

= Battle of Cooch 's Bridge =

The Battle of Cooch 's Bridge , also known as the Battle of Iron Hill , was a battle fought on September 3 , 1777 , between the Continental Army and American militia and primarily German soldiers serving alongside the British Army during the American Revolutionary War . It was the only significant military action during the war on the soil of Delaware (though there were also naval engagements off the state 's coast) , and it took place about a week before the major Battle of Brandywine . Reportedly , the battle saw the first flying of the American flag .

After landing in Maryland on August 25 as part of a campaign to capture Philadelphia , the seat of the Continental Congress , British and German forces under the overall command of General William Howe began to move north . Their advance was monitored by a light infantry corps of Continental Army and militia forces that had based itself at Cooch 's Bridge , near Newark , Delaware . On September 3 , German troops leading the British advance were met by musket fire from the American light infantry in the woods on either side of the road leading toward Cooch 's Bridge . Calling up reinforcements , they flushed the Americans out and drove them across the bridge .

= = Background = =

After having successfully captured New York City in 1776 , British military planners organized two expeditions to divide the Thirteen Colonies and , they hoped , decisively end the rebellion . One expedition was to take control of the Hudson River by a descent from Quebec , while the other was targeted at the colonial capital , Philadelphia . In pursuit of the latter objective , Lieutenant General William Howe embarked an army numbering about 18 @,@ 000 (plus about 5 @,@ 000 camp followers) onto transports in late July 1777 , and sailed from New York City to the Chesapeake Bay . The Continental Army of Major General George Washington remained near New York until Howe 's objective became clear . Howe 's plan was gauged to the south , intending to move against Philadelphia via the Chesapeake . Washington marched his army , numbering about 16 @,@ 000 , through Philadelphia , and established a camp at Wilmington , Delaware . Riding further south and west to perform reconnaissance on August 26 , Washington learned that the British had landed .

On August 25 , Howe 's army disembarked below a small town called Head of Elk (now known as Elkton , and located at the head of navigation of the Elk River) in Maryland , about 50 miles (80 km) south of Philadelphia . Due to the relatively poor quality of the landing area , his troops moved immediately to the north , reaching Head of Elk itself on August 28 . Advance troops consisting of British light infantry and German jägers went east across Elk Creek and occupied Gray 's Hill , about one mile (1 @.@ 6 km) west of Iron Hill , near Cooch 's Bridge , which was a few miles south of Newark . The bridge was named for Thomas Cooch , a local landowner whose house was near the bridge .

Washington would normally have assigned the duties of advance guard to Daniel Morgan and his riflemen , but he had detached these to assist Horatio Gates in the defense of the Hudson River Valley against the advance of General John Burgoyne . Since they were unavailable , he organized a light infantry corps consisting of 700 picked men from Continental Army regiments (including future Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall , who would go on to fight in the coming battle) and about 1 @,@ 000 Pennsylvania and Delaware militia , and placed them under the command of Brigadier General William Maxwell . These troops occupied Iron Hill and Cooch 's Bridge . General Nathanael Greene advocating moving the entire Continental Army to this position , believing the Christina River to be a more defensible point , but Washington declined , instead ordering Maxwell to monitor British movements and slow its advance while the rest of the army fortified the Red Clay Creek and Wilmington . Maxwell 's men were encamped on either side of the road leading south from Cooch 's Bridge toward Aiken 's Tavern (present @-@ day Glasgow , Delaware) in a series of small camps designed to facilitate ambushes . On August 28 , Washington , atop Iron Hill , and Howe , on Gray 's Hill , observed each other as they took stock of the enemy 's position ; one of the Hessian generals wrote , " These gentlemen observed us with their glasses as carefully as we

observed them . Those of our officers who know Washington well , maintained that the man in the plain coat was Washington . "

On September 2 , Howe 's right wing , under the command of the Hessian general , Wilhelm von Knyphausen , left Cecil County Court House and headed north , hampered by rain and bad roads . Early the next morning , Howe 's left wing , headed by troops under the command of Charles Cornwallis , left Head of Elk , expecting to join with Knyphausen 's division at Aiken 's Tavern , about 5 miles (8 @. @ 0 km) east . Cornwallis reached the tavern first , and Howe , traveling with Cornwallis , decided to press on to the north without waiting for Knyphausen .

= = Battle = =

A small company of Hessian dragoons led by Captain Johann Ewald headed up the road from the tavern toward Cooch 's Bridge as Cornwallis 's advance guard . These were struck by a volley of fire from an American ambush , and many of them fell , either killed or wounded . Ewald did not , and he quickly alerted the Hessian and Ansbach jägers , who rushed forward to meet the Americans . This began a running skirmish that Major John André described as follows : " Here the rebels began to attack us about 9 o 'clock with a continued irregular fire for nearly two miles . " Howe rode to the front lines , and seeing Iron Hill crawling with enemy soldiers , ordered his troops to clear it . At this time , much of Maxwell 's force was defending Iron Hill , while the rest were protecting Cooch 's Bridge . The jägers , numbering over 400 men led by Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb , formed a line and , with the support of some artillery , advanced on the Americans . Von Wurmb sent one detachment to Maxwell 's left , hoping to flank his position , and supported the move with a bayonet charge against the American center .

