

## THE METAMORPHOSIS OF FORT NECESSITY

Talk by J. C. Harrington at banquet,  
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A definition of the word "metamorphosis" might be given as follows: "A striking alteration in appearance, especially by witchcraft or magic." Apt as the word is for what has taken place at Fort Necessity during the past year, its use in the title for this talk actually was suggested by a statement found in the writings of a former prominent Uniontown attorney, Judge James Veech, who, I am sure, none of you knew personally. In his history of Fayette County, written in the eighteenth fifties, Judge Veech was reviewing the real and fanciful descriptions of Fort Necessity which had been made by previous writers and observers, among them a fellow Pennsylvanian, Col. James Burd. Colonel Burd had visited the site five years after the battle and had noted that the original stockade, charred remains of which could still be seen on the ground, was small and circular in shape. Veech, with unconcealed contemptuousness, wasted few words in dealing with such heresy as a round fort! He wrote: "How the good colonel could metamorphose the lines [of the fort] into a circular form is a mystery which we cannot solve."

The full title of my talk, therefore, is "The Metahorphosis of Fort Necessity, or The Vindication of the Late Col. James Burd."

One day this spring when I was in Mr. Sowers' restaurant up on the National Road above Fort Necessity, a traveller stopped in and, looking down across the field to where the fort was being reconstructed, asked what was going on. Mr. Sowers told him that the stockade was being rebuilt; that it was being made round instead of square. The traveller, either because he was naive or just liked to talk; or possibly because he was impatient with what probably appeared to him as pure iconoclasm on the part of historians, then asked a perfectly natural, though somewhat disconcerting question. He said, "What difference does it make whether it's round or square?" Mr. Sowers terminated the discussion with the best possible answer, when he replied, "As long as you're going to do it, you might as well do it right."

Now a more pertinent question from the traveller would have been, "Why is it being reconstructed at all?"

Strangely enough, visitors to the fort itself seldom ask that question. They seem to realize, without being told, that the fort has been reconstructed and the exhibits installed for their enjoyment and their

enlightenment.

But visitors to Fort Necessity do ask questions, and one question they are quite likely to ask is "How do you know it looked like this?" Tonight I will tell you how we know it looked like this. Before I try to answer that question, however, I would like to dwell a little longer on the hypothetical question our traveller did not ask—"Why was the fort reconstructed?"

In a nutshell, reconstruction appeared to be the best solution to the problem of developing the area so that it would best serve the visitor's needs. "Needs" cover a wide variety of things, and it is not always easy to distinguish between "needs" and wants." But they all were considered in making the final decision as to what was considered essential to the proper enjoyment and the fullest experience the traveller might get from his visit to the site of George Washington's first battle.

But even the most authentic reconstruction requires some adjuncts in order that the visitor can do his looking and his emoting with relevancy. Pageants, motion pictures, illustrated talks, and guided tours are some of the more satisfactory supplementary aids for a situation of this sort, but none of these are feasible at Fort Necessity at present. Descriptive plaques, left from the earlier reconstruction, and museum exhibits were used, therefore, as practical substitutes.

Mention of these plaques recalls the wonderful effort made by the people of this community under the leadership of Dr. Hindman back in 1932 in bringing Fort Necessity to the attention of the nation. They solved the problem of interpretation about as the National Park Service probably would have, had it been on the ground at the time. What this group did was to reconstruct the fort, basing their work on evidence available to them at the time.

The site was later turned over to the National Park Service, and to my knowledge, everyone was quite satisfied with the reconstruction. Then, after some twenty years, the logs began to rot. Actually this was a blessing in disguise. It gave us an excuse to do some archeological exploring—if an archeologist ever needs an excuse to dig! So, before replacing the rotted stockade posts, it was thought advisable to make one last effort to solve some of the controversial problems as to the original shape and location of the fort. Time not only rots wood; it develops new approaches and it produces new documentary evidence.

For one thing, we knew that there had been entrenchments, or earthworks, outside the stockade from which most of the fighting had taken place. Participants in the battle, both French and English—even George Washington—referred to these entrenchments. In spite of the fort having been built on soggy marsh-land, we were quite confident that the entrenchments could be found if they were there; and we knew they were there. Locating these entrenchments was considered important, not just to complete the record, but because we thought their restoration, along with the stockade, would add to the visitor's understanding of the battle.

The main trouble was that the records furnished no clue as to where these entrenchments were supposed to be. Over a hundred years ago, Jared Sparks, an eminent historian and one of the first to treat the subject of Fort Necessity in any detail, was quite sure he knew just where these entrenchments were located. In fact, he definitely states that they were still visible when he visited the site in 1830, and on the basis of what he believed he saw, he had a very convincing picture drawn, showing just how Fort Necessity looked on July 3, 1754. Almost everyone since that date, with the exception of our incredulous Judge Veech, has accepted Sparks' reconstruction. It was followed, in many respects, in the 1932 restoration, and we accepted his guess as to the location of the entrenchments in planning the excavations.

