

## The Battle of Monmouth: *A War Within a War*

### BOOK RATING SYSTEM

★ Poorly written, bad scholarship / factual errors.

★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and / or graphics / typography.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email [gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com](mailto:gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com)

### **Monmouth Court House: The Battle That Made the American Army**

Joseph G. Bilby & Katherine Bilby Jenkins

2010: Westholme Publishing, LLC  
ISBN: 978-1-59416-108-7

Hardcover, 309 pages black and white.

★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

Last summer, I spent a rather sweltering two days watching the re-enactment of the Battle of Monmouth. Trying to tune out the three young boys who insisted on yelling at the top of their lungs and banging into

me in the crowd along the rope-line, I could almost glimpse what those days might have really been like—the sights, sounds and even smells of 18th century war. It could only be an incomplete understanding, of course. The real event, after all, involved many more soldiers involved in actual slaughter with the outcome never assured. And, an even hotter day.

Nevertheless, the men, women, children and even horses—one went down from the heat but, thankfully, was okay—who sweated to portray



General George Washington reviewing his New Jersey troops at the Battle of Monmouth re-enactment, June 2010. photo by Gordon Bond

the battle did a lot to convey a visceral sense.

Trying to gain a full appreciation of the true event, however, requires going beyond the battlefield. And, the process leads into a seamier side of the American Revolution.

Obviously, we'd all like to think our nation was the product of intelligent men with noble ideologies and brave hearts. Yet, the truth is as varied as human nature. Yes, there were intellectuals who espoused the rights of men and bravely fought on principle. But, at the same time, there were also rogues amongst the revolutionaries who bowed to

the baser instincts of petty revenge and greed. The war simply provided them with an excuse to beat up on rivals and loot wealthy neighbors who may or may not have been on the "other side." This dynamic, so often rooted in age-old local feuds, strongly manifested itself in Monmouth County, New Jersey, and it is this less heroic territory that authors Joseph G. Bilby and Katherine Bilby Jenkins tackle to provide needed context in *Monmouth Court House: The Battle That Made the American Army*.

What I particularly like about this book is that it is implicit that the American Revolution was more than the pop-culture

ideal of good guys and bad guys; tyranny and freedom. The adjective "patriot" was all a matter of murky perspective. While the battle itself, of course, is the "star" of the story, placing it so firmly within the context of this sociopolitical landscape gives it a richness and texture that goes beyond a strictly military accounting.

Much of what drew cautious British generals out into New Jersey—aside from the immediate necessities of foraging—was a faith in the strength of the Loyalists, who, it was said, would rally to their support once they saw the might of the British Army marching through their villages.

It was an overestimation that would be played out again in New Jersey as late as 1780.

Bilby and Jenkins suggest that what was happening in Monmouth County could justly be characterized as a complex little civil war within the larger conflict of the revolt. Quakers, for example, often remained on the sidelines, eschewing any participation in the affairs of war as an affront to their God. Yet neutrality often made them targets of a mentality that saw anyone not “for” them as against them. African Americans, enslaved as they were, became mercenary pawns of whoever promised the prospect of freedom, resulting in many blacks serving the British Army—on the side of the nation that had permitted them to be enslaved to begin with, though the Americans could promise them little better. That was a question for another war to settle.

Loyalists and rebels alike launched brutal foraging raids to keep their respective sides in supplies. The British Army lost popular support by looting Loyalist farms with almost as much enthusiasm as they did the rebels.

Whigs formed extra-legal armies who roamed the Monmouth County countryside, looting and pillaging anyone even remotely suspected of having Loyalist sympathies—judge, jury and executioner, as it were. While espousing the rule of law, the Continental Congress, while not officially recognizing them, didn’t entirely discourage them either.

Reading these accounts, it’s a bit hard to feel sympathy for anyone since both were equally guilty of such behavior.

And yet, that’s what makes the history so fascinating—the complexity and shades of gray. The Battle of Monmouth was only the most well-remembered aspect of how the war played out in that part of New Jersey.

The battle itself has been almost “deconstructed” into the major parts. The commanders are each briefly but insightfully treated. It is interesting to see how the personalities of the generals had a real impact on how the war was—or wasn’t—prosecuted. A constant theme that echoes back to the contextual early chapters is how American, British and Hessian commanders fought a largely losing battle within their own respective ranks to maintain order against the looting, pillaging and plundering of civilians.

