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Timothy Murphy: Frontier Rifleman



Little is known of Timothy Murphy's early life. Born in 1751 near the Delaware Water Gap to parents who had only recently immigrated from County Donegal, Ireland, when he was eight his family moved to Shamokin Flats (now Sunbury) in Pennsylvania. Some years after that he was apprenticed to the Van Campen family, and with them relocated to the Wyoming Valley frontier.

On 29 June 1775, Murphy and his brother John enlisted in Captain John Lowdon's Company of Northumberland County Riflemen, and subsequently served in the Siege of Boston, the Battle of Long Island, and skirmishing in Westchester. Later, he became a Sergeant in the 12th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Line and served at Trenton, Princeton, and New Brunswick. An expert marksman (able to hit a seven inch target at 250 yards), Murphy qualified for Morgan's Rifle Corps, and was transferred to that elite organization in July 1777, shortly after its inception. In August of the same year, Murphy was one of 500 hand-picked riflemen sent north to reinforce the Continental forces opposing General Sir John Burgoyne's invasion of Northern New York.

It was at the Battle of Bemis Heights (Second Battle of Saratoga), 7 October 1777, that Murphy is reputed to have fired the shots that killed Sir Francis Clerke and General Simon Fraser, throwing the British command of the

The Defense of the Middle Fort

In Late September, 1780, Colonel Sir John Johnson departed Niagara with a mixed force of British Regulars, Provincial troops, Hessians, and Indians. His objective: a major supplier of wheat to the Continental Army, the Schoharie Valley. By the night of 16 October, his forces increased in transit by additional Tories and Indians to between 750 to 1000 effectives, he stood poised to sweep down on the valley.

In the fourth year of the Revolution, nowhere was its most vicious aspect of civil and guerrilla war more apparent than on the New York frontier. After several years of raids, the settlers lived under the constant threat of attack and had prepared three forts (Upper, Middle, and Lower) along the Schoharie Creek to defend themselves. There being an inadequate number of Continental troops and New York State Levies to man these and those along the Mohawk, a major portion of the defense fell to the local militia.

Early after dawn on the 17th, the trail of Johnson's column was spotted by a local farmer out after his cows as it was secretly bypassing the Upper Fort (Near Fultonham). Immediately the alarm gun was fired from the fort and those settlers who had not already concentrated on the forts, did so.

battle into disarray.

Returning to the main army, Murphy suffered through Valley Forge and was involved in harassing the British withdrawal from Philadelphia before General Washington again ordered the northern dispatch of three companies of riflemen in July 1778, in response to attacks on the New York frontier. Murphy and his fellow riflemen garrisoned the Schoharie Valley forts and conducted long range patrols of Indian lands to the south and west. He participated in the attack on Unadilla in October, 1778, and was a part of Sullivan's Expedition against the Iroquois.

Upon the expiration of his service late in 1779, he returned to the Schoharie Valley to settle. Among with several other riflemen, Murphy enlisted in Captain Jacob Hager's Company of Colonel Peter Vrooman's 15th Regiment of the Albany County Militia. Murphy resumed his patrolling through what are now Schoharie, Otsego, Delaware, and Greene Counties, confirming his reputation as "The terror of the Tories and Indians", as one historian has put it.

It was during this period the Murphy also became the terror of one of the more prosperous Dutch farmers of the valley, Johannes Feeck. Murphy took to scouting more frequently in the direction of his farm, and at first was highly welcome. However, when the farmer and his wife realized that the real reason was a growing attraction between the Irishman and their daughter Margaret (Peggy), Murphy was told not to return. Undeterred, Murphy secured leave from his sympathetic commander, and eloped with Peggy to Duanesburgh to be married by the nearest available Dominie. The father became reconciled to the marriage when Murphy let it be known he would otherwise take his new bride to Pennsylvania.

And shortly thereafter, when the British raided the Schoharie Valley, and Murphy 's fame among his neighbors reached its zenith at the defense of the Middle Fort (see sidebar), Peggy was with him, molding bullets, loading muskets, and swearing to take



Realizing that surprise was no longer possible, the raiders began burning buildings and destroying livestock and crops not known to belong to loyalists. The defenses of the Middle Fort (just North of Middleburgh) were made ready, and a party of skirmishers (including Timothy Murphy) sallied forth to develop a clearer picture of the situation. Encountering the lead elements of the British they were forced back into the fort under heavy fire.

