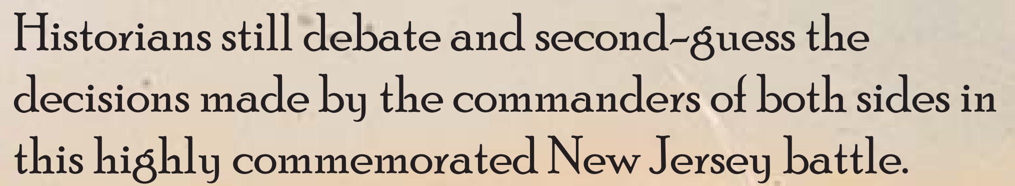


Historians still debate and second-guess the decisions made by the commanders of both sides in this highly commemorated New Jersey battle.

Mayhem on the Roads to Monmouth Courthouse

Robert A. Mayers

http://revolutionarydetective.com/

Reenactors of the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse
2010: Gordon Bond

The engagement at Freehold, New Jersey, in June of 1778, was the longest and hardest fought single-day engagement of the Revolutionary War. It was the only battle of the war fought in an open field where the main forces of both armies, and the greater part of the highest and most renowned officers, participated.

Curiously, however, it is best-remembered only for specific dramatic and heroic episodes. These occurrences have shrouded this battle in the golden haze of the mythology and patriotic rhetoric. A fresh look at this New Jersey campaign, however, focusing on the details and consequences of the movement of the armies before and after the battle, reveals a number of events that could have led to a final decisive victory for either side. Let's take a look at what happened and what *could* have happened.

The battle at Monmouth Courthouse is replete with legends. It was the point in the war when the world image of the American army was transformed from that of a tattered band of ill-trained farmers to one of a disciplined, well-led, professional military force. The legend of Molly Pitcher emerged to personify the bravery of the American woman, when she took the place of her fallen husband. Washington confronted and turned around the retreating Americans, led by the treacherous General Lee. The training by Baron Von Steuben during the dark days at Valley Forge had paid off. General George Washington's Continentals stood toe-to-toe with the best army in the world and repulsed a series of powerful attacks to fight the British to a standstill, thereby passing their first major test.

Yet, beyond this, many questions remain about the Battle at Monmouth Courthouse. Why did King George's mighty army in America, not attack an emaciated Continental army less than half its size at Valley Forge? Why were the British forces allowed to spend a week crossing the Delaware River in flatboats when they could have been caught by the Americans who were only a day's march away? A strung-out British Army passed through New Jersey for nine days and marched more than 50 miles, yet they were largely unopposed by Washington's rejuvenated Continental army.

And, on the other side of the equation, what caused British forces—still intact after a day of intense fighting—to sneak off under the cover of darkness? Why didn't General Howe confront the Americans from the heights at Middletown only 20 miles from Monmouth Courthouse, where he had a tactical advantage? Why were the redcoats, exposed on a barren strip of sand on the Sandy Hook peninsula, awaiting transport, not attacked or bombarded from the Highlands of the Navesink?

Finally, the question about which side was victorious is still the subject of vigorous debate.

Winter 1777–1778

Following the dreadful defeat of the Continental army at Brandywine in

The Hard Winter at Valley Forge

General Sir William Howe
1777: Richard Purcell aka Charles Corbutt

Sir Henry Clinton
1762-5: Andrea Soldi

the fall of 1777, the British army moved a few miles north to capture the patriot capitol of Philadelphia. Here they found snug winter quarters.

Standing in stark contrast, only 20 miles north of the city on a bleak hillside near the Schuylkill River called Valley Forge, the vanquished Americans were leaving bloody footprints in the snow and eating bark to survive. Continental soldiers wrapped in thin blankets huddled around smoky fires of green twigs, chanting, “We want meat!”

Despite the obvious advantages enjoyed by the British, their leaders in Philadelphia became apprehensive as the spring of 1778 approached. France had entered the war six months before, and it would be possible for the French fleet to blockade the mouth of the Delaware Bay. Since they were supplied from the sea, the British Army could be trapped in the city.

