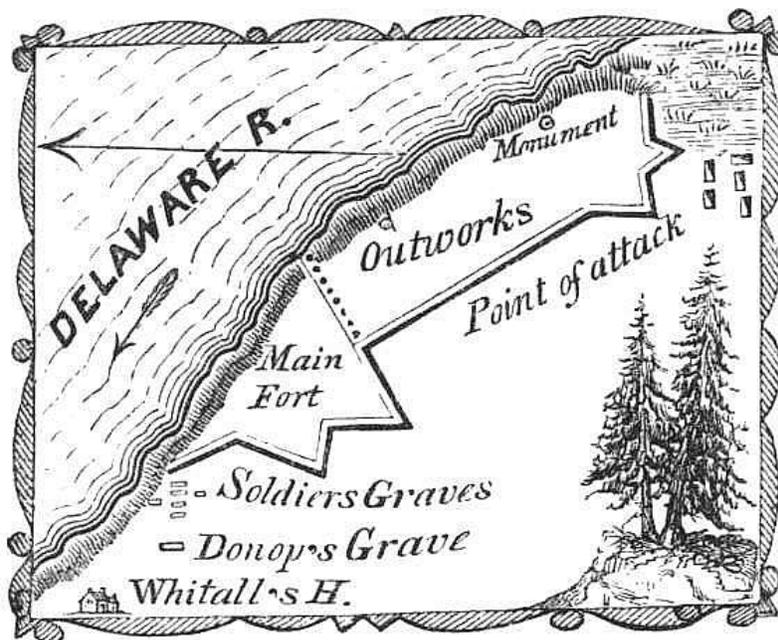


## Fort Mercer

### Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution

By Benson Lossing

Toward noon [November 27, 1848.], accompanied by a friend (Mr. Samuel Agnew), I left the city to visit the remains of the old forts at Red Bank, on the Jersey shore of the Delaware, a few miles below Philadelphia. Unable to gain positive information respecting a ferry, we concluded to drive down to Fort Mifflin, and obtain a passage there. We crossed the Schuylkill, and, passing through the cultivated country on its right bank, missed the proper road to Fort Mifflin, and reached the termination of the one we were traveling, at a farm-house. Here we ascertained that we could not obtain ferriage at the fort, so we crossed the Schuylkill again, upon a bateau, near its mouth, and, returning to the city suburbs, found the proper avenue to League Island, [29](#) whence we could be ferried to Red Bank. Our blunder consumed two hours, and then we had to wait almost another hour upon the dike which defends League Island from the waters of the Delaware, before a skiff, for which we telegraphed by a white handkerchief upon a ratan, came over to us. The river is there about a mile wide; and while the waterman was slowly rowing across, we dined upon bread and cheese, cold sausage, and grape jelly, which the kind consideration of my friend's wife had furnished at our departure. It was a rather uncomfortable pic-nic on that unsheltered dike in the keen November wind.



## LOCALITIES AT RED BANK. [30](#)

Leaving my horse in a stall at the ferry, we crossed to the great coal depôt, upon Eagle Point, on the Jersey shore, about half a mile above the site of Fort Mercer, at Red Bank. We met a resident gentleman on the way to the fort, who kindly turned back and pointed out the various localities. The embankments and trenches are quite prominent, and will doubtless long remain so, for a forest of young pines now covers and protects them from the destroying hand of cultivation. The form of the fort and outworks, as denoted in the sketch, was easily distinguished, and the serried lines of the soldiers' graves were palpable along the brow of the high bank. These are the graves of those who were slain in the battle which occurred there in the autumn of 1777. They were buried in boxes, and now their remains are often exposed by the washing away of the banks. At the southern line of the fort, close by the bank, are the remains of the hickory-tree which was used as a flag-staff during the battle; and near it are traces of the gateway of the fort.



DONOP'S GRAVE.

