

The
BATTLE
of the
SHORT HILLS

The American Revolution Almost Ended in New Jersey

Robert A. Mayers



**Major General
William Alexander**

Few people have heard of this incredible Revolutionary War battle in central New Jersey. The engagement should have been called “The Battle of Edison, Scotch Plains or Plainfield, but it has come down in history as the Battle of The Short Hills. This label causes confusion since it is assumed that the combat occurred in another New Jersey town, Short Hills, ten miles away, in adjoining Essex County. Many people who drive every day over the heavily trafficked streets of these New Jersey towns and even hit golf balls from the site of what had been Patriot defense positions, now on the grounds of the Plainfield Country Club, are completely unaware of the amazing display of patriotism and the fierce struggle that raged here in June of 1777.

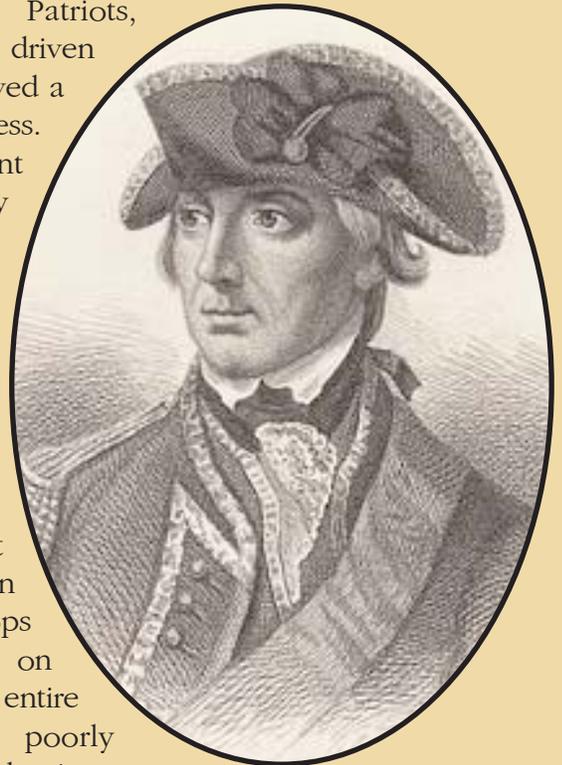
This historic event in America’s struggle for independence was a defeat. Losses, regardless of the bloodshed and valor displayed, usually receive less acclaim from the vanquished than victories. Most of the details of this significant event are found in the little known accounts of British and Hessian officers and not American sources.

At the Short Hills the Patriots, outnumbered six to one, were driven back, but in reality they achieved a crucial strategic American success.

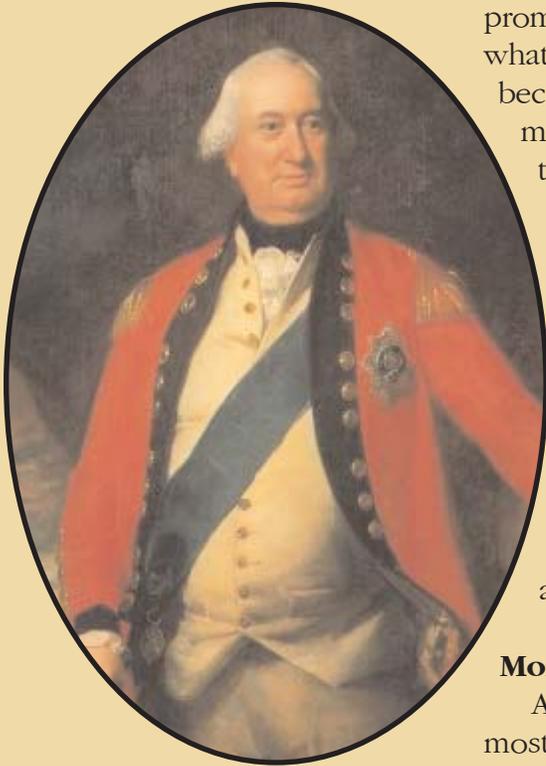
This pivotal engagement delayed the entire British Army and enabled George Washington to save the Continental Army by pulling it back to a safe haven in the Watchung Mountains. Encirclement and defeat on the Plains below at that time could have ended the war.