It seems incredible that General Howe, the commander in chief of the British army in America with a large fleet to cover the city with cannons and a superb army, did not make the least attempt to attack the American campground at Valley Forge during the winter. This was an easy opportunity to end the war. The desolate base, with its starving and freezing army depleted by desertions and expired enlistments, was only a day’s march away. Starving the Americans into surrendering in only a few days was possible had they elected to surround Valley Forge. Howe’s excuses were a lack of reinforcements from England and what he professed as an even greater problem—lack of horse fodder.

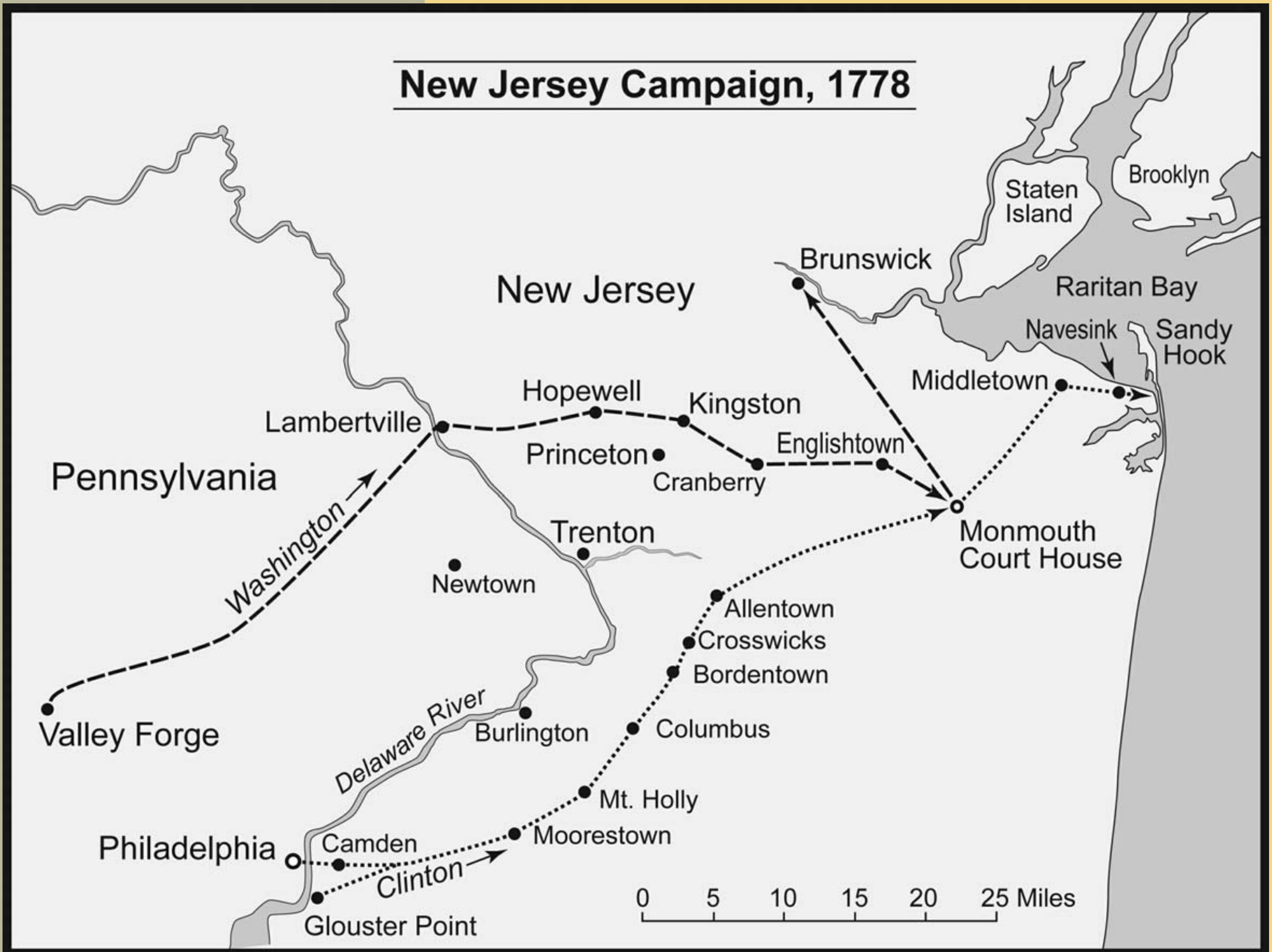
While it may seem frivolous to us now, fodder was extremely important as everything was moved by horse power. A lack of fodder was akin to a lack of fuel for modern truks, tanks, aircraft, etc. Recalled, he sailed for England in May, and Sir Henry Clinton assumed command of His Majesty’s forces in America.

