The New Battle of the Brandywine

Preserving battlefield land

By Catherine Quillman | Photography by Jim Graham

Historian Phil Duffy looked like an ordinary hiker that late spring day. He waded through the tall grasses and occasionally paused to look back to see if I'd caught up to his pace. The former reconnaissance officer was not merely being polite; he wanted to make sure I took in what he had discovered in numerous hikes across the Brandywine Valley, tracing the British troop movements of September 11, 1777, now known as the Battle of the Brandywine.

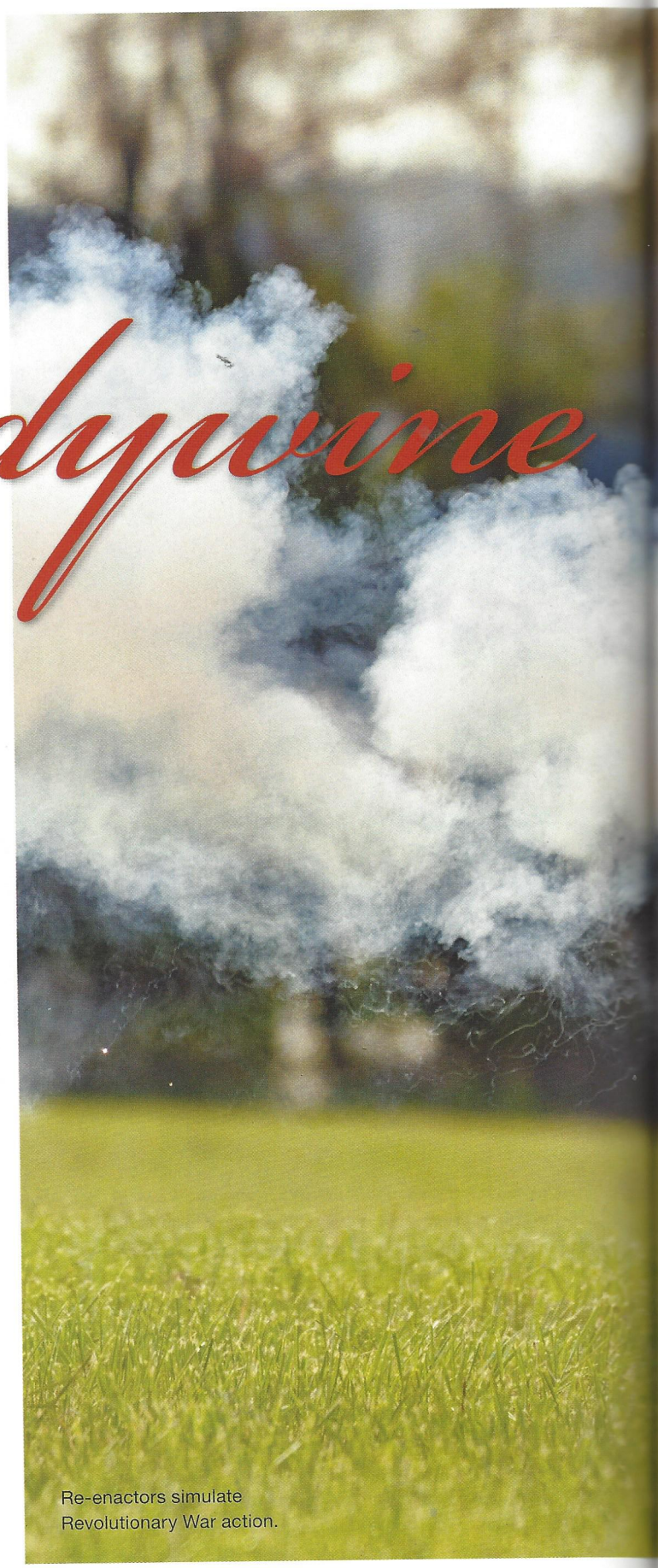
Duffy chose to lead an abbreviated version of the grueling 17-mile trek British Gen. Sir William Howe took after he split his forces to make a crucial flanking maneuver just south of the village of Marshallton.

