

Woodbridge Public Library Oral History Interview

H.L. Heines

WPL09

(digital audio)

On February 1, 1974, H.L. Heines was interviewed for the Woodbridge Public Library Oral History Interviews.

Brenda Beekman: As a boy Mr. Heines did research in the history of Minnesota. In 1928 he came to New Jersey and bought a farm on the Millstone River. Now the question arises as to why this western fellow was driven by a compulsion to take such a deep interest in central New Jersey. The answer is that he immediately wanted to know what happened in this area and he found tremendous things that transpired here.

H.L. Heines: Thank you. Before I delve on the subject I did want to congratulate you people on the interest first of this historical society and also for your enthusiasm on the subject and I congratulate you. Late last summer they wrote to me from Maine and asked me if I would be available on this date. I said quite possibly although I usually am skiing in Europe this time of the year but I had a cataract operation which has kept me from going but it's a real pleasure to be here. I noted the name Demarest, that's the only one that was Dutch, in this central part of New Jersey. Now what I want to talk about are the events which occurred in central Jersey during the American Revolution and try to relate some of those events to Metuchen. I'll be working from a map which I prepared myself thinking that would be the best way to tell this story of a tremendous heritage that belongs to us here in central Jersey and about which there has been very little publicity. I've written some articles and in the process of trying to write a book to emphasize the importance of this and show that it's effective during '76, '77, and '78. I think Brenda Beekman has qualified me quite well and I appreciate it. I congratulate her on her tremendous memory because that's almost verbatim what I told her. I can't add much to that. Now why does one do this research? I'm an engineer, retired, I was forty-one years with Westinghouse. By nature my mind is work but I am also blessed with a number of compulsions. We won't go into those but one was historical research and tactics in battle and what happened here. As Mrs. Beekman said it came to me as a youngster in a small town called Sleepy Eye, Minnesota. I frequented the library and I went to each one of the battle piece engagement places and massacres with a Sioux uprising in 1863. When I moved into this area I bought a farm in the Millstone Valley near Millstone. As soon as I got the whole place fixed up, it's about two hundred years old, I wanted to find out what happened here. I was amazed at the things that happened in our area in central Jersey about which very little is known. So then I embarked upon

one of the ladies of the local ladies club and say why don't you tell us about it? So I started in 1948 to talk about it and I got more requests. I suppose I made more than a hundred stops before schools, rotary clubs and historical societies; several in New York. I'm still as enthusiastic about the subject as I ever was. What I want to tell you here today I sometimes refer to the citizens of New Jersey and I'm speaking about the citizens which occurred during the War of Our Independence. They are, in my mind, in my way of looking at it, in the order of Trenton, second battle of Trenton, Princeton, the decision of Kingston, the big decision, and I consider the turning point of the American Revolution of the Somerset Courthouse and lastly Monmouth. So let us first refresh ourselves. I'm sure I don't have to do this but I'd just like to refresh ourselves of the details. Just to review the dates we all have to reach back and say now was that this year or was that the following year. So the outline of this, I'm sure you'll recall, Lexington conquer occurred in the spring of 1775 and the campaign against Quebec. The battle of Long Island and New York occurred in 1776. In November, 1776 Washington had to repeat across New Jersey coming down the Kings Highway and crossed into Pennsylvania on the 8th of December and then recrossed on Christmas night as you know. In 1776 we had the Battle of Trenton, the Battle of Princeton on the third of January, 1777, Philadelphia was taken in late September of 1777 and then the Battle of Saratoga in October of 1777. Then in the winter of 1777/1778 was spent in Valley Forge. On June 28th the Battle of Monmouth and that was the last engagement in Jersey. The action moved to the southern states in 1779, 1780 and 1781. (Inaudible) surrendered in Yorktown in 1781 and then peach was made in 1783. Now the action which I talk about is the action which occurred in 1776 and 1777 in the central part of Jersey which, at that time and later, is still referred to as the cockpit of the revolution. So if I may, this is a map which prepared from the action map of Jersey. You'll recognize Staten Island, Manhattan, Philadelphia and down here this is the Delaware River. There's your Jersey Shore and Sandy Hook. I have put in there some of the main roads which existed at the time of the American Revolution. The road that we are most interested in, of course, is the Kings Highway which runs to Newark from up in Hackensack crossing over and then to Elizabethtown and Rahway. Here, at this point, is Metuchen. From it you branch off to Amboy which became Perth Amboy. At that time it was called Amboy and it was, incidentally, the headquarters of the proprietor's of East Jersey. The proprietor's of West Jersey were down at Burlington. Now the blue here indicates Franklin Township where I was and where I made my start with my job. The orange is Montgomery Township where I now reside. I've done this just to enlighten or show the people how large their area was and how it was affected. Now we have other roads. Monmouth is over here, Trenton and Princeton and Morristown up here. But here is your Kings Highway which is now Route #27 from here to Princeton and down to Trenton which was the main traveled route between New York and Philadelphia. Occasionally when I'm talking to the lower grades or intermediate grades in schools in my area and I get just a little bit sentimental and I tell them to listen quietly at night

