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COLONEL JOHN ARMSTRONG'S EXPEDITION
AGAINST KITTANNING.*

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The story of the Armstrong expedition has been familiar to many of us from earliest recollections. Some have lived along the line of march and have personal knowledge of the points of interest which marked its progress. Many of those present have spent their lives on the very spot where it had its climax in the sanguinary deeds of fire and blood enacted here one hundred and seventy years ago today. Locally its memory has been kept fresh by tradition and even some rare relics, but history has done more by giving it an imperishable place in its pages. In Francis Parkman's great epic of the North American Indian, it has been immortalized, and no writer, however humble, who has recounted the events of the long fierce struggle, carried on under the dark shadows of the American wilderness by two brave races, each superb of its kind, has failed to make a record of it.

* Address delivered September 8, 1926, at the unveiling of a great weather-worn stone and bronze marker at Kittanning, jointly by The Pennsylvania Historical Commission and The Armstrong County Historical Society.

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Today while we unveil this lasting memorial of an unforgettable episode in the pioneer life and Indian wars of our early days, it is well for us to recall the stirring scenes of those far off times with which it is intimately related. To do so, we must put a strain upon our powers of imagination, for the conditions of life were strangely different from those which now surround us.

The adventure of our hero and his sturdy men had a great background. So great is the setting and so small the incident that they present, in their physical aspects, a contrast that is almost grotesque. For the middle of the 18th century was a pivotal point in world history. It ushered in a great war which was destined to change the map of the world and alter the course of human events. England and France, we will recall, were the dominant powers of that era when a nation's place in the sun was determined by its military prowess. These two countries were and had been for decades bitter rivals; but, in the year 1750, were indulging in a cessation of hostilities such as sometimes interrupted their century of warfare. While resting on their arms, each was stealthily preparing for the inevitable conflict which both knew was rapidly approaching and would settle with finality the supremacy of one over the other. India in the far east and America on the other side of the globe, far off to the west, were the prizes which were to reward the victor as the spoils of war. Ancient India, teeming with population and glittering with the garnered wealth of the ages, inflamed their covetousness, while the new found lands across the western sea challenged the adventurous spirit of the times and glowed golden with the promise of future wealth and power. While the two great foes sat silently glowering at each other across the channel awaiting the circumstance which would open hostilities, the spark that started the conflagration and

wrapped the world in flame was struck by an unknown Virginia youth in the deep recesses of the Pennsylvania forests. Washington's little affair with Jumonville, within the limits of what is now Fayette county, on that eventful May day in 1754, opened the war which added India and North America to the dominions of the British Empire, listed the names of Pitt and Cleave and Wolfe on the roll of England's immortals, established Anglo Saxon civilization upon the North American continent, blazed the way for American independence, and, incidentally, raised to eminence Frederick the Great, whose malign power was to find its ultimate tragedy in the world war of our own times.

If we would fully understand the importance and significance of the incident which holds our interest today, we must make a brief survey of the conditions that then prevailed in the western world. For about a century and a half, England and France had been extending themselves in planting colonies in America. Urged on with missionary zeal and the spirit of conquest, France had pushed her way up the noble expanse of the St. Lawrence, over the broad fresh water inland seas, and thence across the great prairies to the Father of Waters, of which she had taken possession. At the time with which we are dealing, she decided to draw her boundaries close to the western slope of the Alleghenies and was engaged in the establishment of a line of posts running from Ft. Erie by Ft. LeBoeuf, down the Allegheny to the forks of the Ohio, which she proposed to hold to its junction with the Mississippi. The English colonies, on the other hand, had gathered in a fringe along the Atlantic coast. They occupied the important ports from New England to Georgia. The frontier had been gradually pushed inland but as yet had not extended much beyond the half-way between the coast and the mountains. In Pennsylvania, the frontier ran in a great arc beginning with the

