

PRISON MUSEUM POST

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THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE COMES TO BURLINGTON CITY DEC. 1776

We traditionally take a break from Jail stories in our December issue to remember the War of Independence. New Jersey played a central role both politically and militarily. About 600 battles, clashes and skirmishes, including some of Washington's worst setbacks and greatest victories, were fought here. Of course, the most important victory was The Battle of Trenton on

December 26, 1776. There's good old George on the left, after defeating the Hessian mercenaries who fought for Britain in that battle.

In the last issue, we told you about our new acquisition - the massive 1883 book on Burlington County history. We are having a great time perusing it, and serendipitously found in it the diary of a woman named Margaret Hill Morris, who was living in Burlington City in December of 1776. There she is on the right. She may not look like a ball of fire in that painting, but she was actually a pretty interesting gal, as you will see if you finish reading this issue.

But first, we'll give you a little refresher on the events that led up to the events she writes about in her diary.



THE WINDS OF WAR

No great political change happens overnight. The British government had ruled the American colonies for close to a hundred years before significant rumblings of discontent started to emerge in the mid-1700s. New Jersey colonists were polarized in their views on the government. Many had emigrated from England and maintained loyalty to the Crown, and others had economic or social ties to Britain. By 1774, however, many New Jersey colonists joined other colonists in exasperation with the King. If you want to know what was eating them, just read the Declaration of Independence, which outlines their grievances. The King had waged lawfare against them, ignored or changed decisions made by colonial governments, forced colonists to house British soldiers in their homes and interfered with their ability to trade with foreign countries. Worst of all, His Highness taxed them to death and spent the money on useless wars and bureaucracy that made it impossible for them to make a living. More and more people considered throwing the bums out.



Things came to a head in December of 1773, when a bunch of Bostonians protested British taxation by dumping a ship-full of tea in the harbor. This got everyone's blood pumping. Groups in every county in New Jersey, including Burlington, met in early 1774 and passed resolutions disapproving of Britain's actions and appointing representatives to meet at a convention in New Brunswick in June. There the representatives selected five men to

represent them at the newly formed Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

By 1775, New Jersey had two opposing legislative bodies: the General Assembly, recognized by Royal Governor William Franklin*, and the Provincial Congress, which opposed the British. After the Battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts in April of 1775, the tensions between the two groups reached a climax. The Provincial Congress won out, and Governor Franklin was arrested.

* William Franklin was the son of Benjamin Franklin. He lived at one time in Willingboro. He also lived in Burlington City, right on the river at "Green Bank". He remained loyal to Britain to the end. Ben was so angry at him over it that he didn't speak to him for 10 years. William emigrated to England after the war. He had been a good governor - he founded the first Indian reservation, pardoned 105 women jailed for adultery and discouraged imprisonment for debt.

War quickly followed the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Things didn't go so great at first. In November, the British knocked Washington's troops around pretty badly on Long Island, New York, and chased them south through New Jersey. In mid-December, Washington crossed the Delaware into Pennsylvania, and set up camp at McKonkey's Ferry, near the Delaware River in Bucks County. The British retreated back to New York stationed 1,400 Hessian (German mercenary) troops in Trenton and 1,500 in Black Horse (Columbus). They assumed that Washington would stay in Pennsylvania, licking his wounds, until spring. They assumed wrong. Washington wasn't a quitter. He rallied his troops. He told them not to worry; they would win. They would win so much they would get sick of winning.

On Christmas night, Washington led 2,400 men across the Delaware from Pennsylvania in rain, sleet and snow and marched into Trenton at 4 a.m., routing the Hessian garrison. The Americans captured nearly 900 Hessian soldiers within 90 minutes.

Prior to the battle, Washington had arranged for false information to be fed to Colonel von Donop, the Hessian commander in Black Horse. The message was that thousands of Patriot troops were gathering in Mount Holly. Only 600 troops were actually sent. Von Donop fell for it and rushed with his troops to Mount Holly, where on December 22 they dragged their artillery up the mount and started shooting. The ragtag band of



Americans responded from Iron Works Hill. After the brief "Battle of Iron Works Hill", the Hessians decided to stay in Mount Holly, where von Donop was entertained by a "widow" whose identity has been maddeningly lost to history. While von Donop dallied with this lady, our boy George was taking a

boat ride across the icy Delaware. Had von Donop been available to reinforce the troops in Trenton, the battle there might have gone differently. Washington was a brilliant strategist; this is just one example of many times he used spies and subterfuge to make up for disadvantages we had in men and arms.

