Fighting for Philadelphia

Forts Mercer and Mifflin, the Battle of Whitemarsh,
and the Road to Valley Forge, October 5-December 19, 1777

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To the men
who endured the siege of Fort Mifflin

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Preface

If someone had asked me 20 years ago what book I would someday want to write, my heart would have driven me to this study. I grew up a mile from Fort Mercer and have loved studying coastal defenses since childhood. Memories of visiting Fort Sumter and Fort Delaware led to my undergraduate thesis: "The Evolution of Atlantic Seacoast Defenses of the Delaware River Valley." While the Delaware River story is only part of this book, I feel like *Fighting for Philadelphia: Forts Mercer and Mifflin, the Battle of Whitemarsh, and the Road to Valley Forge, October 5-December 19, 1777* has carried me back to my roots.

When I offered my first manuscript to my publisher, *Brandywine: A Military History of the Battle that Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777* (2014), I explained that it was only part of the story of the Philadelphia Campaign and there was more to come. *Germantown: A Military History of the Battle for Philadelphia* (2020) picked up where *Brandywine* left off, but I knew a third volume would be necessary to complete the campaign. Now, finally, that book is in your hands. This trilogy is intended as a comprehensive history of the 1777 Philadelphia Campaign.

The latter phase of the Philadelphia Campaign, which begins in the aftermath of the Battle of Germantown and ends with the Continental Army's arrival at Valley Forge, is the least understood. The major fighting at Fort Mercer, Fort Mifflin, and Gloucester along the Delaware River is but lightly covered in most accounts of the war. The Whitemarsh Hills portion of the campaign just outside Philadelphia is a fascinating chess match—a series of thrusts, parries, and brisk engagements but little understood—all while George Washington's own command was being seriously threatened by what is now known as the Conway Cabal. Various monographs on the campaign rarely cover these events chronologically or in sufficient depth, which fosters ongoing confusion about what happened and their importance. Almost none of these important events—and many others—have been examined and put into the context of the larger three-month period at the end of the Philadelphia campaign.

Individual Studies

Several works exist covering bits and pieces of the fighting along the Delaware River. Philadelphia-based historian John Jackson authored three studies: *Fort Mifflin: Valiant Defender of the Delaware, The Delaware Bay and River Defenses of Philadelphia 1775-1777*, and *The Pennsylvania Navy, 1775-1781: The Defense of the Delaware*. The Gloucester County, New Jersey Historical Society, produced two early histories of Fort Mercer: Wallace McGeorge's 1909 *The Battle of Red Bank: Resulting in the Defeat of the Hessians and the Destruction of the British Frigate Augusta, Oct. 22 and 23, 1777*, and Frank Stewart's 1927 *History of The Battle of Red Bank With Events Prior and Subsequent Thereto*. A more recent look at Fort Mercer—Lee Patrick Anderson's 1999 *Forty Minutes by the Delaware: The Battle for Fort Mercer*—spills over with undocumented myths. Jeffrey Dorwart provides a solid history of Fort Mifflin in his 1998 *Fort Mifflin of Philadelphia: An Illustrated History*. Garry Wheeler Stone and Paul W. Schopp cover a minor engagement in their recent *The Battle of Gloucester, 1777*. Each of these studies focus on individual elements of the river fighting, but none of them put the subject within the larger context of the river fighting or the Philadelphia Campaign.[1]

Other histories focus on the Delaware River fighting in its entirety. Worthington Chauncey Ford covered this subject in his 1894 article "Defences of Philadelphia in 1777." Samuel Smith's excellent 1970 book *Fight for the Delaware, 1777* and James McIntyre's 2022 *A Most Gallant Resistance: The Delaware River Campaign, September-November 1777* both cover the fighting for control of the river. Unfortunately, none of them place the fighting within the larger context of the campaign or the war in general.[2]

1 John W. Jackson, *Fort Mifflin: Valiant Defender of the Delaware* (Norristown, PA, 1986); John W. Jackson, *The Delaware Bay and River Defenses of Philadelphia 1775-1777* (Philadelphia, 1977); John W. Jackson, *The Pennsylvania Navy, 1775-1781: The Defense of the Delaware* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1974); Wallace McGeorge, *The Battle of Red Bank, Resulting in the Defeat of the Hessians and the Destruction of the British Frigate Augusta, Oct. 22 and 23, 1777* (Camden, NJ, 1905); Frank H. Stewart, *History of the Battle of Red Bank: With Events Prior and Subsequent Thereto* (Woodbury, NJ, 1927); Lee Patrick Anderson, *Forty Minutes by the Delaware: "The Battle for Fort Mercer"* (Boca Raton, FL, 1999); Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Fort Mifflin of Philadelphia: An Illustrated History* (Philadelphia, 1998); Garry Wheeler Stone & Paul W. Schopp, *The Battle of Gloucester, 1777* (Yardley, PA, 2022).

2 Worthington Chauncey Ford, "Defences of Philadelphia in 1777," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. 148 vols. (Philadelphia, 1894), vol. 18, 13; Samuel Steele Smith, *Fight for the Delaware, 1777* (Monmouth Beach, NJ, 1970); James R. McIntyre, *A Most Gallant Resistance: The Delaware River Campaign September – November 1777* (Point Pleasant, NJ, 2022).

To date, three studies focus on the fighting at Whitemarsh. William Buck's article "The Battle of Edge Hill" (1900), John Jackson's *Whitemarsh 1777: Impregnable Stronghold* (1984), and Ray Thompson's *Washington at Whitemarsh: Prelude to Valley Forge* (1974). All three lack documentation and campaign context. Mark Lender's recent examination of the effort to remove Washington as commander in chief in *Cabal!: The Plot Against General Washington* (2019), is a well-written and significant contribution, but it is also non-chronological by its nature, which makes following the campaign difficult.[3]

War Histories

The final three months of the Philadelphia Campaign usually receive minimal coverage in histories of the American Revolution. William Gordon did little justice to this phase of the campaign by dedicating fewer than a dozen pages in his four-volume 1788 history of America's establishment *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America.* In just eight pages, Charles Botta covered the same period in his 1845 *History of the War of the Independence of the United States of America.* Botta wrapped up his coverage with this succinct summary: "After a severe and sanguinary campaign of four months, the two armies appeared thus to enjoy some repose, sufficiently protected from the rigors of the season." That same year, Jacob Neff devoted just a single paragraph in his *The Army and Navy of America.* Lord Mahon offered about three pages in his 1858 *History of England.*[4]

George Bancroft's 10-volume 1866 *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent* reserved just 14 pages for these critical three months. In 1912, British statesman and author Sir George Otto Trevelyan, in his four-volume *The American Revolution*, covered the fighting on the Delaware in just 16 pages, but made

3 William J. Buck, "The Battle of Edge Hill," in *Historical Sketches: A Collection of Papers Prepared for the Historical Society of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania*, 8 vols. (Norristown, PA, 1900), vol. 2, 214-233; John W. Jackson, *Whitemarsh 1777: Impregnable Stronghold* (Fort Washington, PA, 1984); Ray Thompson, *Washington at Whitemarsh: Prelude to Valley Forge* (Fort Washington, PA, 1974); Mark Edward Lender, *Cabal!: The Plot Against George Washington* (Yardley, PA, 2019).

