

Noah Stevens

The Role of Fences in the American Revolution

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the devastation of agrarian communities in the middle colonies during the American Revolution, 1776-1783, by focusing on the utilization and destruction of fences. Based on civilian and soldier eyewitness accounts, as well as newspaper articles and maps, it first investigates the obstructive role of fences at the battles of Bunker Hill (1775), Germantown (1777), and Brandywine (1777), and then analyzes the agricultural and financial losses incurred as a result of soldiers plundering civilians' fenced enclosures. Employing an archaeological-material methodology, the author argues that scholars should examine the varied costs of war and demonstrates that focusing on fences allows historians to uncover more comprehensive accounts of wartime devastation and loss of individual property.*

KEYWORDS: *American colonial history; American Revolution; middle colonies; Philadelphia; fences, Battle of Bunker Hill (1777); battlefield obstruction; agrarian devastation; financial loss; archaeological-material methodology*

Introduction

On September 23, 1776, a speaker read to the Continental Congress several complaints made by rural residents seven days earlier. He alerted Congress that the inhabitants of Amboy, New Jersey, lacked firewood, which had resulted in the rampant destruction of wooden fixtures in farm communities. They demanded that Congress “immediately make some law for protecting the little property still left in the town; the means must leave to them, but wood is the grand article.”¹ The speaker informed the Congress that, according to the letter from Amboy, this was a problem that could not be overseen by any one quartermaster, as the “destruction and havock made here with fences and houses is great.”² On September 19, a member of the New Jersey assembly had concurred with the September 16 complaint, stating: “the inhabitants of Amboy are great sufferers by their houses and fences being destroyed by the troops now there, owing in a great measure for the want of proper persons being appointed for purchasing a sufficient quantity of wood.”³ The resolution was to have Congress quickly appoint one Samuel Serjeant, Esq., “or some other suitable person or persons in Amboy” to oversee and “furnish” firewood to troops in order to settle complaints, remedy grievances, and preserve the “peace.”⁴ Both American and British leaders assigned quartermasters to their camps to oversee

¹ Speaker of the Assembly of New Jersey to Richard Stockton, delegate in Congress, read September 23, 1776: “Extract of a Letter from Amboy, dated September 16 1776,” in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Consisting of a Collection of Authentick Records, State Papers, Debates, and Letters and Other Notices of Publick Affairs, the Whole Forming a Documentary History of the Origin an Progress of the North American Colonies; of the Causes and Accomplishment of the American Revolution; and of the Constitution of Government for the United States, to the Final Ratification Thereof*, 5th series, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Peter Force, 1851), col. 365-366.

² Force, *American Archives*, col. 366.

³ Force, *American Archives*, col. 366.

⁴ Force, *American Archives*, col. 366.

wood distribution and inventory in attempts to prevent their troops from entering private properties and plundering enclosures for firewood.

Accounts like this were all too common throughout the colonies during the American Revolution, however, not all accounts of fence destruction were due to cold weather, and not all accounts involving fences were stories that included acts of violence. Fences were integral to the functioning of agrarian communities and the maintenance of farmland. Destroying them consequently left gardens, orchards, animal pens, pastures, and once beautiful landscapes desolate. The plundering of fences during the American Revolution not only caused disruption and devastation for colonists living in rural areas, but affected the war militarily by obstructing battlefields.⁵

Scholars have yet to explore the significance of fences during the American Revolution. To develop an inclusive picture of fences, this article utilizes accounts of rural and domestic destruction, as well as financial and agricultural loss, to catch glimpses of fences, revealing that during war these material objects were influential fixtures and not just discarded props left in the backdrop of war. Employing an archaeological-material methodology, this article suggests that scholars should examine the varied costs of war and demonstrates that focusing on fences allows historians to uncover more comprehensive accounts of wartime devastation and loss of individual property. Civilian and soldier eyewitness accounts, as recorded in diaries and journals, reveal the role of fences in battles and their effect on the countryside, particularly within the middle colonies between 1776 and 1783. The examination of fences during the Revolution may prove valuable for future studies involving other American wars.

This article builds on the studies of three authors who have focused their recent works of the Revolution around violence and destruction as the main factors which contributed to the disruptiveness of war as well as America's formation of collective identity and democracy. Allan Kulikoff's 2000 monograph *From British Peasants to Colonial Farmers* and his 2002 article "Revolutionary Violence and the Origins of Democracy" significantly expand our knowledge about the disruptive effects of war on agrarian economies.⁶ In both of these studies, Kulikoff focuses on "the sounds, sights, and smell of war that drifted just outside the homes of" its observers, but he rarely mentions fences.⁷ Allan Taylor's 2016 monograph *American Revolutions* and Holger Hoock's 2017 study *Scars of Independence* are the two most recent additions to the trend of examining civilian disruption through the lens of violent acts. Taylor argues that the "harsh

⁵ In this article, "fences" mean any natural or artificial barrier or fixture used in the separation of any size of land or body of water. They include felled trees, hedges, ditches, and stone walls, as well as piles of loose sod and other earthly materials.

⁶ Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Allan Kulikoff, "Revolutionary Violence and the Origins of American Democracy," *Journal of the Historical Society* 2 no. 2 (Spring 2002): 229-260, here 258.

⁷ Kulikoff, "Revolutionary Violence," 231.

experiences of war shaped the legacies of the revolution. More than by-products of war, civilian sufferings helped to define the new Republican government.”⁸ Hoock goes one step further than Kulikoff and Taylor by explicitly adopting violence as his “central analytical and narrative focus.”⁹ There is not much separating these three authors from each other. All have paid attention to the varied, costly disruptions of daily life, but none have done so utilizing a archaeological-material methodology that uses the fence as both the focal point of analytical research and a measurement of the Revolution’s wanton destruction on farm communities.

