

## THE BATTLE OF COOCH'S BRIDGE

*“I saw several rebels behind trees, firing at our advancing Jaegers, then retreating about 20 yards behind the next tree and firing again.”*  
—Capt. Friederich von Muenchhausen

In the close summer heat of September 3, 1777 nearly 800 Americans forming the “Special Corps” of Gen. William Maxwell engaged over 4,000 British Light Infantry and Hessian Jägers at Cooch's Bridge near Aikens Tavern (Glasgow). This small force of American rebels took up defensive positions in the creek beds and small ravines along Christina Creek and opened fire. The battle was a series of attacks followed by a fall back to another defensive position. Gen. Maxwell was following orders from Gen. George Washington to “provide every possible annoyance to the enemy” (Ward, p. 190) in an attempt to examine the British forces in terms of troops and munitions. The Battle of Cooch's Bridge was the first engagement in the Philadelphia Campaign of 1777.

In the summer of 1777, British armies led by Sir William Howe and Lord Cornwallis sailed around the Delmarva Peninsula bound for Elkton, Maryland. At Head of Elk they disembarked and rested and refitted for a period of one week. They then marched from Elkton to Aikens Tavern. The British employed the services of German soldiers known as Hessians. Two Hessian companies accompanied Howe's and Cornwallis' legions. They were led by

# UNDERSTANDING DELAWARE'S ROLE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A Study Guide

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Baron Wilhelm Knyphausen and Lt. Col. Ludwig von Wurb.

The initial ambush by the Americans was successful. The British had difficulty returning fire on the hidden rebels. The final American fall-back brought them to Cooch's Bridge where the outnumbered force fought until out of ammunition. Seeing this, Howe ordered a bayonet charge. The American firelocks didn't have bayonets as they were originally designed to be a hunting rifle. Disadvantaged by the lack of ammunition and bayonets, the Americans withdrew from the fight or as it was written by a British soldier they, “became so precipitate that great numbers threw down their arms and blankets.” ([www.ushistory.org/march/phila/to/brandywine\\_4.htm](http://www.ushistory.org/march/phila/to/brandywine_4.htm))

Originally conceived to be a delaying action, the skirmish turned into much more with some reports claiming 30 British casualties and 60 American. In Howe's journal he reported 5 killed and 19 wounded. These numbers seem dubious knowing the fewer casualties reported the more skilled the general appeared to his commanders.

### *Objectives for Students*

- **To understand the setting and rationale for the battle.**
- **To examine the leaders and soldiers of both sides of the battle.**
- **To examine the issues of the Revolution in Delaware. Are their similarities to today's political events?**
- **Using the Battle of Cooch's Bridge as a microcosm determine the success of the Revolution. What lessons learned from Cooch's Bridge helped the Americans win the war?**

## Teaching Activities

### *Background*

Explain to students the causes of the American Revolution. In 1775 Delaware was ordered to raise a regiment of Continental soldiers. Keep in mind that Delaware was not yet a state. That would come on June 15, 1776 when the Lower Counties of Pennsylvania (Delaware) voted to separate from England and Pennsylvania and become the State of Delaware. (Nelson, Ralph)

The regiment of soldiers would become the Delaware Continentals and their story is reviewed in great detail in the book of the same name. Published in 1941 the book was re-released in 2001. The regiment was composed of eight companies of 68 privates, four corporals, four sergeants, one ensign, one lieutenant, and one captain. The regiment was commanded by Col. John Haslet and his adjutant was Lt. Col. Gunning Bedford. Col. Haslet was later killed at the battle of Princeton. (Ward, p.4-5)

It is important to note that the Delaware Regiment was not at the Battle of Cooch's Bridge as they were stationed elsewhere in the summer of 1777. The Delaware Militia did see action at Cooch's Bridge. A militia is composed of non-conscripted soldiers who, when called upon, can fire a gun and take part in a battle. Members of the Cecil Militia from Cecil County, Maryland also saw action at Cooch's Bridge.

