

The Wyoming Massacre and Columbia County

by William Baillie

The year 2003 marks the 225th anniversary of the Battle of Wyoming and the infamous Wyoming Massacre during the Revolutionary War. On July 3, 1778 a contingent of about 300 American militia met a much larger invading army of British regulars, Tories and Indians in the Wyoming Valley near modern Exeter south of Scranton. The Americans were overwhelmed and driven into a panicked retreat, with the Indians scalping every soldier they could lay hands on. The several American forts in the Valley were surrendered or abandoned; the invaders killed many civilians and destroyed houses, crops, and cattle. As news of the "massacre" spread along the River, settlers in the Valley (more than 3000) fled in panic, joined by thousands more from the whole of the North Branch and West Branch regions of the Susquehanna, in what came to be known as the Great Runaway.

While few if any men from the area of modern Columbia County fought in the Battle itself, this region was directly involved in the events which led up to and followed from the Massacre. Local forts, fighters, and families played heroic roles in the struggle to cast off British rule and claim the frontier lands. Among the most noted local names were Lieutenant Moses VanCampen, Captain Lazarus Stewart and pioneer settler James McClure. All three owned lands in the Bloomsburg-Orangeville area; the latter two were brothers-in-law, married to sisters Martha and Mary Espy.

Early in 1776, a Committee of Safety was set up in then-Northumberland County, a huge territory which included all the land in the Forks of the Susquehanna. Wyoming Township, which included modern Columbia County, was represented on the Committee by James McClure (of later Bloomsburg), Thomas Clayton of Catawissa, and Peter Mellick of Fishing Creek. The Committee raised a regiment to join Washington's army near Boston, and one of the early recruits was nineteen-year-old Moses VanCampen, whose family had recently settled on Fishing Creek. James McClure, however, knowing that young VanCampen was a crack shot and expert scout, persuaded him to stay and enroll in the Northumberland militia to help protect the local settlers.

Forts in Columbia County

As a key defense to fend off Indian raids from the north, the county's military commander at Fort Augusta (modern Sunbury) established a chain of forts running from the West Branch to the North Branch, roughly along the line of an ancient warrior trail. Fort Muncy (near today's Lycoming Mall) anchored the line on the west. Next was Fort Freeland along Warrior Run (near Turbotville), then a fort at Bosley's Mills in the Forks of Chillisquaque Creek (now Washingtonville, Montour County). Within (modern) Columbia County were Fort Wheeler (at Lightstreet) and, anchoring the eastern end of

the chain, Fort Jenkins along the North Branch (at Lime Ridge). (A third Columbia County fort was established slightly later, Fort McClure at Bloomsburg.)

Fort Wheeler and Fort Jenkins were both established in early 1778. In the winter and spring of 1777-1778, the region was frightened by reports of a large British/Indian invasion planned for the summer. Moses VanCampen's autobiography relates that "early in the month of April he was ordered to go with his men [from Sunbury] up the North Branch of the Susquehanna river, to the mouth of Fishing Creek, and follow up this three miles, to a compact settlement located in that region [modern Lightstreet], and build a fort for the reception of the inhabitants in case of an attack from the Indians." He built a stockade of sharpened stakes around the farmhouse of Isaiah Wheeler, "sufficiently large to accommodate all the families of the neighborhood." (In the choice of Wheeler's house, VanCampen may have been "influenced by the tender passion," for he was wooing Wheeler's daughter Ann in rivalry with his best friend, Joseph Salmon; the friend won and married Miss Wheeler.) In May, before this fort was completed, Indian raiders approached, driving all the local inhabitants into the stockade. There they watched in dismay as the raiders pillaged and burned their homes, but the fort itself withstood the Indian attack, and by morning the invaders had gone away.

