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My Propositus



“Take my Case into your Consideration...”

The Incredible Tale of Lieutenant Abraham Wood

By Randall Duren Young (Pennsylvania)

The search for an eligible propositus upon whose record I could gain admittance to the Society of the Cincinnati turned into an incredible journey with a number of unanticipated twists and turns. Those of you who have overcome obstacles when researching your own propositus will certainly understand. As a teacher and writer, I consider myself an American history buff, but I knew little of the Society of the Cincinnati until I met William Russell Raiford in 2006. We both live in Thomasville, Georgia, and share a mutual interest in genealogy and history. During a discussion with him I learned about the Society, and of his service as a president general of the Society.

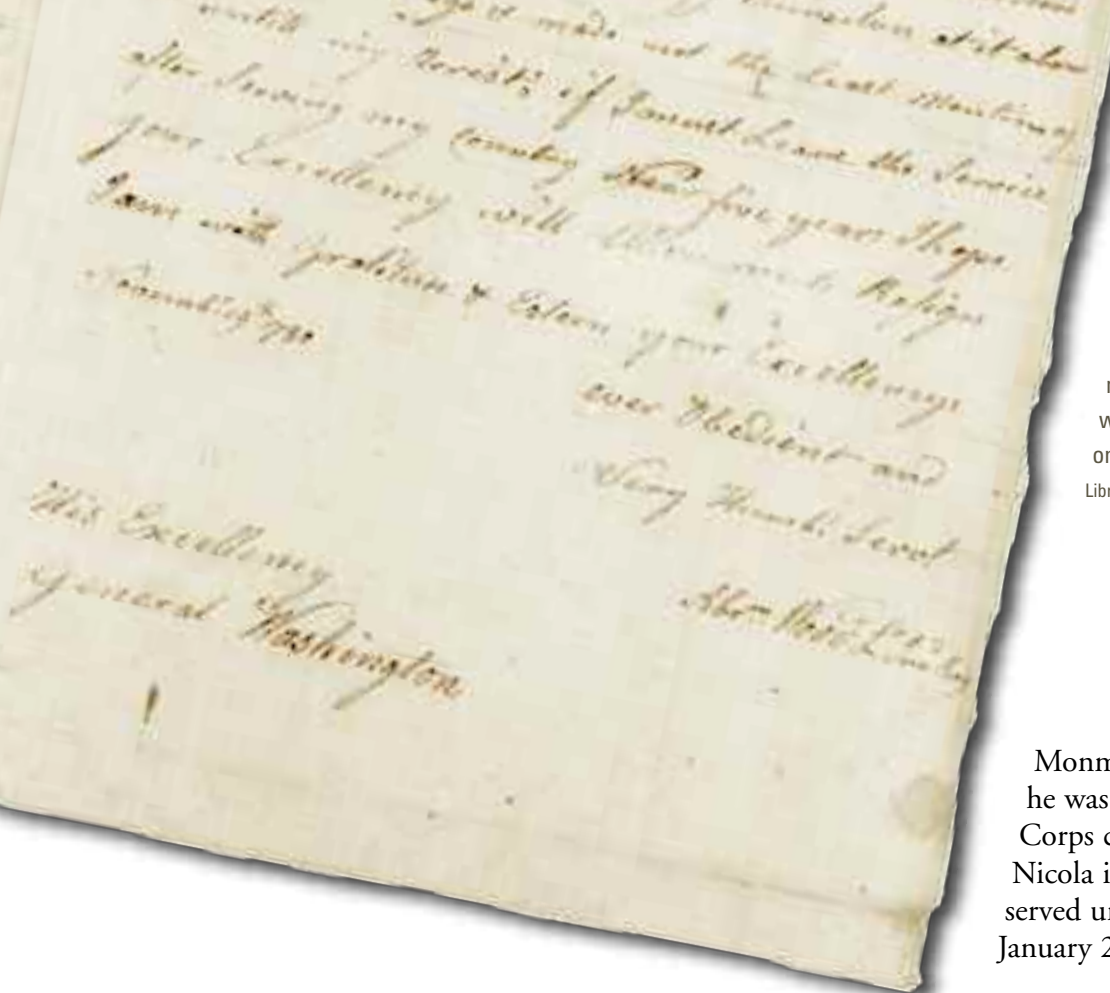
The discovery of an organization founded by Continental officers immediately interested me. I knew, through my own genealogical research, that my fifth great-grandfather was Capt. James Wilson who served in the 10th North Carolina and 4th South Carolina regiments of the Continental Line. It seemed like a perfect fit and an easy path to membership. But nothing is ever as easy as it seems—the search for an eligible propositus, in my case, turned into quite an odyssey. One of my best friends in Thomasville, Cordell Lee Bragg III (Chip), had overheard the conversation regarding the Society between Bill Raiford and myself. Another history zealot, he immediately began researching his family lines and found an eligible propositus in seemingly no

