

THE DOANS
in Bucks County

**The Life and Times of the
Plumstead Cowboys
by Peter Mulcahy**

According to an Act passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1783 the Doans were "**robbers, felons, burglars and traitors**" to the American cause whose reign of terror throughout Bucks County had to cease. To Major John Andre, the director of the British Intelligence Service under General Howe, Moses Doan was the "Eagle Spy" whose efforts had resulted in the defeat of Washington's army on Long Island. To the Doans many friends and supporters, they were Revolutionary era Robin Hoods who covered vast areas from Baltimore to Easton and from Long Island to Lancaster in their quest to lighten rich Whigs of their burden of wealth. Unfortunately, unlike Robin Hood, the Doans seldom gave their spoils to the poor, yet unlike their characterization in the Proclamation of 1783, they were not simply ruthless outlaws. At times they exhibited moments of striking compassion, humility and an unflinching sense of humor although their capacity for violence grew as they prospered and finally brought their downfall. The truth concerning the Doans lies somewhere between the two extremes of their legend and like all people who become larger than life, the truth has not always been easy to find.

The Doan family first came to America in 1629 and branches of it sprang up throughout Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

By 1696 the first of the Doans had moved into Bucks County from Sandwich, Massachusetts and prior to 1726 Israel Doan, the grandfather of the infamous Doan Boys, was squatting on Indian land in Plumstead. At the time this area was deeply forested with great distances between cleared farms. Settlers found the Indians who frequented the area friendly for the most part and there was an abundance of deer and bear to hunt. Bread was made from the Indian corn and when grain was carried to market it was done on long caravans of horses tied head to tail which snaked through the trees on the Indian paths that crisscrossed the area. Men dressed in deerskins and women wore linsey and linen. Every month they would attend the Friends Meeting with the men carrying their weapons because of the strong likelihood of encountering a wolf or bear along the way.

Joseph Doan, Sr., the Father of the outlaw Moses, lived on a farm on what is now Route 611 just south of Plumsteadville. He and his wife Hester had the dubious honor of fathering five of the six Doan outlaws: Joseph, Jr., Moses,

Aaron, Levi and Mahlon. Abraham, their first cousin, was the sixth member of the band. Although at various times other outlaws and highwaymen joined up with them, these six were largely responsible for what became the Doan legend.

To understand the origin of the myth that has surrounded these men since they first undertook their exploits, it is necessary to read the description of them by their contemporaries. The sons of Joseph Doan and their cousin were all about 6' in height. They had dark brown hair and long Romanesque noses. Moses had an extremely long neck although all had that similar characteristic in lesser degrees. They were considered quite handsome by the women of their day and in a quirk of fate, they all looked so much alike that they were seldom positively identified in court. But their looks were not the only physical characteristic that the men shared. Each Doan had an athletic ability that was second to none. Saturday afternoons it was the custom for young men from miles around to gather and test each other with a variety of feats of strength and agility. Such games as pitching quoits (hurling large iron bullets,), corner ball and jumping the cat preceded wrestling and foot races. As children growing up in Plumstead, the Doans always excelled athletically be it wrestling, running or jumping.

Unfortunately, they displayed these talents most often when they bullied the other locals. One of the few young men in the area to stand up to the Doans was William Hart who, in one of Life's inexplicable twists, would prove to be their tenacious foe years later. None the less, the Doans were repeat winners each Saturday in these feats of machismo which was a constant source of envy for most of their male contemporaries. An indication of how well known they were for their athletic prowess was an incident that occurred in Lancaster in 1786 at the height of their notoriety. A group of men were sitting in front of a hotel and challenging one another to a jumping contest (Remember, there was no TV, at the time). One man quickly defeated the others and while he was basking in his victory another man quietly approached the mark and asked to try. While the locals were smirking at the presumptuousness of the stranger, he proceeded to leap more that two feet higher than the newly crowned champion. The onlookers were astonished and the man who had been beaten was so shocked by the height of the jump that he declared the man had to be either the "Devil or a Doan". The stranger immediately left and later the group learned that the challenger was in fact the outlaw, Abraham Doan.

