Lancaster Borough: Host to British and Hessian Prisoners of War, 1775-1784

By Melvern Evans, Jr.

Like it or not, in 1775 the borough citizens of Lancaster were saddled with the unpopular task of housing and guarding prisoners of war from the Revolution. Whether or not they were properly prepared for this undertaking remains a matter of historical conjecture. Some 15 years earlier, James Hamilton had provided the Borough with lots numbering 534 through 537 at Duke and Walnut Streets for the erection of barracks and stables, to be used by local militia during the French and Indian Wars.[1] With the outbreak of the Revolution, the state decided to use these facilities as prisons for the captured British and Hessian soldiers. The Hessians were mercenary soldiers from Hesse, Germany, hired to fight for the British. The non-commissioned prisoners were confined in the barracks, which was enclosed with a strong stockade. The officers were "paroled" and lived in rented quarters among the townspeople. Close to the barracks was the stone tavern known as the "Cat", where General Moses Hazen, commandant of the prison guards maintained his headquarters.[2]

From where did these prisoners come? On the night of Dec. 25, 1776 General Washington crossed the Delaware with about 2500 troops and made a surprise attack on the British, killing about twenty and taking one thousand prisoners at Trenton. Of his own army, two were killed, two were frozen to death, and several wounded. From this victory, many of the captives were marched to Lancaster under light guard, since Washington could not spare many soldiers for this assignment. One of the guards assigned to this project was Henry Haines, a tailor from Columbia, Pa.[3] In 1777 General Gates won a victory at Saratoga and the captives were sent to Lancaster.[4] In 1781 Lord Cornwallis was defeated at Yorktown and many of the prisoners were sent to Lancaster.[5] The first batch to arrive were 250 British captives, including 8 officers, taken at St. Johns, Canada in Oct. 1775, and according to reports, some were in great distress from want of breeches, shoes and stockings. They were accompanied by 30 women and the same number of children, which resulted in bitter controversy among local authorities as to who would pay for their unbudgeted rations. Borough officials often were not informed in advance as to how many persons had to be fed or housed when groups of prisoners and refugees arrived in town, but by the 1780s they began to make some order out of the chaos.[6]

Apparently there was some disagreement over the number of prisoners retained in Lancaster during the Revolution, but eight hundred seems the most acceptable. The barracks and stables were guarded by local citizens, elderly soldiers and portions of the militia. The daily guard-detail ranged from 12 to 20 men. The powder house (filled with 20 tons of powder) was only a block away from the barracks, so round-the-clock guarding was a necessary precaution.[7] Wilhelm Bausman, an inn keeper and later Chief Burgess of Lancaster, was appointed Barracks Master in 1775, and he supervised several hundred employees. As the prisoners increased in number it was thought advisable to transfer some to York and Reading. However, in the winter of 1778, York was stricken with a smallpox epidemic and many of the captives balked at being sent there. Lieut. Dullhanty of the 26th British Regiment refused to transfer since he feared for the health of his wife and two children who were with him. In August of 1777, 200 prisoners left Lancaster under heavy guard and marched to Reading. The following day, 350 Hessian prisoners (some with women companions) marched under strong guard to Lebanon. Not only prisoners of war, but a great many wounded American soldiers were brought back to Lancaster and then sent to various hospital sites. 500 went to Ephrata while 250 were sent to the Moravian Brethren community in Lititz. Additional nursing centers

were established at Manheim and Reamstown.[8]

Probably the most famous of the Lancaster prisoners was Major John Andre, who was captured in Canada on Nov. 3, 1775 by General Montgomery. Andre, a scholarly young man, became an inmate of Caleb Cope's house at North Lime and Grant streets. He taught Cope's sons to draw and paint, and took part in their games and sports. During his stay in the Borough he became quite popular with the local citizens. Eventually he was exchanged along with other prisoners and he rejoined the British army. Many of his borough friends were saddened to learn that he was hanged as a spy for negotiating with Benedict Arnold in the betrayal of West Point. It is said that even General Washington wept when Andre was led to the gallows. Arnold, incidently, was married to Peggy Shippen, a granddaughter of Edward Shippen, one of Lancaster's finest citizens and a Lieutenant Governor.[9]

