REVOLUTIONARY DELAWARE

Independence in the First State

KIM ROGERS BURDICK

Soldiers continued pouring into Delaware. Captain Robert Kirkwood, who grew up on Polly Drummond Road in northern New Castle County, wrote from the Pennsylvania State Headquarters, Chester, "Septr 1st. Tuesday. Sept 2nd Struck tents & march'd to Wilmington in the Delaware State & encamp'd about one Mile West of the town in all 13 miles."[91]

Cooch's Bridge

The Philadelphia Campaign opened with the two armies clashing at the Battle of Cooch's Bridge about two and a half miles east of the Maryland border. On September 3, 1777, American brigadier general William Maxwell's corps of light infantry—composed of about eight hundred American riflemen from New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Delaware militiamen—was hugely outnumbered but bravely fought well-trained Hessian and Ansbach Jägers and British light infantrymen.

Cooch's Bridge. Photographed by Bob Barnes. *Postcard from the Pencader Heritage Collection.*

Voices of the Past

The eyewitness account of Lieutenant Heinrich Carl Philipp von Feilitsch of the Ansbach-Bayreuth Jägers, follows:

> *The 3rd—We marched out of our camp at four o'clock in the morning… thereafter encountered an enemy corps of 3,000 men in the region of… Katschers Mill (Cooch's Mill). The enemy stood firm. The fire was extremely heavy and lasted about two hours. Only our corps* [i.e., the jägers] *was engaged and a few English. The enemy attacked three times. We lost one dead and ten wounded, while the rebels suffered nearly fifty dead and, according to the deserters, very many wounded. We made few prisoners. Our jaegers conducted themselves well and, after the enemy was driven back, we entered camp during the afternoon not far from that place. The affair began at eight o'clock and lasted until ten. The company had two wounded, a corporal and a jaeger.*[92]

A British account reported:

> [A]*dvanced about seven miles, on the road towards Christeen Bridge. At the entrance of a wood, five miles from town, the rebels began to fire upon the advanced corps of Rangers and Chassears; and a smart skermesh continued for some time; till a few shots from one of our field pieces drove the rebels entirely off. The first battalion of light infantry endeavoured to turn their left flank, and just when they thought it was completed unluckily met with an unpassable swamp, and were obliged to return by the way they went.… The rebels in this affair had upwards of thirty men killed. Our loss was trifling… A little in front is Goughs Mill and bridge, over a part of Christeen creek—the light infantry was posted beyond the bridge, and our line extended thence backwards, to one Aikens house, the present headquarters, between four and five miles from Elk, and there we halted a few days.*[93]

That evening, George Washington summed up the day's events:

From Headquarters: Wilmington, Del
September 3, 1777. 8 o Clock P.M.

Sir:

...This Morning the Enemy came out with considerable force and three pieces of Artillery, against our Light Advanced Corps, and after some pretty smart skirmishing obliged them to retreat, being far inferior in number and without Cannon. The loss on either side is not yet ascertained. Ours, tho' not exactly known, is not very considerable. Theirs, we have reason to believe, was much greater, as some of our parties, composed of expert Marksmen, had Opportunities of giving them several close, well-directed fires; more particularly in One instance, when a body of Riflemen formed a kind of Ambuscade. They advanced about Two miles this side of Iron Hill, and then withdrew to that place, leaving a picket at Coach's Mill [sic], *about a mile in Front. Our parties now lie at White Clay Creek, except the advanced pickets which are at Christiana Bridge.... The design of their movement this morning seems to have been to disperse our Light Troops, who had been troublesome to them, and to gain possession of Iron Hill to establish a post most probably for covering their retreat in case of accidents.*

I have the Honor to be with great respect Sir, Yr Most Obedt servt.
Geo Washington[94]

As the sounds of the Battle of Cooch's Bridge echoed across the fields, a rider from Philadelphia brought the Friends at White Clay Creek a frightening message. The day before, by the order of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council and by recommendation of the Continental Congress, twenty well-respected Philadelphia Quakers had been imprisoned without a hearing. The Society of Friends' deliberately neutral position on the war had triggered the fears of the Continental Congress that Quakers were "enemies of their country" and that if the British did indeed capture Philadelphia, area residents would continue to follow the pacifist examples of these longtime social and business leaders.

In the days that followed, the British raided Christiana. Captain William Dansey wrote exuberantly to his mother in Brinsop, Herefordshire, that a "flanking party" of his 33rd Regiment of Foot "took the horse, arms, colors, and drums belonging to a rebel Colonel of the Delaware Militia. Made his

brother prisoner and caused all his Baggage to be taken, which the General very politely sent back again. But the horse, arms, colors came to my share."[95]

The September 5, 1777 *Pennsylvania Evening Post* posted the remonstrance of the Quaker prisoners Israel Pemberton, John Hunt and Samuel Pleasants, claiming the rights of freemen against arbitrary confinement. On September 6, Congress approved a recommendation that records seized from the confined Quakers should be published.

