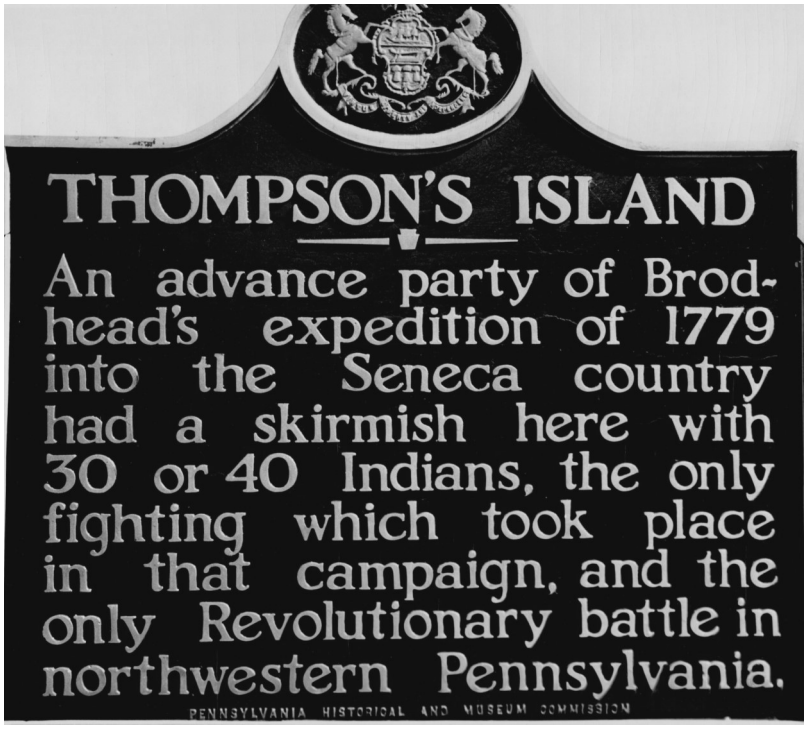
Warren County's Only Revolutionary Engagement

By Mrs. Frances Ramsey



Warren County's only revolutionary engagement is commonly known as the "Battle of Buckaloons" which took place on the 31st of August 1779. The title "Battle of Buckaloons" is entirely erroneous. It wasn't a battle. It was just a skirmish – and it didn't happen at Buckaloons which, as you know, is the Native American name for the Irvine flats. The incident took place about four miles down the river from Buckaloons, that is, four miles south of the mouth of the Brokenstraw, on the west bank of the Allegheny River and the defile which was opposite the south end of Thompson's Island, as we know it.

It was a minor skirmish, but at the time it was considered by the men who took part in it to be a very probable preliminary to a very real battle against hundreds of the foe who would descend upon them after they had been discovered in their territory. Fortunately for them, it was a battle which never came to pass. But as small as this engagement was, it was highly important to the cause of the west as it slowed down for a time the terrible depredations that were made against the settlers by the Native Americans from the north. Since it was the only fight of the War of the Revolution to take place within the confines of Warren County, we shall proceed to make the most of it but, in doing so will adhere strictly to the facts.

During the year 1779, the British and the Torries were in command at Fort Niagara under the leadership of Colonel Bolten, and they had as allies from various tribes – Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandottes, but most important of all – the entire Iroquois Confederation with the exception of some of Oneidas who had pledged their allegiance to the English cause at a conference held in Oswego, New York, in July 1777.

After this union was made, the forays against the white settlers in New York State along the Susquehanna and in the southwestern portion of Pennsylvania increased in such numbers and such violence that they had become practically unendurable. Proof of the close cooperation among the English, Torries, and the Native Americans in our area is found in the fact that Lt. John Dockstader, who was the aide to Colonel Bolten, actually spent the entire winter of 1778-79 living with the Native Americans right here in Warren. That makes him possibly the first white person ever to have resided for any length of time on Warren County soil – at least within the confines of Warren County.

