More on John Christian Reese (Part II)

David McCullough's masterful new book, 1776, not only describes the critical events of the year of our country's birth, but he also likely describes the arrival of John Christian Reese to America. According to McCullough (2005), 7000 Hessians had reached America in the autumn of 1776 under the command of General Wilhelm von Knyphausen. These professional soldiers landed ready for battle and soon faced action. John Christian may have been among the troops who stormed up the rocky ground on November 16, 1776 at Fort Washington. The Hessians had the toughest part of the ascent to the fort, though they were apparently undeterred. Knyphausen had to call off Colonel Rail, who had fearlessly led the assault, from rushing right into the fort. It was a notable effort by the Hessians (McCullough, 2005). But just 40 days later, Washington turned the tables on the Hessians, and altered the course of history of the nation, and our family.

Under the cover of the darkness and a fierce nor'easter, Washington and his troops crossed the icy and treacherous Delaware River, and in an early morning attack, surprised the encampment at Trenton. The ragtag American forces captured-approximately 950 Hessian soldiers, one of whom was listed as “Christian Ries.” Family tradition is backed up by documents that detail the names of prisoners captured at Trenton. And here's the surprise: There are two prisoners named “Ries” – Johannes and Christian. Both have "Schrecksbach, Germany" listed as their place of origin. Both are listed as belonging to the von Knyphausen Regiment. This seems at odds with family tradition until you find out that Rall was the Brigade commander, and von Knyphausen was one of three regiments in Rall's command (Rall had his own regiment, too) at Trenton (Lowell, 1884). Rall had been given command of Trenton after his tenacious actions during the attack and capture of Fort Washington in New York.

Generals John Sullivan and Nathanael Greens also participated in this key victory at Trenton, along with future president James Monroe. Following Washington's orders, Colonel John Glover ferried the prisoners back across the Delaware River to Bucks County, Pennsylvania to avoid their recapture by organizing British troops. On New Year’s Day, 1777, the captives were paraded through the streets of Philadelphia.

Johannes and Christian Ries were held prisoners at Lancaster, Pa., in a Hessian soldier POW Camp. There, Hessian soldiers were allowed to serve local craftsmen, many of whom were of German descent. "John Reis" is listed as having been farmed out to a man named Sebastian Graff, probably the same man who was a member of the Pennsylvania Senate from 1790-1791 (He died in 1791). What was Mr. Graff’s occupation? During the summer of 1778, the British and the Americans agreed to a prisoner exchange. And here is where John Christian's movements are sketchy. The prisoners were sent to Philadelphia, but the exchange did not immediately take place because the British didn't wait. The exchange did finally happen in Elizabethtown, N. J. in the autumn of 1778. It is known that the von Knyphausen regiment reformed in September 1779 and it joined with a fleet of ships that were headed for Canada. However, an Atlantic Hurricane damaged two ships named the Molly and the Triton that were carrying the von Knyphausen regiment. The Americans captured these damaged ships and hauled them into Egg Harbor, New Jersey (Kipping, 1971). Was John C. Reese on one of these ships? Is that how he gained experience as a sailor?

At some point, he joined the American cause and is reported to have served in the Continental Navy. This especially makes sense if he had served on the Molly or the Triton.

In 1797, he surfaces as one of the original settlers of Philipsburg.
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