Spring 1788

The warm days of May revived the spirits of the weary American soldiers at Valley Forge. Morale soared as troops and supplies of food and clothing at last began to arrive. This exuberance was fueled by a new *espirit de corps* inspired by the discipline and pride instilled by Baron Von Steuben. The Continental Army was in a fine mood, spoiling for a fight. On June 10, 1778, they were delighted to receive marching orders and eagerly prepared to leave the squalid huts and haunting memories of the dismal winter.

Signs of enemy activity in New Jersey caused Washington to alert four New Jersey Militia battalions in Burlington County and issue orders for them to “annoy” any British forces that were encountered. These 800 local men were commanded by Major General Philemon Dickinson and were soon joined by General “Scotch Willie” Maxwell’s brigade of 1,000 Continental line soldiers.

Washington then decided to abandon the practice of strategic



withdrawal to preserve his army and to actively pursue the British forces. His plan was to send out a large advanced force to harass the enemy columns but keep the main army back until he could better assess the situation. Major General Charles Lee, second in command to General Washington, was chosen to lead the advanced force on the basis of seniority, despite being openly opposed to any course of action that involved fighting.

On the opposite side, Sir Henry Clinton's first major challenge in his new job was to move the British Army out of Philadelphia and join the rest of the British forces in New York City. He would have preferred transporting the entire force by ship but found there were too few adequate vessels available. So, the British began their evacuation of the city by crossing the Delaware River in open flatboats on June 9, 1778 to Gloucester Point in New Jersey. Reports of their departure from Philadelphia began arriving at Valley Forge but no action was taken to prevent the British forces from gaining a beachhead in New Jersey. Others argue that, with an enemy in retreat, why take a chance?

Washington instead headed east from Valley Forge with the main body

Brigadier General Philemon Dickinson
c. 1885: Albert Rosenthal

General Charles Lee
Unknown: G. R. Hall

of the American army and marched 40 miles up York Road to Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and then to Coryell's Landing (now New Hope) Pennsylvania. They crossed the Delaware River to Lambertville and then moved inland five miles to the hamlet of Amwell.

The 12-mile-long British procession headed northeast from Gloucester Point toward New York. Eleven thousand redcoats and Hessian troops with more than a thousand loyalist civilians and hundreds of camp followers trudged along the sandy roads of southern New Jersey. The baggage train had 1,500 wagons overloaded with weapons, equipment, supplies, personal baggage, and booty stolen from the homes and businesses of civilians who supported the rebellion.

New Jersey commanders Maxwell and Dickenson labored hard to sabotage their routes. Bridges were destroyed and trees felled across roads. The exposed British formation plodded along at an average of only four miles each day and followed meandering paths to avoid the many swamps along the way.

The main British force reached Haddonfield the first night and the next morning marched another six miles to Evesham Township. There they met with the first resistance when a small party of New Jersey militia ambushed part of the column. The event, however, was so inconsequential that no mention of it appears in British journals.

Another detachment moved up King's Highway, now the path of the New Jersey Turnpike, and camped at the Friends Meeting House at Moorestown. Along the way the invaders plundered everything they could find including household goods, grain, horses, and cattle. Many of the villagers, however, had the foresight to hide their property in the swamps. When the raiders reached the deserted town of Mount Holly, they destroyed the iron works and burned the home of Colonel Israel Shreve, the commanding officer of the 2nd New Jersey Regiment.

The terrain north of Mount Holly was a patchwork of streams and swamps. New bridges had to be built and causeways had to be constructed on the fly as they went. Men in the stalled ranks began to suffer from the oppressive heat. After a march of seven miles, the columns at last reached Slabtown, now Columbus and Mansfield. There they learned the ominous news that Washington's army had left Valley Forge and was heading east on a path that could converge with theirs.