What is astonishing is that the clash involved more than 16,000 British and Hessian troops and the top military leaders on both sides of the war. The entire strength of Washington’s poorly equipped Continental Army at the time was about 10,000 soldiers, but allowing for sickness only 5,700 of them were effective fighting men.

Washington directed the action of his forces in the lowland below with semaphore flags. He signaled from a rocky



**Major General
William Howe**



**Major General
Charles Cornwallis**



**Major
John Andre**

**General
Banastre Tarleton**

promontory on the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains in what today is Green Brook Township. In later years the site became known as Washington Rock. The action covered a ten mile area and the fighting encompassed the New Jersey towns of Plainfield, Scotch Plains, Edison, Woodbridge, Westfield and Rahway.

The American detachment at Plainfield was commanded by Major General William Alexander, a wealthy gentleman farmer and soldier from nearby Basking Ridge, better known as Lord Stirling. The British were led by Major General William Howe, commander of all British forces in North America. Major General Charles Cornwallis was second in command of the Redcoat Army. The infamous spy Major John Andre and the most vilified British Commander of the war, Banastre Tarleton, were among the officers.

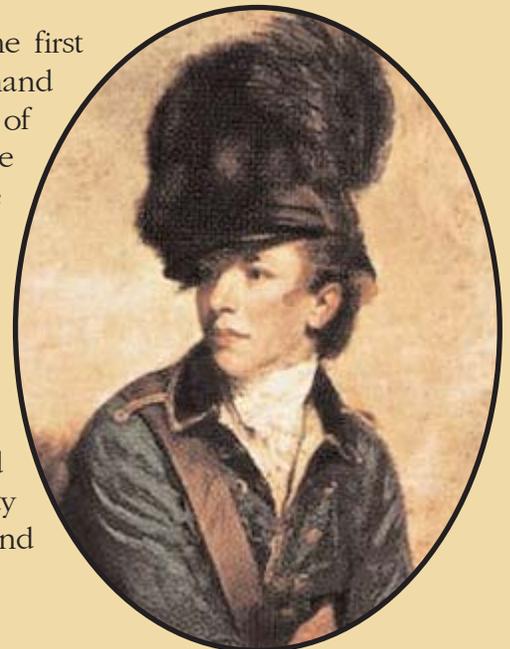
Momentous Events at the Battle

Aside from preventing a final British victory many of the most fascinating and significant events of the entire Revolutionary War occurred during this two day engagement. The flag of the new nation, the stars and stripes, may have been flown in combat for the first time during the engagement. Congress adopted the banner on June 14, 1777, only twelve days before the battle. The British first used repeating rifles here.

Chemical warfare, used for the first time by both sides, was in the form of poisoned bullets, musket balls were dipped in fungus.

The event also marked the first time that French command and arms came to the aid of the American cause. France did not officially enter the war for another seven months.

Non-English-speaking Pennsylvania German Regiments played a major role in the fighting. The British plunder of the countryside during the campaign produced detailed claims for damages of property looted from the farmhouses and shops of the time.





**General
George Washington**

The War Envelopes Bound Brook, New Brunswick and Perth Amboy

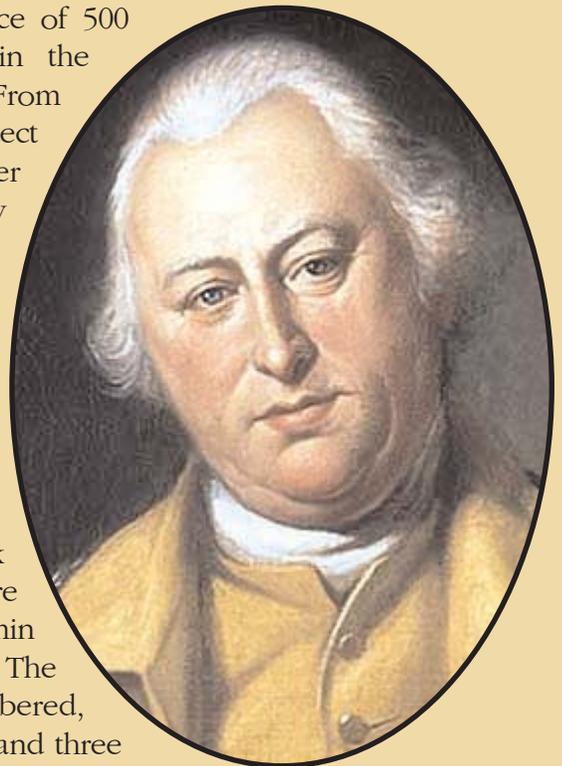
In 1776, the previous year, the war had gone badly for the Patriots. Washington lost Manhattan and Long Island and was chased across New Jersey with his fledgling Continental Army and into Pennsylvania. The horror of this humiliating retreat turned to joy when his beleaguered troops managed a surprise turnaround at the end of the year.

