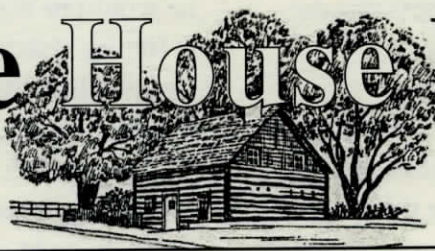


The House Log

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A Publication of the Downingtown Historical Society

DHS Member Co-authors New Local History

Bruce Mowday, a Downingtown Historical Society member, has co-authored a book on Fort Delaware during the Civil War. *Unlikely Allies: Fort Delaware's Community in the Civil War*, the product of thousands of hours of research by Mowday and co-author Dale Fetzer, has with its recent release already created controversy because it counters a traditional perception that Fort Delaware was the "Andersonville of the North."

Fort Delaware, located on an island once known as Pea Patch in the Delaware River, is adjacent to Delaware City, Delaware and, during the Civil War, served as a prison in which a total population of more than 32,000 Confederate prisoners were detained. The book reveals that, of this number, 7.6% died as compared to at least a 39% death rate at Andersonville.

Leland C. Jennings, Historian of Fort Delaware State Park, says of the book: "*Unlikely Allies* is accessible history. The book successfully merges disparate data into a story of powerful human interest."

Bruce Mowday, with more than 25 years experience as a journalist, now runs his own media relations firm, The Mowday Group. Dale Fetzer is a Civil War historian who has contributed to more than a half dozen high profile PBS documentaries.

Unlikely Allies is published by Stackpole Books of Mechanicsburg, Pa and is available directly by calling 800-732-3669 or at Amazon.com or BN.com (Barnes and Noble). Price is \$24.95.

The Hanging of Quakers John Roberts and Abraham Carlisle - 1778

At about noon on November 4th, 1778 John Roberts was executed by hanging on a Philadelphia gallows along with fellow Quaker, Abraham Carlisle. This in spite of petitions that hundreds of citizens signed asking that they be spared. They were tried and convicted on the charge of High Treason against the American cause for Independence.

Of particular relevance to Downingtown's history is the fact that John Roberts was married to

Jane Downing (1723-1795), daughter of early Downingtown settlers, Thomas and Tomazine Downing. After Roberts' death, their property, including 100 acres of land in Merion, was confiscated and Jane moved with her children, back to Downingtown, where she spent the remaining seventeen years of her life.

While the facts surrounding the case are generally known, several historians see Roberts' culpability in different ways, though most agree that

both Roberts and Carlisle's death sentences were extreme and disproportionate to the acts that they committed.

In the *History of Chester County* by J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope, first published in 1881, nearly an entire page is devoted to the case of John Roberts. In this account, Roberts' actions prior to the Battle of Brandywine and during the British occupation of Philadelphia are presented in a very sympathetic light. He is portrayed as one who, motivated only by the desire to help some of his fellow Quakers, found himself exploited, abused and ultimately held captive by British Army. Included is the text of a paper Roberts wrote while in prison awaiting his trial. Portions of Roberts own account read as follows, beginning after the British had occupied Philadelphia:

"Upon the 10th Day of October, 1777, I came to the City for my personal security - having been frequently threatened without any just cause by some malicious Persons in my Neighborhood, both as to my Person, Family and Property - without any Design whatever to aid or arise the Enemy or to injure my Country, the person or property of any Individual in it: When on the 15th a party of militia under the command of Gen. Potter came to my Plantation, inquired for me, threatened my Family, shot at one of my sons and took the other Prisoner, driving off With them at the same time 5 Horses, 21 head Horned Cattle and 38 sheep; which, joined with the most pressing solicitations of my Family, who thought my Life in Danger, deterred me from returning home as I intended."

"December 11th, at 3 o'clock in the morning Jacob James came to my Lodging & as I had before expressed often to him my anxiety to see my Family, & told me there was now an opportunity to go as the army were going over Schuylkill into my neighborhood. I told him it was time enough for me at daylight & then went to bed again; when in about an Hour said James

returned and urged me to go along, & said that he would be company for me, but upon my still refusing said James told me that General Cornwallis was then at the Bridge, and if I would not go, a guard would be sent and compel me to go; upon which, fearing the consequence and not suspecting what the Gen. wanted me for I got ready & went to the Bridge, when said James, going to the Gen. said something to him, when soon after I was put in charge of an orderly sergt., whom I asked the Reason of my being put under guard, who said it was his Lordship's orders to take particular care of me. I then began to think I was intended as a Guide and went & begged the Gen.; that he would not take me along for his Guide, as it would be attended with the most disagreeable and fatal consequences to me, observing to him that there might be others present along the Road who knew the road as well if not better. He replied that I was recommended to him & would not part with me. I then requested him to use his authority to prevent his army from plundering the Inhabitants upon the march: this he assured me of and ordered guards be planted at every house as the army marched along. Notwithstanding, some of the inhabitants were taken prisoners, their Horses, Cattle, Goods & c., plundered, who were released and had their property restored at my intercession as many of the sufferers can testify."