I. Battlefield Obstructions: Bunker Hill

Throughout the American Revolution patriots tore down fences to stop British troops from flanking their forces and capturing their land. This strategy was never more apparent than during the Battle of Bunker Hill, the first major confrontation of the war, beginning on the midday of June 17, 1775, in Charleston, Massachusetts. It was also both the shortest and deadliest of the revolutionary battles, ending hours later in complete bloodshed. Holger Hoock, who has extensively covered this revolutionary war from both the American and British perspectives, reminds us “that more than one-eighth of all British officers killed in the entire war had indeed died at Bunker Hill or as a result of injuries received that day.”¹⁰ These high casualty numbers were indicative of the rough geographical terrain of this small peninsular battlefield. A topographical map of the area (see Figure 1 below) from the collection of nineteenth-century American archivist Peter Force provides a visual representation of this battle’s landscape, which consisted of rolling-hills, stonewalls, hedges, post and rail fences, and several redoubts that impeded Britain’s army of experienced linear fighters from effectively navigating the partitioned landscape. The Patriots were led into battle by Israel Putnam and John Stark. They readied their position at the southeastern base of Bunker Hill, protected behind a distinct system of fenced fortifications involving a main redoubt, several lines of extending breastworks, a reinforced half-stone, half-wooden rail-fence, and a stone wall on the beach of the Mystic River.¹¹ The British stationed their redoubt about three quarters of a mile east of this, at Breeds Hill. Because of the extensive network of fenced barriers on the battlefield, the British had two options to make their way to the peninsula’s neck on foot. The British’s right column was led by General William Howe.

⁸ Allan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 5.

⁹ Holger Hoock, *Scars of Independence: America’s Violent Birth* (New York: Crown, 2017), xi.

¹⁰ Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, 75.

¹¹ Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, 2 vols., ed. John Richard Alden (New York: Macmillan Company, 1952), 2: 86, 87.

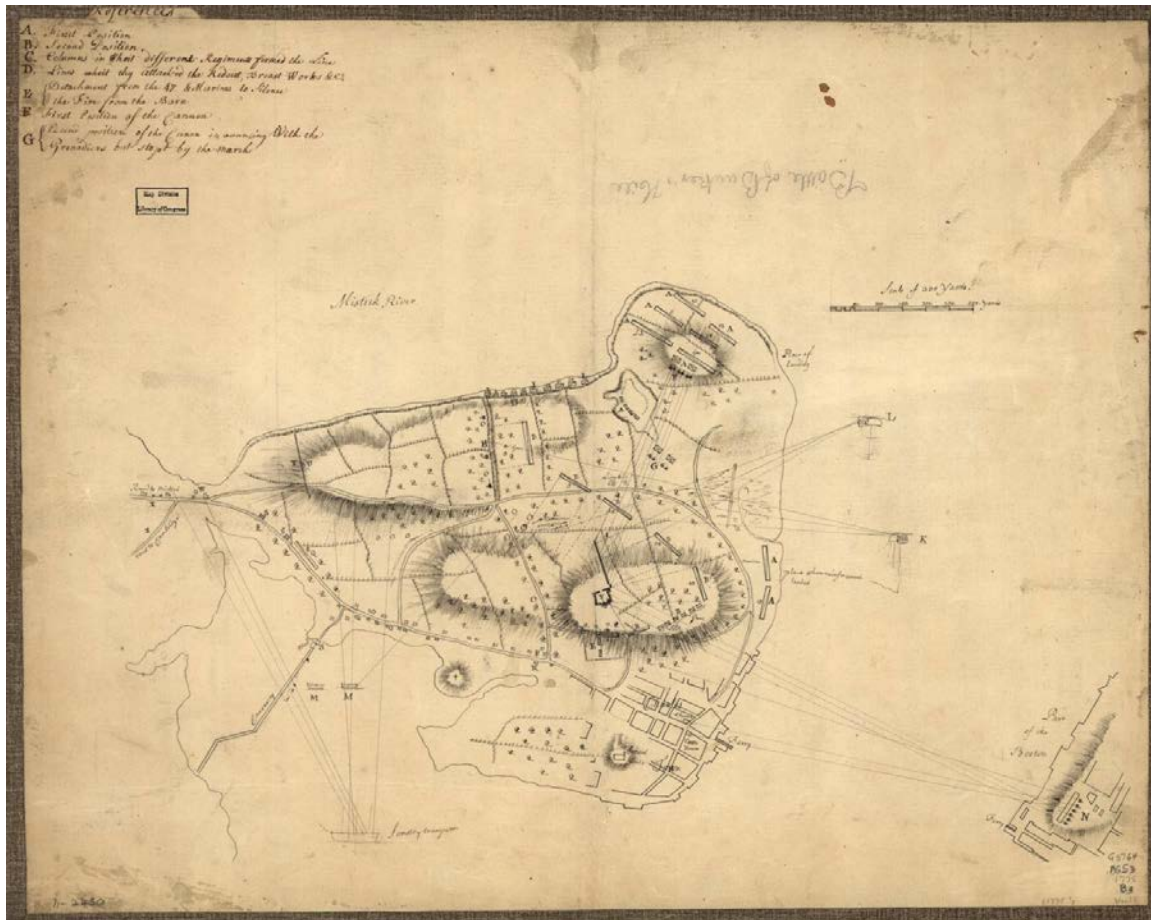


Figure 1: "Battle of Bunker Hill," map [manuscript] (ca. 1775), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G3764.B6S3 1775 .B3, accessed May 24, 2019.

