

Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick and His Teachers in the Revolution¹

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Elisha Cullen Dick was born on 15 March 1762 in Chester Co., Pennsylvania according to a great grandson, J.A. Pearce.² He has long been honored as a distinguished citizen of Alexandria and well-known as one of the physicians entrusted with the care of George Washington in his final illness. On the surface, there seemed to be little prospect of proving that he served in the Revolution. For one thing, he was quite young, just turned 13 when the Revolution began. For another, he was interred in the Quaker burial ground in Alexandria. However, there were other reasons to believe he would have supported the Revolution and provided service. He became a Quaker only in 1812 and was not a pacifist in his younger years. In fact, he saw active duty as the commander of Captain Dick's Troop of Cavalry, Virginia Militia in the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794.³ For another, his father and teachers were ardent patriots. Archibald Dick, his father, twice took the Oath of Allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the second a slightly different oath required of office holders.⁴ He was appointed Assistant Forage Master on 5 April 1780.⁵ In 1780 and 1781 Elisha Dick studied under Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and subsequently under Dr. William Shippen, who had been Director-General of Hospitals for the Continental Army.⁶ Finally, the Pennsylvania Militia Act of 1777 imposed an obligation on men between the ages of 16 and 53. They were enrolled in the militia, were required to serve two months of active duty, and were subject to being drafted.

Elisha Dick turned 18 in 1780, a year when we know he was studying in Philadelphia. It is here we find record of him serving in the militia:⁷

Private, 5th Class, 5th Company (Capt. Jacob Martin), 4th Battalion (Lt. Col. Paul Coxe), Philadelphia City (Pennsylvania) Militia, 1780 or 1781. Listed as Elisha Dick.

Private, 7th Class, 8th Company (Capt. John Cornish), 4th Battalion (Lt. Col. Paule Coxe), Philadelphia City (Pennsylvania) Militia, 1780 or 1781. Listed as Doct. Dick (although he did not receive his Bachelor of Medicine until 1782).

There is no record of Elisha Dick serving on active duty in any campaigns during the Revolution.

Some might wonder about Elisha Dick's change in companies and classes. Those with Pennsylvania ancestors will recognize that such changes were normal, but still might not be able to explain them. When I started Pennsylvania research, I thought my ancestor might have moved within the county. I then found too many ancestors changing units and thought the might be re-organizing the militia. The explanation is found within the Pennsylvania Militia Act of 1777. Each county was required to organize its militia into battalions of eight companies each. The field officers were elected by the men for three years. Seniority of the colonels was determined by lot. The battalion of colonel with the winning lot was designated as the First Battalion, the battalion of the colonel with second-place lot was designated as the Second Battalion, etc. New elections were to be held in 1780 and lots were again drawn. This would result in a renumbering of battalions. For example, the officers and men of the First Battalion at the beginning of 1780 might suddenly appear in the Fourth Battalion based on the drawing.

Company officers within a battalion were also elected and the numbers of companies reflected the drawing of lots for seniority by officers. Each company was divided into eight classes, also based on lots. Lots were drawn again in 1780 for companies and classes.

The permanent rolls of battalions were recorded on general returns. If a man is listed on such a roll, it is evidence of service acceptable to DAR for military service, but not direct evidence of active duty. When the militia men were called to active duty they were called by class, rather than company. The first class of each company would be called to duty and reorganized into an active-duty company, and the companies would be organized into an active duty battalion. Men would suddenly have different commanding officers, and officers suddenly commanded men who had never served under them. A man might appear on a general return in one company and battalion, then appear on the roll of company in active duty with different officers, and then on another general return with the original officers, and after 1780 a general return in a class, company, and battalion with different numbers. In some drafts, more than one or even every class was called out at once.

When the first class was called to active duty, the captain of the first company, first lieutenant of the second company, second lieutenant of the third company, and the ensign of the fourth company were called to duty. Field officers were called to duty in the same rotation. At the end of active duty, men returned to their permanent organizations. Sometime men, including officers, would hire substitutes, further complicating rolls of units on active duty.

