

THE WIPEY AFFAIR:

AN INCIDENT ILLUSTRATING PENNSYLVANIA'S ATTITUDE DURING DUNMORE'S WAR

BY CLARENCE D. STEPHENSON*

JOSEPH WIPEY was a peaceful Delaware Indian who for some years prior to 1774 lived alone in a cabin on the north bank of the Conemaugh River in present Indiana County, opposite the old Squirrel Hill Indian Town on the site of New Florence. He was said to have been somewhat advanced in years. Whether he lived alone for this reason or because of other considerations is not known. He spent his time hunting and fishing in the neighborhood of the "Connemach," known to the Indians as "Otter Creek," and was on friendly terms with most of his pioneer white neighbors.¹ His "cabbin" was a well-known landmark in the neighborhood, being mentioned in various early applications for survey, such as that of George Findley: "Apl. 3, 1769. Application made by George Fendler near Wipsey's Cabin near Conemaugh river." A tract surveyed for William Clark, June 22, 1776, after Wipey's tragic death, was described as "on the path between Conemaugh and Black-lick adjoining George Findley, and including Wipey's cabin."² According to local tradition, Wipey would leave his cabin home as often as three times a year, remain away for a week or ten days, and then return with pounds of lead ore which he melted and cast into pellets for his gun.³ No one ever knew where he got it, but a reasonable supposition would be the Sinking Valley in Blair County, where lead was later mined for Revolutionary armies.

Probably Wipey's very name would have been lost in the obscurity

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¹ Thomas Lynch Montgomery, ed., *Report of the Commission to Locate the Site of the Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1916), II, 229.

² *History of Indiana County, Pennsylvania* (Newark, Ohio, 1880), p. 421.

³ Ralph O. Trexler, *History of Armagh, Pennsylvania* (1949), p. 9.

of Pennsylvania land records had it not been for an affair in 1774 which was regarded by Governor John Penn and the Provincial Council as of grave concern to the welfare of the frontier inhabitants. This was the murder of Wipey, which occurred while the so-called "Dunmore's War" was raging.

Dunmore's War, it will be recalled, began about April, 1774, when some Indians on the lower Ohio, resentful of encroachments on their lands, fired on a group of Virginia land jobbers who then retreated upriver and sent messengers to Dr. John Connolly, Governor Dunmore's lieutenant at Pittsburgh. The messengers returned with word from Connolly that an Indian war was inevitable, whereupon the jobbers declared war on the Indians and proceeded to commit a series of shameful butcheries of peaceful Indians. Even after these atrocities had been committed, the Indians tried to avoid a general war. The head chief of the Delawares urged his people to keep peace, "in a fatherly manner showing unto them the blessings of Peace and the Folly of War," while Cornstalk, leading chief of the Shawnees, went to great lengths to restrain the "foolish People amongst us to sit still and do no harm till we see whether it is the intention of the white people in general to fall on us. . . ."⁴ But Lord Dunmore, last of the colonial governors of Virginia, and others of the land speculating class were determined to make the Ohio safe for their operations, and so the resulting Indian war has been styled "Dunmore's War."

These occurrences were viewed with great apprehension and dislike by the Pennsylvania traders and settlers. Arthur St. Clair, in a letter to Governor Penn, said, "The Distress'd Inhabitants of this place [Hannastown and Westmoreland County] have just cause to Charge their present Calamity & Dread of an Indian War to the Tyrannical . . . Doctor John Connolly, [whose] . . . conduct to our friendly Indians convinces us that he means to force them to a war. . . ."⁵

Against this background occurred the murder of Wipey. It was first reported by St. Clair in a letter to Gov. Penn dated May 29th:

An affair that has given me much trouble and vexation
had like to have escaped my memory. The murder of a

⁴ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series, IV, 497-98, 500, 569-70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 528.