Peter Oliver was a Loyalist who witnessed this battle. He described that, while Howe's column was doing this, British army officer Robert Pigott led the left column to burst through the multiple lines of breastwork that existed in-between and around "Dwelling Houses, from whence they [i.e., the Americans] fired with great Security; by which Means they could take Aim at the Officers of the British Troops, whom they made the particular Objects to be fired at."¹² A 1775 New York broadside article titled "Fresh News" supports Oliver's account and names others involved in the bloody battle. The eyewitness account comes from Captain Elijah Hide who was stationed at Winters Hill. He describes that "Captain Nolton, of Ashford, [arrived] with 400 of said forces, immediately repaired to, and pulled up a post and rail fence, and carrying the posts and rails to another fence, put them together for breastwork."¹³

¹² Peter Oliver, "The Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion" [1781], in *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence*, ed. John H. Rhodehamel (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2001), 44-52, here 45.

¹³ "Fresh news. Just arrived an express from the Provincial camp near Boston, with the following interesting account of the engagement at Charlestown, between about three thousand

By maneuvering fenced structures around this small battlefield and rearranging them when needed, the patriots in particular and the British in general obstructed each other's advancements. With Thomas Knowlton's arrival, the arrangement of fences proved to be a major hindrance for the British. The first two attempts by British troops to pierce the fence-work and win the peninsula proved to be bitter progress. In the span of one day, that progress cost them supplies, manpower, and spirit, resulting in the exhaustion, malnourishment, and death of many men. Hoock includes evidence of "some Americans" charging "some of their muskets with old nails and other pieces of iron," and firing from behind the protective cover of fences in order to maim British soldiers.¹⁴ Evidence of maiming due to the effectiveness of these unconventional tactics were the numerous veterans who returned home with missing limbs or with symptoms of severe sickness.¹⁵

Further corroboration illustrating Americans "owning to that savage Way of fighting, not in open Field, but aiming at their Objects from Houses & behind Walls & Hedges" comes from the aforementioned Peter Oliver's vantage point.¹⁶ He explains that American troops used a several hundred-yard-long "impenetrable hedge" to conceal their numbers as well as cannons.¹⁷ Upon the British's third successful flank on the main redoubt at Bunker Hill, they finally got through the hedge and developed a "Passage through the Fences."¹⁸ Having mounted the parapet in front of the redoubt, Howe's troops drove out the Americans. Casualties for the King's troops, says Oliver, amounted to about "1000 killed & wounded & of the latter many died of their wounds, through the excessive Heat of the Season. The rebels did not lose half that Number."¹⁹ This was, in part, due to fence placement by the Americans, which segmented entire battlefields into enclosed subsections of deadly engagements. This sectionalizing of fields into deadly networks of fenced blockades and barbed hurdles proved effective, and both sides took notice of using fence technology to create obstacles and entrapments.

Roughly forty days after the Battle of Bunker Hill, fence technology continued in the area. An extract of a letter from Cambridge, published in an

of the King's regular forces, and about half the number of Provincial," New York, 1775, *broadside*, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Printed Ephemera Collection, Portfolio 108, Folder 15, accessed May 24, 2019.

¹⁴ Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, 75-76.

¹⁵ *Morning Chronicle*, September 21, 1775; *London Evening Post*, September 23-26, 1775; *Middlesex Journal*, September 21-23, 1775; *Craftsman*, September 23, 1775; *Chester Chronicle*, September, 1775; *Daily Advertiser*, October 11, 1775; *Morning Chronicle*, October 19, 1775, as cited in Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, 439 note 36.

¹⁶ Oliver, "Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion," 44.

¹⁷ Oliver, "Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion," 45-46.

¹⁸ Oliver, "Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion," 46.

¹⁹ Oliver, "Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion," 46.

August 9, 1775, Philadelphia newspaper notes the British “had cut down several large trees, and were busy all night in throwing up a line and abbatis in front of it.”²⁰ Orders were later given to the “York county Rifle company to march down to our advanced post on Charlestown Neck [...] and to bring off some prisoners, from whom we expected to learn the enemy’s design in throwing up the abbatis on the neck.”²¹ The “abatis” (see Figure 2 below), based on old French “abateis” (meaning “thrown down”), was a very simple, yet effective technology that slowed down regiments and blocked key sites for advancement. These devices became more prevalent as infantries moved across bodies of land and water. The publication of this device’s relevance attests to the growing use of fence technology in the Revolution, particularly in Pennsylvania.

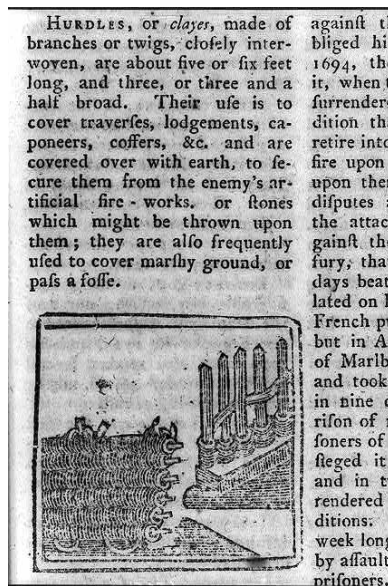


Figure 2: “Hurdles, or clays, made of branches or twigs [...],” book illustration/woodcut (1776), from Thomas Simes, *A new military, historical, and explanatory dictionary: including the warriors gazetteer of places remarkable for sieges or battles* (Philadelphia: Sold by Humphreys, Bell, and Aitken, 1776), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Illus. in U24 .S6 Am Imp [Rare Book RR], accessed May 24, 2019.