Now the disastrous effects of these raids on the upper Allegheny – "from" the upper Allegheny I should have said – are recorded on page after page of the wartime records, and we learn of their effectiveness, too, from the simple statement of Dockstader that the houses of the Senecas were decorated with hundreds of scalps of pioneers – and the Native American director of the raids that year – from this upper Allegheny territory – was the famous Chief Guiesuta. Now some during that winter the Senecas abandoned the Warren village and moved in a body to Geneseedaga. Nobody knows why exactly, but the British statement that year was that smallpox had broken out among the Senecas may supply the clue – although they didn't say just which Senecas those were. But evidently their allies – the Delaware Munseys who had their own village up the Conewango near the point where Jackson Run and Hatch Run empty into the main stream – abandoned their villages also because Brodhead apparently found none there.

The commander at Fort Pitt that winter was Colonel Brodhead and the Native Americans were making his life one of constant trouble. He was sending out rangers – sending out soldiers all of the time – to rescue beleaguered settlers or to bury the burned and the butchered – or to chase Native American war parties in an attempt to free the captured whites. He was always sending spies into this northern area to try and learn the nature of the country and to learn the strength of the enemy, but not one of them ever succeeded in getting to Warren – not even the famous Captain Brady who was one of the finest of all the spies. It's said that he did get as far as Franklin, but he certainly got no farther than that. He had very good reasons for trying to get here if he could in that particular year, for Captain Samuel Brady had a brother killed over in Williamsport just the summer before — that was Captain James killed by Native Americans, and that very spring of 1779 his own father was killed down in the southern part of the state when he was carrying supplies for the Army from Fort Wallace to Fort Munsey. I believe he was called Captain John Brady. Samuel Brady had very good reason to hate the Native Americans and want to find out where they were, but not even he could get into Warren. Colonel Brodhead even sent an expedition out of 150 men or some such number under Captain James Smith (who had a very good war record all the way through) to try and find Muskquagta somewhere up on French Creek. They went up and tried to find it, but they couldn't locate that village although they learned afterwards that they had come within ten miles of it. Brodhead realized the futility of all of these efforts. They were just stop gaps, and they weren't even stopping the gaps. He asked permission of George Washington to conduct a large scale expedition up the Allegheny River to wipe out the Native American strongholds.

George Washington hesitated for three reasons. The first was the scarcity of manpower on the frontier. It was difficult to find soldiers. The second was the problem of logistics – that is, the problem of supply – for the Native Americans were destroying supply train after supply train that were trying to reach the western frontier forts. But his most particular reason was the third, and that was the abysmal lack of knowledge concerning this country in which the Senecas lived.

However, the pressure from New York State and the pressure from the people along the Susquehanna became so great that something had to be done about these raids. So they planned the gigantic Sullivan Expedition which was to go up across New York State all the way to Fort Niagara, if possible, and to obliterate all of the Native American towns along the way, and, after this plan had been made on the 23rd of June 1779, George Washington wrote to Brodhead granting his request — stating that the Sullivan plan made it a very opportune time to undertake such a venture into this unknown territory if he was to take it at all.

There is no indication that the two drives were planned as a cooperative measure with Sullivan's Army at one point of the offensive and Brodhead's Army at the other point, or if the two points of the pinchers were to come together somewhere in New York State.

If Brodhead could manage to meet Sullivan somewhere in New York and continue on to Fort Niagara with him — well and good. And, if he couldn't, he was to do the next best thing. In other words, he was completely on his own in his entry into this unknown territory, and that was all that Brodhead needed. He moved very fast with his preparations. He called in all of the garrisons from outlying forts leaving only token forces in charge and asked for and received some Pennsylvania militia. He acquired 60 boats and 200 pack horses. He rounded up ammunition and small ordinances that could be transported on horse back. He found supplies — taking along cattle for meat. All these things he assembled at a place called Mahoning, that is in an old court house. He assembled it in the old court house about three miles south of Kittanning on the mouth of Mahoning Creek, and the place from which they left was about 15 miles above that. On the 11th of August, he left Pittsburgh with 605 soldiers and a small band of Delaware scouts under Chief Nanolan and Lt. Harden.

