



- #10 2003-REMEMBERING ISABEL (SPRING 05)
- #9 1970-ANNEXATION (SUMMER 05)
- #8 1912-WHEN GUN COTTON WAS KING (FALL 05)
- #7 1864-BERMUDA HUNDRED CAMPAIGN (JAN/FEB 06)
- #6 1815-BELLONA FOUNDRY, CAST IN WAR (MAY/JUN 06)
- #5 1782-NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION IN CHESTERFIELD (SEPT/OCT 06)

#4 1775-1781 BRITISH INVASION

By Dennis Farmer, historic specialist for Chesterfield Parks & Recreation

On July 14, 1774, after a public meeting held by a brick courthouse, so proudly built only 24 years earlier, the people of Chesterfield County adopted a resolution. Soon published in the Virginia Gazette, the only newspaper in the Commonwealth, the views, however respectful, were firm and determined: *“Resolved, that the sole right of making laws for the government of this, His majesty’s ancient Colony and Dominion of Virginia, and for raising and levying taxes on the inhabitants thereof ought to be, and is, invested in the General Assembly of this Colony, and cannot be executed by any other power without danger to our liberties, subject nevertheless, as the custom has been, to His Majesty’s approbation.”* Also confirmed within this resolve, was support of *“our sister Colony of Massachusetts”* and the city of Boston, which the British Parliament had ordered closed to outside trade. Within months, 1,426 _ bushels of grain, donated by Chesterfield County, was sailing toward Boston.

Soon the fighting would break out near Boston, and the Revolutionary War would begin. For Chesterfield, as well as Virginia, the war would come in two separate but distinct phases. The first, in April 1775, would be waged with resources and mainly volunteer efforts, fought far to the north. The second, after the fall of Charleston, S.C., on May 12, 1780, would be a great deal harder as loss of lives, economic hardship and finally British invasion would bring the war right inside the county.

The first call on Chesterfield men was in July of 1775, when three companies, each of 50 men were formed as the Chesterfield Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. Archibald Cary, who with Benjamin Watkins, would provide the main patriotic leadership of the county for the war. Both men had been very active in the cause in the years leading up to the outbreak of conflict. Men from Amelia, Cumberland, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico and Louisa counties completed the First Virginia Regiment under Colonel Patrick Henry with its Chesterfieldians. The town of Warwick, today known as Port of Richmond and also the site of Archibald Cary’s impressive home, Amphill, soon were producing naval stores, rope and military clothing, flags as well as iron and grain from Cary’s nearby mills along Falling Creek. It was also the site of warehouses for flour, gunpowder and tobacco

On Aug. 2, 1776, news of the Declaration of Independence reached Chesterfield and the oath of allegiance to the United States of America was taken by the justices of the peace and court and law officers. Soon

the members of the county militia would take the oath as would, over time, the balance of the voting citizens. From 1777 to 1780, the court house area became a prisoner of war encampment for enemy troops, including the famous “convention” prisoners captured at the battle of Saratoga. Defeated at Saratoga, N.Y., Oct. 17, 1777, British Gen. John Burgoyne yielded to American commander Horatio Gates in a convention to return those soldiers to England. Congress, fearful that this would release thousands of additional enemy troops to come to America, caused the convention troops to go in prison sites in Virginia and Maryland for years until exchanged for surrendered U.S. troops. Lt. Governor Henry Hamilton of British controlled Detroit was captured by Virginia’s George Rogers Clark, and sent to Chesterfield before going to Williamsburg. Hamilton was known as the “hair buyer,” due to a belief that he was paying British allied Indians for American scalps, something that most historians today believe is untrue, however, Chesterfieldians were very pleased to see him on toward the Williamsburg jail.

