



The Last Days of William Wolfe

Sean Moir

As William Wolfe set sail from Cork, Ireland, in the spring of 1775, he must have hoped that one day he would return to live out the remainder of his life peacefully in the land of his birth, eventually being laid to rest with a ceremony befitting an officer of His Majesty's army. Instead, he died a continent away on enemy soil in a midnight raid, and was buried in a shallow grave at the nearest Anglican church without so much as a functioning clergy to oversee his interment.

Besieged in Boston

Wolfe had been a Lieutenant in the 40th Regiment of Foot since 1771, and had just been promoted to Captain, at the age of 25, when his regiment was called to Boston to assist in putting down a local rebellion against the Crown.¹ It must have been quite a surprise when he arrived that June to find General Sir William Howe and his entire army of 8,000 men in the process of being besieged by 14,000 Continental soldiers from all over the 13 colonies, led by General George Washington of Virginia.

In the spring of 1776, it became apparent to Howe that Boston needed to be evacuated immediately, before his supplies ran out and his fleet was destroyed by enemy artillery, which now occupied the heights overlooking Boston Harbor. Not long after sailing his forces to the safety of Halifax, Nova

Scotia, he directed his entire fleet back to the rebellious southern colonies, where they entered the mouth of the Hudson River through the Verrazano Narrows. On the eve of America's independence, July 3rd, 1776, Howe landed on Staten Island, in the still Royal Colony of New York. For Howe, the New York City area represented a valuable strategic prize, since it could potentially be used as a jumping off point to either New England or Philadelphia.

A Foothold in New Jersey

During the waning days of summer, Captain Wolfe's Company battled through Brooklyn and Harlem Heights and up to White Plains. They fought alongside the famously kilted 42nd Royal Highland Regiment, who upheld their reputation for ferocity throughout the successful three month campaign. Howe then proceeded to set up, perhaps prematurely, a number of winter garrisons in New Jersey, stretching from the port town of Perth Amboy, where Captain Wolfe was stationed, to New Brunswick where the Royal Highlanders encamped, and as far as Burlington, NJ, where German-speaking Hessian mercenaries, under the command of General Charles Cornwallis, camped upon the Delaware River.

The recently self-liberated Americans perceived this location as a direct threat against their capital city of Philadelphia.

So, in a surprise move on Christmas Eve, Washington attacked the Hessian troops in Trenton, forcing them back to Princeton where reinforcements waited – including Wolfe and the “Fighting Fortieth.” But in another cunning maneuver, Washington drove the British back to a small corner of New Jersey between New Brunswick and Perth Amboy, across the Arthur Kill from Staten Island.

By early January, Washington’s numbers had dwindled to only about 1,000 men, as he finally settled down for the winter less than 25 miles north of Howe, in Morristown, New Jersey just behind the Watchung Mountains. These heights served as both a protective buffer between the two armies and as high ground from which Washington could keep an eye on enemy movements below.

The 40th Light Company and the 2nd Light Infantry
Down in Perth Amboy in the winter of 1776-77, Captain Wolfe was busy selecting and training the men who would be serving under him that coming summer in the 40th Light Company. This company, taken from the 40th Regiment of Foot, consisted of about 40 men and was built for speed and stealth. The 40th was one of thirteen light companies that made up the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion of about 500 men. Wolfe had been captain of the 40th Light Company since its inception the previous fall, and was the sixth most senior captain in the 2nd Light Infantry.² The practice of fielding a light infantry had recently gained popularity with the British in North America after traditional military formations proved too difficult to maneuver in wilderness battles against French settlers and native inhabitants.

A typical soldier in the 40th Light Company has been described as wearing the campaign dress of cut-down hat, short jacket, gaitered overalls, and a blanket sling instead of a knapsack. Rolled up inside his blanket sling would have been his wallet containing all his “necessaries.” He also carried a tin canteen and a linen haversack that held his food rations, for which he often had to forage. Otherwise, apart from his musket and bayonet, he was unencumbered.

Camp Life in Perth Amboy

Camp life was not easy in Perth Amboy in the winter of 1776-77, and not everyone was coping well with the level of austerity that was required of a light infantryman. One of Wolfe’s counterparts from the 17th Light Company, Captain William Leslie, complained “My whole stock consists of two shirts, two pair of shoes, two handkerchiefs half of which I use, the other half I carry in my blanket, like a peddler’s pack.”³

A detailed glimpse into the camp life of Captain Wolfe and his men in Perth Amboy can be gleaned from the British Army Orderly Book of the 40th Light Company that was captured by Americans in August of 1777. It appears that some men of the 40th found it difficult to strictly adhere to the military standards of neatness. Numerous entries in the

Orderly Book report how the troops needed repeated reminding to “have their necessities constantly packed in their wallets, ready to sling in their blankets which they are to parade with every morning.”⁴

As spring developed, Washington’s pressure on the British food supply intensified as American privateers managed to prevent or delay a growing number of British food shipments coming from Ireland. As a result, the British army’s primary source of food had to be obtained by foraging. However, the foraging parties were being constantly harassed by Washington’s men, who orchestrated their every move from the heights above New Brunswick. It eventually got to the point that any successful British foraging party required at least 1,500 men.⁵

Women and alcohol were also sources of anxiety for the men in camp. The troops needed to be warned that “Any women detected in bringing spirituous liquors to camp or selling it [will] be immediately drummed out of the Regiment and never allowed to join it again.” The army preferred to regulate the use of alcohol itself: “rum is to be delivered regularly to ye company every day at 12 o’clock which the officer of the day is to see mixed with three waters as soon as ever he returns from the watering party.”⁶

It was about this time in Canada, 400 miles to the north, that General John Burgoyne of the British Royal Army began his campaign to sever New England from the rest of the colonies by gaining control of the Hudson Valley. The plan called for Burgoyne to march south while Howe simultaneously headed north up the Hudson River from New York City. The two armies were expected to meet near Albany that summer where Burgoyne was to “put himself under the command of Sir William Howe.”⁷

Unfortunately for Howe, the same Continental army that had been harassing his foraging parties in northeast New Jersey for the last six months was also blocking his land route to Albany or Philadelphia. And preparing his army for a ship voyage anywhere would take at least a month.

The New Jersey Forage Wars

Howe did not fear Washington’s army. On the contrary, he was prepared at any moment to engage them in open battle. The problem was that the Continental army, which had grown to 9,000 men by May, was not interested in such a battle. Instead they had moved their entire winter encampment from Morristown to the very defensible heights of Middlebrook in the Watchung Mountains, only 10 miles north of New Brunswick, where they chose to stay until an advantageous opportunity arose.

