

Col. Thomas Porter

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A nation without monuments is a land without heroes, memories and inheritances. Without these, no people can have an inspiration which develops the individual, builds up national greatness and establishes a lofty patriotism. The backward nations of to-day are those without a history or ancestral inheritances, while the great, progressive lands have the records of their race's achievements by heart, and on every hill-top, in lowly valley or the humble graveyard can be found a monument or memorial marking the graves of their heroes or great men, silently inspiring the resolve that what worthy sires had won should not perish through a degenerate posterity.

There is not a township scarcely in the thirteen original colonies where does not rest the dust of some of the brave men who won our independence. Many of the names of such heroes are unwritten in the pages of local or general history, and many more sleep the dreamless sleep in unmarked graves. It is true all communities cannot have a Bunker Hill and Yorktown where began and ended the greatest Revolution of all time; nor can every spot have a shrine like Mt. Vernon, Monticello or the tomb of a Lincoln, but, as has been stated, every county has its heroes, who, if they played a minor role in a great contest are none the less heroes and worthy of a perpetual memento for the work they accomplished according to their opportunities. The subject of this sketch belongs to the class of almost forgotten heroes of the inconspicuous order, because his career was cut short by dying at the early age of 38 in the year 1777, when the Declaration of Independence

was but a few months old and the Revolution but scarcely begun. But all he had of energy and nearly all of his rather moderate means, he gave to the cause of Independence. He had at least a fraction of that glorious and heroic life which is better than an age without a name. His heart became inflamed with the idea of a free land, self governed and enduring, when the news of Lexington and Concord (battles fought in 1775 before the Declaration was given the world) reached the southern end of our county. The spirit of the community was with him as it was composed of the sturdy Scotch-Irish ever ready for a fight, "who knew their rights and knowing dared maintain." There was never a Tory or a slacker in the "lower end" of our county. George III in order to belittle the Revolution sneered at it as "a Presbyterian war." When we consider the big part the Scotch-Irish played in the contest, in field and cabinet, the king was one-fourth right at least. At any rate, the spirit which animated Col. Porter was common to all our section. This general feeling of the community can be illustrated by stating that when the news of Lexington reached the academy near to or in Liberty Square, this township, taught by the Rev. James Latta, a large majority of the scholars, with or without the consent of their parents, joined the Revolutionary army. Among them were two sons of William Steele. In fact all his sons—four in number—fought under Washington except one who was still a boy. Can their graves be found to-day? It is to be feared not; as many a hero fell in battle or died of wounds in a fearful camp like Valley Forge, whose names and dust are unknown and unmarked by

the generations of to-day. It may not be out of place now to say the Historical Society of Lancaster is doing a noble work in playing the part of Sir Walter Scott's "Old Mortality," in visiting the graveyards of our county to brush away the dust and moss on the crumbling tombstones of our Revolutionary sires and placing perpetual memorial tablets on the birth spots of our noted dead in civil and military life.

With these preliminary remarks now let us look at the life of Col. Porter in some detail. The records concerning him are few and meagre. So far as I know no direct member of his family lives in this community. His children went West and bore a good part in life either as prominent members of their local communities or in the larger affairs of their adopted States. So about all we know of Col. Porter is what the musty records of the Court House tell us or what can be found in the slender accounts given in military archives. Such information as I have been able to obtain I will give you as briefly as possible.

The father of Colonel Porter was John Porter who came from Ireland to this township of Drumore in the early thirties of the eighteenth century. He brought with him the courage of the pioneer immigrant and that bravery an Irishman has never lacked. He must have brought with him also a certain amount of money, for he took up under the Proprietors a tract of land of some 350 acres, where we now stand and where his son, Col. Thomas Porter, was born about 1738 or '39. John Porter's wife answered to the good o'd Scriptural name of Rebecca and bore him five children, two sons, Thomas (the subject of this sketch) William and three daughters, all the latter being married at the time of his death save Violet, who married two years later. He died on this Drumore farm in 1765. Upon the death of the elder Porter's wife, Thomas Porter, the eldest son, became the owner of the homestead. He married Janet (sometimes named Jean) Mitchell, daughter of John Mitchell, June 18, 1761. To them were born nine children, viz: John, William, Thomas, Mary Rebecca, Margaret, George, James and Violet, only one of whom, John, was fourteen years of age upon the death of his father in 1777. Col. Porter died intestate and probably poor, as he had spent most of his possessions in equipping the various companies of militia he raised and drilled and for other expenses incurred in the struggle for independence. But such estate as he left was administered upon by James Porter and Thomas Whiteside, a brother-in-law, who had married his sister, Jean. Patrick Ewing became the guardian of all the minor children. By court proceeding beginning in 1782 and ending in 1784, an inquisition was held on the Porter farm and its 350 acres were appraised at 550