Elisha Dick was probably walking a tightrope while studying medicine, for his teachers Dr. Benjamin Rush and Dr. William Shippen were bitter enemies. The enmity involved a third Pennsylvania physician who also taught at the medical school of the College of Philadelphia, Dr. John Morgan.

Morgan was a very well-trained and able physician, but a rather sensitive character. Shippen was an operator. The two men clashed in the 1760s when Shippen publicly announced that he was the founder of the medical school at the College of Philadelphia and would be offering lectures that covered material on which Morgan planned to lecture. Morgan his own planned lectures in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.⁸ Later when Rush dedicated his thesis to seven friends and teachers, he listed Shippen ahead of Morgan. Morgan was displeased. Making sure that Rush had something for future reference, Morgan wrote 12 page letter on the obligations of friendship.⁹

Morgan was appointed Director-General of and Chief Physician of Hospital on 17 October 1775. He tackled a wide range of serious problems, some of which proved insolvable. These included availability of medicine and supplies as well as organizational issues such as the relationship and authority of the Director-General and the regimental surgeons and hospitals. Many of the organizational issues were referred to Congress, which was not eager to recognize or solve the problems. Dr. William Shippen,

Jr., Morgan's old nemesis, was appointed Chief Physician of the Flying Camp on 15 July 1776. The failure of Congress to resolve the relationship and authority of the Director-General gave Shippen maneuvering room. Shippen soon claimed authority over Continental medical establishments in New Jersey. In contrast to Morgan's reports to Congress, Shippen reported no problems and all was well. Morgan appealed to Congress to resolve the relationship with Shippen and basically lost. On November 28, 1776 Shippen was given authority over the Continental medical establishment west of the Hudson. Washington was camped west of the Hudson, giving Shippen much greater responsibility than Morgan. Shippen wasted no time in claiming medical supplies west of the Hudson that Morgan had worked hard to assemble. The maneuvering continued.

On January 9, 1777 Congress dismissed Morgan from any further service in his office and on April 11, 1777 appointed new officers of the Hospital Department.¹⁰ William Shippen, Jr. was unanimously appointed Director-General for all military hospitals for the armies of the United States. Benjamin Rush was appointed Surgeon-General of the hospital in the Middle Department. Formal charges had not been brought against Morgan, much less a hearing conducted. Morgan requested a hearing, but for long it fell on deaf ears. Morgan then published a defense of his conduct, in which he bitterly attacked Shippen. Congress finally considered Morgan's case and on June 12, 1779 resolved "...That Congress are satisfied with the conduct of Dr. John Morgan while acting as director-general and physician in chief in the general hospitals of the United States; and the this resolution be published."¹¹ Morgan was not re-instated and Shippen remain in his position.

This only ended a phase of the controversy. On June 15th Congress referred charges by Dr. Morgan against Dr. Shippen for malpractices and misconduct in office and referred the matter to the commander-in-chief.¹² Morgan was no longer alone in the fight against, however. By now Benjamin Rush complained that Shippen did would set foot in a hospital and charged Shippen with ignorance, incompetence, and dishonesty. For example, Rush claimed that Shippen had bought wine, kept it with hospital stores, and then sold it for a profit. Shippen defended himself by claiming, "No fatal disease prevails in the hospitals, and very few die and the hospitals are in very good order."¹³ These statements, however, were simply untrue.

Dr. John Witherspoon, Chairman of the Medical Committee of the Continental Congress, told Rush that either he or Shippen must go. Rush responded undiplomatically.

Do not think to terrify me into a resignation by fear of being dismissed by the Congress. You have suffered enough in the opinion of the public by dismissing Dr.

Morgan without a trial. I dare you to dismiss me in the same manner.

Witherspoon informed Rush that he must go.¹⁴ Rush resigned on April 30, 1778.

Shippen was tried in 1780. Both Morgan and Rush testified against him. Shippen was acquitted by one vote, but the decision of the court did not clear his name. The court ventured the opinion that "...doctor Shippen did speculate in and sell hospital stores, that is, stores proper for hospitals whilst he was purveyor general: which conduct they

consider highly improper, and justly reprehensible,” but that the charges had not been clearly established.¹⁵ Notwithstanding a clear vindication, Shippen resumed his duties.

