

EARLY HISTORY OF COLONEL ALEXANDER McKEE

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BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Time has done much to scatter the heavy clouds which have hovered for so many years about the name of Colonel Alexander McKee, colonial British Indian agent, who preferred to remain loyal to the government which had long employed him when the colonies decided to sever connections with the motherland. Since the rebellion proved successful, he and his descendants found themselves out of step with the new order of patriotism which prevailed so strongly after the war and so his devotion to his government was condemned as a vice rather than as a virtue.

When discussing the parentage of Colonel McKee, the colonial writers could give full vent to their dislike for the loyalist by pointing out that his mother was either a simple Shawnese squaw or else a white captive reared in savagery. This charge coupled with the fact that his father, Thomas McKee, spent many years living as a trader among the tribes in the back country was sufficient evidence for many early writers to claim that Colonel McKee had a half-savage nature by inheritance.¹

It is true that the boyhood of Alexander was spent in the primeval simplicity of western Pennsylvania long before the forerunners of a commercial civilization had even altered the virginal character of the wildwood. Here nature quickly taught him self-reliance and it is

¹ Hanna, Charles, *The Wilderness Trail; or the Ventures of the Pennsylvania Traders on the Allegheny Path with Some New Annals of the Old West and the Records of Some Strong Men and Some Bad Ones*. New York, Putnam & Sons, 1911, I. 212.

not surprising that he was awarded the rank of lieutenant in the French-Indian War in 1757 while he was still a youth in his teens.² His early accomplishment of learning Indian languages made him valuable to the Indian commissioners at Fort Pitt and also to the British commanders in the field.³ This acquirement came into even more prominence during Pontiac's war, 1763-1764, when as a true son of the forest, McKee acted as the go-between for the Indians and the garrison at Fort Pitt. In this service he showed his wisdom of the ways of the forest people and his aid was one of the factors that enabled the outpost to be one of the very few frontier forts that was not surprised and sacked by Pontiac's followers.⁴

The question of recompense for such services usually could find its answer in land grants if not in coin in those days. At the close of the war General Henry Bouquet considered McKee in line for such a gift and conferred upon him fourteen hundred acres at the mouth of Chartiers Creek (the site of McKees Rocks) upon condition that he would always be subject to orders "for the good of his majesty's service".⁵ McKee's fidelity to this pledge was to cost him dearly during the testing time of the Revolution.

Five years before the Revolution opened, McKee had the honor of having the then Virginian surveyor, George Washington, as a dinner guest at his table in the backwoods country. The young surveyor was exploring the Kanawha region when he stopped and

² *Pennsylvania Archives: Selected and Arranged from Original Documents in the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth Conformably to Acts of the General Assembly*; Fifth Series, I. 182.

³ *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*; Fourth Series, IX. 299.

⁴ Darlington, Mary C., *Fort Pitt and Letters from the Frontier*. Pittsburgh, J. R. Weldin & Co., 1892, p. 97ff.

⁵ Hassler, Edgar W., *Pennsylvania Scrapbook of Clippings*. Roseville, New York, 1891, I. 82.

“dined” at McKee’s humble home.⁶ Seated at the same table they unknowingly presented sharply contrasting pictures in the light of the later choice that each was to make. In age they were about a half-dozen years apart with Washington the senior. Although the surveyor’s fame was to be much the greater when they both succumbed to ailments in 1799, yet the interpreter was to know the reward for ability and trusted service as the English Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Northwest (1794) and as an important power in Canadian politics.⁷

Upon the resignation of Colonel George Croghan as chief agent at Fort Pitt in 1772, Sir William Johnson chose McKee as the most competent among the applicants to take charge of affairs at the fort.⁸ Thus he was placed in a fairly important position just prior to the time when the question of rejecting the old-time allegiance was to arise.

The first problem that McKee had to face was the Indian uprising known in history as Lord Dunmore’s War. The scramble for land had been accompanied by minor deeds of hostility which had aroused resentment among both whites and Indians. The final outbreak seemed a natural consequence of the ill-concealed hostility that could be easily seen along the border. Deputy McKee, assisted by Colonel Croghan and Captain Connelly, worked untiringly to keep the Delawares and Six Nations from becoming as hostile as the Shawnees in Virginia.⁹ General Arthur St. Clair also appealed to the redman to remain clear of the quarrel in Virginia.

A series of notes was exchanged and numerous pow-

⁶ Fitzpatrick, John C., Editor, *The Diaries of George Washington, 1748-1799*. Boston, Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1925, I. 412.

