***Why Teach Morristown?***

**Morristown and the Revolutionary War: SOME INTERPRETIVE THEMES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

Mark Edward Lender Nathan Weiss School of Graduate Studies, Kean University

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Morristown's central role in the War for Independence offers a particularly useful window on the entire Revolutionary experience. The story of a particularly important town and its inhabitants during a war is intrinsically interesting, and good local history is a helpful teaching point in and of itself. But what happened at Morristown was more than a good story. For, closely observed, events in the small rural community intersected with most of the

major trends shaping the Revolution itself. Morristown presents a case study of the interpretive themes deriving from the conflict, with all of their military, social, economic, and other implications. “Teaching Morristown” is a way to place broad and complex questions in a local context, making them more explicable.

This paper offers a brief overview of what actually took place in Morristown during the War for Independence. It then presents some thematic perspectives on the Revolution as reflected in the Morristown experience, offering suggestions as to why these are especially important in teaching about the Revolution generally.

**Morristown: The Revolution’s “Military Capital”**

When the War for Independence erupted in 1775, the residents of Morristown, New Jersey, had little reason to suspect that their town would play a central role in the conflict. Yet by late 1776, Morristown occupied a key position in Patriot operations, and thereafter, events unfolded in a way that assured the country village's fame as America's de facto military capital.

Morristown was a modest farming community when war and revolution brought Patriot armies there. The town could boast only some seventy homes and other buildings; about 250 people lived around the square and along the nearby streets and country lanes. Although predominant, farming was not the only way of life. A cadre of skilled artisans and craftsmen made saddles and farm implements. There was a small but established commercial and professional community that met the needs of Morris County inhabitants.

Though small, Morristown was the center of regional economic, legal, political, and social life. As the county seat, it boasted the courthouse and jail. There were two popular taverns, and Presbyterian and Baptist churches. Morristown also enjoyed a good location, lying in a central position along the best transportation routes across northern New Jersey. One contemporary described the place as “a very clever little village” with “a consequential look.” Thus, even before the war, Morristown's small size belied its importance as a rural center.

It was largely its location that brought the Continental military forces to Morristown. Washington quickly appreciated Morristown's strategic importance. It is protected to the east and south by the Watchung Mountains and the Great Swamp. The hills of the Watchungs provided good observation of points south, and the main inland highway from the Hudson Highlands to Philadelphia ran through Morristown. So did the main highway from Newark and Elizabethtown to the hills of Morris County. From the relative protection of the village, Washington could strike at the British whether they moved north or south. Significantly, the surrounding farms of Morris County were productive, and patriot commanders relied on local agriculture to help feed thousands of men and animals while it continued to support the civilian population. The iron mines and fabrication works to the north were important. This nascent iron industry provided the army with a considerable proportion of its shot and other sinews of war. Jacob Ford, Jr., an active patriot and a colonel in the rebel militia, constructed and operated one of the state's rare but vital powder mills. For the rebel army, then, the town was an almost perfect base area.

It was this role as a base and staging area that accounted for a virtually constant military presence at Morristown. From late 1775 until the end of the war, the village and its immediate precincts saw the coming and going of large and small units of militia and Continental troops; supply, storage, and logistics operations; and major hospital and training efforts.

**The Morristown Timeline**

The Morristown area witnessed its share of Revolutionary drama, including nearby battles, a winter more brutal as the legendary Valley Forge's, and an army mutiny. It would be difficult to interpret the importance of this wartime village without at least an overview of the period. Even a brief chronology illustrates how significantly the coming of the War for Independence transformed a farming town into the rebellion’s “Military Capital.”

**Spring 1775 - Fall 1776**

Morristown patriots reacted to the news of Lexington and Concord by organizing local committees to maintain contact with other New Jersey patriots. As the resistance movement gathered strength, local leaders became fully involved with provincial Whig (Patriot) political action. Local militia units formed and Patriots leaders organized the collection of military supplies. The town was a recognized Whig political and militia center by mid-1775. The first refugees from British-occupied New York trickled into town during the early fall of 1776, with the number increasing substantially when New Jersey itself was invaded in November.

**November - December 1776**

The village was a major refuge for those fleeing the British advance across the state. In late November, in One of the few instances where militia fought well against British regulars, gritty local resistance at Hobart's Gap stopped an enemy probe from moving through the Short Hills toward Morristown. This preserved the area as a rebel stronghold, and as a safe haven for Washington's army, which arrived in early January 1777. The town became a major destination for Continental troops moving south from New England and west across northern New Jersey to join Washington's main army, which had crossed into Pennsylvania in early December.