4 William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America*, 4 vols. (London, 1788), vol. 3, 1-12; Charles Botta, *History of the War of the Independence of the United States of America*, 2 vols., George Alexander Otis, trans. (Cooperstown, NY, 1845), vol., 2, 55; Jacob Neff, *The Army and Navy of America: Containing a View of the Heroic Adventures, Battles, Naval Engagements, Remarkable Incidents, and Glorious Achievements in the Cause of Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1845), 404-405; Lord Mahon, *History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, 1713-1783*, 7 vols. (London, 1858), vol. 6, 171-174.

no mention of the fighting at Whitemarsh. Christopher Ward's outstanding *The War of the Revolution*, a two-volume history published in 1952, covers the fighting better than most but does so in just 11 pages. Despite the important size and scale of the engagements, W. J. Wood's well-received and reviewed *Battles of the Revolutionary War, 1775-1781* (1990) spills just a page of ink to cover these three months. Lastly, *Angel in the Whirlwind*, a 1997 book by Benson Bobrick, covers the time after the battle of Germantown in fewer than three pages.[5]

Campaign Histories

John Reed's *Campaign to Valley Forge: July 1, 1777-December 19, 1777* made its appearance in 1965. The study, now considered a classic, stands up well against many later monographs. Unlike most campaign histories, Reed does a solid job of covering the events chronologically: Fort Mercer, Fort Mifflin, Conway's Cabal, and Whitemarsh. The nation's bicentennial saw a resurgence in the publication of books and articles on the battles of the Revolution. Only two dealt in any meaningful way with the final three months of the Philadelphia Campaign. John Pancake's *1777: The Year of the Hangman* covers this time in eight pages with no new conclusions. Historian John Jackson researched and wrote on the British occupation of Philadelphia and the fighting along the Delaware River in his 1979 *With the British Army in Philadelphia: 1778-1778*. Jackson's chronology gets bogged down with chapters on administrative aspects of the occupation interspersed within his campaign narrative.[6]

David Martin's 1993 *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778* includes 48 pages on the final three months of the campaign but lacks documentation and misrepresents several aspects of the contending forces. Gregory Edgar's 1998 *The Philadelphia Campaign: 1777-1778* relied on undocumented block quotes of campaign participants in his single chapter coverage that fails to mention Whitemarsh. *Philadelphia 1777: Taking the Capital*, Justin Clement's 2007 campaign

5 George Bancroft, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1866), vol. 9, 429-460; George Otto Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, 4 vols. (New York, 1912), vol. 4, 250-266; Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1952), vol. 1, 372-383; W. J. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War, 1775-1781* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990); Benson Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind* (New York, 1997), 269-271.

6 John F. Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge: July 1, 1777-December 19, 1777* (Philadelphia, 1965), 249-396; John S. Pancake, *1777: The Year of the Hangman* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1977), 199-207; John W. Jackson, *With the British Army in Philadelphia* (San Rafael, CA, 1979), 53-163.

study, provides evenhanded coverage before concluding, "the British achieved nothing strategically for all their effort and their tactical successes." Arguably, none of these works did much to further our understanding of the Philadelphia Campaign.[7]

The most recent and well-documented examination of the Philadelphia campaign's conclusion can be found in Thomas McGuire's 2007 *The Philadelphia Campaign: Germantown and the Roads to Valley Forge*. While it has its strengths, the parts read like separate studies on Fort Mercer, Fort Mifflin, and Whitemarsh, and the chapters overlap in campaign chronology, which can be confusing. A lack of quality maps make it more than difficult to understand the ebb and flow of the narrative and the complex actions it attempts to describe.[8]

A New Study

Like Brandywine and Germantown, plenty of primary accounts exist for Fort Mercer, Fort Mifflin, and Whitemarsh to provide solid monographs on each of those actions. Each must be put into the context of the Saratoga Campaign, the Conway Cabal, and the larger Philadelphia Campaign. My hope is this study satisfies those searching for the most recent research coupled with good maps, insightful footnotes, and complete orders of battle. While this book focuses on the larger actions along the Delaware River and at Whitemarsh, lesser-known engagements at Gloucester and Matson's Ford are also covered and put within the overall context of the campaign. The Continental Army's arrival at Valley Forge cannot be appreciated without understanding the complex events that followed Germantown.

Acknowledgments

An undertaking of this magnitude requires the help of many people around the world. If I fail to include your name, please know I appreciate deeply your help in making this book a reality.

7 David G. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778* (Conshohocken, PA, 1993), 121-169; Gregory T. Edgar, *The Philadelphia Campaign: 1777-1778* (Bowie, MD, 1998), 71-104; Justin Clement, *Philadelphia 1777: Taking the Capital* (New York, 2007), 88.

8 Thomas J. McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign: Germantown and the Roads to Valley Forge*, (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2007).

I would like to collectively thank the staffs at the following repositories: the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library of Congress, the Rush Rees Library at the University of Rochester, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the National Archives, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Chicago Historical Society, the British Library, the Historical Society of Delaware, Durham University in England, the National Archives of Scotland, the Maryland Historical Society, the Historical Society of Montgomery County Pennsylvania, the Virginia Historical Society, the New York Public Library, the National Library of Scotland, the curator for the United States House of Representatives, Morristown National Historical Park, the William Clements Library, the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, the First City Troop Archives, the University of Virginia Library, the Harlan Crow Library, the Duke University Library, the New York Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, the British Archives, the Gloucester County, New Jersey Historical Society, and the Canadian Archives.

