

# The Plunder of Chester County During and After the Battle of Brandywine

by Paul Mullin, Westtown Township Historical Commissioner

On the morning of September 11, 1777, a thick fog covered the ground when Martha Taylor awoke to begin her daily routine on their farm in Westtown along Street Road (now Pleasant Grove). Martha's mind was on the safety of her husband Thomas, and two sons, Thomas Jr. and Titus, who were with the Chester County militia. They were likely stationed with other battalions of militia along the Brandywine Creek near Pyle's Ford.

General Howe's army had sailed up the Chesapeake Bay and landed near the Head of Elk (near Elkton, Maryland) little more than a month ago. The British and Hessians were now camped at Kennett Square. Martha had watched the local militia drill on their farm. She knew these men, who were her neighbors and friends, and she worried about them. Word had it that General Howe was intending to cross the Brandywine at one of the many fords in the area and continue to Philadelphia to capture the city. Around nine o'clock in the morning, as Martha continued her work, she suddenly heard the faint sound of gunfire.

Soon, the roar of cannon fire could be heard in the distance from the area of Chadds Ford. Hessian General Knyphausen had begun the feint at Chadds Ford, thus allowing Howe to begin his flanking movement around Washington's right and the American position near the John Chad's House. Later in the afternoon, Howe completed his flanking march and rested the tired soldiers for about half an hour at Osborne Hill off the Birmingham Road. After the troops were rested, around four o'clock in the afternoon, the main battle began as the British and Hessians advanced toward Birmingham Meeting. The Battle of Brandywine had begun.

The Americans lost the battle, but put up a good scrap against the British. After several days, Howe had moved some of his troops to Chester. September 15, Howe discovered that Washington was marching along the Lancaster Road (Swedesford Road today) only 10 miles away. Howe's troops once again marched through Westtown along Old Wilmington Pike. Their march passed near the present eastern part of Cribilly

Farm, past today's Amish Market and Planet Fitness towards the Boot Tavern (Boot Road and Phoenixville Pike). Lord Cornwallis was marching through the east end of Westtown along the Chester Road (route 352) towards the White Horse Tavern (Swedesford Road near Planebrook Road). The short-lived Battle of the Clouds soon commenced, much of it occurring at what is now Immaculata University. Soon after, the British captured the capitol at Philadelphia. The residents of Chester County survived the storm of musket balls, grapeshot, and cannon balls from these battles, but had no idea of the suffering that would plague them for years to come.

For years after the battle, Chester County residents were recovering from the damages (depredations) that the British had wreaked from their commandeering of animals, food, crops, clothing, and other items. It is important to note that this was harvest time and as fruit and crops were being gathered, suddenly two armies descended on the county.

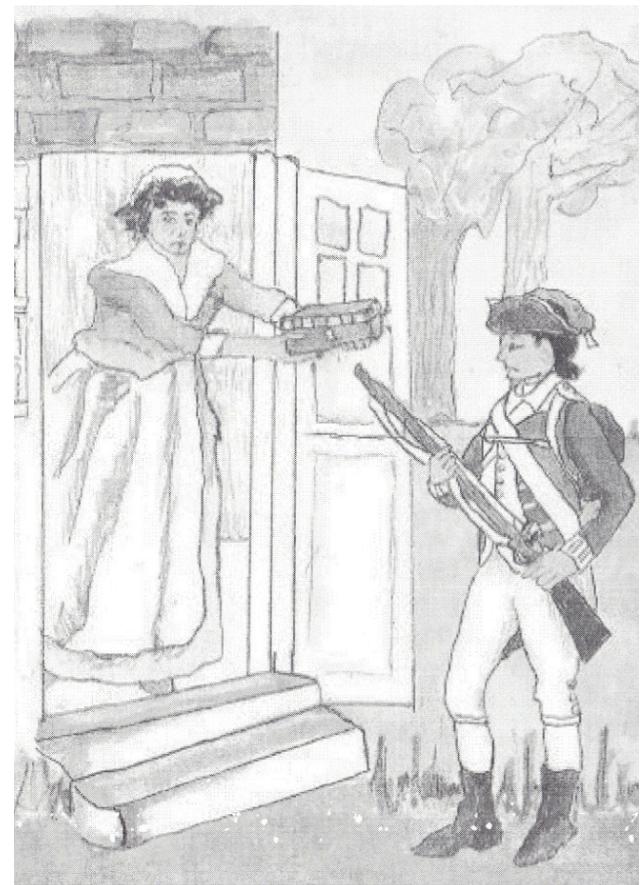
The two townships that suffered the most were Birmingham and Tredyffrin as the British had camped in these areas the longest. In Birmingham, it is said that General Howe's headquarters was the c: 1750 George Gilpin Homestead on Harvey Road. The British camp in Tredyffrin was generally parallel along the Lancaster Road (Route 30) to the south and Swedesford Road to the north. Local author and historian, Thomas Maguire, states that the approximate boundary of the camp is roughly defined by today's Swedesford Road, Valley Forge Road, Hickory Lane, and Howellville Road. Cold Stream Drive runs approximately through the center of the camp.

