

Indispensable Hand

Irish-born Edward Hand, physician and general, played a variety of roles in the War for Independence

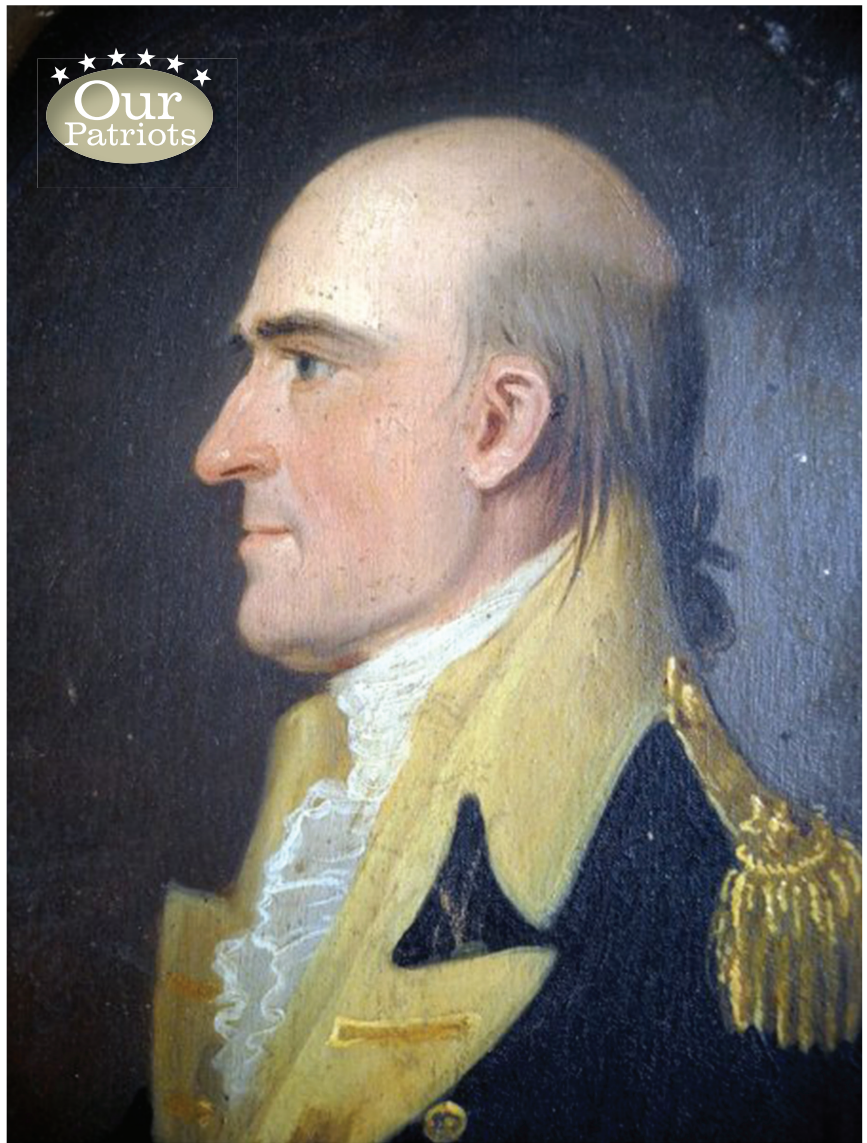
— By Jeff Walter —

In the early days of the Revolution, Edward Hand served in Boston with his Pennsylvania riflemen.

When General George Washington crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Night 1776 to launch a game-changing attack on Hessian forces at Trenton, N.J., Hand was there.

And when British General Charles Cornwallis formally surrendered 8,000 troops at Yorktown, Va., on October 19, 1781, effectively bringing the War for Independence to a close, Hand again was there on the scene.

Hand also served as a physician and as a respected political and civic leader, and was a trusted friend of Washington himself. But like some Revolutionary heroes, he did not start out on the American side.