General Anthony Wayne’s brigade, who were camped near Chimney Rock that spring⁸, would have had a clear view, many for the first time, of Howe’s army parading below on the open plains as they tried to bait the Americans into con-

flict. And if the new Continental recruits in Wayne's 7th Pennsylvania Regiment weren't intimidated by the spectacle of the British light infantry marching in full campaign dress, they should have been, because before the coming summer turned to fall, those same light infantrymen would be appearing out of the midnight darkness within bayonet thrusting range.

As a last effort to coax Washington down from the mountains, Howe feigned evacuation of New Jersey by marching all his troops out of New Brunswick and consolidating the entire army of 15,000 in Perth Amboy. The plan was to have light infantry and dragoons march immediately out of Perth Amboy and strike Washington's entire army, which was presumably chasing the ostensibly retreating Howe.

On June 24th, Captain Wolfe and his light company, still camped at Perth Amboy, received orders, "to hold themselves in readiness to embark and be brigaded." The next day they were told "the Army...will March in two Columns from the right by half companies...None but the Light Infantry and Flankers to be loaded on this march...All the Women and Children are to remain with the Baggage."⁹ So the light infantry led the British forces on the morning of June 26th in what is now referred to as the Battle of Short Hills. But instead of finding the entire Continental army, they discovered only about 2,000 men from the 5th Continental Division within striking distance. These Continentals were ready to fight and they inflicted disproportionate damage on the British, killing seventy, while themselves losing only around a dozen men.

By now, Howe had grown tired of New Jersey, so he decided to realize the evacuation from Perth Amboy which had started as a ruse. The Forage Wars, as they came to be known, clearly turned out in Washington's favor, since the Continental army had managed to successfully block the British from advancing by land to either Philadelphia or Albany. Howe's next move would have to be by sea.¹⁰

For a man like Wolfe, loyal enough to risk his very life for king and country, it must have felt like one humiliation after another, starting in Boston and continuing in Trenton and across New Jersey. Now all that humiliation culminated as His Majesty's army was literally driven into the sea by an undisciplined army of rebels for the second time in a year. Fortunately for Howe, who had the world's most powerful Navy at his disposal, the sea wasn't such a bad place.

Stalled in Staten Island

It was early in July, and there was still half a campaign season left, as Howe's forces settled back on Staten Island, which had been the starting point of the New York campaign. In the course of a year they had made a great loop as far north as White Plains and across the Hudson River to New Jersey and south. Perhaps it could be said that the British failed to take control of New Jersey that spring, but sum-

mer had just begun, and New York City belonged to General Howe.

Nevertheless, he still had a lot of work ahead of him. Embarking 17,000 men, 5,000 horses, wagons, arms, and ammunition for a possibly months-long campaign was a daunting task in itself. He needed time to plan. And then once upon the sea, where would he sail? He much preferred the idea of going to Philadelphia than to Albany, writing, "to make the capital an objective was the surest road to peace and the defeat of the rebel army."¹¹ But first he needed to hear that Burgoyne was doing fine without him.

By the end of the first week of July, most of his troops had embarked the ships, including Major General Charles Grey, who just arrived from England, and the Light Infantry Battalions, who were some of the last to board. Now the crew waited for the word to set sail from Admiral Richard Howe, General Howe's brother. On July 15th General Howe received the letter he'd been waiting for from Burgoyne reporting that he had made great progress down Lake Champlain and had taken Fort Ticonderoga on the northern end of Lake George. Delighted to hear that his services weren't urgently needed after all, Howe immediately sent a letter of congratulations to Burgoyne, being sure to add that if Washington, "goes to the northward, contrary to my expectation, and you can keep him at bay, be assured I shall soon be after him to relieve you."¹² But that was the last thing Howe wanted or expected to do. The real point of his letter was to make it clear that, "my intention is for Pennsylvania where I expect to meet Washington."¹³ A week later, on July 23, Howe's fleet of over 200 vessels set sail for Philadelphia.

Howe Sails to Philadelphia

The southerly direction of Howe's fleet left Washington in a state of disbelief. By now he fully expected that he'd be dealing head-on with a British assault up the Hudson River towards Albany. Instead, his army stood almost paralyzed in New Jersey, trying to determine if Howe's apparent move south was yet another ruse, and if his real intention was to double back toward New York or even Boston. Washington didn't start to be convinced that Philadelphia was Howe's true destination until the fleet was spotted off Egg Harbor later that week.¹⁴ Then on July 30, Howe paused once more, this time anchored at the mouth of the Delaware River, where he and his officers considered a naval assault upon Philadelphia. After deciding that the river was too heavily fortified, they set off for the Chesapeake Bay, whose headwaters would put them fifty land miles from Philadelphia.¹⁵ Upon hearing of the fleet's movements from his sources in southern New Jersey, Washington moved his army across the Delaware River to Bucks County where they spent the next few weeks camped uneasily awaiting further intelligence.

Howe's fleet continued on for another stormy, hot, crowded and unhealthy three weeks upon the sea. On August 14th they

rounded Cape Charles;¹⁶ past the recently destroyed town of Norfolk, Virginia; past the mouth of the James River where almost two hundred years earlier Britain had established its first permanent settlement in the New World; and past the mouth of the York River, where four years hence Cornwallis would surrender the last remaining hope of British supremacy in North America.

Washington recognized Howe's move as a potentially serious threat upon Philadelphia, but more importantly he saw it as an opportunity to "let all New England rise and crush Burgoyne"¹⁷ who, only days after sending that optimistic letter from Fort Ticonderoga, found his army mired in the densely forested and rugged mountains of the Adirondacks, abandoned by their Indian allies, harassed by angry frontier militia, and running desperately low on supplies. And to make matters worse, Washington was now sending Continental reinforcements to help determine Burgoyne's fate.

The Start of the Philadelphia Campaign

Early on August 25th, as the weather turned stormy once again, Howe's weary crew landed on the west side of the River Elk at Turkey Point in Maryland, just south of today's Elk Neck State Park. Captain Wolfe's company was among the first to disembark that day, along with other elite forces from the light infantry, the grenadiers, and the Hessian Jägers. The troops quickly chased off local militia, secured the area, set up camp, and tended to the cattle they had brought with them to the Head of the Elk. Some women came ashore too, but the Orderly Book specifically stated that "one woman per company is permitted to Land."¹⁸

That same day Washington and his army arrived in Wilmington, Delaware, from Philadelphia. The next morning he personally watched from a nearby hill just east of Elkton as the British disembarked. That night a bad storm rolled in and Washington sought shelter at a nearby Tory farmhouse before returning to Wilmington.