Roberts, having served his purpose as guide, and unable to reach his home, requested and was granted permission to return to Philadelphia. He continues:

"On the 12th December, when the army returned, they brought with them a number of inhabitants prisoners, and the property and effects of many others. I made it my Business by every means in my power to have them set at Liberty, their property restored or satisfied for, which in many Instances I affected, in all I attempted it, and the threats and abusive treatment I frequently received from the British officers must have convinced both them and others present in what light

I was viewed by the B. army.”

Roberts goes on to list the names of twenty people brought in as prisoners who he had helped release, maintaining that he himself was considered a prisoner by the British when a prisoner for whom he had posted bond escaped.

According to Futhey and Cope, Roberts' conflict with the forces for Independence may have started several weeks prior to October 10, 1777 when he began his chronology of events. As they relate, "...just prior to the Battle of Brandywine, when several Friends in Philadelphia had been arrested, and without any trial, sentenced to banishment, under guard, to Virginia, John Roberts was in the city, and seeing the distress and anxiety of the wives and families of those persons, undertook the hazardous expedient of visiting the British army, then arrived in this county, and asking for a sufficient force to intercept them. On his way to effect this he called in the night at the residence of his son-in-law, George Thomas, in West Whiteland, who warned him of the consequences, but he said that he could not feel easy without doing something on their behalf. Whether he communicated with the enemy is not stated, but the route of the exiles being changed, and their march accelerated, no interference was experienced by their escort.”

The question of whether Roberts “communicated with the enemy” is an important one. If he did and the forces for Independence learned of his activity, it would explain the visit to his home by a militia commanded by General Potter on October 15 with the apparent attempt to arrest him.

Roberts' actions aside, he attempts in his explanation to depict himself as politically neutral but in the 19th century book, *The Loyalists of the American Revolution* author Lorenzo Sabine (1803-1877) includes both John Roberts and Abraham Carlisle in his comprehensive biography of American Loyalists. Of John Roberts, he says: “He joined the Royal forces when Sir Wil-

liam Howe took possession of Philadelphia and was tried for his life in 1778. Thomas McKean, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and at that time Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, presided at the trial. Roberts' offence was legally and satisfactorily proved, and he suffered as a traitor to his country.” Sabine also quotes excerpts of a letter by Isaac Ogden, a Loyalist who witnessed the execution. Ogden wrote: “Roberts' wife, with ten children, went to Congress, threw themselves on their knees and supplicated mercy, but in vain. His behavior at the gallows did honor to human nature. He told his audience that his conscience acquitted him of guilt; that he suffered for doing his duty to his Sovereign; that his blood would one day be demanded at their hands; and then turning to his children, charged and exhorted them to remember his principles, for which he died, and to adhere to them while they had breath. This is the substance of his speech; after which he suffered with the resolution of a Roman.”

Of Abraham Carlisle, Sabine writes: “When the Royal troops took possession of that city [Philadelphia], he received a commission from Sir William Howe, to watch and guard its entrances, and to grant passports. For this offence he was tried for his life in 1778, and having been found guilty of an overt act of aiding and assisting the enemy, was executed.” Sabine also writes that the executions of both Carlisle and Roberts were denounced by some at the time as judicial murder.

In her diaries, Elizabeth Drinker makes several references to John Roberts and Abraham Carlisle during this period. The Drinkers were a prosperous Quaker family who lived in Philadelphia. Her husband, Henry Drinker, was one of the seventeen “Quaker Exiles” who had been ordered removed to Virginia on suspicion of Loyalist sympathies. It was this action, according to Futhey and Cope, which set John Roberts on his fateful course to the gallows.

Roberts' name first appeared on April 5, 1778 while the British remained in Philadelphia and her husband was still held in Virginia. Elizabeth and three other women had secured permission to see General Washington at Valley Forge to ask him to intercede in behalf of the exiles. After crossing the Schuylkill River by ferry she writes: "We went no further than John Roberts, (miller), about 10 miles from home. We did not meet with above 2 or 3 persons on ye road. We were kindly entertained by ye woman of ye House, and her daughters; ye owner being at this time a Refugee in Town. In ye evening came a scouting party of near one hundred men; 2 of their officers came into ye House saying, that they had heard there were Ladies from Philad. here. They asked how many miles it was thither. They were strangers that had lately come from New England. They behaved civilly, and stayed but a short time. They were about ye House, and in ye Barn when we went to bed, which leaves under some apprehension concerning ye Carriages and Horses." The following day, they continued on to Valley Forge.

By the fall of this same year, the British Army had evacuated Philadelphia, the Continental Congress again held session at Independence Hall and there was, among some of those returned to power, a pressing desire for retribution against anyone who may have assisted the British during their stay in the city. Robert's and Carlisle's names again appear in Drinker's diary:

Sept. 25: "Abraham Carlisle's trial came on today, and is not yet concluded. We are at a loss to judge how it will go with him."

