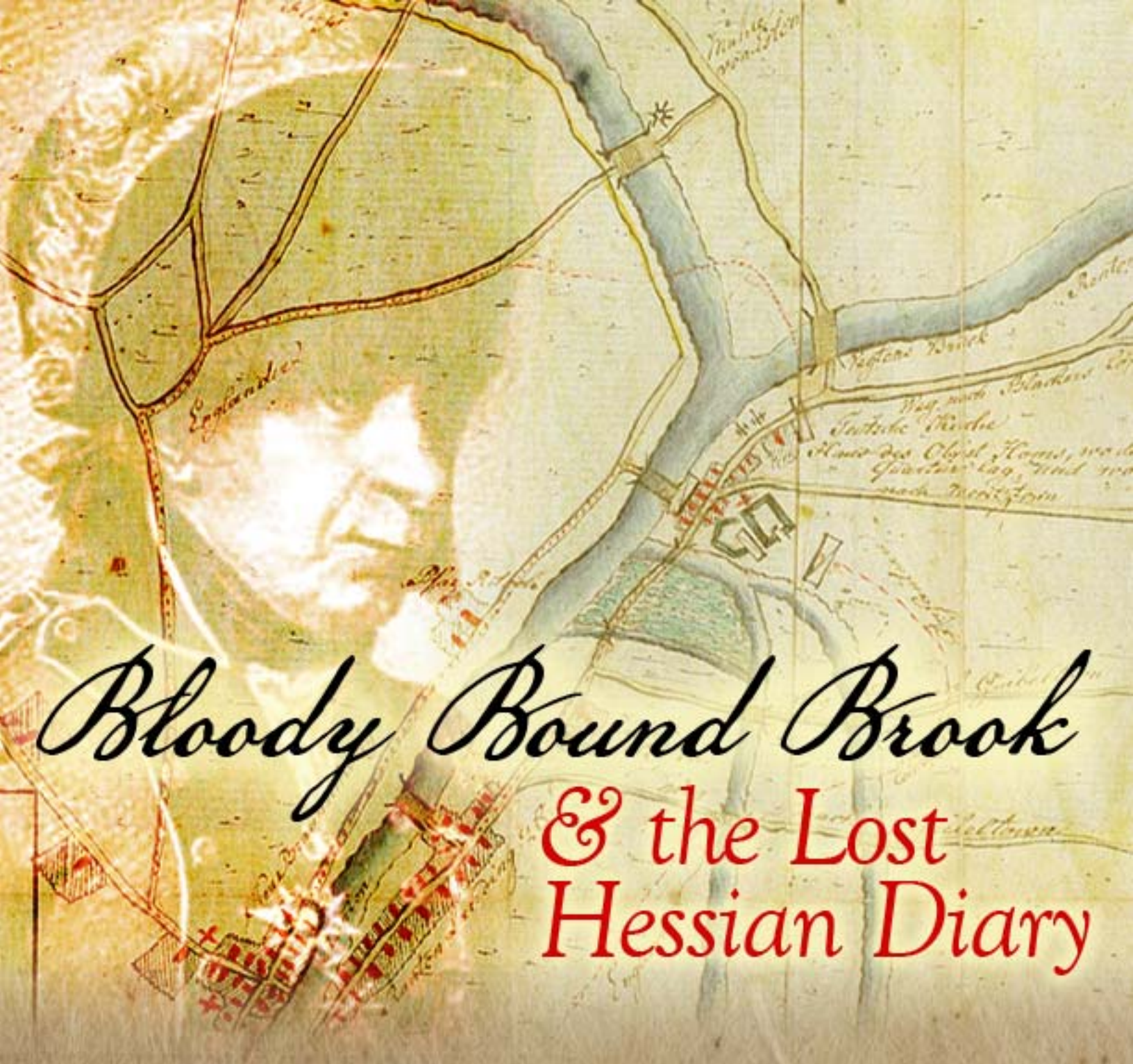

Bloody Bound Brook & the Lost Hessian Diary

by Bob Mayers

It would not be until the end of World War II that a diary was rediscovered that shed new light on the importance of the Battle of Bound Brook.