and they'll hear the Trenton's rumbling highways when the armies marched over those roads and won our independence. I like to say it that way because whenever I'm driving over a road I think now who past here, how many armies past here, what happened here on the roads of our community here and whether the ones that came through Metuchen are truly historical and should be remembered in that way. In other words they can just let their imagination roam and think about those soldiers in their crimson red uniforms and the Calvary riding over it like those in their pea green jackets and pruned helmets. So let's get to the decisions which I consider greatly affected the outcome of that struggle for independence. We'll start with the loss of the Battle of Long Island and Washington losing Fort Lee and Fort Washington and ultimately having to cross the Hudson going up Hackensack and starting down to the Kings Highway. He had lost many men in the Battle of Long Island, many more in the loss of Fort Washington and Fort Lee which straddled the Hudson River. It came down this highway with only about three thousand affected, the three thousand regulars that we might say stayed with them. The militia had gone home and they considered the rebellion quite over and it was at that time that Payne wrote those words "These are the times that try men's souls". It was written, at that time, about bad conditions. Because shortly at the Raritan River Alexander Hamilton started his artillery and set up some cannons on the present grounds of the Rutgers University where Rutgers now exists. But then they moved on and on the 8th of December of 1776 Washington had crossed the Delaware taking all the boats over to the Philadelphia side so that the British couldn't follow. We know the story now of Washington getting information as to the dispersment of the Hessian Garrisons. You might say that after Washington crossed in to Delaware Corn Wallace did not pursue him vigorously and did not catch up with him so Washington did escape but he setup Hessian Garrisons at Brunswick, at Princeton, at Trenton, at Bordentown and Mount Holly. They were not able to support themselves very well. Washington recognized this and planned the attack of the Hessian Garrison at Trenton and it came all upon Christmas night as we know and he captured most of the Hessians and immediately retired back across the Delaware. The other Garrisons were alarmed by this and went rushing back as far as New Brunswick and then gave up their posts around here. So Washington now re-crossed the Delaware. Corn Wallace had now decided that the rebellion was over and was about ready to go aboard ship and head back to England. When he got news of the loss at Trenton he reassembled his men and started down Kings Highway through Metuchen and on the first day of 1777 he was in Princeton and Washington was in this area and fought a retiring engagement on the second of January and fell back to Trenton and occupied the southern bank in the Assunpink Creek there. Corn Wallace had his main force reserved back in Princeton on the north side of Assunpink Creek when darkness fell. If you remember your history you remember how Washington, at ten or eleven o'clock at night, decided to move out but kept people digging that propriety line with enough noise going, and by a back route which I've indicated here, a road which sometimes had

