

SIEGE OF FORT HENRY

Dr. Joseph Doddridge

1777

Fort Henry, at Wheeling, was built at the expense of the English Government, by the order of the Earl of Dunmore, while on his campaign against the Indians in the summer of 1774, who, when he descended the river in pursuit of the Indians on the Scioto, left Colonel William Crawford and Angus McDonald, with a detachment of men to build and garrison the fort.

The fort was substantially built of squared timbers painted at the top and furnished with bastions and sentry boxes at the angles. The interior of the fort contained an house for the officers and barracks for the men. Its area was something more than half an acre.

This fort was designed for the refuge and protection of the lower settlements in this district of country, and being next in strength and importance to fort Pitt, soon attracted the notice of the Indians and their English allies, who at three different periods attempted to break up the establishment.

The first attack on fort Henry took place on the first day of September 1777.

Genl. Hand had, at that time, the command of the western department. The Moravian Indians who had three villages on the Muskingum about sixty miles from the Ohio river were in the practice of sending runners to Genl. Hand, with information concerning any intended scout or campaign of the Indian warriors against any of the settlements or forts of the white people.

About three weeks before the attack of fort Henry, Genl Hand sent notice to Coln David Shepherd, the Lieutenant Colonel of Ohio County, that he had received advice that fort Henry would be attacked in short time, by a large Indian force, aided by a body of British rangers from Detroit. This advice was accompanied with an order to the Coln to leave his own fort which was about six miles distant from fort Henry, and take the command of the latter fort. The Coln was directed to issue his orders to all the Captains between the Ohio and Monongahala, to rendezvous at fort Henry with all possible dispatch, with the whole number of their men. Accordingly Captains Williamson, Virgin, Crooks, Miller, Hathaway, and Ogle, with some others whose names are not recollected, assembled with their companies at the fort. Their number was from four to five hundred men.

The Indians not coming on as soon as was expected, some of the Captains, thinking the report of the intended attack of fort Henry a "false alarm" left the place with their companies and returned home. Two companies left the place the day before the attack. Capt. Ogle, and his company were the only distant troops at the place at the time of the engagement. These troops, and those of Cap Mason of the place, amounting in all to about one hundred men, constituted the whole force which defended fort Henry at its first attack.

About sunrise, on the day of the attack, Andrew Zane, with a small party, set out from the fort to go to a place about a mile distant to get some horses, to move a family [Dr. McMechan's] from the fort up the country towards the Monongahala. When this party had reached the brow of the hill, back of Wheeling, at the spot where the national turn pike now passes sit, they were attacked by several Indians, who, however, did not fire on them, but endeavoured to kill, or take them prisoners without giving an alarm. One of the party of the name of Boyd, was caught, after running about Eighty yards, and tomahawked. Zane made his escape by jumping over a cliff of rocks of considerable height. The Indians who were running after him, not choosing to imitate the perilous leap he had taken gave up the pursuit. Zane was much bruised in the fall, and his gun was broken to pieces; but in the course of the day he reached Coln Shepherds fort. One man and a negro boy of this little party returned to the fort and gave the alarm.

According to the usual folly and rashness of our militia of early times, about twenty turned out of the fort to give battle to Indians; notwithstanding the advice of Genl Hand, that the place would be attacked by at least 200 of the enemy.

The Indians, after finishing their work with the small party, passed over the top of the hill and descended into the bottom, following the bend of the creek, until they came to the flat piece of ground at the south end of Wheeling hill. In this flat they formed an ambuscade in the form of a crescent, with its convexity towards the creek, its points within a short distance of the foot of the hill. A considerable force had also been left among the bushes, on the western side of the hill, some distance in front of the ambuscade to prevent the escape of any of our men, in case they should pursue the Indians and fall into the ambuscade.

The Indians in their march over the hill, down the bottom and through the centre of the ambuscade, had taken the precaution to make a large trail so that they might be readily pursued so as to draw our men into the snare.

When the party which had left the fort, for the pursuit of the Indians had fallen on their trail, they selected two or three men to follow directly on the tracks. The others divided into two equal parties and marched in single file at the distance of several steps of each other about 70 yards to the right and left of the trail.

When our party had progressed some distance into the flat, in which the ambuscade was formed, a soldier of the name of Thomas Glen, who was marching next to Captain Mason, discovered an Indian on the right flank of the enemy whom he instantly shot down. The first shot from the Indians wounded Capt Mason in the hand and carried off the lock of his gun....

Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. *Frontier Defense on the Upper Ohio, 1777-1778*. (Madison: 1912):54-58.