

the Timen Stiddem Society

NEWSLETTER



The family history newsletter for the descendants of the immigrant from Sweden in the seventeenth century to New Sweden (Wilmington), Delaware, encompassing the surnames: Stidham, Steadham, Stedham, Stidam and Steddom among many others.

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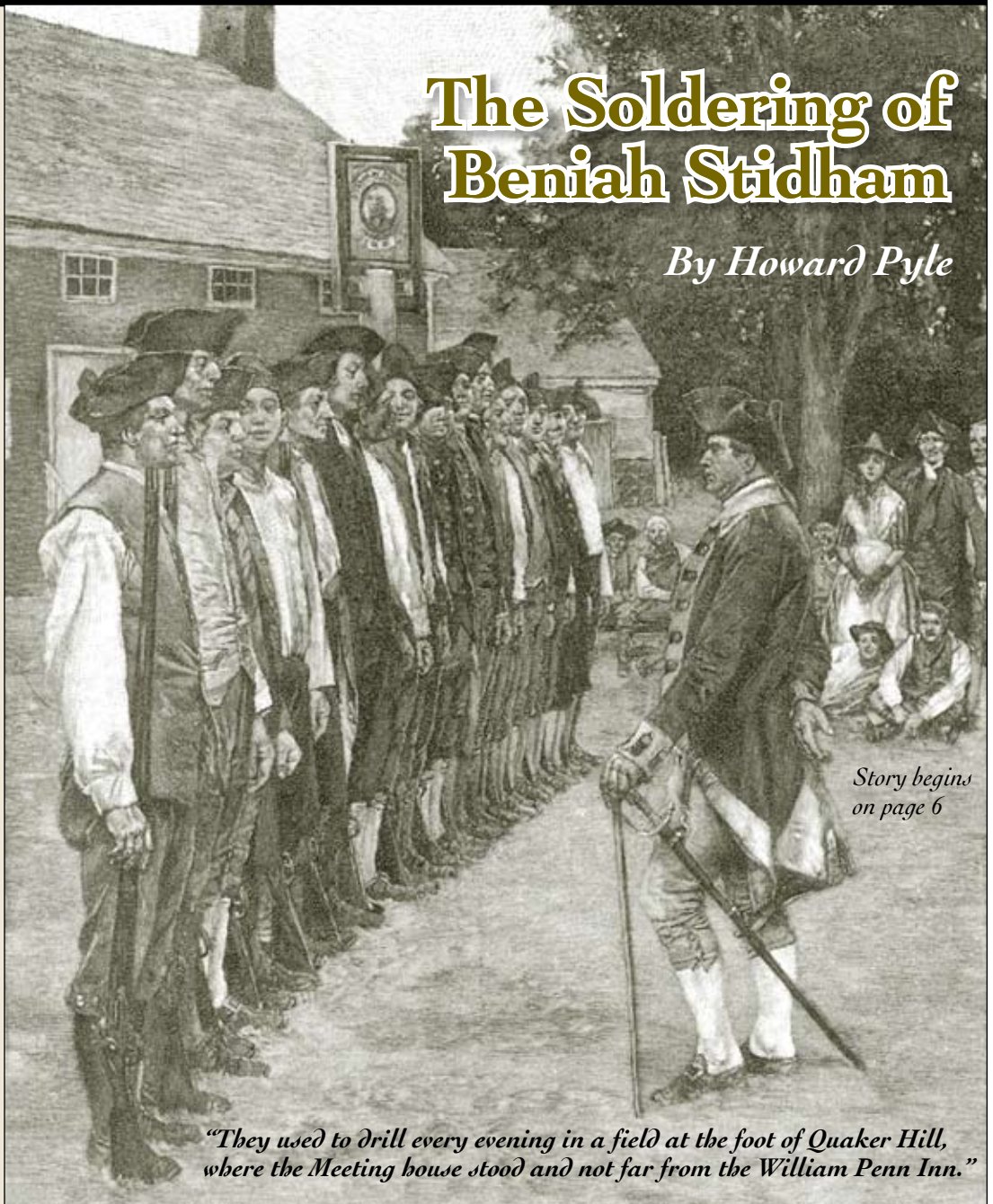
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The Soldering of Beniah Stidham