The late 1700s became the era of astronomical inflation, black marketing and corrupt administration, which even included collecting taxes for higher fees than the law allowed. At that time, the price (in Continental money) for a pound of butter was $12.00; eggs were $6.00 a dozen, a loaf of bread cost $4.00 and a pint of wine sold for $50.00. Inflation was further complicated by the usage of two other currencies: English money and Pennsylvania money. Trying to keep ledgers in balance with three different currencies was a frustrating ordeal for the local bookkeepers. The Continental dollar was devised for the sole purpose of keeping the patriot armies in the field. When it was first issued in Sept. 1777, it had a face value of 8 shillings, but each succeeding month thereafter it dropped in value, so that by May of 1780 it had sunk to two and a half pence and soon became worthless. During this period it was inevitable that a store for British goods be started, and it was! The store opened under a pretense of supplying the prisoners with clothing and other staples. However, clandestine traffic in merchandise developed between the townspeople and those who resided within the garrisons, and this illicit commerence caused great discouragement among the honest and lawful businessmen. Added to the borough's woes was the embarrassing fact that some of the citizen's daughters were having secret rendezvous with the German-speaking prisoners. One might think that such romantic trysts would be practically impossible, owing to careful scrutiny of the barrack guards, but this was not always the case. Many of the prisoners (especially the officers) gave their word of honor not to stray any further than six miles from the borough, and consequently had unrestricted freedom to roam about almost at will. In fact the presence of paroled British officers

strutting around town in their impressive red uniforms often evoked bitter criticism from the outraged citizens.[10]

In 1789 General Hand proposed to Congress that Lancaster be chosen as the new capital of the Nation. His local pride induced him to present a "rosy bill of goods" to the Congressmen, boasting that our borough had 5 public buildings, many large elegant brick houses, and flourishing industries which included 14 hatters, 25 tailors, 36 shoemakers, 7 gunsmiths, 12 bakers, 30 carpenters, 6 dyers, 5 silversmiths, 3 breweries, 3 brickyards, 3 printing presses, 40 houses of public entertainment, and Franklin College. His estimate of 4,200 inhabitants was exaggerated, since the first U.S. census of 1790 showed that Lancaster had a population of 3773 souls. However, he was correct in his faith of local industries, which were indeed flourishing. The 36 shoemakers, for example, could not keep pace with order for shoeing the American troops, so John Hubley, Commissary for the army, enlisted all the shoemakers among the Hessian prisoners to fill the back-log of orders. Another example was the brickyards, which simply could not keep up with the demand as new houses were being constructed continuously. These were the days when Lancaster boasted of its excellent gunsmiths, and expert craftsmen like Stengel, Young, Ferree and Henry, made and rifled their own gun barrels, and decorated their finely carved stocks with elaborate brass fittings, plates and patchboxes. The range and accuracy of these famous rifles proved their worth in the Revolution, as they were far superior to the short-range, inaccurate, smoothbore muskets used by the British. It was little wonder that the Borough became known as the "Armorer's town." Despite the success of local industry, the Borough was having its fair share of "growing pains," and felonies among the townspeople became a daily problem. Several resolutions were finally adopted along with appropriate fines, in order to curb such misdemeanors. Here is a partial list of what the Borough Council decreed:

5 shilling fine for playing ball near the courthouse.
5 shilling fine for firing a gun or other firearm in borough limits.
10 shilling fine for anyone allowing his or her chimney to catch fire.
15 shilling fine for selling food products at any place other than the market-house.
20 shilling fine for peddling spirituous liquors on public streets.[11]

In May of 1781 a prisoner's plot to escape was discovered. The British had planned to rush the barrack gates when they were opened for a delivery of wood, overpower the guards, then sneak away to meet an aide, who would supply them with arms and ammunition. The "aide" was never identified and the plan never

materialized owing to an advance "tip-off."[12] During that same summer, many of the prisoners took ill from malignant fever, and Borough citizens became alarmed lest they have an epidemic on their hands. Dr. John Houston was brought in and he advocated that no additional prisoners be accepted, and those already in confinement be spread out into additional quarters. This was never adopted since the fever soon ran its course, and proved not as serious as first thought.[13]