After back to back victories at Trenton and Princeton the Continental Army withdrew to Morristown, New Jersey for the winter. Most of the military action during the ensuing winter and spring was a foraging war. To sustain itself, the British Army, headquartered at New Brunswick, constantly plundered local farmers and merchants. The area from Sandy Hook north to New York State along the Hudson River was regarded as a no man's land. During this time prosperous farmers in Somerset County along the Raritan River had their property continually ransacked by British foraging parties.

In March, Washington sent General Benjamin Lincoln with a force of 500 soldiers to Bound Brook in the center of the devastation. From here Washington could protect area farms from further deprivation and send an early warning if the enemy began an advance inland through the Watchung Mountains known then as the Blue Hills.

On April 12, 1777, Cornwallis with a force of 2,000 men started out from New Brunswick to attack Bound Brook. In a surprise pre dawn attack General Benjamin Lincoln narrowly escaped. The Americans, greatly outnumbered, fell back after losing 36 men and three cannon in this stinging setback. In late May, 1777, Washington moved the entire Continental Army to Middlebrook on the heights above Bound Brook. Here they were 20 miles closer to the enemy in New Brunswick.

The Middlebrook encampment was on the south slopes of



**General
Benjamin Lincoln**



Washington Rock today

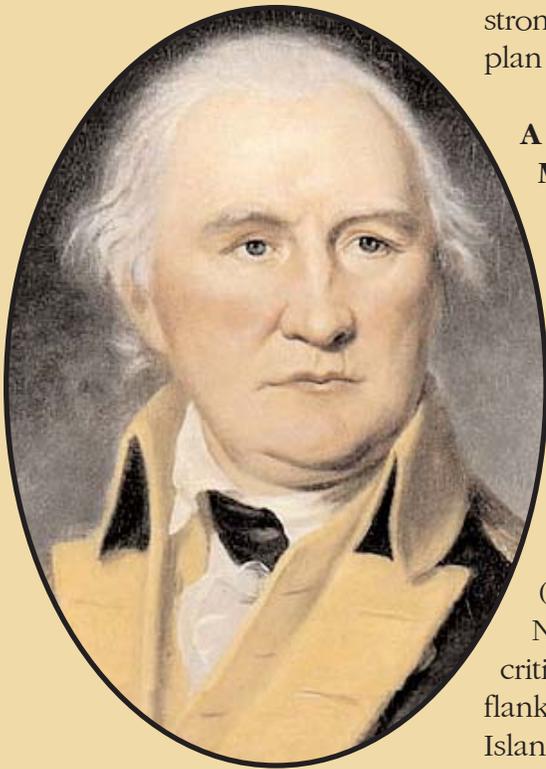
the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains. Today the site is on the high ground just west of the junction of Routes 22 and 287. This strategically placed position allowed the American Army to defend the mountain passes at Westfield, Scotch Plains, Watchung and Bound Brook and to threaten British-held New York and Staten Island. This high ground also provided an observation post from which General Washington could watch British troop movements over the 30 miles of flatland that stretched east to Staten Island.

Meanwhile, Lord Howe encamped in New Brunswick with the main body of the British Army continued to raid and forage eastern New Jersey and prepared to open a campaign in the state. His master strategy was to crush the American Army by drawing Washington out into the open flat land where the Continentals would be at a disadvantage in numbers and arms.

From the Middlebrook encampment Washington often walked two miles north along the crest of the ridge to a natural outcropping of rock. The rock could be reached from the plain below, now Plainfield, where a militia post was established on the farm of Cornelius and Frederick Vermuele. This post protected the mountain passes and guarded the main road from Scotch Plains to Bound Brook (which is present day Front Street in the town of Plainfield). From here, Brigadier General William Winds gathered the Militia of Somerset and Essex Counties, New Jersey.

