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Watershed moments continue

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From its Revolutionary War role to today's habitat, Christina's importance is undeniable

By GERALD J. KAUFFMAN

The waters of the Christina Basin are unique in Delaware for their water supply, ecological, economic and historic values. The watershed, with headwaters in Maryland and Pennsylvania, is the only one in Delaware with waters that flow through three states. Creeks like the Brandywine, Red Clay, White Clay and Christina provide more than 60 percent of the drinking water for the First State.

The basin is the habitat of the only six trout streams in Delaware. Bald eagles, a federally protected species, nest near Churchmans Marsh. The Port of Wilmington at the mouth of the Christina River imports some of the highest tonnage of fresh fruit in the nation. More than 200 years ago, the du Ponts chose the falls of the Brandywine Creek above Wilmington to power their mills. Two hundred and twenty seven years ago, the watershed was the site of two battles in the War for Independence: the Battle of Cooch's Bridge near Newark and the Battle of the Brandywine near Chadds Ford, Pa.

George Washington, a land surveyor before he became a general, knew that the streams in the Christina Basin were strategic defenses against the 1777 British march from the head of the Chesapeake Bay through Delaware en route to Philadelphia. In August and September 1777 he positioned American troops along the White Clay and Red Clay Creeks to defend against a British advance to Wilmington. He chose a ford along the Christina River in the shadow of Iron Hill as the site of the Sept. 3, 1777, skirmish at Cooch's Bridge - the only battle of the American Revolution fought on Delaware soil. On Sept. 11, 1777, the British defeated the Americans at the Battle of the Brandywine at Chadds Ford, one of the few places north of Wilmington in the hilly valley that was flat enough for troops to cross over the creek. The 1940 book "The Battle of Cooch's Bridge" by Edward W. Cooch provides a fascinating story of the battle that utilized the streams and places of the Christina Basin as a backdrop while the British and American armies marched across northern Delaware. The Battle of Cooch's Bridge is debated to be the first where the Stars and Stripes were raised as the American flag. This book, and others as referenced, provides the following report of the battle, a watershed moment in American history. In August 1777, British Gen. William Howe and his brother Admiral Richard Howe sailed British troops up the Chesapeake Bay as part of their campaign to capture Philadelphia. They chose this longer, more circumspect route to Philadelphia via the Chesapeake because the Delaware River was heavily defended by Americans positioned between the mouths of the Christina River and the Schuylkill. On Aug. 22, Washington received reports that British ships were nearing the Elk River in Maryland, so he positioned 1,000 Delaware militia along the banks of the Christina River at Newport and Christiana (Bridge) to defend Wilmington. On Aug. 25, Washington established headquarters in Wilmington on West Street between Third and Fourth streets. On the same day the British and Hessians landed at the Cecil Court House six miles downstream from Head of the Elk (present day Elkton).

On the next day Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette surveyed the British in Elkton from the summit of Iron Hill. This promontory, which looms to your left while motoring south down I-95 through Newark, is a unique landmark that geologists call an anomaly, more characteristic of the hilly, rocky Piedmont Plateau to the north rather than the flat sandy coastal plain that surrounds it. Iron Hill is one of the few spots where the waters of the Chesapeake and the Delaware could be viewed from the same pinnacle. On Aug. 27, Washington ordered battalions to take positions at the Town of Christiana and along the White Clay on the outskirts of Newark. As the book describes: "On Aug. 28, the American army left its camp on the east side of the Brandywine at 4 a.m. and proceeded through Wilmington, Newport, passed Rising Sun Tavern at Stanton, and encamped to the north of the White Clay Creek and east of White Clay Creek Presbyterian Church." From this description it appears that the Americans camped on the high ground between the White Clay Creek and Muddy Run (Middle Run) between what is now Paper Mill Road and Polly Drummond Hill Road. On Aug. 29, the British marched east along the route of present day Old Baltimore Pike, coming within sight of 600 American troops at Sandy Brae, a hill near Otts Chapel Road. On the same day, the Americans left the White Clay Creek and set up earthworks along the east side of the Red Clay Creek in a triangular formation stretching from Marshallton to Stanton to Newport. Washington supposed that the British would prefer to march on flat terrain (on the Coastal Plain) from Elkton to Wilmington by way of Newark, Stanton and Newport instead of up and down the hills to the north (in the Piedmont). So his generals chose the crossroads at Cooch's Bridge along the Upper Christina River as the site for his defenses.

