

A Modern Marriage

Inspired by the American Revolution

by William C. Kashatus III



“Keep your eyes wide open before marriage,” advised Benjamin Franklin in his *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, “half shut afterwards.” Despite their great admiration for Philadelphia’s most prominent—if not wittiest—sage, historians David and Joan Dutcher don’t set much store by his marital advice. Their courtship was inspired by the American Revolution and their wedding established a mutual support system between two of the most significant national historical parks in the nation, Independence National Historical Park and Valley Forge National Historical Park. And in spite of *Poor Richard’s* counsel, they continue to keep their eyes wide open—especially for each other—to this day.

Joan Marshall-Dutcher is chief historian at Valley Forge National Historical Park, the site of the six month encampment of Gen. George Washington’s Continental Army during the winter of 1777-1778 (see “Valley Forge: Commemorating the Centennial of a National Symbol” by Lorette Treese in the Spring 1993 edition and “The Apotheosis of George Washington:

America’s Cincinnatus and the Valley Forge Encampment” by William C. Kashatus III in the Winter 1994 edition). General Washington’s army was ravaged by sickness and disease that winter but the hardships only galvanized the soldiers’ resolve to continue the fight for American independence. David C. G. Dutcher is the chief historian for Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, the site at which the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution were debated and signed.

Together, Joan and David Dutcher have given fifty years of their professional lives to the National Park Service (NPS). As chief historians they have entertained presidents and politicians, state and federal legislators, and a former chief justice; welcomed statesmen and diplomats; served as consultants to film directors and major television network producers; written for national periodicals; and helped coordinate two of the largest celebrations the nation witnessed in this century: the 1976 Bicentennial of American Independence and the Bicentennial of the Constitution in 1987. But “their story” has a much more modest beginning.

After receiving a bachelor’s degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Joan Marshall-Dutcher taught English at a high school near her native Lock Haven, Clinton County. She returned to Penn as an assistant dean of women, and immersed herself in the study of the history of Philadelphia, earning a master’s degree in 1965. “It occurred to me,” she recalls, “Why am I spending all these hours being a dean of women when I should be a historian?” Joan left the university the following year to continue graduate work in American history at the University of Delaware. Not long after, she accepted a position as museum curator at Independence National Historical Park.

“My career was more typical of the Park Service experience,” says David. “I am the son of an Army chaplain and my boyhood was spent touring military bases around the United States and Europe. After completing graduate work at Vanderbilt University and the College of Emporia in Kansas, I joined the National Park Service. That would have been in 1964. And I moved around to various parks related to different periods of American history.” Initially, David worked at Chickamauga and Chattanooga, Civil War battlefields administered by the NPS in Georgia and Tennessee, and at Castillo de San Marcos, the oldest masonry fort in the continental United States, built by the Spanish in 1672 to protect St. Augustine, Florida. In 1972, he transferred to Independence National Historical Park—where he met Joan.

According to David, “Independence has always been considered the ‘crown jewel’ of the National Park Service. It is the cradle of the American political system. And we found ourselves right in the middle of planning for the nation’s two hundredth birthday.” Joan is quick to add that “it was a historian’s dream. David and I were two members of a three person history staff, which worked on everything from building design to interpretation of the sites.” The Dutchers credit three people for the success

