How the Quaker State took a lead in the formation of the first regular United States Army is told here by the Chief of the Organizational History and Honors Branch of the Office of the Chief of Military History. Dr. Mahon, a graduate of Swarthmore College, is a captain in the Army Reserve and associate editor of Military Affairs.

PENNSYLVANIA AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE REGULAR ARMY

By John K. Mahon*

Professional historians have seldom touched the history of the United States Army. As a result, this rich field has been the exclusive province of retired officers. These, seeing American history as one long error in military policy, have usually belabored Congress without bothering to inquire into the conditions which made that body, at any given time, behave as it did.¹

The present study is, in part, an attempt to re-examine one of Congress' most ridiculed actions concerning the military. It is focused on two years, 1783 and 1784, when the last elements of the Continental Army were on their way out of existence, and when the first American military peace establishment developed. It points out why that particular establishment, and not some other, came into being; and describes one or two of its least known uses. The post-Revolutionary force, with which we will deal, is the first in the Regular Army having continuity into the present.² (It is now the Third Infantry Regiment.) Pennsylvania's relationship to its beginnings will become apparent as we progress.

It is one of the wonders of our history that most of the Conti-

---

¹Paper read at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Lancaster, October 24, 1953.
²The best example is Emory Upton, Military Policy of the United States (Wash., 1907).
³There is one company, Battery D, 5th Field Artillery, which has an official lineage beginning with the Revolution, but its claim to this origin does not rest on the grounds that a body of men from the Continental Army actually remained in service after 1785.
nentals—who were owed a year's wages—being furloughed on June 13, 1783, trudged off home without pay and without even written promises to pay. Thus harmlessly did the Revolutionary army fade away for all time as a force in politics and in war.\(^3\) Even after the June exodus there were still more than 1,000 Continentals remaining in service. They were organized into units, and these were the logical corps upon which to found a military peace establishment, if there was to be one.

Certain factors, however, disqualified them. To begin with, the Confederation had no means to pay them their year’s wages; so there was always a fear that they might mutiny. The fear was realized when on June 19 a small body of Pennsylvania recruits had demonstrated against the Congress in Philadelphia. This small mutiny did not truly represent the spirit of the Continentals but, when lumped with others that had occurred since 1781, and when considered by minds full of an urgent fear of standing armies, it hurt the chances of the extant outfits to be retained.\(^4\)

Another unfavorable characteristic the remaining Continentals displayed was their high cost. A majority of them had been raised in Massachusetts and New Hampshire under uncommon conditions. Massachusetts men, for example, drew \(\$8\ 1/3\) instead of the usual continental rate of \(\$4\ 1/4\) a month.\(^5\) The state paid the difference. Whoever paid, it was almost certain that such high-priced soldiers would be replaced by cheaper ones when the time came.

By far the strongest disqualifying factor was their entanglement in the tension between Massachusetts and New York over the land along the shores of Lakes Erie and Ontario. The immediate irritant was a knowledge that some troops would soon have to take over the British forts at Oswego and Niagara in disputed territory. The only Continental command available was composed of men from Massachusetts, men whom the New Yorkers would not, under any circumstance, permit to enter those garrisons.\(^6\)

\(^3\) Merrill Jensen, _The New Nation, 1781-1789_ (N. Y., 1950), 82.


\(^5\) Capt. John Doughty to Maj. Nicholas Fish, 14 July 1785, MS., transcripts of certain papers of Nicholas Fish, Ofc., Chief of Military History, Wash., D. C.; Rept. of Comm., 6 Apr. 1784, _Journals of the Continental Congress_, XXVI, 202 (hereafter referred to as \textit{JCC}).

\(^6\) James Monroe to Gov. of Va., 11 June 1784, Edmund C. Burnett, ed., _Letters of Members of the Continental Congress_, 8 vols. (Wash., 1921-1936), VII, 552. This letter gives a good account of the Mass.-N. Y. troubles. Also
Be it remembered that in May, 1783, British troops still occupied, not only Oswego and Niagara, but all the western posts from which England had for decades controlled the fur trade. They also lingered in New York town. Americans, however, believed that as soon as there was official peace, the redcoats would depart. In order to be prepared, the Continental legislators—at the rare times when delegates from nine states could be assembled—faced the need, long before ratification, to provide garrisons for the western forts. This brought them to consider a military peace establishment.