Most accounts add Captain Brady to this list but there isn't any evidence that he was on the Brodhead Expedition. In fact the evidence is quite to the contrary, for he seems to have been sent out at that time to pursue various bands of Native Americans in other parts of the southwestern portion of Pennsylvania.

John Montour was along on the expedition. He was part Seneca, and it is generally conceded that he had been as far up as what is now Warren but no farther than that. Joseph Nicholson was with him too, both serving as guides and interpreters. This is the same Joseph Nicholson who was later the interpreter for Cornplanter and one of his best friends. The party was delayed for four days at Mahoning. They transported everything by boats except, of course, driving the horses and the cattle over land. At Mahoning, they were held up by rain for four days, and then they went due north by what Brodhead called a "blind path" running through the wilderness up hill and down dales through terrible country. This path was evidently taken because the Native Americans were not so likely to use it, and they wouldn't be likely to be seen, probably taking them up through Clarion County about on the line of the present town of Rymersburg. They forded Tionesta someplace. Of course, we don't know just where, and they arrived at Kushkushing — which is East Hickory — on the 28th of August. That was just two days after Sullivan had started up the Tioga. It had taken them 15 days to come that far if you count the four days in which they were stalled at Mahoning.

They forded the river at East Hickory and followed the west bank to the creek, and all of you who know how those steep hills jut out into the water there realize that was a very terrible trek. But as the path eased a little bit, when they got beyond the heavy hills, the advance party which consisted of 15 white soldiers, eight Native Americans, Chief Nanolan, and Lt. Harden, and Nicholson in the advance — entered a little defile at what we know now as the lower end of Thompson's Island. There they discovered a party of 30 or 40 warriors landing their canoes. Both sides fired. Five Native Americans were killed, and three Americans were wounded: Nanolan, Joseph Nicholson, and a private soldier whose name is not given.

The Native Americans saw the main body of troops coming up about that time hurrying to outflank them. They fled precipitously, and that was the end of the skirmish. One of their warriors known as Arrow or Red Eye swam under the water to the east shore and ran all the way to Gennesseedaga to warn the people and enable the women and children to gather together a few supplies and flee for their lives. Mr. Deardorff said that Native American friend of his, William Gordon, told him that he recalled the old folks telling of how Red Eye came over the hills of Roper Hollow calling out in Seneca as he came "Woe, Woe," and they could hear him a long way off and knew that trouble was coming up the river.

Brodhead had described the Native Americans as warriors and he certainly knew what a Seneca warrior looked like. However, Governor Blacksnake said in an interview with Lyman Draper in the 1850s that they were just an innocent hunting party, but Mr. Deardorff always humorously added, "But Governor Blacksnake wasn't there."

Brodhead and his party left the scene of the skirmish without much delay, although I believe they did stay the night according to his account. Then they went four miles up the river to Buckaloons where they selected a suitable site for a small breastworks and they threw one up. Considering the fact that they were expecting a heavy battle to follow, they probably built it just as strong as they were able — and with over 600 men to do the work they could, of course, accomplish it quite quickly.

Whether the breastworks that they built were the same ones that stood there for decades on the hill back of the National Forge, we do not know. Those breastworks were there when Mr. Clair Andrews was a boy. He mentioned something about some stones and a foundation, although that is not mentioned in Brodhead's account, but since there was never a reason for building any breastworks after that date due to the fact that Cornplanter succeeded in keeping the Senecas friendly during the war with the Native Americans in 1791-1895. Afterwards, it is reasonable to suppose that they might be the very breastworks.

In that breastworks, Brodhead, of course, left his reserves of supplies. He left the three wounded men. He left 40 soldiers and a Captain, and on the 2nd of September — equipped for very fast travel — he marched into Warren with the main body of troops. When they arrived in Warren, they expressed surprise at finding the houses empty, and Brodhead estimated that they had been vacated about 18 months before that. We know that he was wrong in his estimate of course. They had been vacated that very winter.

