

# On New Jersey hillside, clues to Revolutionary War mystery

May 9 2016, by By David Porter

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In this May 5, 2016, photo, Kevin Bradley, left, and Donald Purdon, project archeologists with Commonwealth Heritage Group, a Michigan-based firm that specializes in archaeological surveying, look at some items found by William Style, right, at a site in Chatham, N.J. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

On a gently sloping hillside studded with pine trees, clues to a Revolutionary War mystery are slowly being revealed, spurred by the

dogged efforts of a local historian and his teenage son.

An archaeological survey last week conducted on an unspoiled swath of land about 15 miles west of Newark Liberty International Airport produced several dozen items including metal buckles, a knob from a desk drawer, a shard from a clay pot and a partial pipe bowl.

William Styple, an author and editor of numerous American history books, believes those artifacts are proof that Gen. George Washington's army made camp there for several months in the winter of 1777, a year before the ragtag group hunkered down at its more well-known refuge at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

"We know they ate here, we know they smoked here, we know they unstrapped their gear here," he said.

If Styple is right, it could add a chapter to the historical record of the Revolutionary War that has been hinted at but never fully explored. Compared with Valley Forge, considerably less is known about the 1777 encampment, which closely followed Washington's famous crossing of the Delaware River and the battles of Princeton and Trenton.

That there is virtually no contemporaneous written record of the camp casts some uncertainty over the site's location, however, said Eric Olsen, park ranger and historian at nearby Morristown National Historical Park, site of Washington's army's camp in the winter of 1780.



In this May 5, 2016, photo, William Style holds an old farm implement that he unearthed while looking for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. A group is digging for artifacts that may be the best evidence yet, that this unspoiled swath of land about 15 miles west of Newark Liberty International Airport hosted Gen. George Washington's army in the winter of 1777, a year before the ragtag group hunkered down at its more well-known refuge at Valley Forge, Pa. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

"It could be an encampment during the war, possibly '77," Olsen said. "But armies constantly marched through here through the entire American Revolution, and bits of armies were camping as they passed through."

It was Style's research over the last year, with a key assist from his son, that led him to the largely pristine land that had been used as farmland before it became part of the Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge estate for much of the 20th century.

Fortuitously, and unbeknownst to Style at the time, Chatham officials had purchased the land late in 2014 and earmarked it for open space.



In this Thursday, May 5, 2016, photo, William Style, right, carries a metal detector as he walks with project archeologist Kevin Bradley, of Commonwealth Heritage Group, a Michigan-based firm that specializes in archaeological surveying, as they look for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. Archaeologists have uncovered artifacts from a site in northern New Jersey where American soldiers likely camped during the early part of the Revolutionary War. (AP Photo/Mel

Evans)

Style had come across an 1855 newspaper article that reprinted a speech by the Rev. Samuel Tuttle, who allegedly interviewed people who were old enough to have witnessed the camp.

On a visit to a library in Morristown, Brad Style, a high school junior who shares his father's keen interest in history, located two photographs from 1890 that showed a mansion that stands on the same spot today.

A marking on one of the photos was described as the location where the camp's flagpole flew the Grand Union, the forerunner to the Stars and Stripes.



In this May 5, 2016, photo, Kevin Bradley, project archeologists with Commonwealth Heritage Group, a Michigan-based firm that specializes in archaeological surveying, examines a spoon unearthed while looking for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. A group is digging for artifacts that may be the best evidence yet, that this unspoiled swath of land about 15 miles west of Newark Liberty International Airport hosted Gen. George Washington's army in the winter of 1777, a year before the ragtag group hunkered down at its more well-known refuge at Valley Forge, Pa. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

"It is really cool to be able to find your own piece of history," Brad Style said last week.

The newspaper article described the first troops arriving in early January 1777. For the next several months they ate, slept, performed daily drills, got drunk on whiskey from local peddlers and did their best to stave off the winter's cold.

It was a harsh existence: Many soldiers died from smallpox, and some deserters were punished by hanging or by running a gauntlet manned by soldiers wielding whips cut from nearby trees, according to Tuttle.



In this May 5, 2016, photo, Kevin Bradley, project archeologists with Commonwealth Heritage Group, a Michigan-based firm that specializes in archaeological surveying, holds a small button unearthed while looking for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. Archaeologists have uncovered artifacts from a site in northern New Jersey where American soldiers likely camped during the early part of the Revolutionary War. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

Olsen is skeptical of some of Tuttle's claims, primarily due to the lack of supporting documentation.

"I've looked at everything Washington wrote about the 1777 encampment and there's nothing that says, 'Go build a log cabin encampment'" at the Chatham site, he said. "The first time it comes up

in print is when Tuttle writes about it."

The winter of 1777 was a crucial juncture during the Revolutionary War as the Continental Army was gradually developing into the force that would emerge from Valley Forge the following year, said Wade Catts, West Chester, Pennsylvania-based regional director of Commonwealth Heritage Group, the firm that conducted the archaeological survey.



In this May 5, 2016, photo, a replica of the Grand Union flag, the forerunner to the Stars and Stripes, flies nearby as William Style watches his son Brad Style, works with a metal detector to search for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. Archaeologists have uncovered artifacts from a site in northern New Jersey where American soldiers likely camped during the early part of the Revolutionary War. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)



The site is part of a 165-acre parcel of land the town bought for \$14 million. The money came from a state open space grant and public and private donations, Chatham Deputy Mayor Kevin Sullivan said.

Commonwealth's survey was paid with private donations raised by the Chatham Township Historical Society. Everyone approached the project understanding the potential for disappointment.

The town may seek a national historic designation for the site. The goal would be to create a walking tour and reproduce the flagpole to commemorate the soldiers and the hardships they endured.



In this May 5, 2016, photo, as a replica of the Grand Union flag flies nearby, Brad Style, uses a metal detector to search for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. Archaeologists have uncovered artifacts from a site in northern New Jersey

where American soldiers likely camped during the early part of the Revolutionary War. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

"They sacrificed themselves for that idea of the freedom that we all enjoy but often take for granted," Style said. "The least we can do for them is to preserve the ground, put up markers and tell their story."

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In this Thursday, May 5, 2016, photo, a pink colored marker flags show where a crew of archeologists from Commonwealth Heritage Group, a Michigan-based

firm that specializes in archaeological surveying, are looking for artifacts in Chatham, N.J. Archaeologists have uncovered artifacts from a site in northern New Jersey where American soldiers likely camped during the early part of the Revolutionary War. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

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