

THE BLOCK HOUSE IN BERGEN WOOD

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History, as we know it, is replete with tales of Kings and Queens, Emperors, Tyrants, Dictators, Popes, Bishops and thousands of other famous persons. Its annals reveal a long procession of wars and conflicts, voyages of discovery, religious persecution, burnings at the stake, migrations and invasions. But, how much do we know of the day to day activities of the millions of unnamed and unknown persons who have peopled the earth since the dawn of history, amongst whom were our own ancestors? Of these we know next to nothing. In far too many cases even the names of grandparents are forgotten and all that is known is that they were English, Scottish, Irish, French, or German in origin.

Each of us claims to know the name of his Loyalist ancestor. But, do we know much more than that? Our ancestor certainly was familiar with his part in the struggle against rebellion. It is natural to assume that his children know the details of these events. The grandchildren likely recalled only the high lights of the old man's tales. About all that they would remember was that grandpa was in some battle, and that the smell of gunpowder made him cough. Quite likely the next generation recalled only that he was a Loyalist. Succeeding generations sad to relate, so often did not know even this detail. Indeed, there are many such descendants who know not, nor care, who he was or what he may have done.

It is for this reason that I wish to relate a forgotten episode of the Revolution. An episode involving a number of Loyalists who settled along the Bay of Quinte. Those of us who claim to be their offspring should be proud of their heroism, and should endeavour to keep alive the details of this amazing feat.

In the early days of the Revolution, the rebels occupied New York City. In the early summer of 1776, the British army landed on Long Island, and in the middle of September of the same year entered the City, where they remained until the evacuation in the summer of 1783. During this period, thousands of loyal Americans flocked to the city with their families for their safety. The men were incorporated into Loyalist regiments and companies. One of these was a militia company organized and commanded by Captain, later Major Ward. This unit, untrained in military procedure, was employed in pioneering duties, one of which was the cutting of firewood. Their area of activity was at Bergen Wood, on the New Jersey shore, opposite the present Riverside Park in New York City. Here, they constructed a block - house for their protection, in case of enemy action.

About seventy-five men of Ward's Company were at work in Bergen Wood in the early morning of July 19th, 1780. That same morning, the American General "Mad Anthony" Wayne, with two brigades, amounting to more than two thousand men, advanced from Southern New Jersey to round up the cattle from the farms in the Bergen area. This having been accomplished, and hearing that the refugees had constructed a Block-house in Bergen Wood, they decided to destroy it. The story of the action, as described in contemporary records, is very revealing.

The rebel version, which appeared in the Pennsylvania Packet of July 25th, 1780, reads as follows:

"July 19, - This morning, the first and second Pennsylvania brigades commanded by Brigadier-General Wayne marched from their respective encampments for the purpose of collecting and bringing off the cattle in Bergen County, New Jersey, which were exposed to the enemy. After executing the order, General Wayne, on his return, visited a block-house in the vicinity of Bergen town, built and garrisoned by a number of refugees to prevent the disagreeable necessity of being forced into the British seervice. The work was found proof against light artillery, when part of the

first and second Pennsylvania regiments were ordered to attempt it by assault; when, after forcing their way through the abattis and pickets, a retreat was indispensably necessary, there being no other entrance into the block-house but a subterranean passage, sufficient for one to pass. The American loss consists of sixty-nine, including three officers, killed and wounded. Lieutenant Moody, and six of his party, were taken on their return from an excursion to Sussex."

The British version of the action at Bergen Wood is found in the Public Record Office, in London, England, in letter No. 100, of the papers of Sir Henry Clinton, the British Commander in New York. It is addressed to Lord George Germain, and reads as follows:

"East Hampton, Suffolk County, Long Island, the 20th Aug., 1780.

My Lord:

I have the satisfaction of communicating to your Lordship an Instance of Courage, which reflects the greatest honour on a small body of the Refugees.

About seventy of them had taken post on a part of the opposite Shore of the North River called Bulls Ferry, where they had fortified themselves with a Blockhouse and stockade to be protected in cutting wood, the labour they were employed in for their maintenance.

A corps of near two thousand Rebels, under their General Wayne, Irving and Proctor with seven pieces of Cannon made an attack upon them on the 21st Ultimo. Notwithstanding a Cannonade of three hours, almost every shot of which penetrated through the Block House, and an Attempt to carry the place by Assault, they were repulsed by these brave men with the loss of a great many killed and wounded. The Exertions of the Refugees did not cease after having resisted so great a force. They followed the Enemy, seized their Stragglers and rescued from them the Cattle they were driving from the neighbouring district.

The Block House which I visited was pierced with fifty-two Shot in one face only and the two small Guns that were in it dismounted. Six of the Refugees were killed and fifteen wounded, the far greater part in the Blockhouse.

