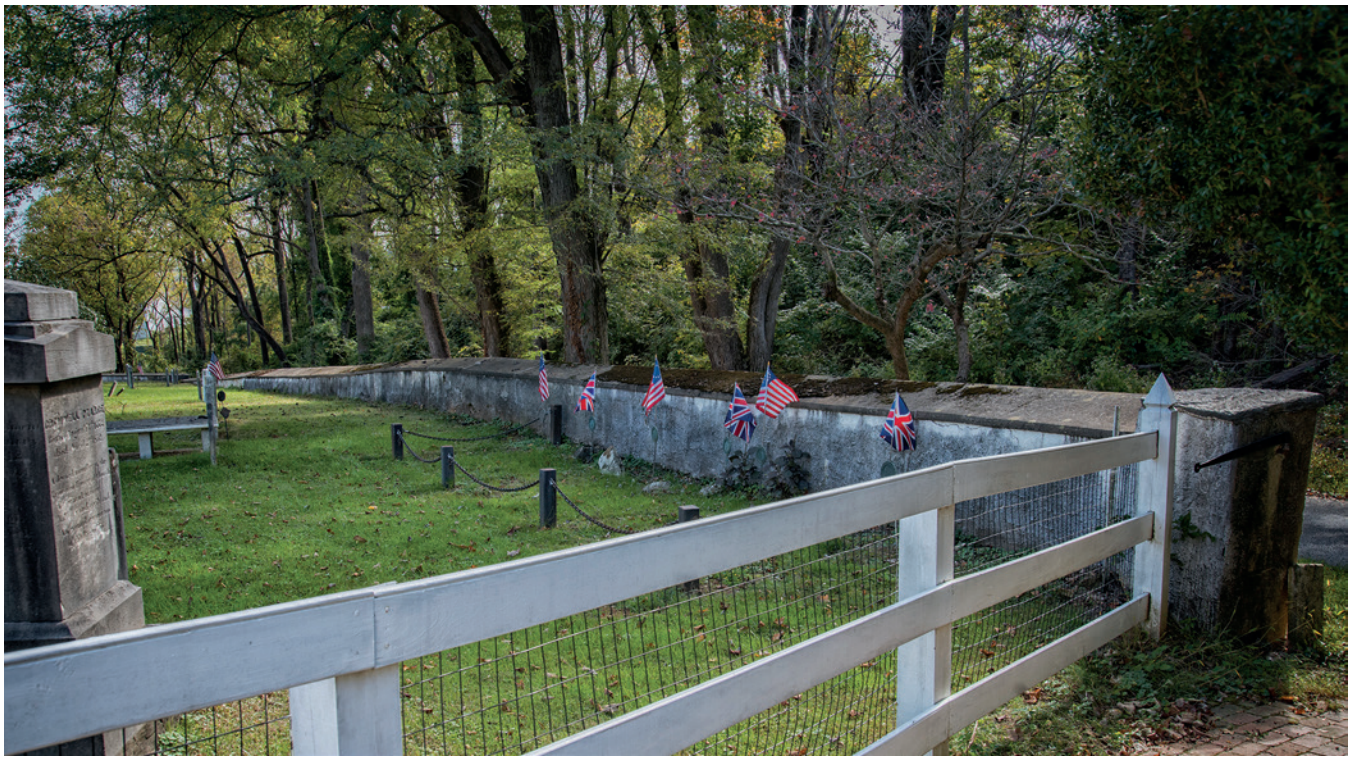
Pursuing a Revolutionary War Legend at St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley

"Print the legend … and the truth"
Historian Thomas Fleming

Roger D. Thorne



The original Colonial burying ground of St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley, looking south from the historic church, with the stone wall built in 1770 acting as the western perimeter of this churchyard. The cordon of iron posts and chains in the foreground is enunciated by both **Stars and Stripes** and **Union Jack**, and raises so many questions. *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne.*

Within days after their victory over the Continental army at Brandywine Creek on September 11, 1777, an army of 15,000 British and German troops, under the command of General Sir William Howe, marched into the Great Valley of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Howe's objective was to capture Philadelphia. Over the next several days each side maneuvered, looking for advantage and an opportunity to attack.

For the British, such an opportunity presented itself on the night of September 20–21 one mile south of the Warren Tavern (today's General Warren Inn) in what is now Malvern. Near midnight, 1,200 men under the command of Major General Charles Gray, with the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion[1] in the lead, along with the 44th Regiment of Foot and the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment, attacked and completely routed two American infantry brigades of the **Pennsylvania Line** numbering between 1,500 and 2,000 men commanded by Brig. General Anthony Wayne. The British attacked using only bayonets and swords, and it was a brutal affair. Many Pennsylvanians were scattered in this savage one-sided battle. At least 52 American soldiers were killed in the assault, and including wounded and missing, Wayne's division suffered 272 casualties. General Gray's command suffered only minor casualties, with three British soldiers killed, including an officer, Captain William Wolfe, commander of the 40th Foot's Light Company attached to the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion.