By the winter of 1779-80, the main theater of war was shifting from the northern states to Georgia and South Carolina, with a major British invasion capturing Charleston, S.C., on May 12, 1780. On that one terrible day, almost all of Virginia’s soldiers were lost, either killed or captured, and at the battle of Camden, S.C., that summer, Virginia and North Carolina militia, poorly trained and unprepared, fled the field, allowing a second American army to be destroyed. The worst was to come, as in October of 1780 a British fleet of more than 60 vessels, with three regiments of British infantry seized and held Norfolk and Portsmouth, which were acting as naval bases in

Virginia. Alarmed and quickly mobilized, but poorly equipped, Virginia militia did badly against this attack and an English foothold became established controlling the Commonwealth’s vital waterways.

In the summer of 1780, Brigadier Gen. Peter



This portrait is of Gen. Lafayette done by Charles Wilson Peale.

Muhlenberg, then in charge of local defense within Virginia, established "the General Rendezvous at Chesterfield Courthouse" and its former prisoner barracks and cabins as the principle training center for both regular and militia soldiers in Virginia. Over the next few months, some 3,000 Virginians would report to, be trained at, and with what could be provided, issued weapons, clothing and equipment. Terrible and near constant shortages of shoes, muskets, uniforms, clothing and blankets as well as food supplies would affect these men until the end of the war. Sickness due to the poor conditions led to a hospital being set up at the courthouse with as many as 150 men being on the sick musters at any time.

On Dec. 4, 1780, Maj. Gen. Friedrich von Steuben, the drillmaster of Valley Forge, was appointed to command in Virginia by Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, the commander of the Southern Department. Both met in Richmond and in Chesterfield, at "Amphill," with Jefferson and other vital Virginia leaders to address military needs. Col. William Davies of Hanover County, formerly sub-inspector of infantry under von Steuben at Valley Forge was appointed superintendent at Chesterfield. Davies would be promoted to commissioner of war in 1781 as the commonwealth's chief supply officer.

Having had two major call-ups of militia during the summer and fall of 1780 for the Southern army, those thousands of returning Virginians had used up almost the entire stock of military equipment and clothing and also failed to return the muskets that the Commonwealth had issued to them. This lack of firearms would greatly affect Virginia's home defenses in 1781. British strategy in late 1779, having shifted toward a Southern campaign, noted the manpower, supplies and arms coming from Virginia into the Carolinas and ordered newly promoted Brigadier General Benedict Arnold to take a fleet of 27 vessels and 1,500 British and Loyalist soldiers to raid up the James River as far as Richmond to disrupt American support in the deep South. Arnold's fleet reached Cape Henry on Dec. 30th. At Chesterfield on the 31st, Col. Davies wrote about the men's conditions at the Courthouse in a letter to von Steuben. "Shoes and blankets and indeed almost every kind of clothing, are universally wanting. I think that not more than 150 men can take the field as at present clad, but with clothing I think 400 might march. Indians are not more naked, nor half so miserable."

By Jan. 2, 1781, Governor Jefferson, surprised by Arnold's troops, gave the alarm, and all of Chesterfield's militia was called out. Von Steuben was ordered to march some 350 of the levies from the courthouse, to west of Manchester opposite of Westham Iron Foundry. Virginia had been slow to respond and preformed poorly in homeland defense, with disorder, lack of weapons and poor leadership, allowing Arnold to seize Richmond and destroy the military supplies, almost without losses. Arnold then evaded pursuit and retired to Portsmouth to fortify for new efforts. Having failed to stop the English, the troops returned to the barracks at Chesterfield and the militia to their homes.

The levies, with 50 additional men at the courthouse marched to North Carolina in late February, the second regiment to reinforce Gen. Greene's army in the South. In addition, two brigades of Virginia militia under generals Stevens and Lawson also joined Greene at this point, allowing the battle of Guilford Courthouse, N.C.,



