



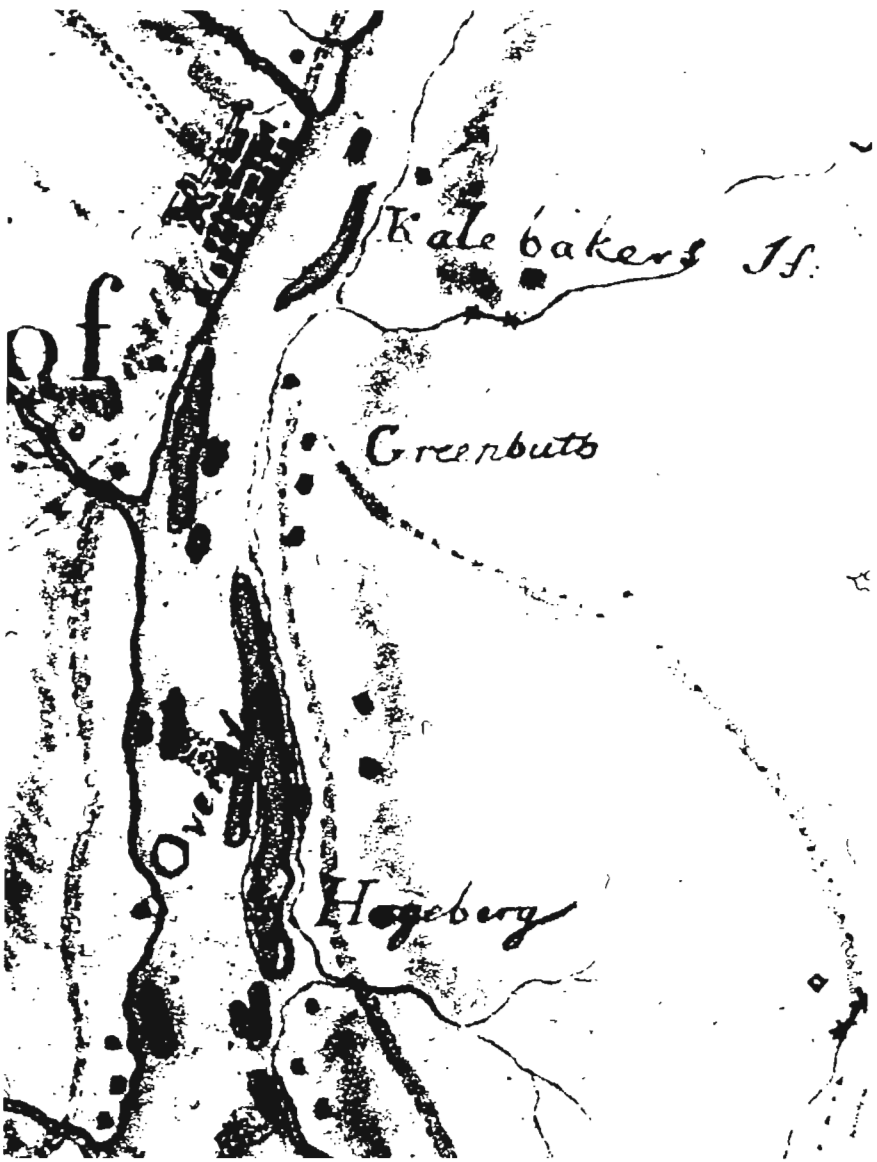
*Aerial photograph showing Papscaenee and Campbell Islands in 1963.
Courtesy of Paul Huey*

“Ben Pie”: A Native American Tale

by Warren F. Broderick

Quite a few tales were written about New York State Indians in the nineteenth century. Their authors rarely had any first-hand knowledge of Native Americans themselves, and their writings were often tainted by popular ethnic biases of the age. Native American characters depicted in these works could be classified as either brutish, evil ignoble savages or their honorable, sagacious “noble savage” counterparts. These “wooden Indians” of literature provided American readers no factual information on the lives of any real Indians. A notable exception was “Ben Pie, or the Indian Murderer,” which appeared in two literary magazines known as *The Minerva* and the *Rural Repository* in 1825, and may have actually been “a tale founded on facts,” as its anonymous author claimed. It is filled with the literary conventions of the day, but the historical information in the story is accurate, likewise the detailed description of the locality where the story is set, Papscaenee Island in Rensselaer County, a place of great antiquity. The story contains information on both the Mahicans and Iroquois and probably has substantial factual basis. “Ben Pie” is significant because the fascinating story of a returned favor recalls interesting interrelationships between Native Americans and white settlers in the late eighteenth century in New York State, as well as the stereotypes commonly presented in nineteenth-century literature.

