

THE FIRST AND LAST BATTLES
OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR
(A Cautionary Family Quest)

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As I read the Winter 2014 issue of *The SAR Magazine*, I found myself getting unduly excited. It carried an article about the Battle of Point Pleasant fought on October 10, 1774. Point Pleasant is located in West Virginia where the Kanawha River joins the Ohio River. The Battle of Point Pleasant was fought between a force of Virginia militiamen and the Shawnee Indians led by Chief Cornstalk. The article recounts the annual celebration that takes place each year at Point Pleasant on what is called "Battle Day."

In his keynote address at this service of recognition, President General Joe Dooley said, "All of us here today would likely regard the Battle of Point Pleasant as the first battle of the American Revolution." He then went on to qualify his statement by saying,

But I suppose most of you know that not everyone would agree with us. Many historians look upon Point Pleasant, which is also called the Battle of Kanawha, as a battle in Lord Dunmore's War.¹

¹ Robert L. "Bob" Bowen, "Commemorating the Battle of Point Pleasant," *The SAR Magazine*, Winter 2013-14, Vol. 108, No. 3. Page 16.

My initial excitement was caused by the fact that I had ancestors who participated in the Battle of Point Pleasant. And these same ancestors also participated in the Battle of Fort Henry in September, 1782. The Battle of Fort Henry is regarded by some to be the last battle of the Revolution. (More on Fort Henry later.) Could it be that there were Wetzels at both the first and the last battles of the Revolution? But as I said at the beginning I had become unduly excited...a common pitfall when one becomes too absorbed in family genealogy.

Of course, most historical interpretations recognize the skirmishes that took place at Lexington and Concord as the first battle of the Revolution, and these took place on April 19, 1775. But the case for the Battle of Point Pleasant being the first battle was made in 1899. An article entitled "‘Manufactured History’: Refighting the Battle of Point Pleasant" in the *West Virginia History* periodical gives the following account:

Efforts to commemorate the battle began as early as 1848. However, it was a Point Pleasant newspaper editor and publisher who led the most ambitious campaign fifty years later. In 1899 Livia Nye Simpson Poffenbarger began a crusade in the *State Gazette* to have Point Pleasant officially designated the "first battle of the American Revolution,..."²

² "‘Manufactured History’: Re-Fighting the Battle of Point Pleasant," *West Virginia History*, Vol 56 (1997), p. 76.

Contrary to Poffenbarger's thesis, the Battle of Point Pleasant is more likely to be seen as the final battle of Lord Dunmore's War.

In response to increased violence between settlers and Native Americans in western Virginia in 1774, Virginia Governor John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, tried to impose peace on the Ohio Valley. Lord Dunmore created two armies, personally leading seventeen hundred men from the north, while Andrew Lewis directed eight hundred troops through the Kanawha Valley. Shawnee chief Keigh-tugh-quah, or Cornstalk, elected to strike the southern regiment before it united with the Dunmore's force. On October 10 Cornstalk's force of approximately twelve hundred men attacked Lewis's troops at the confluence of the Kanawha and Ohio rivers at present-day Point Pleasant.³

Cornstalk was defeated and forced to sign the Treaty of Camp Charlotte which in effect ceded the land south of the Ohio River. This treaty eliminated Native Americans as a threat on the frontier for the first three years of the Revolutionary War and made way for a rapid settlement of the region.

Rather than seeing Lord Dunmore as a protector, there were some settlers who claimed that Dunmore and the Shawnee were in collusion. After the Revolutionary War began and Dunmore was no longer governor of Virginia, even Andrew Lewis, leader of the southern force suggested that "Dunmore had never intended to join the southern forces, setting them up for annihilation. Lewis felt that Dunmore, anticipating the Revolution, intended

³ Ibid.

to weaken the citizen militia.”⁴ If you would like a full account of this argument I refer you to the article from which I have been quoting.

An article on Lord Dunmore’s War in the *Britannica Online Encyclopedia* adds to this controversy: “Lord Dunmore was widely accused of commencing the war to divert Virginians from differences with the royal administration of that colony, and for this reason the fighting at Point Pleasant has sometimes been called the first battle of the Revolution.”⁵

In 1935 the Point Pleasant Battle Monument Commission attempted to prepare a list of the names of the participants in the Battle with a view to having them inscribed on bronze tablets to be attached to the base of the Point Pleasant Battle Monument.⁶ The list contains the names of two of my ancestors, John Wetzel and his oldest son, Martin. Hence you can understand my satisfaction when I read the article in the Winter 2013-14 issue of the SAR Magazine. But I was to discover how controversial this claim was.

