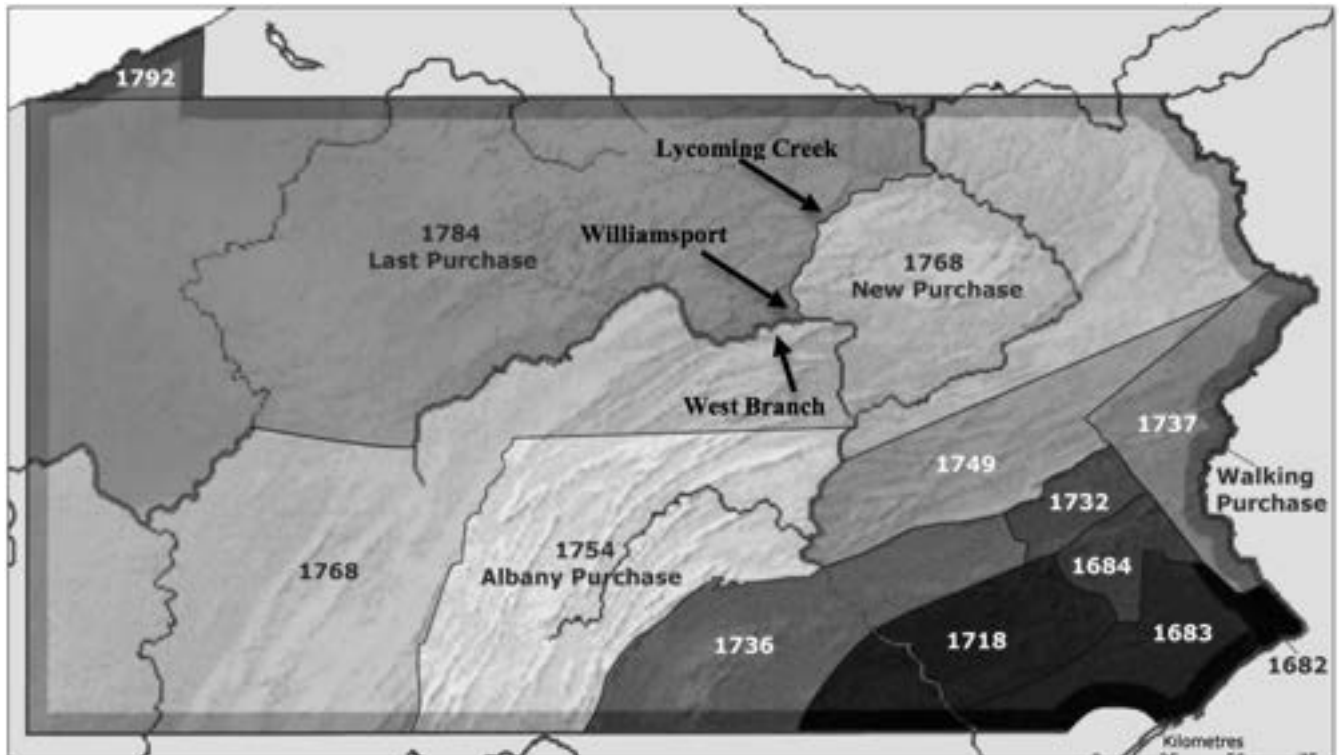


The Battle of Bald Eagle Creek Ted Bainbridge, Ph.D.

A detachment of Northumberland County rangers was attacked by a much larger force of Indians on the 16th of April, 1782. Every expedition member but three was killed or captured.

Background

In October of 1781 General Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington at Yorktown. There were no more major battles in the Revolutionary War, which officially ended with the Treaty of



Paris in September of 1783 [1]. The army remained in the field until the men were discharged in November of that year. During that period between war and peace Northumberland County militia and ranger units continued to serve on the northwest frontier. Half a year after Yorktown, one of those ranger units was defeated by a group of Indians at the battle of Bald Eagle Creek.

At that time Pennsylvania included the New Purchase and the official state boundary was Lycoming Creek with its mouth at today's Williamsport. The regions west of Lycoming Creek and north of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River were Indian territory; they did not become part of Pennsylvania until the Last Purchase, two years after this battle [2].

The Participants

The *Pennsylvania Archives* contains only one reference to the battle at Bald Eagle Creek, included in the category of "Ranging Companies" [4]:

Capt. Thomas Robinson's Company.

