



Perkiomen Peninsula and the Pawling Farm



Bob Moses

Significance of the Perkiomen Peninsula and the Pawling Farm

The land known as the Perkiomen Peninsula, and particularly the Pawling Farm, played an essential role in the Valley Forge winter encampment of 1777-1778. It provided strategic protection for the camp; it was the site of the newly organized Commissary function that saved the Continental Army from starvation; and it was the ultimate site of the encampment itself before the army marched on to victory at Monmouth.

History

During most of the encampment, the army occupied the high ground just south of the Schuylkill River. The Pawling Farm, which comprised much of the Perkiomen Peninsula, was a carefully watched avenue of approach to the high ground. Two fords--the Pawling Ford and the Fatlands Ford--connected the two sides of the river. The peninsula land was considered so important to the encampment, however, that General Washington ordered the army "to throw a Bridge over the Schuylkill near this place, as soon as it was practicable." This timber bridge, called "Sullivan's Bridge," was the only bridge built by the Americans during eight years of

war. A British spy map of the Valley Forge encampment clearly shows two roads leading from the Fatlands Ford across the Pawling Farm. Troops were stationed along the road to protect the bridge. Strategically, Washington regarded the land both as a place to engage the British, should they attack the camp from the north, and also as a place to which to retreat and regroup, should an attack from the south be overwhelming.

The Commissary System

By December, 1777, the immense difficulty of provisioning up to 20,000 troops, as well as the women and children who followed them, had brought the Continental Army to the point of dissolving. Soldiers went days without food, desertions were growing, and the point of mutiny has been reached. General George Washington is recognized for two major accomplishments during the encampment--accomplishments that many had thought were impossible--effectively training and preparing the troops for continued combat; and organizing the provisioning, or Commissary system, to consistently provide for the needs of the army. The system he developed continues to this day. The lands of the Pawling Farm were key to this success.

Washington chose the Valley Forge area as the site of the encampment because of its proximity to the abundant agricultural resources of the Pennsylvania backcountry. Once he was able to install competent, ethical officers to run the Commissary, army foragers were sent to scour Bucks, Berks, and what is now Montgomery County for food. Whatever they found and were able to buy was sent on wagon trains toward the camp. Cattle and sheep were driven on the hoof. Supplies even came from New

York and New Jersey--they were brought across the Delaware River at Coryell's Ferry (now New Hope) and down what is now PA 202, ultimately coming down what is now Pawling's Road. Thousands of wagons and livestock converged at a single point--the Pawling Farm. Provisions were accounted for, organized, and made ready to cross Sullivan's Bridge to the troops. The houses and barns both on the NPS portion of the Pawling Farm and also on the Saint Gabriel's portion (which remain as archeological sites) were the centers of activity.

A market also was established on the Pawling Farm to entice farmers to sell their food to Americans, rather than to the British, who could pay in hard currency.

“Where the Aire is more faire”

Throughout the encampment, General Washington issued daily orders regarding camp cleanliness and hygiene. Within a few days of the army’s arrival in December, however, the recently harvested fields on which they camped and drilled has been churned into roiling mud, worsened by the rainy winter and constant freezing and thawing. Food animals were slaughtered and processed at each brigade location, and the waste shallowly buried. Up to 12 men to a hut meant close quarters, and as was the practice of the day, no baths were taken. Latrines were constantly dug, left open, filled in, and relocated. Despite harsh penalties, men relieved themselves wherever they found convenient. Hanging over everything was a constant haze of wood smoke. The stench was remarkable, and described as “exceedingly foul aire.”

By the month of May, the situation within the camp on the south side of the river has become almost unbearable. General Washington issued orders for the army to abandon camp and move to the Pawling Farm, “where the aire is more fair.” One soldier wrote that “About 8 OCK the Genl. Was beat before the bd. We struck our tents and loded our bagage

and about 10 OCK we marched away from our huts about a haf a mile in the frunt of our Works, and incamped thare in a very pleasant place near wood and water.”

On the Pawling Farm, the forward combat forces-- what today we would call a strike force--readied themselves. It was from the Pawling Farm that these troops and thousands of others--15,000 strong--marched out on June 19, 1778, to chase and catch the British army at the battle of Monmouth.

Today

After the army departed, the Pawling Farm slowly recovered from the devastation of the long occupation. The excellent soil, southern aspect, and proximity to river transportation were great advantages. By the early 19th century, the Pawling family, and later the Wetherill family, were so prosperous that they became well known for early experiments in agriculture, known as scientific farming. Even in the 20th century, most of the Pawling Farm continued to be farmed by private owners and by the Saint Gabriel’s Protectorsy.

Unlike the section of the encampment south of the Schuylkill, the Pawling Farm section of the encampment was never acquired by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and thus was never remade into a commemorative park setting with tour roads, monuments, and memorial groves of trees. Because of this, it is easy for people to misunderstand the significance of the Pawling Farm and to imagine that it is less important than the lands south of the river.

Today the peninsula is a mix of habitats--open meadow, riparian and upland forest, wetlands and extensive vernal ponds. This is why the Pawling Farm lands provide the best wildlife habitat in the entire 3,500-acre park. The park’s unpaved River Trail runs from the Pawling Bridge to Betzwood, and is a favorite of local residents. The paved Schuylkill River Trail runs along the northern edge of the Pawling Farm.

During the many public meetings held for the park’s recent General Management Planning process, participants strongly stated that they value the land just as it is--with quiet trails and extensive opportunities for wildlife watching. They asked for preservation of the open space, restoration of the historic buildings, and for readily accessible interpretive information on the history and significance of the land.

As is true south of the river, the most remarkable historic resources remaining from the encampment are archeological. Archeologists who have studied Valley Forge have concluded that the entire footprint of the camp and its structures, roads, and outposts remains, just under the surface.

The most extensive archeological testing on the Pawling Farm took place prior to construction of the high tension electrical lines on this site. Each tower was tested, and each yielded revolutionary-era and Native American artifacts. Large prehistoric sites confirm human occupation of this land for thousands of years. Archeologists believe that responsible, systematic testing, particularly of the areas around the missing house and barns on the Saint Gabriel’s portion of the Pawling Farm, will be highly productive.