Captain Johann Ewald
C. A. Jensen, after a drawing by H. J. Aldenrath

At dawn on Palm Sunday, April 13, 1777, in the third year of the American Revolution, a Hessian captain with his company of thirty Jaegers faltered and fell as intense musket and cannon fire tore into them from an American redoubt. They were fearlessly attempting a frontal assault over a stone bridge that crossed the Bound Brook at a New Jersey riverbank hamlet of the same name. The Hessians—German mercenaries—were the most deadly light infantry in the world at the time. These elite special forces were feared by their American opponents. Armed with short carbine-type German hunting rifles, they dressed in green and brown to blend in with their surroundings, unlike the blazing red wool uniforms of their British allies.

That, morning the small unit of Jaegers was the advanced party of a British force of 4,000 men. These Redcoat invaders were attempting a surprise attack on an exposed front line outpost on the Raritan River. It was defended by a garrison of 500 Continental troops who were responsible for guarding the three bridges that crossed the Raritan River that were likely to be used by the British in moves against Washington's main army at Morristown.

The Hessian commander, Captain Johann Ewald, sensed that something was dreadfully wrong. Although his rangers were especially combat-trained for both rugged terrain and urban fighting, they were outnumbered and outgunned; they were being slaughtered as they charged into the thick gunfire at the fortification. Ewald was puzzled. Why had his small unit been ordered to lead this suicidal assault when thousands of troops of the main force would soon be arriving? By day break they were surrounded by hundreds of menacing American soldiers. In the confusion that day his British commander had been vague about the mission and Ewald had misunderstood his orders. The Jaegers had been directed only to divert attention from the main forces by a feint, not to engage in a hard-hitting attack.

So began the battle of Bound Brook, New Jersey. The valiant German captain was later admonished for being too aggressive and alerting the Americans that a major British offensive had begun.

The main British force arrived minutes after the fatal charge by the Jaegers and the battle turned against the outnumbered Americans. Confronted by what were considered the best trained and equipped soldiers in the world, they swiftly retreated toward

the mountains. The fighting at Bound Brook lasted 90 minutes before the swift American withdrawal. This action in Somerset County, New Jersey, was an early, though not severe defeat. It has been regarded in history as a humiliating rout and largely overlooked by historians on both sides. American military observers, often neglect depressing setbacks but amplify triumphs.

The British side, however, had not exploited their gain. Their objective of capturing an entire garrison was not met and an American General escaped to fight another day. The Redcoats returned to New Brunswick. However, this clash at the small riverbank outpost had a profound effect on the course of the entire war. It alerted General Washington who along with his 4,000 ragged men—the entire Continental Army was in the secure encampment back in the mountains at Morristown—that there was a real possibility that the British Army with Hessian support could sweep across central New Jersey. By doing so they could take the American capital at Philadelphia, and this campaign could effectively end their War for Independence.

The skirmish at Bound Brook was a pivotal event in the Revolutionary War and this intriguing but neglected event in New Jersey history is worth reexamining today. The few surviving eyewitness accounts and newspaper reports are unabashedly spun to magnify the victory or minimize the loss depending on the viewpoint of the observer. Nevertheless, the physical features of the battle site still exist and can be easily identified. When you arrive in Bound Brook today, you are still in the midst of the waterways, mountains and other landmarks that determined the flow of action. Moreover, structures, that played a role in the clash and later events in the war, have been faithfully restored by devoted residents of the area.

Regardless of how the story was subsequently spun, however, for Captain Ewald, the day had been a disaster. When it was all over, he faithfully committed the event to his diary—the single most detailed eyewitness account. It would be within its pages that he recorded his experiences during the entire eight years of the Revolutionary War, including several maps of the areas where he fought and show the placement of troops and fortifications. He wrote for his family and descendants; it was never intended to be published.

This goldmine for the military historian would remain forgotten for the next 200 years.

Captain Johann von Ewald (1744–1813) had come to America

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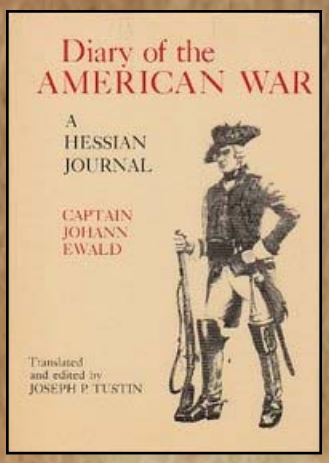


Captain Johann Ewald's diaries, as translated and edited by Joseph P. Tustin, were published in 1979 by Yale University Press.

in 1776 with the British military forces and was a participant in many of the significant battles of the war. Ewald fought in the Philadelphia Campaign, the battle of Monmouth, and with Cornwallis at the surrender of Yorktown in 1781. The captain was recognized by the British as one of the best light infantry officers in their service. This dedicated, trained professional from Hesse-Cassel, was provided on loan by the ruler of his province to the British to oppose the American uprising for independence. He was an expert in weaponry and an excellent leader of men in combat. And, fortunately for historians, a diarist.

