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Thirteen Days in August 1777

“Thirteen Days of August” by Helen H. Gemmill

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In most histories of the Revolution, the Neshaminy encampment is quickly glossed over. In point of fact, it lasted thirteen days, August 10-23, 1777, and was the third longest encampment in Pennsylvania, exceeded only by Whitemarsh and Valley Forge.

Furthermore, it is the place where Lafayette officially assumed his command, where Count Pulaski was introduced to Washington, and where Betsy Ross’ flag is said to have been flown for the first time.

How the Continental Army Came to the Crossroads

Never during the entire war was the Commander-in-Chief more bewildered or frustrated than he was at this time, for he could not locate the enemy. On July 25 he had been informed that the British fleet, which had been anchored in the New York harbor, had sailed—but what was its destination? Had General Howe headed north toward New England or south toward Philadelphia?

Washington was then camped near Morristown, New Jersey, and acting on a “conjecture” that the fleet was bound for Philadelphia, he had set the army in motion and proceeded to the banks of the Delaware River opposite Coryell’s Ferry (now New Hope) to await further news. When a courier arrived on July 30 and reported the British fleet had been sighted off Delaware Bay, Washington decided to continue toward the city.

On the last day of July the soldiers were ferried across the river and headed down York Road. Some of them marched straight through to Germantown, but Lt. McMichael noted in his diary that his regiment “passed Bogarts’ Tavern” (now the General Greene Inn at Buckingham), and camped that night at “the Cross roads in Warwick Township at 7 P.M.”

The next morning (August 1st), they resumed their march toward the city, never suspecting they would be back at the same spot in little more than a week.

They swept through the Crooked Billet (now Hatboro), and arrived at the “plains” above the Falls of the Schuylkill near Germantown that evening. Here they camped, while Washington inspected Philadelphia’s fortifications, and consulted with Congress. He also attended a dinner given in his honor, where he was introduced to the Marquis de Lafayette, who had recently arrived in the city.

On the 8th Washington held a “grand review” of the troops. Lafayette also witnessed the review – his first sight of the American troops he was soon to join.

Shortly the order was given to retrace their steps to Coryell’s Ferry. Washington felt the location on the Delaware had the advantage of being close enough to protect Philadelphia as well as providing a head start toward the north, if that should prove to be Howe’s aim. In any event, he wanted the troops pulled away from the city, because it afforded a temptation to both officers

and men to “indulge themselves in licenses inconsistent with discipline and order, and consequently of a injurious tendency.”.

On the morning of the 10th they reached the Cross Roads (Hartsville), where they encamped at 6 P.M. Washington and his aides, meanwhile, galloped direct from Germantown. His party consisted of 27 men. Judging from the handwriting that appeared on the dispatches of the next two weeks, the officers included Alexander Hamilton, Richard Kidder Meade, Robert Hanson Harrison, Tench Tilghman, John Fitzgerald, Caleb Gibbs, and John Laurens.

The Warwick Township Location

The location, at the intersection of York and Bristol Roads was a good one. It was close to the southwest branch of the Neshaminy, which must have seemed a godsend to the men in the August heat. Its banks were fairly level in this area, affording easy access to the water. The only exception was to the north, where York Road rises steeply up to Kerr’s (or Carr’s) Hill, and even that had its advantages, for here the troops could enjoy what Davis’ “History” calls the “artic drift” that still sweeps across Warwick hills from the west.

Furthermore, the bridge over the creek, built in 1756, must have been a substantial one to warrant mention in date-lines. Unfortunately, before the week was over, heavy rains would turn the lowlands around the bridge into a swamp.

The Local Population

Politically, the area was ideal. The population of the surrounding countryside was almost entirely “Scotch-Irish”, thanks largely to the Neshaminy-Warwick Presbyterian Church not half a mile away, which had been a magnet for this group since its founding in 1726.

Of all the minorities in the colonies, the “Scotch-Irish” (as they are usually, if inaccurately called), had no Tories and no pacifists. Descended from fighting stock, they formed a cordon of defense around the non-fighting Quakers to the south and east.

These, then, were the people who opened their farmhouses and their fields to the Colonials. No doubt their patriotism was a bit strained by the end of the thirteen days.

The Area Surrounding the Encampment

Unfortunately, there are few contemporary descriptions of the area at that time. The “Scotch-Irish” were not so concerned with recordkeeping as their Quaker neighbors (Financial records were another matter!). A census, taken seven years later in 1784 shows that Warwick township (which then extended all the way up to Doylestown), had 609 whites, 27 “blacks and slaves.”