The story is set in the Autumn of 1782 in the neighborhood of Papscaenee Island, located on the east side of the Hudson River in the present towns of East Greenbush and Schodack in Rensselaer County. Papscaenee Island is a low, flat alluvial island about four miles long and one-half mile wide, west of the present State Route 9J and south of the City of Rensselaer. It was originally completely separated from the Hudson River by Papscaenee Creek, but since the northern part of the creek was filled in during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to accommodate railroad construction and commercial development, it now more closely resembles a peninsula.¹ The middle portion of Papscaenee Island was saved from development by the efforts of the Open Space Institute and other organizations, and now constitutes a county nature preserve managed by the Rensselaer County Environmental Management Council.



"Map of the County Albany" [anonymous] 1756, showing roughly the same area as the aerial photograph.
British Museum

The island, which appears on a number of early maps, was named after the Mahican sachem, Papsickene, whose heirs deeded the island to Dutch Colonial government in 1637.² Almost immediately the island, which had been previously farmed by the Mahicans, was settled by Dutch farmers. One of the first, Cornelis Maesen Van Buren, settled on the north end of the island in 1638.³ In the following years ownership of the entire island was divided among a small group of Dutch farmers.⁴ In 1696 title of the farm on the south end of the island was granted to an attorney, Joachim Staats (1654-1712), whose descendants own the land even today. About this time Joachim Staats constructed a substantial two-story stone-and-brick house today inhabited by his descendants. This is the oldest structure in Rensselaer County. A family burying ground adjacent to the house was established as early as 1707, when Anna Barentse, Joachim's wife, was interred there.

The house stands part way up the north side of a small eminence of land known by the Dutch as the "hooge berg" or "hogheberg" (the "high hill"). This small elevation, rising only about fifty feet above the surrounding floodplain, nonetheless represented the highest point of land along the Hudson River, and had previously been called "Patquatchek" or the "big turnip" by the Mahicans. Joachim Staats died in 1712 and the land passed to his son, Barent Staats (1680-1752), who married Nellie Gerritse Vandenberg, who died in 1749. The southern half of the farm, including the homestead and family cemetery, was bequeathed to Joachim Staats (1717-1804), who married Elizabeth Schuyler (1715-1795). The north half of the farm was bequeathed to another son, Gerrit Staats (1722-1807) who erected in 1758 a gambrel-roofed house which burned in 1973. The original homestead farm (the south half) was subsequently inherited by Philip Staats, a Lieutenant in the American Revolution and later a Colonel in the New York State Militia, who was born July 26, 1754 and died August 22, 1821. Philip Staats married Anna Van Alstyne, who was born January 11, 1767 and died on February 18, 1850. Despite some alterations of the 1720s and 1750s, the Joachim Staats house stands today appearing much as it did at the time of the "Ben Pie" story, and remains the best surviving reminder of the area's rich Native American and Dutch/English Colonial history.⁵

Philip Staats served in the American Revolution as a Second Lieutenant of the Fifth Company of the Fourth Regiment (later the Third Company of the Third Regiment) of Albany County Militia, organized on October 20, 1775. Colonel Killian Van Rensselaer commanded this Regiment and Philip's brother, Captain Nicholas Staats (1743-1816), commanded this Militia Company. Philip Staats was later commissioned Colonel in the New York State Militia on April 22, 1805.⁶

The People of the State of New-York, by the Grace of God Free and Independent :

TO Philip Staats Esquire _____ GREETING :
We, reposing special trust and confidence, as well in your Patriotism, Conduct and Loyalty, as in your Valor, and readiness to do us good and faithful Service, Have appointed and constituted, and by these Presents, Do appoint and constitute you the said Philip Staats Lieutenant Colonel Commandant of the Regiment of Militia in the County of Rensselaer lately Commanded by ~~Richard~~ Staats Esquire; — —

YOU are therefore to take the said Regiment into your charge and care, as Lieutenant Colonel Commandant thereof, and duly to exercise the Officers and Soldiers of that Regiment in arms, who are hereby commanded to obey you as their Lieutenant Colonel Commandant, and you are also to observe and follow such Orders and Directions as you shall from time to time receive from our General and Commander in Chief of the Militia of our said State; or any other your superior Officer, according to the Rules and Discipline of War, in pursuance of the Trust reposed in you; and for so doing, this shall be your Commission, for and during our good pleasure, to be signified by our Council of Appointment.