**January - February 1777**

On January 6, the rebel army arrived in Morristown after the Trenton-Princeton Campaign, and took up winter quarters in the Morristown area . Over January and February, the army underwent inoculation for small pox. The effort, although largely successful, did not prevent the disease from causing some deaths among soldiers and civilians.

**Spring - Summer 1777**

Unmolested by the British, Washington successfully rebuilt the Continental Army and used Morristown as a base to wage a small scale war of harassment against the British (then occupying a strip of New Jersey from New Brunswick to Perth Amboy). In April, Morristown was the staging area for the major Patriot redeployment to Middlebrook, which helped the British decide to evacuate New Jersey in June. Over the spring and summer, epidemics of smallpox and dysentery, probably brought by the army and refugees, hit the town hard; by the end of the year, 205 residents of the area had died. It was a death rate some 700% above the normal annual rate.

**1777 - 1779**

With Washington's main army on campaign elsewhere, Morristown served as a storage site for military supplies, guarded mostly by state militia. Local militia and political activities continued through this period.

**Winter 1779 - 1780**

The army endured the worst winter of the war while encamped at Jockey Hollow. Washington made his headquarters at the Ford mansion, while other senior and staff officers lodged with residents throughout the town. Severe weather, poor supplies, and a depreciated currency hurt troop morale; in May, after the worst weather had passed, a Connecticut regiment threatened mutiny. In June, the encampment ended as the army moved out to face the British advance in the Springfield Campaign.

**Winter 1780 - 1781**

On January 1, 1781, the Pennsylvania Line, wintering in some of the Jockey Hollow huts built the year before, mutinied and marched out of camp. Most of the men returned to duty on January 8, when negotiations at Princeton resolved some of the worst of the grievances over enlistments. But the incident sparked rebellion in the New Jersey Line as well, and severely threatened the effectiveness of the entire army.

**August 1782**

After the Yorktown Campaign, the New Jersey Line camped again at Jockey Hollow near the Wick Farm. They marched out on August 29, 1782, finally ending the Continental presence at Morristown.

We could add to this list easily, but the point is clear enough. Few towns contributed so directly to the rebel military effort and to the final Patriot victory. The Morristown story was revealing, reflecting in turns the drama, tedium, and tragedies or the wider war. It was, in short, a town with a story worth studying — and certainly a town worth “teaching" as well.

**Interpreting Morristown and the Revolution: Some Teaching Points**

Teaching implies interpretation and selection. There is neither time or need to teach everything about a place, no matter how interesting or important. But in selecting what to teach, we also need to draw as revealing a picture as we can. Efforts to interpret the experience of Morristown in the Revolution — that is, to extract some wider meaning or lessons from what happened during the war years — can take any number of directions. In explaining British and American military strategies in the field, for example, many historians have used Morristown to illustrate the importance of terrain and location in determining the planning and concerns of both sides. The point is a good one, and we will deal with it further later on, as well as with using the town to teach about other aspects of the military phase of the Revolution.

Events in Morristown served to demonstrate issues beyond military affairs. The war also had significant social implications, and Morristown is a convenient means for talking about them as well. Two are of particular concern. First, we should note that regional demography was unusually diverse, a fact that Morristown increasingly reflected as the war brought new populations from across the state, other colonies, and even from abroad. This diversity had profound implications in explaining who did the fighting, who stayed home, and who played which social roles as the war dragged on. Second, we need to deal with the matter of civil war — and specifically the fact that the War for Independence in New Jersey was, in reality, a particularly bitter example of such a war. The civil conflict was also part of the Morristown experience, and it touched on the issue of why individuals across the colonies chose their loyalties as they did and the matter of the consequences of those loyalties. The key point in all of this is that wars have an impact that reach far beyond the battlefield, and what happened at Morristown affords a particularly apt means of explaining a matter that remains as important in our age as it was two centuries ago.