II. Battlefield Obstructions: Brandywine and Germantown

Fences divided landscapes into segmented battlegrounds, as seen in the 1777 battles of Germantown and Brandywine, both of which took place in Philadelphia. The 1782 painting of the “Battle of Germantown” by the Italian artist Xavier [Saverio] della Gatta (see Figure 3 below) reveals how prevalent fences were during this battle. What is not shown in this painting are the forks, fords (shallow part of ditches), roads, deep streams, and rail-fenced enclosures

²⁰ “Philadelphia, August 9. Extract of a Letter from Cambridge, Dated July 31,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, PA, August 9, 1775, page 2, *America’s Historical Newspapers* [database], accessed December 26, 2018.

²¹ “Philadelphia, August 9. Extract of a Letter from Cambridge, Dated July 31.”

that spanned many fields, “stretching for two miles along the Skippack Road which ran northwest from Philadelphia to Reading.”²² Lieutenant Captain Hinrichs, a Hessian who had joined the British army to sightsee America, described Pennsylvania as having many “defenses, which make this country so cut up that one cannot maneuver with cavalry, even where it is level.”²³



Figure 3: “The Battle of Germantown,” painting (1782) by Xavier [Saverio] della Gatta, Philadelphia, PA, Museum of the American Revolution, accessed May 24, 2019. Image Courtesy of the Museum of the American Revolution. Used by Permission (Museum of the American Revolution).

These *defenses*, Hinrichs wrote, were “merely wooden fences around tilled fields,” but because farmers rotated their cattle in fields that had been harvested, “nearly every field has its own fence.”²⁴ There are not many portraits of battle scenes involving fenced landscapes. Della Gatta’s painting is exemplary of the Revolution’s segmented battlefields, and how one material object can greatly affect both sides during a war in mostly agrarian environment.

Not only did fences divide and obstruct fields, they were ripped apart to make innovative devices, such as bridges, barbed fixtures, and barricades. For example, George Washington ordered a bridge to be constructed over the

²² Ward, *War of the Revolution*, 2: 362-363.

²³ “From Captain Hinrichs, On the Neck Near Philadelphia, January 18, 1778,” in *Letters from America, 1776-1779: Being Letters of Brunswick, Hessian, and Waldeck Officers, with the British Armies during the Revolution*, trans. Ray W. Pettengill (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1924), xviii, 184-185.

²⁴ “From Captain Hinrichs, On the Neck Near Philadelphia, January 18, 1778.”

Schuykill River in order to get heavy supplies across the various fords. This fixture, according to the diary of Albigeance Waldo, Washington's surgeon, consisted "of 36 waggons, with a bridge of Rails between each one."²⁵ Another example comes from Lieutenant William Beatty of the Continental Army who wrote in his diary about "throw[ing] up Breastworks in front of their respective Camps," as well as sharpening the branches from "felled trees" and fence posts and tangling them into *abatis*.²⁶ These large "spike strips," as seen at Bunker Hill, were used to obstruct the British marching toward Philadelphia. Pictures taken of *abatis* during the American Civil War (see Figure 4 below) provide visualization of how effective this device was in carving up the terrain.



Figure 4: "Petersburg, VA: View from breastworks of Fort Sedgwick," photograph [stereograph/wet collodion negative] (April 3, 1865), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-B811- 3209 [P&P], accessed May 24, 2019.

The second device represents the *chevaux-de-frise* (see Figures 5 and 6 below), meaning "Frisian horses." It was used for fencing off fields, particularly waterways. These crate-like structures looked like large spiked rolling pins. The logs were often capped with iron tips and weighted down with stones to sink

²⁵ Quoted in Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *American History Told by Contemporaries*, Vol. II: *Building of the Republic, 1689-1783* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1908), 568. For further information on this bridge, see Thomas J. McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, Vol. 1: *Brandywine and the Fall of Philadelphia* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2006), 171.

²⁶ McGuire, *Philadelphia Campaign*, 158.

just below the water's surface to rip open the bottom of British vessels as they passed.²⁷



Figure 5: "*Chevaux de frise in front of Confederate fortifications, Petersburg, VA,*" photograph [photographic print] (between 1861 and 1865) by Andrew J. Russell, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 4166-E, no. 33 [P&P], accessed May 24, 2019.

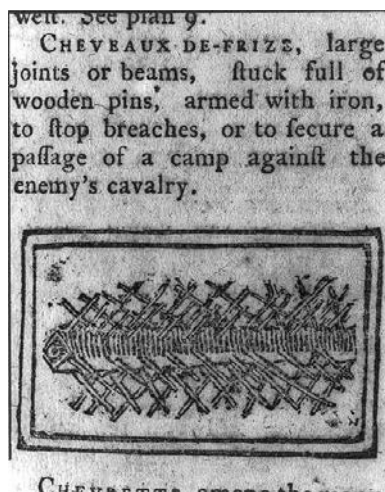


Figure 6: "*Cheveaux de-frize, large joints or beams [...]*," book illustration/woodcut (1776), "from Thomas Simes, *A new military, historical, and explanatory dictionary: including the warriors gazetteer of places remarkable for sieges or battles* (Philadelphia: Sold by Humphreys, Bell, and Aitken, 1776), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Illus. in U24 .S6 Am Imp [Rare Book RR], accessed May 24, 2019.

Washington noted that he directed "the Works upon and obstructions in the Delaware," stating that the construction of them "should be carried on with Spirit and compleated as far as possible lest they should visit that quarter."²⁸ In

²⁷ Michael C. Harris, *Brandywine: A Military History of the Battle that Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2014), 64-65.

²⁸ "To the President of Congress" [Head Quarters, Morris Town, July 7, 1777], in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscripts, 1745-1799*, Vol. 8: May 1, 1777-July 31,

an October 1777 British correspondence between Lord Viscount William Howe and one Mr. Stephens, Howe describes the locations of both Billingsport and the Schuylkill River as having several protective defenses, with each one consisting of “several rows of the chevaux de fries.”²⁹ He elaborates that the devices had been sunk in a way “as to render the nearer approach of ships impracticable and [that] no attempt could be made for moving the sunk frames [...] till the command of the shores on each side of the river could be obtained.”³⁰ Rising tides and prevailing winds turned these dangerous devices into deadly obstacles.