One evening the next month a scout saw Indians sneaking up to the cattle pound at milking time. VanCampen led a party of ten sharpshooters to intercept the raiders, and their volley killed the leader and drove off the rest; the milkmaids "started upon their feet, screamed aloud and ran with all their might, fearful lest the enemy should be upon them. In the mean time the milk pails flew in every direction and the milk was scattered to the winds." VanCampen made Fort Wheeler his headquarters for the next year as he led scout parties regularly on patrols, north up Green Creek, west across the headwaters of Little Fishing Creek to the Muncy Hills, and returning by the line of forts described above.

Fort Jenkins was situated along the North Branch just north of the modern I-80 bridge and about 40 yards from the riverbank. This "fort" too was simply a farmhouse surrounded by a stockade, sixty by eighty feet, intended primarily to afford shelter to local residents. The Fort was already in existence in April 1778: VanCampen's narrative reports that at the first attack on Fort Wheeler, the defenders ran short of ammunition and at night he sent two men to Fort Jenkins, about eight miles distant, for a supply of powder and lead. As the key fort along the lower North Branch, Fort Jenkins was defended by as many as 100 soldiers; in 1778 there were troops of the Pennsylvania Line, then local militia until late 1779 when Hessian mercenaries from General Sullivan's expedition were quartered there for a short time.

Fort McClure was the home of James McClure along the North Branch about a mile above the mouth of Fishing Creek. In late 1778 a company of militia from Lancaster was posted to Fishing Creek and stayed at the McClure house. Lieutenant VanCampen, their officer for a time, stockaded the home and stored supplies there for his scouting operations. This Fort, however, was not regularly garrisoned and apparently was never attacked during the War.

The Battle of Wyoming

Isolated attacks by small Indian raiding parties, though terrifying and often deadly, paled in comparison with the one major pitched battle in this region, the Battle of Wyoming. As mentioned above, few if any men from (later) Columbia County fought at Forty Fort on July 3, 1778. Aid had been urgently requested from Fort Jenkins, but the commander felt that sending soldiers upriver would leave his fort indefensible.

One leader in the Battle, however, did have a Columbia County connection: **Captain Lazarus Stewart**. Born near Harrisburg of Scotch-Irish immigrants, during the French and Indian War of the 1760s he had been a leader in the unofficial mounted militia troop known as the Paxtang Rangers, performing heroically in patrols to protect isolated settlements from enemy raids. After that War ended, however, the Rangers continued forays against local Indians and came into disfavor with the Pennsylvania colonial government; Philadelphia offered a large reward for the arrest of the leading Raiders, including Stewart.

In 1769 Stewart found new opportunities beckoning him up the Susquehanna. There a bitter conflict had broken out in the "Wyoming Settlements" between claimants from Connecticut and from Pennsylvania. (A century earlier, Britain's King Charles II had granted charters to Connecticut and to William Penn which set up overlapping rights to lands between Fishing Creek and the New York border.)

Connecticut men formed a private joint-stock venture, the Susquehannah Company, to settle the lands in the Wyoming Valley along the North Branch, with their southern boundary at the mouth of Fishing Creek. (Actually, the forty-first parallel crosses the Susquehanna River at the northern end of Bloomsburg Airport and cuts diagonally across the Town to the northeast corner of the fairgrounds.)

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania began selling off the same lands under the Patent system, which allowed anyone to stake out up to 300 acres for just £5 per 100 acres. Each colony rushed to beat the other in settling the Wyoming Valley. The rivalry soon broke out into armed conflict called the Yankee—Penamite War, with each side in turn gaining temporary advantage and evicting the other from their new homes.

On May 12, 1769 the Penns' agent in the Valley wrote to the Governor: "On my way up the River from Shamokin, on Wednesday Evening last, I was hailed by a Man at the Mouth of Fishing Creek, named James McClure, who told me He and four others, then at a Fire hard by, was an advanced Party of one hundred, going to join the New England Men, and that they would chiefly be from Lancaster County." Whatever McClure's intent, he soon settled near where he was camped that night. Lazarus Stewart also claimed patent land at Fishing Creek, evidently intending to defend the southern border of the Connecticut claim. In 1770, however, the Yankees offered the Paxtang Rangers large land grants in the Wyoming Valley in exchange for the Rangers' protection of

Connecticut settlers. Lazarus Stewart led some forty Paxtang men to the Wyoming Valley and built a blockhouse at the southern end of the Valley (near modern Nanticoke).