1 The British 2nd Light Infantry Battalion was an elite assault detachment of some 500 men made up of platoon-sized Light Companies comprising some of the best light infantrymen from each of 13 different regiments. The battalion was trained in stealth and fieldcraft, and their specialty was independent tactical action.

In the wake of this bloody engagement, there is a legend which maintains that, within hours after the assault (called by the Americans the "Paoli Massacre"), the three British soldiers killed in combat were buried just three miles distant from the battlefield in the churchyard of the oldest Anglican church in Chester County, St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley.[2] A variation of this tradition adds that, as the British Army prepared to depart the Valley early the following morning to march on Philadelphia, a British burial patrol used the churchyard of this then-abandoned sanctuary not only to inter their honored dead, but additionally to bury some number of American prisoners who had died of their wounds in the hours after their capture. While circumstantial evidence lends credence to the first account, no documentation or other tangible proof has been found to validate either of these legends.[3]

Sometime soon after World War II, a cordon was configured within the original Colonial churchyard in the shape of a rectangle approximately 6' wide and 20' long, its perimeter surrounded by six heavy iron posts, each connected to the other by a substantial iron chain. This space, lying adjacent to a stone wall built in 1770 [4] which serves as the western perimeter of the churchyard, has become known as **The Traditional Burial Spot of British and American Dead from the Paoli Massacre**. Within this cordon one will find, evenly spaced, seven small fieldstones, seemingly representing anonymous burial markers. Ironically, no correspondence or other evidence can be found in St. Peter's archive explaining why this exact location, located next to the original gate serving as the entrance to the church in Colonial and Revolutionary times, was chosen in the mid-20th century. Perhaps this cordon was only intended to be symbolic within the context of this legend rather than purporting to be historically accurate. No one knows, and thus a mystery confounds a legend.

In 2000, historian Thomas McGuire's book *The Battle of Paoli* [5] was published, a book soon to become a seminal document for anyone studying this important military engagement spaced between the larger American defeats at Brandywine and Germantown. Mr. McGuire refers to the legend of these burials at St. Peter's Church, rightly acknowledging the intuitional rather than factual aspects of this tradition.[6]

Two years after publishing his book, I met Mr. McGuire in 2002 in the St. Peter's churchyard (first recorded burial in 1703) to conjure the possibility and veracity of the legend. It was then that we first pondered whether the science of geophysics might be usefully employed to clarify this enigmatic event. But we agreed that the substantial cost of acquiring such technology, and the uncertain results from that investment, presented an impediment beyond our means. Other projects and priorities arose, and no opportunity to use science to elucidate this mystery was sought for another 17 years.[7]

2 Beginning as a Church of England mission in 1700, St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley resides atop the highest natural elevation between the two barrier ridges of the Valley on the border between Tredyffrin and Whiteland (later East Whiteland) Townships, two of the townships within William Penn's **Welsh Tract**. In 1744 **The Church of Saint Peter in the Great Valley** was dedicated—part of the same parish as Saint David's Church, Radnor. The historic St. Peter's Church today resides in East Whiteland Township, and continues as a very active Episcopal parish.

3 In a detailed pamphlet entitled *History of St. Peter's Church*, written by then-rector Thomas Winchester in 1850, at a time when the Revolution was still a pervading memory in the local consciousness, this priest is mute about any wartime events occurring at or involving St. Peter's Church. Three decades later, in their 1881 classic *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania*, historians J.S. Futhey and Gilbert Cope also fail to mention a single Revolutionary contribution in their otherwise extremely detailed chapter entitled "ST. PETER'S, GREAT VALLEY." Interestingly, claims of local activities alleged to have occurred during the Revolution began to appear with great frequency early in the 20th century, but then generally without any documentation to prove the allegation.

4 It is important to understand that the west wall of the churchyard, the "front wall" which faced **Rees Pritchard's Road** (later to be called St. Peter's Road) as that lane led up to and past the church, was constructed from 1770 into 1771, several years before the British invasion in 1777. In December 1770, the St. Peter's Vestry records cite the following: "*John Gronow Received Twenty pounds by order of the Vestry for defraying the Expences of Building the wall on the front of the graveyard …*"

5 Thomas J. McGuire, *Battle of Paoli* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2000).

6 In May 1776, the corrosive political climate within the parish between Tory and Whig closed the church for over four years, and when the British Army entered the Valley in September 1777, the sanctuary was functionally abandoned. Thus, a burial of the British slain would have legally taken place on Church of England property.