In June 1777, Howe attempted to lure Washington into a battle on terrain where he would have no advantages. He advanced his forces from New Brunswick to Somerset Courthouse on the Millstone River. This eight-mile distance was half-way to the American Lines at Middlebrook. Washington wisely remained in his secure mountain stronghold. When Howe saw that his plan was futile he withdrew all his troops from New Brunswick to nearby Perth Amboy. Perth Amboy was a Tory stronghold and the home of Loyalist Governor William Franklin. Ironically he was the son of the great Patriot Benjamin Franklin.

By June 22, 1777, it appeared that the strength by the Patriots had caused Howe to give up on a New Jersey Campaign. He then moved his army from Perth Amboy across the Arthur Kill to Staten Island. This was a sign that the British were abandoning New Jersey and would instead attack the nation's capitol, Philadelphia, by a sea route. While British sources of the time deny it, this withdrawal from New Jersey may have been a move to deceive the Americans. By feigning a major retreat Howe again hoped to tempt Washington out of his mountain



**General Daniel Morgan of
Morgan's Rifle**

stronghold at Middlebrook. While his motive is uncertain, the plan worked.

A New Jersey General in Command and the Redcoats Move through Woodbridge

Washington observing the evacuation from his perch on the rock above was so confident that the enemy was permanently withdrawing from the state that he allowed the New Jersey Militia to return to their homes on June 23. Moving his entire army down to the plains at Samptown (South Plainfield) and Quibbletown (Piscataway) he then fanned out his regiments in a ten-mile arc to defend New Jersey from what seemed to be an unlikely counter attack. The American lines extended from Quibbletown north to The Short Hills and Ash Swamp (Plainfield and Scotch Plains).

New Jersey's Major General Lord Stirling was assigned to the critical Short Hills-Ash Swamp location to protect the northern flank of the American forces. With the British departure to Staten Island he could also try to reoccupy the Tory infested area down to Perth Amboy. Stirling's force included the divisions of Brigadier Generals Thomas Conway and General William, (Scotch Willie) Maxwell. They were joined by Morgan's Rifles and four New Jersey Regiments commanded by Colonels Matthias Ogden, Elias Dayton, Israel Shreve and Ephraim Martin. On June 24, Stirling left the post at Vermuele's farm below Washington Rock and moved his force of 1,798 soldiers to the Short Hills and Ash Swamp. He set up his headquarters at a central location along Inman Avenue.

An American deserter alerted the British commanders that Washington had moved his army down to the vulnerable position on the flatland. At 10 PM on June 25, 1777, Howe suddenly began ferrying his troops back from Staten Island and prepared them to march toward The Short Hills. He planned a fast surprise attack that would first wipe out Stirling, then encircle the main American Army in a pincer movement to crush it with his superior numbers and artillery.

The British and Hessian troops massed at Perth Amboy began their assault inland. The right wing of 5,000 soldiers under Cornwallis left Perth Amboy and started out on the twelve mile march to the Short Hills. They moved west through Woodbridge on a course which followed present day Amboy Avenue, Green Street and Oak Tree Road.

The assault moved only three miles before losing the advantage of surprise at sunrise. At 6:00 AM the Redcoats



**Brigadier General
Thomas Conway**

clashed with a detachment of 150 troops from Morgan's Riflemen led by Captain James Dark heading toward Perth Amboy. This skirmish occurred at a place called Strawberry Hill the junction of present day Green Street and Route 1 in Woodbridge. Here Dark's smaller patrol clashed with British Captain Patrick Ferguson's 250 riflemen using innovative repeating rifles. These guns could be loaded at the breech and fired up to six shots a minute. Despite this superior weaponry and being outnumbered, Dark's patrol held off the entire advance of Cornwallis for about a half hour before being forced back up Oak Tree Road by a massed bayonet charge.

As Dark's pickets fell back, Stirling sent out Brigadier General Thomas Conway's Brigade to support them with about 700 Pennsylvania German volunteers. This front line detachment commanded by New Jersey's General Maxwell and French Colonel Armand-Tuffin was known as Ottendorff's Corps.