When Washington camped there the Crossroads area did possess three amenities (in addition to schools) which are specifically mentioned in his correspondence: a church, a tavern and a mill, all of which are still standing.

The Neshaminy-Warwick church was a half mile down the creek. Nathaniel Irwin was the minister at that time, and like most of his flock, he was an ardent patriot.

The Crossroads had boasted a tavern as early as 1744. Just a day’s ride out of Philadelphia, on the road to New York, it was an ideal spot for travelers to stop. By 1777, there were houses on all four corners, and the tavern license had jumped back and forth across the intersection many times.

The Hartsville Hotel, which was torn down to make way for a gas station in the 1960’s, was generally thought to be the tavern mentioned in the correspondence during the encampment. However, a recent study of deeds and licenses reveals that Davis and Buck were correct when they said that in 1777 the tavern was “on the northwest corner, opposite the present one”, and is, therefore, still standing. Furthermore, the tavern keeper was probably Adam Kerr, for four years later his petition for a license to “retail liquors by small measure” states that he has kept a “house of Publick Entertainment at the Crossroads...for several years past.”

The mill stands just south of the Bridge. In 1777 its owner was a non-resident, John Campbell, a Philadelphia merchant. Like other city dwellers, Campbell may have invested in real estate in the country as a precaution against British occupation of the city. Two years later he sold the mill to George Miller, and it is tempting to speculate that Miller was operating it during the encampment, for one of Washington’s orders commands a guard to be posted “over Mr. Miller’s Oats, to consist of a Serjt and 10 men.”

Washington Chooses a Headquarters

A little to the north of the bridge stands the Moland house, where Washington set up his headquarters.

The historian William J. Buck described the house in the first article ever published on the Neshaminy Encampment. W.W.H. Davis, in his second edition of the History of Bucks County (1905), includes a description:

"Washington quartered in the farm house of John Moland, then lately deceased", says Davis. He refers to it as a "substantial stone dwelling...in good preservation", then continues:

As when Washington occupied it, the first floor of the main building is divided into two rooms with the entry near the kitchen; the larger room being on the south (west) side and entered from the porch, the smaller, back. The latter is thought to have been used by Washington as an office, the larger a reception room. In each there was an open fireplace and then as now a door opened into the kitchen. There has been no change in the porches in sixty years, and similar ones may have been there 1777-8.

Buck claims it was the "best finished house in the neighborhood" at the time of the Revolution. Considering the fact that many structures in the mid-18th century still consisted of one room downstairs and loft above, often built of logs, John Moland's stone house must have seemed palatial.

John Moland was an important man in the province. Born in London about 1700, he studied law at the Inner Temple. Commissioned King's Attorney in Pennsylvania, he came here by way of the West Indies. The earliest record of him in this country is a deed of purchase in 1737, which refers to him as being "of the island of St. Christophers". The deed shows he bought 308 acres in Rockhill township in upper Bucks County from Thomas Freame, the husband of William Penn's daughter Margaret. About the same time he married Catherine Hutchinson, of New Castle, Delaware.

In 1740 Moland petitioned the court in Newtown for admittance as attorney of the Court of Common Pleas, and was accepted "according to his request". During the next two decades his name appears in connection with cases before the Bucks County court, and several times he is referred to as "Justice." Sometime prior to 1742 he was admitted to the Philadelphia bar, and acquired a reputation of being one of its ablest members.

The Continental Army Sets Up Camp

While Washington was settling into the widow Moland's house that hot Sunday evening, August 10, 1777, the troops were pitching their tents throughout the countryside.

Across old York road was General Greene's headquarters. Here, says Buck, all orders to the army were posted, here stood the whipping post, while nearby was the post office.

A short distance to the east on Bristol road, on the farm later owned by Major George Jamison, Lord Stirling's division was stationed.

Opposite Stirling's division on Bristol road General Conway's brigade of Pennsylvania troops was camped, and here, also, the cattle were pastured and slaughtered for the army's use. Earlier in the summer Washington had ordered that in all encampments the slaughter pens were to be placed at a distance from any streams the soldiers planned to use and that the "offal" was to be buried once a day—saving only enough to extract oil for lubricating gunlocks.

Late though it was when the troops arrived at the Crossroads that Sunday evening one of the first orders issued according to Gen. Muhlenberg's Orderly Book was: "As it is uncertain how long we shall remain in the Present Encampment the Soldiers are to fix Booths before their Tents to shelter them from the Heat. The Qr. Masters are to give directions Immediately to have Vaults [latrines] dug in proper and Convenient Places...." These "vaults" were to be camouflaged with "Bows and Bushes" in a single line to the rear of the camp. The men were reminded that at their previous encampment there had been complaints that the "Offensive smells" had become a "public nusence."

