

Erie's Revolutionary vets saw and did just about everything during war

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Valerie Myers

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- Nearly 250 Revolutionary War veterans settled in what is now Erie County, Pennsylvania.
- These veterans participated in major events like the crossing of the Delaware and the Siege of Yorktown.
- The descendants of these veterans became prominent figures in Erie's history, contributing to its development.

Almost 250 Revolutionary War veterans are known to have settled in Erie County, some on land provided by the state for their service.

Early Erie County settlers included men who crossed the Delaware River with George Washington, helped build the great chain across the Hudson River at West Point, and served in the first organized regiment of the Continental Army — now recognized as the first-ever regiment of the U.S. Army.

Their stories are the story of America's war for independence, from the "shot heard 'round the world" in 1775 to Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown eight years later.

Their stories are also Erie's story.



"These are veterans who came and settled here after the war — because Erie didn't exist at the time of the war," said Carl Anderson III, president of the Sons of the American Revolution, Erie Chapter. The organization and local Daughters of the Revolution documented their service.

"They're people like Seth Reed, Erie's first settler, who was a colonel in a Massachusetts regiment during the revolution."

Reed and his family settled in what is now Erie in 1795.

Continental Army rifleman

Lancaster-born Phillip Kinter enlisted in the "Pennsylvania line" weeks after the war's opening shots at Concord and Lexington.

He served in a regiment of riflemen commanded by William Thompson. It was the first Continental Army unit authorized by congress and is recognized as [the first unit of the U.S. Army](#).

The riflemen were sent to Boston to harass the British besieging the city.

"These men are remarkable for the accuracy of their aim, striking a mark with great certainty at two hundred yards distance," Massachusetts physician James Thacher wrote of the riflemen, in a journal later published as "[A Military Journal During the American Revolutionary War, from 1775 to 1783](#)."

"They are now stationed on our lines and and their shot have frequently proved fatal to British officers and soldiers who expose themselves to view."

Kinter settled near Edinboro, where he died in 1829.

Privateer and prisoner

David Stafford of Rhode Island volunteered aboard the privateer Washington in fall 1775. Privateers were privately owned ships commissioned by Congress to disrupt British shipping. Their reward was captured cargo.

The Washington was captured by a British warship off Massachusetts in December 1775. Its 74-man crew was shipped to England; about half died of smallpox enroute.

Survivors were forced into Royal Navy service or later imprisoned in Nova Scotia, according to [historian Patrick Browne](#).

Stafford was a prisoner for almost eight years, until October 1783.

He came to Conneaut Township in 1832 and died there in 1841.



Crossing the Delaware

Aaron Himrod made the hazardous Delaware River crossing on Christmas day 1776.

"Floating ice in the river made the labor almost incredible," Washington's artillery chief, Col. Henry Knox, wrote in a letter [cited by Washington Crossing Historic Park](#). "Night was cold and stormy; it hailed with great violence."

The crossing enabled Washington's troops to surprise and capture a garrison of British-allied German troops at Trenton, New Jersey, the next day.

Himrod fought again at Princeton, New Jersey, days later, helping to force a British retreat.

A New Jersey native, he came to Erie in 1798, died in 1820 and is buried in Waterford Cemetery.

Deploying the 'great chain'

Jesse Belnap helped forge and deploy a massive 1,700-foot chain to block the Hudson River at West Point in 1778.

The chain prevented the British from sailing upriver and isolating New England.

"Jesse successfully swam across the treacherous currents of the Hudson River, pulling a thin string with him to the opposite bank. He then used the string to haul a much larger rope across, which the remaining soldiers held onto as they swam over," according to documents obtained by the Belnap family.



"The team then tied the heavy iron chain to the rope and pulled until it was successfully stretched across the river and fastened to the trees on each side."

Belnap was just 16 when he enlisted in Connecticut in 1777 as an "artificer," or blacksmith.

He settled in North East in 1812, died there in 1854 and is buried in Phillips Cemetery.



At Cornwallis' surrender

David Matteson took part in the siege of Yorktown, Virginia, forcing the surrender of British General Lord Cornwallis' army on Oct. 19, 1781.

"Every eye was prepared to gaze on Lord Cornwallis, the object of peculiar interest and solicitude; but he disappointed our anxious expectations; pretending indisposition, he made General O'Hara his substitute as the leader of his army," Thacher, the physician journalist, wrote. "This officer was followed by the conquered troops in a slow and solemn step, with shouldered arms, colors cased and drums beating a British march."



The surrender ended the fighting. The war officially ended with the Treaty of Paris two years later.

Matteson, from New York, settled in Beaver Dam in 1821 and later lived in Waterford.

Making history in Erie

Many more Revolutionary War veterans and descendants continued to make history in Erie. Here are just a few examples from pension affidavits and local, family and cemetery accounts.

- Seth Reed's son, Rufus Reed, was a merchant and city burgess. Grandson Charles Reed owned a fleet of steamboats, helped develop the Erie Extension Canal and was a state and federal legislator. Great-granddaughter Sarah Reed was a philanthropist and the namesake of today's Sarah A. Reed centers.
- Aaron Himrod's son, William, built Dickson Tavern in Erie and operated the Himrod mission school for Blacks decades before the Civil War. An abolitionist, he bought land along the west bayfront and offered low-cost lots to Blacks and poor whites.
- James Sterrett served in Lancaster County militia during the war and came here in 1807, settling in the area since known as [Sterrettania](#). His son, Joseph, founded the Erie Gazette in 1820 and was a state senator and judge.
- A captain in the war, William Bell, of Lancaster County, also was a state senator and judge in Erie. Wife Dorcas Bell, with her daughters, sister and nieces, made the flags for Oliver Hazard Perry's flagship in the 1813 Battle of Lake Erie.