

**“We had a small attack ... with our Riflemen ...”**  
**A Pennsylvania Soldier’s 1776 Letter**

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“Petit guerre” was the rule of the day for the bulk of the American War for Independence, by comparison large battles or set-piece sieges were few and far between. Pennsylvania militiaman Jacob Krider off-handedly and chillingly described one small, deadly summer 1776 action in a rare extant private soldier’s letter.

First, some background. In August 1833, the year of his veteran’s pension deposition, Krider was “a resident of Southwark in the county of Philadelphia ... residing between Front Street and Swanson Street back of Stump’s Brewery, aged seventy seven years and Ten months ...” Having been “born in the Northern Liberties, County of Philadelphia, on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of September 1755 ... he continued to reside ... in the Northern Liberties and afterwards in Moyamensing until the year 1776 where in the month of July ... he entered the service of the United States as a volunteer in the Company [of Associators] Commanded by Captain George Goodwin of Passyuink township, Rope Maker ...” (At this period of the war the Associators were Pennsylvania’s citizen-soldiers, comparable to the other states’ militia.) Krider went on to succinctly describe his military service:<sup>1</sup>

[Goodwin’s] company marched under the Command of Col. John Dickinson, called the Pennsylvania Farmer: - The majors were named Jacob Morgan & --- Coates. The Chief Commander was Governor Livingston of New Jersey. We went from Philadelphia in a vessel to Burlington, thence marched through Princeton and Brunswick & Elizabethtown Point, where we encamped and remained about six or seven weeks, then returned by the same route to Philadelphia ...

Krider mentioned several people in his deposition, but only two can be identified, William Livingston (later governor of New Jersey) and John Dickinson. In June 1776 Livingston left Philadelphia, where he had been serving as a New Jersey Congressional delegate, to take up the position of New Jersey militia brigadier general. Livingston then commanded New Jersey and Pennsylvania militia forces along the New Jersey coast, serving separately from Brigadier General Hugh Mercer’s Flying Camp militia. Jacob Krider’s regimental commander Colonel John Dickinson was also well known, having participated in Delaware and Pennsylvania politics since the 1760’s, and taken an active part in the 1765 Stamp Act debates. Best known for the 1767-68 “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,” published in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* newspaper, he opposed separation from England as a member of the second Continental Congress (1775-76), refusing to sign the Declaration of Independence. Serving with the Pennsylvania militia in summer 1776, he later resigned his position, but seems to have served as a private soldier in a Delaware militia unit during the 1777 Brandywine Campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Some details of Krider’s deposition can be fleshed out and corroborated by other documents. The Pennsylvania Associators under Dickinson arrived in mid-July 1776 to serve under Livingston, and Colonel Dickinson was present at Elizabethtown, New

Jersey by July 25<sup>th</sup>, when he co-signed Livingston's general orders.<sup>3</sup> On 1 August, "9 oClock at Night," General Livingston wrote Dickinson,

Sir I have just received Information that a number of People, who have held a Correspondence with the Enemy ... on Staten Island, design to go over to them entirely this Night. They live up Hackinsack River & are to go down the Bay ... I m[ust] beg you will give orders to have a proper Number of Men well armed to go over the Bay to the Bergen Shore ... immediately, that with the Commanding officer there, these Rascals may be taken. It is expected they will be moving as soon as it is dark.

The outcome of the affair is not known, but Colonel Dickinson noted on the bottom of Livingston's letter, "The Bearer Lieutenant Crane ask'd only eight men. I ordered twelve well armd and equipt immediately to attend him."<sup>4</sup>

While the skirmish described below by Jacob Krider was unconnected with the August 1<sup>st</sup> operation, it likely occurred shortly before or after. Neither engagement is noted in Howard H. Peckham's *The Toll of Independence: Engagements & Battle Casualties of the American Revolution*. Here is Private Krider's August 1776 letter:<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth Town Point

