

**“In the Morning We Began to Strip and Bury the Dead:” A Context for
Burial Practices During the American War for Independence
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ABSTRACT

Following almost any military engagement, wounded soldiers in various stages of mutilation littered not only the battlefield site proper but could frequently be found for miles around. Interspersed with them lay the corpses of men who were killed in the battle or had died during the pursuit of the enemy. Yet methods of battlefield cleanup, such as taking care of the wounded and disposal of corpses, are topics rarely covered in written accounts of battles and their aftermath during the American War for Independence.

Treatment of the dead and wounded following battles of the American War for Independence varied according to a range of factors. The location of the battle, weather, time of year, who controlled the battlefield, how much time was available for battlefield cleanup, the character of the surrounding community, and the customs and attitudes regarding the dead of those responsible for burial all influenced the ways corpses were treated. Utilizing historical documentation and archaeological examples derived from several Revolutionary War battlefields in the northern and middle Atlantic regions, including Princeton, Bennington, Hubbardton, Brandywine, Paoli, and Red Bank, this paper offers an historical and archaeological context for eighteenth century battlefield burial practices.

On October 23, 1777, the day following the bloody battle of Red Bank (Fort Mercer), Sergeant John Smith of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment began the grisly task of cleaning up. He wrote: "...in the morning we began to strip & bury the Dead of our men & Hessians -- we buried 75 Hessians in one Grave in the intrenchment & Covered them over & 8 or 10 more below the bank by the River -- it took us all Day to bury the Dead" (Smith 1777). In the aftermath of battle, wounded soldiers in various stages of mutilation littered not only the battlefield proper but could frequently be found for miles around. Interspersed with them lay the corpses of men who were killed in the battle or had died during the pursuit of and by the enemy. These dead would soon be joined by those who died at makeshift field hospitals which sprang up surrounding battlefields. Methods of battlefield cleanup, such as taking care of the wounded and the disposal of corpses, are topics infrequently covered in written primary and secondary accounts of battles and their aftermath during the American War for Independence.

Historical documentation describing burial practices at battlefields of the American War of Independence provides a range of first-person accounts on how armies and battle survivors dealt with the corpses lying on their fields. Compiling the written record for the treatment of bodies is essential for understanding the potential archaeological evidence that may survive for battlefield burials. Given the number of historically reported battlefield dead, it is noteworthy that only a handful of battlefield burials have been excavated archaeologically. A similar lack of burial locations for the English and French dead on battlefields of the medieval period has also been reported (Curry and Foard 2017).

Archaeological investigations of prison and hospital locations have been completed and reported on, and many of these are marked with memorials (cf., Cotter et al. 1992a:205-210; Duell and Ragland 1930; Ragland 1930; Rutsch 1972; Santone and Irish 1997; Shaffer and Humpf 1996; Shaffer 1998; Starbuck 1990; Warfel 2000) (Table 1). In contrast, comparatively few archaeological examples of actual battlefield graves have been investigated that provide the physical burial evidence (Table 2).

In the guidance published by the National Register of Historic Places for evaluating and registering historic cemeteries, authors Elisabeth Walton Potter and Beth M. Boland state that "during the American Revolution, soldiers were buried in existing burial grounds near the place of battle" (Potter and Boland 1992:6). No documentary or archaeological evidence is offered to support this statement and our current research reveals it to be incorrect and overly simplistic. Focusing on American Revolutionary War battlefields located within the Middle Atlantic, locations of burials and treatment of corpses varied widely. The time of year of the battle, e.g., is the ground frozen or soft, the composition of the ground, e.g., does it contain many stones, how many dead required burying, whether the dead soldiers were friend or foe, officer or enlisted man, and who buried the dead all effected how, when, and where battle casualties were buried.