We could imagine what it was like on that scorching-hot day in 1777, when low-lying roads, steep hills and the deep and narrow Brandywine Creek provided plenty of military obstacles. Fighting until the last light of dusk, an estimated 30,000 American and British soldiers swarmed over the countryside of Delaware and Chester counties, many of them—even generals—pushing forward with bayonets in hand-to-hand combat.

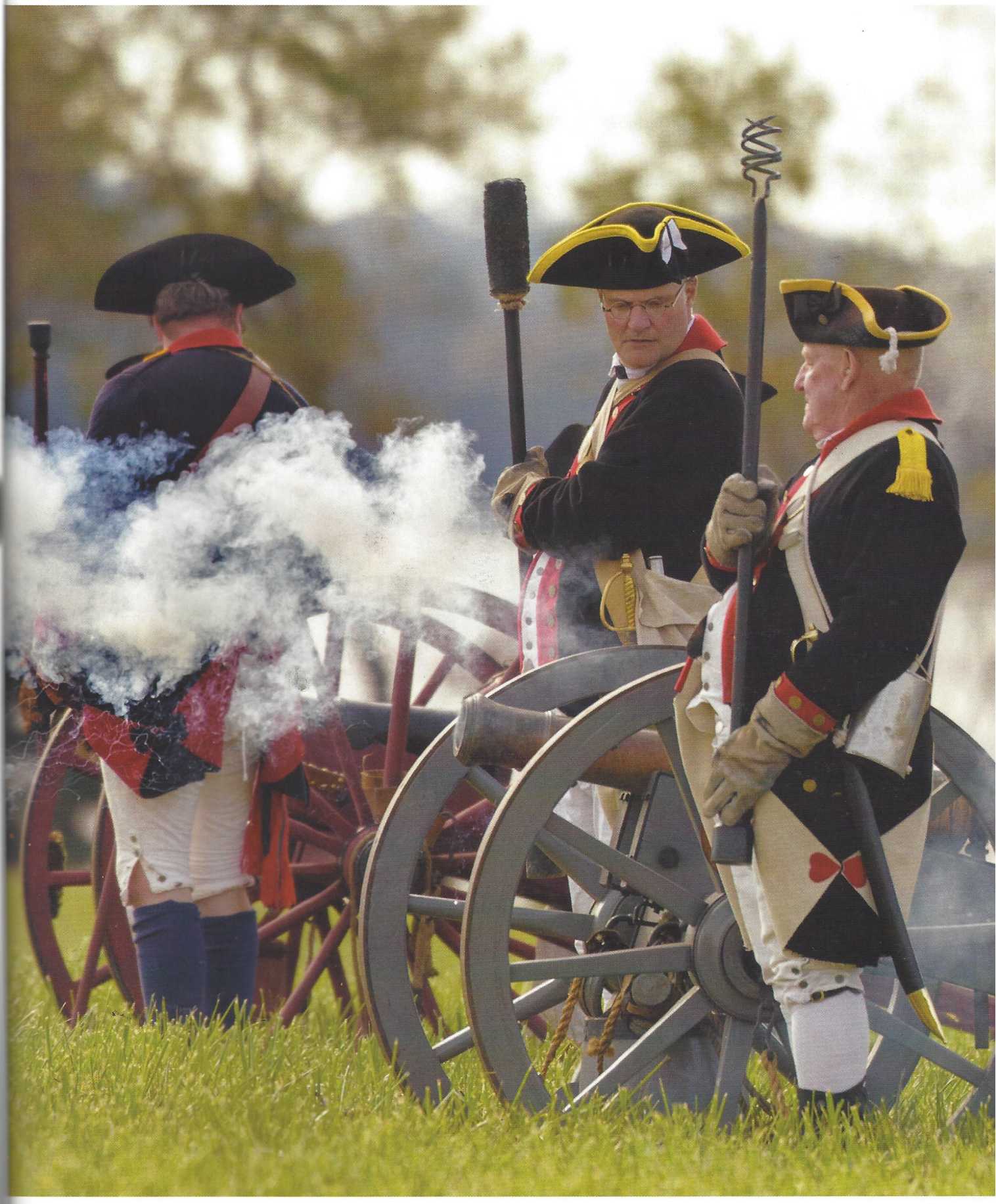
The British forced George Washington and his soldiers to retreat to Chester, then Valley Forge, while the redcoats went on to occupy Philadelphia. They left behind a landscape pocked with cannon craters, creeks tinged with blood and autumn leaves tattered with buckshot.