The career of the Doan Outlaws began with Moses Doan who in the Fall of 1770 quarreled with his Father. In his stubbornness, he refused to make peace and left his childhood home. A few days later he saved the family of the young girl he loved from an Indian attack but his subsequent declaration of love for her was rebuffed. There is speculation that these two events

turned Moses bitter and set him off on his path to notoriety. His most immediate reaction was to join a small band of local Indians from the Wolf tribe after telling them that he hated the settlers who were inexorably forcing them out and wanted to fight on their side. It is believed that he stayed with them for several months, hunting and engaging in feats of strength with them which he always won. There is no evidence that Moses actually joined his Indian friends in an attack on the settlers. He did, however, let his hair grow down over his shoulders and took on what even his relatives called a "Devilish Look". What this did for Moses psychologically, no one knows but by the next mention of him, he had organized his brothers and gone on his first raid.

Bucks County at this time was primarily made up of Quakers who did not support the coming battle with England.

The non-violent nature of the Friends was not welcomed by those who wanted to break from Mother England. The self-sufficient, agrarian Quaker farmers were not as dependent on trade and did not share the rebels' anger over the various taxes that King George was imposing on the Colonies. The local Committees of Safety were taxing the farmers to raise money for the people in Massachusetts who were suffering following England's closure of the port of Boston in 1774. There is some evidence that Moses Doan believed that if the Quakers, including his parents and relatives, did not pay this tax, they would be branded traitors and their lands would be confiscated by the American government. Whether or not this was true, Moses used this information to sway his brothers into fighting with him for the British and against the rebels. It is generally agreed that by 1774 Moses had enlisted his brothers, Aaron, Levi, Mahlon and Joseph and his cousin Abraham to his cause. It was Moses' idea to harass the Colonists and take back the tribute exacted from their own families by robbing the tax collectors. Unfortunately, while Moses rode to Newtown to scout out the strength and location of the rebels, his newly founded band got antsy and decided to break the ice on their new career by crossing into New Jersey and robbing Mary Doremy's father, the woman who months earlier had turned down Moses' offer of love.

What followed was the stuff of which legends are made.

Having returned late from Newtown, Moses learned of the raid and rode to New Jersey in time to find his brothers in the process of beating the old man into telling them where his gold was hidden. After stopping his overeager band, he promised Mary that although they would never have a life together he would always protect her and her family; and they would never need fear him nor his brothers.

Later that evening Moses unveiled to his followers what their principal source of income would prove to be for several years: stealing horses in Bucks County, driving them into Philadelphia and selling them to the British. That and the periodic robbery of Whig tax collectors and wealthy Whig citizens became the *modus operandi* of the Doans. Yet even in their thievery they held to a strange sense of humor. The horse of Joseph Sackett, was stolen by the Doans three different times, keeping it for their own use for nine months the first time and for three months the second. Each time when they no longer needed the horse, they returned it at night to Sackett's pasture. Years later in Canada, Joseph Doan said that they had stolen Sackett's horse for the pure fun of it and did so only to let him and his neighbors know that it could be done. In fact, the surest way to be robbed by the Doans was to let it pass at the local tavern that you were too well protected to ever become their victim.

There were other well-publicized actions during this time that clouded the outlaw name that had been branded on the Doans. Their raid in Chester county on Israel Lucas, for example, clearly showed the limits of Moses' debauchery. During the raid, a sleazy ne'er-do-well by the name of Foxy Joe who had recently joined their group, beat Lucas senseless and then made advances towards his young wife. When Moses Doan entered the room he struck Foxy Joe and made it quite clear that such behavior would not be tolerated. Later that evening when Foxy tried to renew his interest in the woman, Moses beat him near death and then threw him down the stairwell. Returning to the man they were robbing he apologized for Foxy's actions.

At this point in their careers the Doans were working regularly for the British Army as spies and horse "Suppliers". Their cleverness with disguises and their knowledge of the local area allowed them to stay close to the rebel encampments and pass information on troop movements to the British. Their close association with the English began in July of 1776, when Moses and Levi Doan rode to Staten Island, New York to meet with General Howe. He offered himself and his men into the service of the Crown as spies and they were immediately accepted. Their first mission was to spy on the rebel encampments at Newark and Long Island until reinforcements arrived from England and Howe could move on them. While Moses occupied himself primarily with the daily duties of spying, the others went on raiding parties and robbed local Whigs. Many stories began to circulate at this time about Moses' reckless courage since he would ride up to a rebel guard post in the middle of the night, wave hello and then ride off into the darkness on his coal-black horse. His bravado earned him invaluable information for Howe and a reputation as a supernatural being. His reports to the General were so precise and detailed that Howe nicknamed him "Eagle Spy". The ensuing defeat of Washington's army on Long Island was directly attributed to Moses

Doan who discovered an unprotected backway into the American fortifications. The success of the attack left Long Island in the hands of the British and sent Washington retreating down through New Jersey and into Pennsylvania.