Raised in the county of Northumberland.

...

This company had a sharp engagement with the Indians, at Bald Eagle creek. [sic]

That document lists the following members of the unit: Captain Thomas Robinson; Lieutenant Moses Van Campen; Sergeants Jonathan Bey, William Doyle, Ebenezer Green (dead), and Edward Lee; and Privates John Adams, James Bennett/Banett, Conrad Bessell, Claudius Boatman, Jonathan Burnmell, James Busler, Henry Carton, Conrad Cutherman, James Dougherty, Ephraim Dunbar, John Fox, Ebenezer Green, Leonard Groninger, Charles Haines, Adam Hempleman, James Henderson, Joshua Knapp, Michael Lamb, William McGrady, William Miller, Adam Neible, Jonathan Pray, John Shilling, William Snell, Richard Stewart, Francis Varbelet, John Wallace, and Thomas Wilkinson.

That document's inclusion among, "Ranging Companies" indicates that the unit sometimes operated as an independent command, ranging at will within its extensive assigned area of operations. At other times the unit functioned as an infantry company which was a subordinate command within a regiment of the Pennsylvania Line of the Continental Army [5, 6].

Some men on that list were not in the battle, as is made clear by the testimony in Moses Van Campen's pension application [7] and statements below. Some men in the battle were not on that list. No definitive list of men in this battle exists. One participant's pension file includes this comment written by a government clerk: "Remarks: There are no militia rolls in this office." [8] That comment indicates the administrative distance between ranger units and command headquarters was great. Another participant's pension file reveals the effect of that distance; when asked to name his regimental Colonel the man replied, "... what Col. he was under he is unable to say, ... he knew of no officer higher than Captain ..." [9 at page 8].

In places other than the above list, the *Pennsylvania Archives* says these men were in the battle: Jonathan Burwell, Leonard Croninger, James Dougherty, Sergeant Ebenezer Green, Private Ebenezer Greens, Adam Hempleman, Michael Lamb, William McGrady, William Miller, Joshua Nap, Jonathan Pray, Moses Van Campen, and John Wallace [4, 10, 11].

Van Campen said Jonathan Burwell, Henry Craton, Jams Henderson, Richard Stewart, and John Wallace were wounded in the battle [12 at pages 247-249, see also 13]. He also said Thomas Chambers was an Ensign in the company at that time [12 at page 244] but did not say whether he was in the fight or not. Van Campen also said he and Esquire Culbertson, James Dougherty, William McGrady, and a Mr. Barkley were in the fight but Thomas Robinson was not [7]. Van Campen's story, as written by his grandson J. N. Hubbard, said Elisha Hunt was in the battle, was captured, and was taken on the forced march after the battle [12 at page 260]. Hunt is not listed among revolutionary soldiers from Pennsylvania [14], so he probably was not a ranger.

(Some names are spelled differently in various sources. When those records were created spelling was not a rigorously conformist task as it is in modern America. Each name in this paper is typed with the spelling shown in the source document.)

Van Campen and his twenty chosen men marched along the river bank while Culbertson and four others moved upstream in a boat [12 at page 245]. Therefore, there were twenty-six men in the expedition. The lists above name nineteen participants, leaving seven unnamed. Those unnamed men might have come from the *Pennsylvania Archives* roster above, or might have been other men of Captain Robinson's company who were not named in that roster, or might have been civilians recruited from the local population only for this expedition. Van Campen said he selected his men by testing their marksmanship. That suggests the unnamed men were more likely to come from the ranger company than not, but some or all of the seven might have been civilians. [12 at pages 245 and 260, 14]

The Battle

In late March of 1782, Lieutenant Moses Van Campen led Captain Robison's [sic] company to Northumberland County and, "Entered upon the laborious [sic] duty of protecting the frontiers of the said County" [12 at pages 244-246, 5]. While rebuilding a fort at Muncy, the unit was joined by Captain Robison [sic] and a Mr. Culbertson. Culbertson wanted an escort up the West Branch to the area of Bald Eagle Creek, where his brother recently had been killed by Indians. Van Campen was ordered to head that escort. He selected twenty men. Near the middle of April, the group moved along the bank of the river while Culbertson and four other men moved upstream in a boat. Near Big Island (now called Great Island) the boat was beached and all twenty-six men moved together on land until they reached Culbertson's farm. They arrived in the evening of April 15th, set up camp, and posted sentinels for the night. [7, 12 at pages 244-246]

Early the next morning, April 16th [5], they were attacked by about eighty-five Senecas [15]. Those Indians had found Van Campen's beached boat, then followed the rangers' trail to their encampment. The fight was described by Van Campen and recorded by his grandson as follows.