The Skirmish on Oak Tree Road

Moving along Oak Tree Road the Cornwallis column encountered its first major resistance when they met the Ottendorff's Corps, who had been joined by Dark's retreating riflemen and a large number of local militia. They were supported by three new French brass cannon. The clash occurred at about 8:30 AM along the high ground where Oak Tree Road intersects with Plainfield Road and New Dover Road. After heavy hand-to-hand combat the vastly outnumbered Patriot defenders were forced back up Oak Tree Road to New Dover Road and Woodland Avenue. They withdrew up the rising ground through Martin's Woods a mile toward The Short Hills. The valiant Pennsylvania troops took heavy losses. Thirty two men out of eighty fell but they saved the cannon and slowed the British advance.

Cornwallis continued his advance west along Oak tree Road to link up with Howe's left wing force of 12,000 British regulars and Hessians and to close the pincer. The two prongs of the British attack force merged at Oak Tree Junction.

The sounds of gunfire from the skirmish at Strawberry Hill first alerted Washington. At 7:00 AM a scout reported that the invaders were only two and a half miles away. The Commander-In-Chief ordered alarm guns to be fired. He began rapidly withdrawing his army back to the high ground at Middlebrook relying on Stirling's troops at The Short Hills to stall the entire British advance.



Hessian soldier

Furious Combat at the Short Hills and Ash Swamp

Lord Stirling had his command post at the rising ground nearer Ash Swamp at the junction of Inman and Old Raritan Roads, the site of the Short Hills Tavern. He gathered 1,000 men of the New Jersey Brigade and formed a defensive line along Tingley Lane and Rahway Avenue. Here the battle raged for two hours. At first the Continental troops had a brief advantage. As the British advanced along Tingley Lane on the east side of the Short Hills they took heavy fire from American artillery concealed behind trees and in the foliage of the higher ground which is now occupied by the Plainfield Country Club.

A Hessian Grenadier battalion under Von Minningerode attacked positions from Inman Avenue and attempted to block the Americans from retreating toward Westfield by circling north around Ash Swamp. Curiously they came face to face with Pennsylvania German troops, so shouts of German expletives must have come from both sides during the fray. The Hessians were repulsed by grapeshot from the American cannon. A single discharge of canister killed six of the advancing Hessians.

The British assault was supported by at least fifteen cannons and intense musket fire. The fighting was extremely severe with much of the hand to hand combat around four French three pounders that were slowing the enemy bayonet charges with blasts of grapeshot. Captain John Finch, a courageous but reckless British officer, charged up to a Rebel cannon alone and with his pistols forced the crew to abandon it. He spotted Lord Stirling nearby and shouted, "Come here you damned rebel and I will do for you." Stirling directed the fire of four marksmen on him and he fell instantly.

The cannon were lost, then retaken, but three were lost again. French Colonel Armand saved the remaining gun as the defenders fell back. Lord Stirling's horse was shot from under him and General Maxwell was almost captured by Hessian Grenadiers during the fray.

A Courageous Scotch Plains Lady Challenges British General Cornwallis

About noon, the fighting broke off at the house of a carpenter, Gershon Frazee, on Raritan Road in Scotch Plains. As an advanced patrol of famished Redcoats, led by Lord Cornwallis himself, fought their way along Raritan Road toward the concealed American positions in Ash Swamp they approached the humble frame farmhouse. Frazee was a staunch



Patriot, whose family provided bread to the embattled American soldiers as they fell back along the road to Westfield. The mouth-watering aroma of fresh baked bread wafted through the Redcoat ranks. The general himself approached the modest farmhouse and was met by Frazee's 61 year old wife Elizabeth. Cornwallis asked her for her newly baked bread. Aunt Betty Frazee replied, "Sir I give you this bread in fear and not in love." Cornwallis admired her audacity and said to his troops, "Not a man of my command shall touch a single loaf." The Frazee house still stands near the corner of Terrill and Raritan Roads in Scotch Plains. Aunt Betty died in 1792. She rests in the old cemetery at the Westfield Presbyterian Church.

Another local legend tells of the weary British soldiers ending their offensive that day when they reached a cider mill, brew house and distillery owned by James Lambert on Raritan Road and captured three barrels of applejack. It was a hot day and the well water at the Jonathan Terry house on Rahway and Cooper Roads was drunk dry by the British troops.