A sympathetic committee, headed by Alexander Hamilton, went to work. Of the five members, one, James Wilson, was from Pennsylvania. This group made a report on September 10, 1783. There should be, the report said, four regiments of infantry, one of artillery, and a corps of engineers. This meant a peace establishment of nearly three thousand, which was a heavy expense for an insolvent confederation and, according to some delegates, a dangerous menace to liberty. The record is silent as to whether or not the five practical committeeemen expected their recommendation to be adopted; but, in the light of what was enacted later, it certainly had no chance. Be that as it may, there was a warm debate on the proposal in October (the details of which are lost), but not a company resulted. 7

Added to the need to garrison the western posts was another vital factor pressing toward some sort of army. This was the relationship with the Indians northwest of the Ohio River. Western exigencies, however, did not weigh heavily with some of the states. David Howell, for example, said that Rhode Island was not willing to build a chain of forts to defend western Virginia on land which ought to belong to the United States anyway, or to protect New York in the fur trade. These economic opinions were buttressed by constitutional objections to a national army in peacetime. Here was the well-rooted fear of a standing army re-expressed. If Congress had the power to raise five hundred in time of peace, it could raise five thousand as well; then, with such a force, begin to bully the states. 8 The delegates from Massachusetts endorsed

---

7 Their proposals given in detail, *ibid.*, XXV, 722.
8 David Howell to Thomas C. Hazard, 26 Aug. 1783, Burnett, *op. cit.*, VIII, 824.
these views, and added to them a codicil: that the militias of the several states were the only military establishment necessary.\(^9\)

New York offered her own interpretation of what was constitutional and suitable. Although not willing for Massachusetts Continentals to garrison Oswego and Niagara, that principality saw an easy solution. Congress need only set the size of the contingent for that duty, and New York would raise it. There was no doubt, the delegates said, that their sovereign had the right under the Articles of Confederation to provide those garrisons. Congress' only duty in the matter was to say how many New York soldiers were to be raised.\(^10\)

There was precedent for the action New York requested. On October 3, 1783, Congress had given Virginia permission to keep two ships of war and twenty-five soldiers in peacetime.\(^11\) The difference was that Virginia's little array offended no one, whereas Massachusetts stood to be injured if New York placed a corps in the disputed area. For her part, the Bay State was perfectly willing to have the Continental troops at West Point move into Oswego and Niagara. This would not only put Massachusetts men into the forts, but would also relieve the state of paying half the soldier's wages.\(^12\) The middle and southern states, for their part, refused to lighten this expense unless the Bay State would, in return, agree to vote for some sort of peace establishment.\(^13\)

A dangerous temper hung about the preparations to take the forts over from the British. New York hinted that she would raise troops whether Congress authorized them or not. Ephraim Paine, a delegate to the Continental Congress, wrote to Governor Clinton, "High time for our State to tak [sic] the same measures as though it was Sorounded [sic] with open and avowed Enemies." He requested Clinton to say whether or not delegates should protract the debates until New York had had time to move her own troops into the forts.\(^14\) With such feeling at work, it was obvious that the

---

\(^{9}\) As an example see motion made by Gerry and Dana of Mass., 25 May 1784, *JCC*, XXVI, 433.

\(^{10}\) *Ibid.*, XXVII, 380.


\(^{14}\) 29 Apr. 1784, *ibid.*, VIII, 504, 505.
remaining Continentals could not be used. From the vantage point of nearly two centuries this irony stands out: the whole controversy was baseless, since the British did not give up the western posts for another twelve years.

What was the position of Pennsylvania toward a military peace establishment? To give an answer, it is necessary to flash backwards into state politics. The radical party, which had sponsored the constitution of 1776, had, in 1782, lost control of the organs of state power. This was signalized by the election of John Dickinson as president of the Supreme Executive Council. Colonel Francis Johnston called the change a political revolution. It was, he said, accompanied by a "party rage" and an "inordinate thirst" after power. He was not sure that the shift would help the army which seemed to be considered "the fagg end of creation." 15

The fact is that a peace establishment was not a point of conflict between the principal state parties. The newspapers gave very little space to military affairs, and political leaders did not declaim about them. As a result, in all her actions the state quietly supported a strong peace establishment. Here Pennsylvania took a position beside the other middle and southern states. There were good reasons! For one, the old Quaker clique—against armies on religious grounds—had lost control early in the Revolution. 16 For another, an extensive part of the state lay in the area to be taken over from the British and wrested away from the Indians. Help from the Confederation would be not only welcome but absolutely necessary. Moreover, since 1776 the western section had grown vocal in the government, and strong personalities were representing it in the Supreme Executive Council.

