

The Battle of Cooch's Bridge

In 1777 the only Revolutionary War battle fought in Delaware involved the Patriot forces under George Washington pitted against the British army commanded by General Cornwallis.

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At a public ceremony on April 11, 2003, Edward W. (Ned) Cooch, Jr., and his family were commended by Delaware Governor Ruth Ann Minner for arranging to preserve Delaware's only Revolutionary War battlefield, located on nearly 200 acres of land that have been in the Cooch family for over 250 years.



Nine generations of the Cooch family have enjoyed the ancestral home, which has been modified several times since 1760. The Delaware Societies of the SAR and DAR led the effort to erect this monument at Cooch's Bridge. Dedicated in 1901, it is surrounded by four 30-pounder Navy Parrott rifles (cannon) from the Civil War, on loan to the Delaware Society SAR from the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

This site has special historic significance because it covers much of the land on which the Battle of Cooch's Bridge was fought. This "sharp skirmish", in which elements of the Continental Army and the Delaware militia harassed a British column, is the only land battle that was ever fought in the state of Delaware. There were no battles here in colonial days nor during the War of 1812 nor during the Civil War. This was the first battle of the campaign to capture our first capital city. This was the first battle fought by a truly national unit -- Maxwell's Light Infantry Corps, made up of men drawn from nine state brigades -- and about forty of those men died during the battle. And it was here that our first national flag -- the stars and stripes authorized by Congress only eleven weeks previously -- was likely first flown in battle.

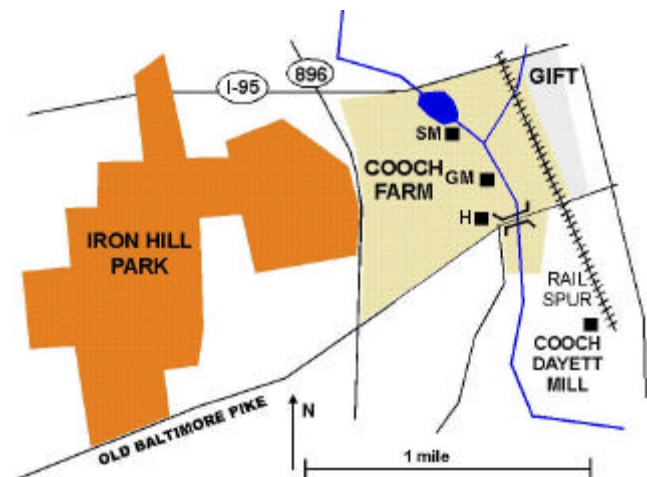
BATTLE FOUGHT ON COOCH PROPERTY

Since colonial times this Cooch property has been farmland -- both the house and the land are listed on the National

Register of Historic Places. However, most of the land is zoned for commercial and industrial use, it is located at the intersection of Interstate 95 and Delaware 896, several housing developments are nearby, and a rail spur runs through the property. Ned Cooch, a member of the Delaware Society SAR for over fifty years, was concerned that the pressures of urbanization would overwhelm the area. After discussing many alternatives with the state and with his family he developed a comprehensive preservation plan.

The state of Delaware used funds from its Open Space Program and the Federal Transportation Enhancement Fund to purchase the development rights to 190 acres of the Cooch property at a bargain-sale price, and the property was placed under a conservation easement in perpetuity. The state also obtained right of first refusal in any proposed sale of either the 190 acres or the Cooch home and several adjacent residences.

Ned's children, Richard Rodney Cooch and Anne Cooch Doran, and their spouses made a bargain sale to the state of an adjacent 20 acre plot. Ned and his family also donated \$1,500,000 to the Delaware Community Fund for the restoration and maintenance of the nearby state-owned Cooch-Dayett Mills. In 1977 the Cooch family had made a bargain sale to New Castle County of 300 acres on nearby Iron Hill, with the restriction that it could be used only for passive purposes -- no development. All 500 acres will now be a conservation and historic heritage area and will remain woodlands and fields forever. (See Map A.)