Among possible approaches to the “teaching" of Morristown, then (with an emphasis on the points stressed above), would be the following:

**1. Elements of British Strategy**

In an important sense, the observation that “geography is destiny" fully describes the situation of Morristown during the War for Independence. For that matter, the entire state was a crucial battleground because of its location between New York and Philadelphia. It was an unenviable situation: New Jersey lay between the de facto rebel capital on one side and the chief enemy garrison on the other. For the British, control of the New Jersey interior would have secured the roads toward Philadelphia and provided a security screen for New York City. As we have seen, however, Morristown was the key to the interior transportation routes in northern new Jersey, and whoever held the town effectively controlled the road network. Failure to take Morristown, or to keep Washington from using it, was a serious impediment to British operations.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the case of Morristown reflected an even wider British problem with New Jersey geography. Holding the state, or at least key districts, was also crucial to river navigation, which was central to colonial communications. In the East, the British wanted to control the Hudson River and occupy northern New Jersey so they could isolate New England from the middle and southern states. Maritime raids from across the Hudson and other New York area waterways made life in eastern New Jersey particularly dangerous. In the West, British commanders saw New Jersey positions along the Delaware River as important to maintaining their forces in operations against Philadelphia in 1777 and during the occupation of the city. They also saw the New Jersey side of the Delaware as a foraging area and as a jumping-off point for operations in the New Jersey interior. Similarly, the state's smaller rivers, such as the Raritan, and the exposed New Jersey coastline left the state vulnerable to British maritime superiority. If these coastal raids stung, however, they were never fatal; the British were never able to penetrate the New Jersey interior with enough force to land a knock-out blow. In war, as in real estate, location was everything, and Morristown was the location that gave the Patriots the edge in the vital interior.

The British also wanted New Jersey as a base of supply. While New Jersey was not yet called “The Garden State,” it was one of the bread-baskets of the British Empire, and royal officers hoped to feed the New York garrison and to support operations from - the state's produce and forage. They devoted enormous resources to foraging in the state, and expeditions to secure food and fodder accounted for most of the hundreds of small unit actions fought on - New Jersey soil. The Hackensack Valley, the Jones rest of Bergen County, Essex County (especially sections contiguous to Staten

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Yet this “forage campaign” was one of the biggest British disappointments of the war, and we already have mentioned the role that Patriot forces operating out of the Morristown area played in this phase of the conflict. While devastating to New Jersey farmers and to the state economy, predations on regional agriculture ultimately became too expensive in casualties and military resources, and as the war dragged on the British turned increasingly to sea-borne supplies from Ireland and Britain. Their forces were stretched too thin to risk prolonged foraging in the state interior, and losing access to New Jersey supplies constituted a major defeat. The fighting punished and disrupted New Jersey; but British operations neither subdued the state nor effectively exploited its resources.

In addition, the topography of New Jersey also gave shape to broad strategy. If the British preferred to control the water, they avoided the riskier meadows and rivers of northeastern New Jersey and the mountains and valleys of the northwest. There were inviting targets in these areas: the vital logistical and training center at mining and fabricating works in Morris and Sussex Counties, the rich agriculture of the western interior of the state. But the Watchungs and other hilly and wooded districts offered the rebels excellent defensive terrain, and enemy probes from the south generally came to grief. The attempts to break through to Morris County in November 1776 at Short Hills, for example, or during the Springfield Campaign of 1780, demonstrated how costly such operations could be, and how easily a British force might be trapped or badly cut up when separated from their main bases.

**2. Elements of American Strategy**

American military strategy essentially mirrored enemy efforts. Rebel commanders sought to frustrate British efforts to hold northern and central New Jersey, and they did this precisely because they fully understood how vital those areas were to the success of British operations. Patriots hoped to keep the northern and the southern Colonies in communication with One another, and simultaneously to prevent an overland attack on Philadelphia, the seat of Congress. They did both. The northern parts of the state, including the entire length of the upper Delaware River, remained open to rebel troop movements, commerce, agriculture, munitions production, and communications.

In all of this, the role of Morristown was central. Indeed, with the British holding New York, the roads through the Morristown area offered the best and most secure lines of communication between North and South, and intercolonial couriers, commerce, and troop movements became a regular feature of village life. In 1777, rebel control Of the interior

compelled the British to Adams attack Philadelphia by sea instead of marching across New Jersey, which cost them invaluable time and resources, and which prevented any effective assistance to the army of General John Burgoyne, who subsequently surrendered at Saratoga. Maintaining effective control of the northern and interior sections of the state constituted a real American strategic advantage.

