

The Doan Gang

From the mid-1770s to the mid-1780's, Bucks County was terrorized by the infamous Doan brothers. The gang was initially comprised of 5 Quaker brothers and a cousin from Plumsteadville, less than a 10 minute drive from Orr's Ford. One can clearly imagine the Doan's wandering through the creek adjacent to the property 225 years ago.

Moses Doan left the Plumsteadville farm of his father, Joseph, after a family disagreement. At that time, Bucks County was home to many self-sufficient Quaker farmers who did not support the imminent war with England. The Quakers did not depend on trade, and did not share the anger of the many colonists rebelling over King George's taxes. By 1774, Moses had convinced his brothers Aaron, Levi, Mahlon, and Joseph, and his cousin Abraham to join with him in fighting for the British and against the rebels. Their plan was to harass the colonists and take back the taxes paid by their families by robbing the tax collectors. This developed into general robbery and horse theft, and eventually the gang expanded beyond only family members.

By 1776, many of Bucks County's able-bodied men had gone to war. The area was left unprotected and the robbery business flourished. In July, Moses and Levi met with General William Howe and offered to become spies. On August 27, Moses told General Howe of the unprotected Jamaica Pass, and Howe used the information to handily defeat Washington at the Battle of Long Island.



Moses then returned to his gang in Bucks County. Since they were well-known by the locals, they had taken to sleeping in caves during the day and spying during the night. They used caves in Durham, Solebury, Buckingham, and Center Bridge. They also frequently camped along the Tohickon Creek only a few miles from Orr's Ford. Within the bounds of Ralph Stover State Park is Doan Cave, one of their most popular hideouts. It is found at N 40° 26.111', W 75° 5.663' and is accessible today from

one of the park trails.

Moses was working for a local man named John Tomlinson, who was in charge of the British spy network in the area. Prior to Christmas 1776, Doan suspected that Washington might attack Trenton but had no idea when. On Christmas Eve, Moses and Abraham were in Newtown and noticed the troops were preparing to march. They also saw boats assembling near McKonkey's Ferry (Washington's



Crossing, PA). Moses went to Coryell's Ferry (New Hope) and saw that the troops had left and the fortifications were being taken down. Atop his horse, Wild Devil, he then rode past Bowman's hill, site of a rebel camp, and detected that something big was happening. Today, visitors can climb a monument erected at the top of Bowman's hill in 1931 to commemorate the site. On a clear day, you can see Trenton from atop the tower. This site is about a 25-minute drive from Orr's Ford. Moses now suspected that the army was preparing to march on Trenton that very

evening. The weather was terrible, but his only chance to help the British was to warn them himself. As he rode Wild Devil toward Trenton, he passed McKonkey's Ferry and saw the rebels pushing toward the Jersey side. Reaching Trenton, he asked to speak with the commander, Colonel Rahl. Apparently, Rahl was pre-occupied with a game of cards and asked not to be disturbed. Moses wrote this note to the Colonel, which was found on his body the next morning: "*Washington is coming on you down the river, he will be here afore long. Doan*". Rahl did not react to the note, either because he was pre-occupied with holiday festivities or because the note was written in English and he spoke only German. By not acting upon Doan's note, Colonel Rahl allowed Washington the element of surprise to easily win the pivotal Battle of Trenton.



John Tomlinson, Moses' boss at the time, lived on Jericho Mountain near Newtown. He was eventually captured, and was hanged at the Newtown Commons in 1782. It is said that his ghost haunts the Pineapple Hill Bed and Breakfast, between Washington Crossing and New Hope, to this day.

Only about a mile from Orr's Ford is the popular Piper Tavern. It was originally established by Colonel George Piper in 1778. Legend has it that Colonel Piper was out and his wife was attending to the operation of the tavern when Robert Gibson and Geddis of the Doan Gang came in and were causing trouble. Mrs. Piper threw a hot iron at Geddis, breaking his arm. She chased Gibson from the Inn with her husband's sword. Geddis had to walk a mile-and-a-half to the farm of George Fox, where a Dr. Shaffer set his arm. This is the very same Gibson who later killed Moses Doan.