Captain Johann Ewald led a regiment of Hessian Jaegers 15 miles to Bordentown and Crosswicks. Taking advantage of the concealment offered by the spring foliage on both sides of the road, however, a scattering of Americans made those a costly 15 miles with a rain of steady musket fire picking them off. The Germans were additionally plagued by the mosquitoes, bridges without planking, filled in or polluted wells, intense heat, and humidity.

Captain Johann Ewald
1835: C. A. Jensen, after a drawing by H. J. Aldenrath

Cannonball still lodged in the Crosswicks Friends Meeting House Wall
R. Mayer

An advanced unit of dragoons nearing Bordentown reached a torn up bridge with the draw raised at Watson's Ford. Today this place is where Route 206 goes over Crosswicks Creek. Here the British finally met with stiff resistance. The New Jersey militia was prepared to defend the crossing from redoubts with a six-pounder cannon. British sappers (engineers) tried to repair the bridge with planks torn from a nearby barn, but the militia regiments of Colonels Frelinghuysen, Van Dyke, and Webster poured volleys of musket and cannon fire on them. When the main British force came up to the bridge, however, they succeeded in taking it. Remains of the American redoubts were still visible in 1899, and remnants of the bridge still exist today.

Another column of dragoons passed through Bordentown at dawn the next day and arrived at another bridge over Crosswicks Creek, where today Route 130 in Yardville crosses over the creek. Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe's Queens Rangers engaged the 2nd New Jersey Regiment and the 12th Pennsylvania Regiment there. The Rangers captured the bridge with the loss of four or five men.

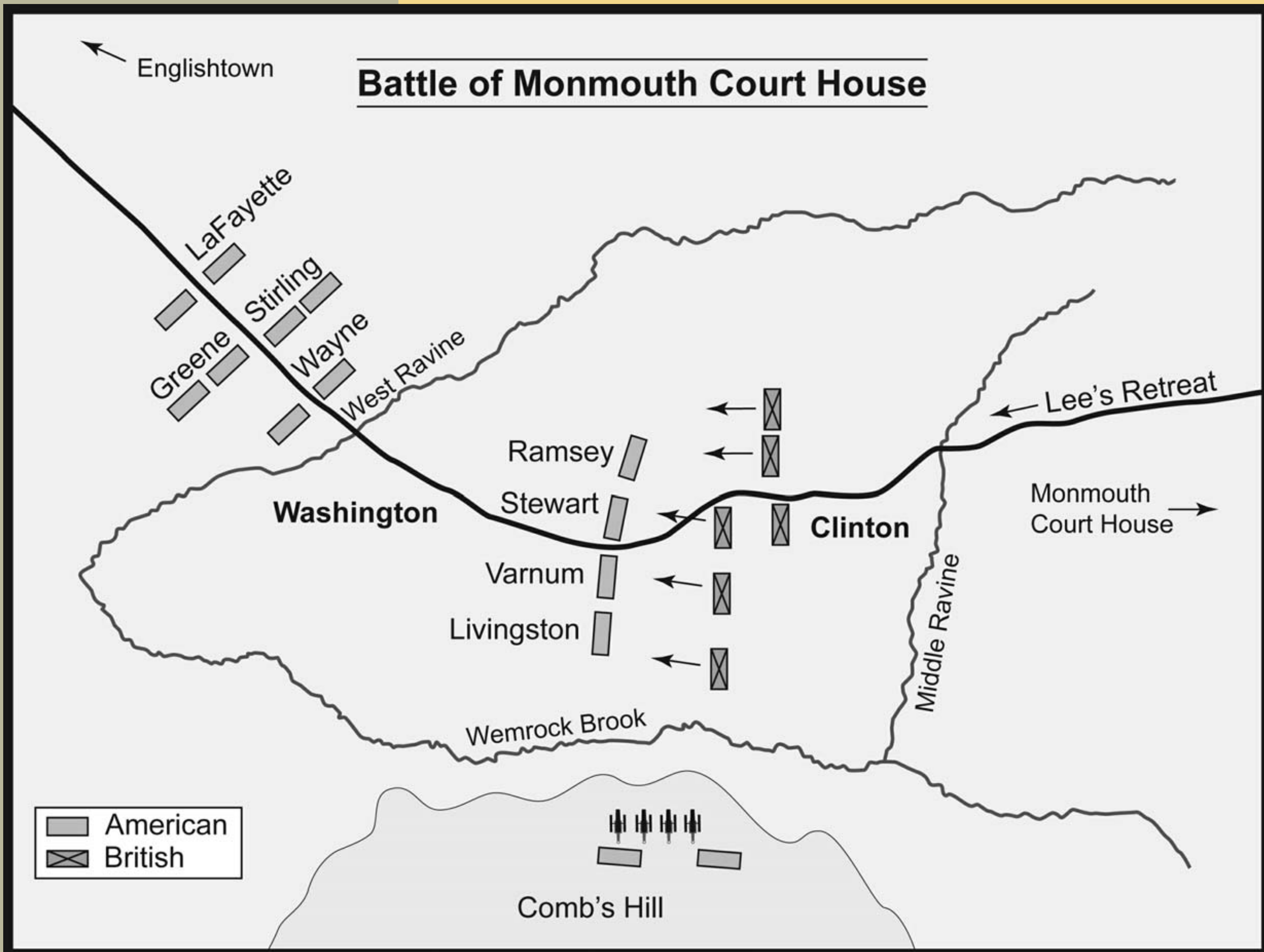
During these skirmishes, three cannonballs fired by the Americans struck the north wall of the Friends Meeting House at the town of Crosswicks. One still remains embedded in the wall to this day.

