as Cooch's Bridge, as we do today. Other pensioners called it Iron Hill or "the Iron Hills" (including Chestnut Hill and Gray's Hill), such as Lewis Barlow and Marshall Burton, both of the 12th Virginia, and Andrew Wallace of the 4th Pennsylvania; Micajah Sims of the 6th Virginia and Blackman Ligon of the 7th Virginia remembered it as "Coot's Bridge"; Chester County militiaman John Clarke and the 5th Pennsylvania's Martin Delaney called it "Couch's Bridge;" Edward Roberts of the 12th Virginia spoke of a fight at "Crouch's Mill," and William Honeyman of the 2nd Pennsylvania noted it as "Cooch's Mill." Some pensioners recalled the general location, such as Thomas Cole of the 5th North Carolina who remembered a fight at the "Welsh Track Meeting House" while John Garland of the 3rd North Carolina remembered being wounded at the fight at "Christian."
- Some made a distinction between fighting at Iron Hill and Cooch's Bridge, suggesting separate actions. To be sure, there were small skirmishes in the days leading to the battle, including some action on the Hill on September 1.
- John Frost of the 1st New Jersey, Jacob Colman of the 13th Virginia, and the 5th North Carolina's Thomas Cole distinctly recall an action at the Head of Elk, and Virginians Joseph Vance and Marshall Burton remember a fight at Gray's Hill. Small fights of this type were to be expected of the Light Corps. Indeed, Samuel Patton of Hartley's Additional Continental Regiment summarized his service well, recalling that in the days before the battle, he was part of a detachment of "500 men... under the command of Col. Wm. Dark and marched towards Elk where we had fighting to do **every day or two....**"

- After the fight at Cooch's Bridge and in the eight days before the Battle of Brandywine, there were other small actions – one at White Clay Creek, one at Red Clay Creek, one at Milltown, and one near New Garden Meeting. Maxwell's Light Corps was engaged in several of these and also played a prominent role in the morning action on September 11 at Brandywine.
- Casualty reports for the Battle of Cooch's Bridge are difficult to interpret and are likely under-reported. British and German accounts indicate that their losses included one or two Hessian jäger killed, 15 Hessian and four Anspach jäger wounded, one British non-commissioned officer killed, three officers and 19 enlisted men wounded. British losses were mostly confined to the 2nd Light Infantry.
- American casualties as reported by the British ranged from 20 to 50 or more. American wounded were carried from the field, but the dead remained to be buried by British pioneers. Lieutenant Gilbert Purdy of the British Corps of Guides and Pioneers noted that his unit buried 24 dead Americans on the field, and **Major John Andre** noted that "among their dead were two or three officers."
- The lack of unit training and cohesion, so critical to a successful offensive military action, was the Corps' Achilles-heel and the principal factor dictating how Maxwell's Corps performed in combat. The tactics chosen to be used at Cooch's Bridge, and at the Battle of Brandywine eight days later, reflect the recognition by the Corps' officers that they were deficient in cohesion. Instead the Corps relied on establishing set defensive lines or positions while engaging the advancing enemy. In several instances, the tactics called for ambushing the lead enemy formations. Jointly, these tactics were designed to force the British to deploy into battle lines to dislodge the Light Corps. The Americans would then

retreat before being overrun to another already-prepared battle line. In his pension application light infantryman Sergeant Samuel Patton of Hartley's Regiment succinctly explained this tactic, testifying that "as we retreated a part of us hid in ambush until the enemy came in gun shot, then [we] fired, retreated and loaded continuing to retreat and load until we met the main army." While thus being forced from one position to another, the Light Corps was able to slow the movement of British forces, inflict casualties, while preserving their own force.