... by the morning light, concealed by the bushes, [the Indians] approached very near to the sentries, and burst so unexpectedly upon these, that they had only time to run to the camp, crying, "The Indian, the Indian," before the savages were in their midst, with the tomahawk and scalping knife. Van Campen and his men started upon their feet and in a moment were ready for action. The enemy had a warm reception. The combat was at first, from hand to hand, and so well sustained was the resistance that the Indians were obliged to retire; but they came up on all sides, and one after another Van Campen's men were cut down with the rifle. Perceiving that the party of warriors was so large as to offer them no hope of escape, and beholding their number every moment growing smaller, they determined, though reluctantly, to surrender themselves to the enemy, under the belief that their lives would be spared.

They surrendered to Lieutenant Nellis, the British officer who commanded and led the Indians. Of the twenty-six men in the expedition; three had escaped (Esquire Culbertson and two others), nine had been killed, and fourteen had been captured. Some of those captured had been wounded and some had not. [5, 7, 9 at page 14, 12 at pages 246-247, 15, 16].

The *Pennsylvania Archives* reports that Henry Carton, John Wallace, and Sergeant Ebenezer Green were killed but Private Ebenezer Green was not [4, 10].

Jonathan Burwell, Leonard Croninger, James Dougherty, Private Ebenezer Greens, Adam Hempleman, Michael Lamb, William McGrady, William Miller, Joshua Nap, Jonathan Pray, and Moses Van Campen lost their weapons during the fight [11].

Immediately After the Battle

The Indians took possession of the prisoners and their weapons. Wallace and Stewart, who had been wounded, were tomahawked. Craton, who also had been wounded, was shot by four or five Indians who, “all aiming their rifles at his head, fired at once, and with their balls tore the top of his skull from his head. Poor Craton fell over, and his brains rolled out and lay smoking upon the ground.” As an Indian approached to tomahawk Burwell, who had been shot during the battle, Van Campen hit him so hard he fell down, “like one dead.” Some Indians moved to tomahawk Van Campen for this defiance, but the majority protected him because of his display of courage and strength. As a further tribute to Van Campen’s courage, Burwell’s life was spared. The life of Henderson, who also had been wounded, was spared. [12 at pages 247-249, 13] Burwell’s wound was described in detail at [8] and [12 at page 248].

The remaining prisoners were stripped of all their clothing except their pantaloons, then seated on the ground in a circle. The Indians surrounded them with rifles and tomahawks in hand, then solemnly brought forward five Indians who had been killed in the battle and placed them within the circle. A chief spoke at length, ending with a smile which was the sign of mercy; the remaining captives would not be killed. The Indians buried their dead by rolling an old log from its place, laying the body in the hollow of the ground, then piling some earth on the body. The prisoners were divided among the captors, with Van Campen assigned to Lieutenant Nellis’ group. Nellis told Van Campen what the chief had said: Their dead demanded that the whites be killed, but many more whites than Indians had been killed in the battle and that was enough. Instead, the prisoners would be adopted into the families of the slain warriors to replace the lives they had destroyed. [7, 12 at pages 250-253]

Forced March

Packs were prepared for the prisoners and everybody hiked to where the Indians had found the rangers’ beached boat. All got in bark canoes, rowed north across the West Branch of the Susquehanna River, and then set the canoes adrift. On the morning of the second day of march, Henderson, who had been wounded in the fight, was tomahawked. The group hiked all day without eating. They moved across hills and came to Pine Creek above its first fork. The Indians shot an elk and everybody had roast meat for supper, the prisoners eating the same way

and as much as the Indians ate. The next morning the elk was divided among the warriors and prisoners and they continued their forced march. They walked up Pine Creek's banks to the third fork, then took the most northerly branch to its head. [7, 12 at page 253-256, 13]