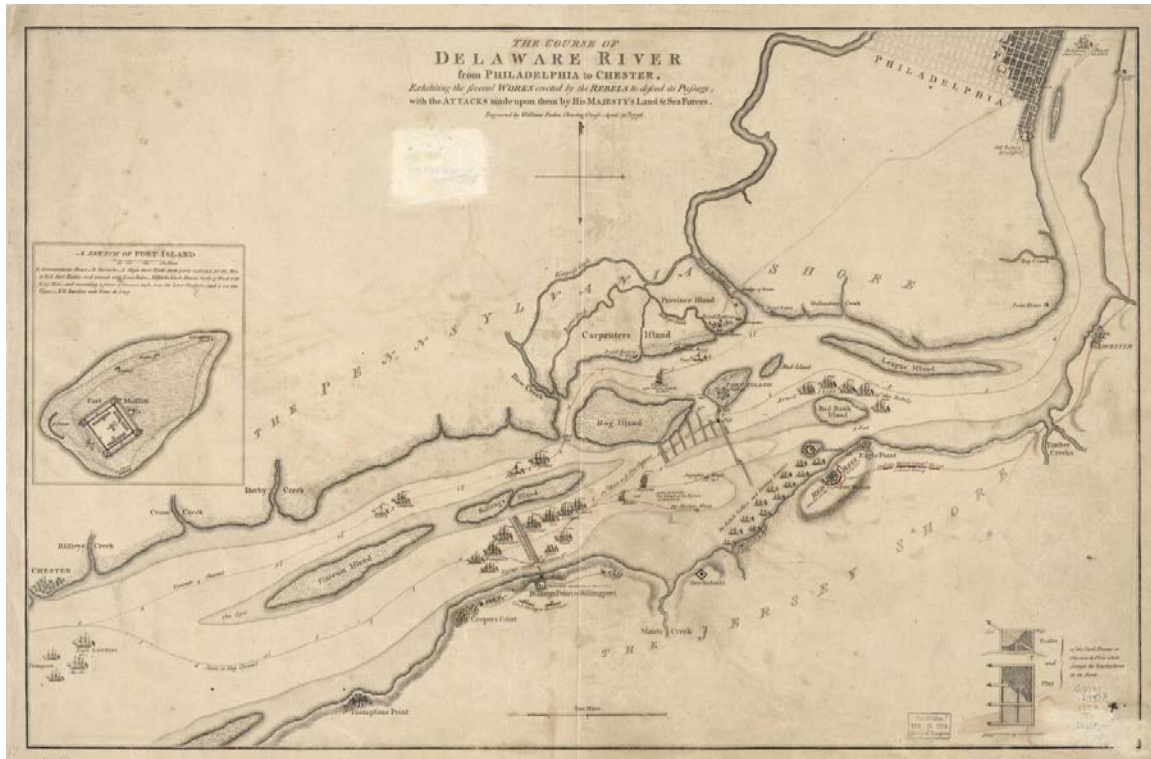


Figure 7: “The course of Delaware River from Philadelphia to Chester, exhibiting the several works erected by the rebels to defend its passage, with the attacks made upon them by His Majesty’s land & sea forces,” map [engraving] by William Faden (London, 1778). Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G3792.D44S3 1778 .F3, accessed May 24, 2019.

The map of the “Course of the Delaware River” (see Figure 7 above) features the areas consisting of three *chevaux* sites, guarded by several redoubt spots. The lower site had a double line strung from Billings Island to the Jersey Shore. The second site had 30 *chevaux*, extending from Mud Island halfway across the Delaware River, guarded by redoubts on both sides. Mud Island itself consisted

1777, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 366-367, here 366.

²⁹ “Copy of a Letter from Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Howe, to Mr. Stephens, Dated on Board His Majesty’s Ship,” *Pennsylvania Ledger*, Pennsylvania, PA, March 7, 1778, issue CXXXIII, page 1, *America’s Historical Newspapers* [database], accessed December 26, 2018.

³⁰ “Copy of a Letter from Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Howe, to Mr. Stephens.”

of a main enclosure, comprised of earth and fences to make *ravelins* (triangular fortifications). The land and water areas seen in this map all had their own *abatis* and fenced obstructions. The thousands of troops that fought within the divided, spiked landscape of Brandywine and Germantown had faced similar challenges in preceding battles. While various forms of obstructions played important roles during these specific battles, their use during the Revolution was not singular. Rail-fencing, ditches, rivers, redoubts, hedges, and spiked-devices of all kinds were fabricated for the hindrance of military advancement. The fabrication of these devices helped fuel the devastation of beautiful landscapes and fenced enclosures.

III. Fences in War: Accounts of Devastation from Fence Destruction

The destruction of fences for battlefield tactics brought about the devastation of the surrounding farmland. This can be seen in the journal entries of civilians who lived through these battles. William Brooke Rawle was a young man when he experienced the British occupation of Philadelphia (September 1777-June 1778). After escaping to London, he wrote of his observations at Germantown. He described the city as exhibiting

a dreary picture of want and desolation; houses empty and abandoned with windows taken out and floors pulled up; enclosures levelled to the ground; gardens ravaged and destroyed; forests cut down, opening an extensive prospect of a silent and deserted country. Such was the change from what, a few weeks before, were the most beautiful, the best cultivated and the most fertile environs of any city in America.³¹

Sarah Logan, the wife of a wealthy Quaker, Thomas Fisher, also recalled scenes of destruction as a result of losing her fences. According to the November 1, 1777, entry in her diary “everything is almost gone of the vegetable kind, plundered, great part of it, by the Hessians, as there can be nothing brought into the city except from down in the Neck [...] Fences torn down, cows, hogs, fowls & everything gone.”³² The disruption caused by losing fences often resulted in losing animals. Because of this, a broken (trading and bartering) economy set in wherein “butchers obliged to kill fine milch [i.e., milk] cows for meat.”³³ The absence of adequate food sources caused monetary inflation to soar and local town markets to shut down. Sarah Fisher observed a woman paying “7 hard dollars for a quarter of pork, common fowls 15 a couple, neither eggs nor butter at any price.”³⁴

³¹ William Brooke Rawle, “Plundering by the British Army during the American Revolution,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 25, no. 1 (1901): 114-117, here 114-115.