Each brigade also set up its own bake oven which "by men that can understand it can be erected in a few hours". Bread baked in this way, the General claimed, would be "wholesomer than the sodden cakes which are by too commonly used." Although the flour turned out at the mill was fresh-ground, the bread that resulted in 1777 was hardly gourmet fare. Two weeks later Washington insisted that the Commissaries "supply the troops with hard bread. The present most common mode of supply, by issuing flour which they make into bad bread, not only injures their health, but is attended with delays sufficient to frustrate the most important, and well-formed enterprises"

The soldiers were issued 5 ounces of soap a week. Washington was a stickler for cleanliness, urging that the men appear “decent and clean.” Orders issued earlier in the summer cautioned about bathing “in the heat of the day,” and warned them not to “stay long in the water at a time.” However, he assured them that “bathing themselves moderately and washing their clothes are of infinite service.” This concern led, of course, to the amusing legend that the general could be seen washing his own clothes in the Neshaminy.

Day-to-Day Difficulties

The scope of the problems Washington dealt with during these thirteen days is extraordinary.

The morning after his arrival, on August 11th, he seems to have sensed the low morale of the men in the heat and the humidity, for one of the first orders issued expressed his “approbation” of their conduct at their Germantown encampment: he had heard few complaints with regard to the damage done to fences. Although, as one historian put it, this “unwonted morality” may have been due to the hot weather (which discouraged the desire for firewood), the General was confident that by the “unworn behavior” of the officers and the “good disposition of the Soldiery” future abuses would be avoided.

There followed an order to the Commissary General to provide and keep in the camp “Spiritous Liquors” to be issued to the men “as the exigency of Service shall require.” The price of liquor at that time was exorbitant, due primarily to the high profit made by the sutlers, who sold it to the troops. Washington, therefore, also ordered that a board of officers be recruited from each regiment to investigate the prices which ought to satisfy the sutlers, and report back their findings.

Attention was then turned to the problem of deserters. Reports were to be delivered to the Brigadier immediately, so that the offenders could be pursued and brought to justice.

Even the horses came in for their share of concern. “Many light Dragoon horses being off their speed and broken down by the extream carelessness and wantonness of the riders,” continues Gen. Muhlenberg’s Orderly Book, “The Commr-in-Chief possitively [sic] orders that no non Comd Officer or trooper in the Corps of Horse ever mount his horse except when on duty, nor leap nor Gallop except for exercise under the direction of his Officer.”

Gen. Conway’s brigade was ordered to fire their blank cartridges at 5 P.M. “in the way of exersise.” All marching, parading, and exercising was to be done after the heat of the day.

Before the day was over, John Dyer, of Dyerstown (just north of Doylestown) visited the camp. His journal entry reads: “I saw the American army Encamped near or at the Cross Roads; consisting of about 18,000 men in Bucks County.” (Lafayette’s estimate of 11,000 is generally considered more accurate.)

On Tuesday, August 12th, the orders continued to pour forth from the Moland house. Among others, the Major Generals were commanded to fit up as many armories as were required to keep the arms of their troops in repair, with one or two traveling forges to accompany each division.

By the 13th, the people from the neighboring countryside began to appear at the camp with fresh vegetables. This pleased the Commander-in-Chief, because, as he had said earlier in the summer, “Nothing can be more comfortable and wholesome than vegetables, [and] every encouragement is to be given to the country people to bring them in, the least insult to them will be severly punished.”

Fortunately for the inhabitants of Warwick, the soldiers were on their best behavior, for Henry Laurens wrote his father that “we hear very few complaints from those immediatly about us of the violation of private property.”

At the end of the day Col. Pickering could not resist a few comments about the Bucks County weather. “Such continual melting hot weather,” he complained, “is unknown in new England. We...had frequent showers of rain and this day some severe thunder.”

Where Were the British?

It was Saturday, August 16th, and still no word on the whereabouts of the British; so Washington turned his attention to the fighting in New York State. In a communique to Gen. Putnam, he wrote that he was sending Col. Morgan’s corps of riflemen to assist the northern army against the Indians, for they would “fight them in their own way.” Always the military strategist, he added: “500 is the true strength of Morgan’s corps, but it will answer a good purpose if you give out they are double that number.”

Then, on the assumption that the elusive enemy would be sighted momentarily, a list of standing regulations was posted. The order of the departure is carefully drawn up, the Pioneers and Artificers to go first to “repair the roads and remove any Obstruction that may incommode the Line of March.”