Howe had intended for his army to start marching on the 27th, but he wrote, "since the heavy rain continues, and the roads are bottomless, and since the horses are sick and stiff, we had to countermand the order to march."¹⁹ The Orderly Book reports that, "upon account of the badness of the weather the Commander In Chief is pleased to order an extra day's rum to be issued to the Army this fore noon."²⁰ While the rest of the army waited for further orders, Generals Cornwallis and Grey were sent to reconnoiter the region around the Head of the Elk.

On the 28th, Captain Wolfe began organizing his company to march along with the other elite forces under Cornwallis to occupy Elkton. This was Howe's first significant foray into enemy territory in over a month. That night he gladly joined his light troops, making his headquarters at the same Tory farmhouse where Washington had stayed two nights earlier. At this point Howe and Cornwallis' men rested for a few

days while they commandeered provisions for the long march to Philadelphia. This was about the time that Americans captured the British Orderly Book for the 40th Light Company that dated back to camp at Perth Amboy.

Washington's army of 11,000 was also on the move that day, establishing camp upon a farm along White Clay Creek between Newark and Newport, Delaware. It was there that Washington organized his own light infantry brigade under General William Maxwell.²¹

On August 30th, General Grey, the 3rd Brigade, and the Royal Highlanders crossed over to Cecil Court House on the Eastern Shore, where they set out on foraging missions which produced hundreds of cows and sheep and some badly needed horses. A couple days later, General von Knyphausen left Turkey Point and joined Grey to take command of Howe's Right Division. They headed north through more storms and swampy roads toward Glasgow, Delaware, where they joined Cornwallis' Left Division coming east from Elkton.

Washington's main force, including Wayne's Pennsylvania Division, moved back to a stronger position along Red Clay Creek near Newport, leaving Maxwell and his recently formed light infantry to harass the British advances.

On the morning of September 3rd, as Captain Wolfe and the vanguard of Cornwallis' division marched toward Newport, they were ambushed, Indian-style, just south of Cooch's Bridge, by Maxwell. After losing the element of surprise and spending most of their ammunition, Maxwell's men fell back to the bridge. The British light infantry attempted to encircle the Americans in a flanking maneuver, but became bogged down in the rain-soaked mire south of the Christina Creek. The battle ended in the mid afternoon as the Hessians organized a bayonet charge and chased the Americans back to Newport.²²

After the Battle of Cooch's Bridge, General Howe joined the army on the field along with the last of the brigades from Elkton. Admiral Howe was ordered to take the British fleet toward the Delaware River where they were to await the main army's arrival.

Howe's men began to move once more on September 8th, but not toward Newport as Washington expected. Instead, they marched due north through Newark to Kennett Square in Pennsylvania. Washington, having been outflanked, was forced to change his position, so he hurried to Chadds Ford along the Brandywine Creek to block Howe's route to Philadelphia.

The Battles of Brandywine and The Clouds

At sunrise on the morning of September 11th, 1777, only three miles separated the two rival armies in Pennsylvania.

The forces were numerically matched: Howe commanding 15,000 men and Washington 14,000.

The first British force to make contact with the Americans that morning was Knyphausen's division, which took the main road leading directly to the bulk of Washington's army. Maxwell's light infantry met them near Kennett Meeting House, but were driven back to Chadds Ford by the British advance forces. It was during this engagement that the Americans used the uncivilized tactic of faking surrender and then firing upon the enemy when they got within close range. Nevertheless, by 11am Knyphausen managed to deploy his artillery on the heights west of the creek and proceeded to engage the Americans in an artillery duel.

For the first time since White Plains almost a year earlier, Washington's entire army was battling head to head with the British, but what Washington didn't realize was that so far he was only seeing half of Howe's army. Only six miles upstream, on today's Route 842 just outside of West Chester, Cornwallis' men were about to turn south on Birmingham Road toward Chadds Ford. With artillery fire echoing in the distance, the bulk of Cornwallis' division stopped to rest at Osborne's Hill, while some Hessian Jägers and Royal Highlanders were sent ahead to scout the area around the Birmingham Meeting House.

By early afternoon, Washington became aware of the British flanking movement, and he sent two divisions to face the British near the meetinghouse. Around 4pm, the British started their march toward the Americans in three columns with Grenadiers on the right (west) side coming down Birmingham Road, while the light infantry dominated the British left side as they marched down New Street toward the meetinghouse where the two roads converge. With banners flying and music playing, Cornwallis' intimidating division made contact with the Americans around Street Road. The Continental's left (west) side collapsed quickly as Hessian Grenadiers poured across the road while the Americans were still lining up.

The British light infantry met more stubborn resistance at the meetinghouse where the two sides fought, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat, until almost sunset, when the Americans had no choice but to flee the scene. The British chased them to Dilworthtown where the Americans reformed their lines. As the British light infantry and Grenadiers approached once again with support from the 4th Brigade, the Americans fired and felled almost all of the British officers in two regiments - another tactic almost unheard of in civilized warfare. As nightfall came, neither side had the strength to continue, and the Americans retreated unmoled toward Chester.

Down in Chadds Ford, Wayne's division fared little better against Knyphausen, who commenced his assault across the creek around 4pm when he heard the fighting start in Bir-

mingham. By nightfall, Wayne's men joined the rest of the Americans fleeing toward Chester.

The Battle of Brandywine turned out to be the largest battle of the American Revolution resulting in the highest number of single-day casualties. Although Howe's tactics were masterfully implemented, and the British clearly won the battle, he was widely criticized for not pursuing Washington vigorously enough after the battle.²³

The bulk of Howe's army spent the next few days recuperating at Dilworthtown, while Cornwallis and a few brigades, including the light infantry, camped upon the heights of Aston toward Chester, near present-day Neumann College. It was here that Wolfe's company witnessed, for the first time under Howe's orders, the hanging of a fellow light infantryman and a grenadier for plundering nearby civilians.²⁴

The day after the battle, the Americans found themselves in the safety of Philadelphia, knowing, however, that they would soon be required to mobilize once again to defend the capital city against the invading army. So, on the 15th, with darkening clouds on the horizon, Washington moved his army west along the Lancaster Road through Lower Merion and Tredyffrin to an area between the Paoli Tavern, located on the current site of the Paoli Post office, and the White Horse Tavern, which still stands today across from the Home Depot.