- The battle of Cooch's Bridge is sometimes dismissed as a skirmish, a prologue to the more important engagements of Brandywine, Paoli, and Germantown. Judging by the pension applications, filed by aged veterans in their seventies and eighties, this is not accurate. Pensioners own words speak to the magnitude of the fight on September 3, 1777. Adjectives such as "severe," "bloody," and "sharp" punctuate their recollections. For those that fought here, whether British, Hessian, or American, Cooch's Bridge was more than a skirmish – it set the tenor for the way the Americans would contest the advance of the Crown Forces during the Philadelphia Campaign.
- Perhaps there is no greater tribute to those who fought here than the words of Virginian William Walker, a Revolutionary War veteran of the battle. In his application for a pension, filed in 1832, the 75-year old veteran pointedly noted that historians had overlooked the battle, but, continuing with pride, he stated that the soldiers who fought there on September 3, 1777 "...deserved well of their country."
- It is fitting that we recognize their service here today, and remember the American killed, wounded, missing, and prisoners of the fight.



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Remarks on the occasion of the 241st anniversary of the Battle of
Cooch's Bridge

1 September 2018

Wade P. Catts

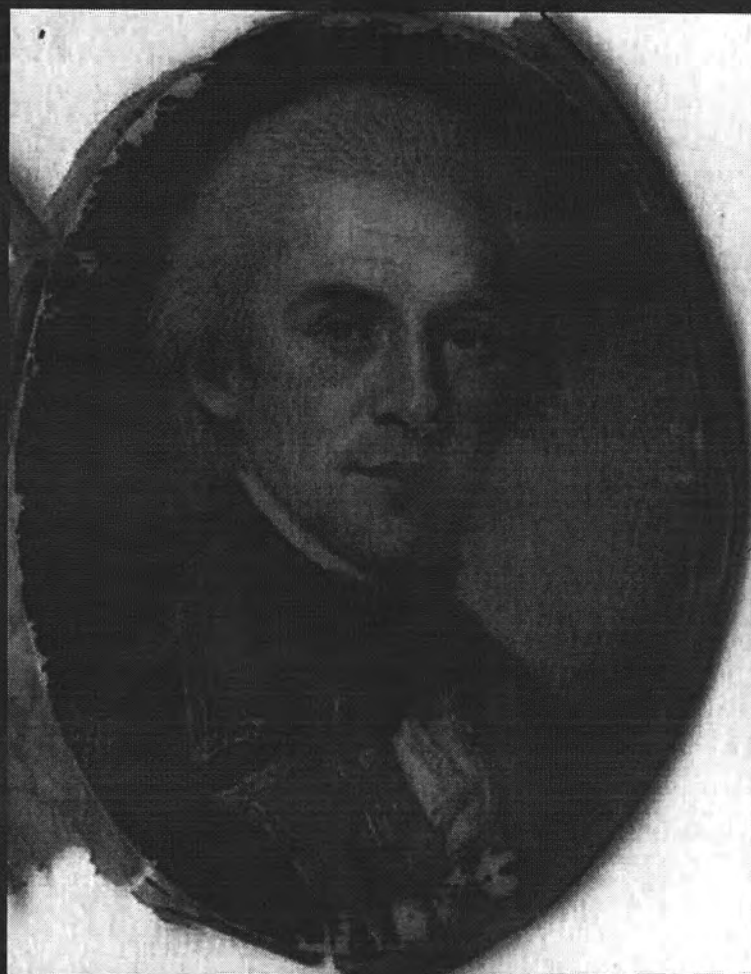


CAPT. W. HALE.
GRENADIER CO. 45TH REGIMENT.



