

“The Battle of Princeton Mapping Project: Report of Military Terrain Analysis and Battle Narrative, Princeton, New Jersey” offers a close reading of the available primary sources dealing with the first phase of the Battle of Princeton, systematically analyzed in light of the landscape on which the initial encounter between British and Continental Army forces took place on 3 January 1777. Although it is not constructed as a conventional work of history, but rather as a discourse on method, a description of terrain features, and a narrative of events, the Report resembles the kind of systematic battlefield analyses that historians have been performing for the last three decades. As such it participates in what once was called the “new military history,” a broad-based approach to past wars that arose in reaction against the tendency of military historians to construct narratives from the perspective of commanding officers, drawing chiefly upon official accounts and memoirs.

The informing assumptions behind older military histories were that commanders both knew what they intended to achieve by the orders they issued and had the most comprehensive knowledge of a battle as a whole; writers therefore tended to discount the perspectives of common soldiers as partial and unreliable, using their accounts only for local color on the assumption that the subjects had little or no sense of the action beyond what they themselves had witnessed. The British historian John Keegan called these assumptions and practices sharply into question in the first chapter of *The Face of Battle* (1976), noting that commanders had every reason to write accounts that claimed credit for (or deflected blame from) themselves and seldom produced anything like a comprehensive or objective view of any given battle. Almost invariably, Keegan argued, they overstated the degree to which their own orders, actions, and desires dictated the movements and behavior of troops in the field. He not only deplored the influence that “battle pieces” dependent on commanders’ accounts had had on military history, however, but went on to demonstrate how to take a more inclusive approach, integrating the

analysis of terrain, technology, psychology, and other factors into brilliant case studies of the battles of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme. Since then many historians have tried to emulate his approach, and indeed to improve upon it by increasing its rigor. One of the most scrupulous and successful of these is the historical archaeologist Lawrence Babits, who has made major contributions to the history of the Revolutionary War in books on the battles of Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse.¹ It seems likely that Babits's work served as a methodological model for the Report.

In approaching Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse Babits gives particular weight to archaeological evidence and terrain analysis, using the former to determine by the concentration of artifacts where units actually stood, and the latter to discern what men on those sites (and elsewhere) could have seen or known at any given time. Properly deployed, this technique permits the scrupulous interrogation of sources, so that commanders' narratives which might once have been treated as definitive serve only as starting points against which can be weighed accounts by participants whose positions can plausibly be fixed at known points during the action. The latter collectively check and modify the top-down view of the commanders and their aides.

No doubt the greatest benefit of this method for understanding battles of the Revolutionary War has been in bringing to bear a rich collection of sources – pension applications from ex-soldiers and their widows, mostly made in response to Congressional acts passed between 1818 and 1832 – that historians writing before the 1990s had dismissed on the assumption that the memories of superannuated witnesses were necessarily unreliable. When checked against the terrain and the archaeological evidence, however, pension narratives have frequently proven accurate, and highly revealing. At the very least they have offered important

¹ Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Lawrence E. Babits and Joshua B. Howard, *Long, Obstinate, and Bloody: The Battle of Guilford Courthouse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

corrections to standard narratives; in some cases they have simulated thoroughgoing reconsiderations of received wisdom. Before Babits's investigation of the Battle of Cowpens, for example, historians had routinely credited the outcome of the battle to Daniel Morgan's brilliant disposition of his forces and to the timing of his orders for withdrawal and counterattack. Babits's narrative compelled historians to recognize the degree to which Morgan's success depended on the exhausted physical and psychic condition of the attacking British soldiers; on the critical consequences of moment when a Highland regiment, having mistaken an American withdrawal for flight, charged directly into a devastating musket volley; and on sheer good fortune. The resulting reassessment has created a more tempered understanding of the battle and more nuanced appraisal of Morgan's place in the history of the Southern campaign of 1781.