stumps in it moved through the night with his cannon and his men sending his baggage south and on the morning of the third of January, 1777, a cold frosty morning, he was near the Stoney Brook Bridge passing the Quaker meeting house and Colonel Mufford, there were three regiments of British still in Princeton and they didn't recognize that this army was marching up and from the southwest were the Continentals, deployed and then we had the Engagement of Trenton. No need to run through that because you know the story of the Battle of Trenton but you might say that it is confirmed that Washington, on his horse, did stand between the two forces, fired and he still was not hurt. Now there is a contemporary diary by Captain Dunne of Delaware who was in charge of one of Washington's men who actually saw it and reported it roughly three or four days later. So it did happen; it's not a bit of American folklore. Well we know that the British were dispersed and they captured some stores but the engagement was won and Washington did not divide until about noon time. I might say that's the third decision, a decision that Washington made on the second Battle of Trenton which was the second of January whether the decision was not to try to cross back into Pennsylvania or to go south where the (inaudible) but the decision to outflank Cornwallis. I didn't say when the engagement started. Cornwallis heard the sound of the battles down there in Trenton, thirteen miles away, and realized that Washington had outmaneuvered him. Now military historians and strategists say that this was one of the brilliant moves in military history because of its smartness and possibly a reason. But you see he had other alternative, he could have gone south or could have tried to get across or he could have engaged Cornwallis but each side at this time had around twelve thousand and Cornwallis was more well trained where he had gone over some lines under three thousand line people but the rest of them were local militia; Delaware, Pennsylvania and some New Jersey. So then at noontime on January 3rd, 1777 Washington leaves Princeton because Cornwallis is coming up from Trenton on the Delaware. Washington destroyed the bridge at Stoney Brook, or tried to destroy it, but Cornwallis was coming into the west end of Princeton as Washington was leaving to the east. He got to the top of the hill, Kingston, which was Route #27, there's a marker there which merely said by this route Washington retired after the Battle of Princeton. Now he had to make a decision and he had counsel with his officers on horseback. Now should he head south to his baggage train, should he go onto New Brunswick here were the British had vast stores but an awful lot of gold that the Americans needed badly or should he take the road down the Millstone River and head for the hill so to speak, Watchung Mountains, and ultimately go to Morristown. He decided to take the side road which turned to the left where that marker is, the corner of that graveyard, the old meeting house graveyard, at Kingston and took that road and came to the bridge at Rocky Hill. On the west bank was the British Calvary and Washington decided to continue on down the Millstone River which he did arriving ultimately, or finally, at the Somerset Courthouse which was called also Hillsborough which is now called Millstone. There was only one marker. Washington gave it to the Dawn

House, which still stands, and his men fell to the roadside and slept wherever they could. They were so exhausted because they fought for two days and marched all night. This was the reason Washington didn't go on to New Brunswick because the army was totally exhausted and they couldn't say, oh what happened to Cornwallis he's chasing Washington instead of following Washington down the side roads down the Millstone River he was concerned about his golden sword and he kept on going and he arrived at New Brunswick somewhere in the middle of the night. This broke off the engagement. Washington, the following day, moved from Somerset Courthouse up to Pluckemin, spent the weekend there, and then went up to Morristown where he wintered. Now then we're coming to the spring of 1777. In your research I'm sure you have found as many scrimmages and engagements which occurred in this area. The British wintered at New Brunswick and at Amboy. Their lines, their supply, were cut here frequently. The British would come out of New Brunswick and forage for food for themselves and for their horses and there were many engagements. We can go into those but I'm certain, I know, that there were many engagements in this area where the Colonels would intercept or cut all the supplies of the British. They were coming to the spring and summer of 1777. Washington with his victories of Trenton and Princeton has now rekindled the fire, the volunteers come in, and in the spring he has over twelve thousand soldiers of the line we might say who were with him in Morristown. The plan for the Battle of 1777 agreed to by Lord German the Prime Minister of Britain and by Howell the Commander here now we were to divide the colonies. Howell will move up from New York, we're going to move down from Canada, from Quebec and Montreal, and we'll split the colonies, the Yankees away from the rest of them, and then we can take care of them peacefully. Well Howell didn't have to hurry because it was going to take some time to come down from Canada. As we know the finally arrived at Saratoga and had to surrender because Howell didn't support it. Howell did not come up there. Instead of that he was trying to get to Philadelphia. Well the first thing he did was try to come across New Jersey. He had, in New Brunswick, a number of twenty or thirty wagons on wheels. You know those wagons that he could take across country so that he could cross the Delaware River and this would be his colony. So in June of 1777 the British main course was in New Brunswick numbering well over twelve thousand and on the night of the thirteenth of June, 1777 the British, Howell and Cornwallis both, decided to get up to the top of Philadelphia. He got Lord German's permission to try to do this in time so that he could get back and support those coming down from Canada. Well as we know he never did. He tried to come across, got stalemated, had to backup, take the shift, came around tried to come up the Delaware, couldn't, and then came up the Chesapeake and finally in late September got to Philadelphia but too late for him to get back and (inaudible) to Saratoga for the surrender of Burgoyne, a victory for the Continental. Now what has this maneuver in our area to do with it? It has precisely this. On June 13th, Cornwallis and Howell moved out of New Brunswick, came down