Thompson's Island on the Allegheny River at 41° 47' 35" N, 79° 17' 4" W
Photo courtesy of Piper VanOrd of Allegheny Outfitters

He said that the men were much perturbed when they arrived in Warren because nobody knew the way to the upper Native American villages from that point.

Governor Blacksnake's account of the Thompson's Island fight as he told it to Lyman Draper through his interpreter, circa 1850s: "While we are gone to Wyoming and other places to war with the American Whites, Brethren Captain Red Eye and other Native Americans were with Red Eye, about ten of them went downstream on the Allegheny River with bark canoes and hunting furs. Red Eye and his comrades were down about five miles below Brokenstraw, now called Warren County, Pennsylvania. They had been camped out on the banks of the river about a quarter of a mile from the camp there, and he saw a company of men of war and could count them and how many were in the company — and there were about 500 men in the company — and they saw him and he ran back to his camp. They fired at him but did not touch him at all. He ran as fast as he could. They put out after him about 50 of them, but he outran them. And as soon as they got into their camp, he told his comrades that the white company was coming close to hand, and they had better run as soon as possible. So they started and ran for their lives. Some ran up the river, and Red Eye and three others went with him and got into their bark canoe and went across the river. But before reaching the crossing, the company came upon them and fired, and these three Native Americans were killed in the river (and Brodhead says five Native Americans were killed). Red Eye jumped out of the canoe and dove into the water, but he made it out and across the river alive. As soon as he got out of the water, he ran to the first tree and got behind it until the water dripped from him. He made an escape from there, but the white company kept pursuing him up the river. Captain Red Eye kept it going day and night until he came up to what's now called "Cornplanter Reservation." The Native Americans and women and children prepared to get out, and they took packages and some provisions and some venison. The young ones and they got them away as soon possible and came into the state of New York and made a stop at Cold Springs to retire for a few days and sent messengers over to Genesee River immediately to tell Uncle Cornplanter and Red Jacket and myself to come over to protect them. When we got down to Cornplanter — now reserved in Pennsylvania — the whites were gone down again and we pursued them as far as Warren, Pennsylvania, and saw nothing of them. We returned again." But as Mr. Deardorff said, "He wasn't there."

Colonel Brodhead and his forces [were] in the village of Conewaga – which is of course Warren – looking about at the empty houses and wondering where to find the trail to the upper villages that they knew existed. Not a soul in the party had any idea where those villages were – not even John Montour who had never been any farther than that, for the Senecas had been extremely successful in keeping everybody out of their country.

The party went up the Conewango River and scouted around until they found what Brodhead described as a path which seemed to have been traveled by the enemies sometime since, and they decided to follow that. That path, of course, was the old Native American Trail leading into New York State which had probably been in use for hundreds of years. Mary Jemison, the white woman of the Genesee, traveled over it in 1759. This path crossed the Conewango at what are now the State Hospital Grounds and went up Hatch Run to the summit of Quaker Hill. It then continued on beyond Smith's Corners until it struck Hodge Run, and it followed the course of Hodge Run down to the Allegheny.

From the top of this ridge, Brodhead and his men gazed down in astonishment at the great scene below. For they saw there stretched out for eight miles, as it proved, several Seneca Villages, some 500 acres of corn – almost ripe and ready to pick.

When they got to them, they discovered that these towns, too, were entirely deserted although that dissertation had evidently been very recent. In front of one of the houses in one of the uppermost towns, they found a post decorated with an animal skin, probably part of the preparation held by the warriors before they went off to fight against Sullivan. For if Brodhead's men had only known that the news of the Sullivan Expedition had leaked out and more than leaked out till the news of it traveled like wildfire all over the country (and it grew larger and larger with every telling), they would probably have felt much happier in their minds, because all the Native Americans had left to join the British and Torries to stop Sullivan if possible. The Brodhead Expedition had evidently not been discovered by the Native Americans at all – by any of their scouts — or there certainly would have been some warriors there to meet him. All in all, the party found 130 dwellings built of squared and rounded logs and covered with bark. Some of them were large enough to shelter two or three families indicating that there was a resident population in that area of some 800 people at least.

