



This is NewsLetter Issue No. Three ~ For the year 2024

The First British Fort To Fall To American Rebels In The American Revolutionary War

In 1799, James Smith wrote an autobiography. In that autobiography he stated that

attack on Fort Bedford. In his book, *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and*



Travels of Col. James Smith, Smith made the claim that “Fort Bedford was the first British fort to be attacked and captured by American rebels,”

Fort Bedford was one of the fortified supply depots that Colonel Henry Bouquet constructed as he cut Forbes Road through the Pennsylvania frontier in 1758. The road was being cut for the use of the British Army under General John Forbes and his expedition to take Fort Duquesne from the French.

in the year 1769, on the 12th of September, he led his Black Boys a group of men who blackened their faces with soot to prevent being identified, in an

Forbes Road, stretching between Carlisle in the east and Fort Duquesne at the Forks of the Ohio in

the west, had numerous fortified supply depots constructed along its course. Those fortified supply depots, including Fort Bedford, were actively manned by British troops from 1758 and 1766. In 1766, when Colonel Bouquet suppressed Pontiac's Rebellion, he headed back east, gathering up all of the British troops along the way. Garrett Pendergrass sent a petition to the Provincial Governor, John Penn in October 1766. In that petition for recompense because his property had been confiscated by the Proprietors, Mr. Pendergrass noted that "*since the King's Troops evacuated that Fort [Bedford], and the Avenues thereof, the Improvements of your Petitioner have been surveyed, under your Honor's Warrant afsd, for the use of the Honorable the Proprietaries.*" From that document, it may be assumed that the King's Troops, meaning the British, were no longer garrisoning the fort by October 1766. The fort would have been garrisoned thereafter by Cumberland (and later Bedford) County Militia for the safety of the local inhabitants up to and during the Revolutionary War.

Following the removal of the British troops, the town of Bedford had been laid out by instructions from the Proprietaries. In 1766 the town of Bedford was still under the jurisdiction of Cumberland County.

During the summer of 1769, three years after the exit of the British troops from Fort Bedford, the Amerindians made a number of incursions into the region around the three-year-old town of Bedford. As noted by Smith: "*yet, the traders continued carrying goods and warlike stores to them.*" Alarmed at the situation, a number of persons plundered the offending traders' stores, which they then destroyed. Although their actions were ostensibly for the safety of their fellow Euro-American settlers, the persons who plundered the traders' goods were arrested.

Whether they were justified in attempting to deprive the Amerindians of ammunition was inconsequential in regard to the fact that ordinary citizens were not allowed to take the law into their own hands. The arrested persons were fettered in iron shackles and confined in the guard-house in Fort Bedford. Eleven years after its construction, the fort's stockade walls might have started to deteriorate, but it would have been the only 'building' in the new town that could be used as temporary jail.

The fact that the arrested persons were confined in the fort is not as significant as it might initially appear. Being held prisoner by red-coated British soldiers wielding bayonet-fixed muskets in a formidable stockade-surrounded fort is the stuff of a dramatic movie. But, as noted, the red-coated British troops had evacuated the fort three years earlier. Activity at the fort, keeping watch for any attack by the Amerindians no doubt came to an end when Pontiac's War was quelled by Bouquet in 1765, and that is probably why the British army evacuated the fort by the following year. Although James Smith did not state it in so many words in his memoirs, the persons arrested for plundering the traders' goods would have had to have been confined somewhere. In 1769, the town of Bedford was not a county seat. The 'county' was two years away. There was no county gaol or prison at that time. There was, in fact, no borough in 1769; Bedford was simply a small frontier village. The rule of law in the region was enforced by the Cumberland County authorities, such as the sheriff and his deputies. So when James Smith made the statement in his memoirs that "*some of these persons, with others, were apprehended and laid in irons in the guard-house in Fort Bedford...*", the assumption should not be made that it was because the 'British army' was in control, or even present at the time, but rather because the fort, though in the process of decaying, would have been the most

logical building, if not the only ‘public’ building, in which to confine the prisoners.

Smith had engaged a friend by the name of William Thompson to gain information on where and how the prisoners were being held. When he and seventeen of the ‘Black Boys’ arrived near the village, Smith met up with Thompson, who informed him that “*the commanding officer had...ordered thirty men upon guard.*” James Smith did not state that the fort was garrisoned by the British Army. By calling him the ‘commanding officer,’ the man heading the provincial authority could have been a sheriff or a provincial militia officer. Also, in regard to this point, the number of men ‘ordered upon guard’ did not necessarily mean that that number of men actually responded for the guard duty. By stating that the ‘commanding officer’ ordered thirty men to guard the prisoners, Smith implied that his little band of eighteen men going up against a superior force of thirty, would be more daring than it might actually have been. At day-break, Thompson told Smith that the gate was finally opened and there were only three sentinels – the rest of the guard were ‘taking a morning dram’, suggesting that they were off getting drunk. Smith completed his narrative of the event with: “*I then concluded to rush into the fort, and told Thompson to run before me to the arms, we ran with all our might, and as it was a misty morning, the centinels scarcely saw us until we were within the gate, and took possession of the arms. Just as we were entering, two of them discharged their guns, though I do not believe they aimed at us. We then raised a shout, which surprized the town, though some of them were well pleased with the news. We compelled a black-smith to take the irons off the prisoners, and then we left the place.*” How Smith knew that some of the townspeople were ‘well pleased with the news’ is not explained, and as no