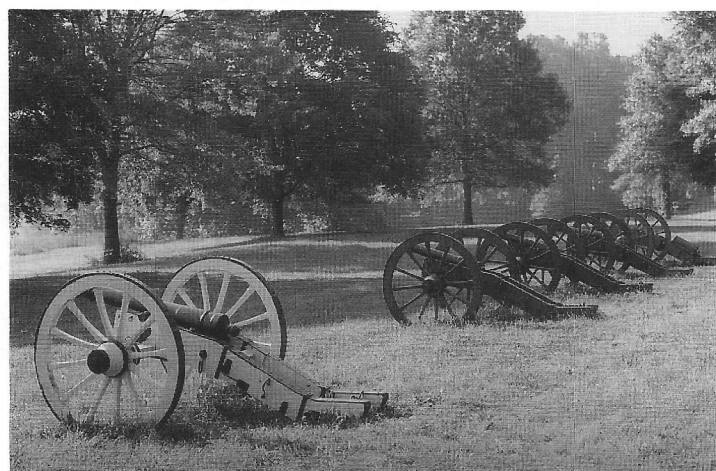
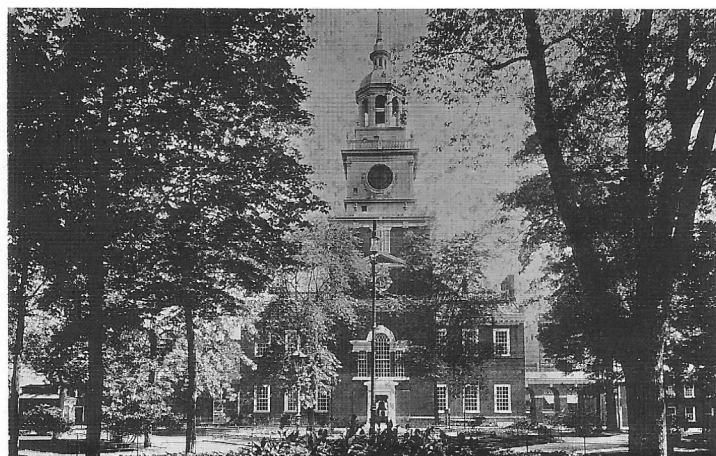
of the 1976 celebration: Martin Yoelson, who was then the chief historian at Independence; Park Superintendent Hobart Cawood; and Chester Brooks, director of the NPS' Mid-Atlantic Region. "They gave us their complete trust and allowed us to do some very creative and innovative things," remembers David. "That was taking a real risk, too, because they had already invested a great deal of their energy in increasing the exposure of the park to a national and international level." During this process, the Dutchers found themselves putting in some *very* long days.

Between 1972 and 1976, their frenetic work schedules averaged ten to fourteen hours each day, often six days a week. During the year before the Bicentennial, they were responsible for training more than two hundred park rangers (known as interpreters)—usually about twenty each week—in the history of the sites, events, and individuals related to the quest for American Independence. The Dutchers devised a curriculum, researched and documented history, taught interpretive techniques, performed in reenactments, and, in short, *lived* early American history. Were they in a constant state of exhaustion? "No, not at all," insists David, "it was the excitement and exhilaration that kept us going." Indeed, they were part of something much larger than anyone could have predicted back in the early 1970s.

"You have to realize," acknowledges Joan, "that Independence was at that time a very small park. If you were to count the entire staff, including the curators, architects, maintenance people, protection rangers, and interpreters, there were only about sixty people total. That's very different from the two hundred people who are on staff there today. Even the physical size of the park was small. A number of the buildings that visitors enjoy today didn't exist. There was no Visitors' Center, Liberty Bell Pavilion, Franklin Court, or City Tavern. Other sites, such as the Second Bank of the United States, were not open to the public." In fact, the only buildings open to the public were Independence Hall (which at the time housed the Liberty Bell), Congress Hall, and—for three hours each day—the one-time private residences of Episcopalian Bishop William White and Quaker lawyer John Todd. By 1976, however, several new buildings were opened, the staff tripled in size, and the park as visitors know it today had been firmly established.

"Nineteen seventy-six was, for us, anti-climactic," confesses Joan. "All the excitement had been in the build-up. That was the challenge. And in seventy-six it was all done."

What then, was the most rewarding part of "the build up" for the Dutchers? "Without question, working with some of the most remarkable people you would ever want to meet," says David. "In those four years Joan and I had the opportunity to meet a cross-section of American society: African Americans, Hispanics, whites, Asians, Christians and Jews, males and females from all walks of life came to Philadelphia. Of course those who came to work as interpreters we were directly responsible for and we



Historians David and Joan Dutcher (facing page) have, by their marriage, also "wedded" two of the nation's greatest historical treasures: Independence National Historical Park (top) and Valley Forge National Historical Park (above).

cared very deeply about them."

Case in point: When asked what she remembers about January 1, 1976, the night the Liberty Bell was ceremoniously relocated from the back hallway of Independence Hall to its new home across Chestnut Street in the Liberty Bell Pavilion, Joan fails to mention Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo's inspiring remarks that launched the Bicentennial celebration, or the thousands of people who thronged the event, or even the freezing rain that shorted out all national radio and television coverage of the event. What she does remember was "offering moral support to the dozens of interpreters that David and I had trained, park rangers who had been on their feet for twelve to fourteen hours that day and into the night since the Bell Pavilion was open for twenty-four hours on

occasion. David was carrying around large thermoses of tavern punch as refreshment and I was offering dry clothing to those who had become soaked by the rain. For us, the camaraderie of that night was one of the most personally rewarding experiences of the seventy-six Bicentennial." But the camaraderie the Dutchers helped to instill among the rangers would have to be carried on without them.