After a few days on the march Burwell's wound became so inflamed and painful that it made it difficult for him to keep up. The Indians collected suitable herbs and boiled them in water. They dipped a feather in the brew and ran it through his wound. Soon after this extremely painful treatment, the inflammation disappeared and the wound healed. [7, 12 at pages 253-256, 13]

They arrived at the head of Pine Creek, they moved cross-country, and arrived at the head of the Genesee River after half a day's travel. Moving down the Genesee two days, they came to Pigeon Woods where a large number of Indians had come to catch pigeons for food. There they met a group of about forty Indians who were going in the opposite direction. After two days at Pigeon Woods the group moved farther down the Genesee, eventually coming to Canneadea, which was the first village they had encountered. In that village all the prisoners were made to run the gauntlet. Squaws and young Indians formed the gauntlet, with the warriors watching and not participating. All the prisoners ran the gauntlet safely. Several Indians patted Van Campen on the shoulder and complimented him for his performance. [7, 12 at pages 256-267]

After completing the gauntlet, the prisoners were quartered with the families of the warriors. The first day and night in the village the warriors and their prisoners rested. The next day, Van Campen ate with Lieutenant Nellis at Nellis' father's home in the village. That evening there was a dance and Van Campen was told that he should participate. Nellis gave him appropriate clothing for the dance. The evening began with the warriors performing the war dance around a few bright fires. That dance was a pantomime of approaching a battle, fighting, and returning home victorious. Next was the turtle dance, performed by the majority of the Indians as they formed a circle around the fire which they faced. After watching for some time, Van Campen was invited to join in and was given a young woman for a dance partner. [12 at pages 267-274]

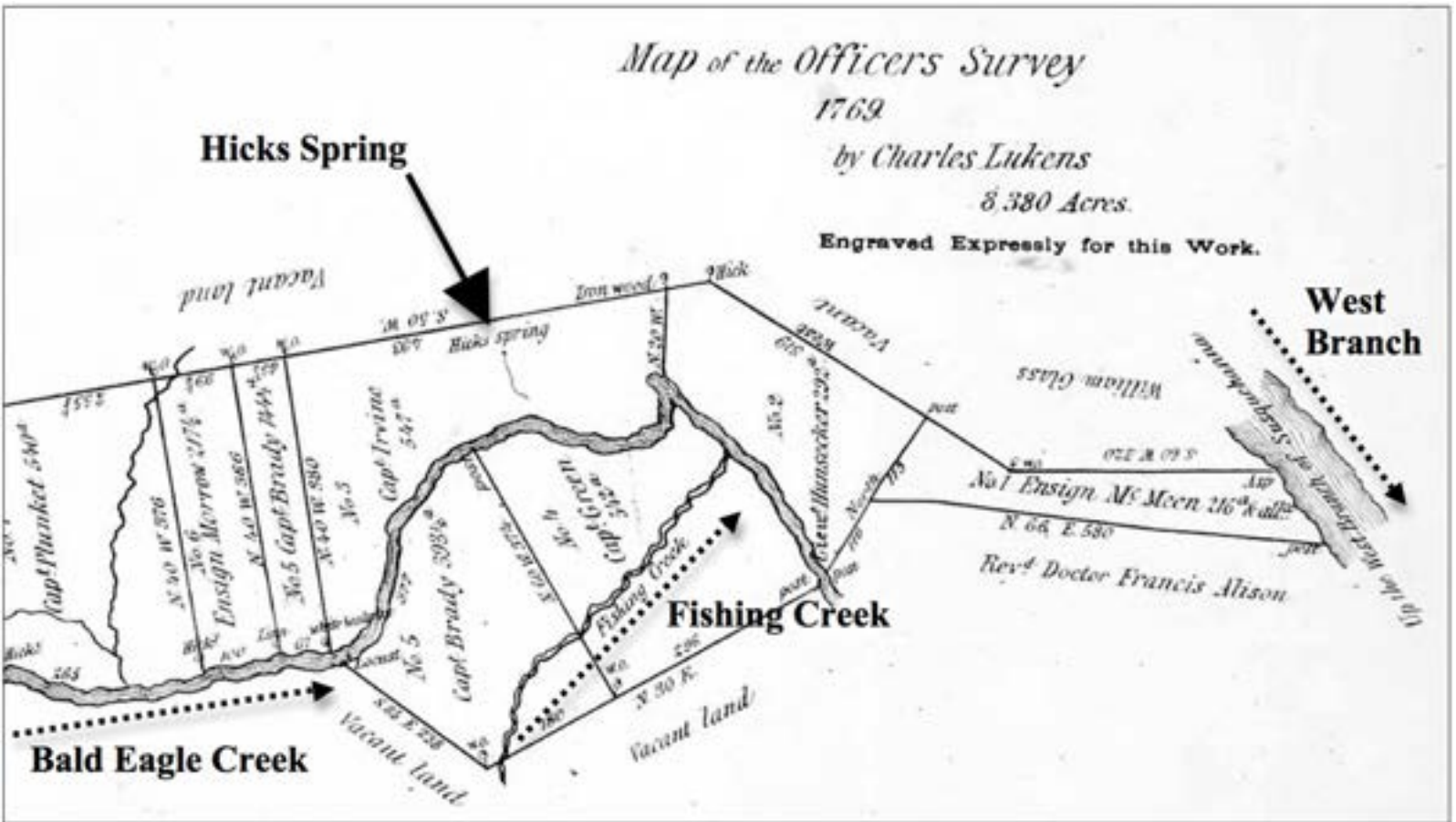
The next day the warriors and their prisoners resumed the march. They followed a path to some Indian settlements on Buffalo Creek. After two days they camped at the mouth of Buffalo Creek. There they met the British officers who had been sent to that place to supply their troops. The next morning Nellis marched his warriors and prisoners to Fort Niagara, where his prisoners were turned over to the officers of that British garrison. [5, 12 at pages 274-276, 13, 15, 16]

