

Massacre and Murder in the Susquehanna Valley: The Lee Massacre and Pine Creek Indian Murders

by

Kathy K. Swope

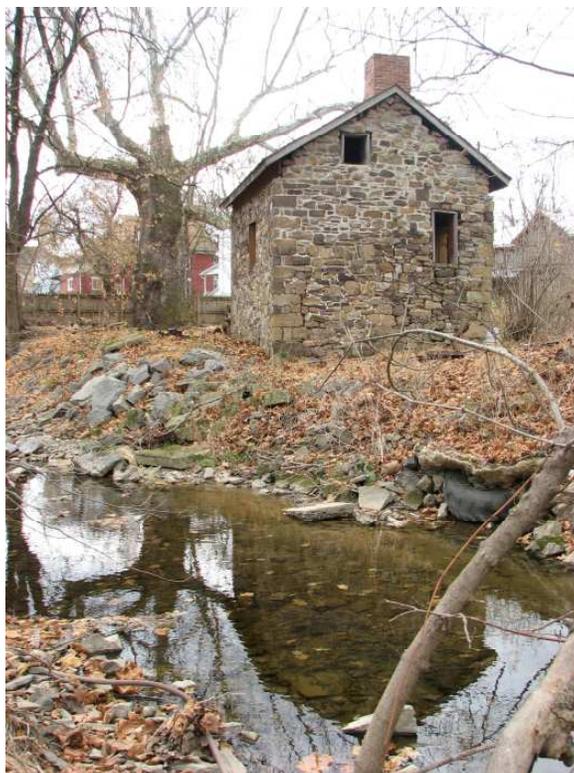
Although difficult to imagine today, two hundred and fifty years ago the busy corridor along Route 15 in Union County was the edge of Pennsylvania's frontier. Local native inhabitants and settlers struggled to live peaceably, members of both groups committing atrocities in the process. One local incident began a chain of events that stretched over nearly a decade, and resulted in the recently elected President of the United States, George Washington, intervening under the newly passed Indian Trade & Intercourse Act of 1790.

During the summer of 1782, although peace talks had begun, the battle for American independence continued. In Northumberland County (Union County would not be formed until 1813), Fort Augusta (Sunbury), under the command of Colonel Samuel Hunter provided protection from attacks by Indian allies of the British Military.

John Lee

Among the local militiamen who volunteered to protect the region, was Major John Lee who had settled in the area now known as Winfield, being among the first settlers following the Treaty of Stanwix (1768). He acquired about 300 acres in April of 1769 from the Penn Proprietors, naming it "Lee's Adventure." The stone house that still stands along the creek in Winfield is believed by many to be the site of Lee's homestead.

In addition to that acreage, records show that in September of 1770 John Lee hired James Wilson to survey a 38-acre tract of land. Wilson states, he "commenced at a white oak at a survey on which Ludwig Derr now lives." This places the 38 acres near Lewisburg, probably in the area of Bucknell University, and raises the question as to whether the white oak referenced is the famous "Witness Tree" that still stands near the entrance to the Lewisburg Cemetery.



The stone house in Winfield believed to be the site of the Lee Massacre

Lee was a respected citizen, as noted in the extant record of his public service. He was appointed Overseer of the Poor of Buffalo Township (which was comprised of all of what is now Union County) in 1773, the first election following the formation of Northumberland County. Also in 1773, Lee was issued a tavern license for the first tavern in what is now Winfield. It is important to recognize that the occupation of tavern keeper was considered a highly respected position in that time period. Taverns were key gathering centers of the community, providing access to the news as travelers would stop to rest their horses and share a meal along with the latest information from other towns gathered along the way.

The 1775 Buffalo Township tax assessment for Lee charges him for 20 acres of cleared land, one cow, ten sheep and one servant. This suggests he amassed some significant wealth, based on the fact that of the 246 heads of households in Northumberland County at the time, only twelve households had servants.

In August of 1776, John Lee along with Charles Gillespie were commissioned as “good and true men,” to produce powder and lead at Harris Landing (now known as Harrisburg) for the newly organized militia. The militia was organized for Northumberland County; Lee was chosen to serve as a 2nd Major of the 1st Battalion, and was later promoted to 1st Major. On December 1, 1776, the Committee of Safety, which was rooted in the Sons of Liberty and organized the militia during the Revolution, offered a \$10.00 bounty for each man from Northumberland County who would march with the Associators (members of the Committee of Safety) to join Washington’s army. The volunteers selected Lee to serve as their Captain before leaving and were assigned to the Twelfth Regiment of the Pennsylvania Line, with Colonel James Potter’s 2nd Battalion.

