An Inquiry into the Validity of the Legend of Braddock's Gold in Northern Virginia

by

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There are few things which stir the heart of man as much as the thought of buried treasure. Man has fought wars, shed blood, and even died for the possibility of obtaining a cache of hidden wealth. So, it is no wonder that modern stories of buried treasure 

would send hordes of specie-hungry entrepeneurs into the woods, armed with their trusty metal detectors, searching the landscape in the hope of fining their fortune. This situation is no less true when these legends speak of a large quantity of gold to be found within a nearby radius.

Well, such has been, and is, the case of the stories, legends, and "facts" concerning a supposed treasure buried near the town of Centreville, Virginia that have accumulated over the last thirty years. These legends speak of one Major General Edward Braddock, in command of the English troops in 1755 at the start of the French and Indian War, his journey through Centreville, Virginia, and his burying of a small fortune in gold near this town, due to difficulties encountered during his march. One of the major sources for this legend is the 1954 issue of the Fairfax Historical Society Yearbook which contains a small article, written by Chas.J. Gillis, a resident of Prince William County, entitled "A Buried Treasure."
This article claimed several facts on which the legend of Braddock's Gold is based: that General Braddock left Alexandria on the 8th or 9th of April with "six companies of the British 44th regiment, including artillery and baggage wagons slated for Winchester;" that Braddock's troops had to "hew a path through the forest" because there was, at that time, no road to Winchester from Alexandria; and that near the present town of Centreville (then Newgate) Braddock's forces became stuck in clay, causing Braddock, in an attempt to lighten weight, to bury two small brass cannons (6 pounders) filled with gold, the equivalent of $40,000 today, two feet below the soil at a place "fifty paces East of a spring where the road runs North and South." Furthermore, in this article, Gillis stated that it was not until many years later that an archivist in England discovered the reports of the gold supposedly buried by Braddock along his route.

Whether Gillis intended this account to be viewed as light folklore or historical account is hard to say. Unfortunately, the late Mr. Gillis' paper contained neither footnotes nor bibliography, and, as the author is now deceased, we will never know for sure whether Gillis attributed his account completely to folklore, or whether it is in part based on historical documentation. However, one thing is evident to the authors, and that is the fact that all accounts of Braddock's Gold dated past 1954, the only accounts we could find, are based primarily on the Gillis account. In fact, there have been at least nine assorted newspaper, magazine, and book articles, all of which are almost word-for-word descriptions of the treasure burying as Gillis told it, making it clear that little or no new research has been done on the subject since Gillis first published in 1954.
All of this preliminary information leads us to our question; are the accounts of Braddock’s Gold, as told to us by Gillis and other subsequent authors, historically accurate, justifiably sound, and at all probable? If not, then many have been unintentionally misled. If so, then there is $40,000 worth of gold waiting for the finder.

In the year 1755, General Edward Braddock was sent to the British Colonies as commander of His Majesty’s forces in the French and Indian Wars. When he set foot on North American soil in February, he was determined to capture the French Fort DuQuesne, in what is now western Pennsylvania, as his first move. Towards this end, Braddock stationed the two major military units in his command, the 44th and 48th Regiments, in the city of Alexandria, Virginia, and began to make the necessary preparations prior to these units’ ill-fated march to Fort DuQuesne, the place where so many English soldiers, including Braddock himself, were soon to meet their death. By the beginning of April, Braddock had pretty much dispensed with the preliminaries and was making final preparations to send his troops to Winchester, Virginia by two different routes, sending the 48th Regiment, under the command of Colonel Thomas Dunbar, by a politically expedient route through Maryland, described by George Washington, who was at that time an aide to Braddock, as being “uncommon and extraordinary,” and sending the 44th Regiment, under the command of Sir Peter Halkett, to Winchester by way of Virginia. Finally, it was on April 9, 1755 that the first large-scale troop movements, including (if we are to believe Gillis) Virginia Riflemen, six companies of the 44th Regiment, some artillery, baggage wagons, and the General himself, departed from Alexandria for Winchester via Virginia. It was on this march,
if Gillis' account is factual, that the gold told of in this popular Northern Virginia was buried.