The Patriot forces for their part also made use of New Jersey geography. They fought a larger, better equipped, and trained army by waging what today would be called a guerilla war. Using surprise attacks on exposed enemy positions and avoiding the larger general engagements in the open field, or between well entrenched forces, both more common to eighteenth century warfare, the Continentals mounted an effective defensive campaign against stronger forces. In the Christmas Campaign at Trenton and Princeton, for example, they used an intimate knowledge of local roads and conditions to launch attacks on their own terms and to flee to safety before the baffled British could react. Less dramatic, but ultimately of equal importance, were the small-scale assaults on British foraging operations which denied New Jersey supplies to an increasingly desperate enemy. These would have been impossible without rebel command of key interior terrain and communications routes, which allowed the success of hit-and-run tactics, and the secure base area at Morristown, which supported re-supply and reorganization. Terrain favored the rebels, and they used it intelligently and made the most of it. In fact, Morristown is probably the best example one can use in making this point in a classroom. Protected by the Watchung Mountains, Morristown was close enough to British positions in New York to support offensive operations, but an attack on Morristown itself posed formidable problems for the British — problems they never solved. The base was a key haven for American forces. After the Battle of Princeton, for instance, the victorious but exhausted rebels found security in and around the town. They also feverishly rebuilt the army over the rest of the 1777 winter and emerged to fight again in the spring, a feat which must stand as one of the military miracles of the war. The

Patriots spent several winters at Morristown as well, including the most brutal of the war in 1780 and 1781. As well as serving as a base, Morristown also protected key iron works, supply depots, support bases, and powder mills of northern New Jersey, all of which made essential contributions to the Patriot cause. War is full of irony, and can assign major importance even to the smallest of places. In this case, terrain dictated that a village of well under three hundred souls would assume a significance out of all proportion to its prewar role in New Jersey society — for it would be difficult to overstate the importance of Morristown to the rebel war effort.

**3. A War in “Many Voices”**

New Jersey was probably the most diverse state in the rebellion. Most, if not all, major cultural and ethnic groups present in British North America were represented in New Jersey long before Independence, and the impact of the war touched all of them. The war also defined roles for women as well as men; and civilian life (the “home front”) was as important as military operations in the waging of the conflict and in accounting four for its results. “Who” lived in an area can matter as much as “what” happened there. -

As the experience of Morristown made clear, the war certainly tested identities and loyalties. Most Presbyterians, for example, were implacable Patriots; and their leaders, such as John Witherspoon of the College of New Jersey in Princeton, or James Caldwell, the “Fighting Parson” of Springfield, were among the clerical “Black Legion” so hated by the forces Of the Crown. Thus, it was with the Morristown population, descended as most of the town was from its Puritan New England forebears. In addition to its other attributes, then, the Patriot army also counted on the firm loyalty of most local residents. Anglicans and the small numbers of Methodists, both with traditional ties to Britain, found it hard to shake suspicions of Loyalism, and Morristown numbered very few adherents to these denominations.

African Americans, free and slave, faced trials as well in New Jersey. They were a significant part of the population, New Jersey having proportionately larger African American population than any other northern colony. In some areas, the black presence was quite pronounced: in Bergen County, for example, free blacks and slaves may have constituted as much as twenty percent of the population. There were slaves in Morris County as well, however, and the town saw Other blacks arrive with refugees and in militia and Continental ranks. In fact, the army that camped at Jockey Hollow was an integrated army, a point to which we will return. Some African-Americans bore arms for whites who hired or even bought them to fight as substitutes, while Others enlisted as free men of their own volition. Still others, hoping for freedom, escaped to the British, and some of these served the King gallantly ashore and afloat. The rhetoric of the Revolution, with its strident contrasts of “Liberty” and “Slavery” also helped evoke some of the first serious concerns about black servitude among whites. The war did not immediately make life remarkably different for New Jersey's slaves, but for the first time, it did put the question of their status on the public agenda.

The diversity of war-time Morristown was evident in other ways. Indeed, virtually all ethnic groups were represented in Patriot ranks, including recent immigrants from Europe, blacks, Native Americans, runaway slaves and indentured servants, enemy deserters, and even criminals serving in ranks instead of in jails. The New Jersey Continental (regular army) regiments, which spent several winters at Jockey Hollow or other regional encampments, were composed mostly young and poor rank and file with an officer corps drawn from the state's middle class and wealthier social strata. Behind the regulars were the militia. These were mostly farm-owning local forces who fought the war close to home. They participated in much of the skirmishing in the state, patrolled to gather intelligence for the Continentals, suppress loyalists, guard prisoners, and maintain local law and order.

