

Lancaster City: A Revolutionary War Prison

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Abstract

The winter of Valley Forge, the defeat at Brandywine and the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia have long represented Pennsylvania's role during the American Revolution. However, our very own Lancaster city played a crucial and dynamic role during the Revolution, hosting thousands of British and German prisoners of war from 1775-1783. While prisoners of war are conventionally kept in tightly guarded barracks far away from civilian life, Lancaster was forced to be different. Unprepared for the sudden influx of prisoners they were being tasked to house, Congress instructed the citizens of Lancaster to let the prisoners walk among them in the town as a show of goodwill. Prisoners were free to walk within the confines of Lancaster city, with some officers even housing with elite families. The unique way that Lancaster dealt with their new identity as a prison town would drastically change the lives of residents, forever altering the city that many of us call home today. This research coincides with The Providence Project that is being run by Dr. Marlene Arnold, which explores the depth and lives of southeast Pennsylvania's earliest settlers.

War Comes to Lancaster (Again)

In 1775, Congress selected four Pennsylvanian inland towns York, Lancaster, Reading and Carlisle as detention centers for prisoners of war (Miller, 2012; Krebs, 2013). Lancaster was chosen for two very good reasons. It still had modern barracks from the Seven Years War and was far enough inland to discourage prisoner escapes. (Evans, 1985; Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979). Congress wanted prisoners accessible for prisoner exchanges and far enough away from battles that they could not escape to the enemy. It was also Lancaster's geography that made it a prime location for housing war materials. Gunpowder, rifles, muskets,

and staples were stored in the city so they could be distributed with ease (Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979).

Citizens of Lancaster were apprehensive about housing prisoners of war (Woods, 1979; Miller, 2015). Britain's Coercive Acts, which had closed off Boston's ports and put their local government under British control, had heightened Lancaster residents' political activism and awareness, yet the borough was still barely a decade removed from the Seven Years War (Miller, 2015). Yet, regardless of their reservations, prisoners were coming to Lancaster.

Lancaster's Committee of Observation had little time to prepare for the first 380 prisoners that arrived from Canada in December 1775 (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). The prisoners only had two days provisions on them, which led to the question of who would later provide them with essentials (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979). The committee had received little instruction for how to supply these captives, which included 60 women and children (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979). Local Committee of Safety member Matthias Slough paid for provisions out of his own pocket for the month of December, otherwise the prisoners would have received nothing (Krebs, 2013). It was only in January did Lancaster's Committee of Observation learn that Philadelphia merchant David Franks was in charge of supplying British prisoners and he was soon contracted to supply for Lancaster's prisoners. However, he was directed not to supply for the women and children. (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015;). With Congress still not offering any directions, local officials supplied the women and children with blankets and linens "on the public account" (Miller, 2012).

Lancaster, a Revolutionary Prison

With suddenly over 400 prisoners, Lancaster faced a daunting task. Without an official prisoner of war doctrine, the local committee was unsure how prisoners should be maintained. It was decided to follow Connecticut's decision, as they treated prisoners with kindness and respect. The goal was to sway British captives' views towards their captors (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2012). General George Washington supported this notion, stating in a letter to the committee of Hartford, Connecticut in 1775, "allow me to recommend a gentleness, even to forbearance, with persons so entirely

in our power. We know not what the chance of war may be; but . . . the duties of humanity and kindness will demand from us such a treatment as we should expect from others, the case being reversed"(Washington, 2004). As a result of this tactic, The Lancaster Committee of Safety allowed the employment of British captives to businesses in Lancaster in order to bolster production and encourage positive interactions between captors and captives (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). British officers were also permitted to find lodgings in the town, although, this was difficult due to residents' fear of being labeled a loyalist (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013; Wood, 1979). Notable officers who lived in town were Major John Andre, who resided in the home of Caleb Cope and Major Thomas Hughes (Wood, 1979).

The decision to treat prisoners kindly was difficult, as it was known American prisoners were poorly treated by the British, often being confined to prison ships and extremely deplorable conditions (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013; Allen, 2008). Viewed as insurgents rather than an opposing nation, American prisoners were treated worse than the average prisoner (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). Captured American officer Colonel Ethan Allen goes into great detail regarding his treatment as an American prisoner, recalling "the cruel and relentless disposition and behaviour of the enemy, towards the prisoners in their power." (Allen, 2008) Yet, negative reciprocation was avoided and a liberal prisoner policy was enforced in January 1776.