For the next five days, Cornwallis used the Cooch home as his headquarters. Two days after the battle, his aide, Major John André, drew a map showing British units posted around the Cooch house. According to family legend, the officers drank all of Cooch's liquor, and the troops burned Cooch's gristmill when they left.

Maxwell's Corps and the Delaware militia returned to the main Continental lines near Stanton. That morning, September 6, 1777, Quaker pacifist Daniel Byrnes, with a wife and several children still at home, received word that his house would be the site of a Council of War. That very evening, Generals Greene, Lafayette, Maxwell, Sullivan and Wayne were among those in attendance.[96]

The General Orders for the day can be found in both the papers of George Washington and Robert Kirkwood's journal:

> *The General begs the favor of the officers to be attentive to all strange faces and suspicious characters which may be discovered in camp; and upon examination of them no good account can be given why they are there, to carry them to the Major General of the day for further examination; this, as it is only a necessary precaution, is to be done in a manner least offensive. The General Officers are to meet at 5 O'Clock this afternoon at the brick house by White-Clay creek, and fix upon proper picquets for the security of the camp. John Laurens and Peter Presley Thornton Esqrs. are appointed Extra-Aids-Du-Camp to the Commander in Chief: all orders therefore thro' them in writing, or otherwise, are to be regarded in the same light as if proceeding from any other of his Aide-du-Camp.*[97]

Many years later, their inadvertent host, Daniel Byrnes, wrote to George Washington presenting his side of the story:

> *In the year 1777 I was owner of and Lived at them Mills in the State of Dallaware on the side of White Clay Creek abought two Miles north of Christiana Bridge at the time the English Army Lay between my Mills*

Hale Byrnes House, near Stanton, Delaware. *Delaware Public Archives.*

and the head of Elk and the American Army Some of them on the Hill by White Clay Creek Bridge in Sight of my House & Mills and Some of them nearer to Newport. Thus was I with my Famely Situated between the two Contending Armies and on the 7th Day of the week Clement Biddle,[98] *an officer as I Supose in thy Army Came to my House and informed me that General Woshington had Sent him to let me know that the wheat & Flour in my Mills must be Removed and told me that thou Said the English Army wod be quite likely to Come that way and wod Distroy what I had but that thou wod take it and I Should be paid for it. I Did then belive thou intended it as a favour to me as I was not Looked on as an Enemy to my Countery and therefore I could Do no other thing but Submit to thy orders accordingly he Sent that Day twenty Wagons and Loaded with Wheat and Flour and next Day being first Day of the week came twenty more Wagons and Loaded (while I was at Meeting) with wheat and flour they also that*

Day took Eight Large Cheese away which was put in the Mill to be out of the way of the Flies they Laft with Some of my young men Recipts for the Wheat & Flour but not for the Cheese they ware to come again the Next Day being the Second Day of the week for more wheat & Flour as there was Some Still Lafft but that Day the English Army Crossed white Clay Creek 2 or 3 miles above my Mills and thy Army moved away. I saw Clement Biddle that Day on Horseback he told me he wod pay me but the Army was moving and all Seemed in a hurry. I Supose he had not time and want away without paying after that time there was Much Difficulties with the Army I knew not whare to apply for pay.[99]

A Steep Defile

At four o'clock in the morning on September 8, 1777, the British 1st Division under General Cornwallis, accompanied by General Howe, started to march. Then the 2nd Division under General Grant followed and then the 3rd Division under General von Knyphausen,

which had with it all our baggage, a lot of cattle, provisions, and other wagons. All marched in one column, and to our great surprise, instead of taking the road by way of Christians Bridge to Wilmington as expected, we went to our left by way of White Clay Creek and Newark. We halted near Nicolson's, the only house on the main road from Newport and Wilmington to Lancaster. Knyphausen's rear guard did not arrive until two o'clock in the morning. Everyone is pleased with the good march and the fact that it was kept a secret, thus cutting off Washington from Lancaster.[100]

Several British officers remarked about seeing an aurora borealis in the sky as they left their Glasgow-area camps: "8th. The whole moved 2 hours before daylight—a remarkable borealis. An amazing; strong ground—marched this day about 12 miles to Head Quarters—a very strong country—but 3 or 4 Shots fired during the march. A great deal of rebel cattle collected."[101]

The soldiers' descriptions of Newark give us a clear picture of what they saw. James Parker observed:

The country is entirely deserted. We pass the Village of Newark, remarkable for Sedition and Presbetarian sermons, the inhabitants have all left their houses.[102]

2018059