The Philadelphia Campaign was a plan conceived by Lord Cornwallis to capture the city of Philadelphia, the colonial capital of the new United States. Cornwallis believed that by capturing the capital city the war would end. Following the battle at Cooch's Bridge and then at Brandywine, Cornwallis did occupy Philadelphia. However the Continental Congress escaped to Lancaster and then York, Pennsylvania.

During the British occupation of Philadelphia in the fall and winter of 1777-78, Gen. Washington trained and refitted his army at Valley Forge.



Photograph of Cooch's Bridge taken fall, 2001

### *Determining the Facts*

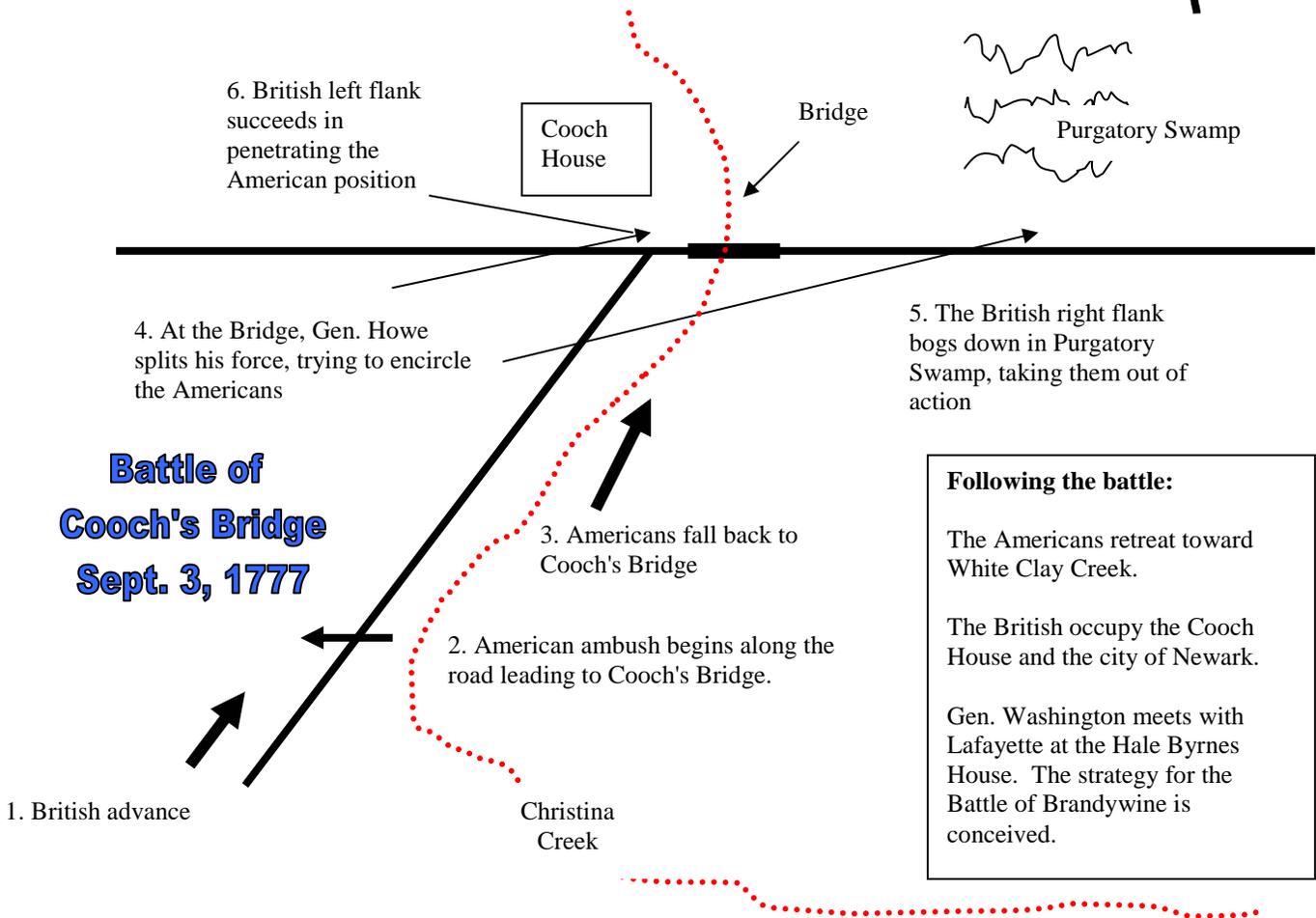