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present city of Easton, along the base of the Blue Ridge to Harris' Fort at what is now the city of Harrisburg, and then down the Cumberland Valley to the Maryland line. East of this irregular line, the population was thin and scattered, but was in a fairly secure position. Everywhere westward lay unbroken wilderness with only here and there some far flung pioneers. A few dim trails led thru the forests onward to the west where the dauntless fur trader carried on his barter with the redman who had already retreated from the Susquehanna country to the valley of the Ohio. Among the tribes who had taken up the retreat before advancing civilization were the Delawares, who, about 1724, left their home at Shamokin, now Sunbury, and after a journey by way of the West Branch of the Susquehanna, the Bald Eagle Valley, and over the mountain by Snow Shoe, Clearfield and the Big Mahoning Creek, had established themselves at a point on the Allegheny river ever since known by the Indian name of Kittanning. Between this point and the settlements, a new trail had been beaten which followed the Juniata valley to the Horse Shoe Curve, over the mountains near Chest Creek to Cherry Tree, Indiana, Shelocta and westward to the Indian settlements on the Allegheny. This path was unimproved by any of the arts of man and was impassable except by foot and horseback. It was marked only by the moccasined tread of the dusky warrior and the heavier foot of the occasional adventurer and trader who took life in his hands to explore or barter for the furs of the western tribes.

While nature thus presented a forbidding aspect, the affairs of the people of the Pennsylvania colony illy prepared them for the shock of war. The government was then in control of a Governor representing the Proprietaries and the Crown, and a popular Assembly chosen by the people. These two functions

were in constant opposition. The Assembly was composed largely of Quakers living in the safety zone surrounding Philadelphia, who were opposed to war as a matter of principle and were the traditional friends of the Indians. In any conflict between the frontiersmen and the Indian, they rather sympathized with the red-men. A new force had lately arisen in the Assembly which, equally with the Quakers, opposed the pretensions of the Governor, but on the other hand sympathized with the frontiersmen. This group had as its spokesman Benjamin Franklin, then in his mature years and rapidly rising to fame. These three conflicting influences in the government of the colony neutralized each other and paralyzed any effort for the relief of the frontier.

With this perspective, let us return again to the progress of the war. In the years 1755 and 1756, things had been going badly on this side for the cause of England and her colonies. Great plans had been laid for campaigns against Canada, the Great Lakes and the Ohio country which, in July, 1755, found their final disaster in the defeat of Gen. Braddock and the destruction of his army as a military force. After this calamity, terror reigned all along the frontier. Pennsylvania suffered above all others because of the helplessness of her Government and the lack of any measures for defense. After the Braddock defeat, the Indians believed they could drive the advancing settlers from the old hunting grounds. Some of the Chiefs boasted, in the presence of prisoners, that they would kill all the whites on the frontier. Their wily French allies urged them on while inflaming their passions and aiding them with arms and supplies. All thru these two years, parties of warriors, usually accompanied by French officers, burst thru the passes of the mountains upon the defenseless settlers, killing and destroying and spreading terror every-

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where. No era in the long bloody struggle between the advancing white man and the retreating redman ever surpassed these two years in relentless savagery.

In this state of affairs, barbarities were practiced on both sides which scarcely have any parallel. A spirit of vindictiveness and hatred was developed which would not be satisfied with anything less than the taking of life by the most cruel tortures. The feeling of the Colonies is illustrated by a proclamation issued by Gov. Morris. Unable to move the Assembly to measures for defense, on April 14, 1756, he issued his famous and by many considered infamous, proclamation offering a reward for Indian prisoners and scalps. It has a sort of sardonic interest in these days when public service is regulated by schedules of rates. Evidently the Governor believed he was doing a necessary public service, and he fixed a schedule that he thought was sufficiently attractive to bring in a plentiful supply of Indian prisoners and scalps. The captor was rewarded with one hundred and fifty Spanish dollars, or pieces of eight, for every male Indian prisoner above the age of twelve years, with one hundred and thirty pieces of eight for the scalp of every such Indian, with one hundred and thirty pieces of eight for every female prisoner and every male under the age of twelve years, and with fifty pieces of eight for the scalp of every Indian woman and male Indian under the age of twelve years. There is some evidence that additional rewards were offered by the authorities of the City of Philadelphia, where the Quaker political influence seemed to be waning. This barbarity horrified the Quakers, and, properly and naturally, madened the Indians. But we can understand the feeling that prompted the Governor to this extreme measure when we consider the atrocities committed by the Indians while on their forays, and upon their captive victims. Two instances of torture at Kittanning

