

Supplementing National Archives' Records: William Keyser's Revolutionary War Service

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Many genealogists know the difficulty of determining the details of an ancestor's Revolutionary War experience based on records typically available from the National Archives. Pension applications and military service records seldom provide the detail we would like, forcing us to use other sources to determine what our ancestor did or in what actions he participated. The following example indicates how the limited records in the National Archives can be supplemented to provide a more comprehensive description of the service of one Revolutionary soldier.

William Keyser, aged 77, applied for a pension for his Revolutionary War service on 9 October 1832 in Bath County summarizing his service as follows:

He enlisted in the service of the United States in the regular army for the term of three years and served out the sd term of three years. He enlisted in the County of Glauster in the state of Va but the time of his enlistment he does not at this time recollect. He enlisted under Captain Thomas Baytop in the second Va State Regiment. He then marched to Hampton Va after he was there he was enoculated for the small pocks. He afterwards was marched to the Valley Forge where he joined the army under General Washington at which place he remained all winter. The next summer he was marched after the British and under the command of Colonel Charles Dabney he overtook the British at monmouth church and was in an engagement with the British the whole day and lay on his arms all night expecting to engage again on the next day but on that night the British got on board their ships. He further stated that he was in a skirmish with the British at saw mill river bridge near fort montgomery under the command

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of Colonel Samuel Griefs and in that skirmish twenty eight soldiers and two officers were taken by the British. He further state that he was in another engagement and was in front of the army in taking Stoney Point Fort under the command of General Anthony Wayne at which engagement Gen. Wayne received a small wound in his temple and then Colonel Feebecker took the command. Cob. Flury was the commander of the vanguard he received no wound.¹

This statement is further supplemented by William Keyser's military service record which covers the period March 1778 to November 1779,² and by a land bounty warrant dated 12 May 1784 which indicates that William Keyser served three years as a private in the Virginia State Line.³ A study of these documents along with other accounts of the Revolution for the period in which Keyser served allows the development of the following more detailed account of his service.

William Keyser enlisted in the 2nd Virginia State Regiment in Gloucester County,⁴ Virginia around 1 March 1777⁵ at the age of 21 or 22. This regiment was one of three such units of regular soldiers authorized by the General Assembly in December 1776 and raised for local (i.e., within the state) defense. The regiments were stationed in the fortifications at Williamsburg, Portsmouth and Yorktown.⁶ However, as Keyser indicated in his pension application, this unit went first to Hampton for inoculation against smallpox before going on garrison duty.

Despite the fact that the three state regiments were raised for in-state service, within a year of their formation the Virginia General Assembly had to place two of them in the Continental Line. This resulted from the capture of most of the 9th Virginia Continental Regiment at Germantown on 4 October 1777, after which the 1st and 2nd Virginia State Regiments were sent to join Gen. Peter Muhlenberg's Brigade.⁷ As Keyser noted, the regiment arrived at Valley Forge in time to spend the

¹ William Keyser (Keziah Keyser, widow) No. W3427, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1900. M804, National Archives.

² William Keyser, 2nd Virginia State Regiment, Compiled Military Service Record of Revolutionary War Soldiers, M881, National Archives.

³ Samuel MacKay Wilson, *Catalogue of Revolutionary Soldiers and Sailors of the Commonwealth of Virginia to Whom Land Bounty Warrants Were Granted by Virginia for Military Services in the War for Independence* (Baltimore: Southern Book Company, 1953), 43.

⁴ Research into the few surviving colonial records of Gloucester County, as well as nearby counties, has yielded no additional information on Keyser or his family. No evidence has been found that Thomas Baytop served in this regiment, although John Baytop did, according to the Harriet Dickins Wight Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. However, Thomas Baytop may have enlisted men in the 2nd Virginia State Regiment as well as other regiments.

⁵ William Keyser, Compiled Military Service Record, Revolutionary War, List dated 8 September 1778 indicates that he was to serve until 1 March 1780. Since he served three years, his enlistment was around 1 March 1777.

⁶ E. M. Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations in the American Revolution, 1774-1787* (Richmond, Va.: Virginia State Library, 1978), 109.

⁷ Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations*, 110-111.

entire winter there, indicating that they probably arrived in late December.⁸ Muhlenberg's Brigade was quartered on the southeast edge of the encampment, perhaps a quarter mile south of the Schuylkill.⁹ Here the 2nd Virginia State Regiment endured the bitter weather and privations described by many writers.