⁷ *Report on the Canadian Archives, Brymner, Douglass, archivist*. Published yearly by the Dominion at Ottawa, Q71-2, p. 99.

⁸ Volwiler, Albert T., *George Croghan and the Westward Movement, 1781-1782*. Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark and Co., 1926, p. 231.

⁹ *American Archives, Fourth Series. I. 475ff.*

wows were held with the white leaders doing what they could with gifts of wampum. McKee defended the attitude of the Indians declaring that they had "given great proofs of their pacific disposition and have acted with more moderation than those who ought to be more rational".¹⁰ His diplomacy coupled with the gifts did much toward keeping the reprisals of the savages from spreading throughout western Pennsylvania.

DURING THE WAR

By the time the fateful year of 1775 arrived, Alexander McKee seemed to have thoroughly established himself as an important and useful citizen of the little town of Pittsburg. In addition to the fourteen hundred acres on Chartiers Creek, he owned two thousand more on the Elkhorn river in Kentucky which he valued highly.¹¹ As a justice of the peace he represented the white man's law in several counties. By virtue of his deputyship at Fort Pitt, he was influential with both the settlers and the Indians.

Pittsburgh, however, had with difficulty survived the firebrand and tomahawk raids of plundering war bands. Although there were two hundred and one buildings around the fort in 1760, there were only twenty houses left when Washington passed through ten years later.¹² Then came a heavy setback in 1772 when the fort was abandoned by order of General Gage. The settlers protested but it availed them nothing for the commander declared that "no Government can undertake to erect Forts for the advantage of Forty or Fifty people".¹³ This was Lord Dunmore's chance since Vir-

¹⁰ *American Archives*, Fourth Series. Washington, Clark & Force, 1837, I. 466.

¹¹ Collins, Lewis, *History of Kentucky*. Two volumes. Covington, Ky., Collis & Co., 1882, II. 183.

¹² *Pennsylvania Archives*. IV. 458.

¹³ Fitzpatrick, John C., *op. cit.*, I. 410.

ginia had long claimed the southwestern part of Pennsylvania by reason of the famous and ambiguous "Sea to Sea" charter. He at once sent Captain John Connelly to repair and occupy the fort late in 1773 and also to organize the district as part of the County of West-Augusta under the rule of Virginia.

Connelly aroused some opposition in Pennsylvania by his military methods in organizing the new government. The fur traders and other interests in the state were powerful enough to have Connelly arrested but the Virginians justified their martial attitude by magnifying the danger of an Indian war. In August, 1775, Captain John Neville succeeded Connelly and took charge with a hundred soldiers at his command. He was more tactful in his handling of the local situation as war had broken out with Great Britain and he was the representative of a revolutionary government which rested on a precarious foundation.

The smouldering sullenness which had been generated by British oppression in the East had by now flared out into an open flame and spread rapidly like a forest fire throughout the colonies. Many wrongs real and fancied were fuel to such flames. Although the frontiersmen had been more concerned about the red menace from the West rather than the redcoat threat from the East, a group of them quickly gathered at Pittsburgh (scarcely a month after the preliminary skirmish at Lexington) and gave their hearty endorsement to the active resistance of the eastern provinces.¹⁴

The loyal Lord Dunmore, through his henchman, Captain Connelly, secretly sounded out many individuals and learned which could be trusted to support the Crown. A list of them, including the name of Alexander McKee, was submitted to the English government in August, 1775. This makes it clear that McKee's

¹⁴ *American Archives*, Fourth Series. II. 612-615.

sympathy was with England from the start even though he did not leave Pittsburgh until 1778. To the patriots Connelly was a marked man and before the year 1775 had closed, he found himself incarcerated with some other Tories in a prison at Frederickstown, Maryland. From there he wrote McKee that he had recommended him to General Gage and that he would have done more for McKee's "honor and advantage" if he could have only gotten safely through to Detroit.¹⁵ Doubtlessly, the thoughts of McKee often strayed to the refuge offered by Detroit but he was reluctant to leave Pittsburgh or his farm at McKees Rocks which had become a favorite rendezvous for Tories.

Leaders of the patriots realized that the British were trying to add to the troubles of the colonies by stirring up an Indian war against them. The English had justified themselves in this work with the information they had received that overtures had been made by colonials to Indians for aid.¹⁶ Many patriots felt that they should deal carefully with such important Loyalists like McKee because of their influence with the neighboring tribes of Shawnees and Delawares. The Six Nations appeared to be committed to the British cause through the influence of Guy Johnson but the American invasion of Canada in 1775 forced them into a position of neutrality when it blocked the St. Lawrence and cut off their source of military supplies.