The chapter titled, “Tactics, Training, and Weapons,” is a workmanlike examination of those topics. Modern archeological investigations come into play to determine such details as the caliber of ball shot. But perhaps most interesting is how the famed Ferguson breech-loading rifle very likely made an appearance on the Monmouth battlefield. Faster-loaded, more accurate and able to be fired in rain and wind, the Ferguson rifle was a major step forward in the tools of war.

Time and care is taken by the authors to lead up to the payoff of the main event. By the

time you get to the chapter describing the battles themselves, you already have an intimate understanding of everything that led to them—from the social dynamics of Monmouth County itself to the men who orchestrated things to the equipment the average soldier would have lugged onto the field.

The account of the battle manages to balance a sense of excitement and peril without straying into the hyperbole that would mar an otherwise well-crafted serious work of history.

In retrospect, it is perhaps easy to impart greater import to events than they warrant. Enshrined in the American creation myth, the Battle of Monmouth has taken on the luster of legend. Sorting through the wishful memories to its true significance is the task of the last chapter.

Curiously, the celebrated and re-enacted battle didn’t assume its importance until some fifty years after the fact, with the first commemoration in 1828. Yet this is perhaps not so surprising if you recall the first chapters and the brutal misery the war brought to Monmouth County. It wasn’t anything anyone really wanted to remember in the face of so many personal wounds that needed healing. Time, as it is wont to do, healed even those wounds, however. By 1834, the battle first began to assume its pivotal place in books about New Jersey history. Local rancor and feuds were subsumed into the desired memory of the overall victory

and ideals of noble sacrifice for the new nation.

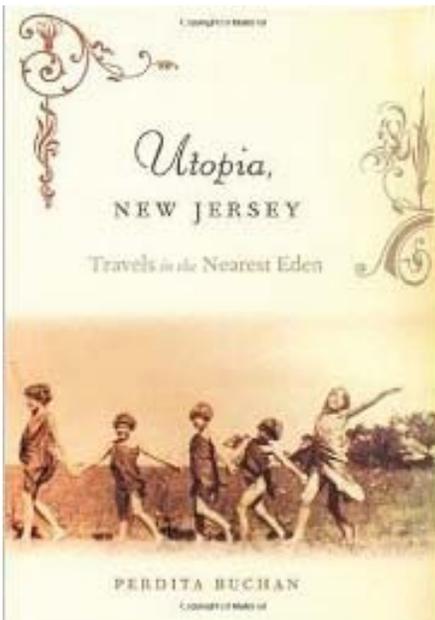
A tale of a woman emerged from this desire to mold memory into a more self-satisfying birth—Molly Pitcher was herself born. Did she really exist? The authors offer their opinion. But regardless, the invention of her legend said more about how Americans in the 19th century were polishing their history to reflect an emerging sense of self—of values and ideals which defined what it meant to “be American.” They were facing increased immigration and the Irish, Germans and Pennsylvania Dutch laid claim to her pedigree. In the late 19th century, both Molly and the Battle of Monmouth as a whole provided New Jersey with an historical touchstone towards the concept of a United States

in the face of the Civil War. The 20th century saw the effort to create a state park and the beginnings of the traditional re-enactments.

How we remember the Battle of Monmouth says as much about ourselves at that given moment as what happened back then. What the two days of fighting that sweltering June proved to people in 1778 was that the American army was indeed a force to be reckoned with. Rather than simply surviving to fight another day, they proved they could slug it out with the might of the British Army—and even manage to prevail. To the Americans, it proved that they might just win this contest yet. To the British, it proved that retaining the American Colonies might prove the impossibility some had the foresight to

suspect.

Joseph G. Bilby has been gaining a lot of press lately with his book, *New Jersey Goes to War* containing 150 biographies of New Jersians in the Civil War and his work with the National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey. He is a prolific author (see his articles in the last two issues of GSL!) and as a military historian. He took care of most of the middle bits about the men, tactics, equipment and campaigns. His daughter, Katherin Bilby Jenkins, also an historian, was largely responsible for the first and last chapters. Together, they have created a detailed and entertaining study of the Battle of Monmouth, rich with context and backed by strong scholarship, all in a concise and manageable package.