On October 22, 1781, the Doan's committed their most well-known crime ... the robbery of the county treasury in Newtown, the largest theft of public funds ever. Washington's army had just won the war, and the local militia was still in Yorktown attending the British surrender. The treasury coffers were full from recent tax collections. The Doan gang consisted of 28 members. Some stayed behind to watch the horses, hidden horse outside of town at Dripping Springs. At about 10PM they went to the house of John Hart, the county treasurer. The Hart House stands today at 252 State Street in Newtown. Jesse and Solomon Vickers stood watch and the rest of the raiding

party burst in, grabbed the keys to the treasury from Hart, walked to the treasury and took 1,307 pounds sterling. They then fled from the scene.



The treasury building was part of a complex that included the treasury, the alms house, and the jail. It is no longer there. The site is now an empty lot on State Street near The Gap with a wall and commemorative plaque.

After the robbery, the gang went to the schoolhouse in Wrightstown to divvy up the loot. The schoolhouse is no longer there, but the original well is still on the site on 413 in Wrightstown, roughly across the street from the Friends Meetinghouse. The money has never been recovered.

On August 28, 1783, the gang was hiding at one of their caves along the Tohickon and had nothing to eat. They went to the nearby cabin of a confederate, Nathan Horsley. Horsley had nothing to feed them, and sent his son for flour to Wismer's mill along the Delaware. The boy unintentionally let it be known where the Doan's were. The word reached Colonel Hart, who was at the auction in Gardenville.



Now the Gardenville Hotel, this spot is on Route 413 only about 6 miles from Orr's Ford. Hart quickly pulled together a posse, which included Major William Kennedy and Captain Robert Gibson. The posse entered Halsey's cabin, where Hart wrestled Moses to the ground. Moses surrendered to Hart, who released him. Moses was still on the ground when Gibson shot him in the heart and killed him instantly. Gibson had actually participated in some of the Doan escapades, and it has been suggested that he killed Moses because "dead men tell no tales".

During the commotion, Abraham and Levi Doan tried to escape through a window by using Mrs. Halsey as a shield and holding their enemies at bay with a rifle. Levi fired, hitting the rifle of Colonel Hart's younger brother and splintering its stock. A piece of wood was driven into Major Kennedy's back and he

died 7 days later. Kennedy was buried with full military honors at the largest funeral ever held in the area.



His headstone is in the cemetery at the Presbyterian Church in Deep Run, located at the intersection of Route 113 and Elephant Road in Bedminster. The large white headstone reads: *"In Memory of Major William Kennedy, who died of the wounds he received from a Robber on the fifth Day of Sept in the Year of Our Lord 1785 in the 40th year of his Age"*.

Also buried in this same cemetery is Robert Gibson, the man who killed Moses. At one time, Gibson owned the property that is now The Plumsteadville Inn, less than 10 minutes from Orr's Ford.

Philip Hinkle returned Moses' body to his parents in Plumsteadville. Joseph was afraid locals would defile the body, so he buried Moses on Israel's farm, marked by a stone. By

1881, the marker was badly deteriorated. Henry Mercer had a new stone made from the door step of the Lear Building in Doylestown, which was undergoing renovation. He placed it at the gravesite, which