It wouldn't be until the end of the Second World War that Ewald's diary would again come to light. It was accidentally discovered by Major Joseph P. Tustin, while he was working as a historian with the United States Occupational Forces in Germany. He found it in the possession of an impoverished clerk who had been a colonel in the German Army. Tustin then spent the next thirty years translating the work and verifying the facts. It was finally published in 1979 by Yale University, and included thirty-three of the original color maps from the diary's four volumes.

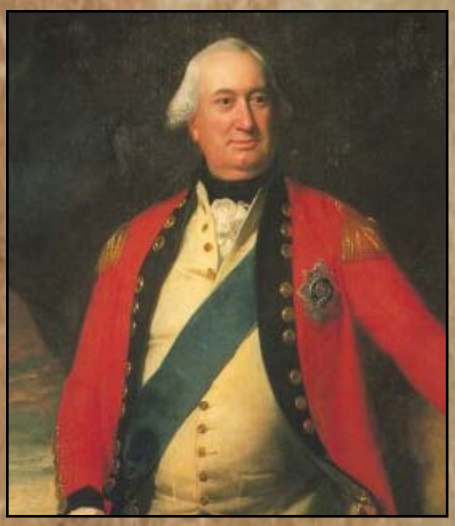
Ewald's account of the battle of Bound Brook appears to be written the very same day, or soon after he returned to camp. His blunt depiction of the action provides a dramatic picture of the action on April 13, 1777.

Bound Brook on the Pathway of the Revolution

Because of its strategic location between New York and Philadelphia, the Bound Brook area was crossed many times by the contending armies. The most direct route toward Morristown passed through Bound Brook. George Washington twice encamped his army at Middlebrook in June and July 1777 and in the winter of 1778–1779. Five houses that were used by Washington and his generals as their headquarters during the battle and the encampments at Middlebrook remain standing.

The remnants of the Stone Arch Bridge, built in 1731, and crossed by Ewald's men, still can be found. More recent versions of the two other strategic crossings, the Queen's Bridge and the Van Veghten Bridge still span the Raritan River at their original battle sites. The Van Horne House occupied by General Benjamin Lincoln on the day of the battle played a significant role in the clash. It was later assigned to William Alexander, (Lord Stirling) Washington's second-in command. The Van Veghten House in Finderne, a section of Bridgewater Township was occupied by

Gen. William Howe
H.B. Hall



Gen. Charles Cornwallis
John Singleton Copley

Quartermaster General Nathaniel Greene. The impeccably restored Abraham Staats House in South Bound Brook was occupied by the Baron von Steuben.

The Forage War

After the American victories at Trenton and Princeton in December 1776 and January 1777, the Continental Army entered winter quarters in Morristown, New Jersey. Washington's Army had been weakened by the winter campaign. Enlistments had expired, so many men returned home. A smallpox epidemic swept through the camp. The frigid winter weather and the effort to prevent the enemy from foraging for supplies in the countryside, bought some time for the Americans to gain strength. A guerrilla war was waged by New Jersey militia companies often supported by Continental Army troops. They continually harassed enemy outposts and ambushed their foraging expeditions. But as spring approached spies reported that the British were planning to attack Morristown.

The British and their Hessian mercenaries were commanded by Generals William Howe and Charles Cornwallis. They decided to encamp for the winter in New Brunswick, New Jersey after learning that the Americans had removed all the boats on the Delaware River to prevent their crossing to Philadelphia. The British garrison in New Jersey with 17,000 soldiers was desperate for supplies and resorted to raids on local farmers and merchants to sustain its forces. The people of Somerset County suffered severely during this winter from the British foraging parties. Prosperous farmers lived along the Raritan River and its tributaries, the Millstone and South Branch. Their well-filled barns, ample livestock and well furnished homes tempted the ravenous British soldiers The Redcoat army met with resistance from the New Jersey Militia and were unsuccessful on foraging raids in January at Van Nest's Mill (near present-day Manville), Samptown (now South Plainfield), and Quibbletown (now Piscataway), and as far north as Scotch Plains, Rahway, and Woodbridge.