British Prisoners in Lancaster

With provisions secured and a relaxed confinement policy in place, Lancaster's local committees were still left on their own regarding the upkeep of their

new prisoners, as Congress offered little to no further guidance regarding their treatment at the time (Krebs, 2013). With prisoners eligible for local work and officers permitted to walk and live in town, British prisoners enjoyed a level of freedom that most prisoners did not experience. Officers were still allowed to gather their captured men in file as well, although mostly, for the distribution of money (Krebs, 2013). A guard comprised of locals was posted at the barracks to maintain the peace of the borough. Although the barracks were overcrowded, as there were 52 rooms for nearly 400 prisoners, the barracks were recognized as extremely accommodating. Each room had a window and a fireplace and the stone/brick walls helped retain heat (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). John Hancock observed these comfortable conditions on a trip to the Lancaster barracks in January 1776, stating that, “as men, they have a claim to all the rights of humanity. As countrymen, though enemies they claim something more” (Miller, 2012; Krebs, 2013).

Lancaster’s kindness was met with contempt by the British prisoners. British officials refused to bow to conventions in a war against domestic rebels, fearing that any recognition of the Americans’ belligerent status might legitimize the insurgency (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). As a result, many British prisoners were rowdy and defiant. According to Lancaster’s councilman John Nixon, “the kind treatment given them meets with very improper and indecent return . . . they often express themselves in most disrespectful and offensive terms, and openly threaten revenge whenever opportunity shall present” (Miller, 2012). Whether it was verbal abuse or attempted escapes, the situation prompted the Pennsylvania’s Council of Safety to petition for their relocation in February 1776

(Miller, 2015). Although rejected, Lancaster decided to relocate officers to Carlisle and York to discourage united uprisings (Miller, 2015). This further exacerbated tension, angry officers argued that their capitulation conditions were violated and that their poor health required staying in Lancaster. When transferred, they threatened revenge, which made the community uneasy (Miller, 2012).

By summer 1776, the British were not changing their behavior towards their captors. British prisoners were caught in American Rifleman clothing and suspected of spying (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). The decision to give prisoners liberal freedoms was only resulting in heightened tensions and violent flare-ups. As a result, Congress ordered, shortly after July 4th, 1776, to enclose prisoners in barracks and separate them from civilians as much as possible.

Although the conflicts between captors and captives began to destroy any chances at attaining British sympathy, tradesmen were still hiring out skilled prisoners for work. Receiving a mixed reception, it was feared that employment afforded more conspiracy or escape opportunities (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). Yet, heightened production of goods and reduction of the barracks’ population, as employed prisoners could house with employers, made it futile to entirely discourage (Krebs, 2013). As a safeguard against escapes, employers were charged a fee if hired prisoners escaped (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013; Woods, 1979). Added security was implemented, so by 1777 confined British officers were required to always wear their uniforms in public and locals, unfit for combat, guarded the prisoners and ammunition stores in town (Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979). However, in 1777, some rowdy prisoners seized a militiaman and stole his arms. After clubbing a few more

militiamen and attempting an escape, they were stopped by other guards. This attempted riot led to more heightened security and fear among the residents regarding their safety (Miller, 2015; Wood, 1979).

For the duration of the war, the attitudes and actions of captured British regulars and officers did not improve. As the British prisoner population fluctuated, from a low of 50 in 1777 to a high of 1400 in 1782, Lancaster residents remained anxious (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013; Woods, 1979). Escapes proved to be a constant issue later in the war. It is estimated that over 500 British prisoners escaped from 1778-1782 (Miller, 2015). To curtail escapes, Congress sent troops to replace the militia performing guard duty in 1781 (Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979). When the troops arrived, an American officer disguised himself as a British prisoner to learn their escape routes. It worked. Fifteen were arrested and tried and further escape numbers dwindled (Woods, 1979).

German Prisoners of Lancaster

The British contracted the German army to aid in the overseas conflict as well. Under British command, over 30,000 German soldiers, collectively known as Hessians, were reputed ruthless mercenaries (Krebs, 2013). American feelings worsened when news spread of the carnage inflicted on the Continental Army by Hessian forces at the Battle of Long Island and Fort Mifflin. (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013) American prisoner Colonel Ethan Allen refers to his Hessian guards in New York as, “a people of a strange language, who were sent to America for no other design but cruelty and desolation” (Allen, 2008).