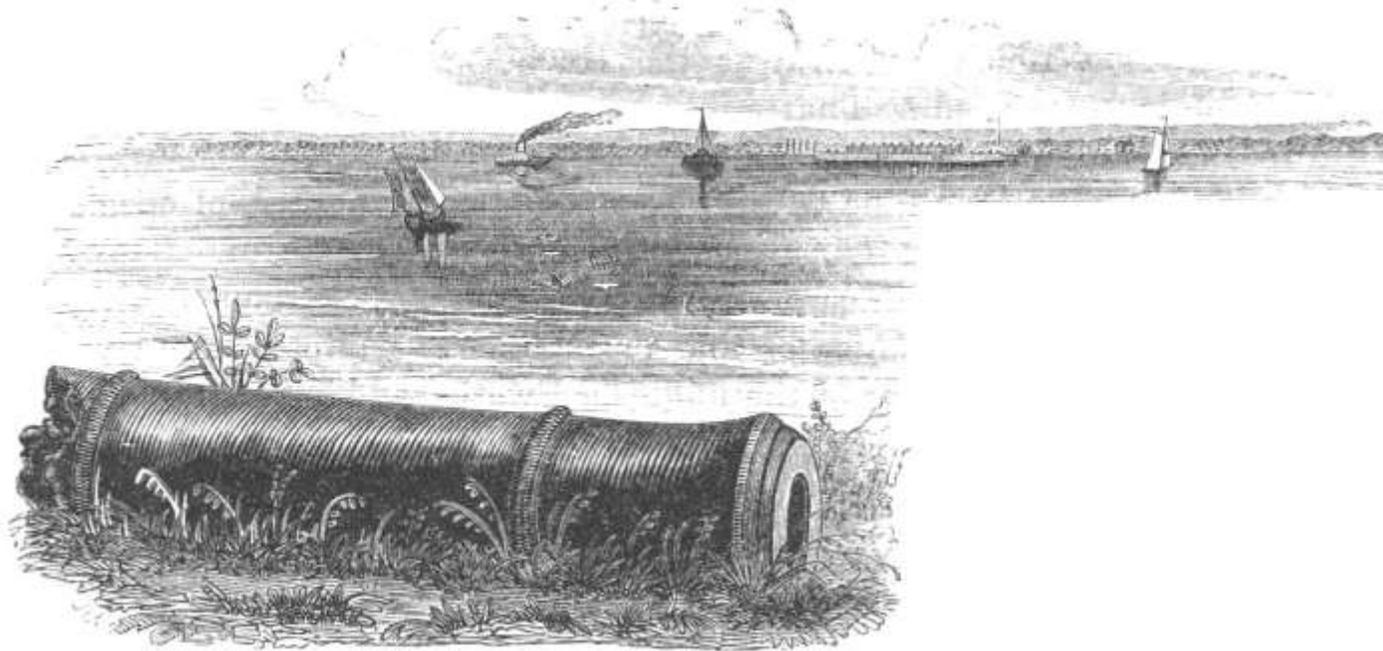
A little below, and in the path leading to the house of Mr. Whitall, is the grave of Count Donop, marked by a small, rough sandstone, about fourteen inches in height. Vandal fingers have plucked relic-pieces from it, and so nearly was the rude inscription effaced that I could only decipher a portion of the words, DONOP WAS LOST, as seen in the sketch. [31](#) Even his bones have not been allowed to molder in his grave, but are scattered about the country as cherished relics, *his skull being in possession of a physician of New Jersey!*



WHITALL'S HOUSE.

A few rods south of Donop's grave, close by the river bank, is the ancient residence of the Whitall family. It is a two-story house, built of brick, and is now (1851) one hundred and three years old. The date of its erection is given on the north gable, where the characters "I A W [James and Anna Whitall] 1748," are delineated by dark, glazed brick. The Whitalls were Quakers, and of course, although Whigs, took no part in the war. This fact made some suspect the old man of Toryism. [32](#) I was informed by the present owner that, when the attack was made upon the fort, and his grandmother was urged to flee from the house, she refused, saying, God's arm is strong, and will protect *me*; I may do good by staying." She was left alone in the house; and while the battle was raging, and cannon-balls were driving like sleet against and around her dwelling, she calmly plied her spinning-wheel in a room in the second story. At length a twelve-pound ball, from a British vessel in the river, grazing the American flag-staff (the walnut-tree) at the fort, passed through the heavy brick wall on the north gable, and with a terrible crash perforated a partition at the head of the stairs, crossed a recess, and lodged in another partition, near where the old lady was sitting. Conceiving Divine protection a little more certain elsewhere after this manifestation of the power of gun-powder, the industrious dame gathered up her implements, and with a step quite as agile as in youth, she retreated to the cellar, where she continued spinning until called to attend the wounded and dying who were brought into her house at the close of the battle. She did, indeed, "do good" by remaining; for, like an angel of mercy, she went among the maimed, unmindful