Following that battle, Moses returned to Bucks County to join up with his band who had been driven out of New Jersey by the hue and cry over their activities. They stayed in the home of a friend on Jericho Mountain leaving just before Christmas 1776 to stay close to the Rebel army that was encamped along the river near Newtown. Since they were known on sight by most of the locals, the Doans slept in caves in Solebury and Buckingham during the day and did their spying at night. One of these caves is located in Center Bridge and was discovered in 1875.

Doan and the British suspected that Washington might attack Trenton but they had no idea when, and felt confident that the British and the Hessian reinforcements there would prevail. Moses and Abraham were in Newtown on Christmas Eve day and noticed that preparations were underway for marching the troops. They also noticed ferry barges assembling near McKonkey's Ferry (Washington's Crossing, PA). Actually, in the weeks prior, General Washington had ordered that all the boats North and South of the ferry to be confiscated for their use or destroyed. Moses sent Levi with this news to General Grant via New Brunswick and then returned to his Jericho Mountain cave and planned to scout the rebels the following day. That morning he disguised himself as a local farmer and took Old York Road towards New Hope. He passed the Buckingham Friends and eventually took the Ferry Road to Coryell's Ferry. It was here that Moses saw that the troops and usual sentinels were gone and preparations were being made to dismantle the fortifications. He rode to Bowman's hill where the main rebel encampment was and realized that something very big was happening. At this time a Nor'easter had begun to blow and sleet and snow were falling. Moses suspected that the rebels were heading for Trenton and knew his only chance to help the British was to warn them himself. He went north past Coryell's to Howell's Ferry which was run by a loyal Tory. There he crossed the ice choked river in what had become a raging storm.. Securing a horse, he rode south into the near blizzard. The howling wind, the pounding of the river and cracking of the ice floes was incredible as was the near zero temperature but he kept on. He encountered no one on the road and considered turning back, thinking he may have been wrong about the Americans' intentions.

In an incredible historic moment, as he passed the embankment across from McKonkey's (now Washington Crossing), he heard and saw the rebel barges filled with soldiers pushing through the blizzard towards the Jersey side. He

was now sure that their objective was Trenton. Moses Doan was, at that moment, in possession of one of the greatest secrets of the war.

There are several versions of what happened next. Historians agree that Moses made it to Trenton and requested to see Colonel Rahl who was in command. The Colonel was playing cards and reportedly did not want to be disturbed. Moses wrote a note and asked that it be immediately brought to Rahl who simply put it into his vest pocket unread. It was found on his person the next day. The note read: "Washington is coming on you down the river, he will be here afore long. Doan". The versions differ mainly on how and from whom Rahl got the note. Most historians agree that a more attentive commander may have utilized Moses Doan's note to prevent one of the Colonial Army's greatest moral victories.

DOAN, The Liberator

Aside from spying, one of the more interesting occupations that the Doans engaged in during this time was the rescue of British Prisoners of War from the American stockade located in Lancaster. Their orchestrated escapes were so frequent and successful that a Major Lee of the American Army pretended to be a prisoner in the hope of uncovering the spy ring responsible for them. For weeks he languished in the prison with the others until he escaped with a group organized by the Doans. His description of one of the typical escapes gives us an indication on just how good the Doans were at what they did. As they made their way back to the British lines Lee realized that their liberator was none other than Abraham Doan. They traveled only at night and were hidden during the day in secret rooms built into homes, barns and even tombs. Abraham, however, had suspected the Major almost immediately and when they reached the Delaware, he confronted him, touching off a life and death struggle. Although both survived their battle, neither could get the better of the other and, when the moment presented itself, the two eagerly fled each other. Lee returned to Lancaster, retraced his escape and arrested 15 people as traitors.