By Howard Pyle



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*"They used to drill every evening in a field at the foot of Quaker Hill,
where the Meeting house stood and not far from the William Penn Inn."*

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By Howard Pyle

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WHEN you look at a very old man, it seems hard to imagine that he was ever once a boy, full of sport and mischief like the boys whom we know nowadays.

There is a daguerreotype of Beniah Stidham that was taken about the year 1850. It is the picture of a very, very old man, with a bald, bony forehead, and a face full of wrinkles and furrows. His lips are sucked in between his toothless gums, and his nose is hooked down as though to meet his lean chin beneath.

In the picture he wears a swallow-tailed coat with a rolling collar and with buttons that look like brass. The cuffs of his long,

wrinkled coat-sleeves come down almost to the knotted knuckles, and one skinny hand rests upon the top of a hooked cane. It does not seem possible that he could ever have been a boy; but he was—though it was away back in the time of the Revolutionary War.

He was about fifteen years old at the time of the battle of Brandywine—that was in the year 1777. He was then an apprentice in Mr. Conelly's cooper-shops near Brandywine. His father, Amos Stidham, kept a tin-store, and sometimes peddled tinware and buckets down in the lower counties and up through Pennsylvania. At that time Beniah was a big,

awkward, loose-jointed, over-grown lad; he shot up like a weed, and his clothes were always too small for him. His hands stuck far out from his sleeves. They were splay and red, and they were big like his feet. He stuttered when he talked, and everybody laughed at him for it.

Most people thought that he was slack-witted, but he was not; he was only very shy and timid. Sometimes he himself felt that he had as good sense as anybody if he only had a chance to show it.

These things happened in Delaware, which in those days was almost like a part of Pennsylvania.

There was a great deal of excitement in Wilmington at the time of the beginning of the trouble in Boston, the fight at Lexington, and the battle at Bunker Hill. There were enlisted for the war more than twenty young fellows from Wilmington and Brandywine Hundred; they used to drill every evening in a field at the foot of Quaker Hill, where the Meeting house stood and not far from the William Penn Inn. A good many people—especially the boys—used to go in the evening to see them drill. It seemed to Beniah that if he could only go for a soldier he might stand a great deal better chance of getting along than he had in Wilmington, where every one laughed at him and seemed to think that he was lacking in wits.

He had it in his mind a great many times to speak to his father about going for a soldier, but he could not quite find courage to do so, for he felt almost sure that he would be laughed at.

One night he did manage to speak of it, and when he did, it was just as he thought it would be. It was just after supper, and they still sat at the table, in the kitchen. He was nervous, and when he began speaking he stuttered more than usual.

"I wo-wo-wo-wo-wish you'd l-let me go for a sis-sis-sis-sis-sis-soldier, Father," he said.

His sister Debby burst out laughing. "A sis-sis-sis-sis-soldier!" she mocked.

"A what!" said Beniah's father. "You a soldier? You would make a pretty soldier, now, wouldn't you? Why, you wouldn't be able to

say 'Who goes there?' fer stutterin'!" and then Debby laughed again, and when she saw that it made Beniah angry, she laughed still more.

So Beniah did not go soldiering that time.

