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JANUARY-SEPTEMBER 1777



THE DEATH OF THOMAS BAKER

c10 January 1777 - DEATH: **Thomas Baker, Sr.**, possibly in **Culpeper County** or in **Rowan County**, North Carolina, or even en route from one to the other.

Baker Family legend has it that Thomas died in Culpeper County in an explosion of his gunpowder mill while making gunpowder for the American troops in the Revolutionary War. This is the story set forth in Elma Baker's The Rugged Trail, a largely anecdotal family history published privately in 1970, and repeated frequently thereafter, sometimes with explicit citation to The Rugged Trail and often with no citation at all. It is, however, a story that is both wholly undocumented and unlikely in all but one of its particulars.

As to the lack of documentation, there are at least five places one would expect some mention of this death to have occurred if it had taken place as the story suggests. The single most likely place was in the will books of Culpeper County, where the Bakers lived from at least as early as 1749 to at least as late as 1776 (David Baker is known to have enlisted at the home of John Strother in February 1776). When a person died owning any kind of property, it would pass either by will (in which case it would be entered in the county will books so as to collect estate taxes and transfer title to property to the heirs) or by operation of law (in which case there would be an inventory entered in the county will books so as to collect estate taxes and transfer title to property to the heirs-at-law). At a minimum, a surviving widow would have a life estate in real property through dower rights and the eldest son and, perhaps, other children after the widow's death. The Culpeper County will books survive intact from 1749 to the present. There is no reference to a Thomas Baker estate in or around 1777.

The next most likely place would be in the deed books of Culpeper County, since even if any powder mill was itself destroyed in the supposed explosion, the land on which it stood would still need to be sold or given to someone else. The Culpeper County deed books also survive for the entire period from 1749 to the present; there are no Thomas Baker land transactions after 11 May 1775 and, indeed, only one Baker land transaction in Culpeper County thereafter (son Henry Baker and wife Nancy to Daniel Brown in March 1779, witnessed by no family member, suggesting that the rest of the extended family was gone from Culpeper County by then). While it is certainly possible that, by 1777, Thomas Baker had sold or given every bit of his real estate to someone else, if he were still living in Culpeper, there should still have been some personal property, again suggesting some reference in the will books.

The third most likely place for the event to have been referenced would be in the records of claims made by individuals for items supplied or sold to the American troops or the newly-formed state governments. In Virginia, such claims often appear in county court records or Henning's Statutes at Large. While the county court records for the late 1770s do not survive in Culpeper County, there is no record of the supply of gunpowder by Baker to Virginia in any of the State records. It is certainly possible that an individual trying to make gunpowder could have suffered an explosion before ever producing a product for which a claim could be made, but the lack of some record is troubling.

The fourth most likely place for the event to have been referenced would be in the pension applications of his sons who served in the Revolutionary War. The death of their father in the service of the new country would have bolstered their own claims to have served and, thus, to be entitled to pension benefits. Charles Baker's pension application is entirely silent on the issue; David Baker's application says only that his father "died while [he] was in service."

Finally, the Virginia Gazette was a newspaper published in Williamsburg throughout the colonial period and the early days of independence. It is now available online and searchable. There are many references to gunpowder in its pages: there was a report on an explosion in a gunpowder mill (in England, some years prior to the Revolution), a report on an attempt to start a gunpowder mill during the Revolution (in Bedford County), and many reports of gunpowder being seized, being imported and even being sold in and around Hanover County. In particular, an article dated 8 March 1776 spoke of a powder mill "being erected" on the James River. There is no mention of Thomas Baker or any gunpowder mill efforts in or around Culpeper County.

Added to this very troubling lack of documentation where documentation could be expected is the inherently unlikely nature of this story. Gunpowder was not produced in the colonies prior to the Revolution. The British did not want the colonists making their own and gunpowder was imported, not made, even by the British colonial authorities. It then was stashed in central locations (such as Williamsburg) to be doled out as needed. When the Revolution broke out, gunpowder was a major need of the American troops, and it was filled principally by importing it from other sources (Holland and France in particular). It wasn't until May of 1775 that the Continental Congress appointed a committee, headed by Robert Treat Paine, to try to introduce the manufacture to the fledgling nation. Well into 1775, bounties were offered throughout the colonies and in Virginia in particular to those who could establish working mills, and directions for making gunpowder were published in 1776. This was a new industry in America, one that required substantial physical effort and expertise.

Yet by 1775, the earliest that Baker might have turned his attention to the making of gunpowder, Thomas Baker was an old man by the standards of the time. He certainly had his first child around 1735. Even assuming he was a very young father, he would have been rising close on 60 by the outset of the Revolution. The likelihood of someone of that age beginning a new career in a highly technical field after a lifetime as a planter is not very great.