whether they were friend or foe, and administered every relief to their sufferings, in her power. She scolded the Hessians for coming to America to butcher the people. At the same time, she bound up their wounds tenderly, and gave them food and water. The scar made by the passage of that iron ball is quite prominent in the gable; it is denoted in the engraving by the dark spot. I saw within the house where the missile cut off the wood-work in its passage, and where it lodged.

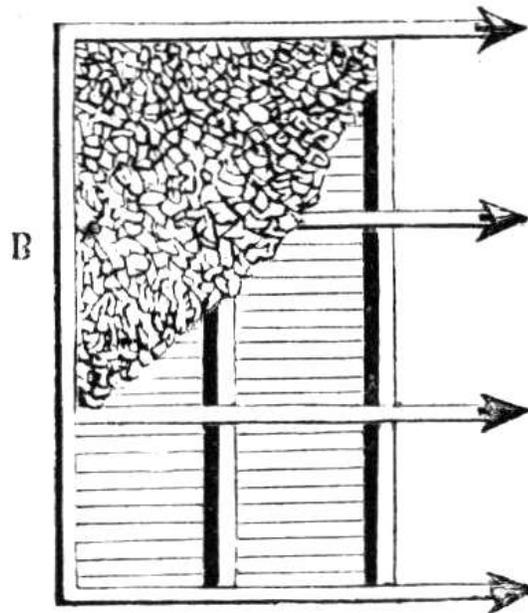
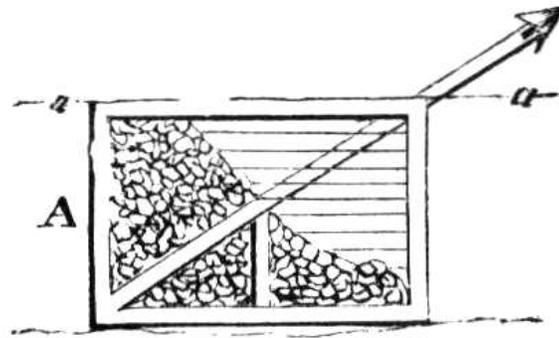


OLD CANNON AT RED BANK.

On the green, between the Whitall house and the river, lies a portion of an iron cannon which was bursted during the engagement. That event killed several of the Americans. The picture represents its present appearance, with its breech blown away. Beyond it is the Delaware, and in the distance, opposite, is seen Fort Mifflin, lying almost upon the water level on Fort or Great Mud Island, near the western shore. In the far distance, bounding the view, are the hills of Pennsylvania, toward Valley Forge.

In the summer of 1777, Sir William Howe, the British commander-in-chief, sailed from New York [July 23.] with a large land force, and with a naval armament under his brother Richard, Earl Howe, and, landing at the head of Chesapeake Bay [August 25.], commenced a victorious march toward Philadelphia. Washington, informed of the movement, went out from Philadelphia to meet him, and had proceeded beyond the Brandywine, in the neighborhood of Wilmington, when the van of the enemy appeared at Kennet Square. The battle of Brandywine occurred soon afterward [September 11.], in which the Americans were defeated, and driven back