From Surgeon to Soldier

Hand was born on December 31, 1744, in Clyduff, King's County (now County Offaly), Ireland. After earning his medical certificate from Trinity College in Dublin, he enlisted in 1767 as a surgeon's mate in the 18th Royal Irish Regiment of Foot. His enlistment might have let him bypass the five-year apprenticeship required to become a doctor. On May 20, 1767, his regiment set sail from Cobh, County Cork, Ireland, arriving in Philadelphia on July 11.

For several years, Hand served with the British army on the Pennsylvania frontier, and in 1772 he was commissioned an ensign. He marched with his regiment to Fort Pitt, where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers converge at modern-day Pittsburgh. Hand served as a surgeon at Fort Pitt during a time of relative calm on the western front.

He returned to Philadelphia in 1774, resigned his British commission and moved to Lancaster, Pa., where he began practicing medicine. On March 13, 1775, he married Katherine “Kitty” Ewing in Philadelphia, a union that would lead to eight children. The region was populated by Scots-Irish immigrants known for their anti-English sentiments, and Hand grew sympathetic to the American cause. That year, he helped form a Colonial militia.

Later in 1775, Hand enlisted in the Continental Army as lieutenant colonel of a battalion of Pennsylvania riflemen. In the Revolutionary War’s opening stage, he served under General Washington during the Siege of Boston, which ran from April 1775 to March 1776, when the British evacuated the city. He also participated in the Battle of Long Island on August 27, 1776, a losing effort for the Continental Army.

Trenton and Princeton

By the time the British overran Manhattan in November 1776, taking 2,000 prisoners, the war was looking bleak for the Americans. Washington realized drastic measures were necessary, leading to a pair of pivotal battles. First came an assault on the site of a Hessian garrison in Trenton, N.J.

On Christmas Night 1776, Washington and his men crossed the icy Delaware River north of Trenton in boats and then marched 19 miles south in a freezing storm. Hand and his Pennsylvania riflemen, accompanied by a battalion of German-speaking infantry, were to block the road leading to nearby Princeton.

On December 26, Washington’s 2,400 troops surprised 1,400 Hessians led by German Colonel Johann Rall, who was mortally wounded. The unprepared Hessians quickly surrendered, while the Americans suffered minimal losses. The relatively easy victory boosted Continental Army morale—and re-enlistments.

A week later, on January 3, 1777, after a series of skirmishes between Washington’s undermanned troops and British forces led by Cornwallis and Major General James Grant near Trenton, Washington’s men found themselves seemingly trapped. All but 500 of the Americans, however, stealthily broke camp during the night and traveled 12 miles to Princeton, where they scored another victory, driving back three British regiments.

The battles of Trenton and Princeton were Washington’s first successes in the open field, and they restored confidence in his leadership ability. Meanwhile, Hand had become an intimate and trusted friend.

According to family tradition, an injury at Princeton cost Hand the sight in his right eye, and portraits from then on show him only in profile from the left side.