Charles Dilworth of Birmingham Township, owner of the tavern at Dilworth (now the Dilworthtown Inn), placed a damage claim of 820 pounds, 15 sterling, and 3 pence (approximately \$49,000 today). The extensive list of losses includes 88 animals (cows, pigs, horses, and sheep), a wide-ranging list of crops destroyed or confiscated, furniture, whiskey, silver, clothing, and damage to real estate (fences, trees,

house, outbuildings, etc.). In his memoirs of the Battle of Brandywine, Joseph Townsend, a Quaker from Sconnelltown, Birmingham Township, lamented seeing furniture and other goods being used for cooking fires by the British when there was plenty of torn down fence rails and timber available. The devastation that he witnessed that day in 1777 induced him to move to Harford County, Maryland in 1782, and later to Baltimore where he died.

The Gibbons family who lived off Street Road (now the Westtown School), was cleaned out of livestock by several foraging parties. The following damages were claimed by Westtown residents and recorded in the Chester County Register of Revolutionary War Damages compiled in 1782. The original spelling is used, totals are in pounds, sterling, pence:

- Thomas Taylor (deceased), submitted by his mother, Phebe totaling 82.14.0: 1 Gray Mare, 1 Brown Horse, 1 Riding Saddle, 29 Geese, 1 Red Heiffer, 2 Coverlids, 1 Pewter Tea pott, 1 Warming Pann, 8 Shirts, 1 Camblet gown, 1 Pair of fine Linen Sheets & Pillows, 1 Pair of Shoes & Buckles Silver, 6 Silver Teaspoons, Sundry Caps & Handk.r, 14 pairs of Stockings, 1 Sell of Home Spun Curtains, 1 Hollon apron, 1 pair of thread Mittons, 1 Cambrick apron, 3 Fine Linen Sheets.  
Note: Phebe Taylor is said to have attributed the depredations above to the Hessians who marched in the left wing of the British forces who swept across Crebilly farm.
- Name Unknown, totaling 23.16.10: 1 New Saddle, Cash taken out of my chest £20 Continental 3 to 1 Hard, Cash in Hard Money, 1 New Beaver Hatt, 1 New pair of Breeches, 1 New Demascus under Jacket, 3 Skirts almost New, 3 pairs of Stockings of Sundry sorts, 1 Mislin Stock & Stock buckle Plate, 1 Pair of Knee Buckles Silver, 1 Cotton Handkerchief.
- John Hunt, totaling 30.0.0: 1 Brown Mare 7 Years old.
- Caleb James, totaling 32.10.0: 1 Mare about 8 or 9 Years old, 1 d.(ditto) about 18 months old, oats in the Sheaf Supposed worth 1.5.0, 1 Pewter Quart.



A British soldier plunders a colonist's home – drawing by Ida Fritsche

These are the only recorded depredations for Westtown in the register since the populace was mostly Quaker. Many Quakers, such as the Gibbons family, did not claim war damages due to religious beliefs. Depredations were recorded by the Quakers themselves and were kept in the Birmingham Meeting minutes. The true toll likely will never be known. Unfortunately, none of this money was ever paid out due to the conditions agreed upon in the Treaty of Paris. The residents of Chester County (which, at the time, included present day Delaware County) took many, many years to recover from the short battles of 1777. Some of them likely never recovering the prosperity that they enjoyed before that fateful September.

SAVE  
THE DATE  
**OCTOBER 1**

## WESTTOWN DAY

Please join us Sunday, October 1 at Oakbourne Park. Enjoy historical presentations, tours of Oakbourne Mansion, live music, food, petting zoo, pony rides, and a childrens' archaeological dig.