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Note on Sources and Methods

This work relies heavily on primary source material. Spelling and grammar acceptable in the 18th century would not pass muster in any classroom today. However, to preserve and distill the flavor of the period, I have refrained from correcting sentence structure and misspellings when directly quoting them. I also have avoided the use of "sic," which interrupts the flow of the narrative. Though a united Germany did not exist in 1777, both "German" and "Hessian" are used interchangeably to identify the various Germanic troops who served with Howe's army. While most of those troops were true Hessians, there were Ansbachers as well.

Introduction

The Origins of the 1777 Campaign

The American Revolution was entering its third year by spring 1777. Most of the prior year was a disaster for American hopes. While the fledgling Continental Congress declared independence from Great Britain that summer, the year also witnessed the failed attempt to make Canada the fourteenth colony, the loss of New York City to British occupation, and the rapidly disintegrating Continental Army's retreat across New Jersey late in the year. As Christmas approached, Gen. William Howe and the British army settled into winter quarters under the mistaken belief that victory was at hand and would be quickly achieved with the spring thaw.

General George Washington, commander of the nascent American army, had different plans. In a daring raid, Washington crossed the Delaware River and defeated the Hessian garrison at Trenton, New Jersey, the day after Christmas. About a week later, Washington stunned the British high command with a successful maneuver again at Trenton, followed by a second victory at Princeton. The patriot victories forced Howe to withdraw his scattered outposts into the New York City area and allowed Washington to move the remnant of his army into the mountains around Morristown, New Jersey, for the balance of the winter. As Washington began the process of rebuilding the Continental Army, William Howe set about deciding his course of operations for 1777.

British Planning

As early as 1775, British strategy revolved around isolating New England, viewed as the core of the rebellion, from the other colonies. If the British seized the Hudson River-Lake Champlain corridor, New England would lose its physical connections and support from the rest of the colonies. Phase one occurred the next year when the British seized New York City. If successful, at least theoretically, Howe could move north along the Hudson River, meet a force coming south from

Canada, and together strike east into Massachusetts. After the relatively easy capture of New York City, Howe proposed moving up the Hudson—which was in line with Great Britain's original strategic thinking.

Late in November 1776, Howe sent a proposal to Lord George Germain, the Secretary of State for the American Department. He wanted a 10,000-man army to penetrate Massachusetts from Rhode Island and an additional 10,000 men to start moving north along the Hudson. Some 8,000 troops would remain in New Jersey to block the remnant of Washington's army. Howe hoped this small force could keep Washington busy while the other two strong columns executed the New England strategy. It was a bold plan designed to bring an end to the war by the close of 1777. With the Americans reeling on all fronts in November 1776, Howe's plan appeared achievable.[1]

While Lord Germain believed the destruction of the Continental Army was the key to victory, Howe believed the occupation of colonial territory was the ticket to success. The more territory that came under British control, the easier it would be for more Loyalists to regain control of provincial affairs and restore crown authority. To achieve victory, Howe intended to move through the countryside with "impressive strength through centers of rebellion, relying upon overawing the disaffected, animating the loyal, and demonstrating to the wavering the futility of resistance." Howe's thoughts on war contrasted sharply with Washington's. The Virginian was willing to lose territory and cities if it meant preserving his fighting strength.[2]

Howe changed his thinking by late December when Washington, beaten and despondent, fled west across New Jersey. Rather than shift units into the Hudson River valley, Howe gave pursuit. By December 20, the British had pushed the Americans across the countryside until Washington crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. The ease with which the British occupied New Jersey caused Howe to change his strategy. Rather than move up the Hudson, he set his eyes on capturing Philadelphia—a seemingly easy target. Washington, who was perhaps at the nadir of his military career, would be forced to defend the American capital, lured into battle and handily defeated. The defeat and occupation of the capital

1 John Stockdale, ed., *The Parliamentary Register; or, History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons: Containing an Account of the most interesting Speeches and Motions; accurate Copies of the most remarkable Letters and Papers; of the most material Evidence, Petitions, &c laid before and offered to the House, During the Fifth Session of the Fourteenth Parliament of Great Britain*, 17 vols. (London, 1802), vol. 10, 362.

2 John F. Luzader, *Saratoga: A Military History of the Decisive Campaign of the American Revolution* (New York, 2008), xxii, 2-3.

would achieve ultimate victory, or at least Howe believed as much. To capture the enemy capital, per traditional European strategy, was to practically win the war.

British leadership remained convinced the Loyalists of North America would rise up and support the British government if given the opportunity to do so, and Philadelphia was believed to be a hotbed of Loyalism. Joseph Galloway, the former speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, convinced Howe that the Loyalists of Philadelphia would indeed rush to his support. Galloway told the general that as much as 90 percent of Pennsylvanians were loyal to the Crown and would rise to support Great Britain. That grand claim was grandly false, but Howe believed it. The inhabitants of the Middle Colonies, he wrote, were "disposed to peace, in which sentiment they would be confirmed, by our getting possession of Philadelphia, I am, from this consideration, fully persuaded, the principal army should act offensively on that side, where the enemy's chief strength will certainly be collected."[1]

And so William Howe abandoned the Hudson River plan before it began. Unaware of the new strategic twist, the northern army under British General Guy Carleton would continue as planned. Howe did not believe Carleton could reach Albany, New York, before September. That would give Howe plenty of time to defeat Washington, swoop into Philadelphia, and return to the Hudson River to help Carleton. To Howe, the capture of Philadelphia trumped all else.

Howe's strategy, explained historian Richard Ketchum, demonstrated an "unwillingness to recognize that the capture of Philadelphia, beyond its potential psychological impact on rebels and loyalists, could not in itself determine the outcome of the war." It's capture, Ketchum argued, "in strategic as well as geographic terms . . . led nowhere." For Howe to win in 1777, he "must destroy Washington's army, and seizing a piece of real estate—no matter how valuable—was no way to achieve that." The double defeats at Trenton and Princeton arrived just after Howe's shift in strategic thinking. Despite the setback, he remained convinced moving on Philadelphia, and not the Hudson River plan, was the key to the final campaign.[2]

Unbeknownst to Howe, John Burgoyne had returned to London during the winter of 1776-77 with orders from his commander, Guy Carleton, to report on the needs and intent of the northern army. During the voyage across the Atlantic, Burgoyne jotted down notes and took the liberty to elaborate upon Carleton's ideas

