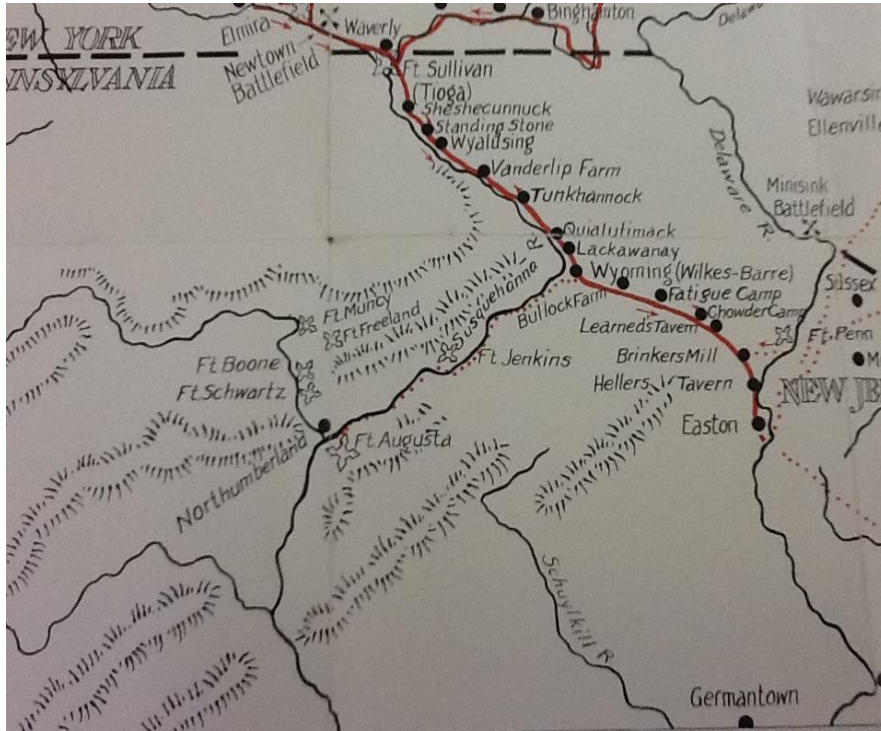


Revisiting Columbia County Forts

By Dani Crossley

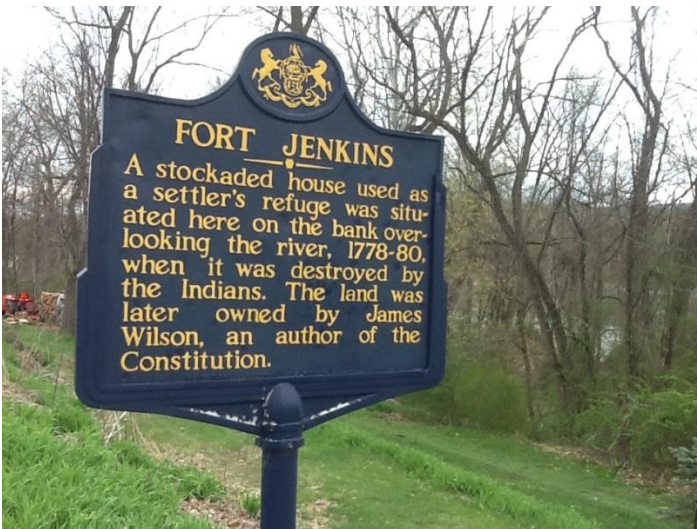
The Ft. McClure Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution rededicated the Ft. Wheeler monument recently after its relocation to Lightstreet Park. The monument had previously been on private property and difficult to access. It was originally dedicated by the Moses Van Campen DAR chapter in 1915. With the approval of and much assistance from Scott Township, the monument was relocated to Lightstreet Park and rededicated Memorial Day weekend. Many local and DAR dignitaries attended and we are all happy it has found a more permanent and accessible home.

There were three such colonial forts in Columbia County in the late 1700s. These forts were basically palisades around a residence for the protection of area settlers against marauding Native Americans.



Map showing Revolutionary War era forts in our area

Fort Jenkins



Ft. Jenkins was built in either the fall of 1777 or spring of 1778 and was only in existence for two years. It was located on the banks of the Susquehanna River (see map, page 1) along what is currently Old Berwick Road in Lime Ridge. The historical marker is on the south side of Old Berwick Road just after the I-80 overpass and before Eshleman's Nursery. The old canal bed can easily be seen between the site of the fort and the river. There is also a plaque/monument on the north side of Old Berwick Road across from the historical marker. It was dedicated by the Ft. McClure and Moses Van Campen DAR chapters in 1925.



