



Howell Living History Farm

Pleasant Valley in the American Revolution

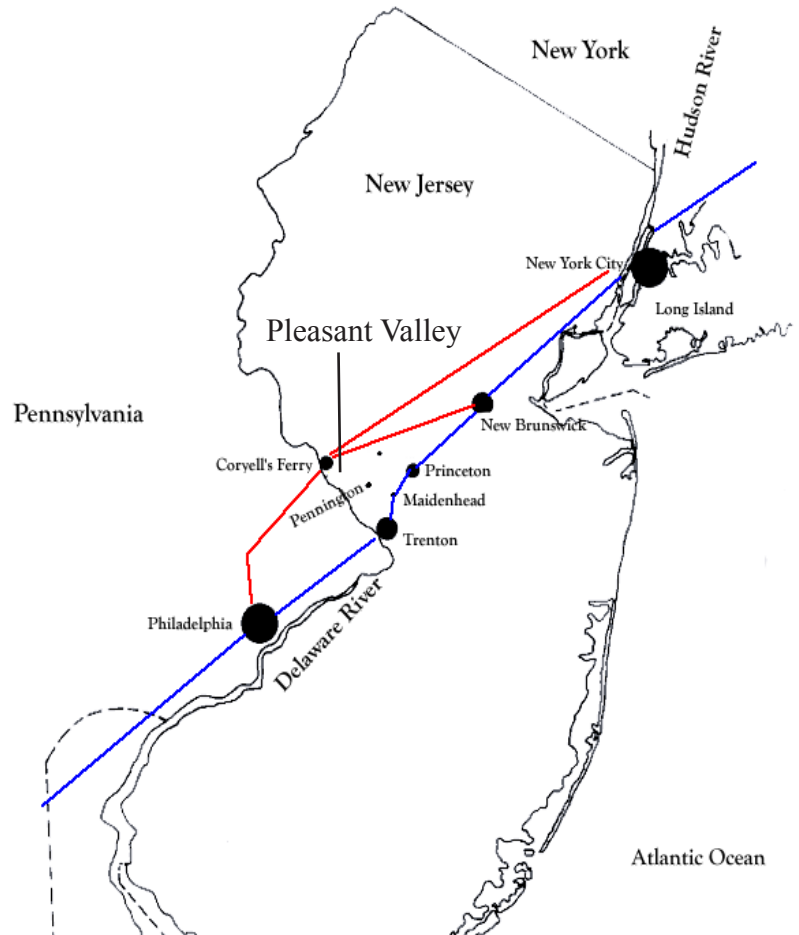
Overview

We generally hear a great deal about the main events and leaders in the American Revolution, but less often hear about the experiences of ordinary citizens such as those living in the Pleasant Valley community of Hopewell Township. Likewise, much is written about the exploits of the Continental Army, but little is recorded about the activities of the militia. The presence of militia is usually stated only in very general terms and often combined with some derogatory comment about its unreliability.

Pleasant Valley was on the “Front” not the “Home Front” for much of the war. Even though we don’t associate Pleasant Valley with any major actions of the Revolution, we can’t look at it as being on the “Home Front” during the American Revolution, as we might look at Pleasant Valley during World War I or II or Vietnam. Pleasant Valley was on the front lines, was in the “war zone”, primarily because of its location and that so many men were involved in frequent militia service. The people in areas like Pleasant Valley had to decide which side to support and to what lengths they would support it. They were trying to survive in a world that was very complex and dangerous during the Revolution. The war was truly a civil war as well as a war for independence from Britain.

Choices individuals made could cause splits in families and friendship groups and could turn former friends into mortal enemies. People always had to be aware of their actions and statements lest they be misinterpreted and bring them into ill repute. Service in the militia was a sign of loyalty to the patriot cause.