time flat. My “easy” path, however, ran into a dead end when I discovered that Captain Wilson’s line was already taken.

It seemed I was stuck. Not aware of any other eligible Continental officers in my family tree, I turned to the ladies of the local Daughters of the American Revolution and United Daughters of the Confederacy, who pride themselves on researching bloodlines. After months of work, a number of ancestors were found who served in the militia, including several militia officers — but no Continental officers. I doggedly kept up the hunt and joined several online genealogy websites in the hopes of being able to connect to a line that would lead to an available propositus. I went down every rabbit hole that appeared to have any chance of providing a positive outcome. None of my efforts were successful.

After several years of holding out hope (it was now 2015) I was ready to admit that I had exhausted all avenues and resigned myself to the fact that I simply didn’t have a qualifying propositus. At an impasse, I gave up the search, moved on, and admired the Society from afar. About that time, through a set of odd circumstances, coupled with Chip Bragg’s persistent research, a previously unknown and hence unexplored limb of my family tree emerged. A small glimmer of hope flickered. Far out on that limb was one Abraham Wood

Accused of running a disorderly “tippling house” near camp, Lt. Abraham Wood ran afoul of the discipline and good order of the Continental Army. This detail from a 1762 scene by John S.C. Schaak suggests the spirit of a well regulated tavern, but sometimes things got out hand. Private Collection.



"If I must Leave the Service after Serving my Country Near five years I hope your Excellency will Allow me to Resign." So Abraham Wood wrote to George Washington, on November 19, 1780.

Library of Congress

Monmouth. On October 6, 1778, he was assigned to the Invalid Corps commanded by Col. Lewis Nicola in Philadelphia where he served until his separation on January 2, 1782.²

of Pennsylvania—my sixth-great-grand uncle. I was encouraged to find that Abraham Wood was unrepresented.

Abraham Wood was appointed corporal in the 4th Pennsylvania Battalion under Col. Anthony Wayne on August 1, 1776, as part of the Fort Ticonderoga garrison. He was commissioned ensign on January 1, 1777, in the 5th Pennsylvania Regiment commanded by Col. Francis Johnston, and served in Capt. John Christy's company. On March 24, 1777, he was promoted to second lieutenant in Capt. Isaac Seely's company. He also served as regimental quartermaster in 1777 and 1778.¹ Lieutenant Wood was present with his regiment during the Morristown encampment in 1777, and on September 11 of that year he was wounded in the Battle of Brandywine, hospitalized, taken prisoner, and later exchanged. Wood took the oath of allegiance to the United States on May 12, 1778, but I have not learned whether his health had sufficiently recovered for him to participate in the June 28, 1778, Battle of

After so much time, research and effort it seemed that my propositus had finally been found. All official records confirmed his eligibility. The story could stop here, but then we would miss the most interesting part. Life got a bit more complicated for Lieutenant Wood. A court martial convened by Colonel Nicola on November 14, 1780, found him guilty of "Conduct unbecoming the Character of an Officer and Gentleman" on the charge of "keeping a tippling house and shuffle board and entertaining Soldiers" and sentenced him to be cashiered from the army.³

Tippling house and shuffleboard? First, I never knew that something as mundane as shuffleboard could be considered "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman," much less a cornerstone in a court martial charge against a military officer (or anyone else for that matter). After a little research I discovered that while considered a game of skill, shuffleboard was a popular gambling game during the eighteenth century. Today we usually think of shuffleboard as a game played on the ground or the deck of a cruise ship,

but for hundreds of years it was a tavern game played on long tables, often built for the game. It reached a peak in popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. Shuffleboard (sometimes “shovel board”) was brought to America by British colonists. A tippling house was a place, often a private home, where alcohol was sold by the glass (in contrast with a tavern, where food and lodging were typically offered, although a tippling house was sometimes referred to as a tavern). Eighteenth-century governments tried to regulate tippling houses and required licenses to run them, but the regulations were often evaded or ignored.