pounds and awarded to the Colonel's son, John, who had then become of age. In the partition proceedings Hugh Long became bondsman for John Porter, purchaser of the estate. In the course of years all of the Porter name moved from this neighborhood and rose to prominence in Kentucky and Indiana, one of the descendants becoming Governor of the latter state. Such is the brief record of the civil or family side of Colonel Porter's life. Let us now turn to his military career.

In common with all the leaders of the day he foresaw that a conflict between this country and George III was sure to come and they uttered in their hearts if not in words the sentiments of the fiery Patrick Henry—"The war is inevitable and let it come. I repeat it, sir, let it come." Let me say in passing that it is well we now know that the War of the Revolution was not one between this land and the English people but a contest between ourselves and a bigoted sovereign aided and abetted by a subservient court and aristocracy to overthrow constitutional government and make omnipotent the prerogative of Kings and "divine right." Liberty loving Englishmen were on our side, led by such mighty champions as Chatham, Pitt, Burke and Fox. These men were fighting the same battle for freedom at home we were fighting for here, and they rejoiced with us when Yorktown ended the war and made the King subservient to the people through a representative Parliament and sounded the death knell of "rotten boroughs." So Colonel Porter, seeing the Revolution was inevitable, keenly felt the necessity of preparation in time of peace. Young as he was, he had become a man of note in both his home community and throughout the country at large. So in 1774, a year before "the embattled farmers" at Lexington and Concord, "fired the shot heard round the world," we find Col. Porter selected by ballot, with his neighbor of Drumore Township, John McEntire, as one of "The Committee of Sixty" for Lancaster County, whose duty it was to look after the loyalty of all the inhabitants of the district, to encourage the timid, convince the wavering, keep burning brightly the ardor of the brave and impulsive and to have a watchful eye on slacker, coward or Tory. We can imagine the labor and zeal of Colonel Porter in riding by day or night throughout this bailiwick in discharge of his duties and on the then bridle paths for roads, which, save in mere width, have not improved greatly to this day. We next find him Colonel of the eight associated Battalions of the county in 1775. At that rank he was retained in the formation of the Revolutionary army and as commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion. In the same year he was member of the assembly from our county and a leader therein, and also a member of the convention to form the Constitution of

the state. During the years of 1775 and 1776 he recruited, armed, equipped (much of it at his own expense without hope of reimbursement from a poor and bankrupt government) and drilled, no less than ten companies of militia and prepared them for the line. Impaired health and fast waning strength rendered him unfit and unable to endure the fatigue of the march and rigors of camp life, and so far as we know from records, he was not engaged in any battle with the soldiers he had so strenuously prepared for duty. As we have noted, he died in 1777, during the initial stages of the Revolutionary conflict. He was a faithful and trusted servant of the people and his country to the full extent of his

physical powers and only death stopped his promising great career and being as near to Washington as our own General Hand. What might have been had he lived, is a matter for mere idle speculation. But we can well conclude that as he gave all he had of strength and means to the cause of Independence, he is as much one of our heroes as if he fell with Warren at Bunker Hill, or as an early victim of the conflict, a martyr worthy to stand by the side of a Nathan Hale. The tablet we now dedicate is a fitting tribute to a man who was without reproach in civil life, without fear as a soldier and who showed the depth of his patriotism by giving his all to his country.

APPENDIX

COL. THOMAS PORTER, OF DRUMORE TOWNSHIP, LANCASTER COUNTY. TRANSCRIPT OF RECORD IN CIVIL AND MILITARY LIFE.