Every individual in Pleasant Valley, and in the region of the First Hunterdon, went through the process of first protesting in the hopes that the British government would redeem itself in their eyes and, when it didn’t, made the paradigm shift to believing that the only solution to their issues with Britain was independence, even if it meant a bloody war. Most, if not all, people in Pleasant Valley appear to have supported the patriot cause with one notable exception – Daniel Coxe, who owned land and an estate in the Valley but seldom, if ever, resided there. His land and possessions in Pleasant Valley were confiscated and sold at auction during the war because of his Tory allegiance. Everyone who supported the patriot cause had to deal with the fact that they were involved in a rebellion and they did not know what the outcome would be, either in terms of eventual victory or defeat or in terms of what an independent country would be like if they should be victorious. They were fighting for independence and the



Pleasant Valley’s geographic location influenced how its residents experienced the American Revolution. Pleasant Valley was sandwiched between the main roads from New York City to Philadelphia. British and American troop movements frequently came through this area of central New Jersey where the families of Pleasant Valley and the other areas of the First Hunterdon County Militia Regiment lived.

hope that they could regain rights they believed they had lost, they were not fighting for the Constitution or a vision of the United States as it is today.

The Phillips family who owned the land that is now Howell Living History Farm and some adjoining lands was a very patriotic family that became deeply involved in the Revolution. Henry Phillips, the son of John Phillips who settled the land in 1737, was a farmer and grist miller who was an early captain of a militia company and later was selected to become one of two majors in the First Hunterdon County Militia Regiment. Trenton, Ewing (then Trenton Township), Lawrence (then Maidenhead) and Hopewell Townships, which all contributed men to the First Hunterdon, were then in Hunterdon County since Mercer County was not created until 1838.

Everyone in Pleasant Valley was connected directly to the war effort. All men between the ages of 16 and 50 were subject to some form of military duty. They could join the Continental Army, which few seem to have done after the first year or two when enlistments were relatively short. If not serving in the Continental Army, men were subject to service in the militia, which was called out pretty much constantly, especially between 1776 and 1780. Life for everyone was affected by the militia call outs. Everyone had one or more nuclear family members, extended family members, in-laws, friends, or all of the above who went out with the militia when called and those at home had to assist in keeping the family farm or business going during the periodic absences of these men.

The men of Pleasant Valley who joined the militia not only served with neighbors under Henry Phillips, but because of the nature of the militia system they often were combined with men from other companies and served under other officers from Hopewell, Maidenhead, or Trenton. To understand the experience of the Pleasant Valley men, and their families, it is necessary to look at the entire First Hunterdon Regiment.

Because of the geographic area of the Pleasant Valley, its people were especially aware of the set backs of the first few years of the war and the see-saw of emotions resulting from such events as the retreat across New Jersey in 1776, that must have looked to many like the brink of total failure, and then the glorious victories at Trenton and Princeton. Everyone in the colonies was certainly affected by these, but the families of Pleasant Valley were directly involved whether they were civilians or serving with the army or militia. The war came directly to Pleasant Valley on December 9, 1776, just a few weeks before the Battle of Trenton, when General Cornwallis brought a body of troops into the Valley on his way to Coryell's Ferry to look for boats he could use to cross and pursue the Americans. A newspaper account of what took place reads:

"[The British] entered the house of Samuel Stout, Esq. in Hopewell, where they destroyed his deeds, papers furniture and effects of every kind, except what they plundered. They took every horse away, left his house and farm in ruins, injuring him to the value of two thousand pounds, in less than three hours. Old Mr. Phillips, his neighbour, they pillaged in the same manner, and then cruelly beat him."

Samuel Stout lived by the Delaware in Pleasant Valley and had two sons in the militia, while "Old Mr. Phillips" was undoubtedly Henry's father.

The story of the Revolution in Pleasant Valley is primarily the story of militiamen and their families who supported the Revolution in a number of ways, but seldom in the classic sense of standing in firing lines opposing an enemy force. Militiamen were regularly called out to guard against British incursions from New York via Staten Island, to protect people from attacks by Tory units, to support Continental Army units, and many other ways. The constant activity put a tremendous burden on family members and neighbors called on to help keep a farm or shop together.

Howell Farm is a facility of the Mercer County Park Commission
Brian M. Hughes, County Executive Kevin B. Bannon, Executive Director