When one compares actual historical documents with Gillis' account of the opening march of Braddock's campaign against Fort Duquesne, certain incongruities appear which seem to cause the validity of Gillis' account to come into question. One of the initial weaknesses in Gillis' opening assertion is his claim that General Braddock, in fact, left with the troops of Halkett's 44th Regiment as they marched out of Alexandria on April 9, 1755. Not only is it illogical for a general, such as Braddock, in command of a large military operation to depart with the vanguard of his troops, for the forces leaving on the 9th were, according to all accounts, the first sizable force to leave Alexandria, but also historical documents written during the period in question seem to place Braddock in areas other than with Halkett's marching troops. General Braddock's own orderly book places the General in Alexandria from April 9, prior to which he was in Annapolis, Maryland, to April 16, thus precluding any possibility of Braddock accompanying Halkett on his march to Winchester, a march which took later detachments only seven days. Later entries in the same source continue to confirm the fact that Braddock did not accompany Halkett's troops on their march, as entries from April 21 through April 28 find Braddock with the troops of the 48th Regiment, who had marched to this encampment at an earlier time, while earlier entries from April 17 through April 20, while not mentioning any specific campsites, can be assumed to have been written during Braddock's trip from Alexandria to Frederick.

Furthermore, entries in the orderly books of both Sir Peter Halkett
and General Braddock himself further confirm the fact that Braddock did not march with the troops of Halkett, for it is unlikely that Braddock, a man reputed to be fond of high living, would march through Virginia while appointing "a Sargent and 12 men of Colonel Dunbar to mount as (his) baggage guard and to march with it" through Maryland on the way to Winchester, via Frederick.

Further doubt is cast on both Gillis' statement concerning the composition of the force which left Alexandria on April 9, and the very existence of Braddock's Gold itself by period accounts of the true composition of the force which left under Halkett on the nineth. Although it is certainly true, as Gillis claims, that Halkett, along with six companies under his command and a group of wagons carrying the "tents and baggage" of those companies did leave Alexandria on April 9, 1755, it is almost assuredly true that Halkett was not accompanied on this march by any force of major artillery. The journal of Robert Orme, an Aide-de-Camp of General Braddock, clearly states that, while Halkett departed on April 9 for Winchester, his assistant "Lieutenant Colonel Gage was left with four other companies to escort the artillery." The significance of this is twofold. Not only does this account, taken from first-reference sources, cast doubt on the validity of Gillis' entire historical representation, as does the earlier proof of the true position of the General during the campaign, but it also poses a difficult question; how was the gold buried in the cannons by General Braddock if neither Braddock nor the cannons were there?

Further confirmation of the fact that the artillery still remained in Alexandria after the 9th of April is provided by the April 10 entry in Halkett's Orderly Book which states that "the
four Companies of Sir Peter Halkett's Regiment and the Royal Artillery Engineers ... are to continue receiving their provisions as usual til further orders," thus showing that the men of the artillery, and therefore the artillery itself, was still in Alexandria after Halkett had departed. In fact, there is no record of any artillery movement until April 12 when both Braddock and Halkett agree that one company of Halkett's Regiment were to escort but two wagons of the artillery, along with three wagons of baggage, to Winchester. This rather small scale movement of the artillery stores was followed later by the movement of the remaining part of Halkett's Regiment, three companies then under Lt. Colonel Gage, who accompanied the large remaining force of artillery still present in Alexandria on April 27, the day of the march. The artillery moved during this march, the last major exodus of troops from Alexandria, included the bulk of the British artillery under the command of Braddock, consisting of "their twelve pounders, howitzers, 9 pounders, wagons and one tumbril loaded with tools," a list which includes the vast majority of British ordnance, thus all but eliminating the possibility that any major movement of artillery, including the light six pounders which Gillis claims were the receptical of Braddock's Gold, occurred before the April 27 date indicated in Halkett's Orderly Book.

Furthermore, even if we accept the fact that Gillis could have been mistaken about both the actual presence of General Braddock at the burial of the gold, and the date on which the artillery force left Alexandria, other data suggests that it is unlikely that any cannons or wagons would have become so stuck during the march of April 26 as to cause the troops involved to bury them in order to free themselves of additional weight. In the first place, despite the fact that the earlier patrols of April 9 and April 12 could have easily
returned intelligence to Alexandria concerning the condition of the road, it is clear that no extraordinary precautions about travelling conditions were taken, for the members of Royal Navy, sent to Braddock to help with both the ferrying of troops and use of heavy block and tackle, remained with Dunbar's 48th Regiment during the entire duration of the march to Winchester, thus indicating that greater problems were faced on the route through Maryland than on the Virginia path taken by the 44th. Moreover, the comparing of Braddock's Orderly Book of April 8, in which Braddock records the campsites and milage from Alexandria to Winchester, with the orderly book of Halkett during the period from April 27 to May 3 demonstrates that the troops of Gage marching on April 27 kept almost perfectly with the time table laid out by General Braddock in his orderly book, taking a one day stop-over at one particular encampment (Mr. Miner's at Leesburg), thus making a 97 mile march in a respectable six days of actual marching time, a figure indicative of the fact that only minor trouble was encountered during the march. Finally, Robert Orth's Journal makes no mention of any unusually inclimate weather during the period that Gage and his troops marched to Winchester, despite the fact on the earlier dates of April 15 and 24 he had recorded the falling of eighteen inches of snow, and the occurrence of an unusually heavy rainfall. In short, there is no evidence to suggest that enough difficulties were encountered on the leg of the journey where the alleged gold is reputed to be buried to indicate that Braddock's troops might have been forced to lighten their load by burying any military supplies. In fact, the contrary seems to be indicated by the historical accounts of the period.

