

NEWS

## Revolutionary War mystery solved in Hockessin

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Nearly 240 years ago, an invading British army of 16,000 marched through northwestern New Castle County, pillaging the local population on their way to Pennsylvania and a fight with George Washington's Colonial Army at the Battle of Brandywine.

In the days before that battle, the invading force set up camp in Hockessin, but precisely where the army and General Sir William Howe camped has been a mystery lost in time for generations until now.

"There were all these references that Howe was at Nichols house, but where was Nichols house?" said amateur historian and Hockessin resident Walt Chiquoine. "You can't tell me it's 2010 and nobody knows where this is."

And so Chiquoine, a former DuPont Co. chemist, spent about 2,000 hours poring through pre-Revolutionary War land records, eventually pinpointing the location of Howe's headquarters as a farmhouse on land that presently houses the Hockessin Greene community of Limestone Road near the Lantana Square Shopping Center.

Last week, Chiquoine was joined by local historians and state officials unveiling a new historic marker at the site.

"For over 100 years, the location of this important point was just lost. I don't know how historians wouldn't have noted the importance of this," said Joe Lake, head of the Hockessin Historical Society. "It's a fantastic discovery."

On Aug. 25, 1777, General Howe and a British and German army of 16,000 ended a six-week on-water journey up the Chesapeake Bay. They landed at the "Head of Elk" near present day Elkton, Maryland, with orders to take Philadelphia.

With Washington's army just miles away near Stanton, Howe slowly began to move the force under his command northward. A portion of those forces engaged briefly with Colonial forces near Newark in what became known as the Battle of Cooch's Bridge, but the more serious confrontation would take place weeks later in Pennsylvania.

And so the army continued northward, "inflicting" themselves on residents of Mill Creek Hundred, an area of northern Delaware that stretches from generally Newark to Stanton north to the Pennsylvania line. The population of the area was no more than 1,500.

"The whole thing was like a locust plague," Lake said. "They ate everything, every horse, every cow, chicken, and grain."

On Sept. 8, 1777, Howe's forces camped in along the ridge of Limestone Road with camps stretching from Pennsylvania down to Carousel Farm. At any given time the force could have occupied 3 to 5 square miles, Chiquoine said.

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"The impact on the community was profound," Chiquoine said. "From the canal to the northern part of the state. It was probably a not pleasant winter because all of their stuff got taken. They were short on food, they were short on animals."

Lake said it had been known that the British camped in Mill Creek Hundred and crossed into Pennsylvania around Limestone Road, but precisely how the camp was positioned and where Howe was headquartered was lost in time.

"It isn't mentioned in books. They say the British arrived at the Head of Elk and a few days later, they fought the Battle of Brandywine," said historian-activist Kim Burdick, who is the resident curator of the historic Hale-Byrnes House in Stanton. "Well I say, beam me up Scotty, how did they actually get there?"

Chiquoine's task in figuring that out was twofold. He had to reconcile various descriptions for where Howe was stationed from accounts like diaries, journals, orderly books and people who were there.

"Over the last 150 years, there have been a lot of people that speculated. You can pick and choose your evidence and make different cases about where this occurred but it is hard to take all the evidence and understand it as one thing," Chiquoine said.

The prevailing theory became that Howe was headquartered at the home of Daniel Nichols. Lake said it was a name that had been lost in time and nobody quite knew where that home was.

In order to figure that out, Chiquoine went through Colonial land records starting in 1676 through the war years.

He eventually uncovered evidence showing Nichols purchased two adjacent tracts in Mill Creek Hundred in 1741 placing his home off Limestone Road. He found further confirmation in an 1842 deed that tracks the bequest of Nichols land to his nephew Thomas Dixon.

Chiquoine said just seeing the deeds was not sufficient to put the house on a map. Adjacent properties helped increase his confidence in the location.

"I have pretty much about 95 percent of Mill Creek mapped out during that period. A lot of that exercise was trial and error," Chiquoine said.

Much of Chiquoine's work has also been painstakingly charting the movements of individual groups under Howe's command into Mill Creek Hundred and out into Pennsylvania. Knowing where the Nichols home is helps in that, he said.

"Basically you are trying to do a jigsaw puzzle," Chiquoine said.

On Sept. 9, 1777, Howe began moving his forces into Pennsylvania on their way to defeating Washington's forces at the Battle of Brandywine.

"This place must have looked like Grand Central Station," Chiquoine said overlooking Lantana Square Shopping Center.

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Burdick said pieces of history like where Howe camped are often overlooked but important to the people who now live there.

"The historians tend to focus more on the action shots and with marching through there was no excitement to them for the chase," Burdick said. "For local people, what (Chiquoine) has done is very important."

Chiquoine said his next task is figuring out what happened to the original Nichols house. He said he hopes his work helps people consider the effect on residents in the area at the time. He noted many residents of the time fled. For some, it was the first time they had left their farms.

"The consequences that the locals felt in terms of losing their property, losing their house, losing their crops and chickens, having outhouses in their backyard: You can't go to a book right now and really read this story," Chiquoine said.

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