That evening at 6 o'clock, two “sober, honest lads” who could speak French were to be sent to headquarters – “if such could be found.” Apparently the evening was to be spent discussing fortifications with the French engineers.

Washington and his staff put in long days at the Moland house, starting at dawn and often not finishing till after midnight.

August 17, 1777 was a Sunday. Washington had been at the Crossroads nearly a week. Gen. Green wrote Gen. Varnum: “Our situation is not a little awkward – buried in the country, out of hearing of the enemy. His excellency is exceedingly impatient; but it is said, if Philadelphia is lost, all, all is ruined.”

To add to the discomfort of the troops, there had been heavy rains, causing the creek to rise and the ground to become saturated. To help counteract the dampness, Washington issued the following General Orders:

“The ground being very wet, the Quarter Master General is to procure as much straw (from which the grain has been threshed) as possible, and distribute the same in the most equal manner among the troops....A gill of rum, or other spirit is to be issued to-day, to each non-commissioned officer, soldier and waggoner.”

It was Monday, August 18, and still no word of a sighting of the British fleet. Although preoccupied with Indians in New York, Congress in Philadelphia, enthusiastic would-be Major Generals in Paris, and unhealthy humidity along the Neshaminy, Washington took the time to acknowledge receipt of a treatise on war which had been sent him for comment, and to congratulate a young man on his intended marriage.

Lafayette Joins the Continental Army

A letter to Benjamin Harrison from “Neshamini Bridge” on Tuesday the 19th brings Lafayette onto the scene. From “various hints” it was Washington’s conviction that Lafayette wanted the actual command of a division as soon as he was considered ready for it. Accustomed to foreigners who expected to instruct raw Colonials in the sophisticated art of war, the General was impressed by a young man who had declared he had “come to learn, not to teach.” The letter concludes with the statement that the Marquis was then in Philadelphia, but “expected up this day or tomorrow.”

Some historians, including Buck, believe that Lafayette had arrived at the encampment long before this, returning briefly to Philadelphia bearing a letter for Congress. In any case, his arrival on the 19th is confirmed by Col. Pickering: “There has been an addition to the General’s family lately, the Marquis de Lafayette of one of the first families of France...a young gentleman of modest manners, possessed of an immense fortune, a country at peace, and a wife....”

Where Lafayette and his aides stayed is a matter of conjecture. Neighborhood tradition had them billeted in a stone farmhouse still standing across from the church. Even in 1912 a brochure sent out by the adjacent Log College Assembly Inn (formerly the old Tennent School) promoted renting the “old Colonial house where, it is said, Washington was a guest and Lafayette had his headquarters.”

Lafayette’s English would have been challenged if he could have heard the name given to the house a century and a quarter later: “Alta-Vista-under-the-Three-Giant-Sycomores-by-the-Edge-o’-the-Wood” [sic]!

The Tenth Day

It was now August 20th, the tenth day of the encampment. Refuse was beginning to accumulate, and the camp colour men were ordered to bury it.

There had been no dependable news of the enemy’s fleet for two weeks, and everyone from private to general was feeling restive in the depressing August humidity.

The next morning Washington called a Council of War in the reception room of the Moland house.

Present at the council, in addition to the Commander-in-Chief, were Major Generals Greene, Stirling, Stephen, and Lafayette; and Brigadier Generals Maxwell, Knox, Wayne, Muhlenberg, Weedon, Woodford, Scott, and Conway. This was Lafayette’s first appearance in the decision-making group.

The conclusion of the council was that Howe was probably planning an attack on Charleston, and since the Americans could not possibly arrive in time to protect it, they should proceed immediately to the North [Hudson] River, and either make an attempt on New York or attack Gen. Burgoyne. Success in either case would help counteract the losses in the south.

A copy of the council's deliberations and conclusions was carried that afternoon to the Congress by Col. Hamilton, who was ordered to "bring back the result of their Opinions."

In a postscript the General added: "That I may not appear inconsistent to advise and to act, before I obtain an Opinion, I beg leave to mention that I shall move the Army to the Delaware, tomorrow Morning, to change their Ground at any rate, as their present Encampment begins to be disagreeable and would injure their Health in a short time. Our forage also begins to grow scarce here."

The Warwick countryside was beginning to feel the effects of supporting 11,000 men and their horses.

At 3 P.M. the afternoon of the 21st young Col. Hamilton dashed into the hall of Congress with Washington's report. After reading it, Congress adjourned for two hours.