³² Nicholas B. Wainwright and Sarah Logan Fisher, “A Diary of Trifling Occurrences:” Philadelphia, 1776-1778, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 82, no. 4 (October 1958): 411-465, here 455, 464.

³³ Wainwright and Fisher, “Diary of Trifling Occurrences,” 455.

³⁴ Wainwright and Fisher, “Diary of Trifling Occurrences,” 455.

At the time of Brandywine, a band of British deserters known as the 4th Georgia Battalion left destruction in its wake. "The Petition of Divers Inhabitants of the Townships of Lower Merriion & Blockley," addressed to Thomas Wharton, the president of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, on August 15, 1777, reflects the grievances that thirty-six Philadelphian property holders from two locations voiced against this battalion:³⁵

[They were] Robbing the neighborhood of everything they could lay their hands on, pillaging their dwelling houses, Spring Houses and Barns, Burning their Fence rails, Cutting down their Timber, Robbing Orchards and Gardens, Stealing their Pigs, Poultry & Lambs, and sometimes killing them through wantonness or bravado, & when complaints were made, they, with the most unparalleled impudence, would threaten the lives of the Complaints or their Houses with fire, frequently damaging the Congress, and Swearing they will never fight against King George.³⁶

Answers to why British soldiers in particular sought and dismantled fences for firewood and makeshift shelters can be found in Arthur Bowler's 1975 study *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America, 1775-1783*.³⁷ Although he focuses on the greater New York area, his evidence reflects the general lack of provisions of the British, such as tents, firewood (fuel), and fodder for their horses. The lack of necessities led to the mass destruction of fences and theft of grain outside the New York area.

Bowler explains that, as early as 1775, fences in the middle colonies were torn up by the mile to keep the army warm during freezing temperatures and that grain was stolen by the wagonload to keep their horses fed. Until 1780, troops were "paid one dollar a head for enemy cattle rounded up during a campaign."³⁸ Financial incentives like these helped fuel the wreckage of enclosures. In the case of shelters, particularly in Brandywine, troops broke down fence rails, cornstalks, tree branches, and other timbered sources to make "wigwams" or "booths," which were tiny huts used as shelter from the hot sun and heavy downpour.³⁹ A resident of Yorktown Virginia, Dr. Robert Honyman, noted in his diary on June 8, 1781, that British soldiers had set up camp on his neighbor's plantation and, as a result, "the fences [were] pulled down & much of them burnt; Many cattle, hogs, sheep & poultry of all sorts killed [...] there was not one Tent in the British army, all of them lying under temporary sheds or arbours, made with boughs of

³⁵ See McGuire, *Philadelphia Campaign*, 118.

³⁶ "The Inhabitants of Montgomery County to the President," Lower Merriion, August 15, 1777, in *Pennsylvania Archives: Second Series, Published under Direction of Matthew S. Quay, Secretary of the Commonwealth*, ed. John B. Linn and William H. Egle (Harrisburg: B. F. Meyers, State Printer, 1875), 118-119.

³⁷ Arthur Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America, 1775-1783* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

³⁸ Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army*, 57-61, 80.

³⁹ McGuire, *Philadelphia Campaign*, 135.

Trees, fence rails &c.”⁴⁰ The lack of adequate provisions for British troops led directly to the breakdown of wooden enclosures for shelter, causing the theft and slaughtering of livestock.

American troops were also guilty of plundering their own people’s fences for firewood, risking alienating their own supporters in the process. Quartermasters played an important role in the maintenance of camp provisions. In 1780, General Nathanael Greene requested that on Continental Army campsites “proper places” were to be selected for kitchen sites and “camp and quarter guards are to confine every person detected either in moving or burning fence stuff.”⁴¹ In the same year, Deputy Commissary General of Purchases for New York, Udny Hay, sent a letter to Governor George Clinton, requesting to revive “the laws for obtaining firewood for the use of the army” to stop the damages that arise from “the burning of fences, and losing or killing Horses & Oxen when Impressed for the use of the army.”⁴² In 1778, George Washington tried to keep his troops from “marauding” and destroying “Inclosures, Fruit Trees or other Property of the Inhabitants.”⁴³ This is a stark contrast to what, roughly two years earlier, he had condoned as necessary, for depriving the enemy of their provisions and food sources was a vengeful act that hurt both Loyalists and Patriots and a strategy of warfare that he was never really able to control among his troops.⁴⁴ Washington and other American leaders were aware that plundering and marauding among their people was a detriment to maintaining support amongst Patriot communities. The 1776 American *Articles of War* state:

All Officers and Soldiers are to behave themselves orderly in Quarters, and on their March, and whosoever shall commit any Waste or Spoil, either in Walks of Trees, Parks, Warrens, Fish-Ponds, Houses, or gardens, Cornfields, Enclosures, or Meadows, or shall maliciously destroy any Property whatsoever belonging to any of our subjects, unless by Order of the

⁴⁰ Richard K. MacMaster and Robert Honyman, “News of the Yorktown Campaign: The Journal of Dr. Robert Honyman, April 17-November 25, 1781,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 79, no. 4 (October 1971): 387-426, here 401-402.