We started our investigations two years ago by digging several exploratory trenches outside the reconstructed stockade in search of the lost entrenchments. None were found. Quite understandably, my confidence was shaken, and it didn't help much to have some of our "side-walk superintendents" suggest that possibly we had dug in the wrong place, or that maybe I couldn't recognize an entrenchment when I saw one. But no amount of scraping with trowels, or peering and squinting at soil profiles, would produce any sign of what we hoped to find. So we finally gave up on our search for the entrenchments and went inside the stockade to see if we could settle, once and for all, the longstanding controversy as to whether the original stockade had been square or triangular in plan. The argument had started way back in 1816 when a surveyor, Freeman Lewis, mapped the visible surface remains at the site. His plan showed a triangular stockade, whereas later observers could see quite clearly that it was more square than triangular; everyone,

that is, but our good friend Judge Veech. Archer Hulbert, writing about 50 years ago, devoted several pages rationalizing as to how Lewis came to make such an obvious mistake, not realizing that he too was on the wrong track. Although Hulbert seemed to have won the argument, being the last and most vociferous participant, we still felt that it would do no harm to check on the misguided Lewis and see if by any chance the fort had been triangular, rather than square. It took very little digging to prove to my satisfaction that Hulbert had, in fact, won the second battle of Fort Necessity.

Then I went back home to write the report on a rather disappointing expedition. I was quite certain that the 1932 reconstruction was not entirely correct, although the excavating had produced no positive evidence to support this view. There has been a lot said about a time-yellowed document being discovered, but the thing that really set us to thinking, and finally put us on the right track, was not finding those entrenchments where they ought to have been.

One of the things that bothered me was the interpretation of the ridges, first mapped by Lewis in 1816, and still visible in 1931. They had always been interpreted as the earth thrown up against the stockade to hold the logs in place. This was not too satisfactory an explanation, for normally a stockade was not built that way.

There were also the two accounts stating that the stockade was small and circular. One of these accounts was that of Col. Burd, and the second, which did not come to light until a few years ago, was written by a contemporary; possibly a participant in the battle. Such evidence could not be tossed aside solely on the grounds of faulty observation, although everyone, including Judge Veech, had done just that. In fact, those of us working on the project in 1952, tried to do that very thing, because we still had that uncontrovertible surface evidence, whether we took it square or triangular.

And then suddenly the light dawned! Of course, the ridges mapped, discussed, remapped and rediscussed, were not remains of earth piled against the stockade, but were remains of the entrenchments! The Newtonian Apple had struck again! This all sounds very simple and obvious, but I can assure you that a century and a half of historical tradition forms a mental barrier that one does not easily break through.

If this interpretation of the ridges was correct, where, then, was

the stockade? The answer was now quite clear, for there was just room for a little circular stockade in the space at the back of the area where the ridges were missing. Although it had always been said that this void was due to erosion by the stream during flood times, it was in this very space that the only evidence of the original stockade was uncovered during the 1932 investigations.

After going over the old maps and the record secured in 1932, I tentatively plotted a circular stockade, 54 feet in diameter. You can imagine how difficult it was to wait until spring to get back there and find that circular stockade. Although quite confident that the stockade would turn up, I had much less hope of finding any remains of the entrenchments, for the previous excavating and construction, I reasoned, would probably have removed what little evidence was left.

We started work again in March—much too early in the season for this part of the country—and began by laying out three trenches across the calculated line of the stockade. As soon as the top layer of earth that had been added or had accumulated since 1754 was removed and the original ground was examined, we could see immediately a band of differently colored earth, about 18 inches wide. This streak, which an archeologist would call an “intrusive feature” cut across the first exploratory trench within a foot of where we had calculated the original stockade to have been located. Similar bends were found in each of the other two trenches.

Going down, one thin layer at a time, we soon came upon further encouraging evidence, and finally found the lower ends of the original stockade posts in each of the three trenches. These three trenches were then widened out, and several feet of the original stockade were exposed. After checking the circle at other points, it was found to be 53 feet in diameter on the inside, and 54 feet overall; or almost exactly what we had calculated. Under the circumstances, I have no objection if you prefer to call this a “guess” rather than a “calculation.”

The next step was to see if any evidence remained of the original entrenchments. Three test trenches were excavated close to the inside of the 1932 stockade, and, much to our surprise, each revealed the full cross-section of the original ditch for the earthwork. This ditch had been a foot and a half deep and nearly 4 feet wide at the top. Even the slopes of the ditch sides could be determined accurately. Once we

had found and identified these ditches, the entrenchments were followed out and their exact lines accurately determined. Even the ends near the stockade were found, as was also an opening at the apex, obviously representing the entrance into the fortified area.