1 Stockdale, *Register*, vol. 10, 371.

2 Richard M. Ketchum, *Saratoga: Turning Point of America's Revolutionary War* (New York, 1997), 59.

for 1777. Once in London, Burgoyne met with Germain and King George III. The primary objective of his army would be the capture of Fort Ticonderoga. Thereafter, argued Burgoyne, the "sole purpose of the Canada army [was] to effect a junction with General Howe, or after co-operating so far as to get possession of Albany and open communication to New York, to remain upon the Hudson's river, and thereby enable that general to act with his whole force to the southward." Burgoyne, throughout the planning process, assumed he would eventually form a juncture with Howe. King George III agreed with Burgoyne's plans, stating that his "force [should move] down to Albany & Join at that [with Howe's army]." In March of 1777, Burgoyne received orders to lead the Canadian army south along the Lake Champlain-Hudson River corridor and form a junction with Howe. These orders were in line with the plan to isolate New England. Once Burgoyne reached Albany, he was to "put himself under the command of Sir William Howe." No matter what complications Burgoyne may encounter along the way, he was to never lose sight of the "intended junction with Sir William Howe as their [Burgoyne's army] principal objective." Germain promised to inform Howe of Burgoyne's orders, but that communication never took place. Burgoyne went into the campaign assuming Howe would stick to the original plan and clear the lower Hudson River valley. It was a fatal mistake.[3]

Although Germain never sent a copy of Burgoyne's orders to Howe, the longstanding Hudson River plan was of course familiar to Howe, who sent dispatches to Lord Germain informing him of his change in objective. Burgoyne never learned of this change in plan. Germain needed to reconcile the issue. "It is clear that Lord George expected the armies to join, that he assumed Howe understood the general plan, and that he believed Howe could take Philadelphia and join Burgoyne in a single campaign." Most historians lay blame for the failures of 1777 at the feet of Lord Germain. However, they fail to consider the limitations of 18th century communication. Germain was forced to rely on face-to-face contact with his subordinates or dispatches sent back-and-forth across the Atlantic Ocean. Sending an inquiry, waiting for a written response, and then the necessary return trip could take up to two months. By the time a letter or order arrived, the facts on the ground were almost always outdated. Germain had no personal contact with Howe during this period. While both Burgoyne and Henry Clinton (a subordinate from Howe's army) returned to London during the winter, Germain viewed the information and opinions of these self-serving officers with caution.

3 Piers Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783* (Lincoln, NE, 1964), 115.

When King George III approved Burgoyne's revision of the Hudson River plan and approved Howe's Philadelphia thrust, it was Germain's duty to point out the contradictory orders to the King, or at least inform the two principal generals of the 1777 campaign of the difference between their orders. Burgoyne's advance was made with the full understanding that Howe would support him, but not until he reached Albany.[4]

Howe's blind ambition to capture Philadelphia would play a major part in the disaster that would befall Burgoyne in the fall of 1777 at Saratoga. One historian has argued, however, that "it would be mistaken to assume that Howe sacrificed Burgoyne either through indifference or stupidity." Howe had no enthusiasm for the New England plan, but "a lack of enthusiasm for it . . . leaves the impression that the failure of the government to send Howe reinforcements as numerous as he wished put him in a mood prejudicial to a sympathetic handling of the problem presented by Burgoyne's advance." Howe previously requested additional troops so he could both attack Philadelphia and support the Hudson River operations. Despite his obsession with Philadelphia, Howe took an inordinate amount of time to achieve his now primary goal, but by then Burgoyne's fate was already sealed.[5]

By spring 1777, the British high command knew of Howe's intentions, approved his plans, and realized he might not return in time to help Burgoyne. In a long letter to Germain, Howe believed Washington would be forced to move south and defend Philadelphia. If he was wrong and Washington moved up the Hudson River Valley, Howe would turn around and follow him. Several weeks later, events proved Howe correct. Washington was forced to block Howe from gaining Philadelphia and played no role in the Hudson River operations.[6]

The 1776 campaign demonstrated that Howe was unwilling to conduct a purely military assault to annihilate Washington's army. He chased, pushed, and kept up pressure without a final blow to the weakened army. Lord Germain preferred a scorched-earth policy as he reasoned the rebellion would not end until they eliminated the main rebel field army. To Howe's way of thinking, such brutality would only further alienate the Americans and set the stage for future civil

4 Ira D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers & the American Revolution* (New York, 1972), 187-188.

5 Troyer Steele Anderson, *The Command of the Howe Brothers During the American Revolution* (New York and London, 1936), 272-273.

6 Stockdale, *Register*, vol. 10, 414-415. For more information and details on William Howe and British strategy in 1777 as well as the options facing George Washington that year, refer to my first book on the Philadelphia campaign: *Brandywine: A Military History of the Battle that Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2014).

wars even if they achieved victory. Winning the hearts and minds of the people was more important than military extermination. Howe intended to "use persuasion in conjunction with demonstrated military might, employing their martial resources to prod the rebels into renewing their allegiance to the Crown." Capturing the capital, he believed, would achieve this with no change to his strategy.[7]

Washington's Strategy

Congress's choice of George Washington to lead the first American army was curious, at best. The Virginia planter never commanded more than a regiment or two in combat, though he had exercised limited departmental command during the French and Indian War. Despite a personal desire to have done so, Washington never served as a British regular, nor did he attend any of the military schools in Europe. Faced by some of the best military professionals of the 18th century, Washington's learning curve needed to be steep. Despite his victories at Trenton and Princeton, Washington had been battered, beaten, and out-generaled throughout 1776.

Washington soon came to realize that it would take time to mold the Continental Army into a force that could stand toe-to-toe with British regulars. He would spend most of the war avoiding pitched battles—especially offensive ones. While this strategy kept his army intact for the long haul, Washington still needed a strategy to defeat the British. The Continental Army could have waged a guerilla war with smaller forces and slowly drained away British strength. Congress, however, whose members had to answer to their constituents, wanted every colony and every major city defended with a standing army. While politically viable, this strategy would have spread Washington's limited manpower thin and guaranteed overall defeat. With limited options available, Washington needed a plan that would be effective with his sparse resources.[8]

Washington became best known for implementing something of a Fabian-style of warfare. While Washington preferred a large professional army and constantly begged Congress for one, he was a realist. The relatively small army he was given was easier to supply and could move more rapidly than their British and Hessian counterparts. When not on the defensive, Washington could attack rapidly

7 James Kirby Martin & Mark Edward Lender, *"A Respectable Army": The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (West Sussex, United Kingdom, 2015), 51-52.