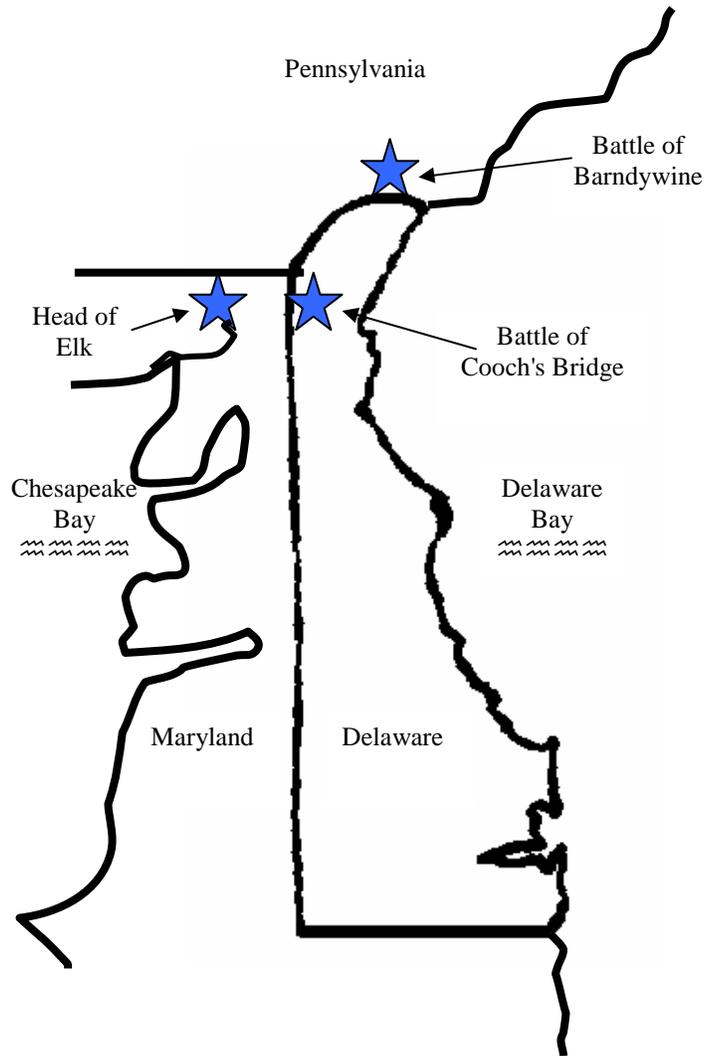
- ★ What was the Philadelphia Campaign?
- ★ How did the two armies come to meet at Cooch's Bridge?
- ★ Why was the Christina Creek and the nearby road a favorable spot for an ambush?
- ★ What was a Hessian? What role did they play in the battle and in the Revolution?
- ★ What is militia? What role did they play in the battle? Is militia helpful?
- ★ What were the tactics of the battle? Were the tactics successful? Would you have done anything different?
- ★ What was a Tory?
- ★ What was the Special Corps?
- ★ What is the root of such phrases as “dressed to kill,” “lock, stock, and barrel,” and “flash in the pan?”