Where were the dead buried? The first answer that comes to mind is in a mass grave or graves on the battlefield, but that was not always the case. Mass burials are mentioned at Lexington and Concord, Brandywine, Germantown, and other large engagements, yet the locations of mass burials are essentially unknown. In the Middle Atlantic region, two are marked – the 52 dead Americans at Paoli (mentioned above), and the mass grave uncovered at Tappan, New York –

Table 1. Summary of Archaeological Examples of Hospital Burials

Hospital Site	Burial Type	Description	Method of Investigation or Reporting	Reference
Bethlehem, PA	individual	Hospital burial ground, buried by religious order (Moravians)	Historical record; archaeological survey	Shaffer 1998; Shaffer and Humpf 1996
Ephrata, PA	individual	Hospital burial ground, buried by religious order (Moravians)	Archaeological survey	Warfel 2000, 2001
Governors Island, NY	Mass grave	Hospital or prison burial ground. Remains likely	Archaeological Survey	Santone and Irish 1997

		represent British sailors		
Fishkill Supply Depot, NY	individual	Hospital burial ground	Historical record; archaeological survey	Goring 1975; Chadwick 2008
Governor's Palace, VA	individual	158 grave shafts uncovered in the garden of the Governors Palace	Archaeological survey	Ragland 1930; Duell and Ragland 1930
Langhorne, PA	shafts	Hospital burials associated with battles of Trenton (1 and 2) and Princeton. Shafts stacked 3 to 4 deep	Historical record; archaeological survey	Stewart 1992
Brandywine, PA	Mass grave	Common grave site at Birmingham Meetinghouse and at Old Kennett Meeting House, buried by civilians	Historical record	Smith 1865
Washington Square, Philadelphia, PA	Individuals in a burial ground	Burials associated with prison and hospitals of both Crown Forces and Americans, circa 1777-78	Archaeological Survey	Cotter et al. 1992a
Morristown, NJ	individual	Cemetery site at Morristown NHP	Historical record; archaeological survey	Rutsch 1972
Mount Independence, VT	Mass and individual	Hospital site at principal American fortification	Historical record; archaeological survey	Starbuck 1990, 1999

the site of Baylor's Massacre. The Paoli mass burial has not been the subject of professional archaeological investigation, but the grave's contents was reported in 1817 when the commemorative monument was erected. The Baylor's Massacre site was excavated by amateur archaeologist in 1968 and included six sets of human remains were recovered from a tanning vat. Based on the recovered artifacts – in particular, marked regimental buttons – several of the individuals were identified as young men of the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons, and subsequent research suggests that they may also be the remains of local militia (Daniels 1968; Maurer 2005:465-497).

Table 2. Summary of Archaeological examples of Battlefield Burials

Battlefield	Burial Type	Description	Method of Investigation or Reporting	Reference
Saratoga, 1777	Individuals	Isolated individuals within British lines, male and female	Archaeological	Snow 2016
Germantown, 1777	Individual	Isolated individual of the 52 nd Regt of Foot; identified	Archaeological	Crane 1986; Cotter et al. 1992; Heyl 1908
Tappan (Baylor Massacre), 1778	Mass grave	Two mass graves containing multiple burials	Archaeological	Daniels 1968; Maurer 2005
Paoli, 1777	Mass grave	Large burial grave containing 52 corpses, buried by local population. Now marked by	Amateur	McGuire 2000

		obelisk		
Brandywine, 1777	Individual & reported mass grave(s)	Several isolated individual graves excavated by locals; reported burial trench	Amateur	Ashmead 1884; Anonymous 1893, 1900; Brinton [1895]
Hubbardton, 1777	Mass grave	Collection site of human remains, now marked by obelisk (1859)	Amateur	Catts and Selig 2017; Hemenway 1877; Williams 1988
Princeton, 1777	Mass grave	Reported to be in a gravel or stone pit, archaeological work identified the pit, but no human remains.	Archaeological	Bradley et al. 2017

Mass burials were also reported at Princeton Battlefield. The battle was fought in January 1777 and bodies of both American and British soldiers were reputedly moved by sled to a central location where they were placed in a stone quarry or “driftway” (defined as a common road or path for driving cattle) (Magee 1896:289; Barber and Howe 1844:272). Historical and topographic evidence, supported by strong local oral tradition located the quarry on a prominent rise on the battlefield. Recent geophysical survey identified a potential feature measuring thirty feet by about 8 feet, with regular sides. The feature was sampled and found to be a portion of a backfilled quarry pit. Unfortunately, within the sampled section, no human remains were discovered (Bradley et al. 2017).