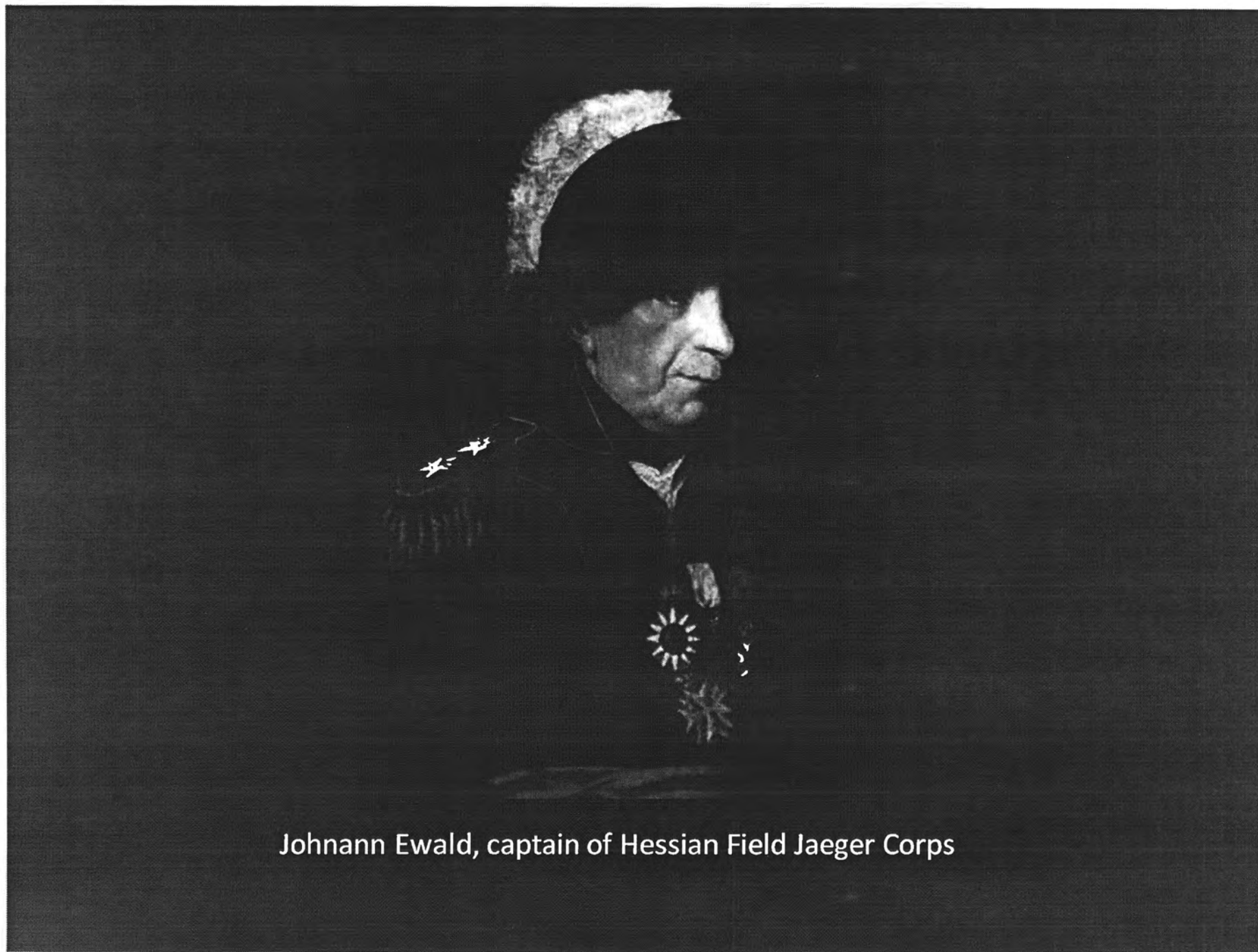
Engineer John Montessor, by John Singleton Copley

