



This stone barn is reminiscent of the dwellings that still stand today as reminders of the past in White Horse

Staff photo by Larry McDavitt

# It was the summer of 1777, and White Horse saw the battle that — almost — ended the Revolution

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Late in the summer of 1777, White Horse village was the site of the battle that ended the American Revolution—almost.

In September 1777, George Washington and his American troops tried to stop General Sir William Howe's British army as it advanced on Philadelphia. Washington blocked Howe at the fords of the Brandywine River near Chadds Ford. A battle was fought there on Sept. 11, and the British won the crossing.

Washington had a last chance to save Philadelphia. There was one more river between Howe and his goal: the Schuylkill. Washington thought his troops were ready to fight again, and he rightly perceived that the only place the British army,

laden with cannons and supplies, could ford the Schuylkill was at one of the various fords east of Valley Forge, probably Swede's Ford.

**BUT WASHINGTON** was outnumbered almost two to one, and at least a quarter of his men were unreliable militia forces, while Howe had the pick of the British army and a large contingent of hard-fighting Hessian mercenaries. Undaunted, Washington marched his army back into Chester County and took up position on the old Lancaster Turnpike in East Whiteland, between Howe's army and Swede's Ford.

Washington anchored his right flank at the White Horse tavern and stretched his forces between there and the Admiral Warren tavern near present-day Malvern.

Howe left small detachments at Wilmington and Chester, where

wounded soldiers from the Battle of the Brandywine were recovering, and wheeled his army of 15,000 northward.

**ON THE MORNING** of Sept. 16, 1777, Washington was still deploying troops. At 11 a.m., the American general was surprised to learn that Howe was coming up fast through Goshen. Washington sent a brigade of skirmishers under Gen. Anthony Wayne and cavalry under Casimir Pulaski forward to slow the British while he established his defensive lines.

Wayne's skirmishers encountered Hessians around the present Immaculata College grounds and near the Ship Inn. After a sharp exchange of fire, the Americans fell back. The Hessians followed, and were about to outflank the Americans, a move that had proved disastrous at the Bran-

dywine.

Washington vacillated between holding his ground and retreating. Howe was moving fast, and the Americans might have been swept from the field.

**BUT IT WAS NOT** to be. A light rain had been falling from an overcast sky all day. Just as Washington issued an order to fall back, a terrific and violent thunderstorm erupted over both armies. Visibility dropped to a few feet; lightning crashed and wind lashed the trees.

"It came down so hard," a Hessian officer wrote later, "that in a few minutes we were drenched and sank in mud up to our calves." The battle ground to a halt.

The storm lasted all afternoon, and into the night. Its intensity never waned.

Washington took advantage of the confusion caused by the rain to fall back to higher (and drier) ground

near the White Horse tavern, and there organized his army to meet Howe's assault.

**BUT THE BRITISH** commander was not inclined to mount an attack in a thundering downpour. The afternoon dragged on, and still the rains came down. The British and Hessians built fires to keep dry, and every farm south of Lancaster Pike was stripped clean of its wooden rail fences.

The Americans were so thoroughly soaked that their ammunition was too wet to fire. Muskets and cannons suddenly were useless. Faced with this dangerous development, Washington finally abandoned the idea of holding the line at White Horse. His army hastily retreated in the direction of Warwick, where fresh ammunition was stored.

The non-engagement of Sept. 16, 1777 is rightly called the Battle of the

Clouds because the only winner was the weather. A total of about 20 soldiers were killed or captured, most of them from Wayne's skirmishers.

**AFTER THE AMERICANS** withdrew, the British sacked the houses and farms around White Horse tavern and burned everything they couldn't carry.

John Kerlin, who owned the tavern in 1777, reported that Howe's soldiery took his table linen, bowls, bottles, and "wairing apparel, both womans and mens," but mentions no liquor, which presumably means the tavern owner had managed to spirit his spirits away before the Hessians arrived.

After the British moved on, one local lamented that they had left him "not even a spoon ... to eat my victuals, nor a comb to comb my hair."