Sometimes, individual corpses were buried where they were found. Indeed, it is the individual burial that is more often archaeologically reported and often these graves are discovered by accident. Individual burials reported include the British light infantryman of the 52nd Regiment excavated at Germantown. In this case, because of the marked regimental coat buttons, the individual was identified as Private John Waite (Crane 1986; Cotter et al. 1992b:351-353). Other isolated remains of soldiers have been found, generally by accident by farmers, on the Brandywine Battlefield (Anonymous 1893, 1900; Ashmead 1884:319). None of the Brandywine remains were archaeologically investigated. Individual burials have been reported by Dean Snow at Saratoga within the British fortification line of the Balcarres Redoubt (Snow 2016:87-91). Archaeological field work with the Redoubt in 1941 uncovered four graves of soldiers attributed to the British Royal Artillery, and in 1972 a fifth grave containing a female was identified within the foot trench inside the redoubt wall. None of the remains were stripped of clothing. The four artillerymen were likely casualties of the First Battle of Saratoga and had been carefully laid with respect (Valosin 2016: 211-2). In contrast, the remains of the female seem to have been more hastily buried, face down, facing northward, covered first with earth and then with logs. Snow estimates that, based on the number of recovered remains and the size of Balcarres Redoubt approximately 80 burials may be present within the redoubt (Snow 2016:90). A sixth burial located in 1972 in the Breymann Redoubt, was buried in a shallow, basin-shaped pit. The individual was male, in his thirties, and had no clothing or uniform parts to identify him. He is interpreted as a Loyalist or German killed in the fighting on October 7, 1777 (Snow 2016:94-95).

During the American Revolution, burial of battlefield dead in consecrated ground – church yards – does not seem to have been a concern, likely due to the practicality of finding a church cemetery convenient to the battlefields. There was obvious regional variation to this, with some battle dead buried in churchyards in more settled areas. At times when the dead could be transported to and buried in church cemeteries, they were, but in most cases this was not a deciding factor in where and how to bury the dead.

More often than enlisted men, officers may have been accorded the religious salvation afforded by consecrated ground. Mortally wounded at the battle of Monmouth, British Lt. Colonel Monckton was buried “at the north corner of the Meetinghouse [Old Tennent Church] ...with all the honors of war” (Means 1833). Hessian Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rall, mortally wounded at the Battle of Trenton, was buried in in the First Presbyterian Church yard. In the case of Trenton, the historical record reports that 24 Hessian soldiers were

also buried in one pit at the Presbyterian Church (Barber and Howe 1844:298). Trenton was an unusual battle action of the War for Independence, since it took place in a somewhat “urbanized” space, so burial in a town churchyard was not unusual. Lexington, Concord, and Germantown also were fought in more settled village spaces, and battlefield dead at these sites were sometimes transported to and buried in church yards.

When disposing of the dead, any hole in the ground would do. The tanning vats at Tappan have already been mentioned, and the use of wells was reported at Brandywine (Brinton [1895]). At Bennington, Asa Fitch wrote that “previous to the battle [there had] been a log hut near the Tory’s breastwork, and a small outdoor cellar formed of slabs covered with earth. The house was gone, and the slabs had rotted and let the dirt tumble down into the cellar hole. Into this cellar hole those [Tories] who were killed... were thrown in a promiscuous heap, & dirt thrown over them. Seventeen bodies were thus thrown in here this being the number of Tories left dead upon the hill on the day of the battle” (Fitch 1777). In his pension application, New Jersey militiaman Jacob Sisco recalled many years after his service “...that a large hole or pit was dug in the earth, on the east side of the Rahway Creek, on a little eminence near the Elizabethtown road, into which the enemy threw the bodies of their dead soldiers. Many of them lay so near the surface, that the rains soon washed bare & exposed to view, the hands, feet & limbs of the dead...” (Sisco 1834).