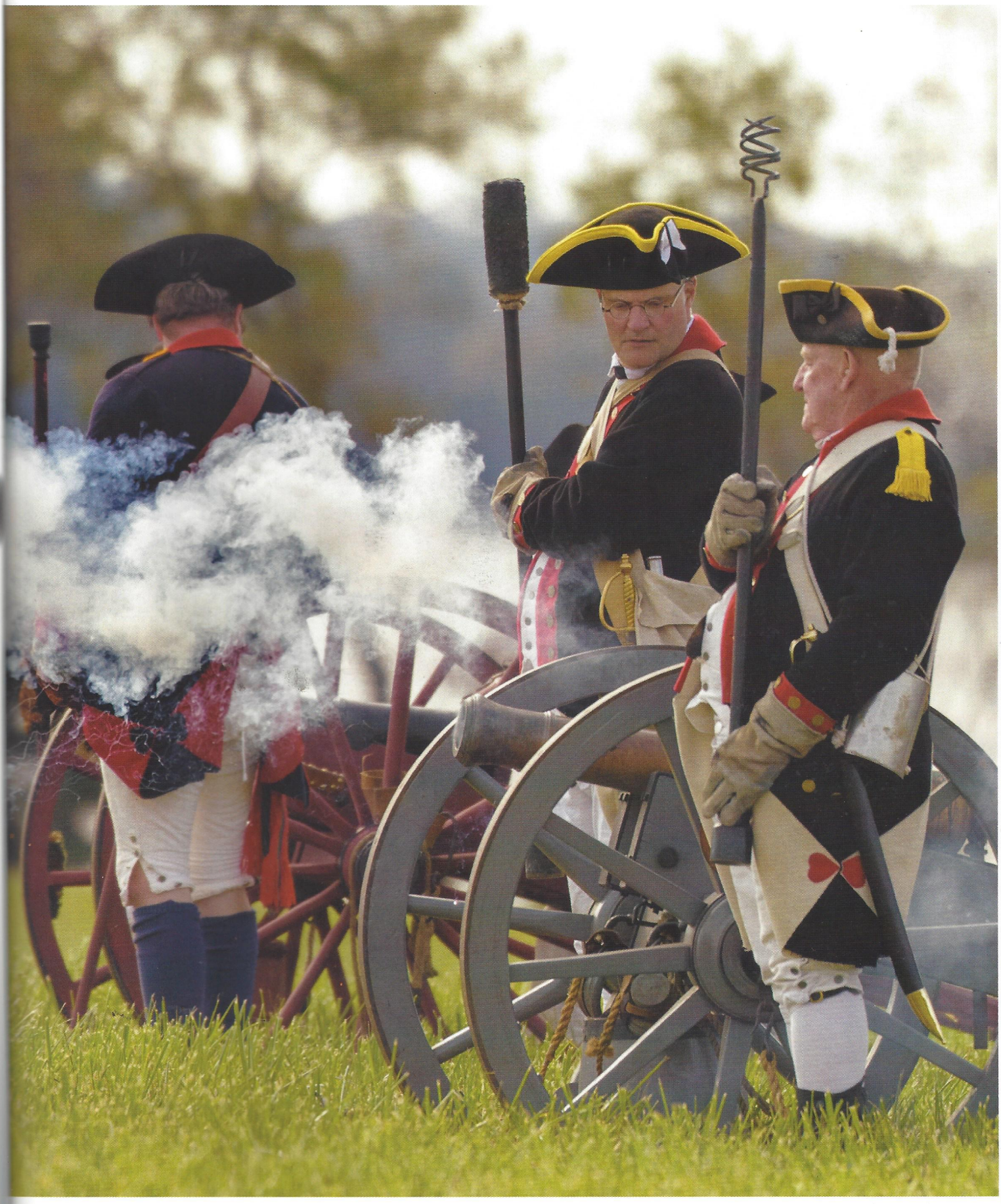
Today, the Battle of the Brandywine is considered the turning point of the American Revolution. In a way, the fighting is still going on now, as preservationists try to save a landscape once parceled into large farms and interlaced with cow paths and unpaved roads.

