



GENERAL EDWARD HAND

*An Extraordinary Lancaster Patriot, Military Officer,
Physician, and Surgeon*

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IRISH BEGINNINGS

General Edward Hand was a physician and a military officer who became one of Lancaster's most illustrious citizens and political leaders. He was born into a privileged Anglican family on December 31, 1744, in Clydruff, a small village just west of Dublin, Ireland. This meant he had certain social advantages, as he was neither an Irish Protestant dissenter, nor a Roman Catholic like most of the population.¹

He attended Trinity College in Dublin where he studied medicine. To meet the certification requirements of the medical guild, he then had to serve either a five-year apprenticeship under a Dublin surgeon, or a term as a surgeon's mate in the British army. Hand chose the latter, and became a surgeon's mate with the Royal Irish 18th Regiment, which was sent to the American colonies.

AMERICA

Arriving in Philadelphia on July 11, 1767, his regiment passed through Lancaster en route to their assigned post at Fort Pitt in the Ohio River Valley. Hand was so impressed with Lancaster and its beautiful environs that he expressed the desire to someday establish a medical practice in the area.²

During his early days in Western Pennsylvania, Hand engaged in friendly discourse with the local Indians, and learned their medical practices and their use of plants and herbs with medicinal value.³ Unfortunately, his low rank made his military experience disagreeable, and he grew resentful and impatient with incompetent and lazy officers. He was also frustrated by foolish orders that compromised his ability to acquire medical supplies from the

local traders. Some of these traders with Lancaster connections later became business associates with whom he also managed lucrative investments and land deals.⁴ He purchased a total of 1,632 acres in Westmoreland County, which was indentured on December 28, 1770.⁵

In 1770, George Washington, then an officer of the British Virginia Militia, and known to the Indians as Caunotarius (Towntaker), visited Fort Pitt. Hand was invited to dinner at Semple's Tavern in the local village, where Washington was the guest of honor. These two gentlemen must have stood out among the others, as in that era they were probably the only two six-footers. Their conversation undoubtedly covered the history of Fort Pitt, which had been France's Fort Duquesne during the British/French and Indian Wars (1754-1763) when Washington fought with the British. The two men bonded, and formed a close relationship that was to last a lifetime. Little did either of them know what the future held for these two great men.⁶



General Edward Hand

In 1772, Hand, with funds he earned from his lucrative land deals on the western front, purchased an ensign's commission and became the fort's supply officer, a coveted position in the British garrison. But with the growing hostilities between the British and the colonists in the eastern cities, the British decided not only to close Fort Pitt, but to begin its demolition. The British refused to leave the fort intact, as "the ungrateful Americans can now fend for themselves against any hostile influences, Indians, or otherwise." As it turned out, the leftover supplies could be bought for 1% of their original value; Hand, in his unique position as

supply officer, made huge profits with his partners.⁷

The 18th Regiment was reassigned to Philadelphia. In protest against passage of the Tea Act in 1773, Samuel Adams and his “infamous” Tea Party boarded three recently docked ships in Boston and dumped hundreds of crates of tea into Boston Harbor, creating a firestorm and further recrimination from the King and his parliament. There was great turmoil in the colonial cities, and Hand witnessed the intense spirit of indignation and the call for liberty among the people in the streets and taverns of Philadelphia. He not only sympathized with the American cause, but to the dismay of his fellow officers, he became quite outspoken in defense of American independence. By now Hand had completed his five-year tour, and in 1774, after the Boston massacre and the closing of Boston Harbor, he sold his ensign’s commission for 400 pounds and terminated all ties to His Majesty’s forces.⁸

LANCASTER

He also had not forgotten Lancaster. A letter of introduction from the Reverend William Smith, the provost of the College of Philadelphia, to the Reverend Mr. Thomas Barton of St. James Episcopal, Lancaster’s Anglican Church, paved the way for a firm connection to the Lancaster community:

Dear Sir...

The Bearer Dr. Hand of the Royal Irish, has some Intention of settling in Lancaster... I am under so many obligations & have so sincere a Regard for the Gentlemen Officers of the Royal Irish & to Dr. Hand in particular that I could not let him go without testifying to you the good character he sustains...whether there may not be Room and Business sufficient to encourage him to settle with you also. Lancaster and its Environs have encouraged from Time to Time half a Score of Doctors of some kind or another. Pray might not two regular-bred and able men be better than all of them.