In Testimony whereof, We have caused our Seal for Military Commissions to be hereunto affixed: WITNES our trusty and well-beloved Morgan Lewis — Esquire, Governor of our said State, General and Commander in Chief of all the Militia, and Admiral of the Navy of the same, by and with the advice and consent of our said Council of Appointment, at our city of Albany, the ~~first~~ _____ day of ~~April~~ _____ in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ~~five~~ _____ and in the twenty _____ year of our Independence.

Passed the Secretary's Office, the 22nd day of ~~April~~ _____ 1805.

Chas. W. Minton
Secy. Secretary.

Morgan Lewis

*Manufacture Company & Charles Office in
26 August 1805. Taken as the authentic
Morgan Lewis*

According to the short story, Philip Staats “served his country with the greatest distinction” during the American Revolution. His widow’s pension records reveal that Lieutenant Staats first served at Fort Constitution in the Hudson Highlands between July and December in 1776. The company was then transferred to the northern frontier, and he was stationed at both Fort Anne and Fort Edward in 1777. One of the principal duties at that time was to conduct reconnaissance missions relative to the advance of General Burgoyne’s forces from Canada; this is doubtless when Lieutenant Staats was rescued by Ben Pie and his Mohawks from a party of Burgoyne’s Canadian Indian mercenaries. It is noteworthy that Canadian Indian mercenaries of Burgoyne were responsible for the infamous killing and scalping of Jane McCrea, which occurred near Fort Edward on July 26th.

Philip Staats was shot in the calf by a musket ball and received a severe leg wound while General Philip Schuyler’s army was retreating southwardly to Van Schaick’s Island (in the present City of Cohoes) in late July of 1777, during a skirmish “at a place called Moses Creek” (Moses Kill, about four miles south of Fort Edward, in the present Washington County). Schuyler had ordered the abandonment of Fort George, Fort Anne and Fort Edward because of the proximity of Burgoyne’s forces.⁷ His army remained at the fortifications at Moses Creek until July 31st, when they finally retreated southward. Philip remained bedridden in Albany, at the house of Philip Van Rensselaer on Pearl Street (an earlier structure replaced in 1786 by the building known as “Cherry Hill”), from July to October. He was then “carried to his father’s house, a few miles from Albany” (the Staats home on Papscaene Island) to continue his recuperation.⁸

In 1825 a short story, entitled “Ben Pie, or the Indian Murderer: a Tale Founded on Facts,” appeared in two popular literary periodicals of the era, *The Minerva*, published in New York City, and the *Rural Repository*, published in Hudson, New York.⁹ In the process of conducting graduate work at Union College some years ago on images of the American Indian in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American fiction, I identified and studied literally hundreds of now obscure short stories. Few of these possessed much literary merit and equally few seemed stories based on factual events. In the latter regard, the story of Ben Pie is a notable exception.

As suggested earlier, the authors of tales written about New York State Indians in the nineteenth century rarely had any first-hand knowledge of Native Americans, and their writings were often tainted by popular ethnic biases of the age. Thus Native Americans in these works are usually shown to be either brutish, evil ignoble savages or their honorable, sagacious “noble savage”

counterparts. This dichotomy between the “noble” and “ignoble” savage pervades American literature and popular culture from their beginnings well into the twentieth century. The “noble savage,” contrary to popular belief, was not a character invented by James Fenimore Cooper, but rather a stereotype that was found in the first American novels dealing with Native Americans.¹⁰ These stereotypes provided no factual information about the way Native Americans actually lived. Stories such as “Ben Pie,” in which Native Americans seem realistically depicted, stand out as the exception to the rule of stereotypical representations.