Delaware Indian, Joseph Wipey. . . . It is the most astonishing thing in the world, the disposition of the common people of this country, actuated by the most savage cruelty, they wantonly perpetrate crimes that are a disgrace to humanity. . . . Two of the persons concerned in this murder are John Hinkston and James Cooper. I had got information of their design some time before they executed it, and had wrote to Hinkston, whom I knew to be a leader amongst them to dissuade them, but so far from preventing them, it only produced the enclosed letter. The body was hid in a small run of water and covered with stones. I immediately sent for the Coroner, but before he had got a jury together the body was removed, so that no inquest could be taken. I have issued warrants on suspicion, but they are so much on their guard I doubt they can be executed.⁶

The place of the murder was said to be at or near the mouth of Hinckston's Run, which empties into the Conemaugh in the Fourteenth Ward of Johnstown. This is on authority of W. Horace Rose, late of Johnstown, who related the following circumstances:

The statement I make about him having been shot below or near the mouth of Hinckston's Run is based upon the statement of the original settlers in this neighborhood made to my informants. The Adamses were well acquainted with Wipey and from him directly those who informed me had the statement of his death, and the fact that he was killed while fishing from a canoe or boat just below the mouth of Hinkston's Run. Their statement was that he was hidden in Laurel Run to which point he floated in the canoe; and that the canoe was turned upside down and attracted the attention of some Indians who lived in the vicinity of what is now New Florence. They recognized the boat which led to a search for Wipey.⁷

The Adamses mentioned by Rose were Solomon and Samuel

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

⁷ Montgomery, *opt. cit.*, p. 278.

Adams, who settled along Solomon's and Sam's Runs, both in present Stony Creek Township, Cambria County.

On June 12th, St. Clair again reported to Governor Penn that the country between the Forbes Road and the Allegheny River was "totally abandoned, except by a few who are associated with the People who murdered the Indian [Wipey], and are shut up in a small Fort on Conymack, equally afraid of the Indians and the Officers of justice."⁸ The fort "on Conymack" is thought to have been Fort Wallace on McGee's Run, about a mile or more south of Blairsville.

Four days later, June 16th, St. Clair, writing to Governor Penn, mentioned being visited by Major Edward Ward, who "informed me that the Delawares had got notice of the Murder of Wipey and that Mr. Croghan [most noted of the traders with the Indians] had desired him [Ward] to come to me on that occasion, that he advised that they [the Delawares] should be spoke to and some small Present made to them as Condolence and 'to cover his bones' as they express it."⁹

On July 12th, St. Clair informed the Governor that :

Hinkston, with about eighteen men in arms, paid us a visit at Court [in Hannastown] last week, and I am very sorry to say, got leave to go away again, though there was a force sufficient to have secured two such parties. At the Sheriff's direction I got intelligence that they were to be there and *expected to be joined by a party of Cresap's people*. It is said a Commission has been sent him *from Virginia*; certain it is, *he is enlisting men for that Service*¹⁰ [italics mine].

This is circumstantial evidence that the whole affair was probably engineered by Virginians and was another link in the series of outrages characterizing Dunmore's "War." There is something rather questionable in the leniency of the Court in this instance, especially when there were sufficient men to place Hinckston and his whole party under arrest.

⁸ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series, IV, 514.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

No doubt Wipey's friends and neighbors—George Findley, William Clark, the Adamases, Rodgers, Dills, Brackens, and others—were indignant and anxious over the affair. The result of such popular concern, spearheaded by St. Clair's letters, was the passage of a resolution by the Provincial Assembly, July 20, 1774, offering one hundred pounds for the apprehension of Hinkson and Cooper, or fifty pounds for either.¹¹ Eight days later, on the 28th of July, Governor Penn issued a Proclamation in accordance with the Assembly's action. It is here reproduced from an original in the Darlington Library, University of Pittsburgh.