The following autumn, David transferred to Boston to become a supervisor of the Navy Yard, home of the USS *Constitution*, the oldest commissioned ship in the United States Navy, first launched in 1798. A year later Joan left Independence Park to become chief interpreter at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Missouri. Despite the distance, the Dutchers continued their courtship. "Joan and I still managed to get together once a month, either in Philadelphia, Boston, or St. Louis," says David.

Five years later, David accepted the position of chief historian at Independence National Historical Park, his "dream come true." Unfortunately, his second dream—being reunited with Joan on the same history staff—seemed remote, if not impossible, because the National Park Service prohibits family members from working at the same park if one supervises the other. "Since Joan and I realized that we would never be able to work together again at Independence, our goal was to get within two hundred miles [of each other] so we could have our weekends," David recalls. "We never dreamed we'd get close enough to live in the same house," adds Joan.

David and Joan Dutcher's dream came true in 1981 with the opening of chief historian's position at Valley Forge National Park. Joan applied for—and landed—the job. The historians were married later that year.

Unlike more traditional historians who confine their research and writing to the academic arena, the Dutchers consider themselves public historians. According to Joan, "the National Park Service was established, in part, to give Americans a better understanding of their culture and history than they may have acquired in a classroom setting. In public history, therefore, our objective is to bring history directly to the people." David is quick to point out that their emphasis on public history does not lessen the importance of traditional history. "We need traditional historians—the Gordon Woods, Carl Beckers, and Bernard Bailyns—all of whom have written seminal works in the history of the American Revolution. Without them we would not be able to do our jobs since they provide us with a meticulous, detailed, and accurate understanding of the historical event. But we take it from

there and try to make it more appealing, perhaps even human, to the general public." That can be a very challenging and, at times, controversial task.

As chief historians at two of the nation's most significant historical parks, Joan and David Dutcher are faced with the challenging responsibility of separating fact from fiction, and to do so without offending visitors, many of whom have an emotional investment in their version of history. According to Joan, this is a responsibility that "must be handled very carefully and very tactfully." The best example of this dilemma, at Valley Forge, is the

account of a dispirited George Washington kneeling in prayer on a snow covered hill. "That scene has been depicted in paintings, described in literature, and over the years has become a source of patriotic inspiration to many Americans," she explains. "With that kind of emotional attachment, I can't expect to discuss with visitors the primary source documentation or the historiographic literature that casts serious doubts about that supposed event. They won't understand it and, frankly, they don't want to hear about it." What *does* she tell visitors? "Simply that there is no documentation to prove that George Washington knelt in prayer, but also that there is no documentation to prove that he didn't!" she exclaims. "After all, I am not going to try to dissuade people from believing what they really want to believe. I couldn't succeed if I tried. In fact, I would only antagonize them, or make them angry with the park staff or the National Park Service itself." David readily agrees.

"At Independence we are dealing with the growth of the American myth," he explains. "I suppose it began with that Episcopalian minister Mason Weems who, in his biographies of figures such as Washington

and Franklin, began to develop an American pantheon of heroes. Those heroes were adopted by a growing nation in need of roots and, over the years, the more deification that was given to those personalities, the better." But how does David Dutcher personally feel about this process of deification? "It's patriotism run amuck, but it is also a part of our development as a new nation," he responds. "The Mason Weemses and Washington Irvings who wrote in the early nineteenth century were looking back at the revolutionary era as a sacred time in our nation's growth. Historians have been forced to deal with their views ever since. And what do we end up doing? We demythologize and re-mythologize the founding fathers without ever really giving serious attention to *their* own journals, personal correspondence, or public writings. Thus, we never learn to appreciate the founders for who they actually were."