MAP A depicts the large parcels of land that have been preserved in perpetuity by efforts of the Cooch family

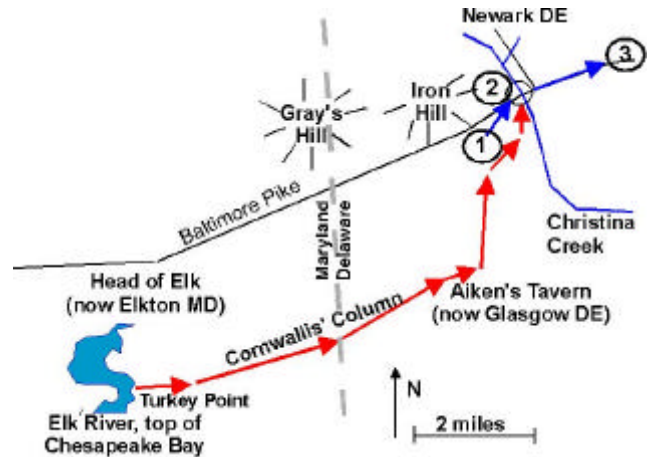
BATTLE LAUNCHED PHILADELPHIA CAMPAIGN IN 1777

The Battle of Cooch's Bridge was the first battle in the Philadelphia campaign. On July 23, 1777, British Gen. Howe left New York City with an armada of 265 ships carrying 18,000 troops. From the shore Continental Army scouts followed the progress of the British fleet, and Commander-in-Chief George Washington led most of the Continental Army south from New York to oppose the British wherever they might land. Because the Americans had strong defensive positions on the Delaware River, Howe decided to sail around the Demarva Peninsula and land at the top of the Chesapeake Bay.

On August 25 Howe's troops began disembarking at Turkey Point and other locations southeast of Head of Elk (now Elkton MD Landing), Maryland. They were exhausted after a month in very cramped quarters on hot summer waters. They had run short of rations and had killed most of their horses. They needed some time to recover and to secure new horses for the upcoming battles to capture Philadelphia.

On that same day most of the Continental Army -- some 11,000 Continentals under General George Washington -- marched into Delaware. They dug entrenchments along the top of the steep northern bank of Red Clay Creek, blocking the most direct route from Elk Landing to Philadelphia. Continental cannon stood nearly wheel-to-wheel from Stanton -- where the flank was protected by extensive marshland -- to Greenbank Mill on Newport Gap Pike.

Three days later Generals Washington, Greene, and Lafayette rode with a strong troop of horse to the top of Iron Hill and then to Gray's Hill (See Map B) to observe the British beachhead around Head of Elk, several miles away. On their way back a violent storm blew in and forced them to spend the night in a local farmhouse before reaching the safety of American lines.



MAP B depicts how the Battle of Cooch's Bridge developed. The accompanying article notes what happened at 1, 2, and 3

WASHINGTON FORMS LIGHT INFANTRY UNIT

The British army had developed a new tactic -- forming temporary light infantry units that could move quickly and operate independently to clear the way so that the main army could move without distraction. Washington formed a similar unit in Delaware to impede the enemy's progress. On August 28 he ordered each of the nine infantry brigades now in Delaware to detach one hundred of their most reliable infantrymen and seventeen officers to form a light infantry corps. On August 30 he appointed Brigadier General William Maxwell as commander of that corps. The permanent brigades were supplied by individual states, with troops and officers almost exclusively from that state. Since Maxwell's corps had officers and men from many states, this was our first truly national unit (see sidebar).

For this emergency duty, several Delaware militia battalions were assigned to (and paid by) the Continental Army (see sidebar). Strange as it may seem, the Delaware Continental Regiment was not in Delaware at this time. It was involved in the raid on Staten Island on Aug 22, led by Maj. Gen John Sullivan (NJ).



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Cooch's Bridge was located in the midst of swampy terrain at a three-way fork in the road from Wilmington to Elkton. Washington anticipated that the British would move toward the bridge around the south side of Iron Hill. He instructed Gen. Maxwell to deploy his Light Infantry Corps and the First Battalion of Delaware militia near Cooch's Bridge and to use them to harass and delay any British advance.

On the morning of September 3, 1777, a British column of nine thousand men under General Cornwallis (see sidebar) advanced up the road from Aiken's Tavern (present-day Glasgow). They followed what is now Route 896 onto Old Cooch's Bridge Road. In the lead were Hessian and Ansbach jägers. The word jäger means hunter, and these troops were excellent marksmen, familiar with fighting in the woods.