The army continued on to Imslayville where Clinton spent the night at the house of a Mrs. Bunting. Apparently, he had begun to succumb to the intense pressure of the forced march and went to bed drunk. During the night he had a nightmare and ran from the house, having to be caught and forcibly returned to bed by his aides.

The next morning, the British forces continued north about 10 miles to Allentown, New Jersey where the road forked. The northern route led to New Brunswick and Staten Island and a single southern path led to Sandy Hook. Clinton chose to head for Sandy Hook. This route ran east through a small village with less that 100 inhabitants called Monmouth Courthouse.

What is surprising about this phase of the British crossing of New Jersey is how Washington's forces missed the chance to wreak more havoc and destruction on them than they did. Other than the minor stand at Crosswicks and Bloomfield's attack beyond Allentown, most of the action by the Americans had been limited to sporadic raids by small detachments and the obstruction of bridges and roads. Yet, once the enemy reached Bordentown, the main body of the American army was never more than 25 miles away.

Yet it is also again possible Washington saw no point in risking his army in a fight while the enemy had just abandoned the colonial capital—a victory that would cost him nothing. It was a question of striking when the advantage was as much in his favor as possible, though obviously that was somewhat a subjective matter.



The Battle of Monmouth Courthouse

On June 25, the British procession began the 18-mile march from Allentown to Monmouth Courthouse. A force under Major Joseph Bloomfield of the New Jersey line made repeated strikes on the British rear and managed to take 15 Hessian prisoners. An exhausted British army lumbered into Monmouth Courthouse on June 26, 1778.

At the same time, the entire American army massed at Hopewell, about eight miles from Princeton. Washington stayed in the house of Joseph Stout as his men prepared for action. His agenda was to maneuver his army into a full-scale battle at Monmouth Courthouse within a few days.

On June 25th the main body of the American army moved out of Hopewell and marched the seven miles to Rocky Hill and Kingston. They next left Kingston for Cranbury after sunset on June 25th and caught up with the advance guard under Lee at Englishtown on June 27th. On the morning of Sunday, June 28th, the British were camped along Dutch Lane and the

Cannonball still lodged in the
Crosswicks Friends Meeting House Wall
R. Mayer

Freehold-Mount Holly Road, while the main American army was camped at Manalapan Bridge, four miles west of Englishtown. Washington sent orders for Lee to attack and then he would bring up the main strength of the American army along the Monmouth Road to support him.