Another “Indian tale” set in Rensselaer County fits the stereotype well and contrasts markedly with the “Ben Pie” story. “The Legend of the Poestenkill” was written by Abba A. Goddard and published in Troy in 1846.¹¹ A beautiful young white woman named Elsie Vaughn, purportedly living at the site of Troy in the late seventeenth century, became the object of the passionate affections of a young Mohawk warrior named Dekanisora. One day the young Mohawk rescued Elsie from an “enormous serpent” in the Poestenkill gorge. While she felt grateful for Dekanisora saving her life, Elsie nonetheless could not conceal her “feelings of repugnance” for the savage who loved her. Elsie plunged to her death over the falls, for it was “fearful to die by her own act, but a thousand times more fearful to live the bride of a haughty Mohawk.” The “once fierce Mohawk, now as helpless as a child, breathed out his last gasp” and joined the spirits of his fathers. Typical of numerous Native American “tales” of the era, “The Legend of the Poestenkill” presents a rather ridiculous portrait of the “noble savage,” who, while possessing many redeeming traits, still remains a savage and is doomed to extinction along with the rest of his race. Goddard’s tale possesses little originality and in fact seems to have plagiarized a story published five years earlier and set in Connecticut.¹²

The protagonist in “Ben Pie, or the Indian Murderer” is possibly the same person as Benjamin Pye, a Native American of Mahican ancestry who is recorded as having enlisted as a Private in a military company organized at Sheffield, Massachusetts, in 1780, serving sixteen days in the Bennington, Vermont region. Sheffield is fairly close to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where a number of Mahicans resided at this time. The anonymous author of the short story, who seems to have the historical information reasonably accurate, refers to Ben as a Chief of the Mohawk Nation. While many authors have admittedly confused the identity of Mahican, Mohawk and Mohegan individuals, I believe that this author would have recognized such tribal distinctions. Ben Pie may very well have been of mixed Mohawk and Mahican ancestry, and thus could have been recognized by the Mohawks as a Chief of

their Nation. Ben's partial Mahican (and even possibly Mohegan) ancestry would help explain two details found in the story. First, when Ben meets the Mahicans during their ceremony on Papscanee Island, he is able to speak their language. In addition, at the conclusion of the story, Ben is permitted to take up residence with a tribe on "the coast" (probably southeastern New England or Long Island); such tribe would have been of Mohegan or other Algonquin ancestry. Also, it would have been highly unlikely to find any true Mohawks fighting alongside patriots in the American Revolution. Lion Miles has identified a Benjamin Pye, probably born in Stockbridge, Massachusetts about 1764, who later removed to Wisconsin, where his name appears on a signatory on tribal petitions in 1838, 1845, 1846 and 1848. He died in the 1850s and is interred in the Indian Cemetery on Lake Winnebago at Stockbridge, Wisconsin. If all these persons bearing the name of "Ben Pie/Pye" are identical, then he may have lived on the New England coast after escaping his would-be captors and before emigrating to Wisconsin. In any case, an association between the Benjamin Pye of Stockbridge and the "Ben Pie" of the short story is not conclusively proven.

"Ben Pie" tells the story, set a few years after the American Revolution (probably in 1782), of a young Mohawk chieftain, fleeing two avenging Oneidas after having killed a young Oneida chieftain in a drunken fight. An intriguing entry is found in the journal of François, Marquis de Barbé-Marbois, who served as Secretary of the French legation in America between 1779 and 1785. He mentions a murder which took place at the Oneida Castle in October of 1784, where negotiations were taking place.

I saw, amongst the Oneidas, a tomb on which the earth and stones seemed new. They told me it was that of an Indian murdered a few days before. They showed me the murderer, who did not mingle with the most distinguished; but no one thought of punishing the crime. They suspected him of wishing to flee to the Onondagas, to shelter himself from pursuit by relatives of the murdered man.¹⁴

If this is a reference to the killing of an Oneida by Ben Pie, then it would coincide with the time when Mahicans were moving from Stockbridge, Massachusetts to their new home in New Stockbridge, Madison County, New York. It does seem unusual that, if indeed an Oneida had been killed at their own castle, justice was not sought on the spot.