The animosity towards them contributed to the elation felt when General Washington captured an estimated 800 Hessian soldiers at Trenton in December 1776 and 100 Hessians during the Battle for Princeton in January 1777 (Krebs, 2013). When announced that the captured Hessians would be led to Lancaster, its residents became uneasy (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013; Evans, 1985). Although the barracks had been expanded to hold a little over 700 prisoners in 1776, there was still not enough room (Krebs, 2013). The arrival meant there were around 77 prisoners per room (Krebs, 2013). With an ill timed food shortage coinciding with overcrowding, Hessian prisoners were soon permitted to work in towns up to 50 miles away (Krebs, 2013). This reduced crowding and prisoners could earn money to buy their own goods.

This decision was controversial; yet, Congress and General Washington hoped to exploit the Hessians for their own gain and tempt them into desertion/defection (Krebs, 2013). The hope was that keeping Hessian prisoners in a heavily German influenced area would foster rapport among German locals and prisoners of war (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015). Congress also hoped that being a foreign army, without British loyalty and no stake in the war, would make their desertion to America easy (Krebs, 2013). The efforts faltered when Hessian soldiers expressed disappointment at how the Continental Army performed in New York (Krebs, 2013). Yet, Congress still intended to show the prisoners the wealth of freedom and prosperity that America offered, hoping that by hiring out Hessian prisoners, they could meet this goal. It is estimated that about 300 skilled prisoners were employed by April 1777, with that number growing to 600 within a few weeks (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013). Skilled professionals were lacking, so Hessian weavers, tailors,

shoemakers and others were easily employed by tradesmen (Krebs, 2013). Employing them proved mutually beneficial, as Hessian laborers filled a serious void left by men fighting in the war. Prisoners, meanwhile, were able to enjoy lodgings away from the barracks, as well as small wages and food (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013).

The crucial factor making it possible was the demeanor Hessian prisoners had. Without the emotional loyalty that British prisoners maintained for their cause, Hessian prisoners were much better behaved and emotionally detached (Miller, 2015; Krebs, 2013; Woods, 1979). Hessian Regimental Quartermaster Lieutenant Matthauss Muller describes the Hessian prisoners during his visit of Lancaster's barracks, stating that the Hessians "were quartered in the middle wing [of the barracks] and everything was peaceful and quiet" (Krebs, 2013). During the British prisoner's riot in 1777, Hessian prisoners refused to aid fellow British prisoners (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015). This decision resulted in good faith towards Hessian prisoners from Lancaster's citizens.

As a result of their docile nature in captivity, Lancaster's citizens enjoyed their Hessian prisoners (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979). They were permitted more freedom than their British captives. They were given the freedom to leave the barracks for work while the British slowly lost that privilege (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015). Hessian prisoners working farther from town only had to report to the barracks twice a week for roll, while those in town had to report twice a day for roll (Krebs, 2013). So enjoyed was Hessian company in town that a Hessian prisoner's band gained notoriety, often playing for the rich families of Lancaster during the war (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979).

Although Hessian prisoners enjoyed their comfortable captivity, desertion rates were much lower than hoped (Krebs 2013; Miller, 2015). Despite General Knyphausen noting that 132 prisoners were missing from the 900 exchanged in 1778, this number included those who had died or were too sick to travel (Krebs, 2013). In reality, it is estimated that only 6-10% of Hessians captured at Trenton deserted, much less than the average desertion rate of 18-20% among European armies of the 18th century (Krebs, 2013).

Conclusion

Lancaster's circumstances surrounding captivity did not fully apply to other colonial detention centers. With a detention center network from Boston to Vera Cruz, life in prisoner detention centers was subjective and unique. However, Lancaster quickly became the model site throughout the colonies, as other detention centers used their barracks blueprints and prisoner of war policies (Krebs, 2013; Miller, 2015; Woods, 1979).

Lancaster would remain a primary detention center for prisoners for the duration of the war. Its strategic location made it a primary location for prisoners. Playing host to over 3000 prisoners for seven years was no easy task, as problems like insolence, provisions, sickness and crowding persisted. Tension was high and violent outbursts were never too far away. Preconceived notions were turned on their head, as the British behaved anything but gentlemanlike and the Hessians acted far from savages in captivity. These shattered preconceptions meant that citizens of Lancaster, and the colonies alike, had to be ready to adapt at a moment's notice, otherwise the war would be lost.

Lancaster may now just be another peaceful city/county that blends in with the rest of southeastern Pennsylvania, but 242 years ago, it was prisoner city.

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