Elizabeth Clarke Kieffer, the capable historian for the German Reformed Church (First Reformed) related that three German preachers; Helmuth (Lutheran), Heyne (Moravian), and Helffenstein (Reformed) were issued passes to visit the prisoners since they could speak their language. Helffenstein also held Sunday afternoon services for them. Ironically enough, one of his first texts was Isaiah 52:2—"Ye have sold yourselves for nothing!" Somewhat later, as the Hessians were allowed more freedom, marriages between them and local girls began to appear on the church records. At the war's end, some of the prisoners bought their liberty and became active members of the church. After a battle was won it became traditional to celebrate the American victory by lighting up the windows with candles. The churches joined in this practice for self protection, as any unlighted windows were apt to be smashed by rowdy urchins or indignant citizens who resented lack of patriotic display.[14]

We found a record of a few British soldiers who died in confinement and were buried in St. James Churchyard, in unmarked graves near the rectory. Hugh Stewart, a Scot, died Oct. 1, 1776 at age 41 and was buried there along with his sons, Hugh Jr. and Joseph; all in the same grave. Interestingly enough, no public services were held in this Episcopal Church for five years after the Declaration of Independence was published. In fact the church was boarded up to prevent destruction by the lawless element.[15]

According to the records of the First Reformed Church, the following Hessian and British prisoners were married there. Whether the brides were "camp-followers" or local girls, was not specified.

Marriages performed by Rev. J.C. Albertus Helffenstein

(Men in this group were designated as "soldiers")

John Hariten & Isabel Billing, Jan. 19, 1778
Adam Fuchs & Susan Wendel, Jan. 26, 1778
William Connolly & Betty Walles, Feb. 6, 1778
Patrick Brown & Mary Nowns, Mar. 20, 1778
Thomas Marshall & Janney Walles, Mar. 28, 1778
Robert Pelan & Sarah McDonnel, Apr. 7, 1778

Marriages performed by Rev. John William Hendel
(Men in this group were designated as "Cornwallis prisoners")

William Clark & Catharine Lenard, Apr. 1783
John Smith & Jannet Dorson, May 7, 1783
Constantine DeArcey & Anna McCauly, May 8, 1783
James Dean & Margaret Hetscherd, 1783
George Clark (Ensign) & Eliz. Hutchins, Jan. 1, 1783

These 1783 marriages occurred when the war was over; the British had returned to England and the American army had disbanded.

The Cocalico Reformed Church at Ephrata (now Bethany) also recorded a few prisoner-marriages. Rev. John C. Gebrecht performed two ceremonies there in March 1778; Mary Bebre (widow) was united with Charles Faerding, and Elizabeth Clements wed Finnick O'Nele. Both men were designated as "soldiers." Probably the most famous of the Hessian prisoners was Johannes Schwalm, who was captured at Trenton on Jan. 26, 1776, and imprisoned at Lancaster. This German prince fulfilled a contract with King George III to recruit thousands of Hessian soldiers to fight for the British cause. In June 1785 he married a local girl, Margaret Resch. Incidently, the British officers scorned these Hessian troops, who were not adapted to their particular type of warfare, and blame for British misdeeds on the battlefield was usually attributed to Hessian inexperience and lack of cooperation.[17]

If all local church records were searched, additional marriages would undoubtedly be uncovered, as well as birth and baptismal records of the numerous children born of these unions, for it is clear that many of the ex-prisoners settled in Lancaster County, where their descendants are still found today.

At this point it is only fair to mention some marriages of our own local high-ranking officers, many who temporarily left successful business careers in order to serve their country.

General Edward Hand & Katharine Ewing, Mar. 13, 1775
General John Steele & Abigail Bailey, Mar. 4, 1784
General James Ewing & Patience Wright
Colonel Bertram Galbraith & Ann Scott, Mar. 30, 1759 & Henrietta Huling
Colonel Peter Grubb & Mary Shippen Burd, 1771
Colonel James Burd & Sarah Shippen, May 14, 1748
Colonel Matthias Slough & Mary Gibson, Apr. 23, 1757
Colonel James Mercer & Margaret Patterson
Colonel George Ross & Ann Lawlor, Aug. 17, 1752

Colonel Alexander Lowry & Ann Alricks, 1774 & Mary Waters, Sept. 1752
Colonel David Watson & Mary Hamilton & Sarah Patterson
Colonel James Crawford & Ann McCausland
Major William McCausland & Elizabeth Crawford
Major John Whitehill & Mary Middleton
Major Robert King & Jannette Smith, Apr. 29, 1773
Major Moses White & Elizabeth Atlee