The relentless scavenging of the countryside continued through the winter. Patriot property was stolen or destroyed and homes were plundered and burned by enemy troops seeking forage and supplies. Hundreds of families were forced to flee through the mountain passes or to build shelters on the wooded heights. Cornelius Vermeule established a militia post on Front Street in today's town of Plainfield in late December 1776, to

defend the Quibbletown Gap, a pass through the mountains at a lookout known today as Washington Rock.

This period of the war in New Jersey, the winter and early spring of 1777, has been called the "forage war." Greatly overestimating the strength and condition of Washington's Army, the English still found themselves on the defensive as April approached. Frustrated by the success of the Americans in blocking their raids, the British planned to retaliate with a concentrated attack on the garrison at Bound Brook. This assault could also provide the opportunity to forage the area for food, fodder, and anything else of value.

The expedition was planned and carried out with so much secrecy, that other units of the army and the people of New Brunswick did not learn of it until after the columns left.

Bound Brook, eight miles up the Raritan river west of New Brunswick, was the nearest to the British Army. The little force assigned there could briefly delay any thrust by the enemy toward Morristown and warn Washington and the main army of an impending invasion. The detachment could also block an English attempt to get supplies up the Raritan River.

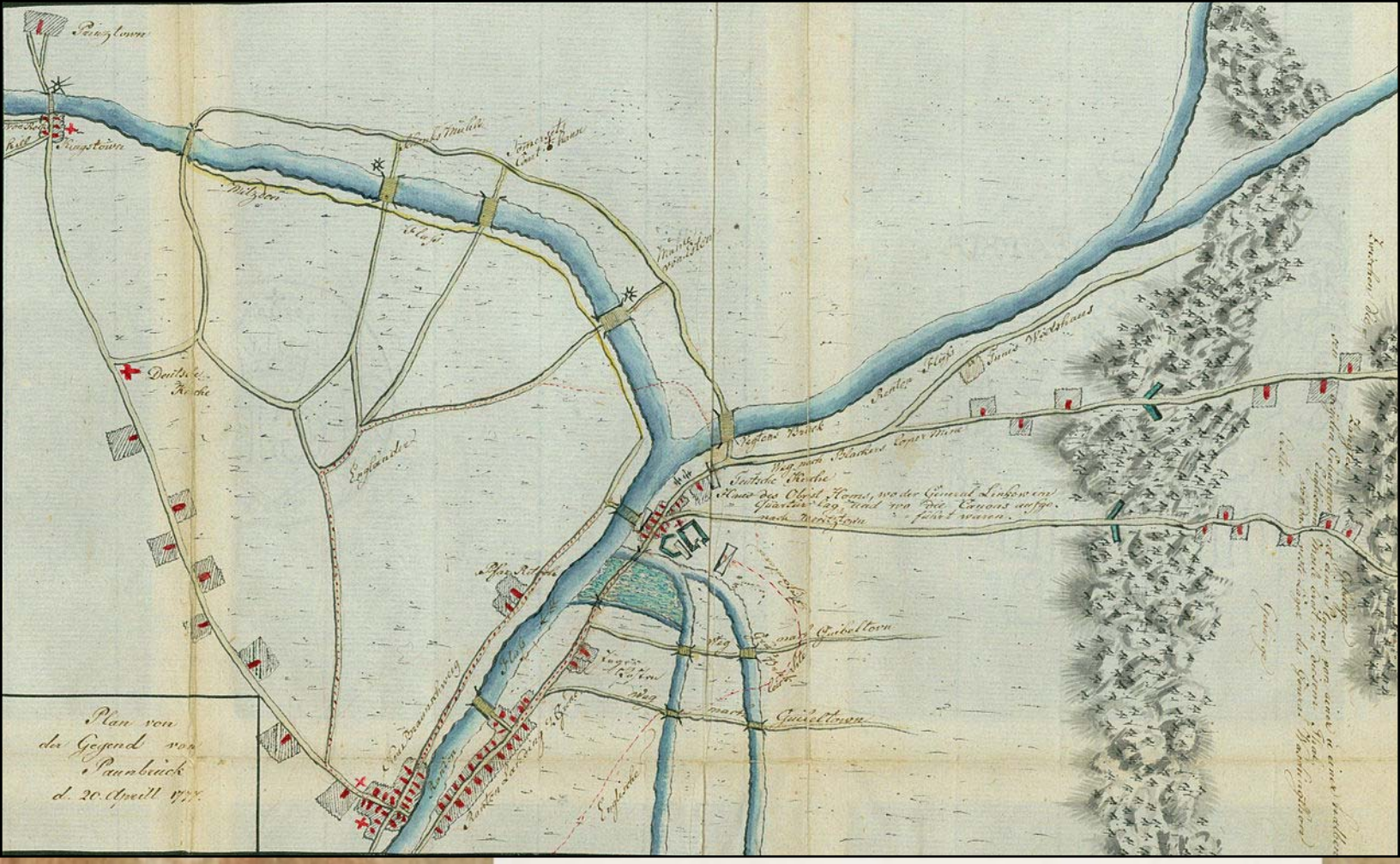
The American line of patrol extended along the north bank of the Raritan River. It ran from the Van Veghten Bridge south to a bend in the river. From here any movements on the Raritan Landing Bridge could be observed. Patrols extended five or six miles and covered the three bridges across the river.