When the Revolutionary War began, the Yankees and Penamites set their local quarrel aside for the duration of the struggle against the British. That is how things stood when in 1778 the British at Niagara gathered forces for a strong raid to clear Americans out of the land in the Forks of the Susquehanna. This army included about 400 British "green coats" and Tories along with nearly 700 Iroquois warriors. The Americans in the Wyoming Valley had a chain of forts to help protect their settlements, but most of their able-bodied fighters had gone off to join the Continental Army. As the invaders approached the Valley in late June, there remained to defend it six companies of raw militia recruits, chiefly old men and boys. By chance, home on leave was a regular-army officer, Col. Zebulon Butler, and he took command of the American militia gathered at Forty Fort across the river from Wilkes-Barre.

After receiving a British demand for surrender, the Americans held a council of war. Col. Butler and several other officers advised waiting for reinforcements. (A troop of Continentals was expected within a day or two, and other forces had been requested from Col. Clingaman at Fort Jenkins.) Captain Lazarus Stewart and others, however, argued vehemently for marching out immediately to face the enemy before Forty Fort was surrounded; according to some reports, Stewart even accused Col. Butler of cowardice. In mid-afternoon, the Americans marched out and within a couple miles met the British. The outnumbered American forces fought bravely, but after a half hour their left flank was turned and they were trapped. The battlefield became a slaughter ground; among those killed were all six company commanders, including Captain Lazarus Stewart.

Fleeing soldiers were chased down and killed; many captives were tortured and then scalped. (Upon their return to Fort Niagara, the Indians collected bounty payments for 227 scalps.) Some of the American soldiers escaped to Forty Fort, but the next morning that fort was surrendered to the British. The Indians went on a rampage throughout the Valley, burning homes and destroying crops and cattle.

The Great Runaway

The terrified settlers fled in all directions, without provisions or protection. Some hiked east through forest and swamps to the Delaware River; others fled by water down the North Branch to Fort Augusta. Among the latter was Lazarus Stewart's widow, Martha. She lashed two canoes together and embarked with her nine children—the youngest just two days old. She floated downstream through the rapids at Nanticoke and Nescopeck; when she reached her sister, the widow of James McClure at their farm in modern Bloomsburg, Mary McClure joined the flight with her children.

As news of the disaster spread beyond the Wyoming Valley, it prompted a general exodus of residents from throughout the area of the Forks of the Susquehanna. In a letter of 1 August, Col. Thomas Hartley reported to the colony's Council: "Four fifths of the Inhabitants fled with such Effects as they could carry from this Country. . . . A most

extraordinary panic seems to have struck the People. The Wyoming Settlement is almost totally destroyed." A few days later, on 10 August, Hartley wrote: "All the People of the West Branch above . . . Muncy had fled & evacuated their settlements—so on the North-East Branch, all above Nescopeck Falls were gone."

Most of (modern) Columbia County was caught up in this panicky flight. In the Greenwood Valley along Fishing Creek, for example, a friendly Indian named Job Shiloway brought news of the Massacre to the John Eves family, who fled West on the Indian path to the fort at Bosley's Mills. The village of Catawissa, on the other hand, was not emptied out; the Quakers there were known to have close ties to the Indians, and some of them were suspected of being Tory sympathizers who would not be bothered by the British. In fact, some refugees fleeing the upriver settlements stopped and stayed at Catawissa. There were also Tory sympathizers remaining in Scotch Valley in (modern) Main Township.

