THE SKIRMISH AT CEDAR BRIDGE

(Excerpt from The Forgotten Years: From Yorktown to Paris 1781-1783)
By Thomas P. Farmer

The stories surrounding John Bacon have grown during the past two centuries and his infamy has become part of the lore of the New Jersey Pine Barrens. Whether he was a loyal British subject or a rogue and a criminal taking advantage of a tension-filled and tumultuous situation may never be settled. Bacon is a symbol of what can occur when a power-vacuum is created, after the major fighting has stopped and before complete order is re-established, and as such is important to the discussion of this period in New Jersey's and Ocean County's history.

Bacon appears to have confined his operations primarily to the lower part of old Monmouth County between Cedar Creek and Tuckerton. His efforts were mainly directed to plundering the dwellings of all well-known active members of the old Monmouth Militia. He and his men were well acquainted with the roads and paths through the forests, and had numerous hiding places, including cabins, caves, and such in the woods and swamps.[From the files of the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission]

Before the Long Beach Island massacre, October 1782, Bacon and his band of men had become notorious for the shooting of Lt. Joshua Studson of Toms River outside Cranberry Inlet in December 1780 and a skirmish with the Manahawkin Militia on December 3, 1781. Two militiamen were wounded, one fatally. The Long Beach Island massacre placed Bacon firmly in the crosshairs of the local patriots and militia.

Their names are known to local historians: Giberson, Davenport, Fagan and Bacon. To most others, they are simply lumped together as Pine Robbers, refugees or "Banditti." To us, they are the lowest of the low, nothing more than common criminals hiding in the vast pine area of Ocean County waiting to pounce on helpless travelers or isolated, innocent farmers. Through the years, they have been vilified and treated as an aberration in the War for Independence, when in reality, they represented a large portion of the population - those who remained loyal to the King.

In a revolution that began as a tax revolt, their property was seized for non-payment of taxes. They were branded traitors by government officials and guilty of treason. The Revolution in Ocean County was also a civil war of neighbor against neighbor, which turned into a guerilla war of the worst kind - one of atrocity and revenge. As the war drew to a close, both sides attempted to get in one last punch. A look at the final one hundred days of the war and the activities of the Loyalist leader, Captain John Bacon, offers some insight into the politics and passions of the Revolution.

Following his night action on the beach at Barnegat Light in October 1782, Bacon sailed back to New York City where he sold the captured rebel privateer ship, Alligator. He then returned to his base of operations at Little Egg Harbor to continue his campaign against rebel shipping. Near the end of December, the rebel governor, William Livingston, placed a reward on Bacon's head for his raid into Burlington County a few months before.

By late in December 1782, the word was out about Bacon's hideout in Cedar Creek. On Christmas Day, Captain Richard Shreve, with a force of six light horse and twenty infantry, left Burlington and headed toward Manahawkin. After a couple of days with no luck, they turned around to head back to Burlington. As they marched west from Manahawkin, they decided to rest at the Cedar Bridge Tavern. While doing so, Bacon and his men arrived and barricaded the bridge. Heavy fire from Bacon's men killed one man and wounded several horses.

Meanwhile, Captain Shreve had gathered his infantry and began a full-scale attack on the bridge. The patriots were winning the battle, when some of the local residents of Cedar Bridge, loyal to Bacon, joined in the battle. Shreve 's men had to stop their attack on Bacon to beat back the locals, thus giving. Bacon the opportunity to retreat into the woods. The locals surrendered to the militia and, according to various accounts, several were captured and brought to Burlington County to be tried. [From the files of the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission]

The skirmish at Cedar Bridge is arguably the last action in the Revolution during which an official militia fought the opposition.

The January 7, 1783 New Jersey Gazette reported the incident.

Captain Richard Shreve, of the Burlington County Light Horse, and Captain Edward Thomas, of the Mansfield Militia, having received information that John Bacon, with his banditti of robbers was in the neighborhood of Cedar Creek ... collected a party of men and went immediately in pursuit of them. They met them at the Cedar Creek bridge. The Refugees ... had greatly the advantage of Captains Shreve and Thomas' party ... but it was nevertheless determined to charge them.

The onset on the part of the militia was furious, and opposed by the Refugees ... for a considerable time, several of them having been guilty of such enormous crimes as to have no expectation of mercy should they surrender. They were, nevertheless, on the point of giving way when the militia was unexpectedly fired upon from a party of the inhabi-tants ... who had suddenly come to Bacon's assistance. This put the militia into some confusion and gave the Refugees time to get off ... The militia are still in pursuit of the Refugees and have taken seven of the inhabitants prisoners and are now in Burlington jail, some of whom have con-fessed the fact.

Because Bacon attacked the militia, rather than hide and let them leave the shore area, claims that he was a lowly criminal are rightly weakened. And, the fact that the local inhabitants aided him shows the complexity of the residents' loyalties, even at this late point in the war. The militia failed to find Bacon, who returned to New York City where newspapers printed his version of his victory.

By March 1783, rumors swept the colonies. The war would soon be over. Bacon left the safety of the British-held New York City and again returned to the shore. Joel Cook, whose brother had been killed at the December skirmish with Bacon, wanted to settle the score.

Cook went to Captain John Steward of Arneytown (Pemberton) in Burlington County to ask for his help. Steward and four other men agreed to make one last attempt to take

Bacon before word of the peace treaty arrived. On April 2, [1783] the party entered the Jersey Pines. Between West Creek and Clam Town, the party came upon the house of William Rose, used occasionally as a tavern. Cook and Stewart crept up to the window. Inside, they saw Bacon sitting by himself, his musket between his knees.

Steward entered the tavern first. Catching Bacon by surprise, Stewart pointed his musket at Bacon and ordered him to surrender. Bacon jumped to his feet and in close quarters of the tavern, attempted to prime and cock his musket. Stewart, who could have fired and killed him instantly, chose instead to take him alive. Stewart grabbed Bacon and the two men fell to the floor. Outfought, Bacon surrendered and asked for quarter. Still holding on to Bacon tightly, Stewart called Cook to join them; Cook entered the room from behind the two and ran Bacon through with his bayonet. Bacon groaned; his body grew limp, and Steward allowed it to collapse to the floor, thinking the prisoner had fainted.

Without saying a word to Stewart, Cook went outside to tell the others. Stewart was standing over Bacon when suddenly the Loyalist revived and jumped up. Stewart tried to block his escape by pushing a table in front of the door, but Bacon shoved it aside. As Steward regained his feet, he picked up his gun and fired. The musket ball passed through Bacon, killing him instantly, then passed through the door and wounded Cook on the other side.

This account is both Stewart's and Cook's official explanation of why Bacon was bayoneted and shot from behind. What really happened the night of April 3 in that tavern will most likely never be known, but many witnessed what the men then did with Bacon's body. The victors dragged their trophy back to Burlington County where one last act of revenge was planned.

During the long ride from the shore, Stewart and Cook decided on a fitting sendoff for the hated Bacon. They would not lay him to rest in the holy ground of a church cemetery. Instead, he would be buried under the main road of Jacobstown where the daily traffic of wagons and horses would prevent his soul from getting any peace.

As a crowd watched the road being dug up, Bacon's brother arrived. After many pleas, he was able to convince the good citizens to turn the body over to him for private burial. The same New Jersey Gazette that proclaimed the glorious news of peace and independence trumpeted the demise of the "notorious" Loyalist John Bacon.