**Summing it up**

The Battle of Cooch's Bridge was a success in that it did draw the British into a fight and did provide Gen. Washington with the delay he needed to fortify his positions for the upcoming Battle of Brandywine. The Americans were learning to use their knowledge of the terrain and setting to their advantage. They were also gaining proficiency at camouflaging themselves in the surroundings of a battleground.

Christopher Ward, the author of *The Delaware Continentals* summed up the battle this way: "this affair was a brisk engagement, in which there were substantial losses on both sides."

Traditional and persuasive evidence suggests that the 13-star "Betsy Ross Flag" was first flown at the Battle of Cooch's Bridge.



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## Student Reading Exercise

With the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 the United States was born. However, by making this bold declaration the new country found itself at war with England. King George III was not willing to allow these 13 colonies to leave English control without a fight. He was convinced that his army of "Redcoats" could defeat this small army of rebels in the colonies. The term Redcoats comes from the brilliant red uniform jacket worn by British soldiers. Most soldiers came from poor homes and the uniform they wore was very ornate and handsome. When they went into battle wearing this grand uniform it was said they were, "dressed to kill." (Jennings, Leland C.)

The first engagements of the Revolution occurred in New England with the Battles of Lexington and Concord. A large battle was fought on August 27, 1776 on Long Island in New York. The battle was a defeat for the Americans and dealt a major blow to those Americans hopeful of independence. Conversely, it was great news for the Tories. A Tory was an American who supported England and was against independence. When the year 1776 came to a close the future of the Revolution was in doubt.

In the early summer of 1777, Lord Cornwallis, a general in the British Army, devised a plan to capture the city of Philadelphia. Philadelphia was the capital of the new United States and Cornwallis believed that if Philadelphia was taken the war would be over. In order to begin the campaign, Cornwallis loaded his army of 18,000 men on ships and sailed south along the Atlantic Coast. The fleet rounded the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula and sailed north up the Chesapeake Bay. The ships arrived at Head of Elk, (Elkton) Maryland on August 25, a "distressingly hot, close morning." (Ward, p.188). The men immediately made camp. They constructed huts made of cornstalks and sticks. The soldiers were so emaciated and weak from their journey that they set off in search of food. In many cases they stole or

were provided nourishment from local Tories. On August 31<sup>st</sup> they made a "foray 'thro Bohemian mannon' and rounded up 261 head of horned cattle, 568 sheep, and 100 horses." (Ward, p. 188). The British troops desperately needed horses. Many died while on board ships during the voyage to Elk Landing. The horses that did survive "were so 'miserably emaciated' as to be 'mere carrion.'" (Ward, p. 189). Reports from the day mention scores of dead horses floating in the Chesapeake Bay.

Lord Cornwallis allowed the men of his army to recover from their long sea journey and after a week he led a march to Aikens Tavern (Glasgow). The American force was already stationed near Cooch's Bridge. It was known as the "Special Corps" and was led by Gen. William Maxwell. It was called the Special Corps because the members were hand-picked from other regiments and battalions in the Continental Army. They were selected for their bravery, intelligence and marksmanship. (Catts, Wade P.) The Special Corps numbered about 800 men.

The Special Corps was a light infantry outfit. A light infantry company carried only a rifle called a firelock. The firelock was a simple gun. It was composed of three parts: a short wooden stock at the base, a steel plate firing mechanism and a hollow, steel barrel. When the three parts were fully assembled it was put together, "lock, stock and barrel." (Jennings, Leland C.) Black powder would be used to ignite a charge that would send a bullet down and out of the barrel. The bullet didn't look like the pointed bullets of today. It was a solid ball of lead. It took a lot of work to prepare the firelock to shoot. First a charge had to be placed in the firing plate or "pan" as it was called. Then the ball had to be pushed down the barrel with a rammer. Then the black powder would be poured into the pan. When the rammer was replaced the firelock was ready to fire. This procedure could take some time and it could be a harrowing experience

trying to fire in the face of an enemy who was about to shoot. If not done properly or if the black powder was wet, the pan would only flash like a mis-struck match. This was called a “flash in the pan” and it would result in having to reload the weapon. (Jennings, Leland C.)

It was the order of Gen. George Washington to Gen. Maxwell that his Special Corps “be constantly near the enemy and to give them every possible annoyance.” (Ward, p.190). By this he meant for Gen. Maxwell's force to harass the British and delay them in moving closer to Philadelphia. Gen. Washington needed to buy some time in order to set up defensive positions and draw the British into a battle on his terms. (Catts, Wade P.)