We often picture our Revolutionary ancestors sitting in a tavern in a city like Philadelphia, Boston, or Charleston, the air in the room thick with the haze of pipe smoke while the matters of the day were discussed and passionately debated. The concept of someone serving ale or spirits as a business in their home was something I must admit I had never considered. Given the fact that many of our patriot ancestors came from rural areas where tippling houses were common, it should be no surprise that such places could be irresistible as gathering places away from camp for soldiers and officers. And in these places rules against drinking, gambling, and fighting were sometimes broken. My realization of this through the experience of my own ancestor was just another lesson learned.

The affair, as described by Abraham Wood in a letter of appeal to Gen. George Washington dated November 19, 1780, began at the tavern kept by his wife to support herself and their children. Ten days earlier four men well-dressed in civilian clothes had shown up at the tavern requesting “entertainment,” presumably in the form of alcoholic beverages and gaming. Sometime after nine o’clock the men settled their tab and were headed for bed when Abraham

arrived on the scene. Some dispute arose and it became evident that the men were soldiers. His wife did not entertain soldiers, he informed them, at which time he was subjected by one of them to “a great deal Insolent Language till,” he said, “I was Oblig’d to Confine him and ordered the others away.”⁴ One of the other men, a sergeant, begged that they be allowed to remain and not be sent to their barracks as they were volunteers from Virginia and had no blankets. When other officers present in the house pleaded with Mrs. Wood on behalf of the detainees and lent them blankets she finally relented. There they stayed for the rest of the night and departed early the next morning. Abraham released the man from confinement after extracting a promise of good behavior.⁵

The Virginians repaid the Woods’ hospitality by complaining to their commanding officer, Col. Christian Febiger, a capable leader, native of Denmark, and a confidant of General Washington who would be an original member of the Society of the Cincinnati. Febiger in turn lodged a complaint with Colonel Nicola.⁶ The situation rapidly spun out of Lieutenant Wood’s control. Colonel Nicola, who Wood characterized as “glad of the opportunity,” placed Wood under arrest after what seems to have been a cursory investigation. Nicola convened a court martial on November 14, 1780, naming Febiger president of the court and himself as prosecutor. Wood’s objection to Febiger as presiding officer — he was the first one complained to — was overruled.⁷ On the morning of November 15, Col. Nicola sent his physician and the judge advocate to determine Wood’s suitability for trial, as he was ill. The doctor left him with some “powders,” and not long after, Colonel Nicola, the judge advocate, and another officer of the court returned to take down Wood’s defense, which he freely agreed to submit in writing after being granted another delay.⁸

His grounds for appeal to General Washington, besides the presence of Febiger, was that he was “Very much Afflicted with a Nervous fever & Rhumatick Pains” that he could scarcely attend the proceedings. Moreover, he contended, he had asked for and been granted time to prepare his defense but did not receive a copy of the charges against him until nine o’clock that night, by which time he was “Greatly Afflicted with the fever & Pains in my head & Breast.” By morning he was so sick that he could scarcely see and was therefore unable to prepare for the proceedings, so he sent a message to the court explaining his indisposition and requested additional time. The court’s response was a demand that he attend immediately, to which he respectfully replied that he could not attend without hazarding his life.⁹ To Wood’s astonished consternation, he found when he tried to deliver his written defense that the court had been dissolved and that he had been found guilty without being allowed to present his side of the argument. His only recourse was an appeal to the commanding general.¹⁰

“I hope your Excellency will take my Case into your Consideration” he wrote to General Washington, adding that he was “Contious [conscious] of having ever done my Duty as a Soldier & Officer in the field with honour & Reputation... before my wounds & Infirmities Ocasioned me to be transfer’d to the Corps of Invalids Commanded by Coll Nicola who has Put me Under an Arrest on Account of my wife keeping Tavern & he Says Shuffleboard....” According to Wood, Colonel Nicola had been aware of his wife’s business for at least eighteen months and had made no mention of it until now. “If I must Leave the Service after Serving my Country Near five years,” said Wood, “I hope your Excellency will Allow me to Resign. I am with Gratitude & Esteem your Excellencys ever Obedient and Very Humbl Servt....”¹¹ The sentence was upheld by General Washington on