How then does David C. G. Dutcher, the historian, view the



During the Bicentennial, David C. G. Dutcher (center) and Joan Marshall-Dutcher (right) welcomed countless visitors to the nation's big birthday bash at Independence National Historical Park.

rather than my eyes," he claims, "to divorce myself from a twentieth century perspective and accept Franklin, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson on their own terms as products of the eighteenth century." Doesn't that make the founders less attractive, less accomplished? "No, not at all," insists David, "it makes their achievements that much more admirable because you can appreciate their humanity."

The Dutchers, however, are more flexible about visitor interpretation than they are with film producers. Over the years they have worked with numerous television and movie directors, producers, and script writers on the interpretation of events in early American history. In spite of their advice, historical accuracy has sometimes been compromised by the Hollywood penchant for the dramatic. Not surprisingly, they give mixed reviews. Clearly the director they admire most is the late John Huston who directed the film *Independence*. "Not only was he a fine director," remembers David, "but he respected our advice and the Park Service's mission to put the visitors first. That is why visitors continued to tour Independence Hall during the filming and were able to watch, by monitor out on the square, the performances of such actors as Eli Wallach, Pat Hingle, and Ken Howard as they re-created history in the Assembly Room. And the film itself is a brilliant piece of work. It is historically accurate, as well as entertaining. That is why eighteen years later it is still used as a visitor orientation film at Independence Park." On the other hand, the television mini-series devoted to George Washington, which aired on CBS in the early 1980s, troubled both Dutchers.

"I had a problem with the mini-series," Joan admits, "because it was promoted as serious, accurate history and, in several instances, it simply wasn't." Joan was particularly disturbed by actress Patty Duke's portrayal of Martha Washington at the Valley Forge encampment where, in the televised version, she visited the soldiers' huts to comfort them and even witnessed the amputation of a soldier's leg. "First of all," Joan points out, "we don't know if any soldier ever had his leg amputated at Valley Forge. A procedure like that, if it did occur, would most likely have taken place in one of the hospitals set up outside of the encampment itself. But more to the point, a woman of Martha Washington's stature at that time in our history would not have visited the huts. And there is the question of whether she would have risked coming in such close proximity to sickness and disease."

Ironically, the producers had submitted all of the scripts to the park's historians before the mini-series was filmed. Reviewing historians offered extensive comments, along with pointed suggestions on how to retain the emotional impact of the piece without compromising historical integrity. "And still they never altered those scripts to accommodate our suggestions," says Joan. "I guess they felt it was the only way of making the characters appear to be human. It makes our job tougher, though, because visitors to the park who have seen such errant productions often say, 'But this is the way it was on television.' And

then we are left with the responsibility of correcting the distortions."

For the Dutchers, history can be accurate and still capture the human element. "Granted, that's a difficult thing to do," notes David, "but it can be done and done quite well." Joan mentions Edmund Morgan as one who has achieved the delicate balance. His *Birth of the Republic* is "readable at a variety of levels, from the professional historian to the novice, and is widely considered a classic." David places Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia* at the same level of quality writing. "It is not only the finest account of the 1787 Federal Convention we have," he believes, "because she manages to integrate Enlightenment philosophy, political science, and biographical vignettes, but she does it in such an entertaining way without compromising the historical integrity of the events. I really appreciate her exceptional ability for making the founders come to life."