At Fort Niagara Van Campen's identity became known. The Indians wanted to torture and burn him in retaliation for all the Indians he had killed in the past, so they offered the British several prisoners in exchange for him. Van Campen told the British commander that he was a prisoner of war so could not be given to the Indians, and if he were the same horrific fate would befall a British officer in rebel hands. He was offered a commission as a British officer but refused. [7]

The British moved their prisoner Moses Van Campen from Fort Niagara to Montreal and then to Quebec [5, 17]. In November, 1782 he was taken in a British fleet that sailed from Quebec to New York. In March, 1783 he was exchanged and rejoined Robinson's company in

Northumberland County. [5, 7, 13, 15, 16] He remained on the company payroll as a Lieutenant (a continental officer) through 4 November 1783 [6]. That month the army was discharged [7].

Location of the Battle



Van Campen said the battle took place where Mr. Culbertson had been killed [7]. John Linn’s history says, “This was on the Capt. James Irvine tract, a mile west of the present limits of Lock Haven, on which there was a spring called in the survey of 1769 ‘Hicks’ Spring’.” [18] John Meginness’ history says, “John Brady had a tract on Fishing Creek, which was returned as containing 393 acres. Captain James Irvine’s tract, westward, contained 547 acres. Culbertson, who was his tenant, was killed by the Indians near what Lukens called ‘Hick’s Spring’.” [19] Lukens’ 1769 survey map shows Hick’s Spring on Captain Irvine’s property [20].

Figure 2: Lukens’ Map, adapted from [20]

Exactly locating these events reveals a reason for Moses Van Campen to be put in charge of the Bald Eagle expedition; it was his home territory. In 1773 his father bought land on Fishing Creek, “eight miles above its junction with” the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. At that time Moses was a teenager living with his father, so this became his home. [12 at page 25]

The map below shows Fishing Creek with Bald Eagle Creek west of it. Hicks Spring is at the black dot on the west side of Bald Eagle Creek. The Van Campen property was upstream (south) of point-x by one and a half times the length of Great Island. To get a sense of scale on this map, note that Great Island is very close to a mile long and half a mile wide.