By a strange coincidence, only that morning word had been received in Philadelphia that the British fleet of "upwards of one hundred sail" had been seen the night of the 14th in the Chesapeake Bay. This intelligence had been immediately forwarded to Washington, but the courier must have passed Hamilton en route.

Since no further news of the fleet had been received during the day, when Congress reassembled at 5 P.M. that evening it passed a resolution approving Washington's plan, and giving him permission to act "as circumstances require."

Meanwhile Washington instigated preparations to march towards Coryell's Ferry. In settling the accounts, a bill was paid for butter, potatoes, cucumbers, beets, cabbage, milk, chickens, a large "fowl", eggs and "sower milk" – all listed as "Articles had of the Woman at Whose house the Gen. Lived at Cross Roads." Certainly the widow Moland could use the money!

During that busy day an important visitor showed up at headquarters. Count Pulaski was received at the Moland house with a letter from Benjamin Franklin, introducing him as a gentleman of "character and Military Abilities." Noting that Pulaski "takes this from me, as an introductory letter at his own request," Washington dispatched him with introductions to President Hancock and George Clymer.

Pulaski's arrival was also welcomed by Lafayette, for he had brought the first letter the Marquis had received from his wife Adrienne since his departure from France in June. They had one child, Henriette, and were expecting a second; so the young man was eager for news.

Although August 21st was the most interesting of the thirteen days, with its Council of War, the introduction of Pulaski, and the preparations to march, it ended anticlimactically. When the courier from Congress finally arrived with the news that the fleet had been sighted in the Chesapeake, Washington cautiously decided to cancel his marching orders. He relayed another communique to Congress: "I am this moment honored with yours of this morning...I shall in consequence halt upon my present ground till I hear something further."

Reluctantly he spent another night at the Moland house.

August 22nd dawned with no indication that by the end of the day the suspense would finally be over.

The Brigadiers and officers were ordered to assemble the next morning at 9 A.M. "at the tavern by the cross roads, to consider of the reports made to them relative to the prices of liquors sold by the sutlers." The tavern keeper, Adam Kerr, could hardly have resisted eavesdropping, when he heard the subject under discussion!

In the meantime word was received that morning in Philadelphia that the fleet had again been sighted, this time "high up" in the northeast part of the Chesapeake. Obviously Gen. Howe intended to make a landing in Maryland, then march on the city. His "strange route," as Washington referred to it, had been caused by "contrary" winds.

When this long-awaited news was relayed to the Neshaminy headquarters, the camp suddenly roused from its lethargy (even the sentinels had been sitting at their posts) and became a beehive of activity. Congress was informed that the army would march in the early morning toward Philadelphia, then continue south, where it would be joined by other units.

In the midst of the bustle of breaking camp a messenger galloped in with news of Gen. Stark's victory at Bennington. An elated

Washington immediately had a bulletin posted, informing the troops that their brothers-in-arms had behaved in a “very brave and heroic manner.”

Orders To Move Out

Finally, the army was ordered to march the next morning – if it should not rain, proceeding in exactly the same order as that posted the day before. Thirty men were to follow in the rear of the baggage “to pick up all stragglers, and see that the sick are not neglected.”

At 4 A.M. August 23rd, the main body of the American army began to pull out of the Neshaminy encampment. 11,000 ragged men, some wearing British uniforms they had stripped from the dead, trudged back down York Road toward Philadelphia. They carried the “Stars and Stripes” which Congress had officially adopted two months before, and which, it is said, was unfurled here for the first time.

General Greene’s division was in the lead, sloshing out of the muddy meadow along the creek, past Greene’s headquarters, the whipping post, and the spot where the General Orders had been posted for the preceding twelve days. They were followed by the troops on the hill, and those on James Wallace’s land. They marched past the mill, then climbed the small rise to the tavern at the Crossroads.

Here the divisions of Generals Stirling and Conway wheeled in from Bristol Road to the east, and from the west the sick were carted from the church, leaving it empty for the court-martial that would sit at nine o’clock. If Lafayette was indeed quartered across Meetinghouse Road from the church, he probably waited for Washington and his staff to leave the Moland house and cross the Neshaminy bridge for the last time.

The inhabitants of Warwick and Warminster must have whistled the tune played by the fifers. Even Washington had admitted not long before that the local people “dread our halting among them even for a night, and are happy when they get rid of us.”

Before he left, Washington had one final duty to perform. An entry in his account book reads: “To cash paid Mrs. Moland for her furniture etc. – £5.5s.” The last notation of August 23rd proves him the perfect guest: “To cash paid woman for Cleaning the Kitchen – £1.2s. 6P.”

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The Thirteen Days of August

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