James Potter (1729-1789) was a veteran of the French & Indian War, who led the construction of three stockade forts in Central Pennsylvania, including one near the present site of Woodward. He would go on to serve as the fourth Vice President of Pennsylvania (1780 & 1781). In 1782 he received a commission as a major general, and that same year lost the election for the Presidency of Pennsylvania (what we know today as Governor) to John Dickenson. Potter served as one of the representatives to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention and Potter County is named for him.

Following his service in the Revolution, Lee and the other members of the militia returned to protect the settlers on the frontier. He continued to be active in public affairs, and was assessed in 1781 for 150 acres in Buffalo Township and 600 acres in Augusta Township. Lee was tax assessor for Buffalo Township at the time of his death in 1782.

The Lee Massacre

There are several accounts of the event that occurred about noon on August 12, 1782, known as the “Lee Massacre,” but the most contemporaneous is from a letter dated August 16, 1782, written by a “Gentleman at Sunbury” that appeared in the September 14, 1782 issue of a Philadelphia newspaper, the *Independent Gazetteer*. It was a warm Monday afternoon, a group of sixty to

seventy native inhabitants entered Major Lee's house while he was dining with his family, friends, and neighbors. According to the letter's account, the natives "took him and his family, and part of two other families to the number of thirteen" people from the house. The gentleman continues, "declaring if they would submit, they should not be hurt; they acquiesced and proceeded as prisoners, walking about a half mile, when the savages, without any hesitation, murdered seven of them, who were tomahawked and scalped in the most shocking manner." The letter ends the recounting of the event by telling us, "a party of volunteer inhabitants upon hearing of the affair, went to their relief...the scene and groans of the dead and dying people, were enough to have melted any heart of flesh."

The writer also provides us with a sense of context from the perspective of the settlers by further explaining, "Since the last spring, no less than sixty two of our people have been butchered by the Indians; and this hath been the practice for several years past." He references the numbers of settlers who have left the area, and the probable need to evacuate the area without some force to protect them. His pleas for protection include a request for financial assistance, and some dried meat and biscuit from the government to support an expedition to attack the native inhabitants, and he suggests a reduction in unnecessary officers and extravagant salaries as a source of funding. The gentleman ends his letter stating that, "the cries of the innocent call up to heaven for vengeance and redress against them." He adds as a final note that, "But we despair of any aid. Our country purposes to put in no fall grain, and many are now awaiting for places to remove." Clearly, settlers were leaving the area due to a fear for their safety, and the Lee massacre appears to have generated a new level of concern.

The seven who were murdered appear from records to be John Lee, his wife, and two young sons, an old gentleman named John Walker, and Mrs. Claudius Boatman and one of her daughters.

Other accounts documented years later offer some additional information and in some cases conflicting reports with regard to some of the details of the event. As with all things, time and oral history have obscured some of the facts, but historian John Meginness wrote in 1857 an account of the incident that told

of a young woman named Katy Stoner, (perhaps the daughter of Gustavus Stoner of Northumberland) who “escaped up the stairs and concealed herself behind the chimney, where she remained undiscovered” in the Lee household that fateful day.

Meginness also adds to the information from an account that was supplied by an A. H. McHenry, whose father, Henry McHenry, was a member of the expedition that followed the native inhabitants after they fled the scene of the Lee massacre. Mrs. Lee, her infant daughter Eliza, two young daughters, Sarah and Rebecca and an older son, Thomas were led away as captives. They were taken on the “Great Path” which roughly followed today’s Route 15 north to Allenwood and there bore left, roughly onto today’s Route 44, then over the Bald Eagle Mountain to Lock Haven.

One of Lee’s sons, Robert, was returning home just as the natives were leaving his home with his family captive. He fled to Fort Augusta (Sunbury) and raised the alarm. Colonel Hunter gathered a party of about 20 men and headed to the area of Lee’s homestead. They arrived to find those still living to be writhing in agony. Lee and Miss Boatman were still alive and were transported to Fort Augusta, where Lee later died. Miss Boatman, although scalped, survived, and lived to an old age.