Due to the pragmatic concerns such as stench and putrefaction of bodies, most battlefield casualties were buried as soon as possible after the action. Military formations took on this task if they occupied the battleground for any length of time. Burial details were created from the companies and battalions that were available. At Red Bank (Fort Mercer), the Rhode Island Continentals and local New Jersey militia buried the large number of Hessian casualties, in this case by throwing the corpses in the fort trenches and covering them. In 2016 geophysical testing at Fort Mercer was unable to locate human remains, likely because the Delaware River has eroded more than 120 feet of shoreline – it was reported that the last bones eroded out of the bluff about 1865 (Catts et al. 2017). British corporal Roger Lamb reported that the task of burying the dead after the First Battle of Saratoga (September 19, 1777) was daunting: “...the ground afforded on the day following a scene truly distressing – the bodies of the slain, thrown together into one receptacle, were scarcely covered with the clay, and the only tribute of respect to fallen officers was, to bury them by themselves, without throwing them into the common grave...” (Lamb 1811:192). We’ll return to the issue of rank a little later.

In some battles specific soldiers, known as pioneers, were responsible assigned burial detail. British Lieutenant Gilbert Purdy, who served under Samuel Holland in the Corps of Guides and Pioneers in 1777-1778, wrote after the battles of Cooch’s Bridge and Brandywine that his company was responsible for burial details. At Brandywine he reported that “In the time we Laid their Dead that was Buryed (sic) By Us on the Day After the Battle were 55 By our [Battalion] Besides What was Buryed (sic) By the rest of the Army” (Purdy 1777-78).

In most cases, the burial was carried out by the local population. Such a situation occurred if the number of casualties was particularly high, overwhelming the meager efforts of the military, or if the contenting armies had moved on without completing the task of burial. After the fight at Lexington and Concord, non-combatants buried the dead, moved by a sense of duty to honor the fallen. Mary Hartwell related that “...could not sleep that night, for I knew there were British soldiers lying dead by the roadside...” The next day, she recalled

“...The men hitched the oxen to the cart, and went down below the house, and gathered up, the dead. As they returned with the team and the dead soldiers, my thoughts went out for the wives, parents, and children away across the Atlantic, who would never again see their loved ones; and I left the house, and taking my little children by the hand, I followed the rude hearse to the grave hastily made in the burial-ground. I remember how cruel it seemed to put them into one large trench without any coffins. There was one in a brilliant uniform, whom I supposed to have been an officer. His hair was tied up in a cue...” (Hartwell no date).

After the battles of Hubbardton, Bennington, Brandywine, Paoli, Germantown, and Tappan, civilians did much of the burying. At Brandywine, for example, Quaker Joseph Townsend recorded that after Howe's army had moved on "...the ground which they [the British army] had lately occupied at Birmingham, being now cleared and left in a desolate condition, exhibited a scene of destruction and waste. Some few of the inhabitants...found it necessary to call in the assistance of their neighbors to rebury many of the dead, who lay exposed to the open air and ravages of beasts and wild fowls, having, in consequence of the late heavy rains, been washed bare, and some few of them had never been interred" (Futhey and Cope 1881: 77). The burials Townsend referred to were located at the Birmingham Meetinghouse, where the location of the mass grave is marked by a commemorative stone.

At the battlefields of Princeton, Brandywine, and Paoli, the locals were members of the Society of Friends – Quakers – who strove to avoid involvement in the war and had little use for military-style clothing or accoutrements. Reports from Brandywine years after the battle identify burials that contained buckles, fragments of uniform coats, regimental buttons, and muskets. An isolated burial, identified as British, containing a musket was uncovered in 1900, and single graves were found in 1859 during railroad work and 1881 by a farmer. The former was identified as an American soldier and the later as British based on recovered buckles and buttons (Ashmead 1884:319; Anonymous 1893, 1900). Evidence from the Paoli battlefield shows that the Quakers buried the dead with honor and respect, and with all of their equipment of war. The 52 dead who were buried on 22 September 1777 were interred in a trench about 12 by 60 feet in two rows of twenty-six with heads facing east. The mass grave included the hats, shoes, clothing and accoutrements of the soldiers. The Paoli Monument Committee Report in 1817 stated that when they moved the bodies of four of the Paoli dead to build a foundation for the monument, they were still in their clothes, shoes, caps, and "armor" and that some bayonets were thrown in with them (McGuire 2000: 185-6).