To restore settler confidence, General De Haas sent a contingent of 80 men to the mouth of Briar Creek, but on August 10 that position was abandoned and Fort Jenkins was garrisoned by Continental troops. In the Fall some refugees began to return, but on 7 October Lieutenant Samuel Hunter wrote from Fort Augusta: "As for the Inhabitants of this [Northumberland] County, they seem very much afraid at present. . . . one half of this County is left vacant, and not more than one third of the Inhabitants that lived formerly here, is putting in any fall crop this year." Indian raids on isolated settlements continued. Lt. Hunter and others repeatedly urged General Washington that only a punitive expedition deep into Iroquois territory in the Finger Lakes region could halt the incursions.

In April of 1779, the Indians approached again in force; Penn agent William McClay reported to Council April 27th: "almost every Hour for Three days past, we have had fresh alarms of the Enemy. Massacres and Depredations have been committed at Wioming, Fort Jenkins, Fishing Creek [and three other forts] almost at one and the same Time. . . . The whole Force of the Six Nations seems to be poured down upon Us." He, too, urged that the American army "carry an Expedition immediately into their Country."

In fact, such an expedition was already planned. In midsummer General Sullivan gathered at Easton a force of some 3000 men, marched overland to Fort Wyoming (Wilkes-Barre) and from there up the North Branch. Lieutenant Moses VanCampen as Quartermaster marshaled the army's supplies carried upriver in 300 boats, while the army marched along the shore. After defeating a British/Indian force at Chemung, New York, Sullivan marched through the home grounds of the Iroquois as far as Rochester, razing villages, orchards and crops everywhere. By September 30 the army was back in the Wyoming Valley, having destroyed the homeland of the Six Nations.

Conclusion

After Sullivan's raid, the region of the Forks of the Susquehanna gradually filled up again with settlers. In most cases, we have no exact information about the resettlement of

(present) Columbia County. Mary McClure seems to have stayed with her family in Northumberland until the end of the War, and the Eves family came back to their farm but had to flee again. Catawissa, on the other hand, seems to have grown considerably in population by War's end.

Indian raids on settlements in the region continued throughout the War. For example, in late April 1779 a band of thirty-five Indians attacked three families living near Fort Jenkins, killing one and taking twenty-four prisoners. Twenty soldiers from the Fort pursued and overtook them, and a thirty-minute battle ensued. During the melee the prisoners escaped and returned to the Fort; the Indians also got away after killing four soldiers and wounding five. The next month, another incident happened just across the river from the fort, where a settler family named Windbigler had a cabin (near modern Mifflinville); one morning two children of the family were sent to Catawissa to purchase flour, but on the way they found evidence of Indians and turned back, only to discover their home burning and the four other family members slain and scalped. Moses VanCampen was twice captured by Indian raiders, escaping once and being freed on parole from Montreal the second time.

Fort Jenkins continued to play an important part in defense of the North Branch. On November 14, 1778 Col. Hartley wrote from that fort: "The enemy is in force between here and Wyoming. By their plunder and desolation near this place they expect the frontiers to give away; but the good continuance of this garrison has saved all below." The next year, however, when the garrison marched to the aid of besieged Fort Rice, a band of Tories and Indians found the fort unoccupied and burned it; it was never rebuilt. By contrast, tradition holds that Fort Wheeler was the only one of the original line of forts across the Forks that was never captured or abandoned. The later Fort McClure, likewise, survived the War intact.

The Battle of Wyoming and the Great Runaway which followed dealt a severe blow to the tenuous settlements in the area of Columbia County. A majority of settlers fled the region, and of those brave ones who remained many were attacked and burned out. Others, including some Tory sympathizers, remained safely in their homes throughout the War. After the Treaty of Paris in 1783 made the region safe from incursions, settlement proceeded rapidly and by 1795 extended to remote valleys and uplands throughout the county.

Stories of the "Massacre" at Wyoming became a powerful propaganda weapon. The bravery of the outnumbered Americans and the heartless cruelty of the enemy were often retold in story, poem, and oration; throughout the Thirteen Colonies, "Wyoming Massacre" became a rallying cry in the War and an important element in eventual American success. On the periphery of the Wyoming Settlements, the region of Columbia County shared in both the horror and the eventual hard-won triumph.

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