7 Several years later, in 2009, the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society successfully used science to definitively solve a widely-known legend from Chester County's Great Valley. Colonial documents tell us that in 1756, during the French and Indian War, the Vestry of St. Peter's Church ordered that a former log sanctuary, standing near the current stone church and built some 50 years earlier, be razed in order to provide greater security in the event of a possible Indian attack. Tradition took it from there, declaring that the logs of that structure, allegedly cut around 1710 for their original purpose, were sold to a nearby landowner for use in building a cabin on Valley Creek that remains today. In 2009, the then-homeowner was doing restoration on her log home, and allowed several slices from original logs to be cut for testing. A dendrochronologist was hired to study these samples, and the complete findings of this research can be read in "The Church Road Cabin of Tredyffrin Township" by Roger D. Thorne, found in the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pages 96–104. **https://www.tehistory.org/hqda/pdf/v46/v46n4p096.pdf**

At the *Commemoration for the Fallen* on September 7, 2007, Col. Michael Vernon-Powell consecrates the ground of the "traditional burial plot" at St. Peter's Church with soil brought from the Royal Berkshire Regiment of the British Army. In a realignment of force structure, the old 49th Regiment of Foot—in which one of the slain British soldiers at the Paoli battle served—had since been subsumed into the Royal Berkshire Regiment. *Courtesy of Suburban & Wayne Times.*

In those ensuing years two events kept this legend alive. In the summer of 2007, Bruce Knapp, president of the Paoli Battlefield Preservation Fund, and I worked with many others to create an event at St. Peter's Church to honor the dead, British and American, from that long-ago conflict. Held on September 7, 2007 and called *The Commemoration for the Fallen* [8], this moving event was attended by almost 200 spectators. The esteemed British Army Colonel Michael Vernon-Powell, (Ret.) led a contingent to this event, and honored the dead of both sides during that long-ago conflict, emphasizing that once-bitter foes now stand side-by-side as closest allies in the worldwide "War on Terror." Seven years later, in September 2014, Col. Vernon-Powell again returned leading another contingent of retired British military officers to honor the dead who may be interred at St. Peter's from that Revolutionary battle.

But another four years elapsed before an opportunity presented itself to allow science to address what really happened at St. Peter's at first light of Sunday, September 21, 1777. In 2018, a friend from the Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area told me of the superb work accomplished by the Geophysics Society of Kutztown University (Pennsylvania) in using ground-penetrating radar and other geophysical tools to reveal secrets at local historical sites. He also mentioned the extraordinary efforts and energy of Laura Sherrod, Ph.D., a professor in Kutztown's Geology Department. I contacted Dr. Sherrod, reviewed with her the events of the Paoli battle and specifically the legend of its possible aftermath at St. Peter's Church, and asked if she might be willing to visit the historic churchyard to apply her geophysical expertise to help clarify the mystery. To my delight, in the spring of 2019, with the permission of The Rev. Abigail Crozier Nestlehutt, Rector of St. Peter's, and facilitated by a financial gift to the Geophysics Society from the Robert & Norma Thorne Charitable Fund, Dr. Sherrod accepted our invitation to conduct a "geophysical reconnaissance," with her pragmatic caveat that the likelihood of any successful revelation was small.

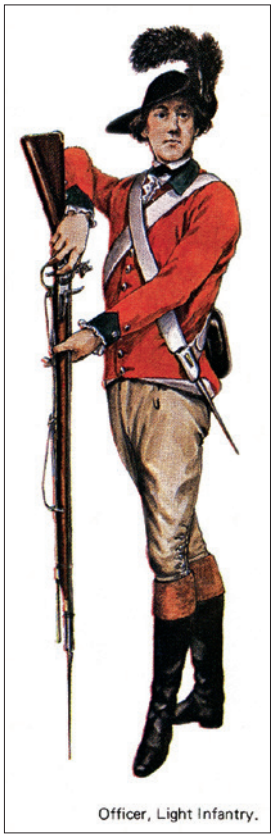
8 For an excellent synthesis of the Battle of Paoli, the British officer who died leading the assault, and the *Commemoration for the Fallen* on September 7, 2007, I direct you to The Last Days of William Wolfe by Sean Moir, found in the Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly, Vol. 45, No. 1, pages 3-14. **https://tehistory.org/qswc/q4501/docs/TheLastDaysOfWilliamWolfe-WebVersion.pdf**