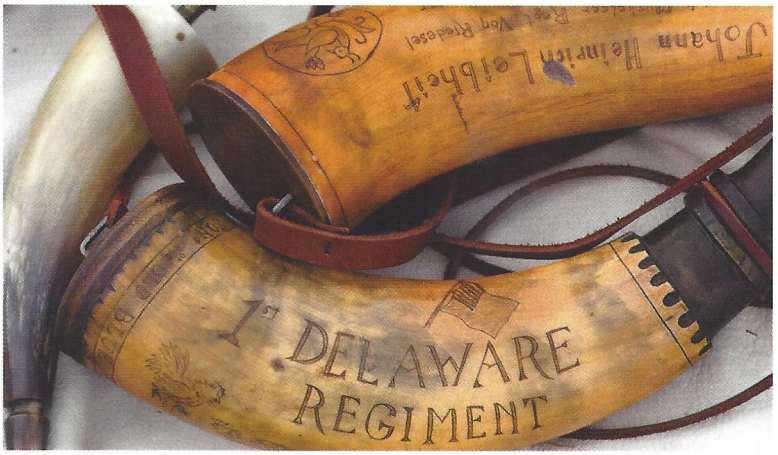
The frontline is the Brandywine Battlefield Task Force, comprised of a small army of representatives in 15 municipalities and the two counties. The goal of preservation has always been two-pronged—historic research and public education.



Re-enactors simulate Revolutionary War action.







Re-enactors; powderhorns from the period. Lower right: local preservationist Linda Kaat at the Marshallton blacksmith's shop.

Having the latest technology helps. Aerial photos and KOCOA, a military mapping technique, recently helped to pinpoint the British crossing at Trimble's Ford, a natural feature that revealed a dark band of blacksmithing debris.

Wade Catts of Commonwealth Heritage Group, who worked with a geophysicist at the site, said it was likely debris from a nearby smithy. "If you're going up and down through that crossing, you're going to be churning up stuff," says Catts. "So the more you can do to protect that river bed, the better."

Tracing a colonial road that once crossed Route 842 at Northbrook Orchards took the mapping ingenuity of Cliff Parker of the Chester County Archives. He created a 1777-era map that will help homeowners know if the British passed by their door. Ironically, Washington could've used such a map to prevent the British surprise attack that set in motion a string of bayonet charges, artillery duels and patriot countercharges.

The Americans lost—and, for generations, it seemed that most of the excitement was reserved for the occasional finds like an old musket or Prussian coin unearthed by a farmer. Still, as our hike revealed that day, local legend has kept many of the sites protected, and most of the stories have proved to be true. The British crossing at Trimbles's Ford discovered in 2010, for instance, is further downstream from Camp Linden Road, where a plaque commemorating the crossing was dedicated in 1915.

That year saw several historic markers go up on the former battlefield, a 10-square-mile area that officially became the Brandywine Battlefield National Historic Landmark in 1961. For 20 years, the designation was largely forgotten. Some say the whole concept of the landmark area was overlooked because its boundaries weren't actually confirmed until 1978 (and re-considered in 2010). It's now the only Revolutionary War battlefield designated as a landmark. Many others are protected state and federal parks.

For battlefield enthusiasts like Duffy and Ken Lawson, who made a popular YouTube video on the British route, traversing the countryside is more than a re-enactor-type exercise to relive a certain day in history. It dawns on you, as Lawson puts it, that the Battle of the Brandywine was the "largest single-day battle against a foreign army in the history of the USA."