shortly before its destruction are typical. In the issue of the *Pennsylvania Journal* of September 9, 1756, is found an affidavit by John Cox, an escaped prisoner, who says that the Indians made an example of one Paul Bradley who, according to their usual cruelty, they beat for half an hour with clubs, billets of wood and tomahawks, and afterwards fastened him to a post, cropped his ears close to his head, chopped off his fingers and darted a vast number of arrows into his body; and that they called together all the English prisoners, numbering about fifty, to witness this sort of inhuman barbarity. John Turner, who had opened the gates at the surrender of Fort Granville, and was carried off a prisoner, suffered even a more cruel and terrifying death. He was burned at the stake with the most horrible torments that could be inflicted upon him for a period of three hours, during which time red hot gun barrels were forced thru parts of his body, his scalp was torn from his head and burning splinters were stuck into his flesh, until at last a young Indian boy, who was held up for the purpose, sunk a hatchet into the brains of the unhappy victim.

During these distressing times, everywhere on the long border the dusky warriors roamed at will, burned, murdered, scalped and tortured, and returned to their strongholds in triumph and safety. The town of Kittanning was the principal point from which war parties issued. The last exploit from this place was the descent by Capt. Jacobs, a Delaware chieftain, upon Fort Granville, near the present site of Lewistown, on the Juniata river. This occurred in the latter part of July, 1756. At the first approach, the Indians hesitated to attack, and, concealed in the surrounding forest, awaited a more favorable opportunity. This came when Capt. Ward, the Commander, withdrew a large part of the garrison on the last day of July and left Lieut. Edward Armstrong, a brother of Col. Arm-

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strong, in command. The next day, August 1st, the Indians surrounded the Fort and demanded its surrender. Lieut. Armstrong refused and made a gallant defense. He held out until the Fort was partially destroyed by fire. Thru the opening thus made, he was killed by a gunshot, whereupon the gates were opened by John Turner and the survivors carried prisoners to Kittanning town.

This misfortune seems to have finally aroused the colony. Undoubtedly the death of Lieut. Armstrong had much to do with bringing matters to a head. His cousin, Joseph Armstrong, was at this time a leading citizen of the Cumberland Valley and a member of the Colonial Assembly. He advised the Governor and the Assembly that unless immediate steps were taken all the settlements west of the Susquehanna would be swept away. It happened, too, at this time that Lieutenant-Colonel Armstrong was in command of a battalion of nine companies of frontiersmen, one of which was commanded by this same cousin, Joseph. The Armstrongs were strong, vigorous and courageous, and undoubtedly were prompted to project the expedition upon Kittanning not merely as a measure of protection for the frontier but as a retaliation upon the slayers of their relative.

Col. Armstrong was then a young man of thirty-one, residing at the new town of Carlisle, which he had helped to lay out. He had been a resident of the Cumberland Valley for ten years, where he had gained much prominence. His profession was surveying and had led him often into the wilderness with which he had become familiar and to the hardships of which he was inured. Stirred by the representations of Capt. Joseph Armstrong, Gov. Morris, in August, issued orders to Lieut. Col. Armstrong to prepare his men for the movement upon Kittanning. All reports say that he assembled about three hundred men, but I believe

the official record makes the exact number three hundred and seven. These were organized into six or seven companies, upon which point the authorities are not clear. In some of the accounts, Col. Armstrong is reported as being in command of a company. I think it is safe to draw the inference that the company in question was commanded by his cousin and that there were just six companies in the little battalion. Every man was a frontiersman, large and sinewy, toughened by hardships in the forests, and a dead shot. With these advantages, their daring resolution was challenged with difficulties which made their undertaking desperate in the extreme. In front of them rose the forbidding barrier of the Alleghenies and their line of march lay thru an unbroken wilderness in which lurked their silent, swift and deadly enemies. As a favoring circumstance, they had fair weather and the light of the moon.