Gen. Maxwell understood that he was greatly outnumbered and that the only way he could have some success against the superior British force was by surprise. He devised a plan to ambush his enemy. In 1777 the road from Aikens Tavern to Cooch's Bridge was a thick woods. He had learned from Native American tactics that it was beneficial to hide behind trees and rocks and jump out to fire then to duck back behind protection when reloading. The order was to attack from a defensive position and then fall back to another defensive position until they had reached Cooch's Bridge. The terrain of the area was familiar territory to the Americans and they knew the British would have to cross the Christina Creek or wade through Purgatory Swamp to counterattack.

At about 9 o'clock in the morning a column of nearly 300 Hessian and British light infantry troops led by Gen. William Howe marched into the ambush. Rising from behind rocks and from around trees the Special Corps opened fire. The sound of the steel hammers slamming the black powder charge was deafening and the smell of sulfur filled the air. The initial volley killed six Hessians who were out front of the column scouting the road. (Lengel, 2002) Captain Friederich von Muenchhausen, an aid to Gen.

Howe, wrote that he saw “several rebels behind trees, firing at our advancing Jaegers, then retreating about 20 yards behind the next tree, then firing again.” (Lengel, 2002). The fall-back continued until the Americans reached the bridge.

After the initial surprise and setbacks from the American ambush, Gen. Howe ordered an advance on both sides of the American position. Lt. Col. Robert Abercromby led a force of light infantry to the right side of the Americans. Unknowingly, he had led his men into Purgatory Swamp where the force bogged down in the mud effectively taking them out of action.

The drive to the left flank was led by Hessian Capt. Carl August von Wreden and he was successful in penetrating the American lines. The Special Corps fought until they were out of ammunition. At this point Gen. Howe ordered a bayonet charge. A bayonet was a long triangular knife that could be attached to the end of the weapon. The triangular shape ensured an open wound—a wound that would not heal. When receiving a bayonet to the body a person could easily bleed to death. Faced with the bayonet, the Americans withdrew. The firelocks of the Americans were not equipped with bayonets because they had originally been designed as a hunting rifle. They also had no training in bayonet fighting. The disorder caused by the bayonet charge led to a speedy retreat from the field. Maj. John André of Gen. Howe's staff wrote of the American retreat saying, “their flight afterwards became so precipitate that great numbers threw down their arms and blankets.” (Lengel, 2002)

The fear of battle and especially of the bayonet terrified the ranks of the militia. Unaccustomed to battle, the militia forces often broke ranks and ran. They simply were not professional soldiers trained in tactics and maneuvers. They were beneficial if they could manage to get off a shot or cause the enemy some alarm.

### ***Following the battle:***

Historians believe the casualties of the battle number around 30 for the British and 60 for the Americans.

After the engagement the Cooch home was occupied by British. Lord Cornwallis and Baron Knyphausen used the home as a temporary headquarters. The British army occupied the city of Newark where they once again foraged for food and looted stores and homes. The American forces regrouped along White Clay Creek. Gen. Washington headquartered in Newport, Delaware before moving the army to Chadds Ford. Lord Cornwallis and the British army followed, passing through Hockessin on their way into Pennsylvania.

On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, the two armies met at the Battle of Brandywine. In a brilliant flanking maneuver, the British drove the Americans from the field and won the day. The British moved on and would occupy Philadelphia. The Continental Congress escaped to Lancaster and then to York, Pennsylvania. Cornwallis wintered his troops in Philadelphia. Gen. Washington moved his army to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania to rest and refit his weary soldiers.

The war would continue until 1783 when, with assistance from the French army, the Americans surrounded Lord Cornwallis and his entire British army at Yorktown, Virginia. The British could not escape by land because the French fleet had been stationed off the coast thus cutting off an escape via the sea. Lord Cornwallis had no choice but to surrender. The war was over and the United States succeeded in gaining independence.

The Delaware Heritage Commission is a non-profit agency within the Delaware Department of State. Originally founded in 1972, the Commission exists to celebrate the history and heritage of the First State. We do this through books (18 now in print), special events (Delaware Authors Day, Oral History Training Day), guest lectures, celebrations (The Battle of Cooch's Bridge Reenactment), and the Hands On Heritage Summer Camp (focus is on Delaware history). We also provide outreach services to public organizations in Delaware. Please feel free to contact us.

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