

Close calls and death near Fort Horn

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: All quotations and facts in this article are from John M. Buckalew's "Frontier Forts within the North and West Branches of the Susquehanna River," in Clarence M. Busch's 1896 "Report of the Commission to Locate the Sites of the Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania." The complete report is available on the Internet.)

McELHATTAN - During the winter of 1777-78, white settlers along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River above Williamsport felt increasingly threatened by the American Indians in the area. Perhaps justly angered by what they saw as "squatters" on their lands, and further incited by the British to harass and attack these white intruders, the Indians reportedly became more and more belligerent.

Fort Antes, Fort Horn and Fort Reid (Reed), all within about a 10-mile stretch of the river, offered places of refuge for the settlers. But, for some, fate led to close calls, woundings and death.

On Dec. 23, 1777, "a man was tomahawked and scalped near the mouth of Pine Creek, almost within sight of the fort (Antes)." Then on Jan. 1, 1778, "another met the same fate further up the river."

Women experienced terrifying moments also. One day, not long before the mass flight early in the summer of 1778 down the river to Fort Augusta in Sunbury - an event known to history as the Big Runaway, a young woman named Ann Carson ventured outside Fort Horn, only to be shot at by a concealed Indian. "The bullet cut through the folds of her dress, making 14 holes in its flight, but left her uninjured," according to accounts at the time.

In another account, a young lady at Fort Horn, Jane Annesley, "while engaged in milking a cow one evening just outside the enclosure, was fired at by a lurking Indian several times. One bullet passed through her dress, grazing her body so closely that she felt the stinging sensation so severely that she was sure she was shot."

The most involved and harrowing incident on record occurred not long after commanding Col. Samuel Hunter's July 3, 1778 order from Fort Augusta to evacuate the West Branch Valley reached Forts Antes, Horn and Reid. Four men - Robert Fleming, Robert Donaldson, James McMichael and John Hamilton - "squatters" from the Indian lands on the north side of the Susquehanna across from Fort Horn, canoed down to Antes Fort "to secure a flat in which to transport their families (left temporarily in the safety of Fort Horn) below."

Successfully obtaining a flat, "they had just pushed their canoes up through the Pine Creek riffles, when they pushed over to the south side of the river for the purpose of resting and to wait for other parties who were following them with the flat." Just before reaching shore, they were fired upon by a "small band" of Indians hidden in the brush.

"Donaldson jumped out of his canoe, ran up the bank, and said to the others, 'Come on, boys!' Hamilton saw the Indians rise up and at the same time noticed the blood spurting from a wound in Donaldson's back as he was trying to reload his gun. He fell from exhaustion and died.

McMichael and Fleming were then also killed, but "Hamilton, untouched, gave his canoe a powerful shove into the stream, and jumping into the water, fell flat on the other side, and holding the canoe with one hand, between the Indians and himself, managed to paddle across the river to the other side. Several bullets flew around his frail craft, but he escaped without a scratch.

"When he landed, his woolen clothes were so heavy from being saturated with water as to impede his flight, so he therefore stripped himself of everything except his shirt and ran swiftly up the river ... He ran for life, fear adding wings to his flight ... If a bush came in his way, he cleared it with a bound. He ran this way for nearly three miles, passing the place where his father had settled, until he came opposite Horn's Fort. He was discovered and a canoe sent to rescue him."

When Hamilton, Donaldson, Fleming and McMichael had first been fired upon, those in the flat behind them, "divining the cause, pushed to the north shore at the mouth of Pine Creek, which they hurriedly forded and ran up the path Hamilton had gone along. James Jackson, one of the party on the flat, found a horse pasturing on the Pine Creek clearing, which he caught, mounted, and rode up to the point opposite Horn's Fort, where he also was discovered and brought over in a canoe. The other men made their way to the fort and escaped.

"An armed body of men from Horn's made their way down to the place of ambushcade. They found the dead and scalped bodies of Donaldson, McMichael and Fleming, but the Indians had departed ... The rescuers secured the three bodies and carried them to Antes Fort, where they were buried in the little graveyard that had been started outside the enclosure."

That same day, men driving cattle down on the north side of the river west of Fort Horn were fired on. One, a Samuel Fleming, probably the brother of Robert who was killed in the ambush at Pine Creek, was "shot through the shoulder and severely wounded."

He was "ferried over to the fort, where he had his wound dressed." The rest of the cattle drivers continued down the north-side lands with their herd "in search of a place of greater security for their stock."

The Big Runaway commenced shortly afterward, with the West Branch settlers fleeing the increasing numbers of Indians descending from New York State. They fled their homes and the forts down the river to Fort Augusta on rafts, canoes, flats, boats - practically on anything that floated.

In vengeance the following summer of 1779, generals John Sullivan and James Clinton and Col. Daniel Brodhead led soldiers into New York State, where they decimated about 40 Indian villages. Treaties with the Indians were signed at Fort Stanwix, N.Y., in 1784 (with the Iroquois), at Fort McIntosh, in 1785 (with the Delawares and Wyandots), at Fort Finney, Ohio, in 1786 (with the Shawnees) and at Fort Harmar, Ohio, in 1795 (with all four tribes, after Gen. Anthony Wayne's Aug. 20 victory at Fallen Timbers, Ohio, on the Maumee River).

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