8 David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford, 2004), 79-80.

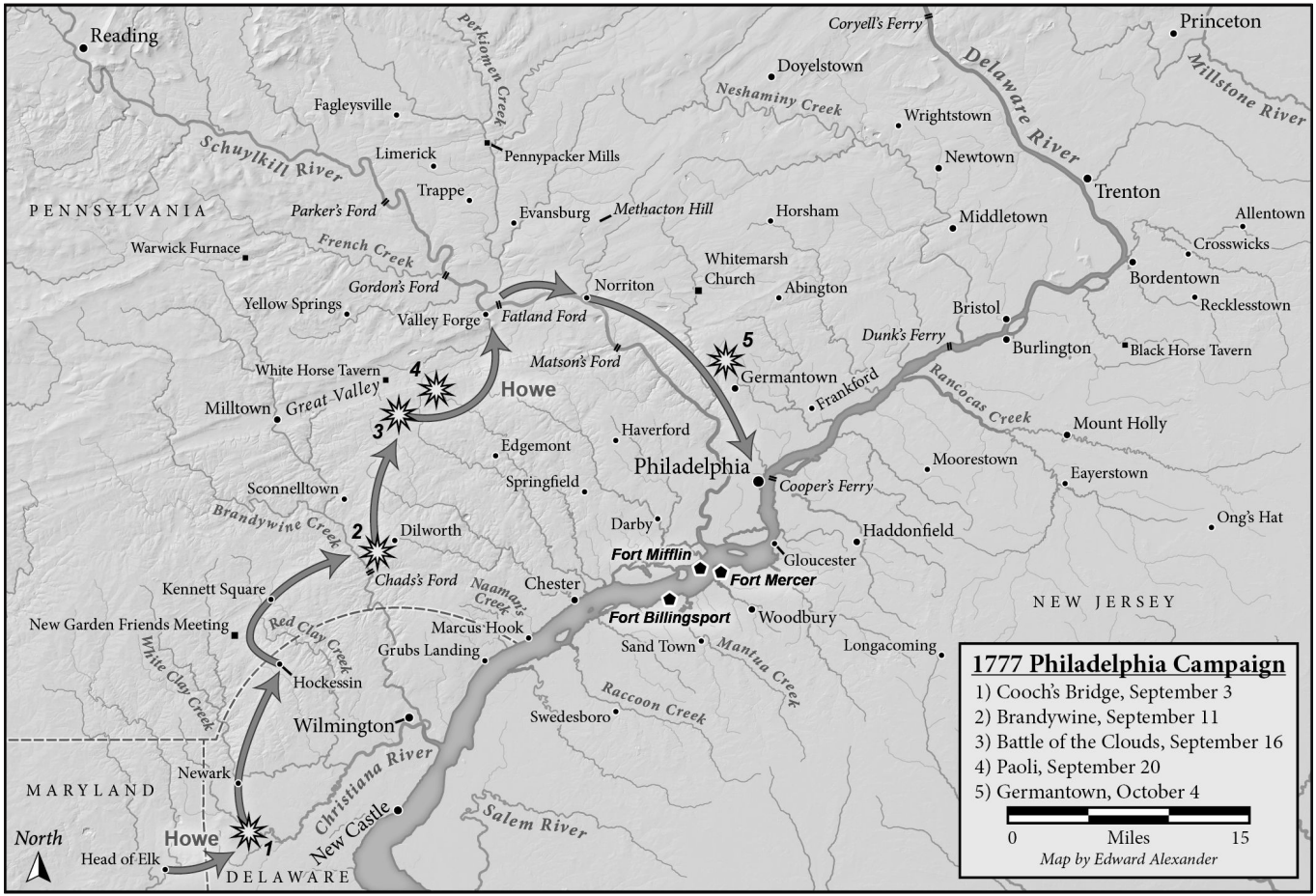
and retreat even more quickly. In this manner he could prevent heavy casualties, maintain his army, and always live to fight another day. By avoiding major battles and using the wilds of North America, Washington hoped to frustrate the British army by making the war too expensive for Great Britain to maintain. Still, Washington harbored a desire to wage a classic battle with the British on equal terms. He hoped to maintain and train the Continental Army through stall tactics until his men were ready to fight on Washington's terms. Washington described his strategy as "time, caution, and worrying the enemy until we could be better provided with arms and other means, and had better disciplined troops to carry on."[9]

The longer the war continued, the more unpopular it became in Parliament and with the people back home. The financial costs were staggering and rising. British leadership hoped to bring the conflict to a conclusion in 1777. In contrast, Washington believed the British government would tire of losing men and material, of the rising costs of the war, and of the increasing criticism of the opposition party. Time was on his side.

The lesson of 1776 was that the fledgling American army was not capable of traditional warfare—yet. In 1777, Washington would rely on defensive warfare, daybreak assaults, sneak attacks, and trickery. It was a strategy of guerilla warfare, known as partisan warfare or at the time, petite guerre.

When the spring campaign season dawned, Washington was in a quandary because he did not know Howe's strategic goals. His opponent had many options because of the large Royal fleet commanded by his brother, Adm. Richard Howe. With few ships of his own, Washington's options were limited. Howe could use his fleet to move north up the Hudson River, jump to any number of ports along the American coastline, or could move directly overland to Philadelphia, picking up where the previous campaign ended. Limited options and manpower forced Washington into a reactive strategy. His defensive positions around Morristown placed him in position to block the overland route to Philadelphia. If Howe pushed north along the Hudson to meet the British force from Canada, Washington would follow him and harass his rear. If Howe chose to completely change the field of operations using the British fleet, Washington would be forced to wait and see where the British army appeared before reacting.

9 Fischer, *Crossing*, 79. This Fabian strategy was named for Fabius Cunctator, a Roman general who had fought a delaying campaign against the Carthaginians. James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston, 1969), 131.