Not the weakest of the factors in Pennsylvania favoring a respectable peace establishment was the lure of western land. Even while the report of Hamilton's committee on a strong corps was being debated, Congress received a request from the Keystone state to hurry a powwow with the Indians so that agents of the state could try to buy land from them. 17 The Revolutionary officers


from Pennsylvania had a vital interest in the western lands, for both Congress and the state had promised to reward them with tracts. Most of the men who held high state office were veterans; among them Generals James Ewing, Vice President of the Supreme Executive Council, Anthony Wayne, a delegate to the General Assembly, Thomas Mifflin, President of Congress, and Edward Hand, a member of the Continental Congress. It was clear to them that a decent army would help win and hold the lands in which they were interested.

Still more important to Pennsylvania was the need to settle affairs with the Northwest Indians. The Confederation now had to assume duties that the mother country had borne before. This called for councils with the principal tribes. If the Continental Congress did not arrange them, Pennsylvania, and some of the other states, would do so, the Articles to the contrary notwithstanding. Indian powwows required uniformed soldiers, not only for protection but to gratify the redman's love of display.

The need to make haste in Indian affairs, coupled with that to provide for the western posts, forced Congress to come to grips with the explosive peace-establishment issue. Although the problem had been brought up, tabled, and brought up again and again during the previous year, it was so controversial that no settlement could be obtained until the very last day of the session in the summer of 1784.

The greatest obstacle was the opposition of New England to any kind of establishment. That region was the seat of the traditional fear of a standing army and, conversely, of the strength of the militia. In addition, Massachusetts was bargaining hard to be relieved of the extra pay she contributed to the wages of the remaining Continentals. Finally, the Bay State interpreted the Articles to say that the Confederation had not the power to requisition soldiers from the states, but only the right to request them.

The first device used to gain New England support was employment of the term militia in the Resolve. When it came to the actual raising of men, the states bypassed the militia and relied on

18 Hugh Williamson to James Duane, 8 June 1784; id. to Gov. of N. C., 5 July 1784; id. to id., 30 Sep. 1784, Burnett, op. cit., VII, 546, 563, 594.
20 JCC, XXVII, 433.
volunteer enlistments. As an additional concession, the middle and southern states did not wrangle over the antagonistic words "requisition" and "request." Lastly, the Confederation dismissed most of the Continentals, and then relieved Massachusetts and New Hampshire of responsibility for half the pay of the few high priced artillerymen who remained.

It was on June 2 that Congress ordered the residue of the Continental Army discharged, except for fifty-eight men at West Point and twenty-six at Pittsburgh, to guard the public stores. A peace establishment followed on the next day! Almost its only virtue in the eyes of the delegates from the middle and southern states was that "The inefficacy and expense of [it might] probably give rise to better ones." Nevertheless, in consequence of the concessions made to New England, the ballot totaled nine Yeas and two Nays. Disgruntled at being refused the right to raise a state corps, New York registered one of the Nays as did New Jersey, whose delegates believed that the Resolve violated the militia provisions of the Jersey constitution.

The force which Congress created by means of broad compromise was remarkable for its small size and for its temporary character. It consisted of one regiment of 700 enlisted men, properly officered, arranged in eight companies of infantry and two of artillery. The men were to enlist for just one year, and to come from the militias of four of the states as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The size of the detachments was based on the white population within each state. On account of supplying the most men, Pennsylvania was allotted the commanding officer, a lieutenant colonel. Connecticut and New York received one major each, while the

---

21 See Act of Gen. Assembly of Penna., 11 Aug. 1784; also Act of N. J. Gen. Assembly, 17 Aug. 1784. These state the manner of raising the troops.
22 Williamson to Gov. of N. C., 30 Sep. 1784, Burnett, op. cit., VII, 594.
23 JCC, XXVII, 538-540.
24 Articles of Conf., IX, Paragraph 5.
company officers went to the four states in proportion to the size of their detachments.²⁵

Why were those four states selected from the thirteen? Although the announced reason was proximity to the zone of troop use, New Jersey and Connecticut, with quotas, were no closer than Massachusetts and Virginia with none. Moreover, they had not as many people from whom to draw soldiers. Since Massachusetts was loud against a standing army, the legislators may have thought it futile to ask her for men. As for Virginia, which was not against an establishment, she was excused, perhaps, on account of her contribution to the common defense through maintaining the two ships of war and the twenty-five soldiers mentioned earlier.