Were the dead stripped of their clothes and buried naked or were they thrown into their graves as they were found? In the eighteenth century the term "naked" did not necessarily mean unclothed or bare, but instead that the body was indecently clothed, perhaps in undergarments of a shirt or shift. The examples of Brandywine and Paoli notwithstanding, the general rule seems to have been that if the burials were done by the army, the usable clothing and equipment, shoes, etc. were taken off the bodies and they would be buried in their shirts and possibly their trousers or breeches, but again the historical evidence is inconclusive. The practice of stripping the dead seems to have been something that each side accused the other of perpetrating and denied doing themselves; in reality, armies did it irrespective of side. Captain Jonathan Buel of the Connecticut militia articulated this dichotomy, remembering at Bemis Heights that

"...as I passed over the battle-ground of the previous day, I saw the British dead lying scattered and mostly stripped of their clothes. This practice of stripping the dead of the enemy seems to have been considered proper at that time. The American dead were not stripped. They lay where they had fallen, and were buried with their clothes on near the place where they were found, two or three in the same hole.... The burial took place the day after the battle.... Two of our men were killed by a cannon ball. I was present when one of them was buried. A shallow grave was dug, a little grass thrown in, then the body, almost cut in two by a cannon ball, was laid in, all bloody as he fell, then a little grass and the earth thrown in to fill up the grave" (Hibbard 1897: 147).

Removal of clothing as something done by "the other" was also noted by American Ashbel Green as he traveled over the battlefield of Springfield, New Jersey. Seeing several corpses, he observed that "...If they had been Americans, I think their countrymen would not have stripped them; and, for the like reason, if they had once been British or Hessian soldiers, their comrades, in their hasty retreat, would probably not have denuded them." Stripping bodies could occur with frightening rapidity after a fight, sort of akin to the speed at which carrion birds and insects descend on a carcass. French officer Count Rechteren of the Royal Deux-Ponts Regiment reported the morning after the assault on Redoubt No. 9 at Yorktown that "...At daybreak, I saw the entrenchments which presented a shocking scene, for dead bodies stripped naked lay strewn all about..." (Baum et al. 2016:109). Stripping of usable clothing happened regardless of whether the corpse was victor or

vanquished. At Princeton one civilian recalled that the American and British dead, “frozen stiff” due to the winter weather, had “their clothing stripped off by the American soldiers....” (Barber and Howe 1844:272).

Scavenging by unauthorized people for clothing, money, and arms has long been an element of battlefield cleanup. Following the Battle of Bemis Heights, Private Ezra Tilden of Colonel Benjamin Gill's Massachusetts Militia Regiment wrote in his diary on 7 October 1777 that he “saw several dead and naked men, Regulars, or the Enemy lying Dead in the woods close by or even where the battle was fought” (MacKerron 2009: 50). On 24 June 1780, the day after the Battle of Springfield, Ashbel Green's “route homeward led me over the whole of this ground, and for the first, and I hope for the last time of my life, I saw the yet unburied corpses of the victims of war. Two or three of these corpses, stripped as naked as when they were born, lay at the bridge which the British attempted to force, and on the side adjoining the town....” (Jones 1849: 119).

Despite their seeming difference in social status conferred by rank and Lamb's statement at Saratoga above, the bodies of dead officers often received the same treatment as enlisted men. Colonel Donop was interred with military honors and received a headstone after he had been killed at Red Bank (Fort Mercer) in October 1777, and Americans buried British Captain William Leslie, mortally wounded at Princeton, with full honors in Pluckemin on 5 January 1777. However, Leslie's fellow officer Captain Francis Tew of the 17th Regiment, a Princeton veteran, was not so fortunate. Following the capture of Stony Point by General Anthony Wayne's forces on 16 July 1779, Ensign Frederick Philipse Robinson of the 17th Regiment of Foot, taken prisoner by American forces, recorded in his journal that “as soon as it was light, my attention was attracted by a Sight which I confess struck me dumb with horror. Near me I saw the naked body of my old friend Captain Tew of the 17th Regt. a man whom I loved and respected in the highest degree; I almost Sickened at the Sight and was rivetted to the Spot. An Officer who witnessed this, took me by the arm and led me amongst the Dead and Wounded in order, as he said afterwards, to familiarise me to Such Sight” (Robinson 1777).