toward Philadelphia. The enemy pushed steadily forward, and entered the city in triumph [September 26.]. In anticipation of the possibility of such an event, the Americans had applied themselves diligently to the erection of obstructions in the Delaware, to prevent the ascent of the British fleet, and also in rearing batteries upon the shores to cover them. Upon isolated marshes, or low islands of mud, made green by reeds, a little below the mouth of the Schuylkill, they erected a strong redoubt, with quite extensive outworks, and called it Fort Mifflin. These islands were called Great and Little Mud Islands. The former, on which the redoubt and main works were erected, has been called Fort Island ever since that time. On the opposite shore of New Jersey, a strong redoubt, called Fort Mercer, was also erected, and well supplied with artillery. In the deep channels of the river between, and under cover of these batteries, they sunk ranges of strong frames, with iron-pointed wooden spikes, called *chevaux de frise*, which formed almost invulnerable *stackadoes*. Three miles further down the river, at Byllinge's Point [33](#) (now Billingsport), was a redoubt with extensive outworks, covering strong *stackadoes*, which were sunken there in the navigable channel of the river, between the main and Billing's Island. In addition to these works, several armed galleys and floating batteries were stationed in the river, all forming strong barriers against the fleet of the enemy. This circumstance troubled the British general, for he foresaw the consequences of having his supplies by water cut off and the danger to which his army would be exposed in Philadelphia if unsupported by the fleet.



CHEVAUX DE FRISE. [34](#)

Immediately after the battle at Brandywine, Earl Howe sailed down the Chesapeake, and entered the lower Delaware with several light vessels, among which was the *Roebuck*, commanded by Captain Hammond. [35](#) That officer represented to General Howe, that if a sufficient force could be sent to reduce the fortifications at Billingsport, he would take upon himself the task of opening a passage for vessels through the *chevaux de frise*, or *stackadoes*, at that point. Howe readily consented to attempt the important measure. Two regiments, under Colonel Stirling, were dispatched from Chester, in Pennsylvania, for that purpose. They crossed the river a little below Billingsport, marched in the rear of the unfinished works, and made a furious assault upon the garrison. The Americans were dismayed at this unexpected attack, and believing themselves incompetent to make a successful defense, they spiked their cannons, set fire to the barracks, and fled. The English remained long enough to demolish the works on the river front; when Hammond, by the great exertions of his men, made a passage-

way seven feet wide in the *chevaux de frise*, and, with six vessels, sailed through, and anchored near Hog Island. Stirling returned to Chester, and, with another detachment, proceeded to camp, as an escort of provisions, bearing to General Howe intelligence of his success.

Howe now determined to make a general sweep of all the American works on the Delaware, and, preparatory thereto, he called in his outposts and concentrated his whole army near to and within Philadelphia. Two Rhode Island regiments, belonging to General Varnum's [36](#) brigade, under Colonel Christopher Greene, garrisoned the fort at Red Bank, and about the same number of the Maryland line, under Lieutenant-colonel Samuel Smith, occupied Fort Mifflin, on Mud Island. The American fleet in the river, consisting chiefly of galleys and floating batteries, was commanded by Commodore Hazlewood. [37](#) It was quite as important to the Americans to maintain these forts and defend the river obstructions as it was to the British to destroy them. It was therefore determined to hold them to the last extremity, for it was evident that such continued possession would force Howe to evacuate Philadelphia.