They also found some bales of furs that they took back to Pittsburgh and sold them for about $30,000 which went far towards paying for the expedition. After taking the furs, Brodhead ordered that all the buildings and all the crops be burned, and they proceeded to burn them to the ground. Brodhead says that they remained three full days in the area, but he may have included the stay at Buckaloons – building the breastworks as a part of those three days. We don't know.

The party debated very briefly about going up into New York State and perhaps trying to contest Sullivan's armies somewhere, but, when Brodhead looked at his soldiers feet he decided they'd better go home and by the easiest route that they could find for the men had completely worn out their shoes on the rough trail coming up. They had no replacements and many of them actually were completely barefoot.

On their return they followed the trail shown on Adlem's map as running along the west side of the river. When they arrived in Warren, they tarried long enough there to set fire to the building and then went on to the Buckaloons where they repeated the burning process in the Native American village there. Then they gathered up their supplies and went on by the inland trail this time to French Creek. On one of their accounts, it mentions that they crossed a creek several times which had an oily liquor on top. That, of course, was Oil Creek. At the junction of French Creek, Brodhead sent an expedition up the stream to locate and destroy Muskquagta which Captain Smith had failed to find earlier in the year, and this detachment did find it. It was about 20 miles up the creek and they found it vacant also and burned it to the ground.

After that the party went on down from Fort Venango over the old familiar Venango Trail and arrived in Pittsburgh on the 14th of September. They had been gone exactly 34 days or four days longer than Brodhead had estimated that they'd be away. However, if you take the four days that they were marooned by the storm, the thirty days was accurate.

The Continental Congress voted a resolution of praise to Brodhead for this expedition, and the whole country greeted the exploit with acclaim. The expedition didn't end all the raids of course, but it slowed them down for about a year and they never were as frequent after that as they were before. Although, of course, there were some terrible raids after that.

As a summary of the whole story, I've included General Brodhead's report to George Washington in a letter which has been preserved for us through the collecting activity of Lyman Draper who we remember as the man who spent his lifetime going about the country interviewing people and collecting old documents – all of which are archived at the Wisconsin Historical Society which makes that city the center of historical research in America.

Thompson's Island
Photo courtesy
of Piper VanOrd

This letter was written two days after Brodhead returned to Fort Pitt. It was on the 16th of September, 1779, and he says: "Dear General:

I returned from the expedition against the Seneca and Munsey Nations on the 14th instant, and I now do myself the honor to inform you how I have proceeded in prosecuting it. I left this place the 11th of last month with 600 rank and file including militia and volunteers and one month's provisions which except the live cattle was transported by boat under an escort of 100 men to a place called Mahoning about 15 miles above Kittanning or Fort Armstrong." (This Fort Armstrong, by the way, had been built by Brodhead just the year before and is located where Kittanning stands now.) "Where after four days detention by heavy rains and the straying of some of the cattle, the stores were loaded onto pack horses and the troops proceeded on the march for Conewango which is Warren on a path leading to Cushcushsee (that is, of course, East Hickory). At ten miles this side of the town (he's referring there to Warren) one of the advance guards consisting of 15 white men including the spies and the eight Delaware Native Americans under the command of Lieutenant Harden of the 8th Pennsylvanian Regiment whom I have before recommended to your Excellency for his great bravery and skill as a partisan discovered between 30 and 40 warriors having likewise discovered some of the troops immediately landed, stripped off their shirts, and prepared for action, and the advance guard immediately began the attack. All the troops except one column and the flankers being in the narrows between the river and a high hill were immediately prepared to receive the enemy – which being done – I went forward to discover the enemy and saw six of them retreating over the river without arms – at the same time the rest ran away leaving their canoes, blankets, shirts, provisions, and eight guns – besides five dead men, and, by the signs of blood, several went off wounded. Only two of my men and one of the Delaware Native Americans were wounded, and they were wounded so slightly that they're already recovered and fit for action. The next morning the troops proceeded to Buckaloons where I ordered a small breastwork to be thrown up of felled timber and fossens. A captain and 40 men were left to secure our baggage and our stores, and the troops immediately proceeded to Conewango which I found to have been deserted about 18 months past.

