The Treatment of the Indians in the Coshocton Campaign of 1781

On April 20, 1781, there appeared before the Indian village of Coshocton in what is now the state of Ohio an American army made up of more than 150 regulars and 134 volunteers. The regulars were under the command of Colonel Daniel Brodhead, who had set out from Fort Pitt on April 7, had stopped at Wheeling to pick up the volunteers under Colonel David Shepherd, and had then crossed the wilderness to attack the central town of the Delaware Indians. The object of the attack was to anticipate one from the Delawares, who, during the winter of 1780-81, had decided to carry on war against the United States. It was believed that a decisive defeat of the Indians would be the most effective way of protecting the settlers on the frontier from savage attacks.

According to Hassler, the attack on the town caught the Indians completely by surprise. Every warrior defending the town was killed. He says, "The mounted volunteers were naturally first into the town and they neither accepted surrender by an Indian buck nor suffered any of the wounded to linger long in agony." The old men, women, and children were spared. The troops then plundered the town, after which they set fire to it and destroyed about forty head of cattle. Lichtenau, another Indian town on the Muskingum about two and a half miles below Coshocton, was also laid waste. There were other Indian towns across the river that Brodhead wished to destroy, but he was unable to approach them because the militia would not cooperate to procure the necessary boats. The troops returned to Wheeling about May 1, and the plunder was sold there.

The question has been raised as to whether or not the expedition was characterized by excessive cruelty in the killing of captured Indians. The

1 Edgar W. Hassler, Old Westmoreland: A History of Western Pennsylvania during the Revolution, 126 (Pittsburgh, 1900).
classic authority for the affirmative is Joseph Doddridge. In his Notes he says that all the inhabitants of the village of Coshocton "were made prisoners without firing a single shot." "Among the prisoners," he continues, "sixteen warriors were pointed out by Pekillon, a friendly Delaware chief, who was with the army of Broadhead [sic]. A little after dark a council of war was held to determine on the fate of the warriors in custody. They were doomed to death and by the order of the commander they were bound, taken a little distance below the town, and dispatched with tomahawks and spears and scalped. . . . Gen. Broadhead committed the care of the [rest of the] prisoners to the militia. They were about twenty in number. After marching about half a mile the men commenced killing them. In a short time they were all dispatched, except a few women and children who were spared and taken to Fort Pitt." Thomas H. Johnson of Coshocton recites a story told him by old settlers that supports Doddridge's view. "The army," writes Johnson, "halted at a spring about one mile east of the village and . . . during that halt the prisoners were killed, and . . . the Indians had marked the site of this massacre by cutting a tomahawk and scalping knife in the bark of a Beech tree growing on the spot. The stump of this tree still existed in my younger days, and was often pointed out to me by my Uncle, Mr. John Johnson." It is clear that this version of the treatment of prisoners is based on local traditions. As Hassler points out, "at the time Brodhead destroyed Coshocton, Joseph Doddridge was about 12 years old, and he did not write his 'Notes' until 40 years afterward." How much credence should be given to a strongly persistent tradition it is hard to say. Hassler, however, claims that he has found evidence that prisoners were not killed. He admits that the failure of Brodhead to mention such a disgraceful affair in his report is not evidence that it did not occur; but he cites the report of the British partisan, Simon Girty, to the British commandant at Detroit, Major Arent S. DePuyster, as quoted by Consul W. Butterfield in his History of the Girtys. Girty, writing on May 4, 1781, from Upper Sandusky, said, "We sent to

2 Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from 1763 to 1783, 225 (Pittsburgh, 1912).
4 Old Westmoreland, 129.
Coshocton twenty of our men [Wyandot] some time ago, and this day they have returned with the following news: 20th April, Colonel Brodhead, with five hundred men, burned the town and killed fifteen men. . . . He likewise took the women and children prisoners, and afterward let them go. He let four men [Delawares] go that were prisoners who showed him a paper that they had from Congress. Brodhead told them [the four Delawares] that it was none of his fault that their people [the Delawares slain] were killed, but the fault of the militia that would not be under his command.

This statement should be closely scrutinized. The Wyandot did not report that a battle took place but that Brodhead "burned the town and killed fifteen men." If the statement is taken literally the killing followed the burning. The Wyandot then said that of the prisoners taken all the women and children were released and also four men who could prove that they were friends. The implication is that there were other men that were retained, and it is positively stated by Brodhead that there was one prisoner taken just before the entry into the town. The Wyandot in closing said that Brodhead apologized for the killing of Delawares and blamed the unruly militia. Why Brodhead should apologize to the Indians and blame the militia for the killing of Delawares in battle is hard to understand. And that fifteen Indians would do battle to the last man with an army of three hundred is difficult to believe. They were not generally that foolhardy. It is much more likely that they surrendered or attempted to do so and were put to death.

At this point it is necessary to introduce the testimony of Brodhead himself. In reporting the campaign to President Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania on May 22 he wrote, "with about three hundred men . . . I surprized the Towns of Cooshasking & Indaochaie, killed fifteen Warriors and took upwards of twenty old men, women & Children. . . . After destroying the Towns with great quantities of poltry [sic] and other stores and killing about forty head of Cattle. I marched up the River, about seven miles . . . The Troops behaved with great Spirit & although there was considerable firing between them and the Indians, I

5 History of the Girtys, 128 (Cincinnati, 1890). This letter, which is in the Haldimand Papers in the British Museum, is also printed in Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 10:478 (Lansing, 1908).
had not a man killed or wounded, & only one horse shot." If the fifteen Indians offered real resistance to Brodhead's troops it is remarkable that not one of the attackers was killed or wounded. This, together with the evidence of the Girty letter and the persistence of the Doddridge tradition, leads to the belief that the treatment of the Indians of Coshocton was not exactly in accordance with the rules of "civilized" warfare.

Butterfield, a competent authority on Indian history, accepted the traditional account. He says in his manuscript narrative of Brodhead's expedition, "Another transaction—one of those unfortunate ones that the moralist must condemn, and which is too often seen in border warfare—was the killing, by the militia, to whose care they had been committed, of the residue of the prisoners, the women and children excepted. It was done immediately after the return march had commenced and without the knowledge of Brodhead or his principal officers." Whether Butterfield knew of the Girty letter when he wrote this is not known. It is hard to conceive of the author of the History of the Girty's not having known of it and not having used it in making his judgment. Nor is the Doddridge tradition to be dismissed merely because it is tradition. Since it places the pioneer in an unfavorable light its survival is indeed remarkable. Traditions that survive have a way of presenting the past in unduly roseate hues. There is, moreover, ample evidence that unresisting Indians, even women and children, were put to death by the frontiersmen on other occasions. The tradition is not out of harmony with the spirit of the time and the place.

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