About a half-mile south of Cooch's Bridge (**#1 on Map B**), the Hessians were fired upon by elements of Maxwell's corps waiting in ambush. After a sharp exchange of gunfire the Americans fell back to a first defensive position, then to a second, and finally to the house, mill, and riverbanks near Cooch's Bridge (**#2 on map**), where they made a determined stand. They may have marked the safe rallying point by flying the stars and stripes (see sidebar).

British attempts to outflank the Americans were frustrated by swamps and streams on both sides of the road, swollen with water from the storms of the previous two days. Eventually the British brought up several light cannon and drove the outnumbered and out-gunned Americans down the road to

Christiana (**#3 on map**). Several cannonballs have been found on the Cooch property. (see photo)

CORNWALLIS USES COOCH HOME AS HQ

The British continued two miles further north to take over the town of Newark, blocking a possible American attack on their base at Head of Elk via the Elkton road. Cornwallis used the Cooch home as his headquarters for the next five days. Two days after the battle his aide, Major John Andre (see sidebar), drew a map (see photo) showing British units posted around the Cooch house. The officers drank all of Cooch's liquor, and the troops burned Cooch's grist mill when they left.

Maxwell's Corps and the Delaware militia returned to the main Continental lines at Stanton. This area (north of Christiana) was sufficiently secure for the Americans that on September 6 Washington held a staff meeting in the Hale-Byrnes house in Stanton with Generals Greene, Lafayette, Maxwell, Sullivan, and Wayne.

The harassing action let the British forces know that the invasion would meet stiff resistance. The dead were buried on the field, and Maxwell's unit was disbanded within a month, so there is no known casualty report for this unit. Historians have reviewed reports from various sources and estimate that 25 to 40 died on the U.S side and perhaps half that many on the British side (many were Hessians from the

Compatriot Ned Cooch Active in Preservation Projects

Edward (Ned) Webb Cooch, Jr., is the great(4)-grandson of Thomas Cooch, Sr. After serving in the U.S. Army (rising to the rank of major in the Coast Artillery Corps) Ned earned a law degree at the Univ. of Virginia. Ned co-founded the law firm of Cooch and Taylor in 1960. He served as president for six years and as a director for thirty-nine years of Delaware Wild Lands, which has preserved 40,000 acres of open land since its formation in 1961. For eleven years he was a member of the Delaware Open Space Council, advising the state on important land purchases. In 1995 he served as co-chair of the Public Archives Enhancement Fund Committee, which raised 1.7 million dollars to upgrade plans for the new Delaware Public Archives building. This supports genealogical and historical research for the estimated twenty million Americans who have a Delaware ancestor.

Ned joined the Delaware Society SAR in 1946 at age 26 and has the lowest national number (65,513) of any active member in Delaware. His son, Judge Richard Rodney Cooch, joined in 1974 at age 26, continuing the family tradition of joining the SAR as a young man and remaining active for life. In recognition of his many contributions to historic preservation that benefit the whole nation the National Society of the SAR authorized a Gold Good Citizenship Medal for Ned Cooch. It will be presented to him at the Delaware Society's Ratification Day Dinner in December 2003.



As is reported in the accompanying feature article, Compatriot Edward M. (Ned) Cooch was commended in April by Delaware Governor Ruth Ann Minner for his efforts in preserving the state's only Revolutionary War battlefield. (Photo courtesy of James T. O'Brien, DelDOT staffer.)

lead units). Several times this number were wounded. The Americans carried their wounded away; the British set up a field hospital in the Presbyterian Church at Aiken's Tavern

The town of Christiana was a river port that played a major role in shipping goods north and south without putting out to sea, where the British navy ruled the seas. However, at this time it was located between the two armies. Capt. William Dansey wrote to his mother that on September 5 he led the British 33rd Infantry in a raid on the town, where they "captured the horse, arms, colours and drums belonging to a rebel colonel of the Delaware militia" -- probably Delaware militia Col. Samuel Patterson, who had a home and mill in Christiana. Nearly 150 years later Capt. Dansey's descendants sold the Delaware militia flag to the Delaware Historical Society, where it may be seen today.