In 1778 following the British victory at Brandywine, the English occupied Philadelphia to the delight of the Doans. It made it much easier for them to sell their plunder and horses in the city. During February of that year their raids throughout Bucks County resulted for the first time in the raising of a posse for the sole purpose of bringing them to justice. At this time an incident occurred which illustrated not only the noble though misguided nature of Moses Doan, but also his capacity for violence.

A young mother whose husband was with Washington at Valley Forge could not obtain a travelling pass from the British in order to buy food for her

children. Despite repeated petitions to the British leaders, the pass was not forthcoming. Spurned on by the cries of her hungry children, she finally set out for the mills along a series of back roads that would keep her from the sight of the British sentinels. The woman was so exhausted from hunger and the long journey that she was near death the following day when she endeavored to return home. Burdened by her sack of flour, she struggled along the road, periodically dragging her cargo through the woods to skirt the British guards along the way. Suddenly she was stopped by a man. She immediately assumed from previous descriptions that he was one of the Doans. She told him of her husband at Valley Forge and her hungry children and the stranger, Moses Doan, gave her his purse with all the money he had in it. He then warned her of another sentinel just ahead on the road and disappeared before she could thank him. She pressed on and was almost home when a British guard challenged her and demanded a pass. When she could not produce it, he demanded her sack of flour which the woman, weak from her journey, gave up meekly. At that moment Moses Doan appeared from the woods. She knew it was Moses by his clothing but his demeanor was quite different from the man she had met only minutes before. He shambled over to the soldier like an old man and asked that he return the woman's flour, even offering twice its value in gold. When the guard refused and then threatened to arrest Moses, he seized him by the throat and told the woman to grab her flour and run. As soon as she was safely away, Moses drew a pistol and shot the guard in the head. Instantly, the alarm went up from the guard house and along the line of pickets. Moses escaped into the woods where he found his horse and rode for the safety of the river. Before he was to finally escape he would shoot another guard and kill a British officer who was in the lead barge pursuing him across the Delaware. Having failed to capture him, the British soldiers later attributed his escape to supernatural reasons which served to further escalate the legend of Moses Doan.

By June of 1780, the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware had become too hot for the Doans. Although they hid in a variety of caves in Holicong, Plumstead and Solebury as well as old hunting cabins which lay obscured in the heavy woods that covered much of the area, they had become so notorious that they could no longer depend on their friends to hide them or warn them of their enemies. Moses and his cousin Abraham were now the accepted leaders of the outlaws and to them fell the job of planning and implementing their raids.

On June 7th just south of Elizabethtown, an army of four thousand British soldiers who had marched from Staten Island to attack a small settlement on the strength of a report by Moses Doan that the citizens were sympathizers to the rebel cause. Moses did not know this, he simply

ascertained that there were wealthy farmers in the settlement and tricked the British into attacking so his men could take the plunder. During the attack, an intoxicated Abraham Doan killed the local Pastor's wife, a mother of nine, as she sat in her home with her children huddled in fear around her. With that crime the Doans crossed a line from which they were never able to return. Within three years their leader would be dead and the others in jail or being pursued unmercifully.

Still their legend grew in all directions. Later that year it became known that Joseph Doan had impersonated the British Lord Rawdon who during the English occupation of Philadelphia was a popular guest at the homes of both Tories and Whigs. For two days this Plumstead farm boy who possessed a striking resemblance to the English Lord, impersonated him while a guest of one of Philadelphia's most distinguished families. He was later described as witty and charming although, in the end, he had relieved his host of his cash and much of his silverware. Several days later, Doan mailed his victim a letter asking if he enjoyed his visit with Lord Rawdon.

The following year, October 22, 1781 the Doans robbed the Newtown Treasury of 1,307 Pounds, the largest robbery of Public funds ever. It is believed they did this in retaliation for the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown three days earlier. Newtown at the time was a mustering center for the Colonial Army.. the Doans' incredible bravado had to be the result of the impunity they had operated with since their first raid. From eyewitness testimony, it is believed that the outlaws fled into Wrightstown where they buried the money.. it was never found.