This was a strategic site, because it covered the intersection of many important roads. Just to the south was the British camp at Dilworthtown; to the east was Swedes Ford, one of the best fords across the Schuylkill; to the west were important food depots; and to the north was the main supply depot of Reading, as well as a number of iron furnaces which manufactured much of the artillery and ammunition for the Continental Army. Upon learning of Washington's new position, Howe called upon his army to move north and reconverge near the Goshen Meeting House.

On the 16th, Washington moved his troops up the South Valley Hill to a position along King Road between Ship and Chester Roads, in front of present-day Immaculata University. Wayne's men were ordered to move to advanced positions along the left toward the Goshen Meeting House on Chester Road where Cornwallis was headquartered, and on the right near the Boot Tavern at Ship Road. The British light infantry quickly repelled Wayne's advance troops on Chester Road, while Hessian Jägers, arriving from Dilworthtown with Knyphausen, engaged Wayne's men near the Boot Tavern. Recognizing the weakness of his position, Washington ordered his men back down to the White Horse Tavern, as the British prepared to enter the valley from both sides: near today's Church Farm School on the west and the Chester Valley Golf Course on the east.

Army, 15,000 (Major General William Howe)
Left Division, 10,000 (Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen)
Light Infantry, 550
2nd Light Infantry Battalion
40th Light Company, 50 (**Captain William Wolfe**)
Various other Companies from various regiments, 40-50 each
3rd Brigade, 1,500 (Major General Charles Grey)
15th Regiment, 400
Various Companies
17th Regiment, 200
42nd Regiment, 600 (Black Watch)
44th Regiment, 300
4th Brigade, 1,400 (Brigadier General James Agnew)
65th Regiment, 400
3 other Regiments, 300 – 400 each
Artillery, 400
Guard Brigade, 900
2 Battalions, 450 each
16th Dragoons, 100
Hessian Brigade, 3,300
4 – 5 Regiments
Hessian Grenadiers, 1,300
3 Battalions, 400-450 each
Hessian Jägers, 550
Right Division, 5000 (Major General Charles Cornwallis)
2nd Brigade, 1,500 (Major General James Grant)
40th Regiment, 300 (Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Musgrave)
4 other Regiments, 250-350 each
1st Brigade, 1,400
4 regiments, 250-350 each
Queen's Rangers, 400
English Riflemen, 150
Light Infantry, 550
1st Light Infantry Battalion
Various Companies from various regiments, 40-50 each
British Grenadiers, 1,000
2 Battalions, 550 each

Approximate Military Structure of the British Army during their movements in the Great Valley.

With his back against the North Valley Ridge, in the vicinity of East Whiteland's Battle of the Clouds Park, Washington desperately tried to reform his lines as he prepared for the second meeting in less than a week of the two competing armies. Then the skies, which had been threatening all day, burst open in a deluge. This was at least the third major storm in the three weeks since the British arrived in the region, and it was by far the worst. The roads quickly became impassable and the ammunition unusable, bringing an end to the Battle of the Clouds before it even started.

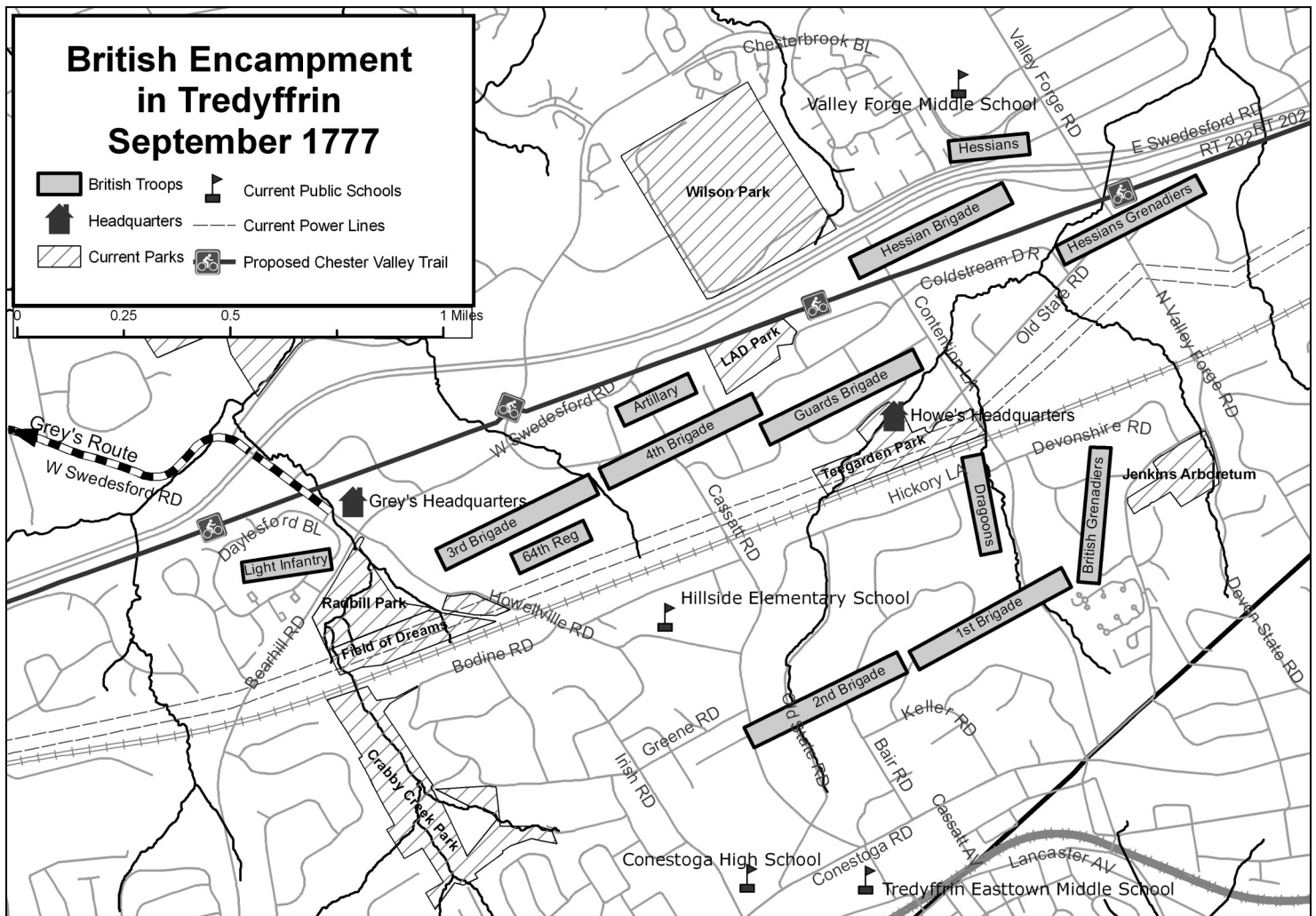
For Washington, the storm was somewhat of a blessing, because it gave him the opportunity to escape to the safety of Yellow Springs, about six miles distant. However, it turned out to be a grueling eight hours away over hilly, muddy, bottomless roads.