MEANWHILE, IN BURLINGTON CITY....

Back to our subject, Margaret Morris. She was born Margaret Hill in Maryland in 1737. When she was 21, she married a merchant named William Morris. They lived in Philadelphia and had four children before he died in 1766. In 1770, she and the children moved to Burlington City to be near her sisters, Sarah and Milcah. She was 39 in December of 1776, when she witnessed the arrival of Hessian and Patriot soldiers in Burlington. She chronicled her experiences in a diary in which she described her encounters with the soldiers and her efforts to defend her home from pillaging. She was one of the first American women to practice medicine, treating patients with ailments ranging from smallpox to battle wounds. She treated both Patriot and British patients during the war.



An important thing to know about Margaret was that she was a Quaker. New Jersey was loaded with Quakers then. Quakers are pacifists, and typically refuse to fight in wars or take sides. This was problematic for the Provincial Congress because people who sympathized with Britain were active in certain places (especially in Monmouth County) and were somewhat successful in exploiting Quaker ambivalence about the war and translating it into opposition to the Patriot cause. Militiamen were sent to suppress and sometimes arrest these agents. Many of them sailed on "gondolas" up and down the Delaware, firing on the Hessians on shore. Sometimes they went ashore to let the townspeople living along the river know that they might find their houses burnt down if they aided British soldiers.

Our book describes Margaret as a "Tory sympathizer" but goes on to point out that as her diary progresses, she appears to become more sympathetic to the Patriots, whom she comes to refer to as "our" soldiers. Many Quakers accused of treason probably actually sided with the Patriots, but were restrained by Quaker doctrine from expressing it.

You can't blame people for being nervous about picking a fight with the most powerful nation on earth and about having real soldiers shooting off real bullets and cannons right in their front yards. Furthermore, if it didn't work out, it wouldn't be just the Continental Congress swinging from trees and gallows.

And you can't blame people for having a doubt or two about this group in Philadelphia who were running the show. First of all, they were really young. The



average age was only 40. Thomas Jefferson was 33. John Adams was 40. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence was only 26! Ben Franklin was the oldest at 70, but he was quite a character. World famous, he was one of the wealthiest men in America

and controlled the media. A genius, he was involved in all sorts of scientific and business ventures - he seemed to do everything except go to Mars. He was a womanizer who had a particularly good time in France. Both his children were born out of wedlock. He was a loyal Tory until the British stupidly got on his wrong side, at which point he jumped head first into the Patriot cause, which changed everything.

Washington was also flamboyant. He was a wealthy businessman with a funny wig who at 6'3" sucked the air out of any room he walked into. He never took no for an answer and although he could seem arrogant at times, he grew on people. During his service in the French and Indian War, he became famous when he continued to ride around on his horse while being shot at. He refused a salary as commander in chief.



Almost all of them liked to drink and party. While they were all human with human flaws, they were also quite extraordinary and pulled off the most extraordinary political feat the world has ever known.

The Founding Fathers weren't the only extraordinary ones. The 230,000 men who served in the war were also extraordinary. It is estimated that between 25,000 and 70,000 died during active service, many from disease and many while prisoners of war, mostly in prison ships in New York harbor. Thousands and thousands of civilians from New Hampshire down to Georgia were also incredible people who endured unimaginable hardships and exhibited astonishing courage.

Margaret Morris was one of those people. Here are some excerpts from her diary:

MARGARET'S DIARY

December 6, 1776 Being on a visit to my friend at Haddonfield, I was preparing to return to my family when a person from Philadelphia told me that the people there were in great commotion, that the English fleet was in the River and hourly expected to sail up to the city; that the inhabitants were removing into the country, and that several persons of considerable repute had been discovered to have formed a design of setting fire to the city (1) and were summoned before the Congress (2) and strictly enjoined to drop the horrid purpose. When I heard the above report, my heart almost died within me and I cried, surely the Lord will not punish the innocent with the guilty, and I wished there might be found some interceding Lots & Abrahams (3) amongst our People. On my journey home I was told the inhabitants of our little town (4) were going in haste into the country and that my nearest neighbors were already removed...

December 7, 1776 A letter from my next neighbor's husband at the camp (5) warned her to be gone in haste, and many persons coming into town today brought intelligence that the British army were advancing towards us.