Reading
Perkiomen Creek
Coryell's Ferry
Princeton
Doyelstown
Neshaminy Creek
Delaware River
Millstone River
Fagleysville
Wrightstown
Schuylkill River
Limerick
Pennypacker Mills
Newtown
Trappe
Trenton
PENNSYLVANIA
Parker's Ford
Evansburg
Methacton Hill
Horsham
Middletown
Allentown
Warwick Furnace
French Creek
Crosswicks
Whitemarsh Church
Gordon's Ford
Norriton
Abington
Bordentown
Yellow Springs
Valley Forge
Fatland Ford
Bristol
Recklesstown
Dunk's Ferry
Burlington
Black Horse Tavern
White Horse Tavern
Matson's Ford
Germantown
Howe
Milltown
Great Valley
Frankford
Rancocas Creek
Mount Holly
Haverford
Edgemont
Moorestown
Philadelphia
Eayerstown
Springfield
Cooper's Ferry
Sconnelltown
Brandywine Creek
Darby
Ong's Hat
Dilworth
Haddonfield
Fort Mifflin
Gloucester
Chads's Ford
Naaman's Creek
Chester
Fort Mercer
Kennett Square
Fort Billingsport
NEW JERSEY
New Garden Friends Meeting
Red Clay Creek
Marcus Hook
Woodbury
White Clay Creek
Grubs Landing
Sand Town
Mantua Creek
Longacoming
Hockessin
Raccoon Creek
Wilmington
Swedesboro
Christiana River
MARYLAND
Newark
Salem River
North
Howe
New Castle
Head of Elk
DELAWARE
1777 Philadelphia Campaign
1) Cooch's Bridge, September 3
2) Brandywine, September 11
3) Battle of the Clouds, September 16
4) Paoli, September 20
5) Germantown, October 4
0
Miles
15
Map by Edward Alexander

Chapter 1

The Philadelphia Campaign

June – October 1777

"[William Howe] can neither support his Army in Philada if he is cut off from comm[u]nication with his ships, neither can he make good a Retreat should any accident befall him."[1]

— Gen. George Washington, September 29, 1777

After his successes at Trenton and Princeton in late December 1776 and early January 1777, Gen. George Washington spent the next six months in the Watchung Mountains around Morristown, New Jersey, building a new army nearly from scratch following the expiration of his one-year enlistments. During that long and arduous process, Washington harassed British outposts scattered across northern New Jersey in a series of raids and skirmishes. Fortunately for him, British Gen. William Howe was more concerned with strategic planning than with what he considered the minor doings of the Continental Army.[2]

1 Philander D. Chase & Edward G. Lengel, eds., *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, 30 vols. (Charlottesville & London, 2001), vol. 11, 347.

2 For more information on the opening months of the campaign as well as the Battle of Brandywine, refer to my first book on the Philadelphia campaign: *Brandywine: A Military History of the Battle that Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2014). A more generalized overview of the campaign can be found in Michael C. Harris, "The Empire Strikes Back:

The small-scale raids and skirmishes between January and June 1777 were the only military operations in that region. The revolution had devolved into something more closely resembling a guerilla war than the more traditional European-style of combat. This respite gave Washington the time and space he needed to rebuild his weakened army. The buildup of stress during this extended low-intensity war boiled over into the savageness exhibited later in the campaign—especially at Paoli.

General Howe mostly ignored Washington's movements during this period and made little effort to open the 1777 campaign season. He openly desired to capture Philadelphia as rapidly as possible and return to New York to join forces with Gen. John Burgoyne and the northern army, yet demonstrated scant urgency to put any plan in motion.

June 1777

Howe finally lurched into action that June. The British commander decided his best bet was to attempt the overland route to Philadelphia in the hope of luring Washington down from his mountain stronghold. Defeating Washington in New Jersey and then marching to Philadelphia offered Howe the best chance to take the colonial capital and leave in time to aid Burgoyne in New York. The delay in opening the campaign triggered some dissatisfaction within the British officer corps. The army had failed to move weeks earlier when the winter rains stopped, and the warmer weather had dried the roads. By the time Howe moved into northern New Jersey, it was already June 13.[3]

To the disbelief of officers in both armies, Howe moved thousands of troops ten miles, went into camp, constructed earthworks . . . and waited. Howe no longer intended to move toward Philadelphia through New Jersey but would instead attempt to draw Washington down from the high ground and offer battle on the relatively flat country east of the Watchung Mountains. No one believed Washington's force formidable, including Washington himself, who refused to allow himself to be drawn into a battle he could not win. By remaining idle during

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Philadelphia Campaign 1777," in Edward G. Lengel, ed., *The 10 Key Campaigns of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC, 2020), 111-28, or Michael C. Harris, *The Philadelphia Campaign 1777* (Havertown, PA, 2023).

3 For a full discussion on the timing and maneuvers and their effect on the northern campaign, see generally Luzader, *Saratoga*.

weeks of good weather, however, Howe effectively removed his army from the active war effort. A flummoxed Howe was on his way back to New Brunswick by June 19, with elements of the Continental Army skirmishing fitfully with his rear guard.[4]

On June 22, Howe retired to Amboy, New Jersey, to load his army and its baggage for the voyage to the Delaware River. The Americans continued pressing Howe's rear guard. Washington's willingness to come down off the high ground and pursue the retreating enemy, however, provided Howe with the opportunity he sought. The Continental Army was on more engageable terrain, and Howe saw his opportunity. On June 25, he turned and assaulted Maj. Gen. Lord Stirling's isolated and heavily outnumbered American division of some 2,500 men. Stirling waged a well-crafted fighting withdrawal and took up a strong defensive position in the area of Ash Swamp and Scotch Plains. The British pushed hard and forced Stirling's command back toward Westfield. With his men suffering under an intense sun, Howe called off the pursuit and ended the fighting. The defensive combat cost Stirling roughly 100 casualties, in addition to 70 men and three cannons captured. British losses totaled just five killed and 30 wounded. The Battle of Short Hills bought precious time for Washington to move the balance of his army into the hill country, once again denying Howe the opportunity of the larger battle he craved. Howe returned to Amboy on June 28, his attempt to defeat Washington in northern New Jersey at an end.

Washington fully expected Howe to use the British fleet to change the field of operations—but where would those ships carry his army? On June 30, Howe removed the last of his troops from New Jersey and returned to Staten Island, New York. He and his men were back where they had started nearly a year earlier before attacking New York City. The city and its environs, together with Newport, Rhode Island, remained under British control, but Howe's withdrawal left Washington in complete control of New Jersey.