I am affectionately

Yours & Wm. Smith

Philadelphia March 11th 1774

To Rev. Mr. Barton (sic)⁹

The doctor soon acquired a good reputation, his practice grew quickly, and he also earned a favorable income from his purchases and land investments on the frontier. He also gained favor among the gentry, becoming a close friend of Judge Jasper Yeates,

and through him met his petite and pretty 23-year-old niece, Katharine (Kitty) Ewing (1751-1805). As the daughter of Captain John Ewing (1727-1754) and Sarah Yeates (1731-1823), she came from one of Lancaster’s most prestigious families, and he married her just before she turned 24 in March 1775.¹⁰

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

By then, the hostilities between the Americans and the British government had reached a fever pitch throughout the colonies; there were calls for independence and a cry to take up arms against the growing British oppression. In May 1775 Edward Shippen of Lancaster, the grandfather of Benedict Arnold’s future wife Peggy Shippen, called for a meeting of the leading members of the community to discuss the growing crisis. The county’s freemen pledged their lives and fortunes in support of the rebellion. Men with military experience were called upon to serve as officers, but Hand had been married only three months earlier, and Kitty was already pregnant, so he did not show any immediate inclination to fight. Nonetheless, he responded affirmatively when asked.¹¹

He accepted a commission as lieutenant colonel in June 1775 to serve under the command of Colonel William Thompson in the famous First Battalion Pennsylvania Riflemen. They marched to Boston, where Hand developed a reputation for working directly with his men, a characteristic that endeared him to the soldiers under his command.¹²

As the war progressed, Hand was to become not only one of Washington’s most trusted officers, but one of his ablest and closest friends. Washington regularly sought his counsel and valued his leadership, and Hand was promoted repeatedly. By 1777, he was a brigadier general, making him the youngest general in the Continental Army. Because of his familiarity with the Fort Pitt area and the growing problem the settlers were having with hostile Indians, he was sent there to quell the threat.

Soon after his arrival, an outbreak of smallpox occurred among the troops. Hand, ever the physician, ordered that a hospital be constructed to quarantine and treat the afflicted. To build the hospital, he dedicated six acres of a 331-acre plot of his own land in Westmoreland County, named “Mount Pleasant.”¹³

The “smallpox hospital” was a windowless log building, two stories high with three rooms on

each floor, that was defended by as many as ten surrounding blockhouses (structures of heavy timber, pierced by gun ports).¹⁴ Although there were other facilities used as hospitals during the war, it may well have been among the first hospitals that was constructed for that purpose in America. Today, a plaque on the site where Hand commanded his brigade reads: "Fort Hand, 1777-1779, the only Fort erected in Westmoreland County by the Continental Congress. Blockhouse surrounded by Stockade with wall guns."¹⁵

Under his command at Fort Pitt was the Indian agent George Morgan (1743-1810), an expert on Indian affairs, transportation routes, and supplies. He was the brother of Dr. John Morgan, the founder of America's first medical school in Philadelphia, who was himself soon going to cross Hand's path. After the war, George and his brother John acquired nearly 9,000 acres of land in Western Pennsylvania.¹⁶

After a brief visit in the late summer of 1778 with Kitty and his family in Lancaster, he was reassigned to command troops in the Albany area. By February 1779, Hand had joined forces with the armies under Generals Sullivan & Clinton, resulting in the defeat of the British and the Six Nations Indians in Western New York.¹⁷

WASHINGTON'S RIGHT "HAND"

Meanwhile, a scandal involving Dr. William Shippen Jr. took front stage, and Washington called on Hand with his medical background and administrative skills to handle the matter. The aforementioned Dr. John Morgan was the director general of hospitals east of the Hudson River, and - after October 1776 - Shippen was the director general of hospitals west of the Hudson. There was a rift between the two, and Shippen used his role to manipulate circumstances to embarrass Morgan, which heightened their hostility.

Morgan, who was considered a good doctor and an exacting administrator, had treated many of his subordinates unkindly, and alienated many of them. Unfortunately for Morgan, Congress had intervened on Shippen's side, perhaps inappropriately, and forced Morgan's dismissal in April 1777.¹⁸ Shippen was then appointed director of all the hospitals of the Continental Army, but his gross mismanagement led to accusations of misappropriating funds and supplies intended for the care of wounded soldiers. Shippen also failed to report the

deaths of soldiers, apparently to lessen his blame for any errors.

Hand presided over Shippen's court martial from March-July 1780. The trial ended with an acquittal on a technicality, but although Hand considered himself a friend of Shippen's Lancaster relatives, he was not happy with this outcome.¹⁹

General Hand had become Washington's close confidant and aide, and when Washington reshuffled his administrative staff, he made Hand his adjutant general. This caused a temporary rift between Washington and his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton, who felt disappointed, if not slighted. Although Hand's appointment was delayed until Congress debated and approved his selection in January 1781, he remained at Washington's side in this position until the British surrender at Yorktown on October 19, 1781. He was rewarded for his distinguished service by being promoted to the rank of major general by brevet (an honor bestowed without commensurate pay).