The detachment there was commanded by Major General Benjamin Lincoln. In February 1777, its outpost consisted of 1,000 men but was reduced by expiring militia enlistments to 500 by mid-March. Only Pennsylvania troops and a Continental artillery company remained. Lincoln was apprehensive. The nearest help was fifteen miles away in Morristown. He warned General Washington that there was no support to "render the least assistance to this post in case it is attacked." He added that he was keeping wagons ready in case a sudden departure was required.

Frustrated by the success of the Americans in blocking their raids, the British planned to retaliate with a concentrated attack on the garrison at Bound Brook.

Redcoat Deception

In February 1777, British General Cornwallis, second in command at New Brunswick, asked the Hessian Jaeger Captain Ewald to draft a plan of attack on Bound Brook. Ewald writes, "Lord Cornwallis showed his confidence in me by with entrusting me with drawing up a plan for a surprise attack on Bound brook. But since it was necessary for a column to cross the Raritan above



Ewald's map of Bound Brook.
Keystone Library Network Digital Collections:
http://digital.klnpa.org/u?/blmmap,19

Bound Brook, the attack was postponed until spring."

The winter drew on without incident and Ewald complained about standing guard duty and patrolling up river in the deep snow. But it was a comfortable winter in New Brunswick for the British Army and their German allies who were abundantly supplied from New York City. The Captain commented in his diary, "But the men lacked for nothing for most of the excellent provisions of salted beef and pork, peas, butter, rice and flower for bread, along with the best Englis beer. With the end of the month we watched the snow disappear and everything was green in a few days"

Ewald led a foraging raid on the town two weeks before the main action at Bound Brook, "We drove the enemy outposts across the causeway into the town, and returned without loss with booty of 15 head of oxen, which enemy soldiers had grazed on our side of the causeway. On the night of April 12, 1777, the Redcoats and Hessians at New Brunswick were poised to strike.

The predawn, four-pronged surprise attack was launched on April 13, 1777. Concealed by darkness, part of the assault force with cannons moved up on Easton Avenue to Raritan Landing, (now at Landing Lane in Johnson Park and the campus of Rutgers University). There, the group split. Under Hessian Colonel Carl von Donop, the main body continued up the left, or Bound Brook,

Col. Carl von Donop

ANKAWÜ

side of the river. They headed directly toward the Queen's Bridge that crossed the Raritan into the town. To avoid detection and to block the American route of retreat to Morristown the other detachment, commanded by Major General James Grant and led by Ewald's Jagers, broke off and crossed the bridge at Raritan Landing. They advanced up River Road on the right side of the river toward Bound Brook. They avoided main roads and moved as quietly as possible.

A third column on the left, commanded by Cornwallis, along with Colonel William Harcourt attacked from the west. It moved up through what today is Franklin and Piscataway Townships to Weston Canal Road. There it crossed the river on the Van Veghten Bridge onto Findern Road. The objective of this thrust was to capture General Benjamin Lincoln. This position was defended by Thomas Proctor's American artillery with three four pounder cannons.