Later in his article, Gillis further states that "there was no
road to Winchester," and that the first divisions, the troops under the command of Halkett, had to "hew" their way through the forest, constructing in the process what would later be called Braddock's Road. Nevertheless, history records otherwise; for in truth, a map drawn in early 1755 by Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson shows two routes already in existence prior to Braddock's march. The first road, later called Braddock's Road, was incorporated in the year 1752, according to the minutes of the 1752 Fairfax courthouse (Truro Vestry Book, p. 22), while the second road, later called the Middle Turnpike or Route 7, was established in 1750, and possibly even earlier. It is clear from this information that Braddock's men did not, in fact, have to battle their way through to Winchester, as Mr. Gillis had erroneously stated, but could instead travel easily over already established roads.

But even with all of the previously asserted proofs that refute the original accounts of "Braddock's Gold," one major question is left unanswered; did General Braddock, or his troops, ever even pass near Centreville, Virginia? If Braddock sent his troops on the route that is now known as Braddock Road, then he did pass extremely close to Newgate, Centreville, and it might yet be possible that gold was buried there, but if the troops took instead the other, more northerly, road to Winchester, Middle Turnpike, then Braddock's forces did not pass anywhere near Centreville, and certainly never buried any gold there. For the answer to this question, one must look at the records of the period.

Both General Braddock's April 8 orderly book entry, and that of Peter Halkett from April 27 through May 3 agree on approximately the same march route between the cities of Alexandria and Winchester.
on the Virginia side of the Potomac, giving the points of the Old Fairfax Court House, Mr. Coleman's on Sugarland Run, Mr. Miner's, Mr. Thompson's, Mr. They's ferry, and Winchester as campsites, thus allowing one to easily chart the progress of both the earlier formation of troops leaving on April 9 and the later one leaving on April 27 simply by locating the sites of the encampments mentioned.

The first of these campsites, that of the Old Fairfax Courthouse, opened in 1742 and abandoned in 1752, which was .4 miles south and west of what is now Tyson's Corner, already begins to indicate that Braddock sent no troops over what has mistakenly come to be known as "Braddock's Road, preferring instead to use the northern, Middle Turnpike, road which passed right by the Old Courthouse. Mr. Coleman's house on Sugarland Run, a stream which crossed the Middle Turnpike but not "Braddock's" Road, could only have been on the more northern of the two routes, and has been placed but a half mile from Route 7, a road which approximates closely the route of the original turnpike. The later sites of Mr. Miner's, shown on the Jefferson and Fry map as being on the northern route, Mr. Thompson's, and Mr. They's ferry (Vestal's Gap) show clearly that the route taken by Halkett and his men was, in fact, the more northerly route through Vestal's Gap to Winchester, a route which does not even approach Centreville which lies, even at its closest many miles to the south and west.

Further confirmation that the troops did in fact take the more northern Middle Turnpike route is provided by the diary of Mrs. Brown, the wife of an officer, who was then travelling along the same route as that followed by the troops many days earlier. In her diary, Mrs. Browne stated that although her "coachman was for taking a better road," probably "Braddock's" Road which had just
recently been opened and which was probably still rather smooth, "but the sentries forbid it," forcing her to travel along the same Middle Turnpike route taken by the troops. The evidence clearly shows that Braddock never even marched his troops across the road so incorrectly named after him, choosing instead to use the Middle Turnpike route in transporting his troops from Alexandria to Winchester. This fact, in itself, shows conclusively that gold could not possibly have been buried in Centreville by Braddock's troops, and calls into serious doubt the validity of the Braddock's Göld myth.