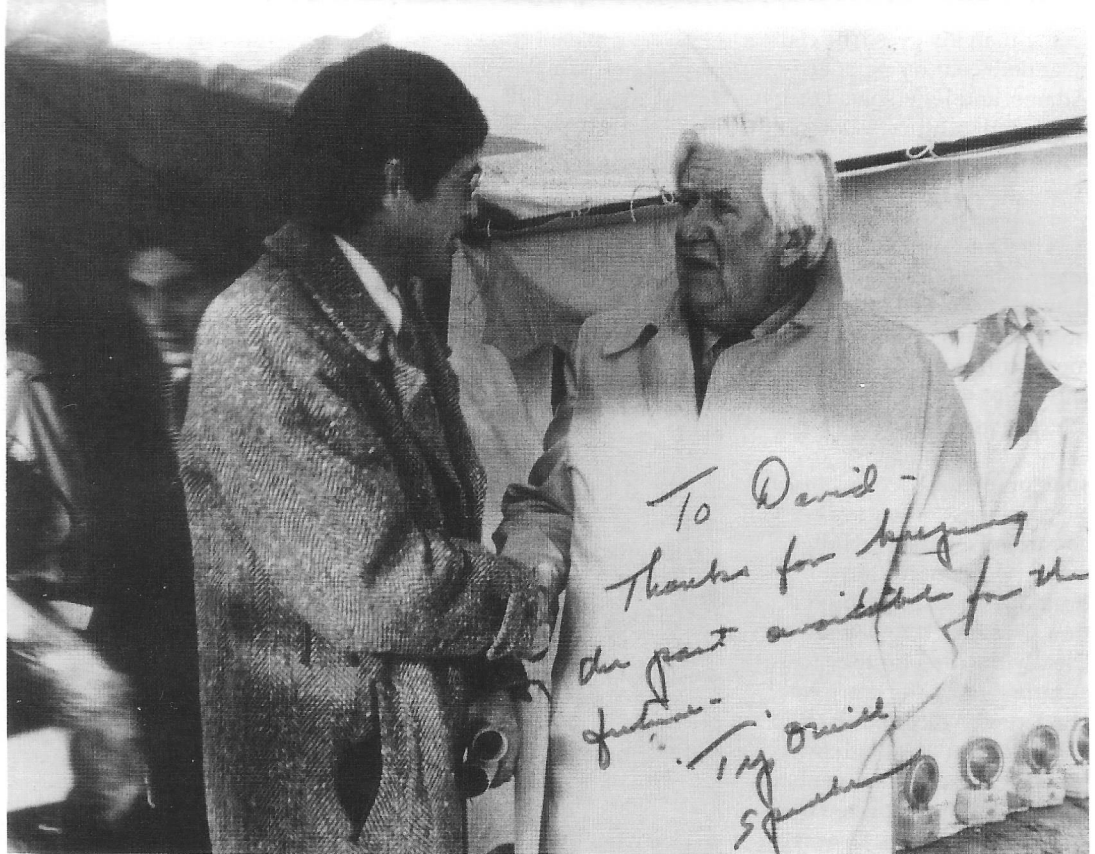
Although convincing others to be as accurate as possible in their interpretation of historical events is but one of several parallel duties of the chief

historian positions at the two parks, Joan and David are quick to point out the differences. "Joan's is a military story," remarks David. "My story is a political one." Joan also identifies the differences in responsibilities. "At Valley Forge, my responsibilities are largely the restoration and maintenance of the park's historic structures. David, on the other hand, is more of a pure historian who supervises a staff of historians that researches and interprets historical personalities and events surrounding the activities of the Revolutionary and early republic periods." But that doesn't prevent him from donning period clothing and stepping back into the eighteenth century to reenact a historical event.

Of the many reenactments in which he participated, David's most personally rewarding experience was the eight day journey—by carriage—from George Washington's Mount Vernon estate in Virginia to New York's Federal Hall. This reenactment of Washington's 1789 journey to the first presiden-



Following a stint as an assistant dean of women at the University of Pennsylvania, Joan continued graduate studies and then joined the National Park Service as a museum curator.



tial inauguration was undertaken as part of the Bicentennial of the U. S. Constitution. David assumed the character of Col. David Humphreys, a personal aide to Washington. The president was portrayed by actor William Summerfield. Herbert Atherton, staff director of the Bicentennial Commission, played Charles Thomson, the Secretary of Congress, who had officially notified Washington of his election. The

three men had a support staff of fifty people traveling along with them in recreational vehicles, vans, and automobiles, including the chairman of the Bicentennial celebration, former Chief Justice Warren Burger.

"Each day the text of a speech that Washington had delivered in a particular town along the route was delivered to us by express mail," recalls David. "The speech would be completed in eighteenth century script, compliments of a state of the art computer." In addition to these technological innovations, Dutcher, Atherton, and Summerfield were impeccable in their respective roles. "Everything we wore, everything we said, and everything we did was based on eighteenth century culture. If someone along the route attempted to question us on current events, we feigned ignorance and changed the topic. The reception we received in each town along the way was unbelievable. People waved handkerchiefs at us, just as they had done for Washington's entourage two centuries earlier; others offered their heartfelt thanks for our efforts at making history come to life. As you can imagine, I was tremendously moved by that outpouring of affection." And so was chairman Warren Burger.