The next day, with rain still coming down, Washington took his army even further northwest toward Elverson to obtain much needed dry supplies from Reading while Wayne remained at Yellow Springs awaiting further orders. In contrast, Howe's army chose to rest on the 17th in and around the soggy field of battle. Cornwallis occupied the White Horse Tavern, while Howe stayed at the Boot.²⁵

Tredyffrin Encampment

On the morning of September 18th, Howe's route to Philadelphia was no longer blocked by Washington's army, but now by a more formidable obstacle, the swollen Schuylkill River. In need of a more comfortable place to camp while he waited for the waters to subside, Howe marched his army east toward the township of Tredyffrin, where scouts reported fertile fields and plentiful drinking water. Captain Friedrich von Munchhausen, a Hessian member of Howe's staff, later commented that "the Valley Creek, part of which flows through our camp, has the best water I have tasted here in America."²⁶

The army moved in two columns. Cornwallis' smaller division of 5,000 men, marching on the right side since Brandywine, climbed back up the south ridge along the Lancaster Road, passing first the Paoli Tavern and then the Blue Ball Tavern. They set up camp along the crest of the ridge beside the headwaters of Trout Creek. Knyphausen's division of 10,000, now on the left, marched in the valley along the muddy and rutted Swedesford Road. The Hessian brigade at the head of the column got as far as Valley Forge Road before they encamped just north of the Great Valley Baptist Church. General Howe set up his headquarters in the house



The Chester Valley Trail may include segments of the Patriots Path trail, a Chester County project intended to link Valley Forge National Historical Park to the site of the Paoli Massacre. Map courtesy of the Chester County GIS Department, 2008.

of Samuel Jones along Trout Creek near Contention Lane. The bulk of the Division made their camps between Howellville Road and Contention Lane, tucked safely between Swedesford Road and the base of the South Valley ridge.

Captain Wolfe's company and the rest of the 2nd Light Infantry bivouacked along the west side of Crabby Creek, across from Howell's Tavern, where General Grey had set up his headquarters. Just upstream, on the east side of Howellville Road, was Grey's Third Brigade and the 42nd Royal Highlanders. Along Bear Hill Road, between the Highlanders and the Light Infantry, numerous cattle and sheep, recently seized from the neighboring countryside, were corralled in their pens.

The British occupied almost one thousand acres of land in central Tredyffrin for three nights between September 18th and the 21st. In 2008 terms we would say that the Light Infantry camped at Daylesford Lakes; the cattle and sheep grazed in the area of Radbill Park and the Field of Dreams; General Grey's headquarters was diagonally across from Howellville Headquarters at the corner of Route 252 and West Swedesford Road; the Royal Highlanders were in the

vicinity of the Refuge Pentecostal Church; while the bulk of the encampment continued east from PECO's Berwyn Service Building, following the power lines to Teegarden Park where General Howe made his headquarters. The Hessians, meanwhile, occupied an area roughly between Barnes and Noble and Valley Forge Middle School, near the southeast corner of Wilson Farm Park. Higher on the ridge, Cornwallis' men were spread out along what today is Bair Road, Keller Road, and Margo Lane, following the ridge almost as far east as Jenkins Arboretum.

Since the British chose to travel light, most of their tents were back at the Elk River, which meant they needed to build their own shelters, which they referred to as "wigwams", from whatever they could find in the area, including leaves, cornstalks, and fence rails. One British Grenadier later wrote that, "the fatigues of the march from the Head of the Elk River to Philadelphia...were really great, our best habitations being wigwams, through which the heavy rains of this climate...easily penetrated."²⁷

As was the case in New Jersey that spring, the British army had become cut off from their supply base, which meant

they were compelled to forage for food. Certainly, these were not the best days for Tredyffrin residents, who watched helplessly as their household property, their crops, their livestock and the fence rails that contained them, were confiscated by the invading army. Franklin Burns of the Tredyffrin Easttown History Club described in 1940 how the British “army behaved as if in a conquered country, sweeping the land bare of provisions”, and how “the Hessians would sneak out of camp without their muskets and visit nearby Quaker farmhouses in search of plunder.”²⁸

The day they arrived in Tredyffrin, British scouts reported a storehouse of particular interest located a couple miles downstream from the encampment at an iron forge along Valley Creek, on the northern border of the township in present-day Valley Forge Park. Apparently, a local iron-master, Colonel William Dewees, had been storing massive amounts of food and other supplies for the Continental Army in these facilities.

Trying to stay a step ahead of Howe that morning, Washington ordered Colonel Alexander Hamilton and Captain Harry Lee to the scene to assist Dewees in salvaging what they could, before the British seized the bounty for themselves. But it was already too late. Howe had sent a number of Dragoons and troops from the 1st Light Infantry to the forge site. Upon their arrival, both Hamilton and Lee narrowly escaped; the former on a flat-bottom boat, the latter on horse up the Nutt Road (Route 23) toward Phoenixville. Casualties included one man dead, one horse dead, and one man wounded. According to von Munchhausen, the British walked away with “4,000 barrels of flour in addition to quantities of axes, horseshoes, and other small items... 123 horses, but unfortunately no rum or other beverages, which we need most of all.”²⁹

Intelligence Intercepts in the Great Valley

Early on the 19th, General Wayne and his 2,000 men moved from their camp at Yellow Springs on Washington’s orders to get behind Howe. They were instructed to “harass and distress” the British when they started to march, and if possible accomplish “the cutting of the enemy’s baggage”, while being especially careful to “take care of ambuscades.”³⁰

That evening the British received intelligence that Wayne had been dispatched and was setting up camp near the Paoli Tavern. Captain Wolfe’s company was called upon once again to perform some stealth maneuvering and surprise Wayne. According to von Munchhausen, the 2nd Light Infantry “had almost surrounded him when fate intervened. Two drunken Englishmen fired at a picket, which touched off an alarm, and permitted their escape.”³¹ This may have been a lucky turn of events for Wayne, but more ominously, it reminded Howe that loaded muskets can eliminate the element of surprise on a night-time raid.