Equally unlikely is the notion that Thomas would enter such a new and risky business at a time when he and Dorothy and members of related families, such as the Whites, Gambills and Davenports, were all disposing of their property in Virginia and moving to the mountain country of western North Carolina. Assuming that Thomas

Baker had in fact disposed of all his real estate in Virginia before 1777 (a fact strongly suggested by the lack of any recorded Thomas Baker land transactions after 11 May 1775), we must ask whether it is more likely that the land divestitures were in order to move the family to North Carolina or that he stayed in Virginia and operated a powder mill on someone else's land.

The one particular of version of Thomas Baker's death set out in The Rugged Trail that does make basic sense is the date, or at least the general time period. We know that he died while David Baker "was in service." David Baker enlisted in the 3rd Virginia Regiment at the home of John Strother in February of 1776; he was discharged at Valley Forge in February 1778. Thus, a date of death in 1777 is entirely possible.



THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR CONTINUES

January – May 1777 – WINTER QUARTERS: From January to May, 1777, General George Washington and the remnants of his winter campaign troops were in winter quarters at Morristown in Morris County, New Jersey. Among the troops so quartered were **David Baker** and the 3rd Virginia Regiment.

The National Park Service now maintains the Morristown National Historical Park, and describes the events of those months: "General Washington first brought his army to Morristown in January of 1777 after the successful raids on Trenton and Princeton. The Continental Army numbered fewer than 2500 troops, and were housed in and around Morristown, where they would remain until May 1777. The two churches became hospitals, as the soldiers brought not only crowded conditions, but two separate epidemics as well. Dysentery swept through the population, but the coming of a smallpox epidemic posed such a threat that the General ordered controversial inoculations be carried out on both military and civilian personnel. The annual death rate for Morristown averaged about forty-two in a normal year. In 1777, an all time annual high of 205 deaths were recorded - more than half of these deaths were the result of the twin epidemics."

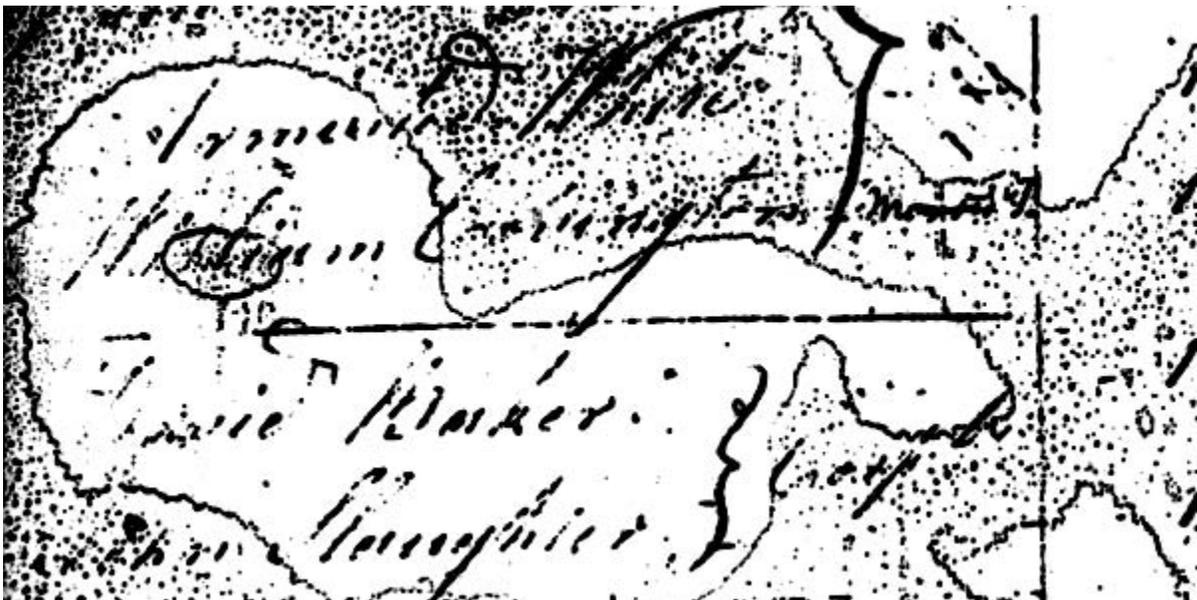
The NPS further notes: "The Continental Army camped in the Morristown area on several occasions because of its location and resources. Morristown was a two day march from the main British base in New York City. The Watchung Mountains and the Great Swamp stand between New York and Morristown and acted as a natural defensive work. As a result, Morristown could not be taken by a surprise attack. The various roads passing through Morristown allowed the army to move in any direction to counter the movements of the British. Because of its roads and safe location, Morristown served as a military supply depot for much of the war. As a result, the army could obtain food, clothing and equipment at Morristown. Local resources such as water and trees for fuel and construction were also a necessity for the army. In addition, the local homes could provide quarters for generals and staff officers."