Clinton suspected that Washington would attack him in strength and ordered Hessian General Knyphausen to move north up the Middletown road. If he expected a full-strength offensive, why did he send the battle-tested Knyphausen away from his main army? Whatever the case, the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse had begun.

At 8:00 A.M. on June 28, 1778, General Charles Lee's advanced brigade struck the British rear guard a few miles north of Monmouth Courthouse. Lee's forces, west of the Middletown road, could have made an effective attack on the slowly moving column. Apparently, Lee gave no specific orders to his commanders, and they missed another opportunity to strike the redcoats at a vulnerable time. One possible explanation was that Lee was not familiar with the troops under his command, as he had been away from the army as a British prisoner from 1776 until May of 1778. It is also suggestive that General Lafayette was originally placed in command of the advance, but when Washington strengthened it, Lee pulled rank and took over. His idea was to scoop up the rear guard, but his advance was inept.

The legend of "Molly Pitcher" was born from events on the battlefield of Monmoth Courthouse

General Washington, advancing up Monmouth Road with the main American army, expected to encounter the rear of the British force. Instead, to everyone's surprise, he met Lee in a full retreat with a disoriented mob and the British in hot pursuit. The temperature was 96 degrees in the shade as the 5,000 weary and thirsty men tramped back along the road back to Englishtown. Lee insisted that the American forces were at risk and actually believed that he was saving the army by pulling back. There are several versions of the exhange between the two generals. Washington's language was reported as "strongly expletive" and "a terrific eloquence of unprintabe scorn." Washington then galloped forward and began rallying Lee's disordered troops.

This description has come under some suspicion by historians as embellished. It is questioned how much of a "disorganized mob" they really were. Even Washington's alleged profanity is debated—the witnesses who reported the interaction appear to have been nowhere near them at the time. Still, Lee would self-destruct his career regardless.

During the battle that followed, a camp follower, Mary Ludwig Hayes brought water to the fighting men from a nearby spring. According to one story, she was the wife of an American who came to battle with her husband, bringing water for swabbing the cannons and for the thirsty crews. But she took a soldier's place after he fell, and fought beside her husband under heavy fire with men falling about her. The artillery unit was about to fall back when she courageously saved the gun position. The legend of "Molly Pitcher" was born.

Aftermath

According to most accounts, the British suffered some 300 casualties and the Americans lost 350 men at Monmouth. Close to 100 men on both sides are thought to have died of heatstroke during the battle. However, recent conclusions have shown that both sides probably lost many more soldiers. The Americans likely lost close to 700 soldiers, and the British perhaps as many as a thousand soldiers.

The Battle of Monmouth Courthouse was technically a draw. Essentially, both sides had accomplished their objectives. The Americans had held the field and could claim a strategic victory and a political triumph. Their army had applied its Valley Forge training and stood as an equal to the British in a major European style battle. Although failing to win a decisive victory in New Jersey—perhaps due to the missed opportunities described—they had inflicted severe casualties on the finest British regiments. Monmouth proved that American troops—if properly led—could stand against the best army in the world. The battle marked the first time in the war that the Continental army was able to hold a battlefield and fight the full force of the British army to a standstill without the advantage of surprise.

Michael Fields Grave- Colts Neck, NJ
R. Mayer

The boost to American morale that respectable showing provided was not to be underestimated.

The exhausted British soldiers were allowed to rest for a few hours after the fighting broke off. In the evening they started marching northeast on the dusty lane that led toward Sandy Hook and set up camp at a place beyond Lincroft called Nut Swamp.

Washington did not attempt to pursue the retreating enemy. They would soon reach a strong defensive position on the high ground at Middletown that stretches into the highlands of the Navesink. As they neared the shoreline, they would come under the protection of the guns of the British naval fleet. Washington wanted to move his army north of New York City to defend the Hudson Highlands.

The morning after the battle the enemy procession moved through the area that today lies in the town of Colts Neck. Washington sent Generals Morgan and Maxwell with the New Jersey militia units to attack the rear of the retreating enemy, preventing further devastation of property and to encourage deserters. On the road to Middletown, Hessian Captain Ewald and his Jaegers reported being cut off on all sides as they moved toward the high ground to the east.