Here the troops seemed much mortified because we had no person to serve as a guide to the upper towns, but I ordered them to proceed on a path which appeared to have been traveled by the enemies sometimes past, and we continued marching on it about 20 miles before making any discoveries except a few tracks of spies; but immediately after ascending a high hill we discovered the Allegheny River and a number of corn fields and descending several towns which the enemy had deserted on the approach of the troops.

Some of them fled just before the advance guard reached the town and left several packs of deer skins. At the upper Seneca town we found a painted post or a war post clothed in a dog skin, and John Montour told me that this town was called Yorumwago. Besides this we saw seven other towns consisting on the whole of 130 houses some of which were large enough to accommodate three or four Native American families. The troops remained on the ground three whole days destroying the towns and the cornfields. I never saw finer corn, although it was planted much thicker than is common with our farmers. From the accounts I can collect from the officers to employ it, it must have exceeded 500 acres which is our lowest estimate – and the plunder taken here is estimated at about $30,000. I have directed that a sale be made of it for the troops."

And that is the main portion then of his letter. After he got back to the camp – to Fort Pitt – he wrote a second letter to George Washington in which he told of the lack of clothing of the soldiers – that they had no shoes completely barefooted and he wanted supplies. A considerable portion of the money for the furs was used to attempt to purchase those supplies. However, they were unable to obtain them, and, in the letter book of General Brodhead for that year, we find that they were barefoot in Fort Pitt except for the moccasins they could make themselves. According to the letters and daybooks on file and micro-film at the Library of Congress, they had no uniforms at all. Some of the soldiers just used their old blankets and made them into clothing that year. So, anyone who may attempt to find the place where the fort was located, and expect to find military buttons, would probably not find any. Most likely, not many of those soldiers had any regular uniforms. They just didn't exist on the frontier, except possibly in the cases of some officers.

This particular engagement wasn't a big one, but it was highly essential to the west because it did stop the raids for a long time to follow – although you will remember a couple of years later Hannastown was burned by these same Senecas and their British allies. They had recovered to some extent by that time. But the Senecas had a very hard time after the Sullivan and the Brodhead raids, for they were driven out completely – and went to Fort Niagara. The British were hard put because they didn't have supplies to feed them. So in that winter the some 5,000 Senecas were so beset with the terrible cold of that year and with the absolute lack of food that is estimated that half of them died either by starvation or freezing to death. So it would take them a couple of years before they could again round up their forces. The two expeditions together worked out very admirably for the whites. They didn't stop everything but they very nearly did.

I find it very curious that we know very little concerning Brodhead's Expedition. Apparently no one on that expedition wrote a diary and we find very few references by any soldiers who took part in it. We only have the few records that were sent from General Brodhead to George Washington and the few references that he made in his daybook at the fort regarding the conditions, lack of provisions, clothing, etc. Whereas on the Sullivan Expedition, which was planned on a much larger scale, we know a great deal. It almost seems as though every soldier on the Sullivan Expedition must have kept a diary. That's an exaggeration, of course, but that expedition was well documented in soldiers' diaries. The Brodhead Expedition occurred much farther out on the western frontier where supplies were very difficult to attain and conditions were such that their only object was to stop the raids. They did the best that they could against the very powerful group of Native Americans to the north. They hurried up the rough trail and got the job done, but nobody wrote about it.

We do have Governor Blacksnake's details as interpreted to Lyman Draper. Governor Blacksnake was an extremely intelligent man and would have told his story well in Seneca.

The Brodhead Expedition was the only Revolutionary engagement on Warren County soil.