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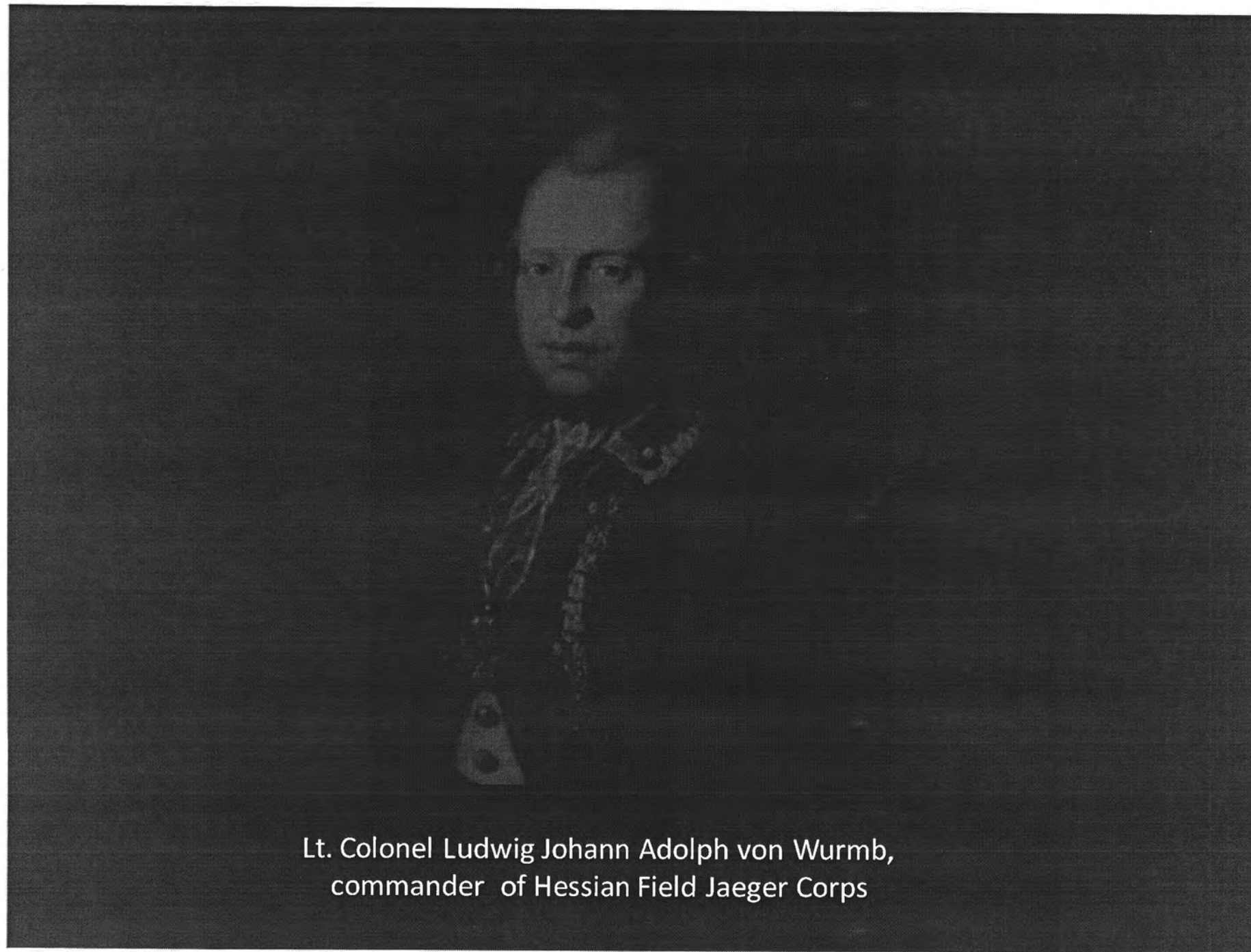