We learn about the history of Ft. Jenkins from the *Report of the Commission to Locate the Site of the Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania*, edited by Thomas Lynch Montgomery, 1916. It was approximately 60x80 feet and the stockade was erected around the residence of Mr. Jenkins, who had been a merchant in Philadelphia. “It is situated on a high bank, or flat, on the North Branch of the Susquehanna and overlooks the river, about twenty rods distant, as well as the country around, about midway between now the thriving towns of Berwick and Bloomsburg, in Columbia county. The first we hear of Fort Jenkins is from Lieut. Moses Van Campen. When building Fort

Wheeler he was attacked by Indians, in the month of May, 1778, and running short of ammunition, he sent two men at night across the country about eight miles to Fort Jenkins; they returned next morning before dawn with an ample supply.”

Ft. Jenkins was the last (eastern most) in a line of forts providing defense for the colonial settlements from the West Branch to the North Branch. “Mr. Jenkins sold the property to James Wilson, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, who, in turn, sold it to Capt. Frederick Hill, who moved upon it and erected a dwelling on the site of Fort Jenkins, where he built and kept a hotel, and in memory of the old fort named it the Fort Jenkins Hotel. In the old days of stage coaches it was a well-known hostelry.”

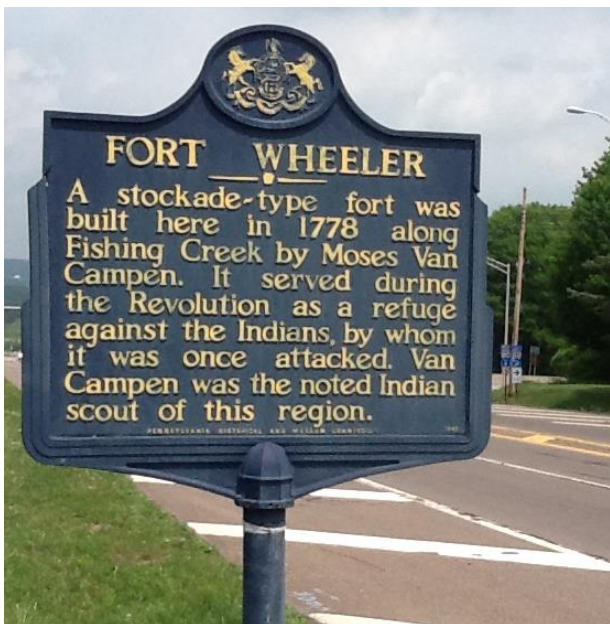
Frederick Hill’s grandson, Charles F. Hill, provided some background during an interview in 1893. “The farm house stood upon the site of the Jenkins house, that the cellar wall was set on the original foundation; that the well at the farm house was dug inside the oaken palisades of the fort during the Revolution, being seventy-five feet deep and down into the limestone rock. Also, where, when a boy, he recollected seeing the remains of the oak palisades still visible in his time; the place where his father had shown him the Indians who were killed in the vicinity were buried; the ground where the whites, civilians and soldiers, who were killed in fights with Indians or died of disease were buried; some half dozen apple trees yet remaining of the orchard planted by Mr. Jenkins before the Revolution, bearing signs of great age, the orchard planted by his grandfather showing less signs of age. The spot where, in digging the foundation to the present kitchen attached to the present farm house he had found the sunken fire place and hearth, with bricks about six inches square, unlike anything he had ever seen, supposed they were of English make and had been brought up the river in boats. He also pointed out where an island of five acres, as he remembers it, stood in the river so heavily timbered as to prevent a view from the fort to the other side, of which not a sign now remains, heavy floods having destroyed it effectually; also, where Nathan Beach’s father’s cabin stood, by the North Branch canal, but under the guns of the fort. The canal passes between the site of the fort and river at the foot of the plateau on which the fort stood. Outside the fort stood the cabin of a family whose name I have dropped; it consisted of at least six persons and is referred to by Col. Hunter under date of 26 May 1779, writing from Fort Augusta, “there has been no mischief done in this county since the 17th instant; that there was a family of four persons killed and scalped about twenty-seven

miles above this, on the North Branch opposite Fort Jenkins. Suppose there are Indians seen every day one place or another on our frontiers.””

“The story of this massacre, as related by Mr. Hill is, the parents sending two of their children, a boy and girl, to the neighborhood of Catawissa, for some necessities, the children took the path on the hill back of the cabin running parallel with the river. After proceeding some distance they came to the remains of a recent fire, where mussels from the river had been roasted. Becoming alarmed, they turned back for home, and, on arriving at the hill overlooking their house, they saw it in flames and Indians disappearing from the clearing into the woods. On descending they found their family they had left in health a short time before, killed and scalped and themselves homeless orphans. This occurred directly opposite the fort and almost within reach of the rifles, but concealed from view of the garrison by the forest of the island and shore. Their first notice came with smoke of the burning cabin, the Indians disappearing as rapidly as they came.”