The final step was to uncover the entire circle of the stockade. Some very interesting information came to light in this connection. We found just three sections, each around 12 feet in length, in which the preserved ends of the original stockade posts were still in place. These post ends were preserved, not, as many think, from having been burned, but rather from having been continuously wet. Between these sections of post ends were stretches of original stockade trench, quite easy to distinguish, but with every post missing.

Along the sections where post ends were found, there were also found fragments of burned posts at the old ground level and other clear evidence of fire. In fact, the earth in places was burned hard and red from the heat. Where water-preserved post ends were missing, so was the charcoal and burned earth. The conclusion is quite obvious. We know from the record that the morning after the battle the French destroyed the fort before returning to Fort Duquesne. Archeological evidence shows quite clearly just how the French went about destroying Fort Necessity. First they pulled up about three-fourth of the stockade and stacked the logs against three short sections of stockade left standing. Then they burned these three piles. This left three stretches of charcoal, roughly circular, which is what Col. Burd must have seen when he visited the site in 1759. Since Burd also saw remains of the log storehouse inside the stockade, it must be that the French burned that structure without tearing it down. Gradually the charcoal disappeared, and apparently was no longer visible when Freeman Lewis went there in 1816. But below the ground level there were still the unburned, buried portions of some of the stockade posts. These gradually rotted away, except for the portion below the water table, and these were the remains found in the excavating.

One very interesting and fortunate discovery was the opening through the stockade where there had been a narrow entrance. Those of you who have inspected the reconstruction must have wondered at the peculiar design of the gateway. Not only was the opening quite narrow, but the use of three round posts at each side seems to be a

unique design. It is the sort of thing that we would never have dreamed up had we not found clear evidence for it in the ground.

Most important of all, the exact method of constructing the stockade was determined from the excavating. Rather than using whole logs, as one would normally assume, the logs had been split in two, with the split, or flat side facing out. All of the logs were white oak, most of them around 10 inches in diameter. Every now and then a small, unsplit log was set between these main split posts, but always on the inside. These small logs must have served to fill large cracks which were considered hazardous. In addition, some of the smaller poles could very well have been cut shorter and placed back of wider openings, to form firing slots. This latter feature, of course, was good military practice in constructing stockades. The use of split logs for the main members, however, is to my knowledge, unique.

Although a flat surface would probably provide the best protection from lead musket balls, I am rather inclined to account for this unique construction on the pressure of time. The logs had to be cut in the woods at some distance from the fort, and half a log would be easier to carry and easier to set in place, for a whole log of the size used, in its freshly cut condition, would have weighed from 300 to 500 pounds. But even more important than the weight was the matter of time. Most woodsmen I have talked with about this have said that it would be quicker to split a log of this size than to cut another one in the woods. And the more trees they cut, the farther afield they would have to go, and the farther the logs would have to be carried.

Most of the area inside the stockade circle was carefully excavated, particularly near the center where the storehouse would have stood. This whole section, however, had been disturbed considerably, and we had little hope of finding any remains of the original structure. Although no charred logs were found, we did uncover evidence as to the angle at which the structure had set and confirmation of the single documentary reference to its having been 14 feet square.

During the digging quite a few objects connected with the battle were found. You have already seen some of these in the new exhibits at the Fort. They include many lead musket balls, iron cannon balls, gun flints, and odds-and-ends from military equipment. Then there were things used by the men during their month's stay at Great Mead-

ows, such as wine bottles, tobacco pipes, and even the lid of a teapot.

With all this information at hand, we felt we could now answer the basic question as to whether sufficient data were available to justify a complete restoration. The answer, everyone agreed, was "Yes." Actually, all that was lacking was the length of the stockade posts and the details of the storehouse construction. The shape of the earthwork was not difficult to establish, since we knew the shape and location of the ditch, and the thickness of the parapet.

So we went ahead and restored the entrenchments, built a stockade of split logs, and conjured up a log storehouse with hides on the roof, just as the contemporary record described it. The main departure from the original, as far as we know, was in peeling the stockade posts, which had to be done so that they could be chemically treated. Then we had to add a few rather conspicuous anachronisms, such as the paved walks, grass on the earthworks, a drinking fountain and some interpretive devices. These were considered necessary, either for the visitor's comfort and understanding, or for more practical reasons of maintenance.

But except for these concessions, I feel quite certain that the thing you see out there at Great Meadows today would not be too great a shock to George Washington, were he to return to the scene of his first battle. In fact, I rather imagine it would be a much greater shock to our good friend Judge Veech.

I am often asked what was the most exciting or thrilling find I have ever made in excavating. I can quite honestly and sincerely say that nothing has ever remotely approached the thrill I had when those bands of discolored earth appeared in the first exploratory trenches, and I knew that this was "it." And when we went deeper and found the first stockade post, I wouldn't have traded it for a Pharaoh's grave ship.