Once the orders were out, preparation was quickly made. In the latter days of August, the men gathered at Fort Shirley, now Shirleysburg, in Huntingdon county. Col. Armstrong sent them in advance to the point on the old trail known as the Beaver Dams, at or near the present site of Hollidaysburg. He left Fort Shirley on August 30th and on the evening of September 3rd joined his forces. At this point, he begins his report of the expedition made immediately after his return, which I shall now follow. Early in the morning of September 4th, began the race thru the wilderness, over the mountains and along the old trail for the stronghold of the enemy. Signs of Indians were shortly seen but fortunately there was no discovery. The manner of march was in Indian file and the pace must have been very fast. The way led to Burgoon's Pass, now Kittanning Point, or the Horse-shoe Curve. From there, it led up to the eastern slope to the Clear Fields on the summit about a mile distant

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from the present postoffice of Chest Springs. Thence it led to Hart's Sleeping Place, near the present site of St. Joseph's Church, at the southwest corner of Elder Township, Cambria county, and on to the headwaters of the Susquehanna at or near Canoe Place, now the Town of Cherry Tree. From there, the path led up Cushcushion Creek to the forks with the Venango trail, somewhere between the villages of Beringer and Cookport, in Indiana county. Here a camp was established the evening of September 5th. This is the point which Armstrong mentions as being fifty miles from Kittanning and from which he dispatched an officer, guide and two men to scout the position of the enemy. Camp was broken on the morning of the 6th and the trail taken to the Shawnee Cabins, near the forks of Two Lick Creek, and thence by the present villages of Diamondville and Penn Run, Cherryhill Township, Indiana county, to Shaver's Sleeping Place on Ramsey's Run, a mile above its entrance into Two Lick Creek, and thence to Shaver's Spring, now McElhaney's Spring, within the present limits of the Borough of Indiana. Here the party camped on the evening of September 6th, at a site which was marked by a nitched white oak which stood until recent years and was known as "Armstrong's Oak." This is the point mentioned by Armstrong as being thirty miles from Kittanning and from which he made his last day-and-night march on the 7th and 8th. On the 7th, the march led by the present town of Shelocta and to the place ever since known as "Blanket Hill." It must have been well on into the night when the weary troops arrived at the latter point. Here scouts reported seeing four Indians around a camp fire in the direction of Kittanning, which they supposed was about six miles distant. As a safeguard, Lieut. James Hogg and twelve men were left here with instructions not to attack the Indian camp or spread any alarm until the

following morning. The remainder of the men made a wide detour over rough and unfamiliar ground and emerged at three o'clock in the morning from the river hills about one hundred rods below the Indian village. It seems the Indians were having a celebration that night and were just retiring when the Armstrong men came into sight. Lighted fires were scattered over the flats to drive away gnats and the bottom lands were covered with corn fields. A young Indian was heard to give a peculiar whistle, which greatly alarmed Col. Armstrong until he was told by one of his men that it was the signal of the young Indian to his sweetheart. The moon was sinking in the west and the men silently concealed themselves to await the dawn of morning to open the fight.

With the streaks of morning light, Armstrong aroused his men from their heavy slumber and prepared for the attack. He divided his little force, keeping the main body under his own command and sending the remainder to the higher ground or ridge which lay to his right so that they might make a flank attack. After waiting a few minutes to give this detachment time to gain its position, he gave the command to advance. With the first volley, Capt. Jacobs gave the war whoop and called his sleeping warriors to the fray. It was a valiant defense. The Indians occupied a village of thirty cabins. That of Capt. Jacobs was a sort of a fortress from which a deadly fire was directed upon the attackers. Armstrong called on volunteers to fire the cabins and his appeal met with prompt response. As the flames leaped up, a demand was made upon the Indians to surrender, but they refused and in one instance, a warrior was heard chiding a squaw who cried out in her terror. Another Indian said he was a warrior and would sooner die than surrender and that he would kill three or four before he died. It seems that the cabins were stocked with large accumu-

