

the MILITARY OCCUPATION of CHESTER COUNTY

By Doug Humes

Chester County was a part of the battleground of the American Revolution from the fall of 1777, when the British and their Hessian mercenaries landed at the head of the Chesapeake Bay, till June of 1778 when they marched off towards New York. Delaware County did not exist at the time of the American Revolution. What we now know as Delaware County was simply the eastern townships of a much larger Chester County. So when we talk about Chester County being a battleground, we are talking largely about Delaware County – as the townships closest to the British army in Philadelphia bore the brunt of the occupation.

After the battle of Brandywine, the British occupied Philadelphia, and so were safe on one side of the Schuylkill River. However, they needed food, supplies, and horses, and they needed to keep their soldiers employed in some productive activities. Where was the food? In the farming communities outside of the city. Where were the American troops that could protect these communities? They were camped on the heights of Valley Forge – far enough away from the British that they could not be surprised, and close to roads that would lead them further west if the British tried to come calling.

The countryside between these two armies was caught in the middle of the fight, and not all of that country-



side was in favor of independence. The minister at St. David's Church was required to offer up prayers for the King and his family – and many in the congregation opposed that thought and let him know. The Quakers who filled Chester County were generally very successful farmers and merchants, philosophically opposed to violence, and war was a challenge on all of those grounds. The British had hard money with which to buy their goods, while the Americans had currency that “wasn't worth a Continental.” So their preference was a sale to the British. The German settlers were not anxious to fight their Hessian brethren. Opinions varied from person to person, and families and communities were torn by these divided allegiances.

Both armies needed supplies, and neither army was above simply taking it when they needed it. A soldier had to eat, and had to stay warm. The American government, weak to begin with, had fled to York, Pennsylvania. They could not protect the countryside. The Pennsyl-

vania state government fled as well, to Lancaster. The outlaw Captain Fitz took advantage of the breakdown in civil authority, and roamed the countryside as well, preying on tax collectors and travelers unlucky enough to meet with him on a lonely stretch of road.

The Pennsylvania militia, volunteers called up to serve for a limited duration, were of some help. General James Potter had command of the militia during that time. In the fall and winter of 1777, the British repeatedly raided eastern Chester County, “Robbing and plundering every person they came across.” General Potter reported on a December raid through Newtown as follows: “My penn cant describe there Barbarity and Crualty, nor can you conseve the waste and Destruction that attended there futsteps every where they go.” A British officer reported: “Lt. Col. Harcourt with a party of dragoons and Light Infantry made an Excursion on the Philadelphia road and brought in 150 horses, which were much wanted, got from New Town square 6 miles from hence.” A Haverford resident reported his losses “In a word, a number of things too tedious to mention; as not even a spoon left to eat my victuals, nor a comb to comb my hair; bonds, notes and other accounts, writings, &c., &c.”

To deal with these situations, Washington wrote this order: “You are immediately to send Genl. Potter with about 600 of our militia across the Schuylkill, with directions to keep himself in such a situation as will be most convenient for interrupting the enemy's intercourse, between Philadelphia and Chester He is to take every method to keep himself well acquainted with what is doing, and to embrace every opportunity of cutting off the convoys and intercepting the dispatches passing between their army and shipping; and to use every method to prevent their getting supplies from the country around them, and in a word to give them all the annoyance and disturbance he can. I would not mean to bend him to any precise position or mode of acting, to answer the ends proposed; but leave him to his own discretion to persue such measures as circumstances shall point out. It appears to me, however, that NEWTOWN SQUARE would be a good general place of rendezvous, from which he might send out his detachments ...”

General Potter followed Washington's advice, and established his base in Newtown at the home of Azariah Lewis in what we now call Echo Valley. Washington also asked Major John Clark to gather intelligence of British movements in the countryside, and Clark established his base not far from Potter, at another

Lewis farmhouse on the Goshen Road just up from the ford over Crum creek. There was no “West Chester Pike” then. The main road for farmers in Chester County to bring their wares to market was the Goshen road, and so Potter and Clark effectively could put an end to farmers bringing their food supplies to the British over this road. Major Clark would ride



off each day from Newtown, in civilian garb, to be the eyes and ears of Washington in Chester County, to report on British forays, skirmishes with the militia, and the sentiments of the local population. Much of their correspondence remains, and it brings home in detail what life in the lawless area between the two armies was like.

Everyone knows of the suffering at Valley Forge that winter, but those who bore the brunt of the raids and confiscations in the countryside suffered as well, when their livestock were taken, their stocks of food, their blankets, clothes, tools, and even their spoons to eat their victuals. But I imagine that these early settlers, living next to each other's families and intermarrying for generations, knew how to take care of each other, in a way that is lost to us two centuries later. They survived and endured that winter, and in June, the armies marched off, one after the other, to visit that type of destruction on other communities

that had the misfortune to be in their path.

The war would go on for another three years, but it would not return to Chester County. That occupation has virtually disappeared into history; and yet local witnesses remain – the Goshen road, old St. David's Church, the Square Tavern, General Potter's headquarters in Echo Valley, and Major Clark's headquarters, to name just a few. Whenever I pass these places I see British cavalry, American militia, farmers looking on as their homes are robbed at gunpoint, and their winter's supply of grain is loaded into British wagons headed for Philadelphia. In places that never experienced the American Revolution firsthand, the story is told in words; but here in Chester and Delaware counties, it is told in a picture book that is still all around us, if we pay a little attention to our local history. And if we preserve these places for future generations.