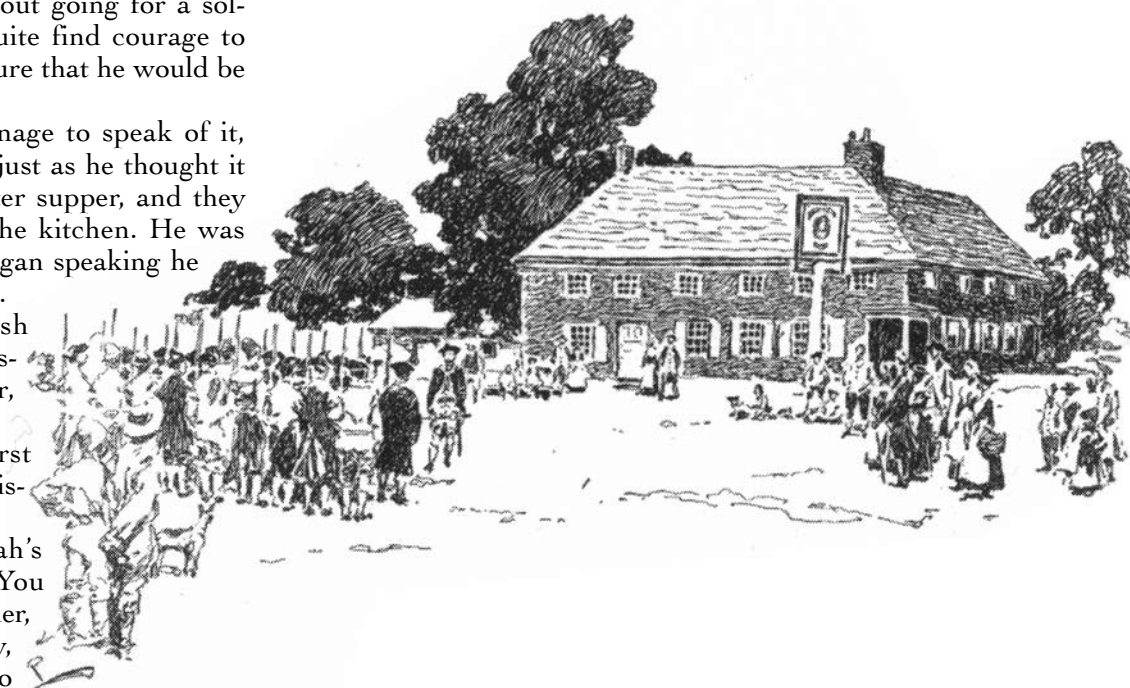
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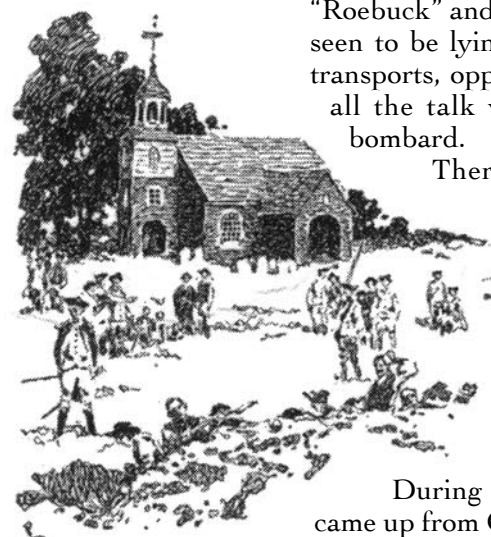
After the battle of Brandywine, Lord Howe's fleet of war-ships came up into the Delaware from the Chesapeake Bay, and everybody was anxious and troubled, for there was talk that the enemy would bombard the town. You could see the fleet coming up the bay from the hills back of the town—the sails seemed to cover the water all over; that was in the afternoon, just before supper. That evening a good many people left town, and others sent their china and silver up into the country for safe keeping.

After supper the bellman went though the streets calling a meeting at the Town hall. Captain Stapler was a home at that time and spoke to the people. He told them that there was no danger of the fleet bombarding the town, for the river was two miles away, and the cannon could not carry that far. He showed them that the only way that the enemy could approach the town was up the Christina River, and that if the citizens would build a redoubt at the head of the marsh the place would be perfectly defended.