July 1777

Early July found most of Washington's Continental Army back in the mountains around Morristown. The position provided Washington with the

4 Although Howe's move appears baffling, he likely never intended to assault Philadelphia by marching through New Jersey, and believed it was worth an effort to bring Washington to battle quickly.

option of shifting north to block the Hudson River, or south to protect Philadelphia. The next move remained with Howe. Determined to use his fleet to reach the capital, on July 8, the British general began the arduous process of loading his army onto transport ships. Howe believed he could ascend the Delaware River, gain Philadelphia, and still aid Burgoyne in upstate New York in a timely fashion. He also believed moving by sea would freeze the Americans in place until Washington realized where Howe headed. On the second point, he was correct.

By the time Howe finished loading on July 9, he had some 260 ships with 20,000 soldiers, support personnel, artillery, horses, and everything else needed to launch a major campaign. Rather than depart immediately, however, he once more delayed, leaving his men and animals bobbing in the harbor for several days in tight quarters aboard hot stuffy transports.

Washington knew Howe was loading ships for a campaign and decided to get a jump on him by moving to the New Jersey-New York border in anticipation of an ascent up the Hudson. The army moved north on July 12. Eight days later Howe ordered the large British armada to sail out of New York harbor, leaving behind Gen. Henry Clinton and the city's garrison of 7,400 troops. American observers along the New Jersey coast speculated the fleet turned south, but at this point Howe's target remained an open question. The lack of a Continental Navy hampered Washington and forced him to rely upon spotters scattered along the coastline to locate the ships and relay information. Until reliable intelligence arrived, Washington had no choice but to mark time in northern New Jersey.

Howe's voyage promised to be long and slow, for the prevailing summer winds along the Atlantic coast tend to blow north, impeding the fleet's southern direction. The journey was a miserable experience for man and beast alike. In addition to the stifling heat and humidity, brisk winds buffeted the ships. Frequent late afternoon thunderstorms added to the misery of the passengers. The weather proved so uncooperative that it took the fleet a week to travel only 150 miles to Cape May, New Jersey. Washington, meanwhile, concentrated near Ramapo on the New York-New Jersey border, a position from which he could march north to the Hudson Highlands or move rapidly to Philadelphia.

On July 26, spotters along the New Jersey shoreline sighted a large portion of the British fleet heading south near Little Egg Harbor, New Jersey. Washington began to hedge his bets and inched toward Morristown with four of the army's five divisions. The Continentals headed for three separate fords on the Delaware River to expedite the crossing into Pennsylvania, if warranted. When news of the fleet found its way to Washington, little doubt remained of Howe's destination. On July 28, Washington's leading elements reached the Delaware.

The final days of July arrived with the British fleet tacking into the Delaware Bay to assess the current conditions and intelligence about Washington's army. When the news reached Washington about 24 hours later, he ordered the army to cross into Pennsylvania to block a move against Philadelphia. Almost simultaneously, the Howe brothers made perhaps the most critical decision of 1777.

At 10:00 a.m. on July 30, Capt. Andrew Hamond reported to Adm. Richard Howe's flagship HMS *Eagle* to meet with the Howe brothers. One of the first questions posed involved whether the naval officer knew the location of Washington's army. The Rebels, replied the captain, crossed the Delaware heading for Wilmington. His intelligence source remains unknown but was untrue. Only two brigades had crossed the river; the rest of Washington's army remained strung out across northern New Jersey. Howe's most recent dispatch to Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the American Department, however, stated that he would ascend the Delaware River only if Washington remained in northern New Jersey. If he entered Pennsylvania, Howe would ascend Chesapeake Bay. Hamond's inaccurate report made Howe's decision for him.[5]

Hamond also told the Howes that Americans constructed fortifications along the shores of the Delaware and placed various obstructions in the river to halt the fleet. These river defenses and a small naval militia were of trifling concern. Apparently, the most important city in North America remained essentially undefended. Although Hamond informed William Howe Washington's army was west of the Delaware River, little if any of the Continental Army had yet to arrive in Philadelphia. A clear and open path for the British to the American capital existed.

Despite easy access to Philadelphia, approximately 90 miles by ship, Howe decided to sail south to Chesapeake Bay, where he could put his troops "ashore without molestation, have time to recover the Horses after the fatigue of the Voyage before they entered Service, and where the Transports could remain in perfect security." The move, he also stressed, would threaten backcountry settlements. The fleet headed back to sea on July 31. Howe later claimed the move farther south benefitted John Burgoyne by drawing Washington away from the Hudson River Valley. In reality, the moment Howe gave the order to steer toward the Chesapeake, he eliminated any reasonable possibility of aiding Burgoyne.[6]

5 Harris, *Brandywine*, 83-84.

6 Denys Hay, "The Denouement of General Howe's Campaign of 1777," in *English Historical Review*, vol. 74 (1964), 504.

August 1777

By the beginning of August, the British fleet was moving south along the Delaware coast. The move left Washington with a conundrum. Was Howe making for the Hudson River or was his objective one of the major port cities farther south, like Charleston or Savannah?

On August 10, Washington shifted the army to the banks of Neshaminy Creek north of Philadelphia and closer to the Delaware River in case he needed to rush back to the Hudson Highlands. Little more could be done until definitive intelligence arrived, confirming the location of Howe's fleet. Washington may well have smiled had he known the British fleet reached the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay after suffering through terrible storms. Fresh food and water ran out on many transports and horses died by the score. When definitive news of Howe's location, if not his army's condition, arrived on August 22, Washington scrambled to move the scattered elements of his army into a position to confront Howe south of Philadelphia. Washington started inching toward northern Delaware to block Howe.

The British fleet anchored near the mouth of the Elk River in the upper reaches of the Chesapeake Bay. Howe would approach Philadelphia from the southwest. Several creeks and rivers, including the Red and White Clay, the Brandywine, and the Schuylkill, would slow Howe's approach to the city. Washington remained concerned Howe might march into the American interior and threaten the major supply depots at Lancaster or Reading. He had no real choice: he would have to advance toward Howe.

On August 24, Washington paraded his army through Philadelphia en route to Delaware to block Howe's approaches to the city. The next morning, Washington crossed into the state with two divisions and camped along Naamans Creek. At about the same time, Howe began offloading troops into northeastern Maryland. Other than meeting some local militia Howe easily brushed aside, his landing proved uneventful.