December 11, 1776 After various reports from one hour to another of light-horse (6) approaching, the people in town had certain intelligence that a large body of Hessians were come to Bordentown, and we might expect to see them in a few hours. About 10 o'clock in the morning of this day, a party of about 600 militia men marched down the main street. As they passed along, they told our doctor and some other persons in this town that a large number of Hessians were advancing and would be in town in less than an hour...On the first certainty of their approach, John Lawrence and two or three others thought best, for the safety of the town, to go out and meet the troops. He communicated his intention to one of the gondola captains, who approved of it and desired to be informed of the result. The gentlemen went out, and though the Hessians spoke but little English, yet they found that, upon being thus met in a peaceable manner on behalf of the inhabitants, he was ready to promise them safety and security, to exchange any messages that might be proper with the gentlemen of the galleys (7). In the meantime he ordered his troops to halt. They remained in their ranks between the bridge and the corner of Main Street, waiting an answer from on board. John Lawrence and T. Hulings went down to

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1. i.e., to destroy it before the British could occupy it
 2. Continental Congress
 3. Men like Abrahams and his nephew Lot in the Bible, who agreed to live in separate regions when their cattle herdsman engaged in constant strife (Genesis 13:8)
 4. Burlington City
 5. The militia camp in Philadelphia
 6. Lightly armed soldiers on horseback
 7. Commanders of the American naval vessels (gondolas)

report what had passed, and told Captain Moore (8) that the colonel had orders to quarter his troops in Burlington that night, and that if the inhabitants were quiet and peaceable and would furnish him with quarters and refreshment, he would pledge his honor that no manner of disorder should happen to disturb or alarm the people. Captain Moore replied that, in his opinion, it would be wrong in such a case to fire on the town, but that he would go down and consult with the commodore and return an answer as soon as might be.

December 16, 1776 About noon a very terrible account of thousands of Hessians coming into town and now actually seen on Gallows Hill (9). My incautious son (10) caught up the spyglass and was running toward the mill to look at them. I told him it would be liable for misconstruction, but he prevailed on me to allow him to gratify his curiosity. He went but returned much dissatisfied, for no troops could he see. As he came back, poor Dick (11) took the glass and, resting it against a tree, took a view of the fleet. Both of these were observed by the people on board, who suspected it was an enemy that was watching their motions. They manned a boat and sent her on shore. A loud knocking on my door brought me to it. I was a little fluttered and kept locking and unlocking that I might get my ruffled face a little composed. At last I opened it, and half a dozen men, all armed ... I asked them what they wanted there; they said to search for a d—d Tory who had been spying at them from the mill...

December 22, 1776 It is said that 1000 (Americans) are at Mount Holly. All the women have removed from town except one widow of our acquaintance. This evening we hear the sound of much hammering in Bristol, and it is conjectured that a fortification is carrying on there – more cannon said to be planted on the (Burlington) island. We hear this afternoon that the gentlemen who went last night to Count von Donop with a request that our town might be allowed to remain a neutral one, are returned and report that he had too many affairs of greater consequence in hand to attend to them or give an answer. I think we don't like the Count quite so well today as we did yesterday...A man who was at Mount Holly the other day tells us he saw a great many of the British troops – that some of them went to the magazine (12) there and took out about 100 wooden canteens and the same number of broken firearms, and, calling for a guard of 100 men, piled them up in the street and ordered the men in derision to take charge of them....Several of the families who left Burlington on the day of the cannonading are returned to their houses. The intelligence brought in this evening is seriously affecting. A party of our men, about 200, marched out of Mount Holly and, meeting with a party of Hessians near a place called Petticoat Bridge, an engagement ensued – the Hessians retreating rather

8. Officer in command of state militia troops

9. We think this is where Laurel Hill Cemetery on Jacksonville Road is located

10. 17-year-old John Morris

11. her other son

12. Small room full of guns and ammunition in the court house

than advancing – a heavy firing of musketry and some cannon heard. We are informed that 21 of our men were killed in the engagement, and that they returned at night to their headquarters in Mount Holly, the Hessians to theirs at the Black Horse.

December 23, 1776 This day 12 gondolas came up the river again, but we know not as yet the occasion of their coming. The troops at Mount Holly went out again today and engaged the Hessians near the same place where they met yesterday. It is reported we lost 10 men and that our troops are totally routed and the Hessians in possession of Mount Holly. This evening a little alarm in our neighborhood – a report reaching us that 3000 troops now at Bristol are to cross over in the night and join the routed party of yesterday (13). We conjecture the gondolas are to lie here in readiness to receive our men should they be put to flight. Be that as it may, we don't like them so near us and wish for another snowstorm to drive them away.

