

The Chaplain and the Camp Followers at Fort Halifax

An army may at times march many miles and have little to eat but somehow finds a way to march on. Just as orders and protocol are parts of army life in the 18th century, part of the army was also preaching and providing guidance for all men.

During the French and Indian War, the Pennsylvania Provincial officers included a Chaplain appointed to the 3rd Battalion Pennsylvania Regiment. His name was Charles Beatty. His 1756 journal contains a great insight into incidents happening before, during, and after the building of Fort Halifax. He joined the Regiment at Harris's Ferry (Fort Hunter) on Monday, May 3, 1756. He writes, "Felt my need of the Divine presence to be with me in my dangerous or at least difficult undertaking."

To be sure this journey from Hunter to Halifax and beyond would indeed be fraught with possible danger.

On Sunday, June 6, 1756, Rev. Beatty arrives at the Camp at Armstrong's and the very next day the troops begin to fell timber for what Gov. Morris named Ft. Halifax.

Rev. Beatty's stay was marred by troop desertion and, in some cases, mutiny. Also, there was dissention among the officers toward their Col. William Clapham. Col. Clapham was a person who was not very well liked and seemed to have a selfish outlook on what was better for him, not the Regiment.

Then comes Thursday, July 1, 1756. Beatty writes, "Up early to prepare for marching. Desired the Colonel to leave the women behind, according to his promise, especially those of bad character. Accordingly, they were ordered to be paraded, and the major had orders to leave such as he saw fit behind; but when this came to be done, one of the officers pleaded for one, and another for another saying that they could wash, etc., so that few were left behind of a bad character, and these would not stay, but followed us that night and kept with us."

As the troops were readying to leave for Shamokin, Beatty felt the camp followers should stay behind. Camp followers in the 18th century were not like the ladies who travelled with the troops during the Civil War. Most were very valuable to the army and many were wives of the men. These ladies were given half rations and any children were given quarter rations because they provided many important tasks such as washing, sewing, and tending to the ill.

Beatty asked that Col. Clapham handle this but Clapham handed it down to his next in command, Major James Burd. Major Burd had to now get involved in the process and had the women paraded in front of him and asked pertinent questions of his own. That, added with comments from other officers, was convincing enough so that all the women went on the march to Shamokin. Beatty does not record his thoughts but surely must have been a bit perplexed.

This is just one example of some of the incidents that were taking place at Fort Halifax in 1756.