Perhaps a better case can be made for recognizing the Battle of Fort Henry as the last Battle of the Revolution. Ordinarily one thinks of the defeat of Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown as the final battle of the Revolution. This occurred on October 19, 1781. When the news of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Lord Dunmore’s War (United States History) – Britannica Online Encyclopedia.

⁶ <http://www.pointpleasantwv.org/Park&Campgrounds/State Parks/TuEndiWei/ListOfParticipants.htm>

Yorktown reached British Prime Minister Lord North on November 25, it is said that he threw up his arms and cried, "O God! It is all over." Britain was to have some further battles with the French and Dutch, but for all practical purposes the Revolution was over. Perhaps word did not get to the frontier where British troops along with their Native American allies, were planning an attack on Fort Henry. Even while the peace negotiations were taking place in Paris, this combined force attacked Fort Henry on September 11, 1782.⁷

Fort Henry was the result of a 1769 settlement in the area of modern day Wheeling, West Virginia. The original settlers were led by the Zane family and included such families as McCulloch, Eberly, Rosencrantz, Wetzel, Biggs, Shepherd and others.⁸ Originally known as Fort Fincastle, the name was changed to Fort Henry in 1776 in honor of Governor Patrick Henry.

In 1777 the Fort was attacked by a combined force of 400 Shawnee, Wyandotte and Mingo Indians who had been supplied with arms and ammunition by the English. Unable to subdue the Fort after a 23 hour battle, the attackers satisfied themselves with plundering and burning nearby cabins. But it was the second attack on Fort Henry in September 1782 that

⁷ The Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Revolutionary War, was signed on September 3, 1783.

⁸ A. B. Brooks, "Story of Fort Henry" *West Virginia History*, Vol. 1, Number 2 (January 1940), p. 110

lays claim for being the last battle of the Revolution. And just as people at Point Pleasant claim the battle there to be the first battle of the Revolution, the people of Wheeling, West Virginia, will tell you that the September 11, 1782 attack on Fort Henry was the last battle of the Revolution. And there were at least two Wetzels in that battle: Captain John Wetzel and his son, Martin. The better known frontiersman, Lewis Wetzel, seems to have been absent for the battle but showed up a few days later.⁹

I hasten to point out that Samuel Morison in *The Oxford History of the American People* asserts that a battle fought on November 10, 1782 between the Shawnee and a force of frontier militia under the leadership of George Rogers Clark was "the last land battle of the War of American Independence." On August 15 a force of Indians organized by two British officers, Captains Mckee and Caldwell had attacked the fort at Bryan Station in Kentucky. Unable to subdue it, the Indians withdrew two days later, and the men of the fort pursued them. But this proved to be a trap that led to the disaster at Blue Lick on August 19 in which 70 of the militia were killed including the son of Daniel Boone. On November 10, 1782, George Rogers

⁹ Allen W. Eckert, *That Dark and Bloody River: Chronicles of the Ohio River Valley*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995. Page 426.

Clark led a force of 1100 men on a "punitive expedition" in which they "routed the Shawnee and burned their villages near Chillicothe, Ohio."¹⁰

Not to be denied a piece of this argument is the claim for a battle fought near Chattanooga. A historical marker placed by the John Sevier Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution recounts a battle between a force of 250 Nolichucky Riflemen and the Chickamaugas: "On September 20, 1782, after several minor encounters, Sevier and his men engaged the Chickamaugas in a battle high in the palisades at the north end of Lookout Mountain." The marker asserts, "This was an official Revolutionary War engagement and is considered by many to be the LAST

'OVERMOUNTAIN' BATTLE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.'"

For some reason this battle is not found on the lists of American Revolutionary Battles that I consulted. But I am sure the people of Chattanooga would consider that as an oversight.¹¹

Perhaps the people of Wheeling might respond that there were actually British soldiers with the Indian forces that attacked Fort Henry on September 11. As one account says, "A force of forty irregular British

¹⁰ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People: Volume One: Prehistory to 1789*. New York: Meridian, 1994) p. 349

¹¹ Leonard Richards calls "Shays' Rebellion" the last battle of the Revolution but this conflict was not a British versus Americans battle. See *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle*. The rebellion was a protest by disgruntled citizens in Massachusetts who were having to deal with the post-war economic depression and high taxes. This occurred in 1787 and 1788.

soldiers and 238 Indians, under Captain Bradt, made the attack.”¹² Both the Battle of Lookout Mountain on September 20 and George Rogers Clark’s November expedition were battles against Indians who had been harassing settlers along the frontier. In fact, Morison calls Clark’s pursuit of the Shawnees a “punitive action” for their part in the August attacks on Bryan Station. But with my bias for the Fort Henry claim, I am probably splitting historical hairs. And I am sure the conflicting claims do not get in the way of the annual celebration that takes place on Labor Day weekend in Wheeling. They would undoubtedly want to show you the monument which bears the inscription,

By authority of the State of West Virginia, to commemorate the siege of Fort Henry, Sept. 11, 1782, the last battle of the American revolution, this tablet is here placed.”