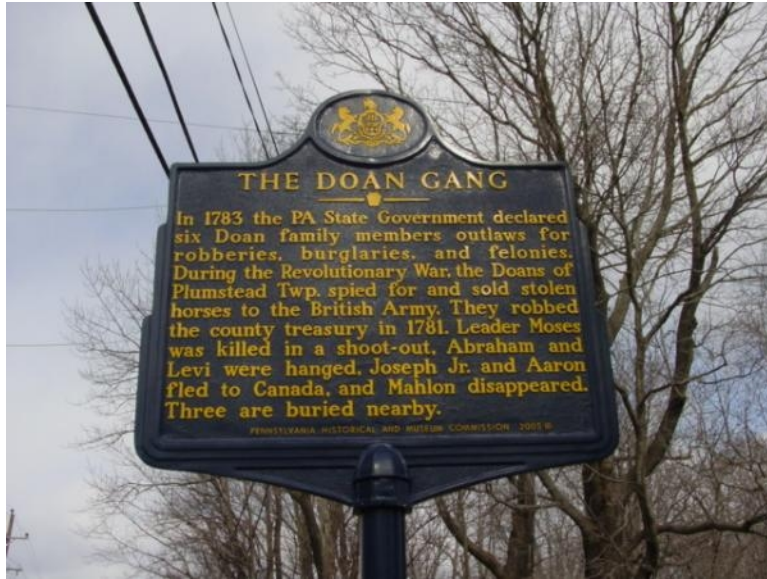


at that time was on the farm of Reuben High. Years later the property owner moved the marker to edge of the property in order to make caring for the fields easier. Today, that marker is on private property on the edge of a field in Plumsteadville. The inscription reads: *"Here lies the famous Tory outlaw Moses Doan. Hunted down, captured, and killed after he had surrendered on Tohicon Creek, August 23, 1783. Vi Et Armis"*. The Latin is an archaic legal term that translates to "With Force Of Arms", meaning that Moses was taken by force.

Later in 1783, Mahlon Doan was arrested in Baltimore for stealing horses. He escaped from a Bedford, PA jail by cutting off the fleshy parts of his heels so that he could slip out of his shackles. He was never found, and there are conflicting stories regarding his fate. One is that he died shortly after the escape from loss of blood, and another is that he escaped to England via New York.

In 1784, Joseph escaped from the jail in Newtown where he was under sentence of death for murder. He changed his name and posed as a New Jersey schoolteacher for nearly a year before his real identity was discovered. He then fled to Canada. There is evidence he taught school in Humberstone, Ontario near Niagara Falls before he returned to Bucks County in 1820 to reclaim property. Some speculate that he returned to claim the bounty from the robbery of the Newtown Treasury, which to this day has never been found. He then went to Walpole, Ontario where he lived the rest of his years.

On May 15, 1787 Abraham and Levi were arrested in Chester County. They were tried in Philadelphia,



admitted to aiding the British, and hung on September 24th. These were the last public hangings in Philadelphia. Many considered the executions to be a gross injustice in light of the 1785 Paris Peace Treaty that protected those who collaborated with the British. Levi's sister, Mary, petitioned the family's meetinghouse in Plumsteadville to allow her to bury them in their cemetery. The Friends denied her, however, instead allowing them to be buried on the property but outside the walls of the cemetery. The graves of the cousins can still be seen outside the far left back wall of the

cemetery, located on Ferry Road just past the Gardenville Hotel. Abraham's stone has his father's name misspelled – "Isreal" instead of "Israel". The commemorative marker shown here was placed on the road just outside the Meeting House in 2005.



Aaron Doan was captured in 1783 and sentenced to hang for robbery. However, in 1785 Pennsylvania's supreme executive council decided there was no legal justification for executing him. It took until 1787 for him to receive a pardon, after having petitioned Benjamin Franklin. He was ordered to leave the US and not return under penalty of death. He went to Canada, and in 1812 at the age of 56, enlisted in the British army and served as a gunner in the Second Lincoln Militia Artillery and in the Third Regiment of the Lincoln Militia. He died in 1844 at the age of 88 and was buried in Humberstone, Canada.



Orr's Ford is about a 15-minute drive from Doylestown, home of the Mercer Museum. There you can see Moses' powder horn and Abraham's rifle. The rifle was found in the cabin following the melee, and was apparently left by Abraham in his haste to escape. A 2003 episode of the popular PBS series History Detectives evaluated the rifle and agreed that its characteristics are consistent with a gun from that era.