

Washington-Rochambeau in Maidenhead 1781:  
Tales of Philip van Cortlandt (and Edward Hand)

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The Township of Maidenhead, as Lawrence was then known, was lucky or unlucky enough to host the main thoroughfare connecting New York and Philadelphia during the late 18th century. Sometimes called the Kings Highway, sometimes the Great Road, sometimes the Post Road, this highway supported transportation and commerce throughout the mid-Atlantic region. In particular, the seven-mile Maidenhead segment of the Kings Highway from Princeton to Trenton was traversed by the armies on both sides of the American Revolution: Continentals, British, German, and French.

As it passed through Maidenhead, this road crossed several streams, all tributaries of the Assunpink Creek, which flows into the Delaware River at Trenton. The southernmost of these tributaries was the Shabakunk Creek, which the Kings Highway crossed about three miles north of Trenton. The others included Five Mile Run (sometimes called the Little Shabakunk), Eight Mile Run (now known as the Shipetaukin), and Six Mile Run (a small tributary of the Shipetaukin), each stream name reflecting its distance along the highway going north from Trenton. For unknown reasons the Shabakunk was never known as Three Mile Run but, as we shall see, its distance from Trenton plays an important role in the story that follows.

This unassuming site where the King's Highway crossed the Shabakunk Creek served to bookend the American Revolution, with military actions that took place here near both the very beginning and the very end of the War of Independence. It was here in early 1777 that Colonel Edward Hand's Pennsylvania Riflemen staged their well-known delaying action that kept Lord

Cornwallis's forces from reaching Trenton early enough in the day to attack Washington's outnumbered army. It was also here in the late summer of 1781 that Colonel Philip van Cortlandt's Second New York Regiment camped, serving as rear guard while the combined Franco-American armies of General George Washington and Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, marched south to lay siege to Cornwallis at Yorktown, the victory that secured the United States their independence from King George III.

Edward Hand is locally famous, commemorated annually every January in Lawrence Township with the Colonel Hand March, a reenactment of his slow retreat down the Kings Highway toward Trenton on January 2, 1777. The march ends where the former Kings Highway—today's Lawrence Road, US-206—crosses Shabakunk Creek. As the story is told, Washington's Continentals lay quartered in Trenton, on the south side of the Assunpink Creek. Cornwallis's British Regulars and Hessian auxiliaries were in Princeton preparing to march on Trenton to capture Washington and rout his much smaller army. On January 2, 1777, they began marching the eleven miles from Princeton to Trenton, passing through Maidenhead on the way. It fell to Colonel Hand to slow the British advance and keep Cornwallis from arriving in Trenton with enough daylight left to launch a full-scale assault.

The Pennsylvania Riflemen and Cornwallis's forces skirmished at several spots along the highway through Maidenhead, but it was at the Shabakunk Creek that the Continentals made their most determined and lengthy stand, keeping Cornwallis at bay for several hours. It was late in the short winter's day when the British finally arrived in Trenton, and Cornwallis fatefully decided to wait until the following morning to launch his attack on Washington. It was not to be: Washington, in one of the most famous tactical maneuvers in military history, quietly moved his forces overnight and, using back roads, was able to surprise the British rear guard in Princeton the following morning, defeating them and capturing their stores of weapons, equipment, and supplies. Colonel Hand's delaying action at Shabakunk Creek was pivotal in setting up that chain of events.

The situation was quite different four-and-a-half years later, in the summer of 1781. Cornwallis and the bulk of his forces were in eastern Virginia, and Washington and his were at West Point, up the Hudson River north of British-controlled New York City. A French expeditionary force under the command of the comte de Rochambeau, had been quartered in Rhode Island since the previous summer. In June 1781, Rochambeau and his army began marching to rendezvous with Washington near the Town of Greenburgh, New York. Washington and Rochambeau originally planned to attack New York City, but it was decided instead to proceed south and engage Cornwallis directly at Yorktown.

The combined armies divided into several columns, marching by different routes so as not to overly stress local resources and local roads. The armies comprised about 2,500 men for

Washington, plus about 100 wagons, and around 4,000 for Rochambeau's French forces, including around 300 wagons drawn by 1,800 oxen and as many as 1,500 horses. They edged into New Jersey in late August and by the end of the month most of both armies had reached or gotten close to Princeton. The plan was to then march to Trenton and either cross the Delaware by ferry and continue marching on the Pennsylvania side, or travel further down the Delaware River by boat before disembarking at Christiana in Delaware. For seven of the eleven miles between Princeton and Trenton, the almost 7,000 officers and men and their animals and equipment passed through Maidenhead.