Arriving at Papscanee Island from the west, Ben sought the assistance of

Colonel Philip Staats, who fought alongside him in the Revolution. It seems that Ben, along with ten of his tribe, had saved Colonel Staats “from the tomahawk and scalping knife of a party of Canadian Indians,” who had surrounded him during a reconnaissance mission. Once Ben had told Colonel and Mrs. Staats of his plight, at once they determined to help the Mohawk chieftain avoid his avengers, who were now close at hand. After they sent Ben out a back door of the Staats home, the Colonel engaged the pursuers in some conversation, and suggested that Ben Pie may have been hiding at the bottom of his well. The “stratagem of the Colonel” had succeeded, and had given Ben “a considerable start of his pursuers.”

Ben sped eastwardly “across a miry piece of meadow land” and crossed the Papscanee Creek, entering a steep-sided ravine nearly opposite the Staats residence, on the east side of the current State Route 9], southeastwardly following a stream known as the Vierda Kill. After killing a large dog belonging to his pursuers, he followed the course of the “dark and contracted ravine” and “reached the foot of a precipice, over which the water formed an elegant cascade.” The steep ravine, bordered by oak and hemlock forest, retains this wild, rugged appearance today.

Climbing out of this ravine, Ben proceeded northward along the ridge and arrived “at another precipice more awful than the first.” This was probably a high waterfall on a small stream which flows into Papscanee Creek, opposite the east end of the present Staats Island Road. Ben was familiar with this ravine, through which passed an Indian trail well known to the Mahicans. He descended the ravine in confidence, “having no idea that he could ever be discovered in so dark and damp a recess.”

. . . the rays of the sun are excluded by the thick foliage of innumerable hemlocks, extending their branches from the two embankments and forming a perfect canopy over its whole extent. This cavity formed a narrow pass about fifty rods long, and terminated by a perpendicular precipice about two hundred [actually about one hundred] feet, from which a number of calcareous rocks, integrated with bed of slate, frequently detached themselves.

But his pursuers followed still. Ben climbed to the top of the precipice, in a steep ravine that has changed little over time, and dislodged a large rock, which carried with it “an immense quantity of loose slate and hardened clay,” and buried his would-be captors under this enormous mass. Having outsmarted his pursuers,



*The Joachim Staats house in Schodack, Rensselaer County, New York
Photograph by Waldron Polgreen, ca. 1930. Courtesy of Shirley Dunn*

Ben Pie “gained the top of the hill” and followed the Indian trail southeastwardly to the coast, to live the remainder of his life with related tribesmen.

The “Ben Pie” story contains a far more detailed and accurate description of the local scenery than is typically encountered in fiction of the era with local settings. The story, in fact, led me to discover a spectacular waterfall well hidden from public view. Another remarkable feature of the story is the fascinating information it contains on Colonial and Native American history and lore. The anonymous author relates how Papscanee Island had been the site of a Mahican castle, and later a Colonial fort. In addition, we gain important insights into the career and character of Philip Staats from the story:

. . . at the close of the revolutionary war, after having served his country with the greatest distinction, [he] had the pleasure to receive General Washington and Governor George Clinton, who continued nearly a whole day under his hospitable roof; until the Mayor and corporation of Albany had arrived, after the greatest exertions against

winds and tide to escort them to their city, in a big Dutch scow, formerly used at the ferry between Albany and Greenbush, and considered until lately as a wonderful production of naval architecture.

Colonel Philip S. occupied the house situated on the south side of the mound. In his youth, and during the war, he had considerable intercourse with the Indians, and had acquired a perfect knowledge of their dialects and manners; having always treated them with kindness and justice, they had for him the greatest veneration. Indeed, encouraged by his humanity, the few scattered remnants of the Mohicandes who loitered on the east shore of the Hudson, called him their father, and continued by his indulgence to hold now and then meetings and dances on top of their favourite Patquatheck . . .

George Washington's stay at the Staats house occurred on June 25, 1782, and Ben Pie is said to have arrived at Papscanee Island "not long after the visit" of Washington and Clinton.¹⁵ This story reveals, for the first time, that descendants of the Mahicans returned to Papscanee to conduct important ceremonies as late as the period following the American Revolution. The particular ceremony which took place on the night of Ben Pie's arrival is described in some detail:

[They] set fire to a pile composed of pine knots and dry brush, intended to serve as a bon-fire in honour of one of their young warriors, who on that day had attained the age of manhood. An old Indian, sitting on a stone, had between his legs a small keg covered with deer-skin; he used it as a drum, and beating time on that rustic instrument, he hummed with his voice the wild melody of the war-dance, in which every man and woman joined; repeating with accuracy the articulated sounds, turning around the fire with frantic gestures, accompanied with the rattling of dried deer's hoofs suspended in bunches to their arms and legs, and concluding each dance with a whooping or yelling . . .

