

New Battlefield Lines Drawn at Brandywine

by **Kenneth Lawson**

The serene and uncompromising beauty of the Brandywine River stands in stark contrast to the events that took place here on September 11, 1777. Yes, there is another reason to remember 9/11, and in the years after the American Revolution to say you were one of the 30,000 at “The Battle of Brandywine Creek” meant you participated in one of the most horrific battles of the war. It is said that the Brandywine River in Chadds Ford ran red with the blood of those engaged in a combat that included cannons, muskets, pistols, bayonets, and swords.

Brandywine Creek was chosen by American Commander-in-Chief General George Washington to engage Commander-in-Chief Lieutenant General Sir William Howe since it is a natural barrier on the way to Philadelphia and crossing (i.e. “fording”) the creek would make the British army vulnerable. Brandywine remains the largest battle ever fought against a foreign army on American soil, and Westtown Township shares an important piece of this legacy.

Today, the battle is best understood by driving along the route taken by the British whose main force marched from Kennett Square to ford the creek twice near Marshallton. This vast (and exhausted!) force rested at a staging area north of Osborne’s Hill stretching out over 1.5 miles including parts of Sconnelstown and Strodes Mill and into the far western fringe of Westtown Township. After an hour they continue to march south on Birmingham Road, meeting America’s first line of defense at Street Rd (Rt. 926). General Howe remained at Osborne’s Hill to observe and command his forces.

A diversionary march of 6,000 Queen’s Rangers, American Loyalists, and German Hessians led by Hessian Lt. General Von Knyphausen simultaneously moved up the “Great Nottingham Road (Rt. 1)” towards Chadds Ford. Skirmishes and cannon volleys continued in this area the rest of the morning and thirteen Hessian soldiers are still buried at the Kennett Meetinghouse.

General Washington, situated on a hill overlooking downtown Chadds Ford, was unable to determine the true intentions of the enemy until late afternoon. The idea that an army of 12,000 men dressed in wool might march 16 miles in heat and humidity before a major battle hadn’t occurred to Washington so he didn’t guard the distant Trimble and Jefferies fords. Conflicting intelligence kept him guessing about the enemy’s location most of the day until Squire Cheney’s warning and loud cannon fire from Birmingham Hill confirmed Howe’s position.

Washington also spent time riding with his troops on the front line and in the morning was within 100 yards of British sharpshooter Patrick Ferguson who decided at the last second not to kill our future President saying, “it was not pleasant to fire at the back of an unoffending individual who was acquitting himself very cool of his duty, so I let him alone.” He didn’t know until the next day it was likely George Washington he had in his sights.

The major battle began at 4:00 pm when a line of Continentals put up a defensive volley as Howe’s troops reached Street Road. Hessian troops moved to the area of where New Street now exists near Crebilly Farm to outflank these Continentals who eventually fell back, preparing for the core battle near Birmingham Meetinghouse. After heavy fighting on “Battle Hill” the Americans retreated to Sandy Hollow and Dilworthtown on their way to Chester via Thornbury and Concord. During this time of the battle, 20 year old Marquis de Lafayette was wounded, and “An act of valor by an American soldier of African descent” was observed when enlisted bombardier Private Edward “Ned” Hector saved his cannon and artillery team from the advancing British. Darkness finally ended this long day of fighting. That both Washington and Howe were with their armies that day, and could actually view each other during the battle, was significant and the only time this ever happened.

The next day bodies were found over 10 square miles and local residents helped treat the wounded and bury the dead. Birmingham Meetinghouse was used as a hospital and the common grave of 300 soldiers there is part of a “Peace Garden.” This shrine is a testimony to those killed in the battle and the Quaker pacifists who demonstrated humility and grace in the face of the destructive forces of war that ripped apart their homes and property.

In fact, the area was so devastated by the battle and British occupation that life was not the same in our peaceful valley for many years. The Gibbons family farm located just off Street road on property given to Westtown School around 1792 was cleaned out of livestock by several foraging parties in the days after the battle. Family matriarch and “queen of the country” Jane Steward Gibbons appeared before General Howe, but her request to have a favorite cow returned was refused when it became known her son was enlisted in General Washington’s army. The cow somehow escaped and returned to the farm on its own.

Brandywine changed how the British viewed America’s army and Lord Cornwallis, who would surrender to Washington at Yorktown 4 years later, exclaimed that “these rebels form well” meaning they were not afraid to face the great British Army in direct battle. Even in victory the British were so beaten up they could not pursue Washington’s army for 5 days. Homes from Turks Head (West Chester) to Wilmington were used as hospitals and Gen Howe wrote to Washington asking for surgeons to help with the wounded. According to some historians, as many as 1600 soldiers still lie in unidentified burial sites on and around the battlefield.

Howe resigned a month after the battle ominously warning parliament that England could not win without more troops. One can argue that Brandywine was the beginning of the end of British rule in the American Colonies. Subsequent victories at Paoli (aka The Paoli Massacre) and Germantown led to a brief but unproductive occupation

of Philadelphia. Meanwhile, the Continentals dug in at Valley Forge and added military organization, discipline, and training to the courage first displayed at Bunker Hill and put to its greatest test yet at Brandywine.

In December 2013, the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) and Chester County released the Brandywine Battlefield Protection Plan (BBPP) called “Revolution in the Peaceful Valley.” This new study was created after a map was found in the Windsor Castle Archives in 2006, the “Windsor Map.” This previously unknown document was created by a British Sergeant in the days after the battle. Using this map along with the military battlefield mapping process known as KOCOIA (Key terrain; Observation and Fields of fire; Cover and concealment; Avenues of approach and retreat), the first accurate representation of the battlefield ever was created. The signs that currently mark the battlefield landmark are from 1992 and are now obsolete. The 70 maps in the BBPP report are fascinating and overlay modern roads and features onto the battlefield to show troop movements, fields of fire, avenues of approach, etc. A link to the BBPP can be found on the Chadds Ford Historical Society website www.chaddsfordhistory.org

Treat yourself to a bit of living history by taking a tour of the Brandywine Battlefield. When you do be sure to get out of the car, look at the distant fields and imagine seeing General Washington on his white horse, surrounded by the Marquis de Lafayette, “Mad” General Anthony Wayne, General Nathaniel Greene (the “Fighting Quaker”), Brig General Casimir Pulaski, Squire Cheney, and many more. Be still for a few moments and maybe you will hear footsteps in the distance. These are the sounds of your ancestors who walked on the very same ground three lifetimes ago and fought a brutal battle for your independence. Their legacy still resonates in the serene and uncompromising beauty of Brandywine.