The possibility of a surprise attack on the moving columns was ever present. Washington tapped Colonel Philip van Cortlandt and his Second New York Regiment of about 400 men to act as rear guard to the Continental and French armies. Philip van Cortlandt is not as locally famous as Edward Hand, but he did lead the only unit of any of the contending armies to camp overnight in Maidenhead during the American War of Independence. The sources disagree on exactly when van Cortlandt's Second New York Regiment arrived at Shabakunk Creek. After the war van Cortlandt wrote that they arrived on Thursday, August 30th, but other sources say it may have been as late as September 2nd. Thus the rear guard could have camped there as many as four nights or as few as one while the rest of the British and French forces crossed the creek on their way to Trenton.

Van Cortlandt wrote in his memoir "about 3 miles from Trenton I was ordered to Incamp for all the army to pass me" (which is unlikely since van Cortlandt marched a day behind the armies and if they had passed him he would have had to have been in front). Three miles from Trenton marks the point at which the Kings Highway crossed the Shabakunk Creek which, as Edward Hand had learned, provided a natural defensive barrier against attack from the north. Thus it is likely that the only Revolutionary War encampment in Maidenhead was on the flat ground on the south side of Shabakunk Creek. This property was then owned by Thomas Tindall, a member of the prominent Tindall family that had helped to settle several communities in what is now Mercer County.

Although it is not known if they ever met, Edward Hand and Philip van Cortlandt did serve together in the Sullivan-Clinton Expedition of August 1779. By this time Hand was a Brigadier General, commanding one of four brigades under General John Sullivan (who himself had fought bravely at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton). Sullivan's second in command was General James Clinton, whose brigade included Colonel van Cortlandt's Second New York Regiment. Their expedition was intended to neutralize British-allied Iroquois tribes in western New York and northern Pennsylvania, which it did successfully at substantial cost to the Native American population and their villages.

The crossing of the Delaware began late in the day on Friday, August 31st, when Colonel John Lamb with his 2nd Continental Artillery Regiment embarked for Philadelphia. There were not enough boats to embark the whole Continental Army, and most of it, including Philip van Cortlandt's regiment, continued their march to Philadelphia on land. After the last of the French forces had crossed the Delaware on the 2nd and 3rd of September and were marching toward Philadelphia, van Cortlandt's regiment made its way to Trenton and was the last to leave New Jersey. On Tuesday, September 4th, word was sent to Quarter Master General Timothy Pickering that "no allied forces designated to participate in the operation at Yorktown remain in New Jersey." In Maidenhead, meanwhile, the cleanup began. One can only imagine what 7,000 men and thousands of animals would have left behind.

By the time the allied armies marched to Yorktown, Edward Hand had joined George Washington's inner circle as Adjutant General, the chief administrator of the Continental Army. Washington, Rochambeau, and their entourage passed through Maidenhead on August 29th and Washington spent the night at the Trent House in Trenton. It is highly likely but not certain that Edward Hand was with Washington as they passed through the township. One is left to wonder if they stopped briefly where the highway crossed the Shabakunk, and if they took a moment to reflect on the events of a winter afternoon four-and-a-half years previously, when Hand's tactics had made possible one of the great early victories of the American War of Independence. The following morning, August 30th, Washington again crossed the Delaware, a day ahead of the armies, and set out for Philadelphia.

On September 28th, 1781 the Siege of Yorktown began and three weeks later, on October 18th, British, French, and Continental officers met to negotiate terms of surrender. The following day Cornwallis and his men laid down their arms, ending large-scale British military action in the former Colonies. It would be another two years, however, until the Second Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783, officially ending the war.

Edward Hand ended his service to the American cause as a Major General. He retired to his home in Lancaster, PA, and served in the Congress of the Confederation and later in the Pennsylvania Assembly. He died in 1802. After the siege of Yorktown, Philip van Cortlandt was given responsibility to conduct British prisoners on their march to Fredericksburg, concluding his service at the end of the war with the rank of Brigadier General. He returned to his home in Cortlandt, NY, where he served in the New York State Senate and Assembly, followed by eight terms in the U.S. Congress. He died in 1831.

The Shabakunk Creek, meanwhile, lives on, proceeding from its headwaters in Hopewell and Ewing Townships, pausing along the way to feed Colonial Lake, and finally flowing into Assunpink Creek, just as it did in 1777 and 1781.