I have the honour to be, with the greatest respect,

Your Lordship's Most obedient and most humble servant

H. Clinton."

An acknowledgement of this letter is found in the British Record Office, being C.O./5.No. 70. It is an extract from a letter to Sir Henry Clinton, K.B., from George Germain. It reads, as follows:

"The very extraordinary Instance of Courage shown by the seventy loyal Refugees in the Affair of Bulls Ferry, of which you make such honourable Mention, is a pleasing Proof of the Spirit and Resolution with which Men in their Circumstances will act against their Oppressors, and how great advantages the King's Service may desire from employing those of approved Fidelity; and His Majesty, to encourage' such Exertions, commands me to desire you will acquaint the Survivors of the brave seventy that their intrepid Behaviour is approved by their Sovereign

Whitehall, Oct. 4th, 1780.

Additional information regarding the Block-house in Bergen Wood is found in the Public Record Office. It is recorded as A.O. 13/67, being the Memorial of Thomas Ward, late of the County of Orange and Province of New York. It reads in part:

"In April, 1780 (with the approbation of Sir Henry Clinton) he embodied 100 Loyal Refugees under the Command of himself and Harding, Hauser, Babcock, etc., and took post at Bull's Ferry on the West side of the Hudson or North River ... to cut and bring in to New York Firewood for the Barracks Master General. It was necessary to erect a Block House for safety.

"On the 21st day of July, 1780 the Post at Bull's Ferry was attacked by General Wayne with a large Body Picked American Troops who after a very severe engagement were forced to retire."

An entirely different but very interesting account of the action in Bergen Wood is found in 'The Life and Career of Major John Andre,' written by Winthrop Sargent, Boston, 1861. It is a poem (a parody on the famous British poem, "Chevy Chase") entitled "The Cow Chase," evidently composed in 1780, by Andre. Through seventy-two verses it ridicules the American attempts to carry off the cattle of Bergen County as well as their futile attack on the Block-House. It reads, in part:

*Know, that some paltry Refugees
Whom I've a mind to fight,
Are playing h-l among the trees
That grow on yonder height.
Their fort and block-houses we'll level.
And deal a horrid slaughter:
We'll drive the scoundrels to the devil.
And ravish wife and daughter.
I, under cover of th'attack.
Whilst you are all at blows.
From English-Neighbourhood and Tinack
Will drive away the cows.
For well you know the latter is
The serious operation :
And fighting with the Refugees
In only--demonstration.
His daring words, from all the crowd
Such great applause did gain,
That every man declar'd aloud
For serious work-with Wayne.*

Many verses later we have:

*And now the foe began to lead
His forces to th' attack;
Balls whistling unto balls succeed,
And make the blockhouse crack.
No shot could pass, if you will take
The Generals word for true;
But 'tis a d-mnable mistake,
For every shot went through.
The firmer as the rebels press'd
The loyal heroes stand.
Virtue had nerv'd each honest breast,
And industry each hand.*

And still another interesting verse reads, as follows:

*Five Refugees. 'tis true, were found
Stiff on the blockhouse floor:
But then, 'tis thought the shot went round.
And in at the back door.*

The poet, in a facetious mood, ends the poem with this verse:

*And now I've closed my epic strain.
I tremble as I shew it;
Lest this same warrior-drover Wayne
Should ever catch the poet!*

There is something prophetic contained in this last verse of "The Cow Chase." Major Andre, the famous spy of the Revolution wrote these verses in Elizabethtown on August 1st, 1780, nearly two weeks after the assault on the Block-house.

On the following Sept. 19th, Andre left New York by boat for his rendezvous with Benedict Arnold at Fort Montgomery. Andre was captured two days later and was executed on October 2nd.

The heroic action at Bergen Wood was recalled in Upper Canada in 1807, when the British Embargo Act threatened war with the American States. Upper Canada ordered twenty-five per cent of the militia called out for active duty. The address of Lieut.-Col. Richard Cartwright to the militia on 15th December, 1807 (as recorded in the Cartwright Letter Book in the Douglas Library, Queen's University) has this reference to General Wayne's most embarrassing moment.

"...Our Population affords Thousands of brave Men to arm in the Cause of their Country; and supported as we shall be by a regular Military Force, what have we to fear from any attempt to invade us? Some who now hear me know from Experience what a few brave & determined Men can perform; and let us learn from the Heroes of the Block House what may be achieved against the greatest Superiority of Numbers by men who are not wanting to themselves. During the American War seventy - five undisciplined Loyalists in a paltry Block House near Paule's Rock, on the New Jersey Shore, beat off, after a Conflict of several Hours, General Wayne with upwards of 2000 American regular Troops and six Pieces of Cannon. The Americans had a very considerable Number of Men killed & wounded on the Occasion. - This incident gave rise to a Ludicrous Poem by the unfortunate Major Andre called Cow Chase. Some of these brave fellows belong to the Frontenac Militia.-R.C."