In Dr. Sherrod's experience, the deterioration of bodies over almost 250 years almost certainly minimizes any reasonable likelihood of precise discovery, even with the most advanced geoscientific tools. However, she was intrigued to learn that Captain William Wolfe, the British officer killed while leading his **Light Company** in the Paoli assault, would have assuredly been buried wearing his distinctive Light Infantry short uniform jacket with its vertical pattern of pewter buttons; a metal gorget worn suspended around his, and the neck of every British officer to signify both rank and authority—and (as Mr. McGuire reminded me), Capt. Wolfe would most probably have been interred with his sword. Thus, the presence of these metal objects might increase the possibility of a subsurface "signature." Dr. Sherrod agreed to personally conduct a cursory survey within a small portion of the original St. Peter's churchyard using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) technology. She explained to me that with this geophysical tool, electromagnetic waves are emitted into the earth by means of an antenna attached to a mobile control unit. Coming into contact with materials having differing electromagnetic properties, the reflections, as waves, are received back through the antenna and to a computer for processing and analysis. In archeological searches, this technology has proved useful in detecting not only buried objects of metal, wood, and stone, but also for detecting anomalies such as hollow cavities or voids beneath the ground such as caused by digging and refilling.

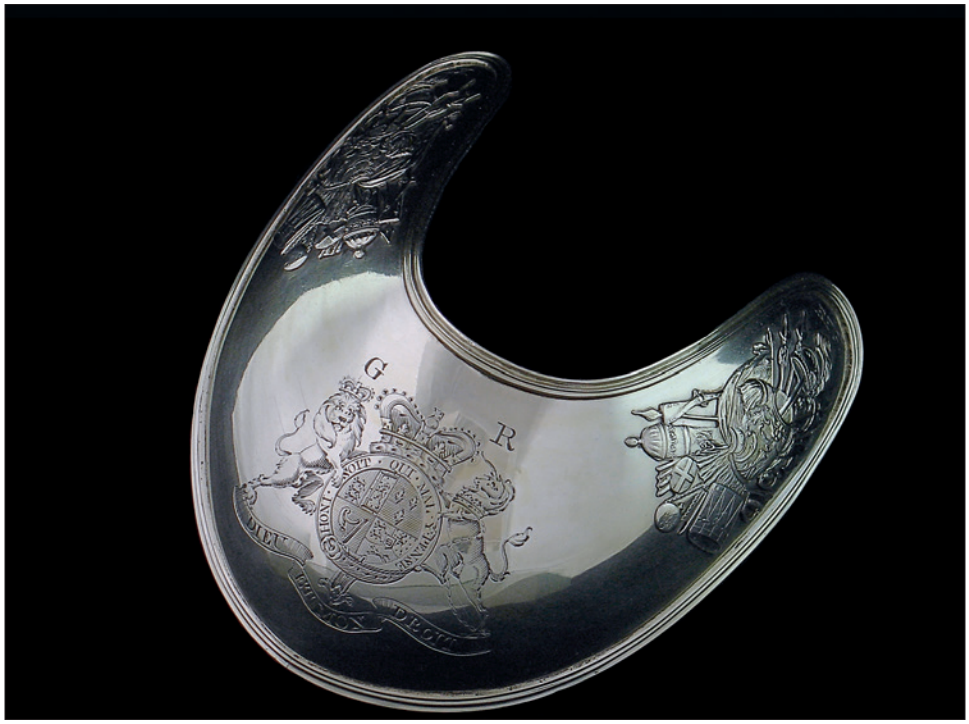
The First Geophysical Testing

Arriving at St. Peter's with her **GSSI Sir-4000 3D GPR** control unit on the beautiful, late-spring morning of June 11, 2019, Dr. Sherrod began rolling the wheeled, triangular device in repeated linear passes, separated in one-foot increments, to create a survey grid running parallel to a portion of the 1770 wall in a distance extending from the wall of between 3 and 9 feet. These repeated passes took her some three hours to complete. She immediately commented to me that, while she generally does not make guesses as to results until final analysis is complete, the presence of the chain surrounding the traditional burial location had made it quite impossible to maintain contact between the ground and the antenna of the GPR system. That contact is necessary for the electro-magnetic (EM) waves to pass into the subsurface. Without that contact, the waves are instead reflected from the surface of the ground back to the antenna, and thereby prohibiting any subsurface reflections.

Two weeks later, on June 24th, I received Dr. Sherrod's very complete technical field report summarizing the data collected at St. Peter's on June 11. In an addendum to her report, she asked an important question: *"… a more thorough analysis of the data at my computer did produce some potential interpretations which may be of interest to you. Any chance the burial could have been a mass burial?"* To say that I was suddenly excited by her question is to understate!



Officer, Light Infantry.



Formerly used as protective armor for the throat area, the gorget became primarily ornamental from the 18th century onward. This dazzling silver gorget was made in England in 1775-1776 for an officer of the 60th or Royal American Regiment during the American Revolution. Perhaps the gorget worn by Captain William Wolfe was similar. **https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/british-gorget**

Continue to Part 2