That winter they began stealing horses again and running them south to Baltimore for sale. A neighborhood defense group was organized to put an end to their raids but many of the locals refused to help fearing that, if unsuccessful, the Doans would come down hard on them. Colonel William Hart, a Doan adversary from his childhood years with them, enlisted the aid of twelve other men including a Colonel Robinson who was running a popular tavern in Dublin at the time. Also on the posse was Patrick Mechlin who proved to be a rather large thorn in the Doans' side. His was the job of spying on the outlaws activities and he did so with such determination that he would sleep all day and prowl all night in search of them. He rode a horse faster than any ridden by the outlaws and he had a habit of catching them on the road, riding ahead and screaming, "The Doans are Coming, The Doans are Coming". Needless to say, this thwarted many of the outlaws' intentions.

At this time Colonel George Piper of Bedminster was appointed deputy U.S. Marshal with authority to arrest the Doans dead or alive. He and his *posse*

commitatus made it very difficult for the Doans, nearly capturing them on several occasions and rooting out their secret rooms and hiding places in area barns. Colonel Hart's tenacity forced the Doans south into Virginia and they stayed away from Bucks County for more than a year. During that time, one of the gang's number, James Fitzpatrick of Chester County, who had decided not to go South with them, was captured, tried and hung in Philadelphia. Fitzpatrick, a well known Chester County outlaw, had joined the Doans and became a close friend of Moses. His execution had a profound effect on the gang's leader who, uncharacteristically and unsuccessfully tried to murder the woman who had betrayed Fitzpatrick to the rebels. He informed his gang that from then on they could expect the same treatment from the authorities if they were captured.

From this point on the Doans were trailed incessantly by a variety of armed posses. With the war over, they could no longer count on the help of Loyalists. Worse, they could not return home literally since the government had confiscated the properties of their parents in punishment for their children's actions. Yet with all the pressures on them, they returned to the Plumstead area and began robbing the local farmers once again.

Some time later during an attempted robbery at Colonel Robinson's tavern in Dublin, Joseph Doan was shot and captured. He was immediately transferred into Philadelphia and imprisoned. Moses and the rest meanwhile were hiding in a small log house along the Tohickon Creek on the Plumstead side. It is this event that led to the legend that Moses Doan rode his horse off the cliffs above Fleecydale Road, choosing death rather than capture at the hands of Colonel Hart's men.

The gang was, in fact, secreted at a farm above Fleecydale Road. It was owned by a man named Halsey who had hidden them on occasion. The man's wife had no flour with which to feed them and she sent her eleven year old son to Wismer's mill located along the Delaware. The boy let it slip that the Doans were at his house and word was passed to Colonel Hart who was drinking at the Gardenville Tavern at the time.

You can still get a beer at the Gardenville Tavern today at the corner of Ferry Road and Route 413. Hart raised a rather meager posse of seven men including a Major William Kennedy. A short time later, Hart burst into the Halsey cabin and grappled with Moses in a fierce wrestling match that harkened back to their early childhood when Hart was the only youth to stand up to their bullying.

As they wrestled, a Captain Robert Gibson of Fisherville arrived at the cabin just as Hart threw Moses to the ground and appeared to have subdued him.

Testimony indicates that, at this point, an exhausted Moses surrendered to Hart and the two men who were standing with him. As Colonel Hart released Moses and began to stand, Gibson took aim on the prostrate Moses Doan and fired a musket ball through his heart, killing him instantly.

At that moment Abraham and Levi Doan leaped through the back window of the cabin and tried to escape. Abraham used Mrs. Halsey as a shield and was able to get to his horse and flee, while Levi grabbed his rifle and, holding his pursuers at bay, demanded they release Moses. As Moses was already dead, there could be no bargaining and their silence infuriated Levi who took aim and fired. Tragically the musket ball struck the rifle of Colonel Hart's younger brother, splintered the wood and drove a shard of it into Major Kennedy's groin...the Major would die of the wound two days later at the age of forty.

His funeral, the largest ever held in that area, saw hundreds of local and State military units who had come to pay their respects. The Major was buried with full military honors at the Presbyterian Church in Deep Run where his grave can still be seen today marked with a large white headstone.

The disposition of Moses' body was a different matter. As he lay dead on the steps of the Halsey home, a local man, Philip Hinkle, dragged the body on to his horse and rode with it to Fisherville before anyone could protest. There he came upon Moses' mother and father and dumped the body at their feet crying, "Here is one of your Tory sons. He won't bother any of us soon again."

