

# Bucks County Adventures

From William Penn  
and George Washington to Neil Armstrong

By  
Carl LaVO



Open Door Publications

Bucks County Adventures  
From William Penn and George Washington to Neil Armstrong

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# Dedication

*To my daughter, Genevieve, and my grandchildren Dashiell and Margaux, in  
memory of our adventures together.*



The author and his wife, Mary Anne, in a photo taken in the 1970s, sitting on the tracks of the New Hope and Ivyland Railroad in Buckingham Township, Pennsylvania.

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New Hope's town clock,  
at the Visitors Center  
on Main Street.



# Foreword

By Rachel Riley

As a reporter, if you asked longtime and beloved editor Carl LaVO if he had time to talk about a story, the real question was, did you have time for his answer?

More importantly, were you willing to hear it?

While he was always patient, encouraging and more than happy to listen, Carl was also filled with a plethora of endless brainstorming sessions...and he was a huge fan of a good debate.

To him, writing a story was like an archeological dig. I often teased that an example of a Carl LaVO edit would be to find any school district budget line item with the number seven in it.

But my mentor was going above and beyond doing his job. He was trying to teach me a challenging lesson: how to truly treasure hunt for that nugget that leads to a gem of a great story. To be perfectly honest, I usually walked away from his desk feeling inspired.

That's because the topic of conversation may have started with news, but it somehow usually ended up about life. For Carl, the essence of any story was the human element. Events happened, yes, but more importantly, they affected people.

In the author's *Bucks County Adventures: From William Penn and George Washington to Neil Armstrong*, Carl takes you on a journey with his family to get to know the history behind some of those events and how they affected the people of the county.

A Bucks County newsman for years, Carl lived and breathed his subject matter so his master storytelling flows like a truly great historian's should, as if he were there himself.

The author shares a Bucks County history that's even richer than one could imagine, revealing details about the likes of Henry Chapman Mercer, James A. Michener and Oscar Hammerstein.

He finds more interesting depth and tragic backstory about places you may not even know existed, including an old village or Bowman's Tower, and the simplest, most unassuming of things like Route 13 and a local community church.

With an uncanny ability to find humor in any situation, Carl will make you laugh about seemingly silly reasons why folks could've gotten arrested back in the day.

On these adventures with his daughter and grandchildren, the author discovers things about himself that he never knew. A grandfather teaching his grandson, their combined endearing innocent yet simultaneous wise view on the



world, will make you smile□ □e'll also warm your heart, sharing personal details like where he met and fell in love with his wife, a love that continues to be celebrated today.

Carl never assumes and always wants to know more□□In case you're curious, he even provides resources to help you keep the story going and maybe even find out something about yourself.

□ometimes the tale isn't about finding the right answer, or any resolution at all□□It's about the process, asking the right □uestions□□□ife's an adventure,□ Carl once told me□□It's about the □ourney, who embarks on it with you and the fun you have along the way.

*Rachel Riley is a former newspaper/multimedia journalist for Calkins Media from 2004 to 2014, and reported directly to Carl LaVO from 2005 to 2011.*



Winter fun at Bolton Mansion in Levittown. The home, which was built in the 1600s, once was owned by William Penn's estate manager.



# Introduction

Why write about Bucks County history? Hasn't everything been written that is worth writing about? Hardly.

That's the lesson I learned after being challenged a few years ago by Patricia Walker to write a weekly newspaper column centered on the county's 300-year-old history. I was a little skeptical. But Pat persisted as executive editor of the county's two daily and Sunday newspapers, the *Bucks County Courier Times* and *The Intelligencer*. After all, she stressed, I had written four books about local history for the local Institute Press in Annapolis. Certainly, as a *Courier Times* managing editor and resident of Bucks for more than 30 years, I could find some interesting things to write about locally.

