

BUT IS IT HISTORY?

(How Cranford Got Its Name and Its Place in the American Revolution)

By Robert Fridlington

Most of us take a casual approach to our local history. We simply do not use the same standards of scholarship that we apply in other areas of historical study. If a story is a good one, we suspend critical judgment and brush aside objections, convincing ourselves that it has to be true. Because of this, almost anything goes. And once the story is in print, it is virtually impossible to lay it to rest. It just gets repeated again and again. The result is that through retelling local legends and local folklore are transformed into local history.

This is not to say that we don't take local history seriously. Quite the contrary. Many embrace it with an evangelical fervor. One can criticize national figures and events with impunity; but question some local legend (Was that house really a stop on the Underground Railroad?) and you must be prepared to dodge brickbats. So if you are a brickbat thrower, get ready.

Probably the best local example of legend disguised as history is the often repeated and widely held belief that Cranford was at one time called Crane's Ford. This story has been around a long, long time but it has been challenged enough in the last few years so that it appears to be losing ground, although not without a fight.

Actually, at the time of the American Revolution, the hamlet that existed near the present center of Cranford was known as Crane's Mills. A few years later, it was called Craneville, although it is possible that Crane's Mills and Craneville were names used at the same time in the early nineteenth century to refer to different neighborhoods in the area. In any event, the village became Craneville.

The Story of how Craneville got its name is another case in point. This tale first appeared in W. Woodward Clayton's History of Union and Middlesex Counties, published in 1882. Here is what Clayton had to say:

“In the year 1849, the residence of Mr. Josiah Crane, Sr., was visited on the 4th of July by some Sabbath-school children from Westfield. They spent a pleasant day rambling along the riverbanks, fishing, etc. Mr. Crane, in his hospitable manner, doing all in his power to make it pleasant for them.... Before the children left for their homes some of them marked with chalk on an old building near the tract [sic] in large letters the name of “Cranesville,” and such it remained for years, until the present commodious depot was built in 1869, and the name was changed to Cranford.”

Where Clayton got this story is anybody's guess, but it has been repeated many times since. Writing nearly sixty years ago, William Bragdon in his Cranford: An Outline History (1937) said that Clayton's story had become a local legend, “much like the cherry tree tale of George Washington.” And “as a matter of fact, no history of Cranford is satisfying without its introduction.” It might be pointed out that the “Cranesville” of Clayton became “Craneville” in the subsequent versions, which goes to show that even the inventors of legends can make mistakes.

Bragdon takes issue with Clayton, but he does so rather gently, merely saying, “In fact, the first tickets issued by the railroad bore the name “Craneville”. Bragdon does not say when this was, but he clearly means it was before 1849. Actually, as Bragdon knew, the name Craneville was in use at least as early as 1801, nearly half a century before the children were supposed to have chalked up the sign.

In Cranford New Jersey Illustrated (1904), Louie E. Hendrickson relates an interesting tale about the old Miller homestead on Elizabeth Avenue. According to Hendrickson, General Lafayette dined upon one occasion with the Millers and drank from the old well....”. Although this story does not seem to have been picked up by later writers it does illustrate the uncritical approach to local history.

What, I wonder, was Lafayette doing in Crane’s Mills (Cranford)? Do any primary sources verify his visit? I suppose that he might have been in this area in May or June, 1780. He had just returned from France, and there were American troops stationed at Crane’s Mills during this time. There is, however, a record of the officers who were in command at Crane’s Mills and of those who were there on temporary duty. Lafayette’s name is not among them. And I doubt that he dropped in just to sample the local cuisine. If he was here at some time, there has to be more to the story. If he was not, one must wonder how the tale got started.

This story raises another intriguing question. Why are there no tales concerning prominent figures who definitely were here during the Revolution, people such as General William Irvine or Lord Stirling? Why are there no stories concerning the British prisoners-of-war who were held at Crane’s Mills or of the group of American officers who planned the disastrous raid on Staten Island in 1780?

Alexander Hamilton, although young, was well known in this area. He had lived nearby and had gone to school in Elizabethtown. Less than ten years after he was sent to Crane’s Mills by Washington, he became the most powerful figure in the new American government next to the President. His stay here was brief, but wouldn’t you think someone would have remembered it and passed the story along? Didn’t he drink from anyone’s well?

Another story that has made the rounds is the one about a revolutionary war hospital that built in the area of present-day Fairview Cemetery. This story can be traced directly to Charles A. Philhower’s History of the Town of Westfield...(1923). Philhower was told by Mr. Oliver Pierson that a “Revolutionary hospital” had been located on a farm belonging to his father, Sylvanus Pierson. Sylvanus was presumably the source of this information. Oliver Pierson was quite specific as to the hospital’s location and he even remembered seeing evidence of its foundation when he was a boy.

How accurate was Pierson’s story? Was there really a hospital there? Who knows? There is no independent record of its existence. The fact that there was a foundation suggests a permanent structure, something that an army constantly on the move did not build. Besides, not much care was lavished on hospitals, as they were the places where people were sent when they were not expected to recover. Remember at Morristown, the hospitals were log huts.

Of course, a permanent building of some kind could have been used as a temporary hospital but why in such a remote area? Who were the patients? Why and when were they there? None of these questions were addressed by Philhower, but they have apparently bothered at least one subsequent writer, who felt free to elaborate on the original information. He speaks of a “make-shift military hospital” and he gives the year as 1777. Thus are the legends polished up.

There are a hatful of “traditions” attached to the William-Droescher Mill. One of them is that the mill produced blankets for the Patriot Army during the American Revolution. Is there any basis for this? I do not know much about the development of technology and nothing at all about textiles, but I thought that almost all eighteenth century weaving was done on hand looms. Would blankets, then, be made at a mill set far out in the country? Maybe, but I am not persuaded.

There are many other stories about Cranford’s past that could be included here, but these are probably enough for an initial list. I do, however, have one last question: Does anyone know the earliest authenticated use of “Crane’s Ford” as a place name?