Up Front

Meadowcroft

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Point Pleasant, A Point of Contention

Our region has seen a multitude of commemoration ceremonies in honor of the Civil War’s sesquicentennial. The Gettysburg campaign, Morgan’s Raiders, and the tragedy of the Allegheny Arsenal were all a part of local 2013 commemorations. But let’s not forget that this coming year is the 240th anniversary of a series of forays and depredations known as Lord Dunmore’s War.

With the spring thaw of 1774, Virginians moved out into the frontier in order to survey for new land purchases along the southern bank of the Ohio River. This act put the already displaced Native Americans into close competition for land and resources along the Virginia border. The beginning of the bloodshed was a reaction to an unsubstantiated rumor that Indians had stolen horses from the land jobbers at the mouth of the Kanawha. This report, without evidence having ever been found, set off a series of revenge killings by men that Joseph Doddridge (a contemporaneous settler of Washington County and Virginia) deemed “white savages” for their murders of innocents that set the frontier ablaze. The situation grew worse as men, women, and children were put to the knife in a cycle of barbarity.

The violence along the Ohio River had a sweeping impact along the western lands, including Pennsylvania. Anger over the terrible acts committed by those men pervaded frontier communities, both Indian and European. In preparation for the reprisals of Native Americans affected by the murders, many settlers began to seek refuge to the east of the Monongahela River instead. Those who did not move took shelter in the frontier forts that dotted the changing landscape.

Balancing the British crown’s desire for peace with the Indians’ and the Virginians’ demand for more land, John Murray, Fourth Earl of Dunmore and Royal Governor of Virginia, was forced into action. He appointed Botetourt County Lieutenant Andrew Lewis to raise a militia and march to the mouth of the Kanawha River, where they would rendezvous with Dunmore’s force for a united march through the Ohio Country, razing Native American villages as they went.

Early in the morning of October 10, 1774, with army rations running low, a few men engaged in an act of insubordination and took to the woods for a hunting trip. Those men happened upon Chief Cornstalk’s coalition of Native Americans, who had crossed the Ohio River for a surprise attack on the Virginians before the two armies could join forces against them. That chance encounter began the Battle of Point Pleasant,
with the two sides pitted against one another for the final rights to the land south and east of the Ohio.

The militia’s victory and the ensuing Treaty of Camp Charlotte calmed the nerves of frontier settlers, for a time, and opened the Virginia wilderness to a new throng of European emigration. From that point forward the confluence of the Ohio and Kanawha rivers was open to white settlement. In the 20th century, the town of Point Pleasant, W Va., that had grown up at the site began a successful campaign to establish a park at the location of Lewis’ crudely assembled defensive works. With this effort came a drive to increase the recognition of the historical importance of Dunmore’s War in general, and the local battle in particular, billing it as the prologue to the American Revolution. The effort worked, and in 1908 funds were raised for a monument within the already established park dedicated to the event, which had become to some locals the first battle of the Revolutionary War. So this October 10, between your observance of the 150th anniversary of Sherman’s arrival in Atlanta and your celebration of the Union victory at Cedar Creek, don’t forget the 240th commemoration of an event with local ties.

Meadowcroft will observe the event on Saturday, October 11, with special presentations in our 18th-century exhibit.

Further Reading:


1 Doddridge, Joseph, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from 1763 to 1783*, inclusive, together with a Review of the State Society and Manners of the First Settlers of the Western Country (Parsons, W Va.: McClain Printing, 2010), 171.