### **Utopia, New Jersey—Travels in the Nearest Eden**

by Perdita Buchan  
2007: Rutgers University Press  
ISBN-10: 0813541786  
ISBN-13: 978-0813541785  
Hardcover 253 pages black and white  
★★★★★  
Review by Virginia Troeger

At first glance, “Utopia” and “Eden” may seem like curious words to describe eight, experimental New Jersey communities since they conjure up visionary societies of idealized perfection, societies reaching beyond the confines of the real world. But Ocean Grove resident Perdita Buchan has made good use of these descriptions in her well-

researched accounts of these unusual communities. (The author has omitted religious experiments and those planned around physical space, such as Radburn.)

Buchan introduces each Utopia with an overview of the physical site as she first approaches it from New Jersey highways and byways. Sadly the book contains no illustrations except for a cover photograph of young girls dancing at the Ferrer Modern School in Stelton in 1925.

The author’s travels start in Englewood at the site of the short-lived Helicon Home Colony or Helicon Hall, a cooperative-living community,

founded in 1906 by Upton Sinclair, author of the well-known novel, *The Jungle*, which centered on the social injustices of the meat-packing industry. Sinclair envisioned Helicon Hall (Helicon was the mythical home of Apollo) as a place where residents would share cooking, childcare and maintenance duties, thus affording them time for intellectual pursuits. No Jews or African-Americans were welcome in Helicon's imposing building, a former boys' school. "It is hard to know how long Helicon would have lasted, or how its difficulties would have been resolved, because on March 16, 1907, at three in the morning, Helicon Hall burned to the ground."

The author turns next to Free Acres in the Union County Township of Berkeley Heights. This utopia recently celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary and is the only such New Jersey community examined by Buchan which survives as originally planned.

Free Acres was founded by Irish-born Bolton Hall who was influenced by the ideas of American economist Henry George (1835—1897). Hall based Free Acres on George's single tax theory. The financial structure of the land belongs to the community as a whole where residents pay rent to the Free Acres Association who in turn pay real estate taxes in a lump sum to Berkeley Heights.

Today approximately 85 families remain committed to preserving Free Acres narrow, curving roads, historic red farmhouse, hidden gardens, and

towering trees. The author notes that Laurel Hessian, Free Acres' unofficial historian, worries about the future and changing attitudes of the residents. But Buchan concludes that "Most people who stay in Free Acres pick up the vibrations and find themselves involved in the debate of whether to spray for gypsy moth or the outcry when the farmhouse meadow was accidentally mown before the buttercups had bloomed."

An educational experiment, the Ferrer Modern School, was founded in New York City and moved to Stelton, (Piscataway) in 1915. It was based on the importance of educating all children and on the idea of lifelong learning, beliefs espoused by Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, a Spanish educator and anarchist who was executed in Spain in 1909. A residential school, Stelton emphasized an arts and crafts curriculum. Most of the school closed during World War II when Camp Kilmer, a United States Army staging area, moved into the area. Only the primary school continued until 1953.

In 1905 the health and fitness guru, Bernarr McFadden, established Physical Culture City in Outcalt, (East Brunswick). McFadden envisioned a city of 309,000, but it never reached its potential. The founder is primarily remembered today for his influence on magazine publishing.

Founded in 1908 and led by Andress S. Floyd, the Self-Master Colony in the Township of Union lasted until 1929. During its successful years the men

living there struggled to reconstruct their lives destroyed by alcohol, drugs, unemployment and homelessness. They learned useful trades and were guided by Floyd's emphasis on self-mastery, which would "hold the evil in the individual at bay."

Woodbine and other towns in Cape May County were established through philanthropic groups to resettle Jews from the Russian pogroms of the nineteenth century. World War I saw an upsurge in the textile industries of Woodbine, but the Great Depression caused much unemployment. Monetary and cultural differences among the settlers and their benefactors as well as societal changes following World War II also contributed to its ultimate failure. Woodbiners, like Americans everywhere, were moving toward industrialization. Woodbine struggles on today with a mixed immigrant population, but the dream of joining factory and farm did not survive.