The General Assembly of Pennsylvania was recessed when Congress constituted the peace establishment, but the need for troops seemed so urgent that the Assembly met in special session on July 20. The delegates showed no sympathy for the tensions which rent Congress. It had been perfectly apparent, they said, before the Continental Army was disbanded that the frontier posts would have to be manned, the borders protected, and the public stores guarded. Hence the occasion should not have been allowed to arise wherein a special session was necessary.²⁶ Having thus "blown off steam" on August 11, they authorized the quota requested, making it clear that the Confederation was to foot the bills.

When all arrangements were completed the Supreme Executive Council had the appointing of four captains, three lieutenants, three ensigns, a surgeon, and a surgeon's mate, besides the lieutenant colonel. It made them on August 13, 1784.²⁷ There must have been politics involved, but the preserved documents only hint at it. The lieutenant colonelcy fell to Josiah Harmar, thirty-one years old, a regimental commander during the late war. Harmar had been with the Pennsylvania Continentals in South Carolina as late as November, 1783. Hardly had he returned home when he became Thomas Mifflin's personal secretary (Mifflin was President of the Continental Congress), and was whisked off to England with one copy of the ratified treaty of peace. In his absence,

²⁵ JCC, XXVII, 524, 538-540.
Mifflin urged him for the new command. As a result, Harmar had been back from his ocean voyage but six days when he was chosen. His position was one many men would have welcomed. Times were lean and the $66.00 a month, plus forage, plus $11.00 ration allowance, was good pay, even if slow in coming. What is more, there was prestige in the job. No less a person that Horatio Gates saw that it was merely a beginning: "Permit me to felicitate you and your brother officers," he wrote, "upon this partial resurrection of the American Army."

The first duty of the officers was to recruit the men they were to command. Harmar set up his camp on the "Western Heights of the Schuylkill" and secured most of his men around Philadelphia. The enrollees had to sign a statement acknowledging that they had volunteered in the Pennsylvania troops and, at the same time, swearing to be faithful to the United States. Each man got $2.00 advance on his wages from the Confederation, and $1.00 bounty from the state. Although a few absconded with their $3.00, recruiting progressed well; indeed, by September 25 there were 256 men on the rolls. Their quality can only be approached through a later list of deserters. Out of 60, 19 were born in Ireland, 7 in Germany, 2 in England, and 2 in Scotland. The youngest was seventeen, the oldest thirty-nine. Thirty-one listed themselves as laborers without special skills.

Harmar designated his command "The First American Regiment." Although it was primarily national in character, the colonel continued to report to President Dickinson as well as to Congress. The boundary line between the power of the state and that of the Confederation was not well defined; nor were the responsibilities of each toward the new Regiment. Although supplies were supposed to come from Congress, sometimes Harmar had to appeal to his home state for aid in securing them. As a result, he kept up his correspondence with both sovereigns. The reports to Dickinson, of course, related only to the Pennsylvania contingent.

28 General Mifflin's petition in favor of Harmar, dated 17 July 1784, is in the Harmar Papers, loc. cit.
29 Gates to Harmar, 28 Sep. 1784, Harmar Papers, loc. cit.
30 Receipts from each of the Captains for $140 are in the Harmar Papers. For Pennsylvania's bonus see Pennsylvania General Assembly, Minutes, 1784, 25 Sep. 1784, 353.
32 Ibid., 388.
Colonel Harmar always thought of his corps as a regiment, and prepared himself by reading European treatises to use it as such. Actually he saw no portion of it during the first year except the Pennsylvania detachment. Joseph Carleton, Secretary in the War Office, sent the New Jersey corps—which recruited at the same time as Pennsylvania’s—to Ft. Stanwix to assist the Indian commissioners in that quarter, and did not pass the order through the colonel. Nevertheless, Derick Lane, commanding the Jersey troops, faithfully reported to his commander by mail, and Harmar included Lane’s figures in his returns to Congress. As for the other two states with quotas, Connecticut raised her men too late to help with the Indian powwows of 1784, so they were discharged early in April 1785. New York—denied the right to raise her own troops—refused to comply, and did not recruit a single man.

Carleton sent the Pennsylvania soldiers to Fort Pitt, on account of an important council to be held in the area with the Wyandot, Chippewa, Delaware, and Ottawa tribes. The artillery, and Walter Finney’s company of infantry got there on October 18; David Ziegler’s and William McCurdy’s on October 29. Thus, but two months after the first day of recruiting, the Pennsylvania contingent was fully raised and equipped, and had marched nearly four hundred miles on foot to the western limits of the state.