Although Elisha Dick was not part of the medical department of the Continental army, he studied with two of the three disputants before the Revolution had ended.

Elisha Dick is perhaps best known as one of the physicians summoned to Mt. Vernon at the time of George Washington’s final illness. Dr. James Craik was summoned first and was the attending physician.¹⁶ Dr. Craik recognized that the illness was serious and sent for two consulting physicians, first Dr. Gustavus Brown and then Dr. Elisha Dick. Dick opposed continued bleeding of Washington and recommended a tracheotomy. The two senior physicians did not concur. Brown wrote to Craik on 21 January 1800,

Sir: I have lately met Dr. Dick again in consultation and high opinion that I formed of him when we were in conference last month, concerning the situation of our Illustrious friend, has been confirmed. You remember how, by his clear reasoning and evident knowledge of the cause of certain symptoms after the examination of the General, he assured us that it was not really quinsy, which we supposed it to be, but a violent inflammation of the membranes of the throat, which it had almost closed, and which if not immediately arrested would result in his death. You must remember he was averse to bleeding the General, and I have often thought that if we had acted accordingly to his suggestion, when he said, "he needs all his strength - bleeding will diminish it", and taken no more blood from him, our good friend might have been alive now. But we were governed by the best light we had: we thought we were right, and so we were justified.¹⁷

After Washington’s death, William Cobette blamed Benjamin Rush’s medical theory in the *Porcupine Gazette*.¹⁸ It is ironic that the only physician summoned to Mt. Vernon who opposed the bleeding was a student of Rush.

Elisha Dick’s documented service in the American Revolution was in the militia as a plain soldier. His teachers, however, included two men who held the high positions in the medical department of the Continental Army: William Shippen and Benjamin Rush. Their service was marked by bitter hostility that undoubtedly was difficult for students of the two men after they had left service.

¹ This paper was the basis for a talk given to the Dr. Elisha Dick Chapter DAR on December 1, 2012 celebrating their 75th anniversary.

² Letter from J.A. Peirce to Dr. A.M. Toner, 20 August 1885, original document in Biographical File on Dr. Elisha Dick, Kate Waller Barrett Branch, Alexandria Public Libraries. Peirce was a great grandson of Dr. Dick. Some sources, including his death notice, place his birth in the 1750s.

³ Compiled Service Records of Soldiers in Volunteer Organizations, 1784-1811, National Archives

⁴ Williams, Richard T & Mildred C. Williams: *Oaths of Allegiance: Chester County, 1777-1785*, Newtown, PA, Will-Britt, 1987, pp. 32, 99.

⁵ Pennsylvania Archives, Colonial Series, Vol. 10, pp. 744, 747, Series 2, p. 615.

⁶ Letter from J.A. Peirce to Dr. A.M. Toner, 20 August 1885.

⁷ Revolutionary War Military Abstract Card File, Pennsylvania State Archives.

⁸ Bell, Whitfield J., Jr.: *John Morgan: Continental Doctor*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1965, pp. 141-142.

⁹ Bell, p. 143.

¹⁰ *Journals of the American Congress, Vol. 2*, Way and Gideon, Washington, 1823, pp. 7, 87.

¹¹ *Journals of the American Congress, Vol. 3*, Way and Gideon, Washington, 1823, p. 307.

¹² *Journals of the American Congress, Vol. 3*, pp. 308, 510.

¹³ Binger, Carl: *Revolutionary Doctor: Benjamin Rush (1746-1813)*, W.W. Norton Co., New York, 1966, p. 140.

¹⁴ Binger, pp. 141-142.

¹⁵ Binger, p. 143.

¹⁶ For further details about last illness of George Washington, see David R. Curfman's "The Medical History of the Father of our Country," 1999. A copy of the paper is posted at:

http://www.founderspatriots.org/articles/gw_medical_history.htm

Dr. Curfman was a distinguished member of the District of Columbia Society, Sons of the American Revolution.

¹⁷ Quoted in Curfman, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ Binger, p. 246.