December 24, 1776 The gondolas all gone out of sight, but whether up or down the river we know not. This morning we are told of a fearful alarm which was spread through the town last night – that the gondolas had orders to fire on it in the night, as it was said the Hessians were expected to come in after the rout of yesterday and take possession here as they had done in Mount Holly. Happily, the account did not reach us till it was proved to be false...We hear the Hessians are still at Holly...The gondolas have been lying down at Dunk's Ferry (14) all this day...

December 27, 1776 A letter from General Reed to his brother, informing him that Washington with the regulars on the 25th, early in the morning, taking them by surprise. Killed 50 and took 900 prisoners. The loss on our side is not known, or if known, not suffered (permitted) to be public. It seems this heavy loss to Hessians was owing to the prevailing custom of the Hessians of getting drunk on the eve of that great day which brought peace on earth and good-will to men; but oh! How unlike Christians is the manner in which they celebrate it. Can we call ourselves Christians while we act so contrary to our Master's rules? (15) He set the example which we profess to follow, and here is a recent instant that we only profess it – instead of good-will, envy and hatred seem to be ruling the passions in the breasts of thousands.

December 30, 1776 A number of poor soldiers sick and wounded brought into town today and lodged in the courthouse, some of them in private houses. Today, I hear, several of our townsmen have agreed to procure wood for the soldiers, but they found it was attended with considerable difficulty as most of the wagons usually employed to bring in wood were pressed to take soldier's baggage.

13. This was the false intelligence Washington put out

14. Beverly/Edgewater Park

15. Yes

January 5, 1777 I heard today that Capt. Shippen, who threatened to shoot my son for spying at the gondolas, is killed. I forgave him long ago for the fright he occasioned me, and felt sorry when I heard he was dead. We are told today that Gen. Mercer (16) is killed and Mifflin(17) is wounded. What sad havoc will this dreadful war make in our land!

January 9, 1777 We hear today that our troops have driven the English to Brunswick, and some say there has been another battle. All the officers went out of town today. The report of poor A. Morris being killed is confirmed by an officer who was in the battle. I feel sorry for everyone that falls in battle. We hear that Washington has sent to buy up a number of stores (provisions), from which it is concluded he is going into winter quarters. The weather very cold: some snow falling has also filled the river with ice, and we expect it will be strong enough to walk over in a day or two and give an opportunity to those inclined to escape crossing over, which, for several weeks past, has been attended with some difficulty, all the boats belonging to the town being seized upon by the gentlemen of the galleys (18) and either borne away or broken to pieces, which they said was done to prevent the Hessians from crossing the river; and, on the same pretense, a number of bridges have been taken up, and others so much damaged as to make it difficult for travelers to pass hence to Philadelphia. Several of the soldiers who were brought to town sick have died, and it is feared the disorder by which they were afflicted is infectious.

16. Hugh Mercer was a Scottish brigadier general in the Continental Army. He was killed at the battle of Princeton. Mercer County is named for him. One of his descendants was General George Patton.

17. Thomas Mifflin was an American soldier, merchant and politician from Pennsylvania. He served as an aide-de-camp for Washington during the war. Washington named him the army's first quartermaster general. He was a signer of the US Constitution and served as Pennsylvania's first governor.

18. The commanders of the gondolas

It was hard to pick out which parts of the diary to present here. The whole thing is worth reading. We have a copy in the PMA office for anyone who would like to see it.

**Historic Burlington County
Prison Museum Association ("PMA")**

PO Box 483
Mt. Holly, NJ 08060
Museum/Gift Shop Phone:
609-265-5476
PMA Phone: 609-288-6372
Email: info@pma1811.net
Website: www.prisonmuseum.net

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In Memoriam

Jay Tomlinson 1893-1967
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Please help us preserve and promote the
museum
by joining the PMA. Annual dues are
\$15 (individual)/\$25 (family).
Membership
benefits include a quarterly newsletter,
event
updates and free admission to the
museum. See
website for application.

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The annual meeting was held on November 13
and two new Board members were elected:
Wade Jablonski and Dan Wolverton. All the
Board members are listed in the box to the
left.

MEETING DATES FOR 2025

PMA meetings will be held on:

Tuesday, February 18
Tuesday, May 20
Tuesday, August 19
Tuesday, November 18 (Annual meeting)

All meetings are at the PMA office and
start at 7 p.m.

HAPPY HANUKKAH



MERRY CHRISTMAS



... and Happy New Year!

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