Wayne’s understanding was that General Smallwood and his

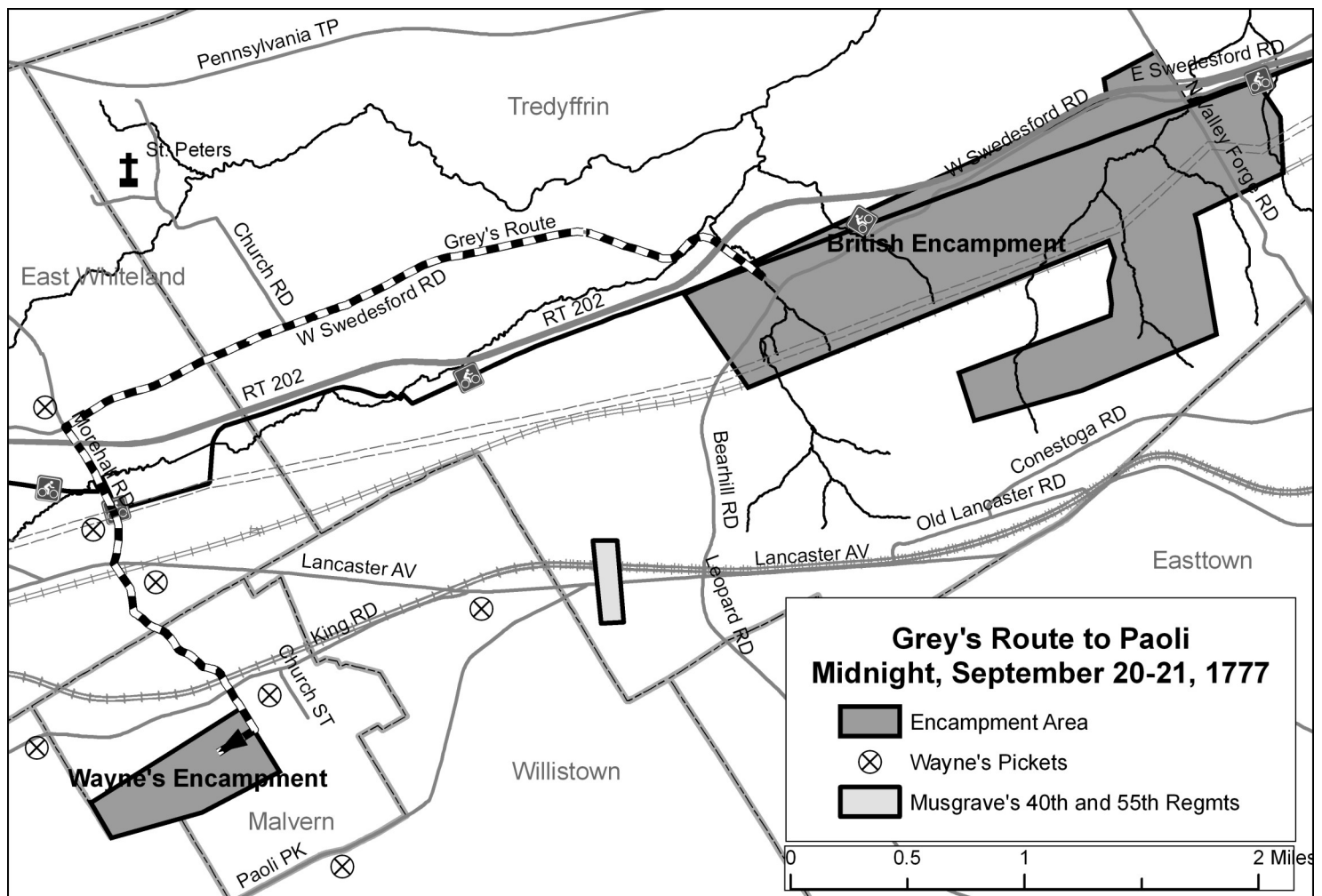
2,000 militiamen from Maryland would be arriving soon, at which point they would combine forces and attack Howe’s right flank under Cornwallis on top of the ridge just off Conestoga Road. Meanwhile, General Maxwell’s light infantry was to attack Knyphausen’s men on the left flank in the valley along Swedesford Road. Wayne also understood that Washington’s main force would be there to back them up as they attempted to pin Howe’s army against the swollen Schuylkill River. Had this come to pass, it may have led to a considerable battle on Tredyffrin soil, but Wayne’s letters to Washington, urging him to arrive quickly so they could commence the battle, went unanswered.

Wayne was unaware that his plans for a concerted attack upon Howe had already been made impossible by the fact that Washington had opted to maneuver around the British, to their front, by crossing the Schuylkill River near Pottstown and heading downstream toward Trappe. Strategically, this could have worked to the American advantage because it put the British in the middle of a pincer. It was risky, however, because it left Wayne’s men isolated. Even worse, Wayne was completely unaware of Washington’s recent movements because Howe had intercepted the message that was meant to notify him of the change in plans. So as Wayne sat in Paoli planning his attack upon the British in Tredyffrin, he may have perceived his location as concealed and substantially reinforced by his compatriots, while in actuality it was quite well known and highly vulnerable.

General Howe recognized Wayne’s position as a threat to his “hundreds of supply wagons and herds of livestock”³² located along Bear Hill Road, and now with full knowledge of Wayne’s whereabouts in Paoli, and further knowing of Wayne’s plan to attack him as soon as Smallwood arrived, Howe needed to act quickly to avert trouble in his rear. General Grey’s aide Captain John Andre wrote in his journal on the 20th, “Intelligence having been received of the situation of General Wayne and his design of attacking our rear, a plan was concerted for surprising him and the execution entrusted to Major-General Grey.”³³

Death in Paoli

On September 20th, Captain William Wolfe was called to organize his 40th Light Company for a second consecutive night-time raid. As the sun slipped from his view, unknowingly for the very last time, Wolfe reported to General Grey’s headquarters at Howell’s Tavern, along with 1,200 other British troops including the rest of the 2nd Light Infantry, the 44th Regiment, the 42nd Royal Highlander Regiment, and about a dozen light horsemen of the 16th Dragoons.³⁴ In order to not repeat the mistakes of the previous night, Howe ordered complete quiet, “under the threat of the death penalty.”³⁵ To achieve this, Grey planned to rely on the bayonet, so he ordered his men not to load their weapons and to remove their flints, earning him the sobriquet “No Flint Grey.” Recalling from the previous week the American ambushes, their practice of fake surrenders, and the targeting of offi-



Map courtesy of the Chester County GIS Department, 2008.

cers, Grey must have felt somewhat justified in using his own ruthless and grizzly tactics that night.