This constitutes possibly the earliest of the few documented accounts of Mahican Indians returning to their ancestral homeland, although, according to Shirley Dunn, a number of similar stories are found in oral history. Shirley suggests that these particular Mahicans mentioned in the short story may have come from a number of places at this time, including Stockbridge, Massachusetts

continued after insert

and New Stockbridge, Oneida County, New York. Even though the Mahicans and Mohawks had been mortal enemies over a century before, the Mahicans greeted Ben Pie in friendship, and welcomed him to drink with them and smoke the “calmet of peace.” The story also speaks of an Indian trail running along the north side of one of the deep ravines, and leading southeastwardly towards the coast. The Mohawks were said to have used this trail in order to “collect the tribute of dried clams and wampum annually sold to those fierce warriors by the poor fishing tribes, the principal of which were the Mannhattans and the Montauks; the first being the proprietors of the island of New York, and the other of Long Island.”

While the “Ben Pie” tale clearly represents historical fiction, it provides a good deal of apparently factual information on both the local scenery and early Colonial and Native American history of the immediate area, information available from few other sources. This is one of the very few fictional works dealing with the Mahicans. While the story is filled with the literary conventions of the day and reflects some of the biases with which White authors viewed Indians, the Native Americans the anonymous author describes seem believable. One needs only to read the majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American “Indian tales” to notice the startling differences between the stereotypes these works contain and the Native American character portrayals in the “Ben Pie” story. While we may never learn exactly how factual is the story’s theme, one would be safe in assuming that the story of the favor returned in kind is as accurately recalled as the local landscape and early history the story documents.

Notes

1. Paul Huey, “A Short History of Cuyper Island, Towns of East Greenbush and Schodack, New York, and its Relation to Dutch and Mahican Culture Contact,” *Journal of Middle Atlantic Archaeology*, Vol. 12, 1994, pp. 131-147.
2. Indian Deed #15, April 13, 1637, Albany Institute of History and Art.
3. Shirley Dunn, “Settlement Patterns in Rensselaerswijck: Locating Seventeenth Century Farms on the East Side of the Hudson River,” *De Halve Maen*, Vol. 67, Fall 1994, pp. 62-74.
4. Map of Papsance Island, ca. 1792, Cherry Hill Papers, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library.
5. Shirley Dunn and Allison Bennett, *Dutch Architecture Near Albany: The Polgreen Photographs*. (Fleischmanns, NY: 1996), pp. 30-37
6. Berthold Fernow, *New York in the Revolution* (Albany, 1887), p. 265; Staats Family Papers, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library.
7. Donald Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler and the War of Independence, 1775-1783* (Syracuse: 1987), pp. 258-285.

8. Revolutionary War Pension Records, Claim of Anna, Widow of Philip Staats, M 804, Reel 2265, National Archives and Records Administration.
9. "Ben Pie, or The Indian Murderer: A Tale Founded on Facts," *The Minerva*, Vol. III, 1825, pp. 113-117; also published in the *Rural Repository*, II, 1825, pp. 33-35, 41-43.
10. Warren F. Broderick, "Fiction Based on 'Well-Authenticated Facts': Documenting the Birth of the American Novel," *Hudson Valley Regional Review*, Vol. IV, No. 2, September, 1987, pp. 9-37. See also Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization* (Baltimore, 1965)
11. Abha A. Goddard, "Legend of the Poestenkill," *The Trojan Sketch Book* (Troy: 1846), pp. 87-96.
12. Samuel G. Goodrich, "The Legend of Bethel Rock," *Sketches From a Student's Window* (Boston: 1841), pp. 78-85.
13. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Boston: 1904), vol. 12, p. 883.
14. [François, Marquis de Barbé-Marbois], *Our Revolutionary Forefathers; the Letters of François, Marquis de Barbé-Marbois During His Residence in the United States as Secretary of the French Legation, 1779-1785*, translated and edited by Eugene Parker Chase (New York: 1929), p. 214.
15. William Spohn Baker, *Itinerary of General Washington From June 15, 1775 to December 23, 1783* (Philadelphia: 1892), pp. 265-266.