It should be noted that some lists of Revolutionary War Battles include a number of sea battles fought from late 1782 and to mid-1783. But these battles pitted the British against French as well as the British against the Spanish. But they did not involve the Americans.¹³

In 1901 when the novelist Zane Grey was preparing to publish his novel, *Betty Zane*, he noted that he had taken “the main facts of my story”

¹² A. B. Brooks, “Story of Fort Henry,” in *West Virginia History*. Vol. 1, Number 2, (January 1940)

¹³ In an action off the coast of Spain on December 12, 1782 the British attacked French ships carrying supplies to the United States. An American privateer was sunk in this action. The Treaty of Paris which officially ended the American Revolutionary War was not signed until September 3, 1783.

from an old note book that had belonged to his great-grandfather, Col. Ebenezer Zane." Ebenezer was the patriarch of the Zane family who originally settled the area that was to become Wheeling, West Virginia.

Betty Zane, a younger sister of Ebenezer, was the heroine of the 1782 battle of Fort Henry. It was she who made the famous dash from the Fort to the Zane stockade home to retrieve an apron full of gunpowder.

At some point the Zane family moved across the river to what is now Martins Ferry, Ohio. Members of the Zane family are buried in the Walnut Grove Cemetery. Having been born in Martins Ferry, some of my earliest memories go back to playing in that cemetery. It was located across the creek and up the hill from my Grandparents home. I remember being impressed with a cannon and the stature of Betty Zane. The cannon was more likely a Civil War artillery piece rather than a Revolutionary War artifact. But the statue of Betty Zane portrays her in full stride with her apron full of gunpowder.

My family moved from the Ohio valley while I was still in the lower grades, and by the time I was in the sixth grade we had moved to Kansas. It has only been in later years that I have attempted to reclaim some of my family history. Perhaps I cannot make the dubious claim of having had ancestors who fought in both the first and the last battles of the

Revolution.... unless of course I visited the Point Pleasant and Wheeling celebrations. Furthermore, as perhaps you have discovered, there is always a certain hazard in uncovering family history. For example, my lineage goes back to Martin Wetzel, brother of the better known Lewis Wetzel. Lewis never married. Not too much is known of Martin which is just as well. As indicated earlier, we do know that he participated in both the Battle of Point Pleasant and Fort Henry. But one author, after recounting Martin's skill with a tomahawk, says of him, "He must have possessed some redeeming qualities, but history fails to record them."¹⁴

About twenty years ago I was invited to speak at a church located just above Wheeling, West Virginia. On a Saturday I drove up I-77 to Parkersburg, where I would ordinarily have crossed the Ohio River to Marietta. There I would drive up the four-lane Highway 7 on the Ohio side of the river. Then I would cross back over the river up above Wheeling to get to my destination. Highway 2 on the West Virginia side is a two lane road and hence considerably slower. But since I had never been through Wetzel County, West Virginia, located below Wheeling, I thought why not indulge in a bit of family nostalgia. As I drove along Highway 2 in the Moundsville area, perhaps my thoughts were too much on family history and

¹⁴ C. B. Allman, *Lewis Wetzel, Indian Fighter: The Life and Times of a Frontier Hero*. (Connecticut: Devin-Adair Co. 1977. Copyright 1939) p. 47

not enough on the speed I was driving. I was pulled over by a highway patrolman. He came to my car and said, "You were driving 65 miles an hour in a 55 mile an hour speed zone." He took my drivers license back to his car, I suppose to run a computer check. At this point I confess the thought occurred to me: "Perhaps when he sees the name Wetzel and we are in Wetzel County, maybe he will cut me some slack." After all, a name should count for something. In a few minutes he returned to my car, handed me my license and said, "Mr. Wetzel, I am just going to give you a warning ticket this time, but do slow down." I thanked him and smiled inwardly. And then he said, "By the way, happy birthday." I had entirely forgotten. It was my birthday...May 20th. Thus the moral of the story: The name counted for nothing, but the birthday did." A humbling reminder for those of us who become unduly impressed with our genealogy! Perhaps what is more appropriate is a sincere gratitude for the country we have inherited and enjoy today because of our forbearers.