Colonel Hunter and his party continued in pursuit of those taken captive, coming in sight of them above Lycoming Creek. Mrs. Lee was bitten on the ankle by a rattlesnake while going through the mountains and she was unable to walk any further. One of the native inhabitants, noting Colonel Hunter’s rapidly approaching party, shot her in the head and dashed the small child against a tree, before fleeing hastily with Thomas, Sarah and Rebecca still captive. The small child, believed to be Eliza, was shaken but not injured.

Hunter pursued until they reached Antes’ Gap, where Hunter decided it was unwise to continue due to the possibility of an ambush and the exhaustion of the members of the expedition. They returned to Fort Augusta, burying Mrs. Lee, and stopping to bury the dead at the scene of the massacre along the way.

Lee’s oldest son, Robert, spent several years trying to secure the release of his young brother from the native captivity, eventually succeeding in obtaining

his freedom. His two sisters, Rebecca and Sarah, escaped and returned home within a short time after their capture. In 1797, Robert Lee obtained releases from each of his siblings in order to deed the property in Winfield to Abraham Ire (Eyer).

Among the dead was an old gentleman named John Walker (1706-1782). In an assessment that is dated between 1778 and 1780 he is taxed in Buffalo Township, apparently in the neighborhood of John Lee. According to a 1937 letter written by a Walker descendant, Alice Walker who was born in 1855, John Walker lived in Harrisburg prior to the Revolution. She states that John Walker was a Dutchman who had several sons, three are remembered by history, Benjamin, William and Henry.

The Walker Brothers

The Walker brothers, although young at the time of their father's death, grew up to be respected citizens of the Pine Creek, a few miles above what is now Jersey Shore, Lycoming County, but at that time was part of Northumberland County. On June 27, 1790, eight years after the Lee massacre, the Walker brothers were among a number of men at Stephenson's Tavern that was located near the mouth of Pine Creek. Two Seneca Indian chiefs who were "in the bash a hunting" stopped at the tavern, one was a young man and the other was middle aged. There are various versions of the story, but it is clear from all accounts, that the chiefs became intoxicated.

One version handed down in the Walker family states that one of the chiefs exhibited a stick with notches in it that represented lives of white men he had taken. One of the patrons noted a long notch, and inquired about it. The drunken chief explained that it was for Colonel Walker, a big officer we killed. He went on to provide details of the death of John Walker, entertaining spectators by lying on the ground making grimacing faces that mimicked Walker, gloating how he looked as they tomahawked and scalped him.

Benjamin, William and Henry Walker became incensed with rage at the performance, and set in place a plan to avenge their father's death. They sought the help of Samuel Doyle (1752-1817), a Revolutionary War veteran and

frontiersman. They pursued the two Senecas, and a desperate battle ensued with knives and tomahawks that ended in Pine Creek with the death of both Seneca chiefs, despite the younger man's pleas to be spared, since he had not participated in the death of John Walker. Reports say the bodies were sunk in the creek, but rising waters revealed the murders as the bodies washed onto a gravel bar in the creek.

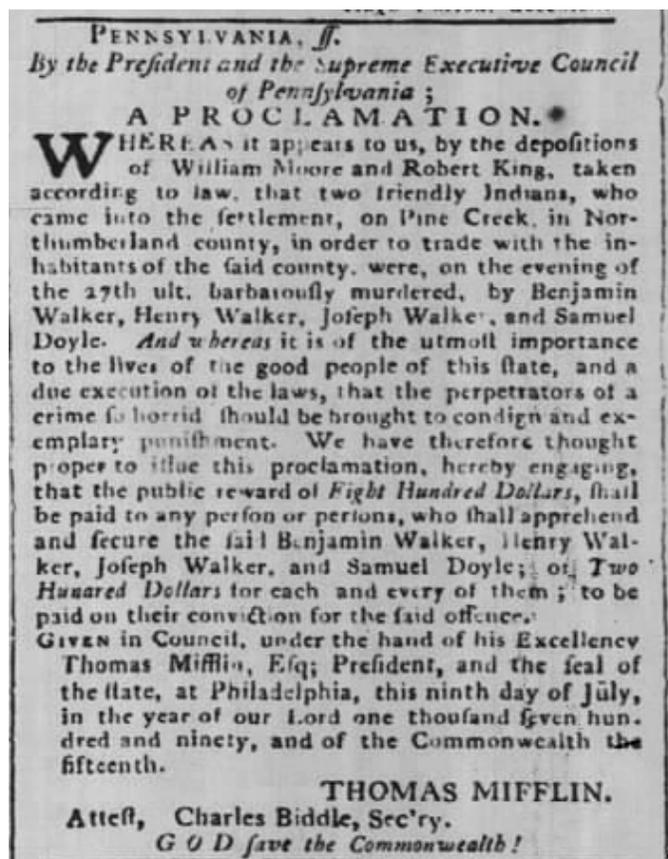
Following the discovery of the murder of the Seneca chiefs the native inhabitants threatened to avenge their deaths. As the native inhabitants became agitated the local settlers became concerned for their own safety. The Walkers were suspected to be the murderers and some of the locals felt their actions were justified, while others believed that such an atrocity committed during a time of peace would renew the violence that had finally subsided in recent years.

