

The War Comes to Delaware

Battle of Cooch's Bridge

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The Blue Hen State

Delaware was largely untouched by war during the Revolutionary period. In June of 1776, Delaware had separated from Pennsylvania as its "lower three counties", declared independence from the British Crown, and was considered an independent colony. Known as the Blue Hen State, Delaware's nickname traces back to a Captain Caldwell from Kent County who, during the Revolutionary War, carried with him, a pair of fighting game cocks. These chickens, descendants of a famous Blue Hen, were well known in Kent County for their superior fighting qualities. It is said that upon seeing these game cocks fight, one soldier cried "We're sons of the Old Blue Hen and we're game to the end!" comparing the fighting prowess of the chickens to the fighting prowess of the Delaware soldiers. These regiments from Kent County became known as "Blue Hen's Chickens." This name was soon applied state wide.

Only one engagement, more of skirmish than a major battle, took place in late summer of 1777. The Battle of Cooch's Bridge was the singular event that occurred on Delaware soil. It is believed by some, that the Stars and Stripes were first carried in battle during this engagement.

THE ROAD TO PHILADELPHIA

By the summer of 1777, the British fleet set sail from Sandy Hook, New Jersey to the Chesapeake Bay. Spotters along the coast of New Jersey near Cape May spotted the flotilla heading south. The Howes had with them 265 ships and 15,000 troops as well as seasoned field officers such as Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis and Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen.

Although it was known that the fleet was heading south, it was not known where they would anchor. Washington surmised that Philadelphia would be General Howe's target. He just didn't know the route the British would take. The fleet could have entered the Delaware Bay and headed up the Delaware River and put in at New Castle or Wilmington. But there were forts along the Delaware River as well as defensive hazards on the river bed. The British

lacked knowledgeable pilots as well. Although Philadelphia held no strategic value to the British, they knew it would be a psychological blow to the Patriot's cause to capture the American capitol.

What should have taken a mere couple of weeks to journey lasted six weeks due to a combination of poor weather and Howe's characteristic caution. By the time the fleet reached the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay, the British army had lost more than half of their horses to the diseases and horrid conditions of the voyage.

On August 24th, General Washington began his march of 11,000 troops to Wilmington, Delaware. Although the troops had no uniforms, Washington ordered that clothes be washed, arms burnished, and all the men wear a "green sprig, emblem of hope" in their hats. He expected to intercept the Howe brothers on their march to Philadelphia. On Monday, August 25th, the British met no resistance upon reaching Head of Elk, (current day Elkton) Maryland. This afforded them a week to unload the ships and recover from the voyage. From there, British units began their 55 mile march towards Philadelphia. The path they chose was due east through Newark, Delaware then north to Chad's Ford, Pennsylvania. On the morning of Tuesday the 26th, a party of American horsemen, including Washington, left their camp in Wilmington and reconnoitered the British from Iron Hill, a rise nine miles northeast of the British position. Accompanying Washington were Major Generals Greene and then nineteen year old Lafayette. By Thursday, the 28th, Howe had set up Headquarters at the Elk Tavern. 293 advance troops consisting of British light infantry and German jägers went east across Elk Creek and occupied Gray's Hill.

About one mile east of Gray's Hill stood Iron Hill. At the base of Iron Hill, to the east, were the farm lands and homestead of Thomas Cooch. Cooch's Bridge spanned the Christiana Creek which ran through the Cooch property. Thomas Cooch came from England and, in 1746, purchased a tract of land in Pencader, containing two hundred acres. Though neither Tory nor Whig, Cooch fled with his family to Pennsylvania as the British units infiltrated his lands.