Moses was interred in a field behind the village of Fisherville in an unmarked grave that has never been found. Seven days following the death of Major Kennedy the Pennsylvania Legislature passed an act designed to bring the Doans to justice. 100 pounds reward was offered for Abraham, Mahlon, Levi and Aaron Doan. Furthermore the family of any citizen killed in an attempt to capture any of the Doans would receive 800 pounds. A month later Mahlon Doan was arrested in Baltimore for stealing horses. He escaped by cutting off the fleshy parts of his heels in order to slip off his iron shackles and although he was tracked by his blood for several miles, he was never found. For years it was believed that he drowned himself in the Chesapeake rather than be captured again but years later, during an interview, the son of outlaw Aaron Doan said that Mahlon escaped to New York where he and other loyalists boarded a boat for England.

On May 15, 1787 Abraham and Levi were arrested in Chester county. Exhausted by years of dogged pursuit, they surrendered without a struggle.

They stood trial in Philadelphia, were convicted and taken to Smith's Island and hung on September 24th. True to their legend their days in prison were marked with controversy and several attempted escapes. The controversy centered on the Treaty of Peace signed in 1785 which explicitly protected them from punishment for their actions during the Revolution. Their execution was considered by many to be a gross injustice in light of the treaty. Equally newsworthy were the escape tries which were the work of Mary Doan, Abraham's sister. Her first attempt involved a saw and a file baked into a loaf of bread. Having been discovered and turned away, she returned later that day disguised as an old Quaker woman on her regular visit to the jail. This time she was able to pass a file to her brother. Unfortunately they were hung before they sawed through the bars. Mary Doan pleaded for their bodies and returned home with them to Plumstead where she petitioned the Friends to allow her to bury them in the Meeting House cemetery. The Friends refused and the cousins graves can still be seen outside the far left back wall of the cemetery located on Ferry Road just past the Gardenville Inn.

If you visit it, enter the walled cemetery through the wooden gate in front and walk carefully to the rear left wall. There, if you peek over the wall slowly, you will see the headstones of the two cousins. Do it slowly because legend has it that you should never surprise a Doan whether alive or dead.

Following Levi and Abraham's deaths Aaron and Joseph, Jr. fled to Canada. There is evidence that Joseph, Jr. taught school in Humberstone, Ontario near Niagara Falls and returned to Bucks County to reclaim property in 1820. He later returned to Walpole, Ontario where he lived the remainder of his years. It is believed that Aaron stayed close by and was interred at Humberstone.

Without any doubt The Doans were and have been big news in Bucks County from the moment of their first raid. Periodically the local papers have serialized their life and times which not only spurred newspaper sales but also helped blur much of the evidence concerning their exploits. The first of such stories appeared in the July 1839 issue of *Record of the Volunteers of the United States*, one of several magazines published between 1830-1840 in the interest of military and naval readers After that, serialized accounts of the **Plumstead Cowboys** and the **Bucks County Bandittories** appeared in the *Doylestown Democrat*, *The Democratic Standard*, *the Doylestown Watchtower* and several other publications. The issues of these newspapers that contained material about the Doans were always well received.

The continual re-telling of the Doans' story and the emotions involved in interviewing their aging victims and supporters led to a thick layer of myth

that encrusted the facts of their life. The story that Moses Doan rode his horse off the cliffs above Fleecydale Road in order to commit suicide on the trail below is myth. What is fact, however, is that the Doans were a major presence in Carversville during their reign of terror which perhaps accounts for some of the ongoing interest in the Plumstead Cowboys. There are several sources of information on the Doans ranging from The *New Doan Book* by George MacReynolds to copies of the old newspaper stories available on microfiche at the Spruance Library. In addition, the Mercer Museum has several artifacts including Moses' gun and powder horn.

The more you learn about the Doans and their exploits, the more you will be prepared for that moment when you are walking through the woods on Jericho Mountain or in Northhampton Township or on the hillside above Center Bridge and you hear the ghostly sound of approaching horses in the darkness. Don't panic and run because you may accidentally stumble into one of the long lost caves frequented by the Doans. If you do, be sure to take some time and look around before you spread the word. Why? Because that 1,300 pounds sterling from the Newtown Treasury was never recovered.

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