The battle lasted for much of the day ; at Cooch 's Bridge , Maxwell 's men made a stand until they " had shot themselves out of ammunition " and " the fight was carried on with the sword " and bayonet (the latter being a weapon Maxwell 's militia lacked experience in using) . After seven hours of fighting , the Americans were forced to retreat from Iron Hill across Cooch 's Bridge , taking up a position on the far side . Howe ordered the 1st and 2nd British Light Infantry Battalion to assist the jägers in taking the bridge . While the 1st Battalion under Robert Abercromby became mired in swampy terrain attempting to ford the Christina River , the 2nd Battalion reached the right of the jägers and the bridge was taken . Maxwell 's army then retreated back toward Wilmington .

Casualty reports for the British range from 3 killed and 20 wounded to about 30 each killed and wounded . One British deserter reported that nine wagonloads of wounded were sent toward the fleet . The Americans claimed 20 killed and another 20 wounded , and Washington in a letter to Congress said the losses were " not very considerable " ; however , the British reported burying 41 Americans , and Howe 's official report claimed " not less than fifty killed and many more wounded " . General Maxwell was criticized for his leadership by a number of Washington 's subordinates . One foreign officer with service in the Army of Prussia commented to Henry Laurens in reference to Maxwell , " Your soldiers are very good mans , so good as any brave mans in the world , but your officers my dear colonel , your officers ... "

= = Aftermath = =

General Cornwallis occupied the house of Thomas Cooch , and Howe 's forces remained at Iron Hill for five days . In a letter to Congress , Washington justified the defeat by saying , " This Morning the Enemy came out with considerable force and three pieces of Artillery , against our Light advanced Corps , and after some pretty smart skirmishing obliged them to retreat , being far inferior in number and without Cannon . " Certain that Howe would advance along the main road toward Wilmington in his bid to capture Philadelphia , Washington continued to fortify the city and the Red Clay Creek . He moved his headquarters from Wilmington to Newport , and the army formed defenses between Newport and Marshallton . While Howe 's army remained in place , the two forces engaged in small skirmishes over the next few days . One officer under Howe noted that the rebel patrols , which usually consist of 10 to 15 dragoons and 20 to 30 infantrymen , now appear more often , and they

fire at our posts occasionally . "

Sensing an attack coming , Washington told his troops on September 5th , " Should they [the British] push their design against Philadelphia , on this route , their all is at stake ? they will put the contest on the event of a single battle : If they are overthrown , they are utterly undone ? the war is at an end . " Two days later , upon hearing that British ships had left the Chesapeake , Washington was sure Howe 's move was imminent . He rallied his troops , referencing Horatio Gates 's successes against the British in the north , saying " Who can forbear to emulate their [Gates 's army] noble spirit ? Who is there without ambition , to share with them , the applauses of their countrymen , and of all posterity , as the defenders of Liberty , and the procurers of peace and happiness to millions in the present and future generations ? Two years we have maintained the war and struggled with difficulties innumerable . But the prospect has since brightened , and our affairs put on a better face ? Now is the time to reap the fruits of all our toils and dangers ! ... The eyes of all America , and of Europe are turned upon us . "

But the attack never came . Instead , on September 8 , Howe moved his force north , through Newark and Hockessin into Pennsylvania . Upon realizing what the British were doing late in the night , Washington rushed his forces north as well to find a new defensive position . He settled on Chadds Ford , just across the Delaware border , upon the Brandywine River ? the last natural defense before the Schuylkill River and Philadelphia . It was there that the two armies clashed again in the major Battle of Brandywine on September 11 . The British victory in that battle paved the way for their eventual entry into and occupation of the city of Philadelphia .

This success was more than offset by the failure of the expedition to the Hudson , in which General Burgoyne surrendered his army after the Battles of Saratoga , in October 1777 . News of Burgoyne 's surrender greatly changed the war , because it (and the Battle of Germantown , fought after the British occupied Philadelphia) was a major factor in France 's decision to enter the war as an American ally in 1778 .

= = Legacy = =

The site of the battle has been preserved as the Cooch 's Bridge Historic District , and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places . In 2003 , the Cooch family sold the state some land as well as development rights for an additional 200 acres (81 ha) of land in the area of the battlefield . They also established a \$ 1 @. @ 5 million fund to restore and maintain the property , and granted the state a right of first refusal to purchase the Thomas Cooch house , which remained with the family .

In 2007 , the 230th anniversary of the battle was commemorated by a re @-@ enactment event hosted by members of the recreated 2nd Virginia Regiment .