

IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY
A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MODERN MARYLAND FORCES

Situated at the foot of North Mountain in the western reaches of Maryland, Fort Frederick has always offered a perfect setting for "living history" demonstrations. During the Civil War Centennial, the fort was the site of several reenactments and encampments. In anticipation of the American Bicentennial, the First Maryland Regiment performed at Fort Frederick on summer weekends throughout the late 60's to the present.

For years, local persons had talked about establishing a militia company to better tell the French & Indian War story. Such a group, the Fort Frederick Volunteer Militia, got its start with an article in the Hagerstown Daily Mail 10 January 1975:

FORT FREDERICK ASKS MILITIA VOLUNTEERS

The Maryland Park Service is trying to raise a militia. It is seeking volunteers to take part in interpretive activities at Fort Frederick State Park in preparation for the American Bicentennial.

Fort Frederick was the site of an English garrison during the French & Indian War.

Park Historian James E. Rogers said the volunteers will provide visitors with a better look at the past and will "add life" to the fort's setting.

Although the article was buried within the newspaper, several prospective volunteers took notice and enlisted.

As of 6 April, membership included Frank Clopper, Jeff Hastings, Jim Fisher, Howard Weaver, Howard C. Wiley, and Jim Rogers. Eugene Henesy and Bob Newkirk were charged with Civil War activities. Technical advice would be supplied by Steve Henthorne and John DiCarlo.

Since the original article had brought forth several persons interested in the Civil War period, a decision was made to include these activities in the summer schedule. Eventually, the concept foundered and the Civil War effort completely died. The remaining members would concentrate on the French & Indian War era as first proposed.

Uniforms were to be kept simple and inexpensive. The basic components would be the hunting shirt, trousers, shirt, moccasins, hat and assorted gear. Due to the high cost of muskets, most members purchased rifles as their first weapons. The overall appearance of the unit was not one of uniformity, but on the contrary, one of individual tastes which was in keeping with the militia image of the 18th century. Unfortunately, through bad advice and a lack of proper information, many of us made uniforms and purchased gear more in keeping with the Revolutionary War era. Our original goal of establishing an authentic French & Indian War unit would later be hindered by this error.

A decision was made to elect officers on a yearly basis. The first officers of the Fort Frederick Volunteer Militia were Lieutenant Frank Clopper, Sergeant Howard Weaver, Quartermaster Greg Slick, and Adjutant Jim Rogers. Plans were to participate in a few outside events which would hopefully generate funds for the treasury and attract new members. Otherwise, most activities would be fort oriented.

Summer activities included the French & Indian War Rendezvous, artillery training sessions, and numerous activity weekends at the fort. The Fort Frederick Craft Days were started as an annual August event with the militia participating. Camps were the primary means of demonstrating frontier military life to the public during this time. Quite a bit of live firing was staged in the form of musket and rifle competition.

During August of 1975, a crisis of sorts developed over the unit's name, the Fort Frederick Volunteer Militia. The name was not historically sound and was a bit cumbersome. Jim Fisher saw a need for a more realistic name for a unit operating out of Fort Frederick. He proposed the new one, Cresap's Rifle Company. Thomas Cresap had been a famous Western Marylander during the French & Indian War, while his son, Michael, later distinguished himself in the Revolutionary War.

The new Cresap's Rifle Company participated in the 10th Annual Firelock Match in September. Despite much difficulty with questionable match rules, several prizes were taken. Dave and Greg Slick dominated the tomahawk throw. Greg also did well in the rifle shoot. The artillery team, which Steve Henthorne and John DiCarlo had worked so hard to create, placed a respectable second. A good finish for a tumultuous year of creation and growth.

During the winter of 1975, efforts were made to better prepare ourselves for the 1976 season and the great bicentennial celebration. Many requests came in for our appearances and the unit had to make selections and establish a summer calendar. Uniforms were improved, drill practiced and a general strengthening of our organization took place under the guidance of Lieutenant Clopper.

In May 1976, necessity dictated tighter requirements. The attraction of youthful members posed problems which at the time were unforeseen. In order to maintain our position as serious historians, a minimum age of 16 years of age was established. Also some members were continuing to show up improperly dressed. Further efforts were made to tighten our clothing standards.

The spring started with the Mason-Dixon Scout Camporee and the dedication of the newly restored barracks. The summer of 1976 would prove to be a busy one for Cresap's Rifle Company. Local activities were sprouting up everywhere with each event's chairman requesting the unit's appearance. One fort activity weekend and one outside event were scheduled for each of the summer months. Due to the previous year's difficulties, the unit did not participate in the Firelock Match. Nevertheless, an enjoyable and fulfilling summer was the end result for each of us. With the fort schedule and the many outside appearances, most of us were quite tired by the time September rolled around.

As elections approached, it was decided to change the rank of Lieutenant to that of Captain in keeping with proper 18th century military organization. Elections were held in August with new officers as follows: Captain Jim Rogers, Sergeant Greg Slick, Quartermaster Jerry Higgins and Adjutant Cliff Owens.

By November 1976, the unit's name had changed once again. The new one: the Maryland Forces, a unit which is historically linked to the fort and was commanded by Captain (later Lt. Colonel) John Dagworthy.

With the preparation of a manual and past experience to fall back on, the modern Maryland Forces will undoubtedly be a major interpretive attraction at Fort Frederick. As with any new organization, the early years have been marked by growth and much change. A general operating structure had to be established which was both workable and practical for a group of volunteers. Many mistakes were made initially, but the Maryland Forces will be all the better because of those mistakes. Our foundation is now firm, our goals firmly established - may our future be a bright one.