Johnson next brought up his artillery to subdue the fort. Too light to breach the walls, the cannon and mortar fire accomplished nothing more effective than confounding an old Dutchman when a shell exploded in a room full of feather bedding that had been put up. Seeing no advantage to the shelling, Johnson then attempted another stratagem: he sent forth a party under a flag of truce to demand the fort's surrender to superior forces.

As the flag bearer, an officer of Butler's Rangers, and a fifer playing Yankee Doodle approached, the commander of the fort, a Major Woolsey of the Regulars, determined to admit the party over the objections of his officers who felt the parlay was a ruse to learn the true state of affairs within the fort.

(Although the fort's two cannons had been well served, and the garrison had even been able to mount limited forays, ammunition was critically low and the women had been preparing spears, pitchforks, and boiling water to resist the final onslaught.) Woolsey reiterated his order and withdrew inside a building. It was then that Murphy, well acquainted with the horrors that often befell frontier prisoners, fired a rifle ball over the truce party's heads. They immediately retreated.

Again the party approached, and Woolsey returned, ordering Murphy not to fire. Another round was fired and the white flag withdrew. As the parlay came forward yet another

up a spear when the ammunition ran out.

Early in 1781, Murphy reenlisted in the Pennsylvania Line under General Wayne and was present for the final battle of Yorktown. He returned to Fultonham in the Schoharie at the war's end.

By his first wife, Murphy had five sons and four daughters. Several years after Peggy died in 1807, he married Mary Robertson, and with her relocated to Charlottesville and there by her had four more sons. Murphy never learned to read or write, nor applied for a veteran's grant or pension, but nonetheless was able to acquire a number of farms and a grist mill, and become a local political power. Later, he returned to Fultonham, where he died in 1818, at age 67, of cancer.

Murphy was buried there next to his first wife. In 1872, he was reinterred at Middleburgh cemetery. Although the State Legislature voted to erect monument to Murphy in 1819, none was built until some of his descendants purchased one to be placed in the cemetery in 1910. In 1913, the Ancient Order of Hibernians placed a marker commemorating Murphy at the Saratoga Battlefield, and the state put up its own marker there in 1929. In dedicating that monument, Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt said:

This country has been made by Timothy Murphys, the men in the ranks. Conditions here called for the qualities of the heart and head that Tim Murphy had in abundance. Our histories should tell us more of the men in the ranks, for it was to them, more than to the generals, that we were indebted for our military victories

time, Woolsey threatened to shoot Murphy on the spot if he disobeyed. Murphy declared "I'll die before they have me prisoner" and fired for the last time. Woolsey, livid, ordered the fort to show the white flag. Murphy threatened to shoot anyone attempting to run the flag up. Woolsey's nerve broke, and he withdrew to the cellar of the fort's stone building where the commander of the local militia found him and convinced him to relinquish command to him.

With no apparent diminishing of the fort's resistance, Johnson abandoned the siege in mid-afternoon and continued burning his way down the valley. After a desultory attack on the by now well prepared Lower Fort (the Old Stone Fort, still standing just North of Schoharie), he continued on to the Mohawk, to effect his return to Canada. New York State forces from Albany pursued and recovered some prisoners and plunder, but were unable to decisively engage the enemy.

Commenting on the attack from Congress, James Madison wrote: "The inroads of the enemy on the frontiers of New York have been fatal to us. They have almost totally ruined that fine wheat country. The settlement of Schoharie which alone was able to furnish, according to a letter from General Washington, eighty thousand bushels of grain for the public use, has been totally laid in ashes."

But the forts had held. And rather than being driven out of the valley, soon the populace would take up the task of rebuilding it, using grain that had been hidden and livestock that had been turned out in anticipation of the attack. And the flag of the United States, once hoisted on the frontier, would never come down.



The Middle Fort, near present day Middleburgh, NY as it likely appeared in 1780

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