

Fort Rice

Fort Rice was a small Revolutionary War stronghold built between 1779 and 1780 by the German Regiment of Maryland and Pennsylvania, the first ethnically based unit in the American military. The fort was built to protect the inhabitants of Northumberland County from Native American and British attacks. Regulars of the Eleventh Pennsylvania Regiment had been stationed loosely throughout the area to bolster the defense provided by the unreliable militia of the county, but they were called up to join Major General John Sullivan's campaign in 1779. In July of that year, while the Continental soldiers were gone, the area's wooden fort—Fort Freeland—was burned after a war party surrounded it and forced the people inside to surrender.¹ As a response to the increased violence, the German Regiment was sent in to reinforce the militia and to rebuild two different fortifications, one of which was Fort Rice. Bloodshed on this central Pennsylvania frontier affected all settlers, no matter their distance from the Continental and British armies; the construction of Fort Rice, the only limestone fortification built, demonstrated that these people were determined to live in the area despite constant attack by their enemies.

In order to protect those living on the frontier county of Northumberland, the German Regiment was sent to Sunbury, a little over fifty miles north of Harrisburg, to be deployed as a renewed backbone of defense to local militia. Normally, a regiment sent in to reinforce an area would be welcomed as a blessing, but when it arrived in October 1779 at Sunbury's Fort Augusta, Colonel Samuel Hunter complained that the German force was too small. This reception caused a strained relationship between him and the German commander, Colonel Ludwig Weltner. When the unit had been recruited in 1776, it boasted over 400 members and had even been referred to by General George Washington as "a large regiment." By 1779, after years of desertion and fighting the British and Native Americans during Sullivan's Expedition, the number of soldiers had dwindled to 120 men.²

¹ Northumberland County Historical Society, *Northumberland County in the American Revolution*, ed. Charles F. Snyder (Sunbury, PA, 1976), 96, 180–81.

² Henry J. Retzer, *The German Regiment of Maryland and Pennsylvania in the Continental Army, 1776–1781* (Westminster, MD, 2000), v, 35.

Despite their small number, the members of the German Regiment were responsible for reconstructing two forts, built no more than a single day's march apart so the forts could support each other against attack. One of these forts was Fort Rice. Named after Captain William Rice, who commanded the detachment sent to erect and man the limestone structure, the fort was seated on the land of John Montgomery, who had fled after attacks in 1778 burned local homes and fortified structures. Located two miles outside of present-day Turbotville (approximately a twenty-five-minute drive south and east of Williamsport), Fort Rice remains mostly intact to this day.³ Captain Christian Myers, who was stationed at the fort during the spring of 1780, referred to the fort as Fort Montgomery, after the former property owner, in garrison orders written in March 1780.⁴ Rice was constructed out of grey limestone found on the surrounding farmland. The building stands two-and-a-half stories tall over a spring that supplied the occupiers with fresh water. Limestone walls a foot thick, dotted with gun ports, ensured that no small arms could penetrate and prevented the building from being burned down while allowing soldiers within to fire on the enemy in safety.⁵

Work on Fort Rice started in the fall of 1779 and was completed in early 1780. According to Captain Christian Myers, whose company of eighteen men was stationed at Fort Rice in early 1780, work on the defenses continued into March of that year. With spring came renewed fears of attacks on farms by raiding parties. In October of 1780 the German Regiment was recalled by General George Washington to rejoin the main army in New York. Less than three days after the soldiers left Fort Rice, a British raiding party tried to attack. Colonel Hunter moved local militia inside the limestone walls to replace the Continental soldiers who left. The two sides fired on one another for a short time before the raiders realized the men inside were well equipped to repel an attack and more militiamen were on the way to flank the enemy combatants.⁶

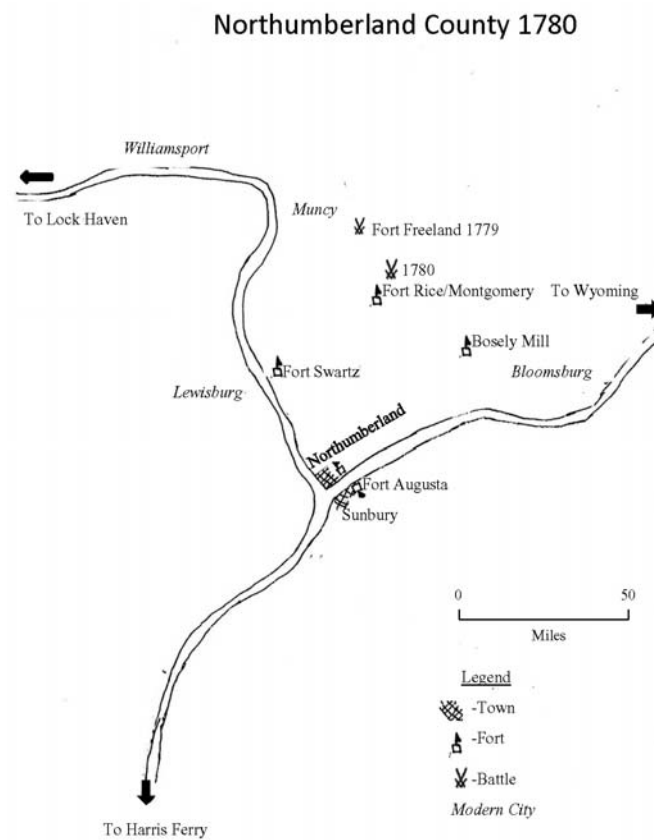
Today the fort stands proudly and bears a commemorative marker placed by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1912. Fort Rice is the last piece of standing evidence of the American Revolution in central Pennsylvania. While Forts Augusta, Freeland, and Muncy have been

³ Ibid., 66–67.

⁴ Ibid, 62.

⁵ Henry Melchior Muhlenberg Richards et al., *Report of the Commission to Locate the Site of the Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania*, 2 vols. (Harrisburg, 1896), 1:375–81.

⁶ Retzer, *German Regiment*, 36, 40.



explored archeologically and preserved by local historical societies, Rice continues to remain intact only through the generosity of private landowners throughout the years. Their efforts have allowed this author to travel back in history to a place his ancestor helped to build those many years ago and share its story with anyone who cares to listen.⁷

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⁷ Northumberland County Historical Society, *Northumberland County in the American Revolution*, 518.