I told her I'd give it a try but promised no great revelations. I began by skimming *Place Names in Bucks County Pennsylvania* by George MacReynolds. I discovered the circa 1900 book in the *Courier Times* library in Levittown. Inside were brief but tantalizing tales I knew nothing about. To follow up on them, I invited my daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren to make an adventure of visiting places the book described. We'd then figure out how these places evolved in county history, enlarging on stories rooted to 1, 2, 3 years ago. Before long, we had explored back roads to historic sites, checked ancient archives like Doylestown's Spruance Library of the Bucks County Historical Society and talked to people from one end of the county to the other. Our journey has taken us hiking up the slopes of Haycock Mountain to stand atop massive volcanic boulders. We've stepped into a boat that carried George Washington and his army across the Delaware River. We've followed woodland trails to the ruins of a fabled estate in Lower Bucks, and kayaked among beaver dams to understand the history of an exotic pond in Tinicum Township. We've visited the home of a Broadway legend, a mountaintop church that once sheltered runaway slaves from the South and the centrifuge where the first man who landed on the moon once trained for his mission.

The response from readers to our adventures has been overwhelming, many suggesting this book. Our column, said reader Mandy Capella, reminds me of how truly blessed I am to live in such a wonderful area as Bucks County. She and others continue to inspire us and provide new mysteries to resolve, and unusual sites to visit. The list of ideas is long and getting longer. The family fun continues.

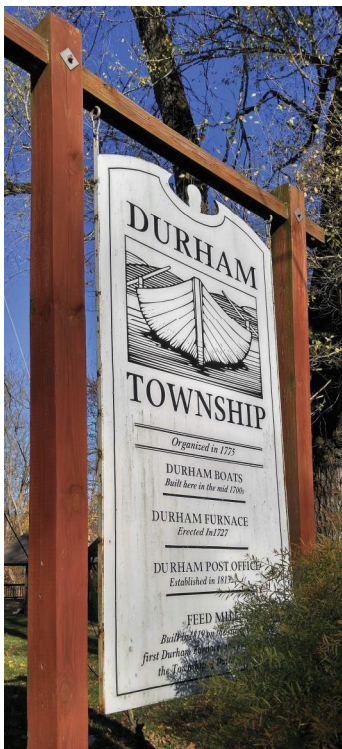
I hope you enjoy these selected works and gather the sense of history and beauty that makes Bucks County extraordinary. My hope is this book adds to your own enjoyment of a very special place.

Carl LaVO  
November, 2016

# THE DURHAM BOATS



## The Boats That Ensured Washington's Crossing of the Delaware



Welcoming sign in Durham Township .

But we couldn't see anything resembling the forge built in 1727. To our surprise, however, we spied a Durham boat under an open-air pavilion in a pocket park. Wooden steps led to the vessel's topside, inviting visitors to explore the 40-foot-long

THE CHALLENGE WAS SIMPLE: "Let's go find an oven where cannon balls were made and boats built to carry George Washington and thousands of soldiers across the Delaware River on Christmas."

Genevieve, Dashiell and Margaux were eager, to say the least. So we piled in the car and headed to the postcard village of Durham in Upper Bucks to begin our adventure. The town easily can be missed since it sits down the slope of Mine Hill just off State Highway 213. The settlement of about two dozen Victorian homes and an ancient grist mill sits on a tributary to the nearby Delaware. At first we zoomed past the village, then doubled back to a small roadside marker pointing the way down the hill. From a website, I knew the

Durham Blast Furnace was located near the town post office.



Famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Luetze.



craft. Cool In a snap, all four of us scampered aboard. Dash took charge of a 1-foot -long tiller at the stern as if steering through a make-believe current. We walked planks running the length of the deck where boatmen once shouldered iron-tipped poles to push the boat through river shallows. We climbed down to the keel, peered into a dark hold and studied oar locks and paddles.

The boat's design was conceived by Robert Durham in 1730. The vessels were needed to carry pig iron from the new blast furnace down the Delaware to markets in Bristol and Philadelphia. Durham's

boat was similar to skiffs used by early Scandinavian settlers. At 12 feet long and pointed at both ends, it was flat-bottomed, 4 feet wide and 3 feet deep. When fully loaded with 17 tons of cargo, it could float in water only 20 inches deep—perfect for navigating river shoals. Crewmen used oars when the river was deep enough. Durham's boats became ubiquitous. A fleet of 1,000 with 2-man crews dominated river commerce. There were so many by 1777 when George Washington contemplated crossing the Delaware that he commandeered dozens to move his army. They delivered rifle and cannon shot from the Durham furnace.

Our objective in Durham was to find that forge. About to give up, we saw a middle-aged couple raking leaves in front of their home. "The furnace is in the hillside near the parking lot, right in front of the grist mill," we were told. "It's very small." Indeed. Backtracking we found



Margaux, Genevieve and Dashiell in the hold at the stern of the Durham boat.