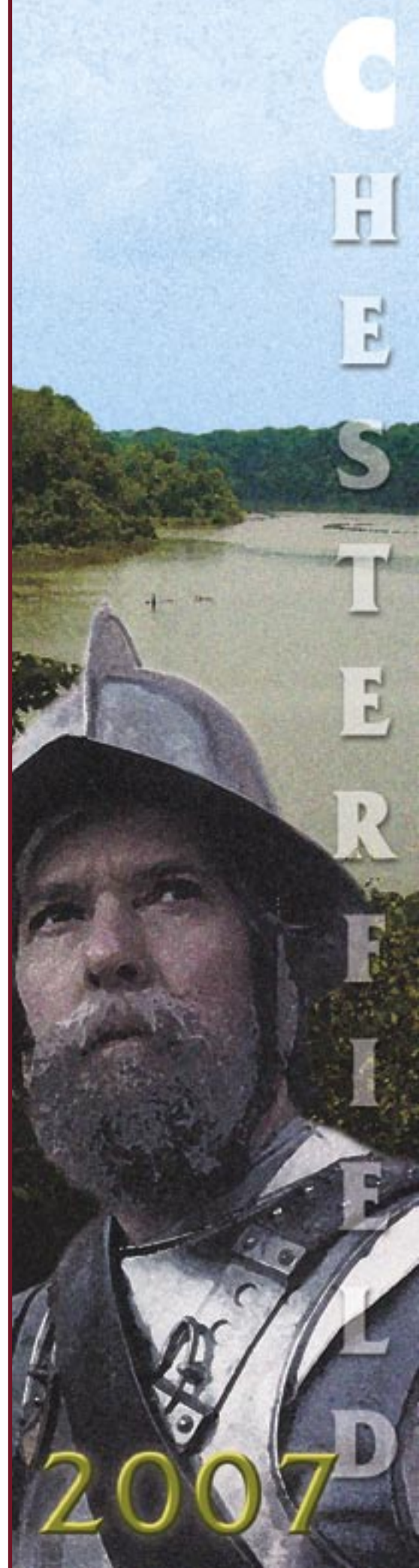
This map depicts the March of the Army under Cornwallis on July 12, 1781. The map is unsigned, but is done in the style of Capt. Edward Fage, Royal Artillery, who fought here in 1781.

to be fought and while the American's were defeated, British losses were so high that Lord Cornwallis retired to Wilmington, N.C., and then turned north to march on Virginia. On March 20, 1781, more British, loyalist and Hessian troops under Maj. Gen. William Phillips landed and joined with Arnold's command. Phillips, as commander, launched a new attack, this time directly aimed at Chesterfield, Warwick, Petersburg and Manchester, the supply and training bases for Virginia.

On April 25, 1781, the battle of Petersburg was fought between von Steuben with about 1,000 Virginia militia, including Col. Robert Goode's Chesterfield Battalion and some 2,300 British under Phillips. After fighting until out of ammunition, the Americans retreated into Colonial Heights tearing apart the Pocahontas Bridge. Von Steuben retired to the Chesterfield Courthouse, where much of the remaining supplies had been removed and hidden, before continuing to the Midlothian coalfields. Phillips, with 1,000 troops, marched to and destroyed the training camp at Chesterfield Courthouse on April 27th, however, the courthouse was not burned down and public records of Chesterfield County were saved. That same day, Arnold, with the rest of the British force, destroyed or captured all the Virginia State Emergency Fleet at Osborne's Landing. American reinforcements under Maj. Gen. Lafayette blocked a second attack on Richmond, thus ending Phillip's operation.

On May 20, Lord Cornwallis joined his army with Phillips' command and had a veteran force of 7,200 troops. On May 23, he ordered Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's British Legion to raid and destroy Cary's flourmill at Falling Creek. Chesterfield militia, from Col. Goode's battalion, were guarding the crossings of Falling Creek, but Tarleton skillfully evaded them, crossing about one mile to the west. In a heavy rainstorm, the British surprised and took 40 Chesterfield men prisoners and killed two or three. Some days later, the British Legion would cross Chesterfield raiding, toward the west and in July, again raided just south of Chesterfield. With those terrible few days from late April to late July of 1781, citizens had seen the war come into Chesterfield itself. It killed and took loved ones, plundered homes and goods, caused folk to take to the woods as refugees, a turn of events that would be repeated 84 years later as Federal troops marched through Chesterfield at the end of the Civil War. ■

CHESTERFIELD



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