Sept. 26: "I went in this afternoon to visit our distressed neighbor Carlisle, whose husband they have brought in guilty of High Treason; though it is hoped by many he will not suffer what some others fear he will."

Sept 30: "John Roberts' trial came on today. I have not heard how it goes on. Abraham Carlisle is to be tried again, they say, on seventh day next,

as ye Lawyers have made a demur."

Oct. 1: "John Roberts' trial is not yet over."

Oct. 2: "John Roberts is brought in guilty, at which some are surprised as they did not expect it, of those who attended ye court. I understand this evening there is some demur in his case."

Oct. 17: "Wm. Hamilton was this Day tried for his life, and acquitted. John Roberts condemned to die - shocking doings!"

Oct. 18: "...A. Carlisle's irons are taken off."

Oct. 20: "H.D. [Henry Drinker, her husband], C. West, and David Estaugh visited John Roberts and A. Carlisle in prison. David Franks taken up and put into jail for something they find fault with."

Oct. 24: "John Roberts' and Abm. Carlisle's Death warrants were signed today and read to them."

Oct, 28: "Jane Roberts, wife of John Roberts, Owen Jones and wife, and James Thornton were here this morning. H.D. and self went with them to visit our neighbor Ann Carlisle; when James had something to say to ye afflicted women, by way of Testimony, which I thought encouraging. Ye time for the execution of their Husbands is fix'd ye 4th next month. Ye distressed wives have been with the men in power, and several Petitions are signing by different people to send in to ye Council or Assembly - 'tis hoped and believed that their Lives will be spared - 'twould be terrible indeed should it happen otherwise."

Nov. 3: "This afternoon I spent at Cat. Greenleafs', ye evening at S. Pleasants, where I was informed that preparations were making this evening for the execution of our poor friends tomorrow morning. Notwithstanding the many petitions that have been sent in, and ye personal appearance of ye distressed wives and children

before ye Council, I am still of ye mind that they will not be permitted to tarry this matter to ye last extremity."

Nov. 4: "They have actually put to Death, Hang'd on ye Commons, John Roberts and Abm. Carlisle this morning, or about noon - an awful solemn day it has been. I went this evening with my H.D. to neighbor Carlisle's; ye body is brought home and laid out - looks placid and serene - no marks of agony or distortion; ye poor afflicted widows are wonderfully upheld and supported under their very great trial - they have many sympathizing friends."

Nov. 5: "Our back parlor was filled this afternoon with company who came to ye burial of our neighbor Carlisle; myself and four children went. Sister stayed at home; it was a remarkably large Funeral, and a solemn time; George Dilwyn and S. Emlin spoke at ye Grave, and ye former prayed fervently."

The episode of the executions of John Roberts

and Abraham Carlisle is a sad and little known chapter in American history. But it illustrates to what extent the American Revolution is to be viewed as a civil war. As near as can be accurately estimated, the political sentiments of its people during the American Revolution fall evenly into three categories. One third supported the cause for Independence, one third were Loyalists, and the remaining third were politically neutral. Those of the latter category, Quakers included, must have found themselves under relentless pressure to join one side or the other. Viewed in this context, one can see how men like Roberts and Carlisle could have been drawn into the conflict.

In 1792, in what was perhaps a tacit admission of their extreme judicial action, the Supreme Court awarded to Jane, wife of John Roberts, an allowance of 75 pounds per year. As for Abraham, son of Abraham Carlisle, part of his father's estate was returned to him.

Jim LaDrew

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Officers: Roger Grigson, president; Don Greenleaf, vice president; Jay Byerly, secretary; Wesley Sollenberger, treasurer. Board: Dave & Joyce Benfer, Nancy d, Angelo, Ann Gee, Harry Helms, Dorothea Parker, Bill Woodruff, *House Log* Editors: Roslyn Blyn-LaDrew and Jim LaDrew

DHS WEBSITE

The Society's website is available for viewing on line, connected to several Chester County links by keying in "downingtwn historical society" or our direct address is: http://members.xoom.com/dhs_pa. Photos from Jay Byerly's collection can be viewed along with all previous editions of *The House Log*.

Upcoming Events

Annual Dinner: The Society's annual dinner will be held on Sunday, May 21st at 5:30 pm at Ruffini's Restaurant in Thorndale. The speaker will be Philadelphia Inquirer historical reporter, Kathy Quillman. The topic is Downingtown history.

Antiques Appraisal: To be held on Saturday, May 13th from 12:00 to 4:00 pm at Central Presbyterian Church in Downingtown. Verbal appraisals provided by Pook and Pook and staff. Cost for appraising a single item is \$10 or three items for \$25. Members receive a \$2 discount per item. Bring those old family treasures or that yard-sale acquisition you've always been curious about. Last year's appraisal was a lot of fun and informative as well.

Also: Raffle tickets will be sold for a miniature quilt wall hanging, proceeds to benefit the Ashbridge House. Drawing held at 4:00.

Downingtwn Historical Society

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