

THREE BLOODY DAYS IN JULY - INTRODUCTION

The land west of the Susquehanna River and north of the Blue Mountains was the new frontier in 1750 Colonial America. It was a virgin unspoiled land of oak, maple, and pine forests with seemingly endless supplies of deer, bear, and turkey. It was a land of untold riches and unlimited opportunity.

By treaty with William Penn this was Indian Territory. Intrepid and adventurous European settlers just couldn't resist the opportunity and started to move into the area in the 1740s and throughout the 1750s. The Native Americans continually complained and the Provincial Government responded by arresting trespassers, removing them from their illegally claimed lands and burning their cabins. This would not deter the settlers and they moved further into Shermans Valley and then north into Tuscarora Valley.

At the entrance to Shermans Valley was a trader's cabin and tavern owned by George Croghan. Croghan had been legally trading with the Indians for many years and was highly respected by them. Some of the meetings between the Indians and the Provincial Officials were held at his homestead in Pennsboro and others at his cabin on top of Blue Mountain, then called Kittatinny. He later sold the mountain property to William Sterritt. Today this gateway to the north and west retains his name and is known as Sterrets Gap. Later in history the property was owned by James Buchanan, the 15th President of the United States.

Traders licensed by the government could legally enter the territory and conduct business with the Indians. These traders followed old Indian trails that became the main routes of travel in the new territory. These "traders' trails" defined how and why towns and villages were established in Perry County. The trails also played a large role in the last great Indian uprising during three days in July 1763.

Indian Trails – Routes for expansion

Croghan's Trail, also called the Traders Trail, the New Trail or the New Path was an old Indian trail. It transversed the majority of Perry County. From Croghan's the trail headed north (today PA Route 34) where it intersected Shermans Creek and where a village called Smileytown would later be established. Today we know this area as Shermansdale. Following Shermans Creek the trail passed Gibson's Rock and then to the west to the homestead of Andrew Montour. Montour's homestead later became the town of Landisburg. Today the route is mostly traced by PA Route 850. From Landisburg the trail headed northwest to Centre. At Centre the settlers erected a fort for protection from the Indians on the lands of George Robinson near the site of Centre Presbyterian Church. Fort Robinson served as a site of protection and safety for the peoples in Shermans Valley and successfully warded off the Indian attack on Fort Robinson in July of 1756. From Fort Robinson the trail turned abruptly to the north and proceeded to enter Tuscarora Valley between the Conococheague Ridge and Tuscarora Mountain. This is commonly known as Bingham's Gap and was named for an early settler named Samuel Bingham (Bigham). Bingham also built a fort for the

protection of the peoples in Tuscarora Valley but it was destroyed by the Indians on June 11, 1756 with great loss of life.



W. Shull Map of 1770 showing the Traders Path from Croghan's Gap to Juniata County. The circle marks the spot near Centre where the trail turned north to go to Bingham's Gap.

Other important trails

The Harris Trail extended west from Duncannon and met Croghan's Trail at Dromgolds Corner just south of Gibsons Rock. Prior to establishing his famous ferry at Harrisburg, John Harris ran a ferry from the east side of the Susquehanna at the Juniata River to Duncannon so the trail from the ferry was given his name.

About midway to Drumgolds, at what we know today as Mecks Corner, the Mahanoy Gap Trail headed north through a gap in the Mahanoy Mountain just south of present day New Bloomfield. Today this route is PA Route 274/34.

It was along this path that Archibald Stewart and his sons William and John purchased a traders cabin and opened the Bark Tavern in 1753. It was near Perry County's famous Box Huckleberry. While not likely the first settlers in the county, the Stewarts are the earliest legally documented settlers in the county. Later William Stewart moved north into Juniata County and is recognized as one of the earliest settlers in that county as well. From New Bloomfield the trails headed west on the Shermans Valley Trail, (Rt 274) to meet the Croghans trail at Landisburg and east to the Juniata River near present day Newport (Rt 34).

Numerous other trails existed and did aid in the settlement of the county but the Trader's Trail from Croghan's (Sterrets) Gap and the Harris Trail largely defined the settlement of Perry County.