To follow the route of the British retreat from Monmouth Courthouse to Sandy Hook today, start at Freehold on West Main Street and head out of the center of town to Dutch Lane. The flat sandy road east was ideal for rapid evacuation of the British wagon train. Dutch Lane continues for about six miles through what was once called Montrose and connects with Revolutionary Road just below Vandenburg, where it falls off a few degrees to the south. Turn east onto Conover/Liard Road to the grave of Private Michael Field in a small roadside memorial park. Field was in the 1st Regiment, New Jersey Militia. He was wounded and captured in the battle and left here when the British army moved on.

The British route continued over Laird Road to Phalanx, where the troops crossed a ford at Swimming River. The route continues northeast along the Lincroft–Middletown Road.

On the evening of June 30th, their second day out from Middletown, the British army marched toward today's Borough of Highlands. This path can be followed today by taking King's Highway east to the village of Navesink. The terrain rises here and along the roadside are a number of historic markers that all say that the British army camped on both sides of the road on their way to Sandy Hook after the Battle of Monmouth on what are known as the "Heights of Middletown." The high ground here would have provided the redcoat army with a tactical advantage that could have defeated any pursing enemy forces.

King's Highway becomes Monmouth Avenue and intersects with Navesink Avenue (Route 36). The British continued a few hundred yards

John Montresor
c. 1771: John Singleton Copley

and then turned toward the Shrewsbury River, down Linden Avenue to Water Witch Avenue. These short streets descend a steep hill down into Huddy Park in the Borough of Highlands. By crossing over the park to Gravelly Point, the weary troops at last reached the river beach.

Advanced parties had sent word back that Sandy Hook was separated from the mainland by the narrow inlet. Captain John Montresor, Chief Engineer of the British forces, began building a pontoon bridge across the narrow 60-yard channel. The river here is much wider now. A 1781 survey of Monmouth County, drawn by I. Hill, shows the channel running through a swamp. But the place was since dredged to create the wide main channel that serves as the outlet to Sandy Hook Bay from the Shrewsbury River. Gravelly Point is a mile north of the Route 36, Sandy Hook-Highlands Bridge. Somewhere along this stretch, likely on the site of Bahrs Restaurant, was the pontoon bridge. The bridge crossed over to Plum Island on Sandy Hook near the toll gate to the present-day beaches that swarm with thousands of people during the summer months.

The British fleet arrived in the waters off Sandy Hook on the morning of the same day, and then sailed inside the bay to anchor and embark the army. For the next five days, the army crossed over the pontoon bridge or was ferried over the narrow channel on flatboats, to Sandy Hook where they would embark on the ships.

The men-of-war offered a reassuring sight to the troops that evening as they descended down to the beach at Gravelly Point. The exact site of the anchorage is unknown but local historians report that it was Horseshoe Cove on Sandy Hook, as that area has the depth required for deep draft vessels.

A marker near these anchorages reads, "British Embarkation—On July 5th, 1778, armies under General Sir Henry Clinton passed this point to reach British ships, at anchor off Horseshoe Cove, which evacuated them to New York. This completed their withdrawal through Middletown from Freehold after the Battle of Monmouth seven days earlier."

While waiting their turns to board the ships, the ominous sound of gunfire was heard in the distance. It was the guns of the Continental army at New Brunswick celebrating the second anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

It took three days to for the British forces to embark. Then the fleet sailed over Lower New York Bay and through the Narrows to the safety of Manhattan. New York City remained the principal base for British forces until the end of the war in 1783.

Archair generaling is certainly easier than making real life and death decisions on an actual battlefield. Reflecting on the New Jersey Campaign of 1778, it can seem curiously replete with occasions where both sides missed tantalizing windows of opportunity that could have inflicted heavy losses

General George Washington
1792: John Trumbull

and been decisive in bringing the war to an earlier end. This lack of a decisive confrontation created a stalemate that lasted for the next five years.

If the Americans had been more aggressive, they could have pounced on Clinton's vulnerable procession as the troops and civilians crossed the Delaware River. A vigorous assault there would have disrupted or entirely stopped the British campaign across New Jersey. Bolder strikes on the plodding miles long wagon train strung out during the eight days that it took the British to reach Monmouth Courthouse from the Delaware River did not occur, although Washington's army was only about 25 miles away during that entire time.