Such a detailed and intensive analytical approach to the primary sources, in general, offers the kinds of benefits and insights associated with the genre of microhistory: the investigator operating at this level can actually exhaust the relevant primary sources and produce a result that is as close to comprehensive as it is possible to come. Microhistorical studies can have great heuristic power, compelling historians to re-examine received narratives from new angles. Yet microhistory can also introduce substantial interpretative problems when its practitioners do not adequately connect their particular cases with the larger narratives that frame them, and hence fail to make measured judgments concerning the significance of their findings.² Virtually all historians suffer from the temptation to overestimate the importance of the specialized knowledge

² This is in general the case that Andrew Cayton and I argued in "The Problem of Authority in the Writing of Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 64 (2009): 467-494. Jill Lepore makes a related argument about the character of the genre, speaking specifically of microhistories that center on individuals as distinct from biographies in "Historians who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History*, 88 (2001): 129-144. Robert Darnton, one of the earliest and most accomplished practitioners of microhistory, anticipated these cautionary arguments in a review of Pierre Darmon, *Damning the Innocent: A History of the Persecution of the Impotent in Pre-Revolutionary France*, "Pop Foucaultism," in *The New York Review of Books*, 33 no. 15 (9 Oct. 1986).

they have developed through study and research, of course. But practitioners of microhistory may be more apt even than the common run of scholars to imagine that the rigor of their analytic schemes and their ability to exhaust the available sources give their findings a superior claim to truth, and therefore a kind of *a priori* claim to significance. If the former tendency merely manifests a familiar scholarly shortcoming in a new setting, the latter is actively dangerous because it can produce accounts of the past that, for all their sophistication, are fundamentally antiquarian. Both the benefits and the risks of microhistorical analysis seem to me to be evident in this Report.

The Report accurately maintains that previous accounts of the battle have suffered by giving too much credence to the narratives of Washington's aides, and particularly to the early nineteenth-century account written by James Wilkinson, who was by Washington's side and thus did describe the battle's early stages from personal knowledge. Under the authors' scrutiny Wilkinson's account frays badly, as do those parts of the standard modern narratives (especially certain aspects of troop movements before and during the battle as described in Richard Ketchum, *The Winter Soldiers* [1973], and in David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* [2004]) that depend on it. These corrections are particularly important in clarifying how Brigadier General Hugh Mercer's brigade came into contact with Lt. Col. Charles Mawhood's force at the outset of the engagement, and what happened next. The modifications proposed by the authors do not, for the most part, change the sequence or timing of events as the modern narratives describe them; nor do they significantly alter prevailing understandings of the battle's significance.

The standard narrative runs more or less as follows. Upon receiving orders from Washington to secure the area near William Clarke's farm from what Washington mistakenly believed to be a small detachment of redcoat observers, Mercer's brigade left Quaker Road in the Stony Brook defile and marched overland to the northeast toward the farm and its orchard. There

they were surprised to meet a strong detachment of troops from the 17th Regiment and 16th Light Dragoons, drawn up in battle order. The ensuing action was a straightforward example of what contemporaries called a “meeting engagement” between a moving force, not yet deployed to fight, and an adversary that had taken up a position from which it was prepared to deliver an attack. Unlike a “pitched battle” for which the antagonists were equally prepared and deployed in combat order at the outset of the fighting, meeting engagements were understood to be fluid, improvised affairs. The better-prepared combatant’s advantage, established by the shock of the initial volleys and subsequent advance, would last so long as it could continue to move against its opponent; success depended upon pressing ahead until the enemy formation’s cohesion failed and its troops fled in disorder. That was very nearly the case when Mawhood’s men fired on Mercer’s surprised brigade, which briefly fought back, only to break down and run when its principal officers were killed. The flight of Mercer’s troops in turn caused the militia brigade that had been behind them to flee. In this case, however, Captain Joseph Moulder’s small artillery battery, located with the militia to the rear of Mercer’s column, held fast, fired into Mawhood’s oncoming troops, and arrested their advance until supporting forces could arrive. With the attackers halted, Continental and militia reinforcements formed a defensive line anchored on Moulder’s guns; many of the fleeing soldiers and militiamen managed to recover their composure and re-form as well. By the time Washington appeared enough order had been restored to launch a counterattack. The battle ended when Mawhood’s men, heavily outnumbered and under relentless pressure, broke and fled. An under-strength battalion of the British 55th Regiment, which had observed the action from a broad hilltop to the north (now known as Mercer Heights), might conceivably have come to Mawhood’s aid. Instead it withdrew toward Princeton in order to defend the remnants of the British garrison gathered in and around Nassau Hall. Washington

was thus able to consolidate his control over the field and renew his advance on Princeton proper, which his numerically superior force soon seized.

