

Berlin (later Brunswick) and the Revolutionary War

By WAYNE ALLGAIER

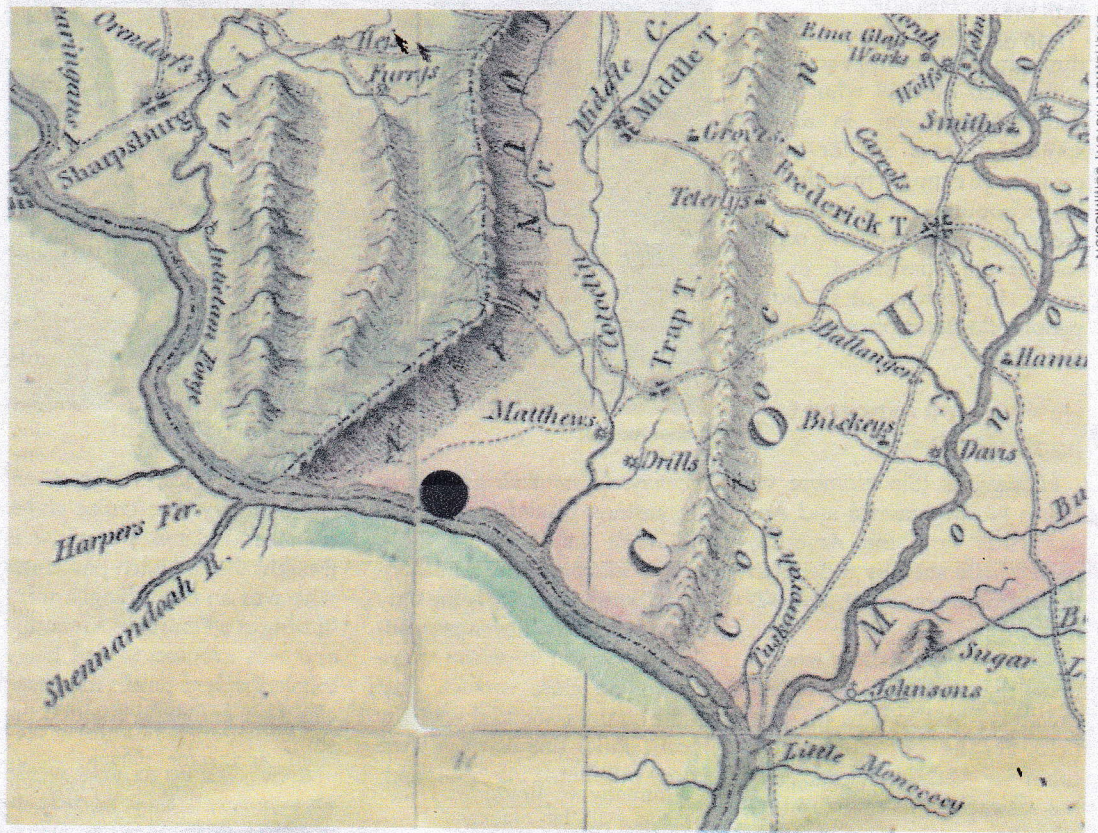
As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence this year, it is interesting to reflect on what was going on here in Brunswick (previously Berlin) at that time. This could be a pretty short story, since Berlin didn't exist in 1776; it was not founded until 1787. But there was a lot going on around here leading up to and shortly following that historic year of 1776.

Land records record that on July 3, 1776, Clement Holliday purchased 201½ acres of land bordering on the upper Potomac River in Frederick County where Berlin (later Brunswick) would later be located. The following day, the colonies declared independence from Great Britain. Whatever plans Holliday had for this property, it was going to have to wait due to the war that ensued.

If you had stood that day where our downtown is now located, you would have been in the middle of undeveloped land, probably woods. Facing south towards the river, with the hills behind you, you would be standing beside a creek (today's Martin's Creek) which cut a 20-foot-deep gully through where the railroad tracks are today as it found its way down to the Potomac River. Other than a possible ferry down at the river, you wouldn't have seen any signs of civilization. (See map.)

George Washington's visit

In order to appreciate the value of that seemingly remote property, one needs to be aware of George Washington's vision, as early as 1754, of making the Potomac River a major commercial route into the Ohio River Valley (where he would eventually possess tens of thousands of acres of land) by creating bypasses around various falls in the river. That dream was also put on hold in 1776 when he became commander in chief of the continental army.



This 1795 map by Dennis Griffeth shows what this area looked like around the time Berlin (black dot) was platted. Note that the path from Trap Town (Jefferson) to Harpers Ferry was unimproved at that time.

At the conclusion of the war, George Washington resumed his interest in developing the Potomac River. In August of 1785, as president of the newly-chartered Patowmack Company, he took a trip up the river as far as Harpers Ferry to assess conditions. On the way back to Mount Vernon, he stopped by and had breakfast with Captain John Smith who was living in this area at that time.

Leonard Smith enters the picture

Captain John Smith was the son of Leonard Smith, a native of southern Maryland who had become interested in real estate in Frederick County. He had laid out the village of New Town (aka Trap Town — today's Jefferson) in 1774. The war, which started two years later, did not interfere with his business transactions. In 1780, he purchased Holliday's 201½ acres. It was on this property where his son John Smith entertained George Washington for breakfast five

years later.

Whether Leonard Smith was at that breakfast, or whether they discussed the canal project, is not documented. But, according to Helen Smith Muse, a descendent living in Baltimore, "Leonard Smith had visions of the Potomac River becoming a navigable waterway to the Chesapeake Bay. Berlin would become a center of commerce, located at the juncture of the main road leading to the 'German Settlement' (now Lovettsville). Tradition tells us that Smith once talked about this vision with George Washington, who had a similar dream."

Two years after George Washington's visit, on January 1, 1787, Leonard Smith platted the town of Berlin, consisting of 92 quarter-acre lots, thus creating the foundation of what would eventually become the City of Brunswick.

George Washington's and Leonard Smith's dreams fulfilled

It wasn't until 1834, 40 years after Leonard Smith's death, that the C&O Canal and the B&O Railroad reached Berlin, fulfilling his dream of Berlin becoming an inland port. Farmers from the Middletown Valley, as well as those living across the river in Loudoun County, began bringing their products to Berlin for shipment to Georgetown by canal boat and by rail.

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