With Howe now ashore, making a connection with the Delaware River by land became imperative. A good supply of land transportation plagued the British throughout the war. The death of so many horses during the voyage compounded Howe's logistical concerns. British armies needed to operate near navigable rivers so the Royal Navy could easily resupply them. As one recent historian put it, "The insecurity of overland communications restricted an army's maximum operational range to about fifteen to twenty miles from navigable water." This operational conundrum affected Howe's decision-making throughout the campaign. A landing

in northern Delaware at the end of July would have given him a connection with the Delaware River. Now that he was back on land, Howe had no choice but to operate near and along the Delaware, which eviscerated the reason he provided for delaying the campaign for another month by shifting his army farther south.[7]

Howe stripped the countryside in northeastern Maryland in search of needed supplies, including fresh horses and reinforcements. Food he could find; more troops were another matter. Contrary to his belief, Loyalists showed little interest in flocking to his standard. Howe later claimed the real reason he could not support Burgoyne's army was the failure to recruit Loyalist support. Excuses for abandoning Burgoyne grew larger with each telling.[8]

September 1777

By the beginning of September, Howe's men itched for action. They spent several weeks cooped up on ships and the last several days conducting a frustrating advance into northeastern Maryland. Thus far Howe had missed opportunities for a pitched confrontation, but the campaign season was winding down and the British had precious little to show for it.

Washington placed an outpost in northern Delaware at Cooch's Bridge on the Christiana River, which Howe needed to cross to reach Washington's main army. He attacked the position on September 3, pushing jagers and light infantry in a series of flanking movements against Americans under William Maxwell. The fighting lasted seven hours before Maxwell's men ran out of ammunition and fled across the bridge back toward Wilmington, leaving the British in command of the banks of the river. The fitful fighting carried Howe one step closer to Philadelphia and was the largest land engagement in the history of Delaware. Once he achieved this success, however, Howe settled down for another five days to strip the countryside of supplies. Feeding his army was imperative, and providing for it in a hostile land was a constant problem.[9]

7 Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and With Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman, OK, 2008), 35.

8 Stockdale, ed., *Register*, vol. 10, 418.

9 William Maxwell was born in Ireland about 1733 and lived in New Jersey by 1747. He served as a militia officer during the French and Indian War and took command of the 2nd New Jersey Battalion when the Revolution erupted. He served as a member of the New Jersey Provincial Congress in 1775-1776 and in the Canadian Expedition in 1776. Appointed brigadier general in October 1776, Maxwell took part in Washington's successful late December campaign. He made a

Following Cooch's Bridge, Washington convinced himself Howe would take the main road into Wilmington and deployed his army behind the Red Clay Creek with a defense-in-depth. Howe utilized flanking attacks at Long Island, White Plains, Short Hills, and Cooch's Bridge and had never tried a frontal assault, so Washington's thinking remains a mystery. Given his history, Howe's next move was entirely predictable. On September 8 he gained the Pennsylvania border ahead of Washington, and by late morning the bulk of his army was camped on the hills around Hockessin, Delaware—well above Washington's right flank.[10]

The outgeneraled Washington scrambled to get his army in motion and into a blocking position to protect Philadelphia. In the middle of the night, the Virginian pulled the Continental Army from northern Delaware, marched north, and the next day began moving into positions on the east side of the Brandywine River near Chads's Ford in Pennsylvania.[11]

On the evening of September 9, Howe moved north, parallel to Washington's position, and camped at Kennett Square six miles west of Washington at Chads's Ford. Washington had spent the long summer months using militia and other troops to hinder British movements while seeking a favorable opportunity to make a stand. The terrain along the Brandywine River provided him with that opportunity. The battle that followed would be the longest and largest single-day engagement of the war. It is also a study of contradictions.

Washington hoped a stout defense along the rolling terrain hugging the Brandywine and its various crossings would block access to Philadelphia by preventing the British from gaining the east bank. Although he had his troops in position east of the Brandywine for a full day before the fighting began, Washington somehow failed to gather the intelligence he needed to execute his battle plan. He intended to use the river to block Howe's advance yet remained almost completely ignorant of the surrounding terrain and road network and failed to identify and guard all the possible crossings. Even more alarming, no one in a

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reputation for himself during the skirmishes in northern New Jersey during the winter and spring of 1777 and Washington gave him the command of the light infantry that August, with whom he served at Cooch's Bridge and Brandywine. The light infantry brigade was soon disbanded, and Maxwell lost his independent command. Michael C. Harris, *Germantown: A Military History of the Battle for Philadelphia, October 4, 1777* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2020), xv.

10 Harris, *Brandywine*, 140-145.

11 Chads's Ford is named for John Chads, the local property owner prior to his death before the war. The name morphed into Chadds Ford in the 19th century.

position of authority thought to speak to the locals serving in the ranks of the Continental Army.

While Washington prepared for battle with little terrain knowledge and even less help from the nearby residents, William Howe made his plans with the advantage of both. Pennsylvania loyalist Joseph Galloway and others provided Howe with everything he needed to know about terrain conditions and the road network. Washington's position east of the Brandywine limited Howe's options. A frontal assault against the American positions would be too costly and the men hard to replace. Instead, Howe determined to shove a diversion against the center of Washington's position to pin him in place and throw a heavy left hook in the form of a flanking march to turn his enemy out of his position.

Howe had used this tactic repeatedly and recently against Washington, but the Virginian had not yet taken the lesson to heart and was consistently unprepared for Howe's predictable maneuver. Wilhelm von Knyphausen's division moved ahead and staked Washington in place. A short time later, General Lord Cornwallis surprised the Americans by appearing beyond their vulnerable right flank. Washington discovered the move too late to prevent it. To his credit, he shifted the bulk of his army to oppose the flanking operation and conducted a dogged defensive action that cost Howe dearly. British success at the Brandywine can be evenly credited to his good generalship and Washington's failures.[12]

The tactical defeat cost the Continental Army about 1,300 casualties (300 killed, 600 wounded, and 400 missing/captured). Washington's poor use of scouts and the conflicting intelligence they produced haunted him throughout that long day. Given the trying circumstances, the Americans fought remarkably well. Howe, on the other hand, gathered accurate information about local terrain despite operating in hostile territory. He based his flanking maneuver on that intelligence, and it worked almost to perfection. His veteran British and Hessian troops performed well and did all Howe asked of them. Knyphausen's division played its diversionary role exceedingly well, deceiving Washington through most of the day as to Howe's true intentions. Cornwallis's division executed a grueling flank march, deployed, and broke the American lines in what eventually evolved into a frontal assault. British losses approached 600, with 93 killed and nearly 500 wounded.

End of Unedited Excerpt

12 For a full discussion of the battle and its results, see Harris, *Brandywine*.