Because of the lateness of the season, the commissioners decided to hold the meeting close to Pitt, so that it was necessary for the corps to move thirty miles down the Ohio River and repair old Fort McIntosh (where the town of Beaver, Pennsylvania, now stands). The heavy labor of transport and building fell on the common soldiers. Their chief solace was liquor, which usually got them into trouble. John Robert Shaw, one of the few to leave a written record, told how four drunken soldiers looted a store and knocked down the owner. For this exploit each got a hundred lashes, which “... they bore ... with a fortitude worthy of a better cause.” Even the officers sometimes fell a prey. Celebrating Christmas, Captain Thomas Douglas of the artillery, had his

---

33 Derick Lane to Harmar, 10 Sep. 1784, Harmar Papers, loc. cit. There are numerous letters from Lane to his Commanding Officer in these papers.
34 Jos. Carleton to id., 17 Dec. 1784, ibid.
35 Harmar to Dickinson, 5 Dec. 1784, Butterfield, op. cit., 46.
36 John W. Harpster, Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh, 1938), 162 ff.
men haul a cannon into the parade ground in the dead of night and fire salute after salute. Harmar was not there, and Douglas would not stop when ordered to do so by the senior captain.

The commissioners, abetted by the panoply of the Pennsylvania corps, concluded a treaty on January 21, 1785. It extinguished the last Indian claim to land within the borders of the state. This work finished, the troops could turn to other duties. One was to guard the line of the Ohio with a chain of forts. Another was to try to keep squatters off the land belonging to the Confederation. Since migrants were pouring down the river, the latter was well nigh impossible. Believing that ownership ought to go with occupancy, the newcomers did not trouble themselves about title. As a result, the Pennsylvania detachment had the nasty task of evicting many of them and burning their improvements.

The ugliness of the job was partially relieved by the personal interest which the officers had in the land. This interest stemmed from the fact that Pennsylvania had earmarked all the ground between the Ohio River and the western boundary of the state for her soldiers. Determined to keep that tract clear, Harmar evicted the settlers between Pitt and Fort McIntosh, although, by his own statement, to do so was not one of his duties as commander of the United States troops.3

Acting for the United States as early as February, 1785, he began sending parties down the river, beyond Pennsylvania, to dispossess squatters. These parties burned as many as forty cabins on one foray. Calloused though the officers were to rough life, the plight of the settlers sometimes moved them to grant quarter. For example, finding one family with a child lying near death from snakebite, Ensign Ebenezer Denny allowed it thirty days to clear out. Also, although their orders were to burn the crops, the soldiers usually left these standing if the owners promised to evacuate the fields once the grain was harvested. For their part, the settlers, in the presence of uniformed soldiers, were very meek; most of them moved when ordered.38 But no soldier dared move across the country alone or go unarmed.

Josiah Harmar was in a key position regarding the land, and

---

3 Harman to Dickinson, 1 May 1785, Butterfield, op. cit., 61.
38 Addresses from settlers, dated 5 and 8 Apr. 1785; John Armstrong to Harmar, 12 Apr. 1785; E. Denny to id., 23 Aug. 1785; John Doughty to id., 30 Nov. 1785, MSS., Harman Papers, loc. cit.
his powerful friends knew it. General William Irvine regretted that people were preempting the choice pieces. He represented to the colonel that it was not incompatible with his official responsibilities to keep a look out for good spots. “I need not tell you,” he added, “that these hints should not reach beyond yourself.” About the same time, Harmar’s benefactor, General Mifflin, wrote in a tone which indicated that he expected favor for favor. He asked the colonel’s assistance for a friend who was interested in land close to Fort Pitt. In spite of these and other appeals for special consideration, there is no evidence that Harmar used his position for the advantage of his friends, or for his own.

During the first few months of its life, as we have seen, the tiny forerunner of the Regular Army was occupied with organizing itself, with assisting at Indian treaties and with attempting to keep the public land clear of squatters. It was not, fortunately, called upon to fight. Of interest to Pennsylvanians is the fact that seventy percent of the whole force came from Pennsylvania.

Problems concerning the land, the Indians, squatters, surveying, and taking over the western posts from the British, grew and grew. In consequence, it was necessary to continue the Regular Army beyond its one-year enlistment. An important step was taken in early April, 1785, when the same-sized corps as in 1784 was authorized with the same-sized detachments from the same states. This time the term was for three years instead of one! Why Congress—which ten months before had strained over enrolling men for just one year—was so soon willing to engage them for three, is a fascinating question. But there is not space to deal with it here. There only remains to say that Pennsylvania continued as predominant in the Regular Army in 1785, and for some years thereafter, as it had been in 1784.

Irvine to Harmar, 31 May 1785, ibid.
7 May 1785, ibid.