The Resolution and Proclamation were noticed by Lord Dunmore, who claimed in his correspondence with the British government that the Pennsylvanians "had contributed, likewise, to the distress and alarm of the Back Settlements, for the Assembly, in their Message offers a reward for apprehending two men (Hinkson and Cooper) for Murdering an Indian within the bounds of their Province."¹² Thus Dunmore tried to justify his war on the Indians by laying part of the blame for a murder engineered by Virginians at the door of Pennsylvania!

During the summer Penn had received a number of petitions from the inhabitants of Westmoreland County expressing great alarm over an Indian war, which they believed was impending. Indian reprisals for the Virginia atrocities were so greatly feared that a force of Westmoreland Rangers had been organized to patrol the northern borders of the settlements. But, as it turned out, the Indians for the most part left the Pennsylvania settlers alone. On July 26th, St. Clair had written to Governor Penn that "All prospect of Accomodation with the Shawanese and Virginians is certainly over for some time, but yet it does not appear that they have any Hostile Intentions against this Province." He also mentioned that he had refused to permit the Rangers to join the Virginia forces, and that "it would be in my idea . . . not improper that the Shawanese should know this Government is at Peace with them, and will continue so, provided they do not infringe it themselves. . . ."¹³

¹¹ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

¹² Reuben Gold Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1905), p. 387.

¹³ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series, IV, 557-58.



BY THE HONOURABLE

J O H N P E N N, ESQUIRE,

Governor and Commander in Chief of the Province of *Pennsylvania*, and Counties of
New-Castle, Kent and Suffex, on *Delaware*,

A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS I have received Information that, some Time in *May* last, a certain friendly *Indian* Man, called *JOSEPH WIPEY*, was barbarously murdered in the County of *Westmoreland*:
AND WHEREAS there is great Reason to believe, that *JOHN HINKSON* and *JAMES COOPER*, of the same County, were concerned in the Perpetration of the said Murder:
AND WHEREAS it is at all Times, but more especially in the present Situation of our Affairs with the Western *Indian* Nations, of the utmost Consequence to the Peace of the Province, that the Perpetrators of such atrocious Offences, not only against the Authority of Government, but in direct Violation of the Treaties with those *Indians*, should be brought to condign and exemplary Punishment, I HAVE THEREFORE thought fit, with the Advice of the Council, to issue this Proclamation, AND DO hereby strictly charge and command all Judges, Justices, Sheriffs, Constables, and other Officers, as well as all other His Majesty's liege Subjects within this Province, to make diligent Search and Enquiry after the said *John Hinkson* and *James Cooper*, and to use all lawful Means for apprehending and securing them, that they may be proceeded against according to Law. AND I DO hereby promise and engage, that the public Reward of ONE HUNDRED POUNDS shall be paid to any Person or Persons, who shall apprehend the said *John Hinkson* and *James Cooper*, and deliver them into the Custody of the Keeper of the Goal of either of the Counties of *Lancaster, York or Cumberland*, or the Sum of FIFTY POUNDS for either of them.

G I V E N under my Hand, and the Great Seal of the said Province, at Philadelphia, the Twenty-eighth Day of July, in the Fourteenth Year of His Majesty's Reign, and in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy-four.

J O H N P E N N.

By His Honour's Command,
JOSEPH SHIPPEN, jun. Secretary.

G O D Save the K I N G.

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University of Pittsburgh

Governor Penn, acting on this suggestion, sent a personal message to the Delaware chiefs, August 6th:

Brethren. I was grieved at my Heart when I heard that some of our foolish young Men had killed our brother, Joseph Wipey, and that the Virginians had killed some of your People below Fort Pitt. I was fearful that you would suffer your Young Men to take revenge upon our innocent People. But when I heard that you had a good Heart and viewed these things in their proper Light, and that you remembered the Chain of Friendship made by our forefathers, and would not take revenge upon us for what the Virginians or some of our foolish young Men had done, it gave me the greatest Satisfaction and made my mind Easy.