American officers killed at Germantown were buried in mass graves with enlisted men, though some were later disinterred for burial elsewhere (Heyl 1908:55-58). At Bennington, Thomas Mellen recalled how “Not more than a rod from where I fought, we found Captain McClary dead, and stripped naked. We scraped a hole with sticks and just covered him with earth” (Butler and Houghton 1849: 29). Nahum Parker and his detachment “found two ded (sic) men on our road” on the march to Bennington on 17 August. Surely they did not leave them there but buried them probably by the side of the road (Parker 1777). Chauncey Rice in Captain Barnes' Company of Massachusetts Militia wrote that “the Lieutenat [sic] was killed and buried” where he had fallen: “at the foot of a tree” (Rice 1832).

Depending on their number the task of burying the dead could be overwhelming for the survivors, resulting in quick burials and predictable long-term results. Burials were often shallow, or the bodies barely covered. At Brandywine, one historian writing more than a century later noted that the large number of dead lay on the field for several days in hot weather. Bodies were buried in wells, in gullies along the roadside, later to be “washed or Ploughed up when the Road menders come and it was common for fifty years [about 1827] after the Battle to get Bones along the Road side...” (Brinton [1895]). Thomas Anburey at Saratoga noted that burial methods varied according to the burial party and he observed more decency than “...some parties had done, who left heads, legs and arms above ground....” (Anburey 1789:421). At one location at Monmouth battlefield, “...the British grenadiers lay in heaps like sheaves of wheat on a harvest-field. Our informant [Dr. Samuel Forman] states that they dragged the corpses by the heels to shallow pits dug for the purpose, and slightly covered them with earth; he saw thirteen buried in one hole. For many years after, their graves were indicated by the luxuriance of the vegetation....” (Barber and Howe 1844:341).

Treatment of the dead varied according to time, topography, weather conditions, and the vagaries of war. William Boutelle recorded that on 16 August 1777 following the Battle of Bennington “Night came on and [we] were forbidden to pursue the enemy. We continued to our quarters bringing with us the body of Thomas Joslin who was killed in the first onset; he was tied up in a sheet and swung on a pole, and two of us had to carry him at a time and changed often.” A bit later on he recorded: “I went and helped to make a coffin

for Thomas Joslin, Dec's'd, and went to the funeral. [...] The deceased was conveyed in a wagon to Bennington and decently buried in their burying ground, the minister of the town attended and went to pray at the grave; the whole company followed the corpse to the grave as mourners" (Gabriel 2016: 22-31,26-28).

Treatment of the dead sometimes depended on whose side they fought when they were alive. Often bodies were unceremoniously dumped. An anecdote told about Deacon Nathaniel Harmon following the Battle of Bennington gives an idea about the procedures: "It was a rude transaction, but the time was urgent. It was better that the dead bodies of the slain foe should be buried in any manner than left to breed pestilence upon the surface of the earth. There were two large excavations for wintering potatoes — left open in the summer time until another harvest — nearby; Mr. Harmon took his rope slip-noose halter from his horse's neck, and dragged the dead bodies of the slain enemy therewith into the excavations and covered them with earth. There were some sixty bodies thus buried in each of the two excavations (Jennings 1869: 273). In the center of the battlefield "were the remains of two potato holes, at the time of the battle. The dead bodies to the number of thirty, according to Austin Wells' statement were drawn together from this part of the ground and were thrown into these potato holes & covered, whilst a tory also found here was interred half way between the two holes" (Fitch 1777). These potato pits were reportedly near where the Barnet house now stands and recent geophysical survey in this area identified several anomalies that may be these pits (Selig et al. 2017).