Meanwhile, along Conestoga Road, Musgrave was taking command of the 40th and 55th Regiments of Foot as they prepared to head west toward the Paoli Tavern, where they planned to lay waiting for any of Wayne's men who might consider trying to escape to the east. While in the area, they also planned to take the opportunity to search Waynesborough, Wayne's home in Easttown, where eyewitnesses later reported that they "behaved with the utmost politeness to the Women and said they only wanted the General. They did not disturb the least article."³⁶

Grey's forces left camp around 10:00 pm heading west on Swedesford Road, making sure to detain any Tredyffrin resident, sometimes a little roughly, who might have been tempted to sound the alarm. As they approached Moore Hall Road, present-day Route 29, they were spotted by a couple of Wayne's mounted pickets who fired their weapons and sped away to alert Wayne of the coming British advance.

Grey's men didn't flinch as they turned south toward the Warren Tavern, knowing Wayne was camped somewhere on the ridge behind it. Upon reaching the tavern, they abducted

a blacksmith who led them up Longford (Warren) Road toward the east side of Wayne's camp where they were fired upon by Lieutenant Randolph's pickets without effect. The pickets started to run, but were quickly bayoneted by British Dragoons, as were the next set of pickets at the top of the hill near the present-day Malvern train station. Had they come up the old Sugartown Road the British would have been approaching from the west side of Wayne's encampment, increasing the likelihood of driving the Americans into the hands of Musgrave and possibly a mass surrender.

Up to this point, no shots had been fired by British troops and no British had been killed, but many American pickets were lying dead, some mistakenly shot by their own comrades. Now, with pickets out of the way, the British light infantry force charged into Wayne's camp, bayonets first, scattering the 1st Pennsylvania who had been stationed in the woods between Warren Road and the encampment. This left the 7th Pennsylvania exposed, and illuminated in front of their wigwags by their own fires, as they desperately tried to organize themselves to evacuate the camp.

It had been only four months since Wayne's men first spied the British light infantry from the heights of Chimney Rock as they paraded on the plains of New Jersey. On this night

they were face-to-face with those same light infantrymen as they came roaring into camp with bloodthirsty bellows and bayonets flashing. But before the panicked Continentals were driven from their camp, the 7th Pennsylvania managed to fire enough shots to kill three British light infantry troops, one of whom was Captain William Wolfe as he led the 40th Light Company onto the field of victory.

As Wolfe lie dying in the darkness, subsequent waves of British troops, including saber-wielding dragoons and kilted Royal Highlanders, came rushing in, trumpets blasting, to complete the mission. This moment is depicted famously in the Xavier Della Gatta painting entitled *The Paoli Massacre*, which is the work that Thomas McGuire uses as the cover for his book, *Battle of Paoli*. Captain Wolfe, remembered by his countrymen as “a most brave and attentive officer”³⁷ is shown lying dead in the foreground of the painting, putting him on the bottom of the book’s spine as it faces out from bookshelves.

After the battle, Grey’s forces united with Musgrave outside the Paoli Tavern, while Wolfe’s body, the other two dead British soldiers, and a number of wounded, both British and American, were placed on wagons and taken back to the Tredyffrin encampment before the break of day on the 21st.

For General Wayne, Smallwood’s arrival just outside of camp at midnight was too little, too late. The Americans had no choice but to retreat westward, leaving the British with a clear route to Philadelphia.

Before leaving Tredyffrin, and the Great Valley, Howell’s Tavern was converted from a headquarters for General Grey into a hospital for Americans whose injuries he had orchestrated. For years it was unclear exactly what had happened to the bodies of Wolfe and his British compatriots, but recent investigation has helped to support the local belief that all three British fallen were buried on the grounds of St. Peter’s Church in the Great Valley.

Beyond Paoli

In the moments before his death, the 27-year-old Captain Wolfe was at the vanguard of a British army that defended an empire upon which the sun never set; an empire that continued to flourish around the world. Certainly, Howe’s forces dealt with some humiliation earlier that spring in New Jersey, but that was behind them now. In September, 1777, the British were winning the war against their wayward American brethren. The King’s forces occupied New York City, Burgoyne was still making progress towards Albany, and Howe was about to take Philadelphia – the seat of the rebellion. There was much for a British army Captain in the late 18th century to be proud of.

What William Wolfe would never know, however, was that the conquest of Philadelphia was a Pyrrhic victory with little strategic significance, especially after the escape of the Con-

tinental Congress to York. And neither Wolfe nor anybody at the time could have known that this was the fall before the winter of Washington’s Valley Forge encampment, where the Continental Army transformed itself into a disciplined fighting force with confidence and strength enough to put the British Lion on the run; chasing it completely from the thirteen colonies when the Treaty of Paris was signed six Septembers after Paoli, which suddenly left Wolfe’s bones no longer within the British realm, but beneath foreign soil, destined it seemed to lie in a remote churchyard, quietly forsaken, with never a proper Christian burial.

Commemoration for the Fallen at St. Peter’s Church

Over the years there have been quite a few ceremonies to honor the fallen American soldiers at the Battle of Paoli, but none to pay tribute to the British men who died. That is, until 2007, two hundred and thirty Septembers after the Battle of Paoli, when a Commemoration ceremony was held at St. Peter’s Church, where all three British light infantrymen who sacrificed their lives for their country that night were finally honored.

This chapter of the story began in 2002, when Roger Thorne, Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society President and St. Peter’s historian, attempted to generate some interest among reenactment groups to commemorate the 225th anniversary of the burials which are believed to have taken place in St. Peter’s churchyard. For various reasons, however, the initiative didn’t work out. Then, in the spring of 2007, the church was contacted by Bruce Knapp, president of the Paoli Battlefield Preservation Fund (PBBF), to see if the church would like to participate in a burial reenactment. After reviewing the facts and legends surrounding the burial of 1777, the church and PBBF decided to collaborate in holding a commemoration that honored the fallen from both sides.