Deciding that a frontal attack on Washington's well-prepared positions in Delaware was not wise, Howe marched his army to Kennett Square PA, about fifteen miles to the north. Washington made a similar move north and fortified the high ground along the Brandywine River at Chadds Ford. The stage was now set for the Battle of the Brandywine, only two miles from the Delaware border.

THOMAS COOCH, SR., ARRIVED FROM ENGLAND IN 1746

Thomas Cooch, Sr., was born in England and emigrated to Delaware in 1746. He purchased hundreds of acres of land around Iron Hill and in 1760 built a home next to the bridge that carries Old Baltimore Pike over the Christina Creek. In 1777 a dam on this creek provided water to power a sawmill, a foundry, and a grist mill a hundred yards upstream from the house.

Although he was nearly eighty years old at the start of the Revolution Thomas Cooch had been named Colonel and Commander of the 2nd Militia Battalion, Lower Division, in the New Castle Delaware militia. By the time of the British invasion in 1777 Col. Samuel Patterson had become commander of this battalion. The Cooch family had withdrawn to Pennsylvania during the British invasion, so they were not present during the battle. Thomas Cooch died in 1788 and is buried with several later generations of Coochs at the Welsh Tract Baptist Church on Iron Hill.

Thomas' grandson William Cooch decided not to rebuild the burned mill in its original location. In 1792 he built a larger dam and turned what had been swamp-land into a mill pond. New mill-races were built to conduct the water nearly a mile to supply a new mill, located several hundred yards south-east of Cooch's Bridge. In 1822 that was replaced by the Cooch-Dayett Mill, which was rebuilt in 1917 and again in 1932. The Cooch foundry continued in operation until about 1892.



Shown here is a four-pound cannonball found on the Cooch property. The map was made by Captain John André, an aide-de-camp to Maj. Gen. Charles Grey during the Battle of Cooch's Bridge. Later he was promoted to Major and became coordinator of British intelligence operations in the New York area and negotiated with Benedict Arnold to betray the defenses at West Point. On September 22, 1780, André was caught carrying the plans for the West Point defenses back to Gen. Clinton. Because he had worn an American uniform as a disguise he was hanged as a spy rather than being shot as a soldier.

Several generations of the Cooch family have written and spoken about local history, hosted re-enactments of the battle, and helped to preserve the Delaware's historic treasures (see sidebar). This latest and largest gift from the Cooch family will help future generations experience the battlefield in nearly its original condition and understand the struggle for liberty on the very ground where patriots from many states fought and died.

SOURCES

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Maj. Andre's Journal (Bibliophile Society, Boston, 1903), map opp. page 80

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The News Journal (Wilmington DE) -- 1999 Aug 23, page A6 article on raising funds for the Delaware Public Archives; 2003 Apr 10, page A1 article with details of the 2003 gift

Delaware Society SAR archives -- Membership applications for Cooch family members; program for the 1901 dedication of the Cooch's Bridge monument

Composition of the Opposing Forces at Cooch's Bridge

CONTINENTAL UNITS

The nine brigades that sent detachments to Maxwell's Corps are enumerated below

Stirling's Division under Maj. Gen. William Alexander (NJ) also known as Lord Stirling:

#1 detachment led by Brig. Gen. William Maxwell (NJ) came from the New Jersey Brigade under Brig. Gen. William Maxwell (NJ)

#2 detachment led by unknown (NJ) came from Conway's Brigade under Brig. Gen. Thomas Conway (France)

Greene's Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene (RI): eight VA regiments and one PA regiment

#3 detachment led by Col. Josiah Parker (VA) came from the First Virginia Brigade under Brig. Gen. Peter Muhlenberg (VA)

#4 detachment led by Lt. Col. Richard Parker (VA) came from the Second Virginia Brigade under Brig. Gen. George Weedon (VA)

Stephen's Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. Adam Stephen (VA): seven VA regiments and two "additional" regiments

#5 detachment led by Lt. Col. William Heth (VA) came from the Third Virginia Brigade under Brig. Gen. William Woodford (VA)

#6 detachment led by Maj. Charles Simms (VA) came from the Fourth Virginia Brigade under Brig. Gen. Charles Scott (VA)