April 1777 – PAY ROLL – **David Baker**, as corporal, Armistead White and William Covington, on the pay roll of Captain John Thornton's company, 3rd Virginia Regiment. [*Officers and soldiers of the Virginia Continental and State Line: 1782-1787*, microfilm Misc. reels 982-983, Library of Virginia]



A handwritten document, likely a pay roll, showing names and ranks. The text is written in cursive and is somewhat obscured by a heavy speckle effect. The names listed are: Armistead White, William Covington, David Baker, and John Thornton. A large, stylized signature or mark is visible on the right side of the document.

June 1777 – PAY ROLL – **David Baker**, as corporal, Armistead White and William Covington, on the pay roll of Captain John Thornton's company, 3rd Virginia Regiment. [*Officers and soldiers of the Virginia Continental and State Line: 1782-1787*, microfilm Misc. reels 982-983, Library of Virginia]



A handwritten document, likely a pay roll, showing names and ranks. The text is written in cursive and is somewhat obscured by a heavy speckle effect. The names listed are: Armistead White, William Covington, David Baker, and John Thornton. A large, stylized signature or mark is visible on the right side of the document.

July 1777 – PAY ROLL – **David Baker**, as corporal, Armistead White and William Covington, on the pay roll of Captain John Thornton's company, 3rd Virginia Regiment. [*Officers and soldiers of the Virginia Continental and State Line: 1782-1787*, microfilm Misc. reels 982-983, Library of Virginia]

Handwritten pay roll for July 1777. The entries are as follows:

Rank	Name	Amount
3	Armistead White	2.00
4	William Covington	2.00
3	David Baker	2.00
4	William Covington	2.00

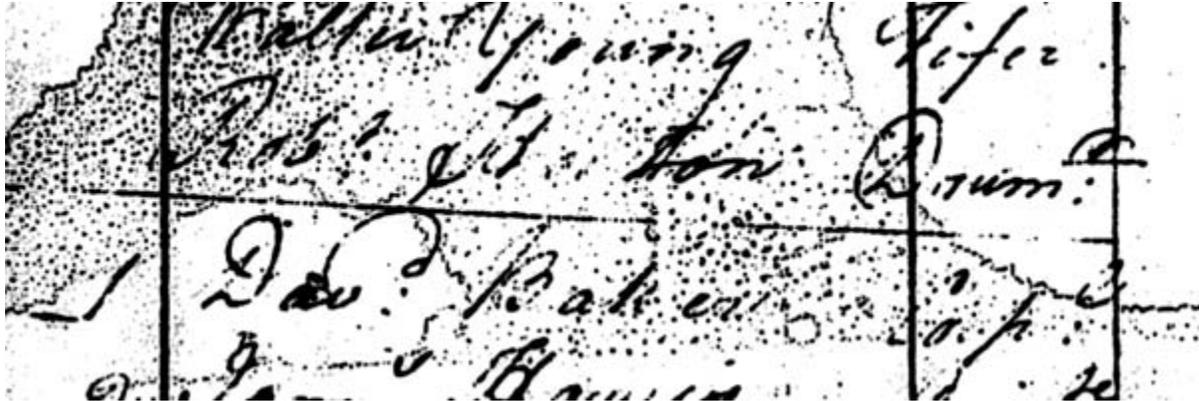
July 1777 – MUSTER ROLL – **David Baker**, as corporal, on the muster roll of Captain John Thornton's company, 3rd Virginia Regiment. [*Officers and soldiers of the Virginia Continental and State Line: 1782-1787*, microfilm Misc. reels 982-983, Library of Virginia]

Handwritten muster roll for July 1777. The entries are as follows:

Names	Rank	Pay
John Baynham	Captain	2.00
John Hungen	Private	5.9
Paul Leather	Private	5.10
James White	Private	6.00
David Baker	Corporal	5.10
James Harris	Private	5.11

Amount with the Regt

6 August 1777 – MUSTER ROLL – **David Baker**, as corporal, on the muster roll of Captain John Thornton's company, 3rd Virginia Regiment. [*Officers and soldiers of the Virginia Continental and State Line: 1782-1787*, microfilm Misc. reels 982-983, Library of Virginia]



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