In February, 1776, an invitation to attend an important council at Niagara in May was sent to McKee by Colonel John Butler, a Royalist in charge of Fort Niagara in the absence of Colonel John Johnson. In

¹⁵ Craig, Neville B., *The Olden Time—A Monthly Publication Devoted to the Preservation of Documents and Other Authentic Information in Relation to Early Explorations and Settlement and Improvement of the Country Around the Head of the Ohio*. Pittsburgh, Dumars & Co., 1846, II. 107.

¹⁶ *American Archives*, Fourth Series. I. 1347, 1349.

formation about the "rebels" was desired by the writer who also hinted mysteriously that he had more to say but would keep it till later. The patriots were on the watch for just such communications and before the messenger reached Pittsburgh, Colonel Richard Butler, a staunch patriot, told McKee that a letter was coming to him from Canada and that he would be expected to reveal the contents as far as they related to the "United Colonies".

Soon after the arrival of this damaging evidence, the committee of safety gathered at the home of McKee and in a tense and quite dramatic setting, McKee produced the Niagara epistle which was read with interest by the visitors. His parole was then demanded and he could do nothing but comply. Some thought that the parole should be in writing but others, led by Butler, believed that McKee's word would be sufficient. Butler did not want to force McKee to become hostile and he still had some hope of having him remain neutral in this crisis.¹⁷

After several days had passed and when Colonel Richard Butler was not present, the committee gave McKee his choice of either putting the parole in writing or becoming a prisoner.¹⁸ After some show of reluctance McKee put his signature to the following pledge:

"I, Alexander McKee, Deputy Agent for the Indian Affairs for the District of Fort Pitt, do hereby promise and engage that I will not transact any business with the Indians on behalf of the Crown or Ministry; that I will not, directly or indirectly, correspond with any of the Crown or Ministerial officers, nor leave the neighborhood of Fort Pitt, without the consent of the committee of West Augusta.

"Given under my hand, at Pittsburg, this ninth day of April, 1776."¹⁹

¹⁷ *American Archives*, Fourth Series. V. 816, 817.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 820.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Congress, which had been provided with copies of the Niagara letter, went on record as follows in this matter: matter:

“Resolved—That the Congress relying on the integrity and honor of Captain A. McGee order that he be permitted to go at large on giving his parole to the committee of West-Augusta and not engage or be concerned in any measure injurious to these colonies by stimulating the Indian nations to make war or otherwise.”²⁰

It was a trying time for the deputy agent as whispers of plots and counterplots were always in the air, and traitors were said to have gone into the forest to exhort the restless braves to burn, slay and pillage. Lord Dunmore, of Virginia, had increased the difficulties of McKee's position by secretly forwarding to him a commission as lieutenant-colonel of a battalion to be raised around Fort Pitt. These papers fell into the hands of Americans and their incriminating evidence was laid bare.²¹ General Edward Hand, now in charge at Fort Pitt, for a time did not permit the captain to visit his farm at McKees Rocks but confined him to his house in Pittsburgh.

Events moved steadily to a climax. The name of McKee was linked with a hair-raising story of how all Whigs were to be murdered and the fort surrendered to Henry Hamilton, lieutenant-governor at Detroit. General Hand ordered the arrest of McKee along with Colonel George Morgan, Colonel John Campbell, and Simon Girty. Nothing definite was uncovered when the plot was investigated and McKee was released but only to be placed under a stricter parole.²²

²⁰ *American Archives*, Fourth Series. 1692.

²¹ Thwaites, Reuben Gold and Louis Phelps Kellogg, *The Revolution of the Upper Ohio, 1775-1777, Compiled from the Draper Manuscripts in the Library of the Wisconsin Historical Society and Published at the Charge of the Wisconsin Society of the Sons of the American Revolution*. p. 74, footnote.

²² Thwaites, Reuben Gold, *Frontier Defense on the Upper Ohio, 1777-1778*. Madison, 1912. Published by the Wisconsin Historical Society. pp. 184-187.

Although by no act of his own had he violated his parole, public sentiment was at the full tide against him making his position almost intolerable. He thought of moving to Lancaster county if permission could be obtained but all at once he dropped this plan.²³ The reason for this about-face is not hard to fathom. A quick escape was the only solution that he could count upon to ease his mind.