Over years, the battlefield has received national attention. In 2000, Congress appropriated $3 million to buy 290 acres in easements on the Meetinghouse Road corridor. Still, public interest has ebbed and flowed.

Perhaps the biggest boost for public awareness was a 2007 study conducted by the National Parks Service's

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American Battlefield Protection Program. It examined the Brandywine battlefield as one of four "intact" Revolutionary War sites with a "Class A/Priority I" rating, according to an ABPP spokesperson.

At a recent interview with several members of the task force that included Jeannine Speirs, chair of the Chester County Planning Commission, documents were spread out in a bunker-like room lined with old deed books in the government services building in West Chester. "It's really exciting," Speirs says. "We can take all this information, combining interpretation, technology, and historic research into one giant coordinated effort. We can now point to an area and say this should really be a planning priority."

To date, the battlefield is described as spanning 35,000 acres. That's considerably more territory than Brandywine Battlefield State Park in Chadds Ford, the 50-acre site many people associate with the battle.

With each new phase of the ABPP-funded research—now in its second phase—another section of the British route is tackled. Analysis of the British flanking maneuver was especially daunting, and they are still a few years

away from the re-examination of what's termed the core battlefield area, just north and west of the park.

Washington was unaware of the British at Sconnelltown, but it and another East Bradford hamlet, Strodes Mill, are typical of those enigmatic sites in history that time

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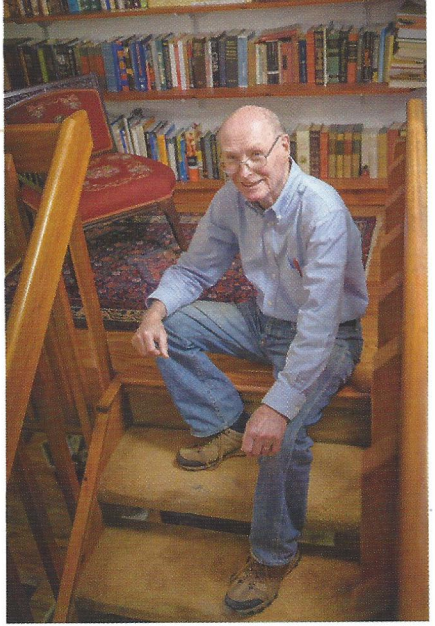
nearly forgot ... until the task force swung into action. They are now part of four "strategic" preservation plans related to the famous British flanking maneuver.

In 1868, poet James B. Everhart summed up Sconelltown's status in a long poem that asked, "Whoever heard of Sconnelltown? —a village long ago?" It was a place, he found, where "scarce a vestige can be found/of tenements or tomb."

Similarly, the Strode's Mill complex just south of West Chester hardly looks like a Revolutionary War landmark—especially since one of the buildings has a faded scrapple advertisement and a collapsed roof. However, in addition to its rare intact colonial mill, the hamlet was an important British staging area (once called "resting" or tea-break sites) and part of the complex was recently acquired by East Bradford Township with the help of state and county open-space grants.

In time, the complex might be an interpretive history center with a network of trails. It's now part of a major fundraising campaign led by Linda Kaat, president of the newly formed Friends of Strode's Mill. Kaat also oversees the Friends of Martin's Tavern, a Marshallton landmark once listed on British spy maps.

The task force notes that 14,000 acres of battlefield land still remains "undeveloped since 1777." As awareness grows, perhaps the usual give-and-take struggle over the land will be less of an effort. The site of the last and bloodiest skirmish of the battle, Sandy Hollow, for instance, was acquired by Birmingham Township as a trade-off for approving a nearby development in 1994.



Historian Phil Duffy at his home near West Chester. His bookshelves are loaded with tomes on local events long since past.

"What we're finding is that battlefields are remarkably resilient places, leaving behind a tremendous amount of material," says Wade Catts. "From a planning perspective, people need to know if they are living on the battlefield. They are stewards of the land." □

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