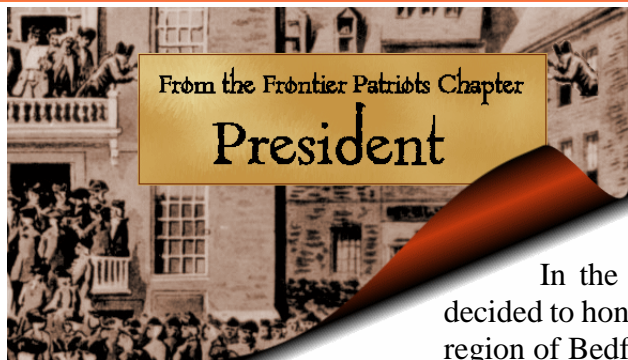
one felt compelled to record the event other than Smith himself, we will never know.

So while Smith and his Black Boys might have truly attacked the fort, it would have been Cumberland County Militia, rather than red-coated British troops, and only three who were in control of the fort at the time. Since Smith and his Black Boys left as quickly as they came, the fort itself was not really ‘captured’ by American rebels. Being captured would imply that it was taken possession of and held for a period of time. Smith and his men, according to his own words simply rushed in, stole some guns, freed the men who had committed a crime and ran off.

The incident didn’t make much of an impression on anyone at the time. It wasn’t even reported by any of the local justices of the peace or the sheriff to the Cumberland County Court. The only source of the so-called ‘capture’ of Fort Bedford by American rebels is the autobiography of James Smith. No record of the incident was recorded in the papers collected together in the Pennsylvania Archives. No record of the incident was recorded at the Cumberland County Court House. The only source of any information on the incident was written by James Smith himself, which he published in 1799, thirty years after the incident.

Instead of flouting that “*Fort Bedford was the first British fort to be attacked and captured by American rebels,*” it should more accurately be stated that Fort Bedford was the first *already evacuated* British fort with no British soldiers present to be attacked and immediately abandoned by a self-appointed vigilante group. But that doesn’t sound very dramatic and noble, so James Smith sort of embellished the tale and laid claim to an honor he really didn’t deserve. The lack of accuracy doesn’t prevent re-enactors from staging mock attacks on the fort in present-day celebrations, though.





The next meeting of the
Frontier Patriots Chapter
of the Sons of the American Revolution
will be held at Hoss's restaurant
at Business 220, Bedford, PA
on Saturday, 14 September 2024
starting at 12 Noon.

In the last meeting of the Frontier Patriots Chapter, it was decided to honor all of the volunteer fire companies in the four county region of Bedford, Blair, Fulton and Huntingdon. Certificates of Appreciation were printed and letters were sent out to the fire chiefs to request a date and time that I (or any other interested Compatriot) could meet with the fire chief to present the certificate to that person. The three companies in Fulton County, which Donald Sheehan took care of, responded in a timely manner. But of the ones that I sent out, only one responded (three weeks after the letters were sent) and Bill Mock and Bob Williams received no responses to their letters. I am discouraged by the lack of interest ~ just to accept a certificate of appreciation ~ shown by the fire companies' chiefs. We will probably just mail the certificates to the remaining fire companies.



Happy Anniversary To Me

This issue of the Frontier Patriots Chapter newsletter is the 100th that I have produced since 1991! The Blair County Chapter had a sporadically produced newsletter a few years before 1991. But those early newsletters were basically simple one-page announcements. Compatriot Edgar R. Hartt produced the first newsletters for the Chapter in 1986. During the December 1990 meeting, Mr. Hartt asked if anyone would be willing to take on the task of producing a newsletter and I volunteered. The first issue that I produced was for the First Quarter of 1991.

Now ~ 99 issues later, I am still producing newsletters that combine anything brought up at the Quarterly Meetings that needs to be disseminated to the members who could not attend the meetings along with an article dealing with some subject relating to the American Revolutionary War, the Colonial Period and/or the region encompassed by Bedford County when it was erected in 1771 out of Cumberland County. Hopefully you, the Compatriot members of the Frontier Patriots Chapter have enjoyed it over the years.

For those of you that receive this newsletter by US mail, if you have an email address, we would appreciate you informing us of it to use for future newsletters. Printing and mailing these newsletters is not that expensive, but it is time consuming. Please send to our Secretary Larry Smith at schmitt@motherbedford.com

Frontier Patriots Chapter website: <https://frontierpatriots.com>