#7 detachment led by Col. Alexander Martin (NC) came from the North Carolina Brigade under Brig. Gen. Francis Nash (NC)

Pennsylvania Division under Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne (PA):

#8 detachment led by Lt. Col. Francis Gurney (PA) came from the First Pennsylvania Brigade under Co. Thomas Hartley (PA)

#9 detachment led by unknown (PA) came from the Second Pennsylvania Brigade under Col. Richard Humpton (PA)

Continental Artillery under Brig. Gen. Henry Knox:

did not contribute men to the light infantry corps

THE DELAWARE MILITIA

The Continental Congress asked Delaware to assign 1,000 militia to service under Washington's orders. The three militia battalions from New Castle County reported for duty with the Continentals.

First (northern) Battalion under Col. Thomas Duff -- about 320 men in seven companies -- was assigned to fight alongside Maxwell's Light Infantry Corps.

Second (central) Battalion under Col. Samuel Patterson -- about 415 men in eight companies -- remained with the main Continental army.

Third (southern) Battalion supplied two companies to the main army; the others went to Middletown and served under state militia Gen. Caesar Rodney to minimize British raids on farms in that area.

The Kent County Battalions joined Gen. Caesar Rodney in Middletown

The Sussex County Battalions remained in their towns for internal defense.

BRITISH MILITARY UNITS

Advancing toward Cooch's Bridge under Maj. Gen. Cornwallis:

Lead Elements: Ansbach Jägers, two British Light Infantry Battalions, British Grenadiers, Hessian Grenadiers (about 2,000 total)

Main Body: 1st Battalion Guards, 1st and 2nd Brigades of Artillery, the 4th, 27th, 40th, and 49th Regiments, and three troops of the 16th Dragoons. (about 7,000 total)

Remaining at Head of Elk under Maj. Gen. Grant: 2nd Battalion Guards, 5th, 10th, 23rd, 28th, and 55th Regiments, with two battalions of the 71st Regiment posted on Grey's Hill and a third posted on the Head of Elk-to-Aikens road. (about 9,000 total)

Did Maxwell Use the Stars and Stripes?

There are no known contemporary reports that state that Maxwell's Corps did or did not have a flag.

Tradition and circumstantial evidence gathered by historians in later years supports a conclusion that the stars and stripes flag was first flown in battle here:

- On June 14, 1777, Congress in Philadelphia approved the stars and stripes design.
- Claims that the stars and stripes flag was first used during battles before September 3 have been disproved.
- The Continental Army paraded through Philadelphia on August 24, so the army probably acquired several of the new stars and stripes flags.
- Maxwell's Light Infantry Corps was formed on August 28 and the Battle of Cooch's Bridge was only five days later. There was little time to design and make a flag with a new design, so they would use a flag that was readily available and different from the other brigades.
- Since Maxwell's Corps was made up of troops from many states it would make sense to use the United States' new flag to identify itself.
- Maxwell's Corps was the only Continental unit involved in the Battle of Cooch's Bridge on September 3, so no other regiment's flag would be used.
- While it would not be prudent to fly a flag from concealed positions they would want a flag 1) to lead the unit as it marched off to its forward position, 2) to identify the rallying point to gather dispersed units for the final stand along the river at Cooch's Bridge, and 3) to lead the unit back to the main lines after the battle.

Other circumstantial evidence supports the opposite conclusion:

- The light infantry corps (whether British or U.S.) were gathered for temporary service and fought as dispersed groups taking advantage of cover (not calling attention to their position), so they did not carry any colors into battle.
- Maxwell's Corps was intended to be a temporary unit, so why would it go to the trouble of obtaining a flag? It was in existence less than a month and was disbanded after the Battle of the Brandywine.
- National colors were used primarily on naval vessels to identify their nationality and to distinguish them from pirates. The proposal to define the stars and stripes as our national flag came from the Continental Congress' Marine Committee.
- Military flags were used to distinguish the units from one another, not to indicate a common origin. Even the commander-in-chief, George Washington, flew only a flag with a 3-2-3-2-3 array of stars in a blue field (the canton design of the national flag) to designate his headquarters.

***Local tradition firmly favors
the first conclusion,
and for over a century
the Cooch family
has proudly flown
the Betsy Ross flag
at Cooch's Bridge.***