Burger had a tremendous personal investment in the 1987 celebration. He had devoted his entire career as a Supreme Court justice to interpreting one of the most brilliant documents in human history, the United States Constitution. He felt a particular allegiance to the document and, consequently, had retired to serve as chairman and ensure the success of the celebration. Despite some physical ailments, Burger accompanied the small entourage on its eight day journey. After one of those long and grueling fourteen hour stints, David Dutcher recounted for Burger a particularly touching event that had occurred in a small New Jersey town earlier that day.

"A father had hoisted his young son up on his shoulders and made his way through the crowd to our carriage," David remembers. "When they got within an arm's length of us the little boy held out a bouquet of dandelions. Though he appeared

David has greeted many dignitaries during his NPS career, including Congressman Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, Jr. (above). The Liberty Bell (top, left) at Independence National Historical Park.

to be rather shy, he managed to say, 'Could I please give these to President Washington? I would like him to have them.' Thanking him for his thoughtfulness, I presented the boy and his father to the president who graciously accepted the bouquet." As David shared the priceless moment to Burger that evening, tears began to well up in the eyes of the former chief justice and he replied, "This is what it's all about, David, this is what it's all about."

Now that the Bicentennial of the Constitution has passed, David can look back with pride on the celebration. "It inspired Americans to take a closer look at our political system and appreciate the brilliance of something we largely take for granted. I also believe that the American political system has exceeded the expectations of the founding fathers. They would be immensely pleased with the fact that the Constitution has withstood the test of time, considering that it has only been amended on twenty-seven occasions since it was first drafted over two hundred years ago."

Most recently Joan enjoyed the professional spotlight in the Dutcher household. She coordinated the centennial celebration of Valley Forge as the first historical park in Pennsylvania. The celebration began on December 19, 1992, with a grand illumination of twelve thousand lights to commemorate the arrival of Washington's troops at the winter encampment. "Approximately eighteen thousand visitors came out to kick off our centennial," she proudly reports. Other events included special tours of the park's buildings given by interpreters dressed in nineteenth century attire, a grand encampment of five hundred reenactors, the dedication of a monument to honor patriots of African American descent, and a ceremony sponsored by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to commemorate the signing of legislation in 1893 that made Valley Forge a state historical park.



William C. Kashatus III, Philadelphia, is a regular contributor to *Pennsylvania Heritage*. He received his bachelor of arts degree from Earlham College, his master of arts degree from Brown University, and his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. His book entitled *Historic Philadelphia: The City, Symbols and Patriots* was published by the University Press of America in 1992 (see "Bookshelf," fall 1992).

One of the more famous attractions at Valley Forge National Historical Park is the log huts (above). New Jersey's state monument (top, right), one of the earliest memorials at Valley Forge.

To underscore the importance of the park's centennial, Joan even persuaded the National Council on Public History to hold its annual proceedings at Valley Forge in 1993. "It was a major coup for her," boasts David, "she was competing against such other places as Lowell, Massachusetts, site of some of the nation's first textile mills, and Anaheim, California, of Disneyland fame, and she still managed to pull it off!"

One secret of the Dutchers' outstanding success has been their strong support of each other. "I don't write anything that Joan doesn't review and critique," says David. "And the same holds true for me," Joan adds. "We work together, just as we did for the 1976 Bicentennial when we first met." Even though they are at different parks these days, the support system remains intact. "In 1987, during the Bicentennial of the Constitution, I was working twelve to sixteen hours a day and Joan was always there for me," David smiles, "whether it was pulling the extra weight in our household duties or helping out at Independence Park. Now that she is immersed in the activities of Valley Forge's centennial celebration, I am Joan's support. We trade off."

And how would these two exceptional historians like to be remembered after their retirement? "As putting people first, above everything else," they respond spontaneously but in unison. They speak with one, clear voice. "History is simply the vehicle we use in our careers with the National Park Service. What has always been most important to us are the people we work with, the visitors we meet, and, of course, each other. We try to be supportive, we always seem to learn from our experiences, and most of all we enjoy the friendships." With their commitment to people and their passion for history, the Dutchers are ever looking forward to the past. ❖

The author wishes to thank David C. G. Dutcher, for whom he worked at Independence National Historical Park, and Joan Marshall-Dutcher, for whom he worked at Valley Forge National Historical Park, while a graduate student in history. He is grateful to them for giving him his first opportunity to work in the field of public history, as well as for their continuing encouragement and friendship.

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