Weather conditions and the time of year that the battle took place were important considerations. Battles fought in the summer and early fall when the weather is still warm necessitated a quick burial of corpses. The odor of death would have soon become apparent and may have been one reason that expedient burials were necessary. The stench or "stink" of the aftermath of battle was something that Nicholas Creswell wrote about while on Staten Island. Creswell, writing on a warm 22 June 1777 commented that he was "[a]lmost bit to death with Mosquitoes and poisoned with the stink of some Rebels, who have been buried about three weeks in such a slight manner that waggons have cut up parts of the half corrupted carcasses and made them stink most horribly" (Creswell 1924: 240). Isolated battlefields, or fields that opposing forces had marched away from prior to cleaning up were places to be avoided. Fought in early July, the battlefield at Fort Ann was a dismal scene of rotting corpses left by both armies. British Lieutenant William Digby recorded the condition at Fort Ann two weeks after the battle, writing "We saw many of their [American] dead unburied... which caused a violent stench. One officer of the [British] 9th Regiment, Lieut. [Richard] Westropp, was then unburied, and from the smell we could only cover him with leaves" (Baxter 1887:234). Corporal Fox of the 47th Regiment of Foot echoed Digby's observation, writing on 26 July 1777 about the casualties of the Battle of Fort Ann that they exuded a "smell so offensive of the hill that a party of us were ordered to go and bury the dead bodies of the 9th regt and the rebels" (Houlding and Yates 1990: 158).

At some battlefields where neither British nor American dead had been buried, disposal of corpses could be extreme, including burning or tossing into a pond. Chaplain Dr. Timothy Dwight visited Forts Clinton and Montgomery with a group of officers in the spring of 1778, some six months after the battle and recorded what he witnessed (Dunwell 1991: 24-5):

"[The] first object that met our eyes...was the remains of a fire kindled by the cottagers... for the purpose of consuming the bones of some of the Americans who had fallen at this place, and had been left unburied. Some of those bones were lying partially consumed round the spot where the fire had been kindled; and some had evidently been converted into ashes. As we went onward, we were distressed by the odor of decayed human bodies. To me this was a novelty, and more overwhelming and dispiriting than I am able to describe. As we were attempting to discover the source from which it proceeded, we found, at a small distance from Fort Montgomery, a pond of moderate size, in which we saw the bodies of several men, who had been killed in the assault upon the fort. They were thrown into this pond, the preceding autumn [1777], by the British, when probably the water was sufficiently deep to cover them. Some of them were covered at this time, but a depth so small, as to leave them distinctly visible. Others had an arm, a leg, and a part of the body above the surface. The clothes, which they wore when they were killed, were still on them; and proved that they were militia, being the ordinary dress of farmers. Their faces were bloated and monstrous; and their postures were uncouth, distorted, and in the highest degree afflictive."

Some of the deceased were still floating in the lake at least 15 years later.

Some remains were never buried. In 1778, two years after the battle of White Plains, Joseph Plum Martin found many of the dead unburied: "Here were Hessian skulls, thick as a bombshell. Poor fellows! They were left unburied in a foreign land" (Martin 2011: 89). Sometimes the dead could be left for decades, as when Anthony Wayne's forces camped around Fort Ticonderoga in December 1776 and came across the bones of French and Indian War dead. Wayne compared it to "The Ancient Golgotha a place of skulls – they are so plenty here that our people for want of Other Vessels drink out of them" (Ketchum 1997: 29). At Hubbardton the American corpses apparently were left to rot where they had fallen and no attempt made to bury the remains until years after the battle. A local historian reported that in 1784 "...the inhabitants turned out and made a general search over the battle-ground and woods adjoining, gathering up what bones they could find, which had lain bleaching in the sun, wind and rain for 7 years (amounting to many bushels) and buried them. Since that time there have not been many found. But, occasionally, when they have been discovered, they have been carefully taken care of and buried" (Catts and Selig 2017; Hemenway 1877: 751). Hubbardton Battlefield's obelisk monument, erected in 1859, is reported to mark the location of the collected remains.

Some graves were clearly known or remembered after the engagement, but their locations have been lost to time. Three years after the battle of Cooch's Bridge, grave locations were apparently still known to military commanders and to the locals. In the spring of 1780, General Samuel Patterson wrote to the Pennsylvania Executive Council to report that, in attempting to locate a New Castle County militiaman named McNabb, "...graves were opened by his wife to try and find him" (Patterson 1780). McNabb had served under Patterson at the battle. The results of his wife's burial search were fortunately unsuccessful; McNabb was found to be a prisoner with the British in New York City. Today, no burials are known at Cooch's Bridge, and geophysical survey work to locate possible graves is ongoing (Chadwick 2018).