⁴¹ George Washington Greene, *The Life of Nathanael Greene: Major-General in the Army of the Revolution*, 3 vols. (New York, NY: Hurd and Houghton, 1871), 3: 219. The author notes that this quote is under the year 1780.

⁴² A letter from Colonel Udny Hay to Governor George Clinton: “Colonel Udny Hay’s Valuable Suggestions” [Poughkeepsie, September 7, 1780], in *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795, 1801-1804*, Vol. 6 (Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1902), 177-178, here 177.

⁴³ *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscripts, 1745-1799*, Vol. 12: June 1, 1778-September 30, 1778, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1939; first published 1934), 93, see also 106, 147.

⁴⁴ Sung Bok Kim, “The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (Dec. 1993): 868-889, here 879.

then Commander in Chief of Our Forces to annoy Rebels, or other Enemies in Arms against Us.⁴⁵

That American leaders created laws such as these to stop the plundering of farm enclosures by their own troops was a sad attempt to control their actions during a war involving harsh weather and significant lack of provisions. While these *Articles of War* were noble and prepared early on in the war, they nonetheless did not have much effect on those who chose to steal, kill, or destroy.



Figure 8: *"British Heroism," print [engraving] (1795) by Elkanah Tisdale, from John Trumbull, M'Fingal: a modern epic poem, in four cantos (New-York: Printed by John Buel, no. 132, Fly-Market, 1795), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Illus. in Rare Book Division [Rare Book RR], accessed May 24, 2019.*

We know from historians such as Stephen Conway that the British's growing dependency on alcohol was an additional cause for plundering fences. During long periods away from home, it was sometimes the only drink available.

⁴⁵ Journals of the Continental Congress, Articles of War, September 20, 1776, Article 16, Section XIII, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, accessed May 6, 2018.

Because of their developed dependency, the British often sold their own provisions, including food and firewood, for cash to buy more liquor.⁴⁶ They then went out on foraging expeditions to raid fences, crops, and animals, only to plunder or sell them to other neighbors for cash. Elkanah Tisdale's 1795 engraving "British Heroism" (see Figure 8 above) provides a visual impression of what such raiding looked like. Loyalist gangs known for their violent expeditions included the De Lancey brothers, John and James. They belonged to the Queens Rangers and often acted on their own as "Cowboys," plundering homes in New York for mere sport and leaving behind skinned Patriots.⁴⁷ There was little that General Alexander McDougal could do to save the American inhabitants of New York from gangs such as these. Within a two-week span in the spring of 1777, the De Lancey gang hauled away over 500 animals, including horses, hogs, and sheep.⁴⁸ Down in Pennsylvania, the raiding became so pervasive that General William Howe protested that "soldiers make a practice of going out of the Lines to bring in Fences &c. to sell to the Inhabitants."⁴⁹

The war's cold-weather seasons only fueled competition and consumption of fences and foodstuffs, particularly around Boston in 1775-1776 and New York in 1779-1780.⁵⁰ By 1779, the British had consumed so much timber that New York had been completely stripped of trees and bushes and fences.⁵¹ Sung Bok Kim has done extensive research on New York during the Revolution. He explains that in the town of Peekskill around sixty homes were deserted by their residents because American soldiers had ruined their wooden enclosures, leaving their land unfit for livestock farming.⁵² Westchester was hit the hardest by devastation due to the prolonged battles of the Revolution. The city's farmers came together in 1779 to petition their Commissioners of Sequestration for financial compensation in the range of £70,000. The total sum reflected the loss of 3,000 cords of firewood and 350,000 fence rails.⁵³ Adding insult to injury for these poor Yankee farmers were the Commissioners of Forfeiture who, in that same year, resold the encompassing territory to several wealthy landowners, among them

⁴⁶ Stephen Conway, "'The Great Mischief Complain'd of': Reflections on the Misconduct of British Soldiers in the Revolution War," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July 1990): 370-390, here 382-383.

⁴⁷ Kim, "Limits of Politicization," 880, 884-885.

⁴⁸ Kim, "Limits of Politicization," 880.

⁴⁹ Kim, "Limits of Politicization," 381.

⁵⁰ Conway, "'The Great Mischief Complain'd of,'" 383.

⁵¹ Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army*, 57-61.

⁵² Kim, "Limits of Politicization," 881.

⁵³ Otto Hufeland, *Westchester County during the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (White Plains: Westchester County Historical Society, 1926), 444-445. The Commissioners of Sequestration were in charge of adjusting claims for damages done to property and for material taken during the war. Such claims involved the stealing or destroying of fences, fields, wood, forage, and provisions.

James De Lancey, for £723,385 and divided that large territory into more than three hundred farms.⁵⁴

As early as 1776, both sides ravaged communities. Farms on Long Island were treated no differently. Loyalist Lydia Minturn Post wrote in her diary (October 1776) of Hessian soldiers cutting down “all the saplings they can find” and piling “them along the road about twelve feet high” to be picked up by wagons and then hauled away to their “forts and barracks at a distance.”⁵⁵ She also recalled that the Hessians were keeping fires “a-going all night,” and that “many a poor farmer rises in the morning to find his cattle strayed miles away, or his grain trampled down and ruined!”⁵⁶ A 1780 entry in her diary reflects how commoners, like herself, viewed the actions of soldiers and were relieved to see them leave: “The neighborhood has been more quiet for a week past, and the Hessians have really left, bag and baggage, for which Heaven be praised! They are like the locusts of Egypt, desolating the land, and eating up every green thing.”⁵⁷ For both Patriots and Loyalists who were trying to survive this war, the constant threat against their fences and animals never stopped. While these accounts of physical destruction illustrate why fences were vital to farming organization and maintenance, financial accounts are harder to come by, but not impossible to find.