The people found a good deal of comfort in what he said; but the next morning the

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During the morning, old Billy Jester came up from Christiana village, and said that the towns-people were building a mud fort down at the Rocks below the Old Swede's Church, and that they expected two cannon and some soldiers to come down from Fort Mifflin in the afternoon.

"Roebuck" and "Liverpool" ships of war were seen to be lying, with their tenders and two transports, opposite the town; and once more all the talk was that they were going to bombard.

There was a great deal said that morning at the cooper-shops about all this. Some opined that the ships were certainly going to bombard, but others held that what they would do would be to send a regiment of Hessians up the creek to burn down the town.

During the morning, old Billy Jester came up from Christiana village, and said that the towns-people were building a mud fort down at the Rocks below the Old Swede's Church, and that they expected two cannon and some soldiers to come down from Fort Mifflin in the afternoon. This was a great comfort to everybody, for the time.

About eleven o'clock in the morning the enemy suddenly began firing. Boom!—the sudden startling noise sounded dull and heavy, like the falling of some great weight; the windows rattled—boom!—boom!—boom!—and then again, after a little pause,—boom!—boom! There was a little while, a few seconds of breathless listening, and then Tom Pierson, the foreman of the shop, shouted:

"By gum! they're bombarding the town!"

Then he dropped his adze, and ran out of the door without waiting to take his hat. As he ran, there sounded again the same dull, heavy report—boom! boom!

There was no more work in the cooper-shops that day. Beniah ran all the way home. His father was just then away in the lower counties, and Beniah didn't not know what was going to happen to Debby and his mother. Maybe he would find the house all knocked to pieces with cannon-balls. Boom! boom! sounded the cannon again, and Beniah ran faster and faster, his mouth all dry and clammy with fear and excitement. The streets were full of people hurrying toward the hills. When he got home he found that no harm had happened, but the house was shut and all the doors locked. He met Mrs. Frist, and she told him that his mother

and Debby had gone up to Quaker Hill.

He found them there a little while later, but by that time the war-ships had stopped firing, and after a while everybody went back home.

In the afternoon it was known that they had not been firing at the town at all, but at some people who had gone down on the neck to look at them, and whom, no doubt, they took to be militia or something of the kind.

Just before supper it was reported that one of Jonas Stidham's cows had been killed by a cannon-ball. Jonas Stidham was Beniah's uncle, and in the evening he went over to look at the cow. He met several others going on the same errand—two men and three or four boys. There was quite a crowd gathered about the place. The cow lay on its side, with its neck stretched out. There was a great hole in its side, made by the cannon-ball, and there was blood upon the ground. It looked very dreadful, and seemed to bring the terrors of war very near; and everybody stood about and talked in low voices.

After he had seen the dead cow, Beniah went down to where they were building the mud fort. They were just putting the cannon into place, and Captain Stapler was drilling a company of young men of the town who had enlisted for its defense. Beniah wished that he was one of them. After the drill was over, Captain Stapler came up to him and said:

"Don't you want to enlist, Beniah?"

Beniah would not have dared to enlist if his father had been at home, but his father was away, and he signed his name to the roll-book!



That was the way that he came to go soldiering.

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That night Beniah did not go home, for he had to stay with the others who had enlisted. They were quartered at the barn just back of the mud fort. But he sent word by Jimmy Rogers that he was not coming home, because he had enlisted in Captain Stapler's company.

However, Captain Stapler let him go home the next morning for a little while. He found that all the boys knew that he had enlisted, and that he was great among them. He had to tell each one he met all about the matter. They all went along with him—fifteen or twenty of them—and waited in the street outside while he was talking with his family within. His mother had gone out, but his sister Debby was in the kitchen.

"Oh, but you'll catch it when daddy comes home!" said she.

Beniah pretended not to pay any attention to her.

"When is he coming home?" said he, after a while.

"I don't know, but, mark my words, you'll catch it when he does come," said Debby.