Days later a letter was sent by Robert Fleming, and signed by 26 settlers of Pine Creek, to both the Northumberland County Council and Lieutenant Bernard Hubley of Northumberland County requesting arms, ammunition and provisions. Hubley along with Colonel William Wilson and other members of the Northumberland Council sent letters to the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council regarding the incident, and expressing fear of retaliation from the Senecas. Several letters of correspondence were exchanged regarding how to proceed because the hostilities had been perpetrated against "friendly Indians," and any troops sent for protection might be considered to be a sign of additional hostility. It was clearly a political situation for Pennsylvania's government.

The Vice President of Pennsylvania, George Ross, responded on behalf of the Council, explaining that a proclamation had been issued by President Mifflin that included an \$800.00 reward for the apprehension of the perpetrators so they may be brought to justice. He provided copies of the proclamation along with a letter to the native inhabitants decrying the murders, and explaining the action being taken by Pennsylvania's government. The hope was that the actions of the state government would quell any retaliation by the Senecas.

A detailed description of each of the perpetrators was issued that would be the 1790 equivalent of a "wanted poster" for a criminal in the age since photography has existed.

Benjamin Walker, about 28 years of age, about five feet nine inches high, straight and well made, full faced, a little freckled, large eyes, dark sandy hair, wears it tied, fond of company and strong liquor, very talkative, and very apt to mock the Germans speaking broken English, is left handed, deals in lands and brags much of his property, followed farming and boating.



Thomas Mifflin, President of Pennsylvania's Proclamation offering an \$800.00 reward for the apprehension and conviction of Benjamin Walker, Henry Walker, Joseph Walker, and Samuel Doyle for the murder of the two Seneca Chiefs on Pine Creek.

Henry Walker, about 25 years of age, five feet six inches high, straight made, thin visage, pockmarked and freckled, squints a little with both eyes, long, dark, sandy hair, brought up to boating and farming.

Joseph Walker, about 23 years of age, five feet ten inches high, slim made and very straight, full faced and much freckled, long dark sandy hair, very proud, a blacksmith by trade but don't follow it, fond of his gun, civil in company, was out with the Commissioners as a hunter and chain bearer when running the New York line.

Samuel Doyle, about 27 years of age, five feet seven inches high, smooth, full faced, short, fair hair, fond of company and strong liquor, was a soldier in Captain Robinson's Company of Pennsylvania Rangers, stout and well built, brought up to farming, apt to brag of his abilities in chopping or mauling rails, very peaceable when sober.

John Robinson of Pine Creek sent a letter to Colonel Proctor on behalf of the Walker brothers and Samuel Doyle, seeking his influence with the Council with a request for a pardon that was submitted. Robinson explains their regret, as well as their reason for killing the native inhabitants being that one of them had vaunted the taking of twenty-three scalps, one of them being their father.

The Supreme Executive Council was notified on September 23, 1790, that Samuel Doyle had been apprehended and was in the Lancaster jail. Doyle was subsequently tried and acquitted in Sunbury. The Walker brothers' oral family history says they hid in a cellar for nine days, and then fled during a noisy and violent storm, traveling deep into the mountains of Western Pennsylvania. In Pittsburgh, where the three rivers come together, they decided it was best to separate and head in different directions.