Amwell Road, came to the Somerset Courthouse and laid there for five days not bearing to move on by any of these roads to Philadelphia because Washington at Bound Brook, at this time, up against the Watchung Mountains, he in fenced himself right up the mountain. He couldn't be planked from either side and they couldn't get at his rear. So Washington there, just north of Bound Brook and there were still some of the drenches visible off Route #22 and was near the campsite where they camped later anyway. Howell came up to Somerset Courthouse which is now Millstone which was also called Hillsborough at that time and laid there on the opened embarkment. There's no need to go into the detail of this thing and on the nineteenth of June, in exasperation, he retired from the area. He dare not come any further because Washington cut his supplies and bought him back into the rear. So he had to try other means then so by staling them not only the five days when he was laying there in Somerset Courthouse but the time it took for separation and the time it took to retreat he us up about a month's time trying to do it that way then deciding to do it the other way and then he went the other way and it took him too long. There is only one marker at the Somerset Courthouse and I would venture that if anyone asked people outside of the state where was Somerset Courthouse they wouldn't be able to name it. As a matter of fact I'm not too sure many people in this state knew where Somerset Courthouse was. And yet as a boy in my small town of Minnesota I remember reading about Somerset Courthouse and had a picture of it in my mind and here I buy a farm only two miles away.....So Clinton now decided this wasn't the place to be, Philadelphia, up the Delaware River, he wanted back in New York. So on the sixteenth of June, Howell decided to recross across New Jersey and get back to New York. Washington and his army trained, in much better shape, at Valley Forge, detected that Clinton was crossing the Delaware, and he came over and crossed at Lambertville and moved along this route here which is now Route #518. At that time it was called the Williamstown Road, I believe, but I am not sure of that term. In any case on the twentieth he was in Hopewell then in Kingston and then he moved over and we had the Engagement at Monmouth Courthouse. The British route was through Mount Holly this way. Washington had sent another colony of Charles Lee down through Princeton and over this way and when Lee engaged the rear of the British he fell back for no reason at all and was scowled by Washington, sent back and later court marshaled. Washington then rallied the troops to Monmouth Courthouse and it was a draw. When the night came along the British withdrew and went to Sandy Hook and then back to New York. It was a victory for the American in a sense. Now that ended the engagement in Central Jersey. Of course there was a very exciting thrilling raid of Simcoe in 1779 when he came out and decided to destroy boats that were supposed to be at Raritan that were being used by Washington to cross the Hudson to get to New York. He with eighty-five (inaudible) and this colorful uniform looked like Perry Lee. He came out as far as Raritan, burned the church there, the United Reformed Church, did try to destroy a few boats there and then came down to Somerset Courthouse. He

found some prisoners in the jail there emaciated and his men got permission for him to destroy the jail and the courthouse and that was the burning of Somerset Courthouse in October of 1779. With it went most of the records of our area, of Somerset County, as a matter of fact. It is marked by a marker which was vandalized. I just happened to see the other day that someone got the bronze back at the Daughters of the American Revolution place here but this is the only marker to say that Washington had camped there after and had stopped there after Princeton, that the British were stopped here, stalled, for five days and had to retire in June, 1777 or that the French armies moved through there to support Washington's forces down at Yorktown. We are unfortunate, very short, of markers. When one goes down through the state of Virginia they're just flooded with these markers. However engagements at many points, even around here, that should be marked and maybe this is the time on our bicentennial, to do this. Now that, in brief, and I'm sorry about taking too much time, is the story of the heritage which belongs to us here in Central Jersey. It's a heritage we can be proud of. I've given this material to the schools, many schools, and they get a tremendous response. I'm been pleased with our school system but I am pleased with the tremendous interest they have in this subject. They just eat it up, they just drink it, and this is another thing we might consider is putting together something in a pamphlet or a book form of our local history. Now as Mrs. Beekman mentioned I told her, or the lack of knowledge, lack of advertising of our heritage, is that this area was settled primarily by the Dutch and the Dutch, and I'm talking about the Holland Dutch, and they by tradition are not the kind of people that blow their bugles, blow their horns or advertise or talk about this. This is precisely the reason, I think, I think it's the main reason why the United States lost the perspective and do not understand that the turning points, the primary decisions that caused it to win the American Revolution occurred here in the cockpit of the revolution. Now during this four to five years, I would think that an organization like yours will consider what one might do to get this thing out in the open. Coming from mid-West I recognize what a tremendous heritage you have here and I'm trying to do something about it if I can. Thank you very much and if there are any questions I'd be glad to answer them. In Boston they talk about Bunker Hill in Lexington County and the conservation was there and it's taboo in Yorktown whereas a person like you knows about Princeton and Trenton having its turning points. But basically the thing was settled here.