Path of the Forced March

The forced march from Hicks Spring to Fort Niagara included the following places and events. As many of these places as possible are shown at the lettered pegs on the following map.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. A Hicks Spring | battle |
| 2. mouth of Bald Eagle Creek | rangers' beached boat |
| 3. across the river | Indians abandoned canoes |
| 4. went across hills | |
| 5. B Pine creek above its first fork | elk for supper |
| 6. went up Pine Creek | |
| 7. C third fork of Pine Creek | |
| 8. moved along most northerly branch of Pine Creek | |
| 9. D head of Pine Creek | |
| 10. went cross-country | |
| 11. E head of Genesee River | |
| 12. went down the Genesee | |
| 13. F Pigeon Woods | Indians catching birds [21] |
| 14. went farther down the Genesee | |

- 15. G Canneadea first village, gauntlet, dance
- 16. followed a path
- 17. settlements on Buffalo Creek
- 18. H mouth of Buffalo Creek (near Lake Erie) met British supply officers
- 19. I Fort Niagara (on shore of Lake Ontario) turned over to garrison commander

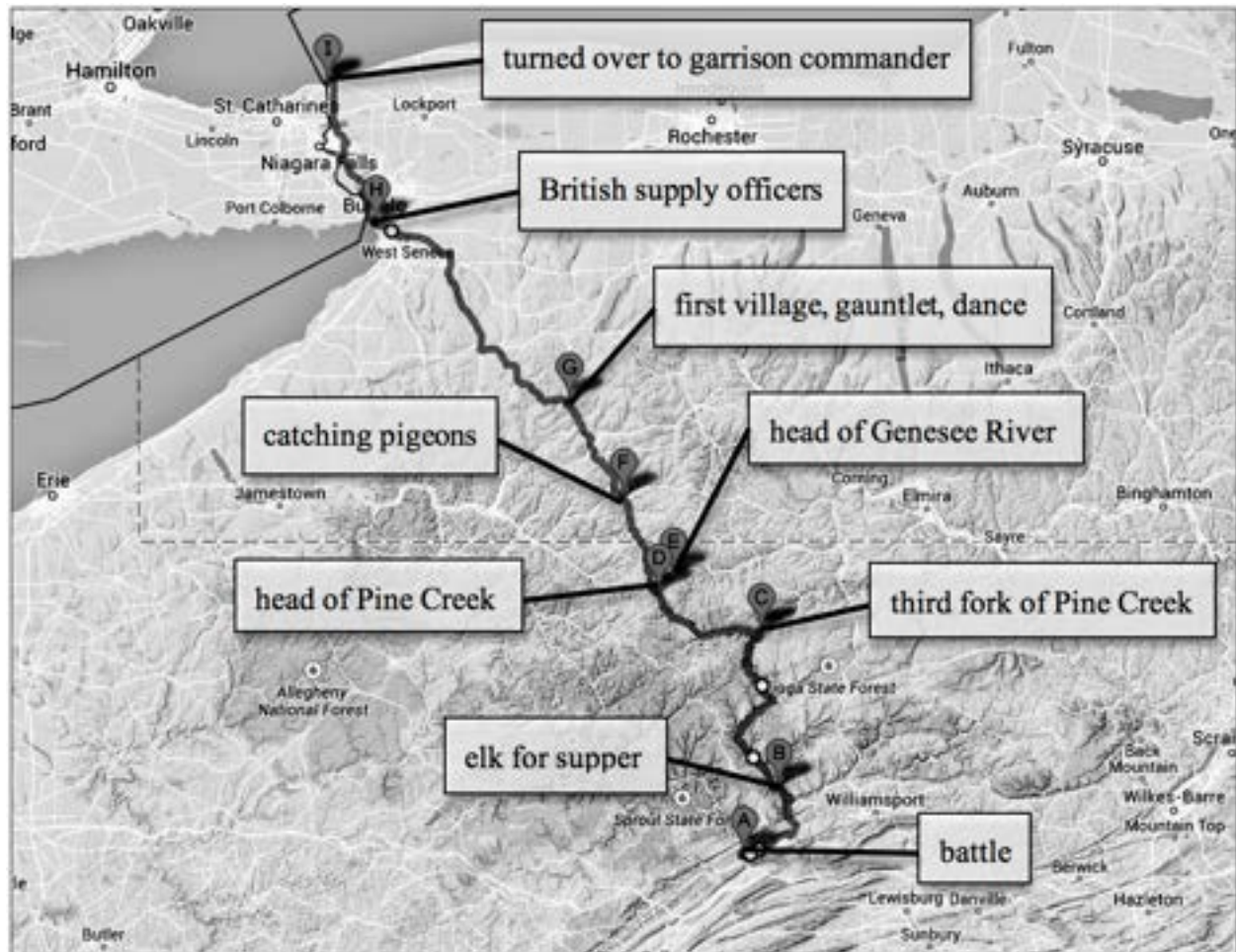


Figure 4: Forced March.