In Geneseo, a key settlement of the Seneca tribe, the actions of Pennsylvania's Executive Council did little to satisfy their anger at the offensive act of war. The Senecas sent a message to the Council demanding that the Governor come to the "Painted Post" (near modern day Tioga, Pennsylvania) and meet with the tribe of the deceased to "bury the hatchet, and put it out of memory as it is yet sticking in our head." In addition, they demanded the return of "the property of the murdered, and to bring the property of the murderers." President Thomas Mifflin declined to make the trip personally, but commissioned Colonel William Wilson to act as his representative to try to re-establish relations with the Senecas.

Washington's Seneca Initiative

The matter came to the attention of the new President of the United States, George Washington, in early September, while he was in Philadelphia.

Noting that Congress had just passed the federal Indian Trade and Intercourse Act on August 22, 1790, Washington took control of the situation, because under the new act, it was not a state matter, but rather the federal government's duty to regulate Indian affairs.

The Constitution was not even a year and half old, and the federal government had not yet organized or staffed itself fully. Washington supported the plan that was put in motion by the government of Pennsylvania, but in addition saw the meeting as an opportunity to communicate the details of the new Indian Trade and Intercourse Act with the Senecas. Under the act, he took control from Pennsylvania on behalf of the federal government, and appointed an individual to represent the United States.

Washington chose Timothy Pickering, who had served as his Quartermaster General of the Continental Army during the Revolution. Pickering was living in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, at the time and was seeking a position with the federal government. In a meeting between the two men, Washington asked Pickering to serve as his representative to meet with the Seneca chiefs. He directed Pickering to "express the fullest displeasure at the murders committed at Pine Creek," to explain the measures that have been taken, and "to communicate the act of Congress respecting the trade and intercourse with the Indian Tribes." He added that he also wanted Pickering to declare to them the friendly disposition of the federal government towards them, and to extend the government's protection and support to them. Washington was clear in that he wanted the meeting to be a small event with only a handful of witnesses to the offering of condolences and presents to the families of the murdered chiefs.

In November of 1790, following the logistics of moving supplies to accommodate the conference that had swelled to approximately 220 Seneca men, women and children in Tioga, a meeting was convened with chiefs Big Tree, Little Beard, Farmer's Brother, and Red Jacket in attendance. It was Red Jacket who insisted that wampum belts be presented to the families of the deceased, not only presents. Pickering had not brought wampum belts with him, and Red Jacket agreed to sell him the wampum belts.

The Tioga conference was a success and resulted in establishing good relations between the United States and the Geneseo Senecas. However, Pickering would later write to Washington in his report on the Tioga conference the following statement, “I am informed that the only one of the murderers of the Indians at Pine Creek who was apprehended has had his trial...and been acquitted against the clearest evidence and the most pointed application of it by the Chief Justice.” Pickering continues, “It is in the highest degree mortifying to find that the bulk of the frontier inhabitants consider the killing of Indians in time of peace to be no crime and that their murderers are faultless, provided they escape detection.” He complains of giving his word to the Senecas that the murderers would be brought to justice in the same manner as if they had murdered a white man.

The Aftermath

Benjamin ended up in Dearborn County, Indiana, and used his mother’s maiden name, Wilson. His wife and children discretely joined him several years later. Henry traveled to New York, dying in Bath, and Joseph went to Butler County, Ohio. A Walker descendant, Dave Miller, claims a pardon was issued years later, and that he possesses a copy.

There is a gravestone on the side of the southbound lane of Route 15 in Winfield that bears Major John Lee’s name. That stone does not mark the grave of John Lee. In 1938, Pennsylvania State Representative, Charles R. Reagan along with C. M. Steese of the Union County Historical Society applied to the War Department for a headstone for the unmarked grave of Lee. Then in August of 1939 a celebration was held in Winfield to set the marker and remember Major John Lee and the incident that occurred in 1782. The program included an invocation, a speech by the Secretary of the Northumberland County Historical Society, a speech by the Honorable Charles R. Reagan, and another by the President of the Union County Historical Society and the unveiling of the marker, a military salute by the Troop “C” firing squad, and closed with a benediction. The marker reads, JOHN LEE MAJOR 1BATTALION PA MILITIA REVOLUTIONARY WAR AUGUST 12, 1782



John Lee's roadside marker at Winfield

The Lee Massacre and the Pine Creek Indian murders were just one sequence of incidents that highlight the atrocities that were committed by both the native inhabitants and the settlers. It also reflects the tensions and the long harbored feelings of anger and resentment that were infused in the settlement of Pennsylvania's frontier and the founding of our nation.

✧ **ACCOUNTS** ✧