A fourth column of light infantry commanded by Major Maitland swept along on the east through Piscataway and moved along the base of the Watchung Ridge to cut off any escape by the Americans to the hills into the north. All but this fourth detachment reached positions surrounding the outpost near daybreak. Soon, the tranquil countryside would be shattered by volleys of cannon blasts and clattering musket fire.

The British plan was to surprise the American riverbank outpost at Bound Brook on April 13, 1777. Then they would encircle the town and block the small garrison of Americans from escaping into the Watchung Mountains. In the confusion they might also be able and capture their commander, General Benjamin Lincoln. At first their strategy was completely successful. Four columns totaling 4,000 Redcoat troops with their Hessian allies marched seven miles from New Brunswick. The entire force was undetected by American sentries and arrived outside the town before sunrise. They rested until daybreak. Their signal to launch the onslaught would be at the moment they heard the American sentries shouting "All is well" and the morning gun had been fired to confirm that all was secure.

Ewald and his band of Jaegers were the first to reach the town. He reported, "I was ordered to form the advanced guard of General Grant's column. At daybreak I came upon an enemy picket on this side of the stone causeway which led to Bound Brook through a marsh . . ." At this point he had to cross over a stone arched bridge that spanned the Bound Brook itself on the edge of

the town. A few yards from the end of the span the Americans had built the "Half Moon Battery." This redoubt or small fortified position blocked entry into town. As the Hessian soldiers poured over the narrow span they were pinned down by deadly fire from the American soldiers in the redoubt.

Ewald wrote in his diary:

At daybreak I came upon an empty picket on this side of the stone causeway which led to Bound Brook through a marsh along the Raritan River for five or six hundred paces over two bridges. The picket received us spiritedly and withdrew under a steady fire. I tried to keep as close as possible to the enemy to get across the causeway into the town at the same time. This succeeded to the extent that I arrived at the second bridge at a distance of a hundred paces from the redoubt which covered it and the flying bridge [Queen's Bridge]. *The day dawned and I was exposed to murderous fire.*

Stunned Patriots Spring into Action

The resounding noise of the intense musket fire exchanged during the disastrous charge by Ewald and his Jaeger Company at the redoubt alerted the 500 Americans defending Bound Brook—and the elite Jaegers were close to being annihilated. After about fifteen minutes their valiant assault faltered. They were saved by Hessian Colonel Donop's troops in the main column advancing north from New Brunswick along present day Easton Avenue. These reinforcements crossed the Queens Bridge over the Raritan River a few yards from the redoubt and quickly overwhelmed the Half Moon position. The tide of battle had turned, and Americans were forced to abandon the battery. Ewald's survivors, together with the thousands of troops from Donop's column, then skirmished with the outnumbered Americans who stubbornly resisted their advance through the streets of Bound Brook.

Ewald wrote:

Luckily for us Colonel Donop's column appeared after a lapse of eight or ten minutes whereupon the Americans abandoned the Redoubt. We arrived in town with the garrison of the redoubt amidst a hard running fight and the greater part were either cut down or captured.

Interestingly, the old stone arched bridge where the Jaegers

Ewald's survivors, together with the thousands of troops from Donop's column, then skirmished with the outnumbered Americans who stubbornly resisted their advance through the streets of Bound Brook.

Surviving parts of the bridge.
Bob Mayers

were pinned down still stands. Built in 1731, it is one of the few existing battlefield resources in New Jersey for which a first-hand action account exists. The triple arched crossing was constructed as a link over the old channel of the Bound Brook. It was part of Old York Road, one of the main highways across New Jersey, connecting New York and Philadelphia in the 18th century. When the railroad was built, the Bound Brook was diverted so it would no longer pass under this bridge. Since the early 1870s the Old Stone Arch Bridge has been almost completely buried by fill due to construction of the railroad embankment. It is exposed above the tops of the arches and underlies a more recent road. Local historians are appalled that 18-wheeler trucks regularly pass over the remains of the fragile structure. Its location is off South Main

Gen. Benjamin Lincoln
Charles Willson Peale

Street at the approach to an industrial zone. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008.

General Cornwallis, commander of the entire operation, took a longer route to the south through Franklin and Piscataway Townships with a column of 2,000 men. He crossed the river over the Van Veghten Bridge onto Finderne Road in Bridgewater. On this route he could attempt to encircle the town thereby blocking an American retreat toward the mountains and capturing the Headquarters of General Lincoln.