The distance along the path taken is 238 miles. The map shows that the Indians and their British leader knew exactly where they were going and exactly how to get there. It also shows the consistency and accuracy of Van Campen’s memory. The path they took, from modern Jersey Shore to the head of the Genesee River, was a major Indian trail during Revolutionary times. Today it is called the Pine Creek Path [22].

Results

BARKLEY	Mr.	civilian	no results known
BURNMELL or BURWELL healed,	Jonathan	Private	prisoner, wounded,
CARTON or CRATON	Henry	Private	lost weapon prisoner, killed

CRONINGER or GRONINGER	Leonard	Private	lost weapon
CULBERTSON	Mr./Esquire	civilian	escaped from battle
DOUGHERTY	James	Private	lost weapon
GREEN	Ebenezer	Sergeant	killed
GREEN or GREENS	Ebenezer	Private	lost weapon
HEMPLEMAN	Adam	Private	lost weapon
HENDERSON	James	Private	prisoner, killed
HUNT	Elisha	civilian	prisoner
KNAPP or NAP	Joshua	Private	lost weapon
LAMB	Michael	Private	lost weapon
McGRADY	William	Private	lost weapon
MILLER	William	Private	lost weapon
PRAY	Jonathan	Private	lost weapon
STEWART	Richard	Private	prisoner, killed
VAN CAMPEN	Moses	Lieutenant	prisoner, lost weapon
WALLACE	John	Private	prisoner, killed
7 unidentified participants			no results known

All twenty-six members of the expedition arrived at Hicks Spring and camped there for the night. All were attacked by Indians and involved in the resulting battle. Here is what we know about the fates of those men:

- 26 In the battle. (see list above)
- 9 Killed in the fight. (Sergeant Ebenezer Green, 8 unnamed)
- 3 Escaped before the surrender. (Esquire Culbertson, 2 unnamed)
-
- = 14 Captured.
- 3 Wounded prisoners killed immediately.
(Henry Craton, Richard Stewart, John Wallace)
-
- = 11 Taken on the forced march.
- 1 Wounded prisoner killed during the march. (James Henderson)
-
- = 10 Survivors. See note below.
(Jonathan Burwell - died after 1821 - pension file [8])
(Leonard Croninger - died 1831 - D.A.R. patriot database [23])

(James Daugherty - died 1825 - D.A.R. patriot database [23])
(Adam Hempleman - died 1825 - D.A.R. patriot database [23])
(Elisha/Elijah Hunt - died 1832 - pension file [24])
(Joshua Knapp - died after 1833 - pension file [9])
(William McGrady - died after 1789 - census 1790 [25])
(William Miller - died after Oct 1783 - clothing, discharge pay [26, 27])
(Jonathan Pray - died after 1820 - D.A.R. patriot database [23])
(Moses Van Campen - died 1849 - pension file [17], memoirs [12])

The eight unnamed men killed in the battle and the two unnamed men who escaped were: Mr. Barkley, Private Ebenezer Green or Greens, Michael Lamb, and the seven unidentified men.

Note: The survivor list might include either or both or neither of the unnamed men who escaped. The preceding is written as though neither is on that list. If the survivor list includes one of the escapees, then there was one man whose fate is unknown. If the list includes both escapees, then two men's fates are unknown.

The list of men who were killed and the list of men who lost their weapons are mutually exclusive. Therefore I believe but cannot prove that Private Green and Michael Lamb were not killed; they escaped with Culbertson. If so, then Mr. Barkley and the seven unidentified participants were killed in the battle with Sergeant Green. Then the final results of the battle are:

KILLED

Mr. Barkley
Henry Craton
Sgt. Ebenezer Green
James Henderson
Richard Stewart
John Wallace
unidentified #1
unidentified #2
unidentified #3
unidentified #4
unidentified #5
unidentified #6
unidentified #7

SURVIVED

Jonathan Burwell
Leonard Croninger
Esquire Culbertson
James Daugherty
Pvt. Ebenezer Green
Adam Hempleman
Elisha/Elijah Hunt
John Knapp
Michael Lamb
William McGrady
William Miller
Jonathan Pray
Moses Van Campen

Getting Paid

James Dougherty, Elijah Hunt, William McGready, William Miller, and Moses Vancampen were paid after surviving these events. No pay records for the other survivors have been found.