Surgeons of the Patriot Forces
Dr. Lackey Murray & Elizabeth Galbraith
Dr. Adam Kuhn & Eliz. (Hartman) Markoe, May 14, 1780
Dr. David Ramsay & Miss Witherspoon & Miss Laurens
Dr. John Houston & Susanna Wright, Jun. 17, 1773

Chaplain Rev. John Woodhull & Sally Spafford, Jun. 4, 1772

Among the marriages of our borough's leading citizens were:

Paul Zantzinger & Hetty Barton, Mar. 16, 1774
Wilhelm Bausman & Eliz. Bier, Jul. 21, 1785
Jasper Yeates & Sarah Burd, Dec. 30, 1767
Edward Shippen & Sarah Plumley, Sep. 20, 1725
William Hamilton & Catharine Carrigan, Feb. 24, 1769
Robert Coleman & Ann Old, Oct. 4, 1773
Amos Slaymaker & Isabella Fleming, Sep. 19, 1780
William A. Atlee & Eliz. Sayre, Aug. 31, 1763
Nathaniel Lightner & Maria Duchman
Christopher DeMuth & Anna Eliz. Hartaffel, 1767
Rev. Thomas Barton & Esther Rittenhouse, 1752 & Mrs. Denormandie, 1776
Rev. Sam Bowman & Susan Sitgreaves & Harriet Clarkson

I tried to confine the above lists to the best known persons of that era, but there were hundreds more who could just have easily been mentioned. It is surprising how many "sisters," "brothers," and "parent-child" combinations show up in these marriages; for example:
Patience and Susanna Wright were sisters, as were Mary and Sarah Shippen, and Margaret and Sarah Patterson. William and Ann McCausland were brother and sister, as were James and Elizabeth Crawford. Father and daughter combinations included Bertram and Elizabeth Galbraith, James and Mary Burd, and Thomas and Hetty Barton.

Apparently, even in those days, persons of the so-called "upper-class" married within their own circle.

A brief article appeared in the L.C.H.S. Journal, number 84/3 which showed a floor plan of the converted barracks-prison at Duke and Walnut Streets. By 1784 hard usage through both wars had taken its toll of this three story building, and John Schreiber, the last barracks master, warned that unless extensive repairs were made, the structure might collapse. Apparently little or nothing was done, and the barracks fell into disuse and disrepair; by 1802 the land was back in the hands of the Hamilton family.[16] Seven years later the United Methodist Church was erected on the same site, and was dedicated Dec. 17, 1809.

Thus ended the era of imprisonment, and regardless of whether our borough was properly prepared or not, most historians agree that our townspeople did a commendable job, despite communication gaps, internal disorder, and typical military red tape.

Information Notes

Symbols used

EE	History Lanc. County by Ellis & Evans
HK	History Lanc. County by Klein
HUS	History U.S. (1834) by J. Olney
FR	Annals of First Reformed Church, by Kieffer
SJ	History of St. James Church, by Klein & Diller
OL	Old Lancaster, by Klein & Carlson
HL	Heritage of Lanc. by Loose
BA	Biographical Annals of Lanc. Co.
HS	Lancaster County Historical Society Journal

[1]EE, page 367; OL, page 51.
[2]HL, page 41, 43; EE, page 367.
[3]HUS, pages 141, 142; BA, page 701.
[4]EE, page 62.
[5]HUS, page 177.
[6]EE, page 60; HL, page 30.
[7]EE, pages 63, 395.
[8]EE, page 61; HK, pages 325, 326; OL, page 56.
[9]EE, page 60; SJ, page 51; OL, page 54; HUS, page 167.
[10]SJ, pages 55, 57; HL, pages 43, 44; OL, page 54; HUS, page 167.
[11]OL, pages 34, 43, 51, 58; FR, p. 23; HK, p. 322, 324.
[12]EE, p. 64.
[13]EE, page 65.
[14]FR, page 22.
[15]SJ, pages 56, 57.
[16]HS, number 87/2, pages 56 through 63.
[17]HS number 81/2, pages 113-114; plus local church records.