Massed volleys of cannon fire from guns as large as twelve pounders forced the outnumbered Americans, now in danger of being surrounded, to fall back into Ash Swamp where they

continued to stubbornly resist. Stirling's main force, hidden in the woods, continued to harass the enemy along the way. British forces began plundering and burning homes along the way as they pushed on toward Westfield

Westfield is desecrated

At Westfield the pursuit ended. As the day came to a close the Americans retreated toward the mountains with wounded soldiers loaded in wagons. They moved up the pass at Scotch Plains, now New Providence Road, and moved down Valley Road through Watchung and Warren to rejoin the main army at Middlebrook.

The Westfield Meeting House, a Presbyterian Church at Broad and Mountain Avenues frantically tolled its bell to warn of the approach of thousands of Redcoats and Hessians. Outraged and frustrated by not being able to draw the weak American Army into a battle the British behavior abruptly changed. These previously well disciplined soldiers, restrained by their officers, degenerated into shameful looters and wanton destroyers of property. Claims recorded by many residents detail the extensive damage done to civilian homes and property.

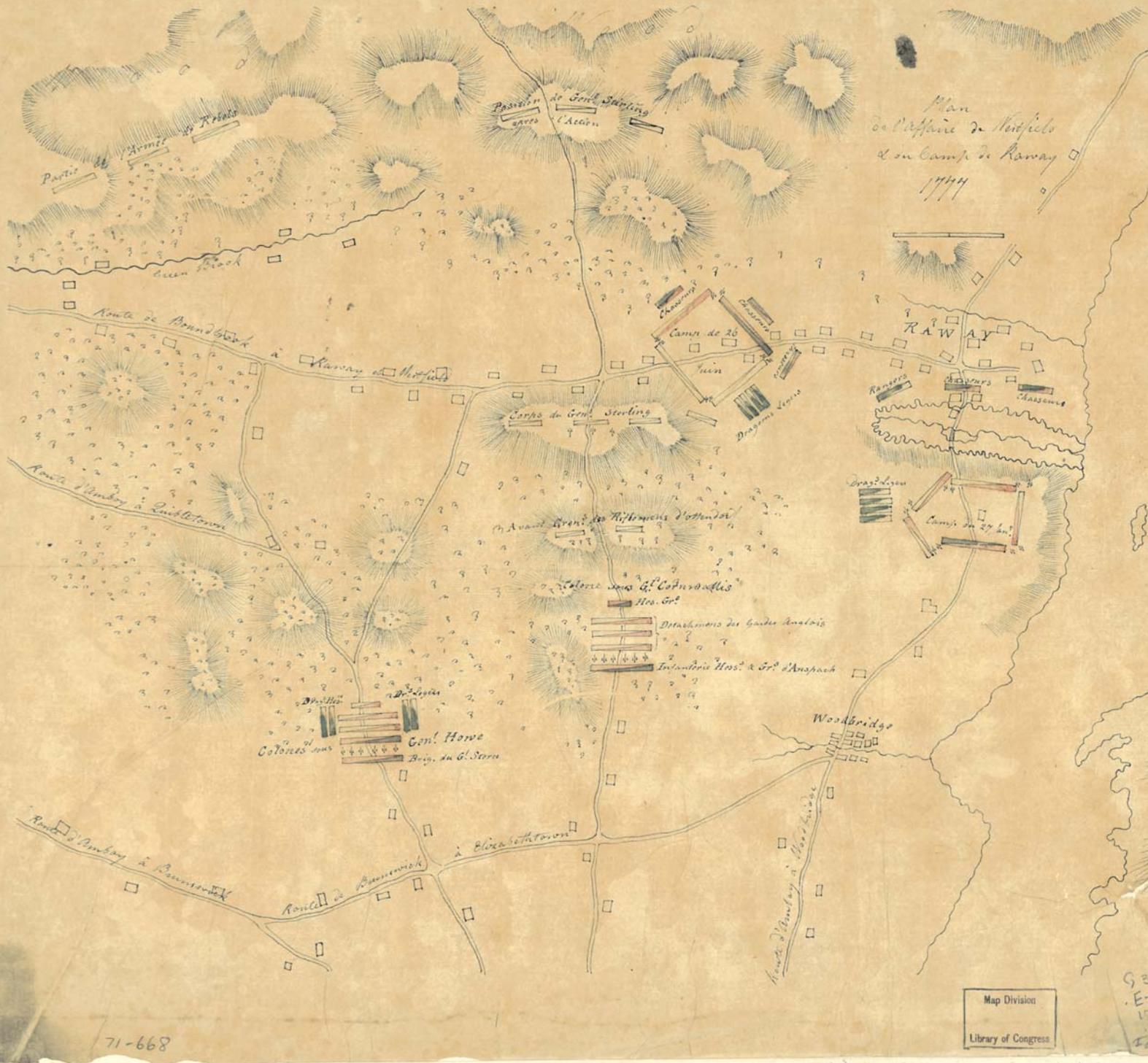
The enemy forces viewed the Presbyterian Church at Westfield as a symbol of radical patriotism. They threw down the bell from the steeple and slaughtered sheep and cattle in the building. The jubilant troops camped overnight in Westfield on the church grounds and along Willow Grove Road to Rahway Road and Grove to Central Avenue. Many of the unwelcomed guests spent the night in homes and shops of the Patriot neighborhood.