After the final peace treaty was signed in Paris on September 3, 1783, Hand returned to Lancaster with Kitty and his family. The following letter from George Washington, dated January 14, 1784, underscores his high regard for Hand:

Dear Sir, When I left Philadelphia I hoped to have had the pleasure of ... expressing to you personally, amongst the last acts of my Official life, my entire approbation of your public conduct, particularly in the execution of the important duties of Adjutant General.

My dear Sir, Your real friend & "Most Obedient Servant

Go. Washington

The Hon "Genl Hand" sic^{20,21}

FAMILY MAN

During his time in the military, Hand visited home several times, and during those years he fathered three daughters (Sarah, 1775-1850, Dorothy, 1777-1862, Katharine, 1779-1791), and one son (John, 1782-1807).²² John was born after the war in Philadelphia, in the temporary house on Spruce Street where Hand's family then resided. Ironically, it was Dr. William Shippen who attended on the afternoon of March 2 to deliver what Hand described as "a chopping boy."²³



Rock Ford Plantation, located along the Conestoga River on Lancaster's south side, is the historic 18th century home of General Edward Hand, adjutant general to George Washington during the American Revolution. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

A second son Jasper was born in 1784, after they had moved back to Lancaster in 1783. Another daughter Mary was born in 1786 and lived till 1880 (age 94), though she never married.

The arrival of one more daughter Margret (1789-1790), and then one more son, Edward (1792-1812), spurred Hand to complete his dream home, Rock Ford, in 1793. It still stands along the Conestoga River on Lancaster's south side, where it is a much loved and celebrated historical landmark that is maintained in fine condition by a nonprofit foundation.

Like so many families during that era, only three of Hand's children survived past their 20s. Tragically, their son John committed suicide in 1807 at age 25, five years after his father died, and three years after his mother. Though Sarah married Samuel Bethel of Columbia, she had no children. The only Hand grandchildren resulted from the marriage of Dorothy (1777-1862) to Edward Brien (1769-1816). Their great-granddaughter, Catherine Brien Rogers, married Dr. John L. Atlee Jr. (1830-1885).²⁴

MEDICAL PRACTITIONER

Hand had permanently returned to Lancaster with Kitty and his family after the Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783. He resumed his medical practice, and as a physician, he was described as "skillful in diagnosis and surgery and a pioneer in smallpox inoculations and in hospital quarantines."²⁵

Another aspect of Hand's medical career was his

mentoring of Edwin Atlee, the brilliant youngest son of William August Atlee, an intense patriot and a chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. When William Atlee died in 1793, Edwin was just 15. The teenager came to live with the Hands, and over the next five years he learned medicine from Dr. Hand. He then went on to study at Dickinson College, where he earned a master's degree, excelled in music, and became proficient in Latin.²⁶ He practiced medicine for a time in Columbia before he acquired his medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania in 1804, after which he settled in Philadelphia and practiced successfully there.

CIVIC LEADER

Hand served in multiple positions at the federal, state and local levels. A Federalist, he was a member of the Continental Congress in 1784 and 1785, appointed major general of the Provisional Army, and inducted as one of the original members of the highly prestigious "Order of Cincinnati." He was a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly from 1785-1786, and served as a member of the Pennsylvania Constitution Convention of 1789-1790. He was also appointed as Lancaster's chief burgess (mayor).²⁷

Hand was known to be compassionate and sensitive to the needs of the poor, and he treated many patients without charge.²⁵ He was among the community leaders calling for "an act to provide for the erection of houses for the employment and support of the Poor in Counties of Chester and Lancaster." The act required the election of six reputable citizens to serve as directors, and Hand was among those elected.²⁸

The resulting Lancaster Almshouse and Hospital was built of stone and still stands. The County Home, as it came to be called, served the needs of the poor for more than 150 years. The Lancaster City and County Medical Society took unprecedented action through the courts to assure that this structure would be preserved. A new contiguous extended care facility, built in the early 1960s and now called Conestoga View, came under private ownership in 2005.

LAST YEARS

After Washington died in December 1799, Hand lost much of his influence. In 1801 Thomas Jefferson was elected president, and under the new Republican administration Hand had to settle outstanding accounts from his time as inspector of

customs, which caused him serious financial distress.

In 1802 Hand became ill with an intestinal disorder described as cholera morbus, a cholera-like illness with symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea. There was no cholera in the United States at the time, and he died in less than one day, leaving questions as to the exact cause of his death. Perhaps he self-medicated, thinking that he had been sickened by a toxin. Common purgatives that were used in

such circumstances included mercurial drugs such as calomel or Hamilton's worm-destroying lozenges, any of which could have hastened his death from dehydration or electrolyte imbalance.²⁹

He died at Rock Ford in September 1802 before he could settle his affairs, and is buried on the grounds of Lancaster's St. James Episcopal Church at the corner of Duke and Orange streets, just four blocks from Lancaster General Hospital.³⁰

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