IV. Fences in War: The Financial Cost of Destruction

From an article by Jason R. Wickersty, we learn that, on June 27, 1777, as 13,000 British troops were leaving their Westfield, New Jersey, campsites to march to Brunswick to fight Washington’s army, they left behind such destruction that it could only be described as a natural disaster. They plundered 92 homes, stole over 1,000 animals, and robbed the residents of 2,365 fence rails, and there were 13 instances of plundering fences.⁵⁸ While only a few residents filed for compensation, their total losses were high. Mr. Corbet Scudder’s loss, for example, was over £1,062. Two other residents lost a combined total of £1,267, 18 shillings, and 7 pence in cash. Altogether, the plundering at Westfield cost nearly £8,703. “The damages from that single day,” Wickersty calculates, “accounted for eighteen percent of the entire damages in Essex County during the war.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Hufeland, *Westchester County*, 445. The Commissioners of Forfeiture were in charge of seizing and selling real estate.

⁵⁵ Lydia Minturn Post, *Personal Recollections of the American Revolution: A Private Journal, Prepared from Authentic Domestic Records, Together with Reminiscences of Washington & Lafayette*, ed. Sidney Barclay (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 26.

⁵⁶ Post, *Personal Recollections of the American Revolution*, 26.

⁵⁷ Post, *Personal Recollections of the American Revolution*, 140.

⁵⁸ Jason R. Wickersty, “A Shocking Havoc: The Plundering of Westfield, New Jersey, June 26, 1777,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, July 21, 2015, accessed May 7, 2018.

⁵⁹ Wickersty, “Shocking Havoc.”

Around the same time, several miles away, Trenton's numerous residents suffered heavy losses resulting from Hessians raiding their small local farms during twenty-six days of violent skirmishes. Patriot Jonathan Seargant, Esq., lost £620 in property damage, £18 of which was from his garden and "75 Panel of Post & Rail Fence."⁶⁰ Major William Scudder of Windsor incurred £1118 worth of damage, £19 of which were for his garden tools, 7 rail fences, and 180 panels for his post-fences.⁶¹ Joseph Olden from Middlesex only lost £31 worth of property, but all of it was farming material, including 5 hogs, 1 ton of hay, 150 fence rails, and 2 cords of fresh wood.⁶² However, Nathanael Littleton Savage of Virginia perhaps takes the prize for the greatest number of fence rails lost by one individual.

Hoock notes Nathanael Savage's damages caused by Loyalist soldiers in 1781, listing them at £583. This was for his numerous horses, livestock, tobacco, grain, and 10,000 fence rails.⁶³ Loyalist and Hessian involvement in Trenton equated to little more than burning fenced enclosures, as well as stealing and killing sheep, cattle, cows, and other livestock. Like the inflated prices and scarce foodstuffs Sarah Logan was encountering in Pennsylvania, these residents also suffered inflation as a result of these Hessians' actions: beef went up from 12 to 18 pence per pound, veal from 18 to 24 pence, and two fowls cost 10 shillings.⁶⁴ All this suggests that fences were valuable necessities that kept farmers' livelihoods safe from harm. The constant plundering of these objects caused monetary inflation to rise and the supply of perishables and animals to dwindle. Fences were, and still are, fundamental to the functioning of a healthy and properly sectionalized society, especially in times of war and civil conflict. As these staple fixtures were plundered, stolen, and burned for either depriving the enemy of foodstuff, generating revenue, producing warmth, or obstructing battlefields, society was thrown into a state of chaos and economic uncertainty. Residents who lost their fence stuff and livestock during the Revolution faced the difficulty of gaining back their lost inventory of perishables and outdoor property.

⁶⁰ *A Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1776-1777: A Contemporary Account of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton*, ed. Varnum Lansing Collins (Princeton: The University Library, 1906), 4-5 note 2, quoting from Trenton, New Jersey, State Library, Ms. "Damages Done by the British" in Middlesex Co., 278.

⁶¹ *Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1777-1777*, ed. Collins, 6-7 note 1, quoting from Trenton, New Jersey, State Library, Ms. "Damages Done by the British" in Middlesex Co., 235.

⁶² *Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1777-1777*, ed. Collins, 10-11 note 1, quoting from Trenton, New Jersey, State Library, Ms. "Damages Done by the British" in Middlesex Co., 256.

⁶³ Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, 323.

⁶⁴ *Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1777-1777*, ed. Collins, 12 note 1, quoting from *Historical Anecdotes Civil & Military in a Series of Letters Written from America in 1777 & 1778* (London: n.p., 1779).

Conclusion

Before and after the Revolution, fences kept livestock and cattle enclosed, and vegetation separated and protected. During the Revolution, they were either plundered for scrap wood, sold for cash, or burned for firewood. This plundering often resulted in the ravaging of crops and grain and animals. Future authors who choose to focus on the varied devastation of the Revolution should utilize physical objects as material witnesses to evaluate the American Revolution in new ways. By putting the fence at the forefront of analysis, we uncover new perspectives we can use to measure the varied effects of this Revolution as well as other American wars, whether they are foreign or domestic. By approaching research such as this from an interdisciplinary angle, while using an archaeological-material methodology, scholars may realize how much fences meant to the organization and maintenance of farming communities and the preservation of luscious landscapes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Noah Stevens of Anaheim, California, earned several Associate's Degrees (2016) from Santiago Canyon College, as well as B.A. degrees in History and American Studies from California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2019). He is currently a paraprofessional in several industries. His article printed above originated in a senior research seminar on the American Revolution offered by CSUF's History Department.