The British and Hessian forces marched out of Westfield at 9:00 a.m. the next morning with their prisoners and wagon loads of plunder and headed to Rahway by way of Rahway and Central Avenues. It was during this retreat that the frustrated British forces were said to have destroyed the print shop of James Parker at Woodbridge. This had been the first permanent print shop in New Jersey. In his book, "James Parker: A Printer on the Eve of the Revolution," Gordon Bond discloses that the building may not have been entirely destroyed. Parker's son, Samuel Franklin Parker, had tried to keep it going, but by 1777 was off serving in Heard's Brigade. The building, thought to be on the corner of Amboy Avenue and Grove Street, probably didn't contain a press anymore. Subsequent damage records talk of damage to part of a printing office, but not the loss of a valuable printing press. By contrast, the younger Parker's house was said to have been burned to the ground, with losses recorded down to a child's tin whistle. No mention of a press. But this destruction was likely turned into the loss of the print shop in the retelling.

Washington took full advantage of the time that Stirling's forces had allowed him to withdraw the Continental Army and get back to the security of Middlebrook. Fearing a possible counterattack he dispersed regiments to defend the vital passes through the Blue Hills at Westfield, Scotch Plains, (New Providence Road), Watchung, (Somerset Street), Bound Brook, (Chimney Rock Road) and Bridgewater (Routes 202/206).

After assessing American strength and defenses, Howe decided to abandon the campaign across New Jersey. The British Army evacuated New Jersey on June 30, 1777 and crossed over to Staten Island and New York.

The stand taken by Stirling's forces at The Short Hills and Ash Swamp had saved Washington's Army. The British had failed to gain entry into the interior of New Jersey. This evacuation was a welcomed relief to civilians throughout the state and they rejoiced



Map drawn by a Hessian officer showing the battle positions.

the following week by celebrating the new nation's first birthday.

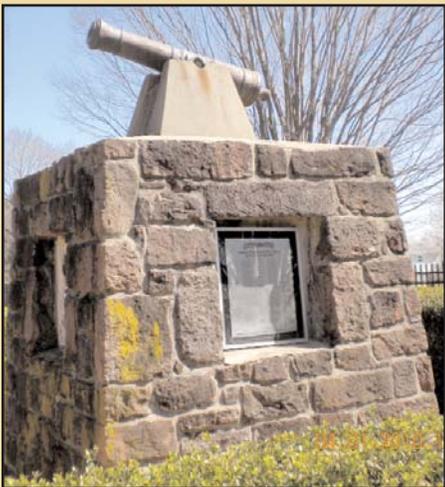
The British and Hessians admitted to 70 men killed, wounded or suffocated by the heat and 13 taken prisoner by the Americans. Perhaps the most reliable number of American losses was published later in the *Continental Journal* a record of the daily proceedings of the Continental Congress. It reported losses of three field pieces, 20 killed and 40 wounded. Howe's aide Maunchhausen reported that he



George W. Stillman of the Metuchen - Edison Historic Society at the marker on the corner of Oak Tree and new Dover Roads.



Photo mural at bank.