Evidence that McKee was planning to leave for Detroit was easy to find. Commander Arbuckle of Fort Randolph, wrote to General Hand insisting that:

"He must be an enemy to the United States for the Grenadier Squaw and her friends who are now at this garrison say that he has engaged his Indian friends to carry off his effects to their town; which being accomplished he would then make his escape to Detroit."²⁴

From the same source came the news that McKee's squaw was at Detroit where she received goods without paying cash upon her promise that McKee would soon pay the bills. General Hand ignored the charges of Arbuckle on grounds that the latter was prejudiced against McKee for personal reasons. However, he ordered the Indian agent to go to Yorktown, Pennsylvania, for a hearing before the Continental Board. McKee was later accused of telling the messenger who brought the summons that no answer was required and that he avoided the general after that.²⁵ About a month later, February 7, 1778, Hand repeated his order and

²³ Butterfield, Consul W., *History of the Girtys—Being a Concise Account of the Girty Brothers—Thomas, Simon, James and George, and of their Half-Brother, John Turner—Also of the Part Taken By Them in Lord Dunmore's War, in a Western Border War of the Revolution and in the Indian War of 1790-95 with a Recital of the Principal Events in the West During these Wars, Drawn From Authentic Sources Largely Original*. Cincinnati, R. Clarke & Co., 1890, p. 46.

²⁴ Randall, Emilius O. and Ryan, Daniel J., *History of Ohio; the Rise and Rapid Progress of an American State*. New York, Century History Co., 1912. Five volumes. II. 183, 184.

²⁵ Thwaites, Reuben Gold, *op. cit.*, 250, 251.

this time McKee is said to have reported at once, apologizing for his delay, at the same time giving the impression that he would depart immediately for Yorktown.²⁶ The commander then had to leave on an expedition into the Indian country (the "Squaw Campaign"). When Hand returned he found that McKee had not gone to Yorktown after all pleading an illness as his excuse. Instead of being spurred into action by such palpable effrontery, the general seemed incapable of making a move to hinder the escape which even the soldiers expected to take place soon. On a Sunday morning, March 29, word reached Hand of McKee's conclusion to set out for the Indian country. Then in true "What ho! the Guard!" fashion, he ordered a lieutenant with a force of men to arrest the Tory at once. Before these troops were even beyond the confines of the fort, they learned that they were too late as McKee and his followers had stolen away during the night.²⁷

The companions of McKee on his flight in addition to several Negro servants were Simon Girty, Matthew Elliott, Robert Surphlit, and John Higgins.²⁸ They had not gone far when they were joined by twenty-one deserting soldiers headed by a sergeant. Elliott was from Quebec and had also been put on parole. Dispatches which he had brought with him from Quebec were believed to have had encouraging news for McKee. It was Elliott also who told McKee that if he went to Yorktown, he would be waylaid and killed by angry patriots.²⁹

This little band's departure for the enemy's country caused much consternation and anxiety in the neigh-

²⁶ Thwaites, Reuben Gold, *op. cit.*, 250, 251.

²⁷ Boucher, John N., *Old and New Westmoreland*. New York, American Historical Association, 1918, I. 215ff.

²⁸ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series. VI. 445.

²⁹ Boucher, John N., *op. cit.*, I. 216.

borhood of Pittsburgh. The influence of McKee and Simon Girty with the savages was well known while the former's knowledge of conditions among the patriots in Pittsburgh would make him "no unwelcome guest at Detroit".³⁰ Colonial writers vied with one another in heaping abuse upon the heads of the escaped Tories and blackened their names for many, many years. As for McKee, though his sympathies were with the British government, he committed no treacherous act before going to join his Majesty's forces at Detroit. He did break his parole but that was obtained under duress. It is true that he fought the American army with Indian warriors for the British assigned him to their tribal allies where his familiarity with the languages and customs of the red men would make a place for him.

One other character should receive some more attention and that is the helpless and perplexed General Hand. In his report of McKee's escape to General Horatio Gates he wrote of his own "mortification" over this event which was all "the more distressing to me as it was distant from my thoughts".³¹ About a month later, on May 2, 1778, his recall papers were forwarded to him by Congress "agreeable to his consent".³² It is noteworthy that even harassed and overworked members of the Continental Congress had come to suspect that he was a Loyalist at heart and was guilty of carrying on questionable negotiations with Tories.³³

³⁰ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series. VI. 445.

³¹ Thwaites, Reuben Gold, *op. cit.*, 250, 251.

³² *Ibid.*, 293, 294.

³³ Burnett, Edmund C., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*. Washington, Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926, III. 153.