Brethren, you may depend that so long as you are inclined to peace and friendship you shall find me in the same mind; for why should we fall out and go to murdering one another for what our foolish young people do, and what neither of us approve of? In such cases let us endeavor to find out such foolish young people and punish them for their wickedness. I have offered a reward of fifty Pounds a piece for those two wicked People who, it is said, murdered Joseph Wipey, and if they can be taken, I shall do everything in my power to have them punished. . . .¹⁴

As to Hinckston and Cooper, neither of them was ever brought to justice. The Wipey affair was soon forgotten and probably even condoned when the Revolution began and most of the Indians took up the hatchet against the Colonists. The name of Hinckston appears again in various records, including the Court Order establishing Wheatfield Township in April, 1775. The order makes reference to "the house that John Hinkston formerly occupied to the west of Squirrel Hill . . . ,"¹⁵ thus indicating that he was no longer living in the area. Hinckston had previously sold his tract to Thomas Galbraith, innkeeper at Ligonier, August 29, 1774 (a

¹⁴ M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, *American Archives*, Fourth Series (Washington, D. C. 1837), I, 676.

¹⁵ George Dallas Albert, *History of the County of Westmoreland, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1882), p. 54.

little more than three months after the murder), for four hundred pounds.¹⁶ After the outbreak of Revolutionary hostilities with the Indians in 1777, he served in various companies of frontier rangers. Vouchers of that year credit "Capt. John Hinkson" with receiving funds "for paying his company raised for the defence of the frontiers." He is cited as having served under Colonel James Smith, and Smith himself related the following incident:

In the year 1778 . . . the Indians made an attack upon our frontiers. I then raised men and pursued them, and the second day we overtook and defeated them. * * At the time of this attack, Capt. John Hinkston pursued an Indian, both their guns being empty, and after the fray was over, he was missing. While we were inquiring about him, he came walking up, *seemingly unconcerned*, with a bloody scalp in his hand—he had pursued the Indian about a quarter of a mile, and tomahawked him [*italics mine*].¹⁷

A "Capt. Hinkson" is referred to in the Journal kept at Fort Preservation (Ligonier) during the Revolution.¹⁸ It is difficult to believe that Wipey's neighbors could have forgotten or condoned this crime, yet such seems to have been the case.

After the Revolution Hinckston apparently moved to Kentucky. Information in the Draper Collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society indicates that in 1775 he led a company of settlers into Kentucky but that, because of Indian dangers, the settlement had to be abandoned; whereupon he returned east and served with the Rangers in Westmoreland County. After the conflict he returned and became a prominent citizen of Bourbon County, serving as Sheriff in 1788. He died at New Madrid, 1789.¹⁹

What was the motive for the murder of Wipey? One possibility is covetousness, inasmuch as Hinckston's tract at present New Florence was directly across the river from Wipey's cabin on the north bank. Perhaps Hinckston and the Indian had a disagreement. Even more likely, Hinckston and Cooper may have committed the crime on the theory that "the only good Indian is a dead one."

¹⁶ Montgomery, *opt. cit.*, p. 280.

¹⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Third Series, VII, 118-19.

¹⁸ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-81.

¹⁹ Thwaites and Kellogg, *op. cit.*, pp. 387-88.

Bigots from time immemorial have hated other people whose ways of life they did not understand. Hinckston's side of the matter has come down to us through the instrumentality of his son, who told Dr. Draper that the killing was in self-defence, that Wipey had a grudge against his father and threatened to kill him; whereupon Hinckston took the initiative and waylaid the Indian upon the highway.²⁰ This version must be taken with reservations. For one thing, the unfortunate victim's side of the story will never be known. For another, if Mr. Rose's account is to be credited, Wipey was killed while fishing in a canoe and not on the highway. And, regardless of which way it was, even the Hinckston version admits that the Indian was "waylaid," shot or otherwise killed by surprise and probably from ambush.

The memory of Joseph Wipey, and the events connected with his tragedy, are worthy of notice on an historical marker.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 387-88.