January 2, 1781, but whether on account of his personal appeal to the commanding general, his good service of long duration that included his being wounded in battle, or perhaps as a result of a repair of his relationship with Colonel Nicola, the sentence was not carried out. Abraham Wood remained in the army until January 2, 1782, when he was given the requested opportunity to resign.¹²

Lt. Abraham Wood was, in spite of it all, an eligible propositus. Wasting no time, Chip and Bill eagerly assisted me in accumulating the necessary documentation with which to seek membership in the Pennsylvania Society. With the paperwork submitted, little remained but to anxiously await the result of the application. Within a few weeks, I received an email which read, “Lt. Wood, you are an officer of worth. My temper got in way, for which I can only plead stress. Your loyalty to our cause and the corps outweighs by far what should have been a minor issue, that I allowed to so escalate that his Excellency the General was asked to intervene. I ask you to accept my regrets for the inconvenience that this has cost you over the passing of time. I remain, Sir, your humble and obedient servant, Lewis Nicola, Col., Invalid Corps.” This was my notice that my membership had been approved, sent by Pennsylvania Society membership chairman Cliff Lewis.

And Cliff’s propositus? None other than Col. Lewis Nicola. Cliff had written my letter of acceptance in the spirit of his own ancestor — the very one who had instigated a court martial against mine. Adding to the already incredible tale that was the search for my propositus, the man who was in charge of approving my membership was already aware of the situation between Colonel Nicola and my Lieutenant Wood. He was familiar with the documentation regarding the court martial, and according to Lewis, it had always bothered him. That our

paths would cross over 230 years after our own ancestors' paths had crossed so strongly, is fateful to me, if not downright providential.

Perhaps on account of ill-health and infirmity, all derived from the service of his country, Abraham Wood was never able to avail himself of the opportunity to become a member of the Society of the Cincinnati. He died sometime prior to September 14, 1785, the date on which his wife, Mary, signed as executrix a settlement for a balance owed for subsistence. Needless to say, this knowledge makes my inclusion into our One Society of Friends even more important for me personally. As fantastically convoluted as his tale might be, Lt. Abraham Wood is clearly an officer

worthy of being represented and I am proud to claim him as my *propositus*.¹³

To say this has been enlightening would be an understatement. One side of the story felt a wrong done by his ancestor in haste was finally righted, and the other finally received a measure of justice. I am able to represent my blood and our family in the Society of the Cincinnati, having in the process discovered an amazing tale of my own ancestor that I might otherwise have never known. Somehow I have a feeling Colonel Nicola and Lieutenant Wood are smiling down at the irony of it all.

The author is indebted to Clifford Butler Lewis for his editorial assistance.

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Co., 1906), 10, 19–21, 34–35.
2. Wood, compiled service record; Nellie Protsman Waldenmaier, *Some of the Earliest Oaths of Allegiance to the United States of America* (Baltimore, Md.: Reprinted for Clearfield Co. by Genealogical Pub. Co., 1993), 55; Samuel Hazard, ed., *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania*, vol. 12 (Harrisburg, Pa.: Theo. Renn & Co., 1853), 51; Thomas Lynch Montgomery, *Pennsylvania Archives, 5th Ser.*, vol. 4 (Harrisburg, Pa: Harrisburg Pub. Co., 1906), 6, 7, 96, 139, 149; John Blair Linn and William H. Egle, *Pennsylvania in the War of the*

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3. John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington 21* (Washington: GPO, 1937), 46–47.
4. Abraham Wood to George Washington, November 19, 1780, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741–1799: Series 4, General Correspondence, 1697–1799, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*; Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington 21*, 46–47.

8. Wood to Washington, November 19, 1780, Library of Congress.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*; Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington 21*, 46–47.
11. Wood to Washington, November 19, 1780, Library of Congress.
12. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington 21*, 46–47; Montgomery, *Pennsylvania Archives, 5th Ser.*, vol. 4, 7, 96.
13. Wood, compiled service record.