The Report's version of these events, based on a thorough analysis of all available sources in light of the terrain, differs from this older account in two main ways. First, Mercer's brigade was marching along Sawmill Road, not Quaker Road, when orders came to investigate the presence of redcoats near the William Clarke farm. To execute Washington's order the brigade merely wheeled left off Sawmill Road and marched northwest up a broad rise, rather than struggling up the shoulder of the Stony Brook ravine and then moving northeastward across steeper terrain. This is consistent with other accounts than Wilkinson's, and makes more topographical sense than the standard narrative. Second, the Report offers convincing evidence from British witnesses that the elements of the 55th Regiment that abandoned Mercer Heights did not make an orderly withdrawal to the northeast to defend Princeton, but rather bolted westward to escape the Continentals. The absence of these troops left the British forces who tried to defend the cantonment near Nassau Hall even more shorthanded as Washington's forces bore down on them in the second phase of the battle.

These changes modify the standard narrative by improving its accuracy in detail. While they alter neither its general shape nor the estimate historians have traditionally made of the battle's significance within the larger story of the Revolutionary War, these corrections are welcome, and by no means inconsequential.³ The authors of the Report, however, are mainly

³ The significance of the battle is generally seen as being twofold. First, the American victory reinforced Washington's reputation as a general who could inflict battlefield defeats on the British, improving morale in the Army and reviving optimism among Whig civilians for the prospects that the United States would ultimately prevail. Second, it demonstrated the vulnerability of the British units occupying New Jersey to attack by mobile, locally superior rebel forces. In the following weeks, New Jersey militia formations carried out scores of attacks on exposed British and Hessian units, inflicting thousands of casualties and making the eastern half of the province uncontrollable. The latter argument is a particular point of emphasis for David Hackett Fischer in *Washington's Crossing*; see 346-63, 415-18.

interested in examining the implications of their findings for the spatial dimensions and progress of the battle, and here they occupy weaker interpretative ground.

The kind of analysis that Babits has done for Cowpens is robust because it rests on the twin pillars of terrain analysis and archaeological evidence; here, where the archaeological evidence is sketchy and the argument depends overwhelmingly on terrain analysis, the results are less conclusive. This is particularly true of those extensive elements of the analysis that depend on the location of Sawmill Road. The authors acknowledge their uncertainty in their discussion of the “Defining Features on Princeton Battlefield,” where they note that most of the route “is conjectural” (p. 20). They point out that, in the absence of a contemporary metes-and-bounds description, a clear sense of when the road was established and abandoned, and any definite knowledge of its point of origin, “its route from Quaker road towards the Clarke farm is conjectural, and portions beyond the Institute for Advanced Study property are equally problematic” (p. 23).⁴ Unfortunately this caveat, stated clearly on pp. 20 and 23, becomes less

⁴ At the risk of digressing, I might add that the Report’s claims concerning the location of the road are in my view least dubious for the 1,200-foot segment that passes near the property marker on the corner of the Thomas Clarke farm, where a more or less straight depression running north-northwest and terminating on “a slight topographical rise” (appearing in Figure 25 as a low, roughly C-shaped hilltop) may indicate a remnant. This is still, of course, a conjecture, but the claim is strengthened by a 1772 deed testifying to the existence of a property-marker near Sawmill Road which is consistent with the position of a stone marker near the linear depression today. There is no such corroborative evidence, however, to sustain the authors’ claim to have discovered a second 700-foot section of the same road, lying essentially at a right angle to the segment that passes the Clarke farm’s property marker. The physical evidence there – a linear depression similar in depth and width to the first – may well indicate the trace of a disused road or lane of some sort, but no further evidence is offered to connect the two features. Nothing indicates that the 1200-foot-long depression and the 700-foot-long depression are of comparable age; nor is any explanation offered for why the road should have turned 90 degrees to the east at the end of the Thomas Clarke farm segment. Assuming for the sake of argument that Sawmill Road indeed passed the David Olden house further to the north (and I stress that I am making this assumption solely for the purposes of argument, because the evidence that the Olden house was located on the road is notably weak), the aerial photograph in Figure 25 suggests that one might plausibly speculate that the road continued from the northern terminus of the Thomas Clarke farm segment in an arc following the axis of the C-shaped hilltop northward, crossing the shallow saddle toward the William Clarke house, then bending eastward with the contour of the land running toward the David Olden house. If that were the case, the 700-foot segment running northeast toward the modern Institute for Advanced Study grounds would appear to have been an intersecting road or lane, not a continuation of the initial 1200-foot segment. It may also have been from another chronological period. I offer this conjecture on the possible track of Sawmill Road only because it seems to me at least as

evident as the argument advances in the narrative section, where what had been conjecture on an earlier page is often taken as evidence to support an assertion of fact on a later one.

