

A key Revolutionary War encampment finally receives its historical marker – May 12, 2024

Maryland may be more well known for its Civil War history but it isn't without notable events from the Revolutionary War era.

In May 1781, General Anthony Wayne's troops encamped at Bruceville, just south of Taneytown in present day Carroll County, on their overland march to Virginia from York, Pennsylvania. Wayne and his Pennsylvania Line were under orders from General George Washington to reinforce French General Marquis de Lafayette in what would become known as the Virginia Campaign, a vital part of multiple actions leading to the Battle of Yorktown. Without Wayne and the arrival of his Pennsylvania Line, the American victory at Yorktown might never have happened.

The story of Wayne's March begins in early 1781. The enlisted men in the Pennsylvania Line led a mutiny to protest low pay, deplorable camp conditions, and the end of their three-year enlistments. Wayne and Joseph Reed entered into negotiations with the enlisted men and controversially dismissed 1,300 of them. Thus, in February 1781, Wayne began the arduous task of reorganizing his regiments and recruiting new enlistments from his new headquarters in York, Pennsylvania.

By late 1780, Benedict Arnold, no longer an American patriot, led British troops in Virginia and began wreaking havoc through the countryside. They ransacked Richmond, sending Governor Thomas Jefferson and many other leaders fleeing the British army. By February 1781, Washington ordered Lafayette down to Virginia at the repeated urging of Jefferson. At the same time Wayne also received orders from Washington to join Lafayette in Virginia.

Lafayette headed south through New Jersey, Pennsylvania and into Maryland on nearly the same route later taken by Washington and Rochambeau. On April 8, a clearly frustrated Washington wrote Wayne urging him to take as many men as possible "**without a moments loss of time.**" In late April Lafayette finally crossed the Potomac and arrived in what was left of Richmond.

At the end of May, Arnold would be reinforced by British General Charles Cornwallis who took command of the British troops in Virginia. This brought the British to an estimated 7,200 men in Virginia, more than twice the roughly 3,000 men under Lafayette's command. Faced with Wayne's delays, Lafayette desperately needed additional men. Voicing his despair to Washington by a letter dated May 24, Lafayette laments "***Was I to fight a Battle I'll Be Cut to pieces, the Militia dispersed, and the Arms lost.***"

Before leaving York, Wayne was forced to put down yet another mutiny. The men had been paid in worthless script and many local business owners would not accept the money. This time Wayne took a much more severe approach and seven men were executed.

Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line finally began their march on May 26 with roughly 800 men, passing the site of the mutineers' execution as a stark reminder. They stopped the first night in Spring Grove and lost three men overnight. Those unknown men are commemorated on a marker in the Garber Mennonite Cemetery. The next day they continued on through Littlestown, stopping just before the Maryland state line. From there they would continue south along the Monocacy Road into Maryland passing through Taneytown and stopping in Bruceville on May 28.

“Monday May 28th [1781]. March’d at five O’Clock A.M. came through Peter Little Town, one & half Miles, Cross’d the State line four Miles, into Maryland; three mile, passd through Tawny Town two miles, thence to Bruces Mills on the Large pipe creek there encamp’d this day marched 16 Miles -” From the Orderly Book of Captain Benjamin Bartholomew.

The Bruceville stop was not an accident. At the time Bruceville was a bustling village founded by an enterprising Scotsman named Normand Bruce, a prominent landowner of the time. In 1761 he married Susannah Gardiner Key of the prestigious Key family. They established Bruceville, setting up a farm and a grist mill along Big Pipe Creek. Bruce built his home, Myrtle Hill, during the 1760s; it still stands today. Terra Rubra, a tract of land owned by Susannah’s family, was nearby. Francis Scott Key was born there in 1779 and spent time during his childhood at his Aunt Susannah and Uncle Normand’s house.

Wayne likely chose a spot at the top of the hill just north of the mill for better visibility of the surrounding landscape. Thirty years later Bruce’s daughter and son-in-law built their home, Good Intent, on that hill. It is another historic home still standing today. Bruceville offered water from Big Pipe Creek and supplies would have been available from the farm and grist mill. Bruce served as an officer in the Maryland Militia and would have been known to Wayne and his officers. It was a friendly place to stop and rest before resuming their march into Virginia.

The next day Wayne led his troops south, crossing the Monocacy and spending a day cleaning up and securing their arms. As noted in Lieutenant William McDowell’s journal, on May 31 they rose early and marched through Frederick to Noland’s Ferry. During the march they passed by the British Convention Army prisoners at Frederick’s Hessian Barracks in a show of force. As they crossed the Potomac they lost four more men and a large quantity of ammunition when a boat sank.

Finally in Virginia, they marched through Leesburg on June 3. A week later they joined Lafayette's troops at Mechunk Creek. Together Wayne and Lafayette spent the summer of 1781 harassing General Cornwallis and his army through Virginia before artfully maneuvering him towards Yorktown. Sensing an opportunity to engage the British, Washington and French General Jean-Baptiste de Rochambeau swiftly traveled down to Virginia to join Lafayette and Wayne by the end of September.

The combined American and French troops under Washington, Rochambeau, Lafayette, and Wayne pinned the British down in Yorktown, and Cornwallis's dramatic surrender on October 19, 1781, led to the end of the Revolutionary War. The American victory over the British was so profound it was said the world turned upside down. Over two hundred years later these events were memorably depicted in the song "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)" in the Broadway musical "Hamilton."

Largely forgotten about today and bypassed in the late 1930s during the construction of the Francis Scott Key Highway, Bruceville might appear to be a minor footnote in Maryland history. However, through the actions of local historians in the Westminster Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), Bruceville is finally being recognized for its role in local history. Longtime SAR member Jim Engler found an article talking about an encampment south of Taneytown. That led to a conversation during a 2021 pandemic-era chapter meeting at the 1623 Brewery in Eldersburg. The chapter formed a committee to explore applying for a historical roadside marker to commemorate the encampment.

In 2022, the committee applied for a historical marker under the Maryland Roadside Historical Marker Program run by the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT). That application was approved last summer and the finished marker was recently delivered to MDOT who is preparing to have it installed on the west side of Francis Scott Key Highway (Rte. 194) near the bridge going over Big Pipe Creek. In an event 243 years in the making, a dedication ceremony for the Bruceville Encampment marker will be hosted at the Taneytown American Legion Hall on May 28, 2024 at 10 a.m. The public is invited to attend.

Guest columnist John Laycock is a member of the Westminster Chapter, SAR, and the Historical Society of Carroll County. In his free time he enjoys researching local Revolutionary War history.

Image 1 – Source: Wikimedia Commons Caption: Mutiny of General Anthony Wayne's Pennsylvania Line troops in 1781.

Image 2 – Source: Submitted photograph Caption: Marker in the Garber Mennonite Cemetery, Spring Grove, PA.