William Canniff in his "Settlement of Upper Canada", in a reference to the Peterson Family, has this to say on the subject:

"Nicholas Peterson with his three sons, Nicholas, Paul and Christopher, were living near New York, and took part in the war. They assisted in fighting one of the most remarkable battles of the revolution. It took place on the west side of the North River, opposite the city of New York, when seventy-five British Militiamen resisted an attack made by 5,500 rebels, for several hours. The British had a Block House, made of logs, with a hollow excavation behind, and in this hollow they loaded their guns and would then step forward and discharge them at the enemy. Only three of the British were slain; the rebels lost many. These Petersons . . ."

Who were the seventy-five heroic defenders of the Block House in Bergen Wood? Of the five men who died in the course of the onslaught we know nothing, at least, there is no known record of them. It must be assumed that those who survived until the evacuation in 1783 emigrated chiefly to New Brunswick and Canada. A few may have returned to the Old Country or to the West Indies. I have tried in vain to turn up a list of the participants. However the names of a few have survived, including at least a dozen of our first Loyalist settlers. They include the following:

1. Captain, late Major, Thomas Ward, who settled, with his family, in Nova Scotia. In addition to the land grants to which he was entitled as a Major, the British Government gave him an annual grant of £60, in recognition of his services as major of his Militia Company.
2. Captain David Babcock, a settler in Kingston Township, whose petition for land on 17 Nov. 1797, states that he served in the Block-House.
3. Lieut. William Howe, a settler in Kingston, served in the action at the Block-house, according to the affidavits of Thomas and John Burnet, David Babcock and John Edgar. My third great grandfather.
4. Thomas Burnet states that he served with William Howe at the Block-House. He settled in Kingston Township in 1784.
5. John Burnet, also of Kingston Township in 1784, likewise stated that he had served with William Howe at the Block-house.
6. John Edgar, also of Kingston Township in 1784, likewise stated that he had served with William Howe at the Block-house. The U.E. List states that John Edgar was wounded in the defence of the Block-house.
7. Nazareth Hill, a settler in Kingston Township, when applying for land on 17th Nov. 1797, stated that "he was in the block house when it was attacked by General Wayne."
8. Benjamin Babcock was a settler in Kingston Township. The U. E. List states that he served in Ward's block house.
9. Nicholas Peterson, Sr., a settler in Adolphustown Township, according to Wm. Caniff's statement in 'Settlement of Upper Canada,' was at the defence of the Blockhouse under Capt. Ward, with his three sons.
10. Nicholas Peterson, Jr. son of Nicholas, Sr., confirms his presence at the Block house in his Loyalist Claim.
11. Paul Peterson, a settler in Adolphustown, son of Nicholas Sr.
12. Christopher Peterson, a settler in Adolphustown, son of Nicholas, Sr.
13. Stephen Roblin, listed as settled in Sophiasburgh. in his application for land on July 7, 1798, asked for additional land because of his service with Capt. Ward in the block house when it was attacked by General Wayne, and stated that he had been wounded at that time. He received 300 additional acres for having served in that remarkable defence.

In addition to the above mentioned survivors of the defence of the Block-house, it is possible that the following men were present:

1. Alexander Snider, who, on 21st August 1797, applied for lands as a settler. The recommendation was 'for 200 acres having served as a volunteer during Mr. Wayne's aggression.
2. Samuel Miller, whose name is found in the U.E. Supplementary List, with the following notation: -Incorporated Loyalist - at Ward's Block House.

3. Samuel Williams, whose name appears in the U. E. List, with the following notation - One of this name Lieutenant of Artillery in Major Ward's Loyalists.

That is the sum total of my knowledge of one of the most amazing episodes of the Revolutionary. One in which some seventy-five untrained militia men withstood for four hours the onslaught of two thousand trained soldiers supported by seven field guns. Nor was that all. The survivors, numbering less than sixty-five, gave chase to the retreating rebels, capturing the stragglers and rescuing the cattle which had been collected by the invading brigades.

As far as it is known, there is no mention of this outstanding event in either British, American or Canadian histories. Admittedly, the King and his ministers commended the action. Major Ward received a small retirement pension. In addition, a number of the survivors received additional grants of land, but nothing more. Ward's junior officers, although duly appointed, were not issued with commissions by either Sir Henry Clinton or Sir Guy Carleton, and, thus, were not recognized by the Executive Council of Upper Canada.

I have never been in New Jersey, except on two very brief occasions a number of years ago. However, on my infrequent visits to New York City, I have looked across the Hudson River at the heights above the New Jersey shore opposite Riverside Park and have wondered just where the Block-house was located. It may have been anywhere above those distant cliffs—in the compound of an apartment house, in the centre of some village square, or on a grassy mound in the broad acres of Hudson Park. In any event, if it is ever located, I shall be surprised if a plaque stands beside it, marking the site of the Block-house in Bergen Wood.

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