A couple of examples may help illustrate the nature of this problem. The authors report on p. 63 that “From Sawmill Road to the orchard (on William Clarke’s farm) it is about 450 yards the way a crow flies,” and that Mercer’s brigade would have covered that distance in “about five minutes” at a quick march. This is quite precise; but if the trace of the road is unknown, the 450-yard distance from the road to the orchard is simply an assumption built on a conjecture, and the time necessary to cover the distance represents yet another guess based on the *double* assumption that Mercer would have ordered his men to advance rapidly and that they would have covered the ground at approximately the contemporary British quick march rate of 3.3 miles per hour.⁵ Similarly on the following page, Sullivan’s division, with Washington near its head, is said to have been on Sawmill Road “well past the present-day IAS property on their way to the David Olden house” when Washington learned that Mercer’s brigade had engaged a British force near William Clarke’s farm. Again, this is a seemingly conclusive statement; but heretofore the strongest evidence offered that the road ran past the Olden house had been that “Roads lead to houses, and houses sit close to roads” (p. 56). No doubt: but sometimes farmhouses also sit at the ends of lanes that run considerable distances from roads. We simply do not know, and in the absence of archaeological or documentary evidence we *cannot* know that a scene presented as a certainty in the text bore any relationship to what actually happened on 3 January 1777.

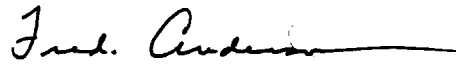
plausible as the hypothesis in the Report, and perhaps as consistent with the “first sighting” of British horsemen at dawn near the Trenton-Princeton Post Road as reported by Apollos Morris (p.51). The absence of alternative hypotheses from the Report seems to me one of its most striking characteristics.⁵ In fact I doubt that these pyramiding assumptions can be justified, if only because they take no account of the physical condition of men who had been marching all night. Under the best of conditions such sustained and stressful exertion would have been fatiguing. But these were far from the best conditions: the weather was bitterly cold; many of the men (particularly the Continentals) were poorly shod and inadequately clad; their rations had been far from adequate; and they had been carrying full loads of field equipment. That Mercer would have ordered them to make a rapid advance under the circumstances – or, if he did, that they would have been able to execute it at the brisk pace stipulated in contemporary British drill manuals – would seem unlikely.

Conjectures that turn after a few pages into given conditions, and givens that are used to support statements made authoritatively as parts of narratives are common enough in drafts of scholarly writing, but the processes of peer review and revision typically root them out before publication. The absence of such second-level scrutiny may account for their presence here, in a document that has more the character of a draft than a formal publication. Whatever the explanation, however, it is regrettable to find them in a report that takes such elaborate pains to weigh various sources against one another, and against the terrain evidence. It would seem to me likely that the authors, having established that Mercer's brigade was in fact marching not on Quaker Road but on Sawmill Road, seized on a possible connection between a plausible stretch of that road near the Thomas Clarke farm and a nearby terrain feature that may or may not have been part of the same road. Having made that connection in the absence of conclusive documentary or archaeological evidence, apparently without entertaining alternative hypotheses concerning the trace of the road, they built increasingly elaborate assertions on what was never more than an assumption. The effect of constructing a narrative in this way is of course to weaken it; with every step taken away from verifiable evidence the underlying argument grows more fragile, tenuous, and unstable. Thus in my view the authors have made valuable corrections to the received narrative without also having proven their principal contention about the location of the action. To do so, more robust evidence – particularly systematically collected, mapped, and interpreted archaeological artifacts – would have to be brought to bear.

Fortunately the Report's authors, by stipulating with some precision where they believe the various incidents in the narrative took place, have created a hypothesis that can be tested by archaeological surveys focused on the terrain features that are central to the Report's argument. I hope that such surveys will at some point be made. In the meantime I cannot see any reason for the Institute to refrain from moving forward with the planned construction of housing units,

provided that it takes care to have thorough archaeological assessments made of the building sites before construction is begun. Should any evidence turn up in the process it will aid in creating a more conclusive analysis of the battle, and can be incorporated in the interpretation of the battlefield for the public by means of accurate, informative signage.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the fundamental goals of battlefield preservation are to educate and inform the public, enabling visitors can understand the significance of the events that took place on the spot. If that understanding of battlefield preservation and commemoration is a reasonable one, I cannot see that there is any contradiction between it and the kind of careful development that the Institute proposes to undertake.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fred Anderson". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Fred Anderson
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