A discharge pay list as of 6 November 1783 said Private William Miller was to receive £20.17.3 [20 pounds, 17 shillings, and 3 pence] [28].

Relevant material is carefully transcribed below without insertion of the customary “sic”s. An undated document says only the following about William McGready and James Dougherty [28]:

for the pay of William McGready & James Dougherty Volunteers who were taken prisoners with a party under the Command of Lt VanCampen 50.0.0

Documents related to Elijah Hunt include the following, among others [28]:

I Do Hearby Certifie That Elijah Hunt has Returned from his Captivity on the Seventeenth Day of Nov. Las and not before to my knolidge he being one of my

Soldiers that was Taken Prisoner at Bald Eagle the 16th of April 1782 given under my hand this tenth Day of January 1785.

Thomas Robinson Capt.n

Six) Please to settle the above Soldiers account as he has neither money nor Cloths to Carry him Down and as he has not Received Pay Equal with the Rest ... your Humbel Serv.t Thos Robinson

Elijah Hunt of Capt.n Robinson's Ranging Co [ranging company]

Recd Jan'y 15h 1785 of Thos Robinson Junr

Elijah Hunt must make Oath of The time of his Return from Captivity and how long confined as prisoner, it seems strange that he should have been so long detained involuntarily ...

Jan'y 18th

Elijah Hunt's captivity until November of 1784 seemed strange because Moses Van Campen returned in March of 1783 [5, 7, 13, 15, 16] and the army was discharged in November of that year [7]. Hunt's late return suggests that he might have been adopted by an Indian family to replace a man who had been killed, and was moved to their home far away from British or Pennsylvania influence. If so, it might have taken a long time for the news of peace to reach him and even longer to negotiate his removal from that family.

On 14 May 1784 the Council approved a detailed accounting for, "Moses Vancampen Lieut of Capt.n Robinsons Rangers" [sic] which showed that he was due £215.6.5 [28].

Jonathan Burwell [8], Elisha/Elijah Hunt [24], Joshua Knapp [9], and Moses Van Campen [17] received pensions for their services in Robinson's Rangers during the Revolutionary War.

Aftermath

Historians have not reported that the Battle of Bald Eagle Creek had any effect on later events. The battle appears to have had no influence on local affairs except for impact on families of the men involved. However, describing the expedition and its effects on the participants adds to our understanding of the events, cultures, and individuals of the northwestern Pennsylvania frontier during Revolutionary times.

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The pension application submitted to Congress as motivation for this report is not in Van Campen's pension file. The Library of Congress does not have the application.

An extract of that application is quoted at length in Meginness, John, *Otzinachson; or, A History of the West Branch Valley of the Susquehanna*, Philadelphia, Henry B. Ashmead, 1857, pages 276-280.

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- [11] Anonymous, "A List of Arms Lost at Bald Eagle Creek in an Engagement of Capt. Tho. Robinson's Co. April 16th-'82.", *Pennsylvania Archives*, Series 6, Volume 2, page 336.
- [12] Hubbard, John Niles, *Sketches of Border Adventures in the Life and Times of Major Moses Van Campen, a Surviving Soldier of the Revolution*, Bath, New York, H. L. Underhill & Co., 1842, pages 244-276. Hubbard, a son of Van Campen's daughter Elizabeth, said that he wrote almost exclusively from statements by Van Campen.

- Minard, John, editor, *Sketches of Border Adventures in the Life and Times of Major Moses Vancampen by His Grandson J. Niles Hubbard*, Fillmore, New York, Jno. S. Minard, 1893, pages 210-227. This book is a rework of Hubbard's 1842 book, with some details removed and material about Van Campen's later life added. It adds nothing to the present paper.
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- [14] Anonymous, "Alphabetical List of Revolutionary Soldiers 1775-1783", *Pennsylvania Archives*, Series 2, Volume 13, page 109.
- [15] Commissioner, *In reply to your request ...*, undated, Revolutionary War pension file of Moses Van Campen, page 17, Ancestry.com. *U.S., Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1900* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Original data: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files (NARA microfilm publication M804, 2,670 rolls). Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15. National Archives, Washington, D.C. This is the first of two distinct form letters and the only one that specifies capture by Senecas.
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