That night they set pickets along the edge of the marsh, and then Beniah really began to soldier. He took his turn at standing guard about nine o'clock. There was no wind, but the night was very raw and chill. At first Beniah rather liked the excitement of it, but by and by he began to get very cold. He remembered his father's overcoat that hung back of the door in the entry, and he wished he had brought it with him from home; but it was too late to wish for that now. And then it was very lonesome and silent in the darkness of the night. A mist hung all over the marsh, and in the still air the voices of the men who were working upon the redoubt by lantern-light, and of the volunteers at their quarters in the barn where they had kindled a fire, sounded with perfect clearness and distinctness in the stillness. The tide was coming in, and the water gurgled and rippled in the ditches, where the reeds stood stark and stiff in the gloom. The reed-birds had not yet flown south, and their sleepy "cheep, cheeping" sounded incessantly through the darkness.

The moon was about rising, and the sky, to the east, was lit with a milky paleness.



Toward it the marsh stretched away into the distance, the thin tops of the nearer reeds just showing above the white mysterious veil of mist that covered the water. It was all very strange and lonesome, and when Beniah thought of home and how nice it would be to be in his warm bed, he could not help wishing that he had not enlisted. And then he certainly would "catch it" when his father came home, as Debby had said he would. It was not a pleasant prospect.

By and by the moon rose, and at the same time a breeze sprang up. It grew colder than ever, and presently the water began to splash and dash against the river-bank beyond. The veil of mist disappeared, and the water darkled and flashed with broken shadows and sparks of light. Beniah's fingers holding the musket felt numb and dead. He wondered how much longer he would have to stay on guard; he felt as though he had been there a long time already. He crouched down under the lee of the river-bank and in the corner of the fence which stood there to keep the cows off of the marsh.

He had been there maybe five minutes, and was growing very sleepy with the cold, when he suddenly heard a sharp sound, and instantly started wide awake. It was the sound as of an oar striking against the side of a boat. There was something very strange in the sharp rap ringing through the stillness, and whoever had made it had evidently not intended to do so, for the after stillness was unbroken.

Beniah crouched in the fence-corner, listening breathlessly, intensely. He had for-

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He hesitated for an intense second or two—then came a blinding flash of resolve. He drew the trigger. Bang!



gotten all about being cold and sleepy and miserable. He felt that his heart was beating and leaping unevenly, and his breath came quickly, as though he had been running. Was the enemy coming? What should he do?

He did not move; he only crouched there, trying to hold his breath, and trying to still the beating of his heart with his elbow pressed against his ribs. He was afraid that if there was another sound he might miss hearing it because of his labored breathing and the pulses humming in his ears. He gripped his musket with straining fingers.

There was a pause of perfect stillness. Then suddenly he heard a faint splash as though some one had stepped incautiously into the water. Again there was stillness. Then something moved in the reeds—maybe it was a regiment of Hessians! Beniah crouched lower, and poked his musket through the bars of the fence. What would happen next? He

wondered if it was all real—if the enemy was actually coming.

Suddenly the reeds stirred again. Beniah crouched down still lower. Then he saw something slowly rise above the edge of the river-bank, sharp-cut and black against the milky sky. It was the head of a man, and it

was surmounted by a tall conical cap—it was the sort of a cap that the British soldiers wore. As Beniah gazed, it seemed to him as though he had now stopped breathing altogether. The head remained there motionless for a while, as though listening; then the body that belonged to it slowly rose as though from the earth, and stood, from the waist up black against the sky.

Beniah tried to say, "Who goes there?" and then he found that what his father had said was true; he could not say the words for stuttering. He was so excited that he could not utter a sound; he would have to shoot without saying, "Who goes there?" There was nothing else to do. He aimed his eye along the barrel of his musket, but it was so dark that he could not see the sights of the gun very well. Should he shoot? He hesitated for an intense second or two—then came a blinding flash of resolve.

He drew the trigger.
Bang!

For a moment he was deafened and bewildered by the report and the blinding flash of light. Then the cloud of pungent gunpowder-smoke drifted away, and his senses came back to him. The head and body were gone from against the sky.