Col. Ludwig Weltner offers this description of the demise of the fort: “April 2, 1780; the savages, the day before yesterday, took seven or eight prisoners about two miles above Fort Jenkins, and, comparing the condition of things with what it was twelve months before, when the forts were well garrisoned, Col. Hunter says, now we have but about thirty men at Fort Jenkins, which was not able to spare enough men out of the garrison to pursue the enemy that carried off the prisoners. On the 9th, Col. Weltner writes from Northumberland and says, “I have manned three material outposts, viz: Fort Jenkins, Fort Montgomery (Fort Rice at Montgomery’s) and Bosley’s Mills. Col. James Potter writes from Sunbury, Sept. 18, 1780, that the enemy burned and destroyed everything in their power and on their going they sent a party and burnt the fort and buildings at Fort Jenkins, which had been evacuated a few days before, on the enemy appearing at Fort Rice.”

Fort Wheeler



Ft. Wheeler, the second fort, was built in April of 1778 by Moses Van Campen. From the above-mentioned Report on the Frontier Forts, “he was ordered to go with this men 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, and build a fort for the reception of the inhabitants in case of an attack from the Indians. News had come thus early of their having visited the outer line of settlements and of their committing depredations, so that terrified messengers were arriving almost daily, bringing the sad news of houses burned, victims scalped and of families carried into captivity.” His command of twenty men commenced immediately upon the work of constructing the fort on the farm of Mr. Wheeler. It was built of stockades and could accommodate all the families of the neighborhood.

Before the fort was completed, a messenger came announcing the approach of a large party of savages. The inhabitants rushed into the fort and were dismayed to watch the marauding Indians spend most of the day pillaging and burning. Fortunately, they were not out there to become victims of the savages as well.

In the spring of 1780, Moses Van Campen ventured outside the fort at the foot of Knob Mt. to assist his father in the rebuilding of his home that had been burned by Indians. With him were his younger brother, uncle and cousin. Ten Indians attacked the small party, killing Moses' father, brother and uncle. Along with two men named Pence and Pike, Van Campen was captured and a trip north commenced. They came to Meshoppen Creek, a little below Wyalusing; slightly above Wyalusing, Van Campen, Pike and Pence killed nine of the ten warriors and escaped. Their homemade raft fell apart not long after heading back down the river. At the Narrows, they stole some Indians' raft and continued to Wyoming. They rested there a day then continued on to Ft. Jenkins where Moses' mother and the rest of his family were safe.

Moses Van Campen was captured again in 1782 near Bald Eagle Creek and transported to New York State and Fort Niagara and turned over to the British. He went to Montreal and then back to New York, where he was eventually paroled. Being friends with Captain Horatio Jones, met during his captivity, he returned to the Genesee Valley near where he eventually made his home in Angelica, NY. He was quite the courageous and colorful character living to almost 93 years of age.



Fort Wheeler became a permanent site, manned by hardy settlers when not garrisoned by troops. It is the only one of its date of the line in front of Fort Augusta that was not destroyed at the time. Nothing remains of it today.

Fort McClure



From *The Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties Pennsylvania*, by J. H. Beers and Company, 1915, we learn of the history of Ft. McClure. "At the time of the destruction of Fort Jenkins, there was a line of forts reaching from the West Branch to the North Branch of the Susquehanna, comprising Forts Muncy, Freeland, Montgomery, Bosley's Mills, Wheeler and Jenkins. The loss of the latter fort left the right exposed to the marauders, so on Van Campen's return from captivity he stockaded the home of Mrs. James McClure, on the bank of the Susquehanna, one mile above the mouth of Fishing creek, and on the later site of the house of Douglas Hughes, below Bloomsburg. This fortification took the name of Fort McClure, and became the headquarters for stores and expeditions as long as the defense of the frontier was necessary. This fort was never seriously

attacked, though the near residents often fled to it for security. It was never more than a stockade and further fortifications were not built. A marker has been placed here by the Fort McClure Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, Bloomsburg." [page 11]

"Just before the commencement of the Revolutionary War, James McClure died, but his widow cultivated the plantation until the Wyoming massacre, in July 1778, when she placed all her portable possessions on a raft and floated down the Susquehanna to Lancaster, remaining there until all danger was over. With her went the widow of Capt. Lazarus Stewart, who had been killed at Wyoming. Maj. Moses Van Campen, who had married the daughter of Widow McClure, built the second fort in the county on her farm, one mile above the mouth of Fishing Creek, calling it after his respected mother-in-law." [page 104]

As you can see, there is some question as to the actual time the fort was constructed. James McClure, Jr. stayed on the farm and the structure currently standing there is believed to be his residence, built around 1810. He died on his plantation at the age of 76 and is buried at Old Rosemont Cemetery. It is family legend that James Sr. is buried on the property.



In 1945 the property was sold to the Town of Bloomsburg. In 1960 the deed was given to the DAR for \$1 provided they care for the house and property. The Ft. McClure Chapter DAR continues to maintain the property and uses it for their chapter meeting house. They open it up for tours during their annual Fall Festival.