When the British evacuated Philadelphia on 18 June 1778 and moved towards New York, Washington followed with the Continental Army. The Americans caught up with the British army near Freehold in Monmouth County, New Jersey on June 28 and there fought what is now known as the Battle of Monmouth. At the end of that day, the Continental Army was positioned to renew the attack on the British early on June 29. However, as Keyser described, the British army withdrew during the night towards the coast and eventually sailed from Sandy Hook to New York on July 5.¹⁰ Following the battle, American troops marched northwest to New Brunswick, New Jersey and then up the Hudson to a point opposite Westchester County, New York. Keyser's contingent crossed the Hudson and went into camp at White Plains.¹¹

The 2nd Virginia State Regiment remained at White Plains at least until 8 September 1778 during which time William Keyser is shown as being assigned to the light infantry.¹² Early in 1778, after a successful experiment with a light infantry brigade under Gen. William Maxwell in 1777, Washington had recommended the formation of light infantry companies in each regiment. They were to be comprised of the best men, the most hardy and active marksmen, commanded by good partisan officers. During a campaign, all the light companies were to be organized into a corps to operate together, as they would at Stony Point in 1779.¹³ In 1778 a new light infantry organization was created effective June 15. Initially it was placed under command of Gen. Charles Scott, though later Gen. Anthony Wayne took over its command.¹⁴ During the July-September period, the light infantry was responsible for

⁸ Washington's army arrived at Valley Forge on December 19. Keyser's compiled military service record begins in mid-March 1778, so he was certainly at Valley Forge by then.

⁹ John F. Reed, *Valley Forge Crucible of Victory* (Monmouth Beach, NJ: Philip Freneau Press, 1969), 5, 21.

¹⁰ Samuel S. Smith, *The Battle of Monmouth* (Monmouth Beach, NJ: Phillip Freneau Press, 1964), 5, 24. Keyser's reference to Monmouth Church was to St. Peter's Anglican Church, which, according to Smith, is the only building still standing in Freehold that was there during the Revolution.

¹¹ William Keyser, *Compiled Military Service Record, Revolutionary War*, List dated 8 September 1778 at White Plains. The next muster roll is dated 1 October 1778 at West Point.

¹² William Keyser, *Compiled Military Service Record, Revolutionary War*, Muster Roll for July 1778 which was dated August 4 at White Plains. Keyser's record shows that he was definitely in this unit by August 1778 and had probably joined it in July when he is shown as being "on command."

¹³ Since Keyser was carried on the muster rolls of the 2nd Virginia throughout this period, the light infantry evidently functioned as a unit only during active campaigning during the winter months its members encamped with their original regiments.

¹⁴ Harry M. Ward, *Charles Scott and the "Spirit of '76"* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 52-3. Further description of the light infantry is in John W. Wright, "The Corps of Light Infantry in the Continental Army," *The American Historical Review*, 31 (1926): 454-6.

patrolling the area between the two armies. The skirmish at Saw Mill River Bridge was one of many such engagements in Westchester County arising when these patrols resulted in American reconnaissance parties encountering the British.

Early in the morning of 16 September 1778, British Lt. Col. J. G. Simcoe, supported by Lt. Col. Banastre Tarlton and Lt. Col. Emmerick, surprised a Continental force under Col. Mordecai Gist at the bridge over the Saw Mill River near the Hudson in what is today Yonkers, New York.¹⁵ This skirmish ended in an American retreat westward across the Saw Mill River with the loss by capture of 35 men, approximately as Keyser recalled the event 54 years later. The British report on this skirmish mentions the presence of 230 "select" Virginia riflemen, undoubtedly the light infantry in which Keyser was serving.¹⁶

In preparation for winter, Washington split his army into three parts, with that containing the 2nd Virginia State Regiment going into camp at West Point, where they had located by October 1.¹⁷ About this time the regiment received a shipment of clothing from Virginia which allowed the enlisted men to have a uniform of "french-made blue coats faced red, red waistcoats, breeches of blue, green or red, silver gilt coat and vest buttons, white linen shirts, single and double knit caps, hats, black stocks, and hose."¹⁸ In November, it moved south to Middlebrook (now the town of Bound Brook¹⁹), New Jersey where it spent the winter. Keyser's records indicate that he was at Middlebrook from November 1778 through May 1779.

The British went on the offensive first in 1779, leaving New York on May 28, taking the American forts at Stony Point, New York, on the west side of the Hudson and at Verplancks Point on the opposite side of the river on June 2. The right wing of Washington's army was at Smith's Cove, about 14 miles west²⁰ of West Point, where Keyser's regiment was camped June 2. It was still there on July 9, just six days before Washington launched his daring night raid to retake Stony Point. On July 15, American light infantry under Gen. Anthony Wayne left their camp south of West Point around noon and marched south, paralleling the Hudson River to point just west of Stony Point. By 11:30 that evening they were in position and at midnight, using unloaded rifles equipped with bayonets, they stormed the fort successfully. The tactical commander was Col. Christian Febiger, and leading the vanguard on the right was a picked force of 150 men, among them William Keyser,

¹⁵ Ward, *Charles Scott*, 56 and Otto Hufeland, *Westchester County During the American Revolution 1775-1783* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1926), 261-3. The Virginia troops were on the slope of the hill where Oakland Cemetery is now located.