Beniah sprang to his feet and flew back toward the mud fort, yelling he knew not what. It seemed as though the whole night was peopled with enemies. But nobody followed him. Suddenly he stopped in his flight, and stood again listening. Were the British following him? Not, they were not. He heard alarmed voices from the fort, and the shouting of the pickets. A strange impulse seized him that he could not resist: he felt that he must go back and see what he had shot. He turned and crept slowly back, step by step, pausing now and then, and listening intently. By and by he came to where the figure had stood, and, craning his neck, peeped cautiously over the river-bank. The moon shone bright on the rippling water in a little open place in the reeds. There was something black lying in the water, and as Beniah continued looking at it, he saw it move with a wallowing splash. Then he ran away shouting and yelling.

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Captain Stapler thought that an attack would surely be made, but it was not; and,

after a while, he ordered a company from the mud fort out along the river-bank, to see who it was that Beniah had shot. They took a lantern along with them, and Beniah went ahead to show them where it was.

"Yonder's the place," said he; "and I fired my gi-gi-gi-gun from the fa-fa-fence, ja-just here."

Captain Stapler peered down among the reeds. "By gum! said he, "he's shot something, sure enough." He went cautiously down the bank; then he stooped over, and soon lifted something that lay in the water. Then there was a groan.

"Come down here, two or three of you!" called out Captain Stapler. "Beniah's actually shot a man, as sure as life!"

A number of the men scrambled down the bank; they lifted the black figure; it groaned again as they did so. They carried it up and laid it down upon the top of the bank. The clothes were very muddy and wet, but the light of the lantern twinkled here and there upon the buttons and braid of a uniform. Captain Stapler bent over the wounded man. "By gracious!" said he, "it's a Hessian—like enough he's a spy." Beniah saw that the blood was running over one side of the wet uniform, and he was filled with a sort of terrible triumph. They carried the wounded man to the barn, and Dr. Taylor came and looked at him. The wound was in the neck, and it was not especially dangerous. No doubt the man had been stunned by the ball when it struck him.

The Hessian was a young man. "Sprechen sie Deutsch?" asked he, but nobody understood him.

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The next morning Beniah's father came home. He did not stop to ungear the horse, but drove straight down to the mud fort in his tinware cart. He was very angry.

"What're you doing here, anyhow?" said he to Beniah; and he caught him by the collar and shook him till Beniah's hat slipped down over one eye. "What're you doin' down here anyhow—killin' and shootin' and murderin' folks? You come home with me, Beniah—you come home with me!" and he shook him again.

"He can't go," said Captain Stapler. "You can't take him, Amos. He's enlisted, and he's signed his name upon the roll-book."



"I don't care a rap what he's signed," said Amos. "He bain't goin' to stay here shootin' folks. He's got to come home along with me, he has." And Beniah went.

"I don't care a rap what he's signed," said Amos. "He hain't goin' to stay here shootin' folks. He's got to come home along with me, he has." And Beniah went.

Nobody knows what happened after he got home, and Beniah did not tell; but next day he went back to work at the cooper-shops again. All the boys seemed glad to see him, and wanted to know just how he shot the Hessian.

A good many people visited the wounded Hessian down in the barn the day he had been shot. Among others came "Dutch Charlie," the cobbler. He could understand what the Hessian said. He told Captain Stapler that the man was not a spy, but a deserter from the transport-ship in the river. It seemed almost a pity that the man had not been a spy; but, after all, it did not make any great difference in the way people looked on what Beniah Stidham had done; for the fact remained that he was a Hessian. And nobody thought of laughing at Beniah, even when he stuttered in telling how he shot him.

After a while the Hessian got well, and then he started a store in Philadelphia. He did well, and made money, and the queerest part of the whole business was that he married Debby Stidham—in spite of its having been Beniah who shot him in the neck.

This is the story of Beniah Stidham's soldiering. It lasted only two nights and a day, but he got a great deal of glory by it.