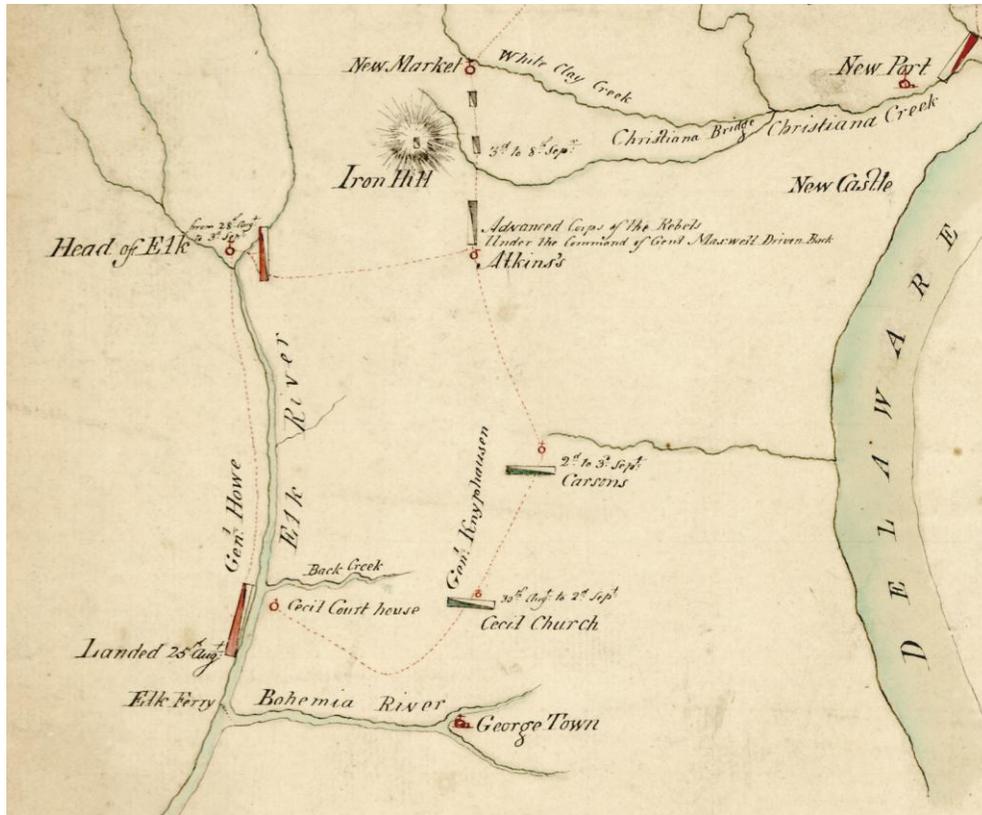


Figure 1: Map of British landing area and movement into Delaware

With Daniel Morgan away reinforcing Gates, Washington, at the behest of Lafayette, assembled a light infantry task force to harass Howe's advance guard. This elite unit was handpicked consisted of 1100 men selected for their stamina and marksmanship. Command of this new light infantry corps was given to Brigadier General William Maxwell of New Jersey. Among these troops was John Marshall, future Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. Marshall was one of six lieutenants chosen from a Virginia brigade. Maxwell's units were encamped on either side of the road leading south from Cooch's Bridge, toward John Aiken's Tavern in a series of small camps designed to facilitate ambushes. Surprisingly, no units from Delaware participated in the engagement.

THE FACE OFF

Washington stood atop Iron Hill, Howe, atop Gray's Hill. With only one mile of separation, both commanders took stock of his enemy's position. One Hessian general wrote, "These gentlemen observed us with their glasses as carefully as we observed them."



Figure 2: Map of Battle of Cooch's Bridge by Maj. John Andre

On Tuesday, September 2nd, Howe's right wing, under the command of the Hessian General Wilhelm von Knyphausen, left Cecil County Court House and headed northeast, hampered by rain and bad roads. Early the morning of September 3rd, Howe's left wing, under the command Cornwallis, left Head of Elk, expecting to join with Knyphausen's division at Aiken's Tavern. Cornwallis reached the tavern first, and Howe, traveling with Cornwallis, decided to press on to the north without waiting for Knyphausen. Washington urged Maxwell "to give them as much trouble as you possibly can."

A BRIEF SKIRMISH

A small company of Hessian dragoons led by Captain Johann Ewald headed up the road from the tavern toward Cooch's Bridge as Cornwallis' advance guard. These were struck by a volley of fire from an American ambush, and many of them fell, either killed or wounded. Ewald did not, and he quickly alerted the Hessian and Ansbach jägers, who rushed forward to meet the Americans. This began a running skirmish that Major John André described as follows: "Here the rebels began to attack us about 9 o'clock with a continued irregular fire for nearly two miles." The jägers, about 300 men led by Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb, formed a line and, with the support of some artillery, advanced on the Americans. Von Wurmb sent one detachment to Maxwell's left, hoping to flank his position, and supported the

move with a bayonet charge against the American center. Maxwell fell back, avoiding the flanking maneuver, and the battle dissolved into a running skirmish as the Americans retreated.



Figure 3: Johann Ewald, commander of the Hessian dragoons

The battle lasted for much of the day. Maxwell's men made a stand until they "had shot themselves out of ammunition" and "the fight was carried on with the sword and bayonet." The Americans eventually retreated across Cooch's Bridge, taking up a position on the far side. Von Wurmb and the jägers stopped their pursuit at Cooch's Bridge, and occupied Iron Hill. A battalion of British light infantry that had been sent across the Christina River in an attempt to flank Maxwell's force became mired in swampy terrain, but emerged in time to help dislodge the Americans from that position. The militia retreated back toward the main Continental Army camp near Wilmington.

With the evening came minor skirmishing near Aikin's Tavern. American General Caesar Rodney (then President of Delaware) had sent some mounted militia from Noxontown (today's Townsend) to annoy Howe. Rodney's militia fired a few shots only to retire back into the darkness. Capt. Friederich von Muenchhausen reported, "I saw several rebels behind trees, firing at our advancing Jaegers, then retreating about 20 yards behind the next tree and firing again."