1774. Elected from his township to the Committee of Sixty.
Rupp's History of Lancaster Co., 385.
Ellis & Watson of Lancaster Co., 36.
1775. Colonels of the Associated Battalions from Lancaster County were as follows:
George Ross.
Mathias Slough.
Curtiss Grubb.
Thomas Porter.
John Ferree.
James Burd.
Peter Grubb.
Bartram Galbraith.
Penna. Archives, 2nd. Series, Vol. XIII, p. 257.
1775. Member of State Assembly from Lancaster County.
Record Penna. Assembly Sept. 24, 1776.
Rupp's History of Lancaster County, page 404.
1776. Member of the Convention to form the Constitution.
Rupp's History Lancaster Co., p. 408.
1776. Colonel of Third Battalion, Lancaster County Militia.
1777. Officers of Third Battalion, Lancaster County Militia, were: Colonel Alexander Lowery.
Lieut. Col. James Cunningham.
Major Jacob Cook.
Officers of Second Battalion, Lancaster County Militia, were: Colonel James Watson, (Captain in 1776.)
Lieut. Col. James Porter.
Major Dorrington Wilson, (Captain in 1776.)
Note men transferred from the old 3rd Battalion to the 2nd. Penna. Archives, Series 2nd. Vol. XIII, p. 353.
Colonel Thomas Porter's name is missing in the realignment in 1777 and afterwards. (He died in 1777.)
1776. The earliest minute made in the minutes of the Council of Safety in 1776 concerning this command of Col. Thomas Porter is dated August 13th when Robert Towers (Commissary) is ordered to deliver arms "to Captain Ross of Col. Thomas Porter's Battalion of Lancaster County." "August 29th Mr. Robert Towers, Commissary, was ordered to deliver to Major Ewing a hundred stand of arms for the use of Col. Porter's Battalion of Lancaster County."
Minutes proceedings of Council of Safety same date.
1776. Same date Capt. Thomas Morrison (of Porter's Battalion) was allowed \$25, 2s 6d. for mileage of sixty-seven men ninety miles, and \$6, 10s. for a rifle to be charged to Col. Thomas Porter." The Council of Safety allowed \$2, 8s. 9d. for dieting sixty-five men of the Company of Capt. Ross in the Battalion of Colonel Thomas Porter, and \$1, 2s. 6d. for dieting thirty-nine men of Capt. Boyd's Company, Col. Thomas Porter's Battalion."
"Mention is also made in same minutes of Captain Boyd, Capt. John Eckman and Capt. Patton of Col. Thomas Porter's Battalion.

Ellis & Watson's History of Lancaster County, p. 52. Same facts also noted at several points in Colonial Records, all quoted from minutes of Council of Safety.

1776. The following are the names of the Captains of the Companies under the command of Col. Thomas Porter, of Lancaster County, as Commander of the 2nd Battalion.

Captain James Wilson.
Captain Thomas Whitman.
Captain John Boyer.
Captain James Morrison.
Captain Dorrington Wilson.
Captain Robert Campbell.
Captain James Ross.
Captain ——— Johnson.
Captain ——— Paxton.

Penna. Archives, 2nd. Series, Vol. XIII, p. 325, excepting Capts. Ross, Johnson and Paxton who are named in Ellis & Watson History Lancaster County, p. 52.

Note.

It is worthy of note here that Jean Porter, sister of Col. Thomas Porter, became the wife of Col. Thomas White side, of Colerain Township.

Three daughters of this union, by an odd coincidence, married three brothers, sons of Samuel McConnell, of Colerain, as follows: Rebecca, married Hugh McConnell; Martha, married David McConnell, and Violet, married Samuel McConnell. From this union of three sisters with three brothers have sprung a rather remarkable line of men, McConnells:

Judge A. D. McConnell, Judge of the Courts of Westmoreland County, Pa.; Judge James Marshall, of Iowa; Judge J. P. Smith, of Tennessee; Rev. S. D. McConnell, D. D., Rector of St. Trinity Church, Brooklyn, N. Y.; Rev. David McConnell Steele, Rector of St. Luke's Church and Church of Epiphany, New York; Joseph Mitchel, Chief Counsel of Michigan Central R. R. Co.; Jackson E. Reynolds, Prof. Corporation Law, Columbia University, N. Y., and Chief Counsel of New Jersey Central R. R. Co. All these men were lineal descendants of first John Porter, of Drumore.