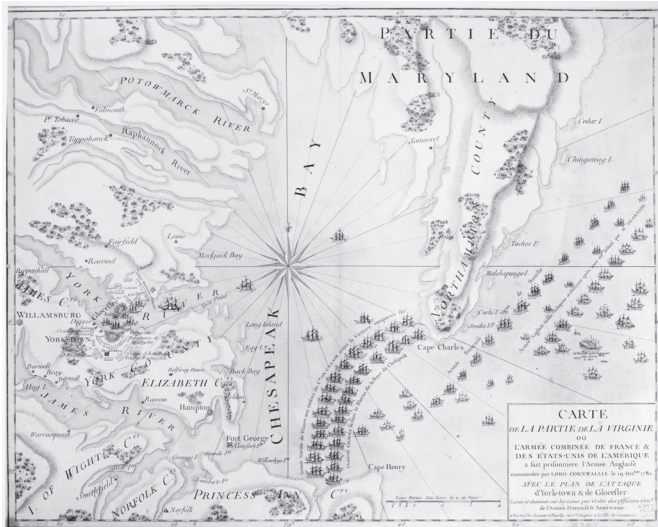
A Promotion, Then Frustration

Having demonstrated tactical and administrative abilities, Hand was promoted to brigadier general on April 1, 1777. He returned to Fort Pitt, charged with bolstering the local militia’s effectiveness and thwarting British and American Indian attacks. But this period proved frustrating for Hand, who was unaccustomed to the American Indian style of wilderness warfare, received insufficient resources and had difficulty recruiting volunteers.

After a series of embarrassing incidents—including the so-called Squaw Campaign, in which an attack by Hand’s men on a Delaware American Indian village brought only the death of one old man, four women and a boy, and the capture of two women—Hand asked to be relieved of his command. Congress voted to accept Hand’s resignation, though Washington did so reluctantly, saying, “I esteem him an officer of great worth and merit.”



In Emanuel Leutze’s iconic 1851 painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” Edward Hand is seated behind Washington in the lead boat, holding his hat to his head. Despite the artwork’s beloved status, it is historically inaccurate: Witness the Stars and Stripes, which was first flown in September 1777, well after the December 25, 1776, crossing.



A French map of the Virginia coast, showing Cornwallis' army on the York River with the American and French armies laying siege around it in 1781.

Hand was reassigned to the northern frontier, based out of New York, and for the next year was a key part of the campaign against Britain's Iroquois Confederacy allies.

Hand was part of the 1780 tribunal that tried and convicted Major John André, a British officer hanged as a spy for aiding traitor Benedict Arnold's attempted surrender of the fort at West Point, N.Y.

Siege of Yorktown

In February 1781, Hand was appointed adjutant general of the Continental Army and charged with overhauling administrative and training procedures. He traveled with Washington to Mount Vernon and then Williamsburg, Va., to prepare for the Siege of Yorktown.

Hand's role at Yorktown, the war's last major land battle, included preparing siege plans and keeping track of casualties and other battle statistics.

Cornwallis' surrender on October 19 after a crushing defeat by a combined force of American and French troops forced the British government to negotiate an end to the war. Fighting continued on the high seas, but it was mostly finished in the Colonies.

Post-military Life

In September 1783, Hand was honored for his long and distinguished service by being brevetted major general. He resigned from the Army in November and returned to Lancaster, where he resumed his

Hand's Hospital

While stationed at Fort Pitt in 1777, Edward Hand set up a hospital to care for American troops. He was a pioneer in establishing a quarantine hospital and promoting smallpox inoculation to combat epidemics, and in 1799 he was a founder of the Lancaster County Almshouse and Hospital.

medical practice. He also became active in politics and civic activities. He was a staunch Federalist whose posts included chief burgess of Lancaster, presidential elector, member of the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania Assembly, and customs inspector.

In 1794, he answered President Washington's call to serve as adjutant general of the troops sent into western Pennsylvania to put down the Whiskey Rebellion.

Hand's death on September 3, 1802, was attributed to cholera morbus, a nonepidemic form of the illness.

Hand's last years were spent at Rock Ford Plantation, on the banks of the Conestoga River a mile south of today's downtown Lancaster, Pa. The Hand family operated a farm there with fields, livestock and vast orchards. Hand was an avid horticulturalist whose efforts produced a plum named for him.

More than 90 percent of the historic fabric of the original house at Rock Ford Plantation remains intact today. The house, an important example of 18th-century Georgian domestic architecture, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is open for tours.

According to *Sword and Scalpel: The Life of Edward Hand of Lancaster* by William W. Betts Jr. (Heritage Books, 2014), Hand "will long be remembered as a fervent patriot and as a distinguished, heroic, high-level officer of the American Revolution, whose contribution to the birth of the country was immense." 🏠