For many participants, whether hardened veteran soldiers or raw militia, the sense of relief in surviving a battle was compounded by the difficult task of burying the dead and recovering the wounded. After the First Battle of Saratoga, British soldier Roger Lamb described the burial detail as "distressing," while Thomas Anburey mention the emotional effect of burying the dead. "You that are pleased to compliment me on my humanity," he wrote, "will think what I must have felt, on seeing fifteen, sixteen and twenty buried in one hole..." (Lamb 1811: 192; Anburey 1789:421). Following the Battle of Springfield in 1780, American Ashbel Green wrote that "...the whole scene was one of gloomy horror — a dead horse, a broken carriage of a fieldpiece, a town laid in ashes, the former' inhabitants standing over the ruins of their dwellings, and the unburied dead, covered with blood and with the flies that were devouring it, filled me with melancholy feelings, till I was ready to say – Is the contest worth all this? I was glad to get away from the affecting spectacle" (Jones 1849:121).

Summary

Treatment of the dead and wounded following American War for Independence battles in the Middle Atlantic and northeast varied according to a range of factors. Variables included 1) The location of the battle; 2) weather; 3) time of year; 4) who controlled the battlefield; 5) how much time was available for battlefield cleanup; 6) the character of the surrounding community; 7) the customs and attitudes regarding the dead of those responsible for burial; 8) whether a friend or foe; and 9) whether officer or other rank. As these eighteenth-century examples show, there existed no clear pattern regarding battlefield clean-up and the disposition of corpses. Many of the factors that influenced the treatment of the dead following a battle are similar to those reported for English and French battlefields of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, reflecting a remarkable continuity in methods of battlefield cleanup over the space of several centuries (Curry and Foard 2017). A further similarity between the medieval battlefields and the Revolutionary War battlefield is the remarkable lack of burials and graves found on the battlefields, despite the large numbers of reported dead and the burying of corpses on the field.

The War for Independence examples permit a general context of what most likely happened during the days after a battle:

- a) Burials were carried out by the force who occupied the battlefield, or more commonly, by civilians.
- b) Burial in consecrated ground, such as a church yard, was not the norm, but was sometimes done if a cemetery was convenient. Often such burials were associated with post-battle hospitals. Burial of officers in consecrated ground was more common than for enlisted men.
- c) The bodies would likely have been stripped of clothing, weapons, and accoutrements, and would have been buried naked or in their small clothes. An exception to this seems to be burials by Quakers, as seen at Brandywine, Paoli, and Princeton. Stripped bodies may mean that burials are not readily identifiable through archaeological means.
- d) A corollary to stripping bodies may be that the general location of mass burials could be identified by concentrations of uniform or clothing items, such as buttons, pins, and buckles.
- e) Depending on the number of casualties, there were usually multiple burial sites on the battlefield.
- f) The dead of both armies were often buried indiscriminately in the same grave.
- g) Burials were often quick and expedient, with corpses placed in wells, pits, ponds, or other already existing holes in the ground.
- h) Graves often were shallow with body parts unburied or protruding from the grave. Post-battle agricultural tillage means that archaeologically, incomplete skeletons may be the result.
- i) As the war progressed, officers and enlisted men were often buried in a common grave or graves as pre-war societal norms were observed less and less among the professional soldiers.
- j) The experience of battle dulled sensibilities. This “dulling” was occasionally induced intentionally in professional soldiers and influenced the approach to burying the dead. Militiamen who experience battle maybe only once in their life-times tended to act and react differently.
- k) The emotional involvement of the adversaries in the cause, i.e. why the troops fought, greatly influenced the approach to enemy dead and their burial.
- l) The definition of the enemy as fellow soldier, Rebel, Loyalist, African American or Native American greatly influenced the approach and treatment of the fallen enemy.
- m) Treatment of enemy dead varied according to the composition of the burial party, particularly in comparing American militia and Continentals.

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