Finally, the army “camp followers” were an important element of the armed forces. Entire families marched with the Continental forces. Wives and single women performed all manner of camp duties including cooking, washing, nursing, foraging, and local marketing (the role of camp followers as prostitutes, while certainly true to an extent, has been largely over-stated). In fact, women were not a particular rarity close to the lines or, less often (as would have been the case for any noncombatant), even on the battlefield. Certainly Washington conceded the importance of women with the army when, following European practice, he allowed up to fifteen women per regiment to draw Official rations. Thus, the Morristown army encampments were not solely the province of men.

The “home front” was as active in New Jersey as it was anywhere during the war. New Jersey farms, as we have seen, were of prime interest to both sides, and harvests were the objects of considerable bloodshed. Farmers suffered cruelly. Rebel and British forces trampled fields as part of marches and combat, and both sides pillaged with a free hand. In fact, the depredations of Patriot troops did little to help civil-military relations. By the end of the war, the agricultural economy was in desperate condition, the result of the last and only major war fought on New Jersey soil. Still, a surprisingly large number of period farms have survived. The Wick farm at Jockey Hollow was under cultivation during the Revolution, and there are plenty of smaller examples in virtually all sections of New Jersey.

If farming was the heart of society, other economic activities received impetus from the war. The iron industry and milling operations that grew vigorously around Morristown were indicative of similar developments across the state. There is solid evidence that all family members, including women and children, had to shoulder burdens, agricultural, shop, and otherwise, left by men off on military duty. Actual work roles at Morristown and elsewhere were not necessarily so strictly defined by gender as more traditional views of the period might suggest.

**4. The War within the War: The Revolution as a Civil War**

Civil war in New Jersey was especially bitter. Loyalist-Patriot conflicts often split family networks as well as communities, and the divisions included some of the most prominent family groups in the state. Animosities were deep, and there were many brutal incidents as Patriot-Tory reprisals and counter-reprisals ranged across the state. In New Jersey, the friends of the King went down fighting.

Loyalism was widespread in New Jersey and a constant factor in the course of the war. Thousands of New Jersey men enlisted in “Skinner's Greens” (Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner was the last Royal Attorney General of colonial New Jersey), and earned a reputation as some of best troops in British army. They fought on fields from New Jersey to South Carolina. The British valued New Jersey a prime recruiting area, and some of their operations in the state were intended to foster Tory enlistments. While precise numbers are hard to verify, it appears likely that as many Jerseymen fought as Tory regulars as served in the Continental Line.

There also were Tory irregulars. In Monmouth County, for example, the “Pine Robbers” were a source of terror and turmoil, and organized Loyalists groups operating out of New York raided frequently along the exposed New Jersey coastline. Loyalism never died a natural death; it had to be killed. It was contested through local Patriot terror against suspected Tory individuals and families, through confiscation of Tory estates, prosecutions for disloyalty (which could be a hanging offense), and through driving thousands of New Jersey residents into exile. It was a grim business, but there was no counter-revolution in New Jersey.

For much of the war, the issue of the Loyalists was muted in Morristown. The rebel sympathies of most of the surrounding populace, and the fact that known Tories generally fled to British lines early in the struggle, kept this issue largely in check. However, events in the town certainly did mirror the animosities born of civil war. In early 1777, for example, Patriot authorities were using the gallows on the Morristown green. Several dozen Tories, taken in arms and convicted of treason, were marched to the green and two of them (both officers) were hung. The rest received a grim choice: hang with their officers or enlist in the Continental forces for the duration of the war. They enlisted, and most served honorably.

**A Concluding Note**

With the end of the war, Morristown resumed its place as a rural center. Once more, the seasons and the harvests set the pace of regional life. The huts at Jockey Hollow fell into disuse and were cleared; campgrounds returned to pasture or fields, or were simply reclaimed by the woods. But the town could never fully revert to its pre-war existence. Too much had happened. Veterans entered public life and many became politically prominent based on their service records. The public agenda now included a broadening of the democratic process, which encompassed changing views of such fundamental matters as slavery and the nature of the new national government. Residents kept alive memories of the encampments, and as the years went by, local lawyers processed pension applications for aging veterans and their widows and orphans. The war and its legacies had become part of the local heritage. It still is. The local heritage, however, remains part of the national heritage. In many ways, the events in and around Morristown constituted a microcosm of the entire Revolutionary experience — and it should be taught as such.

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