Count Donop, with four battalions, consisting of twelve hundred picked Hessians, was sent by Howe to attack Fort Mercer, at Red Bank. They crossed the Delaware, and landed at Cooper's Ferry, on the 21st of October [\[1777.\]](#) The same evening they marched to Haddonsfield, in New Jersey, a little above Gloucester. As they approached Timber Creek, on their way down the river, the Americans took up the bridge, and the enemy were obliged to march four miles up the stream to a shallow ford. They arrived at the edge of a wood, within cannon-shot of Fort Mercer, on the morning of the 22d. Their appearance, full-armed for battle, was the first intimation the garrison had of their approach. Although informed that the number of Hessians was twenty-five hundred, the little garrison of four hundred men, in a feeble earth fort, and with only fourteen pieces of cannon, were not intimidated. They made immediate preparations for defense. While thus engaged, a Hessian officer, who was permitted to approach the fort with a flag and a drummer, rode up, and insolently proclaimed, "The King of England orders his rebellious subjects to lay down their arms; and they are warned that, if they stand the battle, no quarters whatever will be given!" [38](#) "We ask no quarters, nor will, we give any!" was the prompt reply of Colonel Greene. The Hessian and the drummer rode hastily back to Donop, and the assailants began at once the erection of a battery within half cannon-shot of the outworks of Fort Mercer. All was activity and eagerness for combat within the fort. The outworks were unfinished, but the redoubt was a citadel upon which the garrison placed much reliance. Skill and bravery were called to combat fierceness, discipline, and overwhelming numbers.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when a brisk cannonade was opened from the Hessian battery, and at a quarter before five a battalion advanced to the attack, on the north part of the fort, near a morass that covered it. Finding the first advance post and the outworks abandoned, but not destroyed, the enemy imagined that they had frightened the Americans away. Filled with this idea, they raised the shout of victory, and, with the drummer just mentioned beating a lively march, rushed toward the redoubt, where not a man was to be seen. They were about to ascend the ramparts, to plant the flag of conquest upon a merlon, when, from the embrasures in front, and from a half-masked battery upon their left flank, formed by an angle of an old embankment, a shower of grape-shot and musket-balls poured upon them with terrible effect, driving them back to the remote intrenchments. Another division of the enemy, under the immediate command of the brave Donop, attacked the fort on the south side at the same time, passed the *abatis*, traversed the fosse or ditch, and some actually leaped the pickets, and mounted the parapet of the redoubt; but the fire of the Americans was so heavy and continuous that they were soon forced back, and driven out with great loss. They retreated precipitately to Haddonfield, under Lieutenant-colonel Linsing, (Donop, and Mingerode, his second in command, being wounded), leaving between three and four hundred of their comrades behind. They were considerably galled, when first retreating, by the American galleys and floating batteries in the river. The conflict was short, but severe. The precise loss of the enemy is not known. Marshall estimates it at four hundred in killed and wounded. Colonel Donop, the commander of the expedition, fell, mortally wounded, at the first fire. After the engagement, while Manduit, the French engineer, who directed the American artillery on the occasion, was out with a detachment, fixing the palisades, he heard a voice among the slain, saying, "Whoever you are, draw me hence." It was the voice of Count Donop. Manduit had him conveyed into the fort, and the next day to Mr. Whitall's, where he attended him until his death, which occurred three days afterward. "It is finishing a noble career early" [he was thirty-seven], said Donop to Manduit, "but I die the victim of my ambition and of the avarice of my sovereign." [39](#) The loss of the Americans within the fort was eight men killed, twenty-nine wounded, and a captain taken prisoner while reconnoitering. The number killed by the bursting of the cannon, mentioned on a preceding page, is not known. So close was the combat at one time, that several Hessians were pierced by the gun-wads of the Americans. [40](#)

The conduct of Lieutenant-colonel Greene [41](#) on this occasion was highly applauded, and November 4 [1777.], Congress ordered the Board of War to present him with an elegant sword. This tribute was given to his family at the close of the contest, when Colonel Greene was no longer living to receive it. He had been basely murdered in his quarters, near Croton River, in Westchester county, New York, by a band of Tories, consisting of about

one hundred and fifty dragoons, under Colonel Delancy, who surprised his post. Colonel Greene fell after his single arm had slain several of his assailants. They attempted to carry him off, but he died upon the road. Major Flagg, a meritorious officer, was killed at the same time; also two subalterns and twenty-seven men were killed or wounded. [42](#)



MONUMENT AT RED BANK. [43](#)

In commemoration of the battle at Red Bank and the valor of Colonel Greene, a monument of blue veined marble, about fifteen feet high, was erected in 1829, just within the northern line of the outworks of Fort Mercer, and within a few feet of the margin of the Delaware. This tribute to the memory of valor and patriotism was made by some New Jersey and Pennsylvania volunteers. While it is a testimony of one of the most noble

traits in human character, it bears an exhibition of the existence of another of the most detestable. In the inscription were the words NEW JERSEY AND PENNSYLVANIA, in a single prominent line. Some Jersey scoundrel almost obliterated the word PENNSYLVANIA; and afterward some Pennsylvania Vandal, in the fierceness of his retaliatory zeal for the credit of his state, disgraced it, so far as insignificance could do it, by obliterating the words NEW JERSEY. The whole line is destroyed; and that marble shaft perpetuates a remembrance of unknown barbarians as well as of honored patriots. [44](#)