The ceremony, which came to be known as the *Commemoration for the Fallen, 1777*, took place at St. Peter’s Church on the seasonably warm evening of Friday, September 7, 2007. In attendance were nearly 100 onlookers, including church parishioners, historical society members, and other interested people from the region.

The program included over a dozen re-enactors. A few were Color Guard from the Sons of the American Revolution, but most represented the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment of Foot, the Black Watch. Private Bill Risko wore the uniform of the 40th Regiment of Light Infantry.

The service was conducted by Father Roy Almquist of St. Peter’s, along with Father Mark Scheneman, Rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Carlisle, PA. Dennis Kane, Vice-President of the PBBF, was the Master of Ceremonies. The speakers were Bruce Knapp, President of the PBBF, and Roger Thorne, President of the Historical Society. Colonel

Michael Vernon-Powell, retired, of Her Majesty's 49th Regiment of Foot, Royal Berkshire Regiment, was a special guest, who came bearing soil from regimental headquarters to sprinkle upon the graves of the fallen British, thus uniting earth from the two now-reconciled countries.

Although the commemoration ceremony included a number of re-enactors, it was indeed an authentic Anglican Church service. After everyone was seated in the pews of the Old Church, British re-enactors entered the room. Most notable were the kilted members of the Royal Highland Regiment. On the other side of the sanctuary they faced the Continental Color Guard from the Sons of the American Revolution.

Father Almquist began the service with a Welcome and Invocation. After Master of Ceremonies Dennis Kane shared some opening remarks and made introductions, Bruce Knapp provided an informative historical context describing the Battle of Paoli and the subsequent preservation of the battlefield.

Roger Thorne then shared some church history, including how the original log chapel was built in 1705 atop "the highest hill within the center of the valley" within an existing burying ground. He told how William Currie arrived in 1737 from Scotland to take charge of the congregation and built a permanent stone church on the site, which survives to this day. As the Anglican congregation became more wealthy and independent, he explained, a Whig sentiment began to grow, leading to tension with the loyalist congregants and with Parson Currie himself. When the war broke out, Currie resigned, and the pews remained empty throughout the war, which is how the British would have found them in September, 1777, as they sought a place to bury their dead after the Battle of Paoli.

"Though the exact location of the graves is unknown," explains Thorne, "an oft-quoted Revolutionary legend states that soldiers killed in combat, including British troops, were buried near the west wall of the churchyard." The facts as they are currently understood, "strongly suggest the validity of the St. Peter's legend...that this abandoned Church of England in the Great Valley was not only known to the British Army, but would have been considered its logical burial spot for its soldiers killed less than 3 miles distant."

Taking this a step further Thorne described his "best conjecture of this interment",

"Perhaps the burial happened this way: ...At first light, about 05:15 am, a designated burial detail departed the 2nd Battalion camp for the isolated location that was (and still is) St. Peter's Church.

"Perhaps Light Dragoons rode point for the detail's 3½ mile journey to the churchyard. In the autumn the Valley is often shrouded by mist at first light, an aid to snipers or ambush. Marching warily in route step, with flankers out, Light infantryman wearing short red jackets and broad brimmed campaign hats followed the dragoons, in

turn followed by a team and wagon. Upon the wagon's plank bed lay the three British corpses, and the bodies of several Continentals who had not survived their wounds from the night's fight. Passing through the gates along St. Peter's west wall into the quiet churchyard, there were shallow graves to be dug, and a short burial service to be read. No priest or military chaplain attended the proceedings. Per Army regulations, the familiar yet haunting words from the Order for the Burial of the Dead from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer was read by the officer in command. A brief salute, and the interment of Captain William Wolfe, 40th Foot; Private Daniel Robertson, 49th Foot; and a sergeant unknown to us from the 71st Foot, as well as the unknown Americans, was concluded. Quickly returning to rejoin their battalion, they would leave the Great Valley for the last time."

With this interpretation of the burial fresh in everyone's minds, a procession from the sanctuary to the grave site was led by the American Color Guard and the British re-enactors as the audience gathered along the iron fence. Some in attendance were visibly moved as haunting strains of bagpipes droned across the graveyard, courtesy of William Gable from the Black Watch. At the grave site, Patrick MacNamee played the Dead March upon a muffled drum.

The Order for the Burial of the Dead, from the Church of England's 1662 Book of Common Prayer, was read by Father Mark Scheneman. This was followed by the placing of a wreath upon the graves by Colonel Michael Vernon-Powell. Colonel Vernon-Powell then sprinkled British soil upon the graves of his fallen countrymen, as a symbol both of respect to the memory of the men who died, and of the important friendship which now exists between our two independent nations.

Following a moment of silence, a salute was led by Colonel Vernon-Powell, and Roger Thorne read a sonnet from the British war poet Rupert Brooke entitled *The Soldier*.

The ceremony ended with trumpeter Leighton Johnson playing Taps and Father Scheneman providing the benediction. The procession then retired from the grave site and the audience was given the opportunity to photograph the re-enactors, preserving images from this emotionally complex day, which combined belated respect for the dead with historical reconciliation.

Thus, after two centuries, the late Captain William Wolfe of Great Britain, along with his two countrymen, could finally rest in peace with dignity.

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.*

From Rupert Brooks 1914 Sonnet *The Soldier*.

NOTES

1. Smythies, *Historical Records of the 40th Regiment*.
2. British War Office Records.
3. Cohen, *New Jersey History*, 63.
4. *George Washington Papers*.
5. Mitnick, 52.
6. *George Washington Papers*.
7. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 15.
8. Erskine, Map #55.
9. *George Washington Papers*.
10. Mitnick, 51-53.
11. Carrington, 405-415.
12. Fiske, 308-309.
13. Fiske, 308.
14. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 32.
15. Nelson, Paul, 37.
16. Nickerson, 215.
17. Hibbert, 182.
18. *George Washington Papers*.
19. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 40.
20. *George Washington Papers*.
21. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 47.
22. Nelson, *The Battle of Cooch's Bridge*.
23. McGuire, *Brandywine Battlefield Park*, 23-39.
24. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 29-30.
25. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 31-37 and Martin, 80-83.
26. von Munchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 34.
27. Rees, *British Soldiers and Brush Shelters, 1777-1781*, 2-9.
28. Burns, *The Invasion of Tredyffrin*, 58-70.
29. von Munchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 34.
30. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 65-66.
31. von Munchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 34.
32. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 51.
33. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 92.
34. Nelson, *The Battle of Cooch's Bridge*, 43.
35. von Munchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 34.
36. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 135.
37. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli*, 132.

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