Local historians dispute the location of the house where General Lincoln was headquartered that morning. Some say it was in the house of Peter Williamson, known as the "Battery House," situated in the eastern part of the village and at the half moon battery. Others maintain it was the Van Horne House in the same area. A short distance south of this house the Americans built a blockhouse surrounded by earthworks to prevent any river crossing from that direction. Proctor's Artillery Company manned this position with three, four pounder cannons.

At daybreak, the sentries who had been posted near the house heard the roll of drums and the report of cannon. The sudden appearance of the Redcoat dragoons, grenadiers, and light infantry startled the Americans who managed to shout "To arms" before they were overwhelmed. The frantic cries of the sentries awoke General Lincoln and his staff. From the house they were stunned to see the enemy only 200 yards away. Without his uniform, Lincoln vaulted onto his horse and began leading his surviving soldiers out of the town between the gap of the rapidly closing British pincers. One of his aides was captured and all his baggage and records were taken. Hessian Colonel Von Donop reported that General Lincoln "must have retired *en Profond Négligé*"—translating to "profoundly undressed," or naked.

Ewald describes the incident:

> *At eleven o'clock in the evening Colonel Harcourt with 50 horse, two light infantry battalions and a battalion of British grenadiers crossed the Raritan River below the Van Veghten bridge and arrived behind Horne's plantation where generals Lincoln and Wayne lay in their quarters under cover of three 4-pounders mounted in the rear of the enemy quarters. The guard was partly cut down and partly captured, the three cannon seized and the two generals fled without their breeches.*

Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene
Charles Willson Peale

The attack by the Cornwallis column prompted the Americans to begin abandoning the blockhouse. At that position Proctor's artillery company was decimated. Most of its men were killed or captured; their cannons were taken. Had the alarm from the sentries come only a few minutes later, or had the Cornwallis plan for surrounding the Americans been better organized the entire Americans force at Bound Brook might have been encircled and captured. The British strategy was muddled by Ewald's early skirmishing which alerted the Americans as well as the late arrival of Major Maitland's column closing in from the north from Green Brook. The crown forces were not able to cut off the route to Morristown. Most of the 500-man garrison escaped into the mountains.

Ewald exaggerates American losses:

Every American who could took flight. But since the light infantry had not come up close enough around Green Brook only 300 men were captured, among whom were the adjutant of General Lincoln, one captain, and two officers.

The escaping Americans swiftly fell back along Vosseller Avenue toward the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains. They managed to maintain brisk musket fire as they retreated and after reaching the higher ground they rallied and attempted to make a stand. After the overwhelming British forces began reforming and returning heavy fire, the Patriots continued retreating to the safety of the mountains. The British looted the outpost at Bound Brook and captured Proctor's three cannons along with ammunition, and supplies. They returned to New Brunswick later that morning.

Ewald's diary reads:

...afterward the place was ransacked and plundered because all the inhabitants were rebellious-minded, and then the entire corps withdrew along the road from Bound Brook to New Brunswick—and the enemy who had rushed support from Basking Ridge showed himself only at a distance.

Aftermath

Washington responded immediately to the setback, and soon after the action in the town American reinforcements arrived. He sent a large force from Basking Ridge under Major General

Nathanael Greene to reoccupy Bound Brook. Greene hurried to support Lincoln but it was past midday when he reached the town. But it was too late; the British had already left the area. Green was able to send a detachment to harass the British rear guard. His unit caught up with the Redcoats near Raritan Landing and killed eight and captured 16 of the enemy.

Thousands of British and Hessian soldiers caught the American defenders at Bound Brook by surprise. They attempted to valiantly defend the town but their effort failed. The overwhelming numbers of the British and Hessian troops doomed the Americans and they withdrew into the hills with their commanding General Benjamin Lincoln. The British captured artillery and a number of officers and men but their triumph was fruitless. Their four columns had not been able to close the trap and the shocked Americans had a brief time to resist and escape.

The British side reported that about thirty Americans were killed and eighty to ninety captured. Among the British and Hessians Howe claimed no deaths and seven men wounded. General Lincoln reported that sixty of his men were killed or wounded. The New Jersey Militia assigned to guard the Raritan River crossings were blamed for allowing the large enemy force to reach the town without detection.