In conclusion, it is all but impossible that Braddock, or his troops, buried any gold in the Centreville area. All the first-hand accounts, based on diaries, orderly books, letters, maps, and court records, along with modern historical accounts support this thesis, for the records show that not only are certain elements of the legend provably false, but also that Braddock's troops took a march route which never brought them within ten miles of Centreville. Furthermore, not only is it improbable that any gold was buried by Braddock in the Centreville area, but also is it extremely doubtful that Braddock buried gold anywhere in the Northern Virginia area. This assumption is made from the fact that no references in any of the original accounts that would tend to indicate any cause for burying a large supply of gold can be found, coupled with the fact that many, if not most, of the elements of the Braddock's Gold myth perpetuated, or maybe started, by Gillis are certainly false, thus casting the myth itself in a very unfavorable light.

Afterword

While it is obvious to the authors that the probability of Braddock's Gold being buried in Fairfax County is virtually nil,
the possibility, small as it may be, of gold being buried elsewhere along Braddock's route does exist, and in that way be the source of the Northern Virginia legend. In the Winchester area, local legends, handed down from generation to generation, tell of gold being buried by Braddock somewhere in the hills west of Winchester; further along Braddock's march, thus sparking interest in the possibility of gold being buried in that region. Although the actual source of this rumor may be the simple fact that Braddock's troops marched both toward and away from Fort Duquesne along the same route, it is possible, though unlikely, that some gold might have been cached by Braddock in the hills west of Winchester, or, more specifically, in the area one day's march from Fort Cumberland, or Willis Creek, in Maryland. Both the orderly book of Braddock and the journal of Robert Orme indicate that during the first day of the journey from Fort Cumberland, a rather poorly constructed fort, to Fort Duquesne in Pennsylvania, Braddock's troops encountered much trouble with the terrain due to bad roads and exceptionally weak horses. It was on June 11, 1755, one day out of Fort Cumberland, that these conditions caused Braddock to call a meeting of officers, where it was decided that "two six-pounders, four coehorns, and some powder and stores" were to be sent back to Fort Cumberland. Some, including we think Gillis though many days and miles off, have interpreted this statement of "sending back" the aforementioned stores as being a euphemism for burying them where they lay, a conclusion we think unlikely due to both the relative nearness of Fort Cumberland, and the weakness of its defences, which would have been greatly bolstered by the presence of two six-pounders. Finally, a last item helps to assert the position that General Braddock did not, in fact, bury any gold anywhere
along his route; this item being that '25,000 in specie were captured by the French at the massacre at Fort Duquesne.

Post Facto

Ah! Braddock, why did you persuade
To stand and fight each recreant blade,
That left thee in the wood?
They Knew that those who run away,
Might live to fight another day,
But all must die that stood.
Does this look like the face of a man who would bury gold?


4. Gillis, p. 36.


8. McCardell, p. 245.


11. Gillis, pp.35, 36

12. Gillis, p. 36.

13. Gillis, p. 35


18. McCardell, p.158.

19. Braddock's Orderly Book, April 12, 1755, and Halkett's Orderly Book, April 12, 1755

20. Halkett's Orderly Book, April 8, 1755.


23. Halkett's *Orderly Book*, April 12, Braddock's *Orderly Book* April 12, 1755.

24. Halkett's *Orderly Book*, April 26, 1755


27. Halkett's *Orderly Book*, April 27, 1755.


29. Braddock's *Orderly Book*, April 8, 1755.

30. Braddock's *Orderly Book*, April 8, 1755.


34. Gillis, pp. 35, 36.


36. Harrison, p. 510.

37. Harrison, p. 570.


41. Braddock's *Orderly Book*, April 8, 1755.

42. Braddock's *Orderly Book*, April 8, 1755.

43. Halkett's *Orderly Book*, April 27, 1755.
44. Fairfax County Historical Landmarks Commission, The Fairfax County Court House 1722-1752.


46. Harrison, pp. 479, 510.

47. Braddock's Orderly Book, April 8, 1755.


49. Hugh, p. 72.


51. Hugh, pp. 72-74.

52. Harrison, p. 253.


54. Hugh, p. 56.

55. Hugh, p. 56.


57. Braddock's Orderly Book, June 11-17, 1755.


60. Robert Orme's Journal, June 10, 1755.


63. Sargent, p. 239.

64. Sargent, p. 416.


66. McCordell, p. i.
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We would like to give our thanks to Mr. John Gott, Mrs. Edith Sprouse, and all the very friendly workers at the Virginia Room of the Fairfax County Public Library. A very special thank-you is offered to the Reverend Bill Peterson, whose help was of great value.