The beginning of the settler and Indian disputes

In 1754, the family of William Penn signed a treaty at Albany, New York with the Five Nations of the Iroquois. This treaty opened the area north of the Blue Mountains and west of the Susquehanna to European settlers. The area we call Perry County came from a part of these lands. To stake claims and warrant lands, the Provincial Land Office was opened in February, 1755. What is today Perry County was now officially “white-man’s land”. (In 1755, the area we call Perry County today was part of Cumberland County.)

Not all of the tribes affected by the Albany Treaty, however, agreed with giving the lands to the Province of Pennsylvania and opening them for settlement. The Shawnee and Delaware were particularly upset that the Five Nations of the Iroquois had given away some of their best hunting grounds. As a result, after the defeat of the British army under General Braddock on July 9, 1755, Indian attacks within Perry County began. This was also the start of what is called the French and Indian War in the United States. For the French and the English, it was a war over the lands of western Pennsylvania and Ohio. For many Native Americans, however, it was a war to keep their

lands which lay between French and the English claims; basically, all of the lands west of Path Valley. Many Indian tribes sided with the French in this war because the French were less of a threat. The French didn't want the Indian lands for their settlers like the English. The French were only interested in maintaining a robust fur trade with the Indians.

The Provincial Government responded to the Indian attacks by building a line of military forts to hopefully protect the settlers. This line started at Sunbury on the Susquehanna River. It ran down the broad Tuscarora Valley, called the Path Valley, to near Chambersburg. None of these official military forts, however, were set up in what is today Perry County. As a result, settlers were left to either build their own forts such as Robinson's Fort at Centre or leave the area when an attack began. During this period of warfare, which lasted from 1755 until 1758, numerous murders and massacres occurred on both sides. Settlers were killed and homesteads burned throughout Perry County. Today, as we travel down Perry County roads, we pass sites of massacres totally unaware of the events that shaped our communities. At places like Shermansdale, Dellville, Duncannon, Haldeman Island, Landisburg, Loysville, Centre, Cisna Run,

Blain, Newport, Millerstown, and all along the Juniata River and Shermans Creek, we pass locations where settlers were captured, tortured and killed.

In 1758 the Provincial Government and the Indians signed a peace treaty at Easton, Pennsylvania, but scattered skirmishes still occurred. By 1762 the French and Indian War had ended with the English winning control of the Ohio Valley and forcing the French north to Quebec. However, a decade or more of being forced from their lands either by treaty or force and continual conflict with the “English” settlers still had some tribes mentally in a state of war

Unfortunately the Native American side of the story was not recorded. We can only assume that the atrocities against the Indians were as bad as or worse than those against the settlers. Considering that the Indians lost their ancestral homes and were forced to settle new areas to the north and west we can only assume the hardships that they faced.

Pontiac's War moves east

On Sunday, July 3, 1763 a lone rider galloped into Carlisle and while resting and watering his horse in the town square he warned the citizens that Fort Pitt was under attack. Many forts to the west had fallen to the Indians in what history now calls Pontiac's War. Prepare for the Indians are not far behind he warned. The warning never reached the settlers to the north.

The hatred and anger of some native tribes reached the boiling point in the summer of 1763. One of the last great conflicts in Perry and Juniata Counties occurred during three bloody days in July. While it started across the Juniata River near the present day Village of Mexico in Juniata County, it ended in Perry County along a small run called Buffalo Creek.

This is a story about 12 brave men that set out to warn the settlers of the impending attack and the dozens of settlers that lost their lives protecting their homes. The families involved were those of the earliest settlers in Juniata and Perry Counties, those hearty souls that carved communities out of the hostile wilderness we now call home.

The people of Central Pennsylvania enjoy a tranquil and beautiful land with fertile farms, picturesque mountains and clear streams. May we never forget the efforts and sacrifices of our ancestors and predecessors that shaped our communities! This historical record is a tribute to those that went before and paid the ultimate price on those three bloody days in July 1763.