The valiant Captain Ewald, who both developed the plan and led the successful attack, was admonished for his role in the battle. He was blamed for being too aggressive and alerting the Americans that a major British offensive had begun.

He laments in his diary:

I learned later that I was accused of attacking too rashly. I should have been advised if this attack was to have been a faint, for then I would have only skirmished with the enemy picket. General Grant said to me, Captain Ewald, you know the area, I say nothing further to you. You know everything else.

The British captured artillery and a number of officers and men but their triumph was fruitless.

It was quite normal for Ewald's Jaegers to lead attacks and he often was in the front of other skirmishes and battles in New Jersey, including the action at Mount Holly in 1778. His diary is a fascinating account of his adventures and was written "with much toil and many a drop of sweat." Forgotten after its completion in 1791, it is a great contribution to the literature of the American Revolution and is the most significant work of any Hessian leader.

In May, 1777 General Washington pulled back the garrison

Interpretive signs commemorating the Battle of Bound Brook.

Bob Mayers

from Bound Brook but moved a large part of the Continental Army from Morristown to a new camp at Middlebrook. This position was in the well protected hills overlooking the town. From this high ground the movement of the British army in the plains below and as far Perth Amboy and New Brunswick could be observed.

In June 1777, Howe with his entire force of 18,000 men attempted to draw Washington out of the Watching Hills. Washington, outgunned and out manned, knowing that defeat at the time would end the war in favor of the British, was unwilling to confront this superior force in a general engagement and refused to leave the security of Middlebrook. On June 26, Howe tried unsuccessfully to trap Lord Stirling's detachment at Woodbridge, Edison, Scotch Plains, and Plainfield. This advance was repulsed in the Battle of the Short Hills and the British Army withdrew through Westfield, Rahway, and Perth Amboy to Staten Island. By June 30, 1777, no Crown troops remained in New Jersey.

Bound Brook's location on the confluence of waterways has pervaded in its history. The Raritan River and its tributaries, the Middle Brook and Green Brook that comprise the western and eastern boundaries of the town, made it a critical place during the Revolutionary War. However, the site of the town has been its misfortune. Over the past 200 years of recorded weather history frequent flooding has repeatedly devastated the town.

Bound Brook has always been a tenacious town and has survived the ravages of both warfare as well as natural blows.

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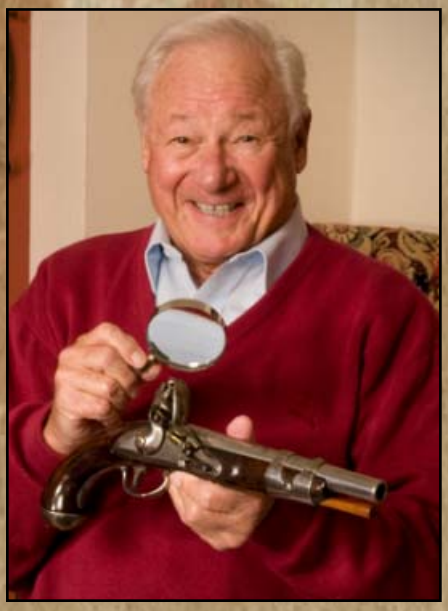
Sketch map of the battle of Bound Brook, New Jersey, April 13, 1777 (As per Ewald with selected additions.), graphics by Brian Mc Cormack, undated.



About the Author

Bob Mayers thrives on discovering facts about the American Revolution not found in the work of earlier writers. As the descendant of patriot soldier Corporal John Allison, the revolution is personal to him.

His on-site visits to battlefields, encampments and places of many critical events of the Revolutionary War shed light on revered places that have been lost or neglected by history, places where patriots fought and died but are unmarked, shrouded in mystery, distorted by mythology and unknown even to local people.

These field trips combined with research into original documents and oral accounts passed down in his family through many generations bring the history alive. His readers often comment that they regret that during their school days that they tuned out history as distant and dull. His writing can be enjoyed by average readers and not just hard core history or genealogy fans.

Bob is an active member of 10 historical societies and is a frequent speaker and contributor to their publications His service as a combat officer in both the Navy and the Marine Corps provides him with a deeper perspective of the many battles depicted in his work. He is a graduate of Rutgers University and served as an adjunct professor at Seton Hall University.

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