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lations of powder and loaded guns. The heat caused discharges from the later and finally terrific explosions of powder. From one of the cabins bodies were hurled high in the air. Capt. Jacobs sought to escape by jumping from an upper window but was killed and scalped. The fight was fast and furious and ended only when the flames had spread throughout the village. The number of Indian dead was not known but Armstrong estimated them at from thirty to forty. Eleven scalps were taken and eleven white prisoners released. Armstrong and twelve of his men were wounded and seventeen killed. Indians appeared across the river and great haste was made to begin the return journey lest the little army might be cut off from the rear. In addition, one of the released prisoners said that preparations were being made for another descent on the Juniata country and that a party of twenty-four Indians had gone in advance the evening before. This at once alarmed Col. Armstrong for the safety of the rearguard under Lieut. Hogg and was an added inducement to hasten the retreat. We have no evidence of the time of day when this began but after a few miles they were met by Lieut. Hogg who was mortally wounded, and learned of the disaster to his little party at Blanket Hill. When he made the attack upon the Indian encampment which had been seen the night before, he discovered that it outnumbered his own party two to one. After the loss of several of his men, others deserted him and he was apparently left to his fate. He had been wounded in the fight and in his endeavor to escape had received his last and fatal wound. We know little of the details of the return journey, but we do know that Col. Armstrong made his report at Fort Lowden, in Bedford county, on the 13th of September. From all of the evidence, it may be safely inferred that the end of the return journey was reached on the 12th.

And thus ends an unforgettable episode of heroism.

Measured by the usual standards of military operations, it seems insignificant. It was performed by a little battalion of about three hundred. Its action covered not more than one hundred and seventy miles and was completed in the short space of nine days. The fight in the dawning hours of September 8, 1756, lasted but a few hours and closed with a loss of seventeen men killed on the side of the victor and less than forty on the side of the vanquished. It does not rise to the dignity of a campaign or the importance of a battle, and yet the news of it was heralded throughout the Colonies and reported in the courts of Europe. The City authorities of Philadelphia passed resolutions of praise, struck a gold medal in honor of Col. Armstrong, and presented his men with suitable rewards for their bravery. Col. Armstrong was promoted to the command of a regiment and given substantial recognition by the conveyance of valuable land grants.

The effect of this dash into the heart of the enemy country was immediate and powerful. The Indians lost their feeling of security and withdrew further to the westward so as to place their French allies between them and their adversaries. The forays upon the settlement were practically broken up. Thenceforward there was a wholesome respect for the Scotch Irish Woodsmen as first rate fighting men. They in turn were inspired with a confidence that did not hesitate to match itself against the warrior in his forest haunts, and two decades later, against the trained legions of the Mother Country. This stroke, after all the disasters that had gone before, was the shaft of light that pierced the gloom of the harrassed frontier.

It is difficult for us to relate the scenes of one hundred and seventy years ago with the ceremonies of this occasion. Then, the wilderness, the trail, the rifle, the tomahawk, the scalping knife, the war whoop, the wild savagery: Now, the broad acres and lowing herds on

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yonder hills, this great Benjamin Franklin Highway running at our feet from sea to sea, the whirr and rush of passing vehicles, those immense establishments and implements of modern industry, the hum and roar and rush of trade, yon high school and churches, these beautiful homes of comfort and convenience that surround us, and everywhere the visible signs and emblems of our marvelous civilization. And the effect is heightened and the significance of these ceremonies emphasized by the presence here of the blood descendants of Col. John Armstrong and Capt. Jacobs, the redoubtable leaders in the strife of that other September day. They help us to span the vast stretches that lay between the *then* and the *now*. Surely the "chain of friendship" that the fanciful orators of the tribes forged in imagination at the peace councils with the white brother in bygone days has been wrought into the golden bond between the Pale Face and the Red Man which shall never again be broken "so long as the sun shines and the rivers flow."