

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 14, 2009

1776, A Very Important Year: In the fall of 1776, a 20-year-old Quaker was apprenticed to a tanner in Uwchlan, Chester County, Pennsylvania. Present-day Uwchlan is on Route 100, about a mile north of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. His widowed mother (who had remarried) and his sisters lived at Coryell's Ferry along the Delaware River near the site of present-day New Hope.

General Washington and his troops fought long and hard that summer to prevent a far-superior British force, supplemented by Hessian mercenaries, from taking New York, but battle after battle, they were pushed back and finally nearly annihilated at Fort Mifflin on the New Jersey palisades. Washington's hungry and deprived army hurried southwestward across New Jersey with the British in hot pursuit. The young tanner apprentice worried for the safety of his mother and sisters and in November asked his employer if he could take time off to check on their precarious situation. The employer agreed, and the apprentice made his way to Philadelphia with the hope of catching the first coach to Coryell's Ferry.

He was relieved when he found the coach to New York was still operating but was told there was little chance he could get from Morrisville (where passengers were ferried across the river to Trenton) to his mother's home at Coryell's Ferry, as the area along that section of the river was in chaos. Refugees from New Jersey were everywhere, and it was considered a highly unsafe area. Rumors abounded. The young apprentice was apprehensive about continuing when he encountered a Scotch-Irish teamster with a wagon who said he was half Quaker and half Presbyterian. "Where's thee going?" the teamster inquired of the apprentice. "I want to find my mother and sisters at Coryell's Ferry, but I'm told I have little chance to make it safely" was the reply. "Good luck and Godspeed" said the teamster, and the young apprentice climbed aboard the coach as it pulled out for Morrisville, many hours and several stops away.

Morrisville was indeed crowded with refugees. There was no chance he could get a coach to Coryell's Ferry, about 20 miles away. Someone suggested he might get a ride on a wagon if he could find one going that way. As he looked around, here was the same teamster he had seen in Philadelphia who greeted him with "Laddie, what brings thee here?" The apprentice told him of his predicament. "Never fear, laddie, the Americans have 2,000 troops on this side of the river, and the redcoats don't want to get their boots wet coming after them. Besides, Washington has commandeered all the boats between here and Phillipsburg. Now, we've got to get thee to thy family. I have a proposition for thee, but thee may have to think about it, thee being a Quaker. I signed up to take a wagon of clothes, shoes, stockings and blankets for Washington's boys as soon as they got across the river—no guns or ammunition or anything like that. I'm a Quaker, too, and don't believe in war, but our boys need help. Thee can ride on the wagon if it's not against thy principles." The apprentice thought hard about the teamster's proposition. When the wagon pulled out, however, he was aboard. "How can I pay thee?" he inquired. "Don't worry about that, lad," replied the teamster. "If thee ever gets to Uwchlan, I'll make thee a new harness!" said the young apprentice as he jumped down from the wagon and prepared to walk the few miles to his mother's home. "Don't worry, Thomas Marshall, the British won't try to cross the river this winter" were the teamster's parting words.

As history tells us, Washington and his troops crossed the river on Christmas night and captured Trenton. Thomas later became a successful tanner in Concordville. His uncle, John Marshall, had bought 160 acres of land on Red Clay Creek in Kennett Township (Marshall's Bridge) in 1759 and was known in the family as "John of Kennett." He was my great-great-great-grandfather. Nancy Marshall Bauer of Madison, Wisconsin, has just written a wonderful genealogy of our branch of the Marshall family, from which this story is taken. Young Thomas was her great-great-great-grandfather, which makes Nancy and me fifth cousins, once removed.