¹⁶ The Col. Samuel Griefs mentioned in Keyser's pension application has not been identified in spite of a search for surnames such as Greaves and phonetic variants.

¹⁷ Keyser's compiled military service record shows he was at White Plains as late as September 9.

¹⁸ *Military Collector & Historian*, 17 (1965): 86.

¹⁹ Douglas S. Freeman, *George Washington*, Vol. 5, (New York: Scribners, 1952), 88 (note 10).

²⁰ Freeman, *George Washington*, Vol. 5, 109 (note 12).

led by Lt. Col. Francois Louis de Fleury.²¹ In 30 minutes the fort was in American hands and Gen. Wayne dispatched the following note to his commander:

Dear Gen'l: The fort & garrison with Col. Johnston are ours. Our officers & men behaved like men who are determined to be free.²²

Washington came from West Point on July 17 to see the spoils of war and to review the light infantry,²³ who were to be "shavd and made clean as circumstances will permit"²⁴ for his visit. Keyser along with the other light infantry troops saw the commander-in-chief at close quarters that day.

Stony Point was not a large battle but it was the only American military success of 1779. It provided an enormous morale boost for the Continental Army by proving that Americans soldiers could defeat British regulars in the kind of combat the latter considered their specialty.

The 2nd Virginia State Regiment was at Camp Ramapan on August 3,²⁵ from which it returned to Smith's Cove by early September. The regiment remained with Washington's army through November, departing with the other Virginia regiments about December 11 for the South. Their route of march was through Trenton, Philadelphia, Lancaster, York, and Frederick, Maryland, to Fredericksburg, Virginia, where they had arrived by early February. Most of the Virginia Continental regiments were being sent to strengthen American forces at Charleston, South Carolina (only to be captured when that city fell to the British on 12 May 1780). The two state regiments, many of whose enlistments would expire by 1 March 1780, were reluctant to go to Charleston and were allowed to remain in Virginia.²⁶ William Keyser's Revolutionary service ended on or about that date, as did that of about 280 others in his regiment.²⁷

William Keyser's whereabouts immediately following his discharge from the 2nd Virginia State Regiment are not definitely known. On 24 May 1782 he was among

²¹ John R. Sellers, *The Virginia Continental Line* (Williamsburg: The Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission, 1978), 54. As can be seen from William Keyser's statement, he correctly recalled the names of his commanding officers, and thereby corroborated his own statement about being at the head of the troops which took Stony Point.

²² Henry P. Johnston, *The Storming of Stony Point on the Hudson, Midnight, July 15, 1779* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 72-85.

²³ Freeman, *George Washington*, Vol. 5, 114.

²⁴ Sons of the American Revolution Museum collections, Unland Diaries, entry for 17 July 1779.

²⁵ William Keyser, Compiled Military Service Record, Revolutionary War, muster roll for August 3 gives this location, which was probably Ramapo, New York, about a dozen miles west of Stony Point.

²⁶ Mrs. Catesby Willis Stewart, *The Life of Brigadier General William Woodford of the American Revolution* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1973), 1122-54.

²⁷ Harriet Dickins Wight Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, contains a list of the officers of the 2nd Virginia State Regiment. It states that these men were discharged in April and May, 1780. As noted above, records for Keyser's service indicate that his service would have expired 1 March 1780.

116 petitioners of Hanover County who objected to the proposed drafting of militia instead of recruiting for the army by using bounties or other inducements.²⁸ Over half of these men had already served in Continental regiments, or in other state or local units,²⁹ so their objection seems justified.

He lived in Hanover County until he moved to Bath County about 1795.³⁰ He remained in the latter county until his death in December 1837. He left a list of his children and their approximate birth dates as follows:³¹

Child	Birth Date	Marriage Information ³²
Polly	January 24, 1782	December 3, 1800 Robert Surber
John	October 10, 1784	
William	November 20, 1785	February 6, 1827 Rebeckah Stowers
Elizabeth	October 13, 1787	December 2, 1805 Robert Brinkley
Christopher	May 30, 1789	
Catherine	January 26, 1792	December 22, 1813 Roland Burns
Fleming	January 26, 1794	October 15, 1819 Nancy Morris
David	July 30, 1796	May 21, 1819 Margret Morris
James	May 1, 1799	
Sally	September 13, 1801	September 29, 1821 Jacob Karnes

²⁸ Legislative Petitions, Hanover County, 24 May 1782, Archival and Information Services Division, Library of Virginia.

²⁹ Based on a comparison of the names on the petition with those in John H. Gwathmey, *Historical Register of Virginians in the Revolution* (1938; reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1973).

³⁰ Bath County, Virginia, Deed Book I, pp. 244-5.

³¹ Revolutionary War Pension Application W3427. This includes a statement by Fleming Keyser that his father had lost the original list of his children's birthdates and had created a new list based on the birthdates of a neighbor's children. Hence the approximate nature of these dates.

³² Marriage information was taken from Bath County bonds and ministers' returns.