

Spanning the Gap

"On the Frontier of New Jersey" An Introduction to Military Trail



U.S. Dept. of the Interior
National Park Service

Spanning the Gap
The newsletter of
Delaware Water Gap National
Recreation Area
Vol. 22 No. 2 Summer 2000



In 1758, this part of New Jersey was frontier. The hills and valleys were inhabited by Lenape natives, whom Europeans called the *Delaware*, and by several hundred white settlers. As more white settlers arrived, increasing friction between the settlers and the natives exploded in the French and Indian

War. Indian attacks and raids caused the Pennsylvania and New Jersey legislatures to authorize the building of blockhouses and fortifications. The "forts" were often little more than sturdy stone farmhouses that were strengthened against attack and enclosed by a palisade.

(Left) Military Trail in winter, climbing eastward over the top of Walpack Ridge.



Military encampment on Van Campen Day, 1990s.



(Left) Shapanack Flats from Old Mine Road. Beyond the trees is the Delaware River. The hills beyond the river are across the river in Pennsylvania.

A letter from Captain Jonathan Hampton, Quartermaster, dated "Headquarters, on the Frontier of New Jersey, May17" (1758) mentions seven forts in existence. Eventually, there were 16 forts along the river on the Jersey side.

The largest one was built around the dwelling of John Rosencrans, a colonel in the local militia. It was located on a high knoll a few hundred yards north of the dwelling of Van Campen Inn. Known as Fort Johns or Headquarters, it commanded a view of the Shappanack flats along the Delaware River. The site of the fort has been the subject of archeological investigations in the park.

To aid in the transportation of supplies to the forts, new roads were built or old ones improved. Military Road developed in 1756 to haul supplies from Elizabethtown to Headquarters for distribution to the other forts along the river. Hampton's map of 1758 shows it is approximately 60 miles from Elizabethtown to Fort Johns.

Much of this road is still in existence today. The modern route would be from Newton to Halsey, Balesville and Myrtle Grove. It then becomes Sussex County Route 521 to Mecca Lake. It is at this point an old trail, barely passable, goes over the mountain to Brinks Road in Stokes State Forest and then follows the present day road to Tillmans Ravine and crosses the Flatbrook to Walpack Center. From Walpack Center it crossed Pompey Ridge to Shapanack. This one-mile section within the recreation area is designated *Military Trail*.



The north side of Van Campen Inn, showing the scar where the kitchen "wing" (actually an earlier structure than the house) was taken away..



Detail of stoneworks at Fort Johns site, possibly the blockhouse.



Detail of gravestones found elsewhere in the park and placed along the route.

The road again played a part in military strategy during the Revolutionary War. On December 10, 1776, General Gates arrived from Kingston with seven regiments, including one commanded by the future traitor Benedict Arnold. The soldiers camped on the flats in front of the Van Campen Inn. Five days later, Gates used Military Road to cross over the mountain to Sussex Court House (Newton), on his way to join George Washington in the Battle of Trenton.

Count Casimir Pulaski, the Revolutionary War hero from Poland, was briefly assigned to the Shapanack area with 250 cavalry and infantry soldiers. Colonel Philip Van Cortlandt marched down the Old Mine Road past Van Campen Inn and on to Decker Ferry in Flatbrookville on May 9, 1779 with 1,000 men. There he crossed into Pennsylvania to cut a road for the passage of General Sullivan's Army.



Grave marker, probably of a slave, at a cemetery just off Military Trail. (Actual height about 12")



With the end of the Revolutionary War, this became a prosperous valley of self-sufficient plantations with their church, blacksmith, neighborhood school, and gristmill. Farmers used the Military Road to travel from the river to Walpack Center and the interior. The decline of rural villages everywhere affected this area also, and the road saw less

and less use in the 1900s. It closed to vehicles in the 1960s.

(Left) Evergreen grove at Haulk Farm, a former homestead on the trail near Walpack Center.



Remnants of driveway and retaining wall at Haulk Farm.



(Left) Main Street, Walpack Center looking east from the east end of *Military Trail* at Route NPS 615. From here, the path of *Military Road* continued down Main Street through Walpack Center and over Kittatinny Ridge NJ in the distance.