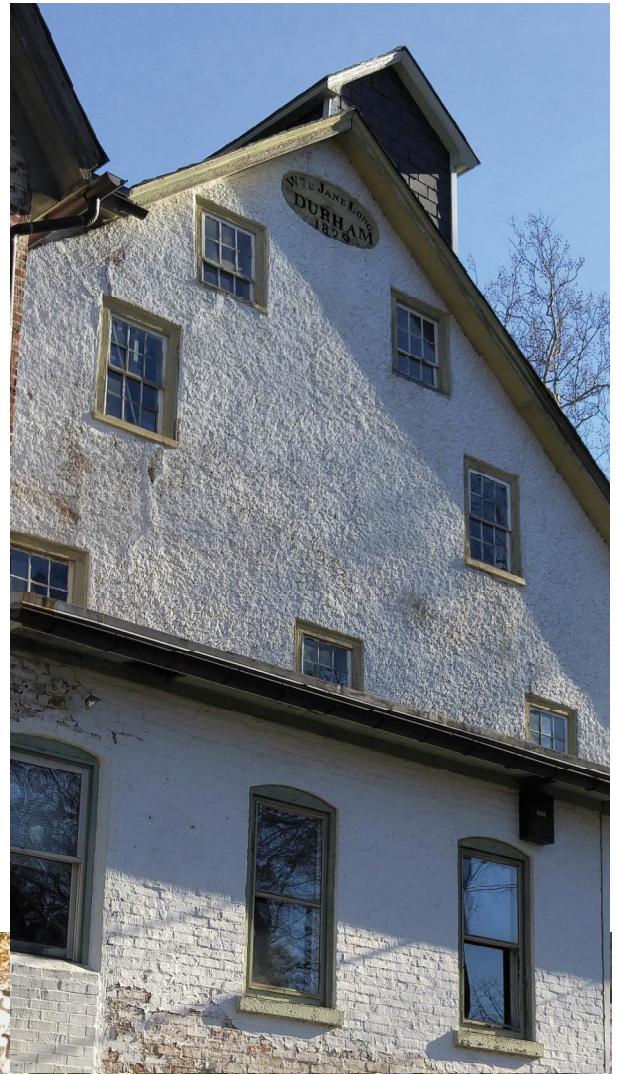


Grandson Dashiell takes the tiller of the boat in Durham Township in Upper Bucks alongside sister, Margaux, and the author.



it, looking much like a brick-lined Hobbit hole. It was about 4 feet high and 5 feet deep. Wow Hard to believe such a small furnace could manufacture all the ammo for Washington's guns as well as iron for "dam and leve" wood-burning stoves sold all over the Delaware River Valley in the 1700s. Later we found out what we had been inspecting was a evolutionary War oven used to produce coal for the furnace that used to exist, now replaced by the grist mill.

"Well, kids," I implored. "Let's go see how far it is to Washington Crossing where the boats were used to get Washington across the Delaware." It took more than an hour on a 10-mile stretch of winding river road. Enough daylight remained for us to visit the park's museum and collection of four Durham boats stacked in a barn to protect them. They were about to be moved to the river where people dressed as soldiers and officers including one playing George Washington would oar across the



Above right, an ancient grist mill now covers what once was a blast furnace that produced Delaware River boats on which munitions were shipped to George Washington's army during the American Revolution. Bottom center, the author kneeling in front of what turned out to be a stone oven used to produce coal for the Durham blast furnace.



Delaware on Christmas Day to re-enact the famous crossing prior to the Battle of Trenton 240 years ago. That in its way, I told my grandchildren, led to the creation of the United States.

Dash saw a print of “Washington Crossing the Delaware” propped on an easel near the boats. “Loo, Margau, there’s George Washington”



Another view of the grist mill, which covers the remains of the Revolutionary War era blast furnace.

*More information can be found in “History of the Durham Boat” by the Durham Historical Society.*



Margaux standing on the keel of a Durham boat, the type that carried George Washington and the Continental Army across the Delaware River on Christmas 1776 to win his first big battle in Trenton, N.J.





The fabulous interior of Doylestown's Mercer Museum, which displays a vast collection of Early American life on seven floors and an open atrium.