Entrance to Ashbrook Golf Course

counted thirty seven rebel wagons carrying wounded into the Blue Mountains via the pass at New Providence Road in Scotch Plains. The road was known as Bloody Gap for many years as a direct result of this incident.

The Scene Today

Heavily wooded locales have replaced the plowed fields of 1777 but the Short Hills viewed from Oak Tree Road look much the same as they did to Cornwallis and his Redcoat columns. At the Plainfield Country Club Golf Course the high ground which was the location of the American cannon emplacements stretches from the 4th to the 13th greens. From here the defenders could fire down on the enemy advancing along Tingley Lane. The grounds of the club occupy much of the crest of the Short Hills. Looking west from this promontory the first ridge of the Watchung mountains appears exactly as it did during the war. Trees obscure the heavily populated towns of Plainfield and Scotch Plains which lie below.

The roads followed by both sides during the battle are intact but heavily built over in places. The route from Strawberry Hill along Green Street, crosses over both the Garden State Parkway and U. S. Routes 1 and 9. Oak Tree Road and Inman Avenue are busy thoroughfares but New Dover Road, Woodland Avenue, Rahway Ave and Raritan Road with scattered upscale houses and much open land, retain much of their original appearance.

The area around the Short Hills abounds with historic sites and restored colonial houses. On the corner of Oak Tree and New Dover Roads near where the Ottendorf Corps made its stand is a five acre site with unusually well detailed markers that describes the battle. A photo mural of New Jersey Brigade soldiers adorns the wall of a bank adjoining the park. Not far from the Frazee House on Old Raritan Road an eight foot antique sandstone monument topped by a replica Revolutionary War cannon stands at the entrance to Ashbrook Golf Course.

Washington Rock the General's observation place set in a 52 acre State Park on top of the first Watchung Mountain is in nearby Greenbrook Township. There a dramatic scenic overlook provides a thirty mile panoramic view of the eastern plains of New Jersey as far as Staten Island. George Washington directed the Battle of the Short Hills from here. Curiously the renowned artist Charles Wilson Peale made a sketch in his diary. It shows the General on the rock during the battle. Peale included himself in the picture.

While the Battle of The Short Hills was a tactical defeat for the Americans, it was really a significant strategic victory of the Revolutionary War. Stirling's valiant stand against a vastly superior force provided the time for Washington to move the Continental Army back to the safety of the hills at Middlebrook and avoided the British victory that would have doomed the struggle for independence. Washington's tactics and strategy at the Battle of The Short Hills earned him the respect of Lord Cornwallis who, four years later after his surrender at the final decisive American victory of the war at Yorktown said, "But after all, your Excellency's achievements in New Jersey were such that nothing could surpass them"



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About the Author

Robert A. Mayers lives in Watchung, New Jersey. Over the years, the author has traveled to the battlefields of the Revolution and other historic sites in the eastern US and Canada. He has a special interest in New Jersey history. His works are based on his onsite experience and primary sources combined with the discovery of original documents and oral accounts passed down in his family through many generations.

His book, "The War Man" published by Westholme Publishing, 2009, the biography of Corporal John Allison, is a true account of a soldier in the Continental Army. He served for the entire eight years of the American Revolution. It provides a rare detailed account of the life of a private soldier and serves as a model for researching Revolutionary War soldiers. Currently the book is selling successfully world-wide.

"The Portrait of an American Family" Allison / Mayers Family History. Heritage Books, 2011. This narrative traces an American family back 600 years and 20 generations. The work spans medieval England, the puritan emigration, colonial America, the revolutionary war and the industrial revolution.

"The Forgotten Revolution" soon to be released is a study of several battlefields, encampments and sites of many critical events of the Revolutionary War that have been lost or neglected by history.

"The Voyage of the Marion" published in the U.K. by *Cheshire Magazine* is the account of the journey of a silk worker from England to Paterson, New Jersey in 1839.

Mayers is an active member of ten historical societies and a frequent speaker and contributor to society publications. He typically presents about 20 speaking events each year. A former Human Resources executive he is a graduate of Rutgers University and was an adjunct professor at Seton Hall University.

Mayers served as a combat officer in the Navy and Marine Corps. His military experiences provide him with a deeper perspective of the campaigns and battles depicted in this works.