Their contention was that the Christina River, with its open land which spread south from Iron Hill, was more defensible than the Red Clay Creek. The battle plan specifically mentioned a ford on a small stream that still flows today into the Christina River about 200 yards south of Cooch's Bridge. On Aug. 30, American troops gathered here to defend against British troops garrisoned just across the Mason-Dixon line. On Sept. 2, the main army of the British invaded New Castle County, moving from Grey's Hill in Maryland to just west of Iron Hill into Delaware and then down to Glasgow. Sept. 3, 1777, dawned cool but was excessively hot by noon. The British marched along the road between Glasgow and Cooch's Bridge. The two armies skirmished along the road that is now the route of present day Old Cooch's Bridge Road behind the Glasgow High School.

About 500 Americans made a stand at Cooch's Bridge where the Christina River crosses under present-day Old Baltimore Pike. The Americans were driven off and retreated north on a road along the west bank of the Christina River to the Welsh Tract Baptist Church (near the site of the present day I-95/Del. 896 interchange).

The British marched east and then north to cut off the retreat but could not because they bogged down in the impassable Purgatory Swamp. According to USGS maps this wetland still flows today into the Christina River, about halfway between Old Baltimore Pike and I-95. The wetland, protected today by the Federal Clean Water Act, prevented the British from declaring a more decisive victory. Thus the skirmish ended in a draw.

After the battle, the Americans withdrew along the Chestnut Hill-Ogletown Road (now Del. 4) as far east as the railroad between Newark and Delaware City (now Del. 72). From there they moved north to rejoin the American Army along the White Clay Creek and then back to the triangular earthworks on the east side of the Red Clay Creek. By Sept. 5, Washington was back in Wilmington. The British and Hessians remained in Glasgow from Sept. 3 through 6. Lord Cornwallis took residence in the Cooch house. On Sept. 8, the British departed Glasgow by the "light of a remarkable borealis," the northern lights. As Cooch describes, "at quarter past seven they passed through Newark. Their route was north on Academy Street, east on Main Street and north on Chapel Street, into Mill Creek Hundred." As the British passed through Newark, mischievous soldiers started the machinery in Simonton's flour and gristmill, situated along the south bank of the White Clay Creek. The mill was just downstream from present day Paper Mill Road, site of the old NVF plant and now the site of Timothy's restaurant. The entire American army was now ready for battle, dug in behind the triangular earthworks along the east side of the Red Clay Creek to defend Wilmington. But the British maneuvered north into the hilly Piedmont (literally foot of the mountains) to outflank and evade the Americans. Two prongs of the red coats and Hessians marched up roads near present day Paper Mill Road and Limestone Road, near Hockessin, and through into New Garden Township, Pa., near Kennett Square.

On their way, the Hessians burned down a mill on a farm along the Pike Creek just downstream from present day Paper Mill Road. Then the British traveled generally along the path of present day U.S. 1 on their way to cross the Brandywine and then toward Philadelphia.

Washington tailed them, heading northeast along the arc of Delaware marching up and down the hills from the Red Clay to the Brandywine Creek. On Sept. 11, 1777, the British defeated the Americans at the Battle of the Brandywine at Chadds Ford. This was a hydrogeologically suitable location because the series of fords here were one of the few locations upstream from Wilmington above the gorge of the Brandywine where troops could cross the creek on their way to Philadelphia, the ultimate destination of the British army.

The British went on to take Philadelphia, and the Americans spent the winter frozen in Valley Forge along the Schuylkill River. But that's another story for another watershed.

By turning north into the hills of the Piedmont instead of marching straight along the flat Coastal Plain toward Wilmington, the British evaded Washington's desire to fight a major battle along the Red Clay Creek. With the exception of a few changes in troop strategy, the major battle of the Chesapeake to Philadelphia campaign might well have occurred more to the Americans' favor along the Christina or Red Clay, not by the Brandywine.

The Christina Basin occupies an important place in Delaware and American history. It's streams and geology such as the Christina River, Purgatory Swamp and Iron Hill are mentioned prominently by historians of the American Revolution. This historic watershed provides irreplaceable resources such as drinking water for 500,000 people in Delaware and Pennsylvania and nesting grounds for the bald eagle, our nation's symbol. The basin is a resource to be treasured for its natural and historic values. Washington knew the value of the streams in the Christina Basin as he fought for independence.

And yes, George Washington did sleep here.

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