Figure 4: Ludwig von Wormb, commander of the Ansbach jägers

Howe remained in northern Delaware for five more days while the final supplies were unloaded from the fleet. Cornwallis used the Cooch homestead as his headquarters during that time, his officers consuming all of Cooch's liquor, while troops burned Cooch's grist mill. The Americans has removed the mill stone prior to the fighting. Two days after the battle his aide, Major John Andre, drew a map showing British units posted around the Cooch house.

COUNCIL OF WAR

On September 6th Washington called for a Council of War to be held that evening. On the advice of a local officer, Capt. Robert Kirkwood, a farm house along the banks of White Clay Creek, roughly 9 miles south west of Wilmington, was chosen. The house was owned by Daniel Byrnes, a Quaker preacher and miller; who agreed to permit the meeting to be held in his stately brick home (today's Hale-Byrnes House). Byrnes risked being turned out of his Meeting for allowing a Council of War to be held at his home. Generals Green and Knox were among the attendees of the meeting, as were Kirkwood and Major Alexander Hamilton. The Marquis de Lafayette celebrated his 20th birthday that evening. After the council concluded, Washington left orders to take all provisions that could be used by the army. Clement Biddle arrived to take the provisions from Byrnes on the 7th, and again on the 8th. In total, 40 wagonloads of grain, flour, and cheeses were denied the British.

Sixteen years later, Daniel Byrnes wrote to President Washington in hopes of being reimbursed for the materials that were confiscated from his property after the Council of War.

"... in the year 1777 I was owner of and Lived at them Mills in the State of Dallaware on the side of White Clay Creek abought two Miles north of Christiana Bridge at the time the English Army Lay between my Mills and the head of Elk and the American Army Some of them on the Hill by White Clay Creek Bridge in Sight of my House & Mills and Some of them nearer to Newport. Thus was I with my Famely Situated between the two Contending Armies and on the 7th Day of the week Clement Biddle, an officer as I Supose in thy Army Came to my House and informed me that General Woshington had Sent him to let me know that the wheat & Flour in my Mills must be Removed and told me that thou Said the English Army wod be quite likely to Come that way and wod Distroy what I had but that thou wod take it and I Should be paid for it. I Did then belive thou intended it as a favour to me as I was not Looked on as an Enemy to my Counetry and therefore I could Do no other thing but Submit to thy orders accordingly he Sent that Day twenty Wagons and Loaded with Wheat and Flour and next Day being first Day of the week came twenty more Wagons and Loaded (while I was at Meeting) with wheat and flour the also that Day took Eight Large Cheese away which was put in the Mill to be out of the way of the Flies they Laft with Some of my young men Recipts for the Wheat & Flour but not for the Cheese they ware to come again the Next Day being the Second Day of the week for more wheat & Flour as there was Some Still Lafft but that Day the English Army Crossed white Clay Creek 2 Or 3 miles above my Mills and thy Army

moved away. I saw Clement Biddle that Day on Horseback he told me he wou pay me but the Army was moving and all Seemed in a hurry. I Suppose he had not time and want away without paying after that time there was Much Difucalties with the Army I knew not whare to apply for pay...."

AFTERMATH

Casualty reports for the British range from 3 killed and 20 wounded to about 30 each killed and wounded. One British deserter reported that nine wagonloads of wounded were sent back toward the fleet. The Americans claimed 20 killed and another 20 wounded, and Washington in a letter to Congress said the losses were "not very considerable"; however, the British reported burying 41 Americans, and Howe's official report claimed "not less than fifty killed and many more wounded." General Maxwell was criticized for his leadership by a number of Washington's subordinates. One foreign officer with service in the army of Prussia commented to Henry Laurens in reference to Maxwell, "Your Soldiers are very good Mans, so good as any brave Mans in the World, but your Officers my Dear Colonel, your Officers..."

When considering the impact this event had on the war, it was insignificant. The Battle of Brandywine occurred one week later. Philadelphia subsequently fell and was occupied by the British.

Earlier that summer on June 14, 1777, Congress passed the Flag Resolution (now celebrated as Flag Day). There is debate over whether American troops carried the Stars and Stripes into battle for the first time at Cooch's Bridge. It is unlikely that American units sent forward to reconnoiter and harass advance British guards carried a flag to announce their position when they were trying to hard not to be seen. That Washington's troops left Philadelphia on their way to Wilmington carrying the newly adopted Stars and Stripes is not in doubt. Whether the flag was shown during the skirmish has not been borne out in fact and is inconsequential when taking into consideration the 20 American lives lost that day.

Washington and Rochambeau on their way to Yorktown, marched along Old Baltimore Pike, across Cooch's Bridge once more four years later almost to the day in 1781. And in 1787, Delaware became the first state by being the first to ratify the US Constitution. Richard Cooch died in 1791.

The site of the battle has been preserved as the Cooch's Bridge Historic District, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2003, the Cooch family sold the state some land as well as development rights for an additional 200 acres of land in the area of the battlefield. They also

established a \$1.5 million fund to restore and maintain the property, and granted the state a right of first refusal to purchase the Thomas Cooch house, which remains with the family to this day.

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