

THE HISTORY OF NEWTOWN SQUARE

The Notorious Fitz

By Doug Humes



I am currently reading *The Story of Kennett*, written by Bayard Taylor

and published in 1866. He tells a fictionalized tale of life in the late 18th century in Kennett Square, a long way from our Newtown Square. And yet there is a common thread.

The villain of the book is “Sandy Flash,” a highwayman who accosts people on the local roads and relieves them of their valuables at gunpoint. Taylor admits in his prologue that this is a fictitious character, but drawn from a local character from that part of Chester County that people of his time would recognize. The fictitious Sandy was betrayed by his love interest, and ended his life at the wrong end of a rope in Chester, Pennsylvania.

The historical model was James Fitzpatrick, the self-styled Captain Fitz. He was a strong and handsome local boy from southern Chester County who lived during the American Revolution. He joined the American army, but like many boys raised on the frontier, he did not take well to military discipline, and apparently was whipped from some minor infraction. That was enough of the army life for him and so he deserted and went home to work on the local farms again. Later on, two soldiers were dispatched to bring back the deserter, and they found him working in the fields near his mother’s house. He asked if he could go to the house to say goodbye before going with his captors, went in the door, grabbed his gun, and then confronted the two and ran them off his land. No longer safe at home, he went on the lam,



“Castle Rocks Farm”—Right wing is Robert McAfee home where Sandy Flash was captured during the Revolution. Picture shows William Taylor farm in 1800’s

and began his short career as a highwayman during the time of the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777-78. He is reported to have given them local information which let the British surprise and defeat Washington’s army at Brandywine. He robbed, whipped and humiliated local travelers on the roads – and was partial to tax collectors. When the British left Philadelphia in June of 1778, Fitzpatrick lost his legal protection. A warrant was issued for his arrest, together with a substantial reward offer of £1000; and at a farmhouse in Edgmont (now the Edgmont Shopping Center), Captain McFee and his maidservant, Rachel Walker, tackled Fitz, tied him up and turned him over to the authorities. He was promptly tried, convicted, and “hung by the neck until dead.”

In 1922, another author, Captain Clifton Lisle, took Taylor’s villain, and devoted a whole book to him with his *Sandy Flash, the Highwayman of Castle Rock*. All of the larger than life stories that had grown up around Sandy Flash were re-told in detail in the Lisle book. The real Fitz merged with the fictitious Flash, and in the 21st century, who knows the difference?

I’ve been searching for that line between truth and fiction, and also seeking local connections. There are at least three stories that have a Newtown tie. Fitz had an accomplice, Mordecai Dougherty, who took care of the horses of the travelers at the tavern in the Taylor book. A later writer said that Dougherty was actually the hostler at the Square Tavern in Newtown.



A Springfield boy recalled years later of a man stopping by the Fox Chase Tavern (which still stands as an office building) to have his horse shod. The stranger asked what the boy knew about Captain Fitz. The boy admitted that everyone was afraid of him. The stranger flipped a coin to the boy and told him to tell his friends that he had met Captain Fitz. The most colorful Newtown connection is given in Ashmead’s 1884 History of Delaware County. In that account, Fitz walked into the Square Tavern with both pistols drawn, called for a drink and downed it while still holding one pistol, then said “Good day, gentlemen” and backed out of the door, jumped on his horse, and disappeared ... in a flash, no doubt.

A few of us in the Historical Society have formed a posse to track down the historical Captain Fitz and re-trace his haunts. We have a few more stops to make, and then will be publishing what we have found at our website. Join the Society and follow along on our adventures. And in the meantime, walk in the steps of the notorious Captain Fitz at the historic Square Tavern, open on Saturdays from 1-4:00 p.m. during July and August.

Doug Humes is a board member of the Newtown Square Historical Society. Visit our website at www.historicnewtownsquare.org for more information.