Originally called Jersey Homesteads, Roosevelt, near Hightstown and Princeton, was established in 1937 as a project of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Resettlement Administration. The program was planned to fill a need for unemployed factory workers to find a brighter future, and for awhile it appeared that hard work and camaraderie would produce a true Utopia. Ultimately the experiment failed when the government withdrew funding because of overspending and disagreements

among the settlers.

Cassville in Jackson Township in the Jersey Pine Barrens was the site chosen by Russian Americans in 1935 as a refuge for immigrants crowded in city tenements. The immigrants found religious freedom and enjoyed convivial times at Rova Farms for many years, but by the late 1970s the younger generation educated in the US assimilated with the broader population and changed the character of this beloved community.

Although only one of these communities exists in its original

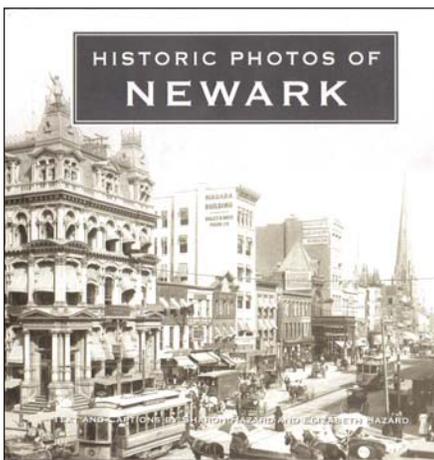
structure today, the author cites various societal changes brought about by these idealistic experiments. The Self-Master Colony was ahead of its time in anticipation of the welfare system; Physical Culture City emphasized health and physical fitness, Helicon looked to women's rights, and many of the Stelton Modern School's educational reforms still exist. "And all of these communities by stressing the importance of the natural world anticipated the environmental movement."

And why New Jersey?

In conclusion Buchan writes

"If utopian experiments come in response to historical events, that still leaves the question of why New Jersey? Geography is the simple answer. Ideological movements were born in the intellectual and financial capitals of New York and Philadelphia, but the communities they generated needed land. The cheap and available land, within reach of either city, was in New Jersey, making it quite literally the nearest Eden."

*(Reviewer's note: All quotations were taken from the text.)*



### Historic Photos of Newark

by Sharon Hazard and Elizabeth Hazard

2009: Turner Publishing Company

ISBN-10: 978-1-59652-538-2

Hardcover 206 pages black and white

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

*Historic Photos of Newark* is a sturdier-than-usual entry in the recently popular historic images book genre. Unlike many, it's a coffee table scaled hardcover with gloss paper.

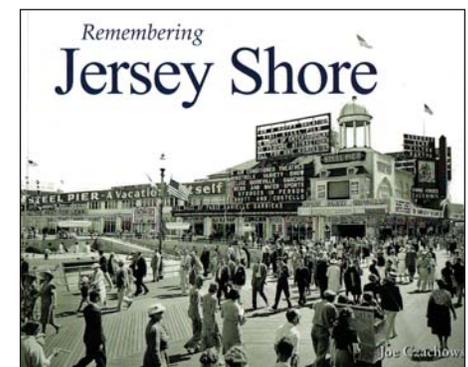
Between its covers is a collection of almost 200 black and white photos divided into

three time periods—1860s to 1899, 1900 to Great Depression, 1930 to postwar. Sifting through countless photos, Sharon Hazard and Elizabeth Hazard selected images that would represent the tremendous range and diversity of a city like Newark—no small undertaking!

Seeing neighborhoods as they used to be and staring into the faces of people from another era provide a visceral connection with the past that is at the heart of the charm of such books.

While I'm not from Newark, I found pictures of the early Newark Airport particularly interesting since I've been in the current incarnation enough times. This was in the days before heightened security and economic woes when flying was a far more civilized experience.

Anyone who thinks of Newark as just the place they had those riots in 1967 needs to peruse these pictures to understand the vitality and history of the place.



### Remembering Jersey Shore

by Joe Czachowski

2010: Turner Publishing Company

ISBN-10: 978-1-59652-659-4

Softcover 134 pages black and white

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

The Jersey Shore is a cultural phenomenon all its own—from amusement parks to cranberry bogs to military bases to summer White Houses. Joe Cachowski has gathered a wonderful collection of photos from the 1800s to 1950s reflecting on the variety of NJ's coastal life both in and off tourist season.

The only thing that bugs me is the title. Shouldn't it be *the* Jersey Shore?