



Howell Living History Farm

Pleasant Valley in the American Revolution

The John Phillips Family

John Philips was a blacksmith from Maidenhead (today's Lawrence Township) who purchased 125 acres in Hopewell Township in 1737 from his relative Joseph Philips, a house carpenter of Maidenhead. This farm was destined to become land in the geographical center of the region that became known as Pleasant Valley. John was born about 1697 so he was about 40 years old when he came to Pleasant Valley. John prospered and added to his land holdings while raising four sons, Henry, Lott, John, and Peter and five daughters, Letitia, Catherine, Frances, Mary, and Rhoda.

When the American Revolution broke out the Phillips family established itself as dedicated to the patriot cause. John Phillips was a Justice of the Peace, now in his eighties, and his son, Henry, was captain of one of the earliest militia companies to form in Hopewell Township after the events at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Henry was born about 1740 and was in his mid-thirties when the Revolution broke out. Probably several years before the Revolution, Henry built a grist mill across the road from the family home where a small stream feeds Moore's Creek. In the years leading up to the Revolution the farmers in Pleasant Valley raised quantities of wheat that were milled and sent down the Delaware River to Philadelphia where the wheat flour was loaded on ships and sent to various parts of the British Empire, particularly the West Indies. Henry's mill was an important facility for the local farmers and Henry's mill became a local landmark.

The earliest date we know that Henry had his grist mill is 1779 when he was taxed for his mill. Mills were not taxed in 1778 so he probably had the mill earlier. During the Revolution Henry had to deal with the conflict between fighting for his freedom while holding another human being in bondage. The tax records also show that he owned one male slave old enough and healthy enough to work. Whether this slave had a wife and small children who weren't taxed is unknown and whether the slave worked on Henry's farm or in his grist mill is also not known. As a leading citizen in Hopewell, Henry Phillips was chosen as captain of an early militia company and was given money to pay militia expenses in August 1776. He was formally commissioned as captain in May 1777 but is named as captain in the pension file affidavits of former members of his company, such as Edmund Roberts, as early as March 1776. Roberts says the company was marched to Perth Amboy by way of Princeton and New Brunswick and stayed there for one month. Another member of the company, Jesse Moore, states that he and Roberts joined Henry Phillips' Company when the militia was first organized in 1775.

In late June 1776 the company again went to Perth Amboy to guard against British incursions from Staten Island. Private Jacob Williamson recalled that when the company reached New Brunswick the recently adopted Declaration of Independence was read to them. Governor Livingston was not satisfied with the response of the militia that month to the threat from New York and stated in a mid-July letter that the militia turnout he had ordered was insufficient and many posts were left unguarded. He noted that only two small companies of Hunterdon militia had appeared "to our aid." Henry Philips' Company was one of the two.

When the American Army retreated across New Jersey after the defeats around New York City, members of Henry's company came out to assist the American Army cross the Delaware River from Trenton to Pennsylvania. During December 1776 members of the company were with the main army in Bucks County and probably participated in forays back into New Jersey. Just after the American Army completed crossing to Pennsylvania on December 8, General Cornwallis was ordered to pursue the Americans and he proceeded to search for boats to get his troops across. The Americans had taken the precaution to remove all boats to the Pennsylvania side of the river. On the

morning of December 9 Cornwallis took British regulars from Pennington to search for boats at Coryell's Ferry - now Lambertville. They undoubtedly passed through Pleasant Valley and also searched at Coxe's Ferry at the end of today's Pleasant Valley Road and perhaps up Moore's Creek into Pleasant Valley. They did not find any boats, but they did take out their frustration on several local patriots. After causing havoc at the farm of Samuel Stout along the River they also "pillaged in the same manner, and then cruelly beat" old Mr. Phillips. This seems to be a clear reference to Henry's father, John Phillips, who was then in his eighties.

When Washington crossed the Delaware on the night of December 25, several men from Henry's company assisted since they knew the river or had been ferrymen, such as the Slacks who operated the former Johnson ferry on the New Jersey side of McKonkey's Ferry. Several men from Henry's company, along with other men from the First Hunterdon, crossed with the American Army and served as advance guides on the roads to Trenton. Henry's company was not engaged as a unit at Trenton, but apparently several men did take part in the fighting as individuals attached to the main army.

Henry finally received an official commission as captain in May 1777 and several months later, in November he was promoted to 2nd Major after the resignation of Major Benjamin VanCleve of Maidenhead, who had been elected to the state assembly. In the request by Colonel Joseph Phillips of the First Hunterdon Militia Regiment to Governor Livingston to make the promotion, Henry was described as the senior captain in the regiment. A document from that same month illustrates the confused nature of the times and the conflicting loyalties that people got caught up in. In October 1777 one John Ink, along with others, was accused of treason, sent to jail in Morristown, and subsequently sentenced to death for taking up arms against the American cause. Major Henry Phillips signed a petition in November 1777 seeking clemency for John Ink whom he knew as a former inhabitant of his neighborhood. The petition stated the opinion of the signers that Ink had been misled by "wicked and designing men" and if given the chance would turn again toward supporting "our rights and liberties".

Little is known about Henry's actions as Major except that he did sit on a court martial board and also on a board to hear appeals of fines levied against militiamen for not serving when called. His company, which included his brother Lott Phillips, Sr. and nephew Lott, Jr. (actually the son of Henry's brother John) as well as other family members and friends from Pleasant Valley and western Hopewell Township, continued under the leadership of Timothy Titus who had been lieutenant under Henry. The company participated in the Battle of Monmouth in 1778 and the Battle of Springfield in 1780 as well as made regular marches to the posts opposite Staten Island.

Henry's mother, Anna, whose maiden name was Lott, died in 1780 and his brother, Lott Phillips, died in 1779. His mother was definitely buried in the family burial plot near the house and Lott was probably buried there also. They were the first burials in this little cemetery that still exists next to the old Pleasant Valley schoolhouse. Lott Phillips had married Hannah Hart, daughter of Ralph Hart a cousin of John Hart who signed the Declaration of Independence. After Lott's death, Hannah submitted a claim for damages done by American troops to their property in 1777. This was in accordance with an ordinance passed to take care of such claims. The inventory of lost or damaged items included a pair of stays, ten pounds of wool, one pair of steelyards, fifteen bottles (contents unspecified), one flannel blanket, one pair of buckskin breeches, and one pair of boots.

Henry had married his cousin, Mary Phillips, in 1765 and in 1783 at the close of the war they had a son they named Henry. Undoubtedly, little Henry grew up hearing the stories told by his father and the other men of Pleasant Valley about their experiences in the Revolution. Major Henry continued to prosper with his grist mill until his death in 1805. The grist mill continued in the family for another generation and young Henry inherited the land that is today the Howell Living History Farm.

Howell Farm is a facility of the Mercer County Park Commission
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