Woman in the Audience: I suggested to Margaret I think it's very clear, would you suggest we might write to the state? Again we come back to that no money deal.

H.L. Heines: Yes, I think you might initiate that. I was listening to your interesting business meeting and I congratulate you again on it. You've got a very fine organization here in general. In general the Historical Society does not belong to Somerset, to Franklin, to Hillsborough, New Jersey or so forth and I haven't seen anything like your enthusiasm now. To make your organization progress and prosper if you will one suggestion I made, and I

made this to the other lady, is take some subjects and assign them, I don't want to take up too much of your time, but yet if you do it, take some subjects and I'll name a few and say a year from now I want you to come up with this story of the (inaudible) in this area or the families in the Revolution that had come here and you can buy this now the listings, I'm not so sure if they've covered this area, but the listing of the soldiers and various companies from the area. Metuchen comes from (inaudible) as does Piscataway. Did you know that Rahway, the town, the revolution was called the Battle of Spanktown. Bernardsville was beautiful and then just above Princeton we have starting Kingston, Squawtown, and Princeton. Well, where was this Metuchen meeting house? Was it the Quaker church? Do we know what it looked like? Kings Highway, did you know that this highway was called Kings Highway?

Woman in the Audience: I didn't know that. I thought this was built later.

H.L. Heines: No, the old map that I work from, Dunham's map and a few others, shows that Metuchen meeting house is right there after the fork in the road actually the one going through Amboy and the other running north to Elizabethtown and south. I didn't get a chance to look at that map but I don't know if it shows those roads or not.

Woman in the Audience: Right here.

H.L. Heines: I've been talking to geologists of Princeton University and I said the ridges just north of Princeton come through Metuchen. I mentioned every turn through here.

Woman in the Audience: Would you give me the dates again please for that?

H.L. Heines: Howell and Cornwallis, both of them were out there at the Somerset Courthouse, Millstone, and on the nineteenth of June of 1777 in exasperation they retired. They came down Amwell Road to New Brunswick and stayed there only a day, possibly the twentieth or twenty-first, they retired through this area to Amboy. Now they started embarking of Amboy over to Staten Island and drew Washington out of his strong position in Bound Brook and Washington moved in this area. Cornwallis backed off and came in and there was a battle at Bound Brook. No, somewhere in this Piscataway area there was an engagement and Washington fell back again to his strong position on the south side of the Watchung mountains and then he continued to go out of Jersey. Another subject would be the things that happened in your area during the winter of 1776/77 when the British headed Garrison at New Brunswick unsupported virtually because they thought it would cut the supply line back to Amboy or back to Elizabethtown. Now there were a number of scrimmages; Maxwell's New Jersey Blues were involved in this. That would be a very interesting subject for research. Those are just a few of the notes that I put down.

Woman in the Audience: I have another question. Have you found, in your experience of being a member of the Historical Society, what does a speaker have just the knowledge of the area or does it interest you?

H.L. Heines: It depends on what you girls like. Geology intrigues me.

Woman in the Audience: Me too. Geology is certainly part of our history. Do many societies have this as a subject?

H.L. Heines: I haven't thought of it that way. That's a good question but it would be interesting, yes because Somerset County is scoward by the ice age. That's the reason we have that red (inaudible) so close to the surface. Princeton, on the other side, we have that beautiful area. I don't know what the geology is here in this area. I don't know where the ridge is that indicates itself.

Woman in the Audience: Well you have to go through Metuchen, Fords and Edison before you get to Amboy.

H.L. Heines: Well anymore questions on this material? Oh, I might say I was going to try to introduce this subject, don't try to memorize it because I've had some people listen to this, whatever I have to say three times and they still come back with questions. So don't worry if it doesn't stick to you. But I had to give you dates. But if I made my point that these six decisions were very important. I'll be around a little bit if you want to ask any questions, thank you.