Dear Father and Mother I now embrace the following opportunity of writing to you hoping these few lines will find you in a good state of health as I am at present thanks be to God [illegible word]. I received yours of the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, which gave me a great deal of pleasure. We are situated in a very pleasant orchard about a quarter of a mile from the [Staten] Island where our enemy lies, we had a small attack here, with our Riflemen making an attack to take a bridge that lay out upon the marsh directly opposite the island. there was Eight of our men sent over, but they being too well intrrenched they were obliged to retreat with the loss of one man, he being too resolute, went up to the bridge, and as he retreated along the side of a small creek, close to the bridge, he was shot through the cheeck, by a Negro, that was on the bridge. And as he fell one of the men stepped up saying you're done for, with that, one of our men said he shot him through the head, and said another was wounded. Dont make yourself uneasy concerning me, as laying so close to our enemy, but I trust in God for the protection of us all who is able to Keep us from all danger if it pleases his good will as I trust in him for safety. The first attack they expect made will be at [New] York which I hope will give them [a] sufficient dose for their attack. our officers seem to be very sociable and clever, I believe would do justice to all the men if possible. we have plenty of good Beef and Bread as good as the country will produce, as for onions or other nescenaries they are very scarce here, none to be had for Love or money, Milk is the only plenty article we have, and that is threepence or three coppers per quart. I have nothing more strange to relate you of at present. W. Bowers desires to be remembered to his wife and family, letting them know he received the money sent him by Mr Sink thirty shillings he is very sorry he could not give them a better description of his situation, just coming off Garde they must excuse him. I have nothing more to relate at present, but remain your ever loving Son.

Remember me to all  
enquiring friends

Jacob Krider

Despite the best intentions, Dickinson's short-term men were unenthusiastic soldiers. On 12 August William Livingston wrote General George Washington, "A Considerable body of the [New Jersey] Militia must be kept here to supply the Place of the Pennsylvania Associators who are deserting their Post in Considerable Numbers notwithstanding the most spirited exertions of their Officers, and particularly their Colonel [John Dickinson] whose Behaviour does honor to his Province in particular and America in general."<sup>6</sup>

Jacob Krider went on to serve with a Pennsylvania militia company, building fortifications at Kensington, just north of Philadelphia, in December 1776, again with the militia in 1777 at the Brandywine and Germantown battles, and immediately after the last action, for two months "in the artillery service."<sup>7</sup>

**My thanks to Gregory T. Knouff for bringing the Krider letter to my attention in his excellent book, *The Soldiers' Revolution: Pennsylvanians in Arms and the Forging of Early American Society* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).**

1. 19 August 1833 deposition, Jacob Krider pension file, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty - Land - Warrant Application Files, National Archives Microfilm Publication M804, W10186 (hereafter cited as Krider pension, Revolutionary War Pension Application Files, National Archives).
2. Carl E. Prince and Dennis P. Ryan, eds., *The Papers of William Livingston*, vol. 1 (Trenton, N.J.: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1979), 16, 55-56 (hereafter cited as Prince and Ryan, *Livingston Papers*). "A Biography of John Dickinson 1732-1808," Department Alfa-Informatica, University of Groningen, Netherlands (World Wide Web), <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/jdickenson/dickenso.htm>. See also John Dickinson, 1732-1808 (WWW), <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/dickinson.htm>. Eric I. Manders, "Notes on Troop Units in the Flying Camp, 1776," *Military Collector & Historian*, vol. XXVI, no. 1 (Spring 1974), 9-13.
3. Washington to President of the Continental Congress, 14 July 1776, "I have sent orders to the Commanding Officer of the Pennsylvania Militia [John Dickinson] to March to Amboy as there remaining at Trenton can be of no good Service." John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799*, 5 (Washington, DC, 1932), 276. William Livingston to Hugh Mercer, 15 July 1776, "If you have the Command of the Pennsylvania Troops now at Trenton, it would be a prodigious ease to our people here to order them up without delay." Prince and Ryan, *Livingston Papers*, vol. 1, 99, 105.
4. *Ibid.*, 112.
5. Howard H. Peckham, ed, *The Toll of Independence: Engagements & Battle Casualties of the American Revolution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974). Jacob Krider to his parents, August 1776 (copy of original letter), Krider pension, Revolutionary War Pension Application Files, National Archives.
6. Prince and Ryan, *Livingston Papers*, vol. 1,
7. 19 August 1833 deposition, Krider pension, Revolutionary War Pension Application Files, National Archives).