Captain Walter Stewart, by Charles Willson Peale

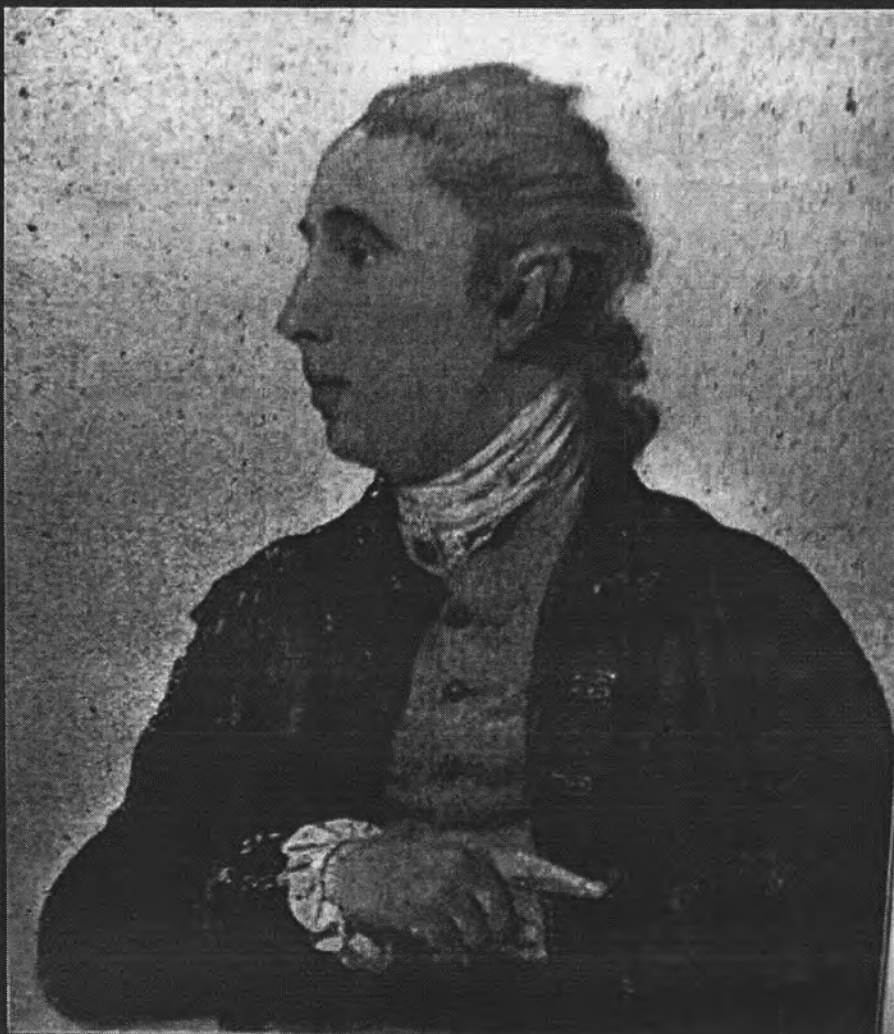




Johann Ewald, captain of Hessian Field Jaeger Corps



Lt. Colonel Ludwig Johann Adolph von Wurmb,
commander of Hessian Field Jaeger Corps



Royal Artillerist Francis Downman



John Andre, Major 7th Regiment of Foot, aide to General Grey

Francis Gurney and William Meneely

By James Stone





Silhouette of Francis Gurney
Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections

Gurney, Francis (Pa). Lieutenant-Colonel 11th Pennsylvania, 21st August, 1776; wounded at Iron Hill, 3d September, 1777; resigned 22d October, 1777. (Died 25th May, 1815.)

Killed

Archibald Dallas, Captain, Spencer's Additional Continental Regiment

James Gano, Private, 2nd New Jersey Regiment

Joseph Lloyd, Private, 2nd New Jersey Regiment

James Neilson, Corporal, 5th Pennsylvania Regiment

Thomas Rice, Sergeant, 1st North Carolina Regiment

Rueben Robinson, Private, 3rd North Carolina Regiment

Unknown, Pennsylvania State Regiment

Unknown, Pennsylvania State Regiment

Unknown, Pennsylvania State Regiment

Wounded

John Clark, Captain, The Pennsylvania State Regiment

John Craig, Private, 5th Pennsylvania Regiment

John Garland, Private, 3rd North Carolina Regiment

Francis Gurney, Major, 11th Pennsylvania Regiment

William Honeyman, 2nd Lieutenant, 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment

William Maneely, Private, Captain John Gardner's Company, Chester County Militia

Richard Savage, Private, Spencer's Additional Continental Regiment

William Sutherland, Private, 3rd Virginia Regiment

Thomas West, Private, 4th Pennsylvania Regiment

Prisoners

Robert Campbell, Private, 3rd New Jersey Regiment

Ebenezer Carson, 1st Lieutenant, 10th Pennsylvania Regiment

Daniel Gill, Private, Hartley's Additional Continental Regiment

William Grant, Private, 12th Virginia Regiment

----- McNabb, Private, 1st (Upper) Battalion, New Castle County Militia

Missing

John Fogel, Private, The German Regiment

Francis Meyer, Private, The German Regiment

Jacob Miller, Sergeant, The German Regiment

John Minton, Private, 12th Virginia Regiment