Why didn't Washington strike? Had an assault failed, it would have proven disastrous, not just for the troops, but the American cause as a whole. Picking his battles, Washington had to weigh the consequences of both success *and* failure, hoping to find a moment where the odds were as much in his favor as possible. It was a fine balance between not being so cautious as to miss opportunities, yet at the same time not becoming over-zealous and blundering into over your head.

During the final evacuation at Sandy Hook, could British forces have been annihilated as by a bombardment from the high ground of the Highlands of the Navesink as they crossed over the pontoon bridge to Sandy Hook? In theory, Continental gunfire raining down on the defenseless redcoats trapped on the barren and exposed strip of sand awaiting the prolonged evacuation would have been a disaster for the British forces and their civilian charges. It is to be wondered if American artillery, the mobile three- to six-pounders so effective on Combs Hill during the battle, could have raked the area from the bridge to Spermaceti Cove. Even if they could have, of course, the British naval ships packed heavier guns and could more easily shoot back. The arrival of the French fleet there only a few days later could have finished off the smaller English Navy that was helplessly anchored loading troops and supplies or blocked their passage over Sandy Hook Bay to New York. But at the time, no one was sure where the French were or when they would arrive.

General Howe, for the British side, with his formidable task force in Philadelphia, could have easily beaten the depleted, starving, and freezing Continental army during the hard winter at Valley Forge. Yet that was perhaps easier said than done. Aside from want of fodder for horses—effectively an 18th century gas shortage—the weather was severe. Moving men in high snow, ice, mud, etc. was never easy. There was a reason armies tended not to fight in winter.

The British army that crossed New Jersey in 1778 was completely self-contained with superior troop strength, weapons, and supplies. It had the infrastructure to engage in the all-out battle that the evasive Washington had avoided for the previous eight months. But that would require drawing

Monmouth Battlefield
2010: Gordon Bond

Washington into storming Middletown Heights—a move that would have been rather stupid for him to attempt. Yet, even if he could have been so-persuaded, all those wagons and civilians could have ended up proving to be too cumbersome. Further, they were under orders to get to New York, not bait Washington.

Reexamining the battle and the events that preceded and followed it nevertheless leads to the conclusion that, in fact, both sides performed quite well. They had both successfully emerged from great hardships before the engagement to fight a battle on one of the hottest days ever recorded in America. Clinton survived the exhausting march across New Jersey, and Washington's men stayed alive after a debilitating winter at Valley Forge.

Today, Monmouth Battlefield—the site of the largest one-day battle of the war when measured in terms of participants—is one of the best preserved Revolutionary War sites in the nation. The intervening years have imposed some changes from agricultural needs and the 19th centry draining of the morass. Nevertheless, the fields and forests that now make up the park cover a scenic rural landscape of hilly farmland and hedgerows that put one in mind of what the place looked like in the 18th century. The park also encompasses miles of hiking and horseback riding trails, picnic areas, and a restored Revolutionary War farmhouse.

And, each year, reenactors take to the field to give crowds some taste of the history—and the decisions—that were made there.

Sources: William S Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth* (Port Washington N.Y. 1927); Daniel M Sivilich and Gary W Stone, *The Archeology of Molly Pitcher, The Royal Highlanders and Colonel Cilley's Light Artillery,* Monmouth Battlefield Visitors Center Collection undated; Garry W. Stone, Daniel M. Sivilich and Mark E. Lender, " A Deadly Minuet: The Advance of the New England "Picked Men" against the Royal Highlanders at the Battle of Monmouth," *The Brigade Dispatch,* (1996); John,Peebles, The Diary of a Scottish Grenadier, 1776–1782 (Army Records Society U.K., 1998); Joseph Bilby and Katherine Bilby Jenkins *Monmouth Courthouse* (Yardley, PA, 2010). George H Moore, *The Treason of Charles Lee; Major General, Second in command of the American Army of the Revolution,*(New York N. Y. 1858). The New Jersey Gazette, July 1 1778. Burlington and Trenton, N.J.

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