

HOMETOWN HERO

William McKerachan

teacher and patriot

It's unclear why William McKerachan traveled from Belfast, Ireland to make his home in America. Perhaps he was worn down by the ongoing bitter conflict between the British and French which began to threaten the shores of his homeland. Or perhaps, as a young man, he wanted to see what America had to offer. Whatever the reason, in 1774, McKerachan, a schoolteacher and shop owner was firmly entrenched in the village of Nanticoke. His peaceful existence, however, would soon be challenged as he would find himself thrust into a war that placed the warring Yankees and Pennamites side by side fighting against a common enemy, Great Britain.

Yankees vs Pennamites

In the 1600's, King Charles II gave the same land in North-Central Pennsylvania to both Pennsylvania and Connecticut allowing both groups of settler's legal rights to the lands. When the Connecticut Yankees, sent forth their newly established Susquehanna Company to survey the tract of land for the creation of a new settlement in 1753, they discovered that Pennsylvania settlers, or Pennamites, were living along the Susquehanna River and throughout the valley. Pennamites argued their right to the land should be honored as they had been there long before the Yankees arrived. Neither side relinquished their rights.

The first Yankee-Pennamite War lasted from 1763 to 1771 and ended with a Yankee victory. The second war ended in the Battle of Rampart Rocks in August 1775, (Nanticoke Falls in the area of Honey Pot and West Nanticoke). A strong Pennamite force of seven hundred men under Colonel William Plunkett defeated the Yankees and drove out the settlers on the west bank of the Susquehanna River. Connecticut assembled four hundred men, under Zebulon Butler and on Christmas Eve of that year surprised the advancing column of Plunkett's army at Rampart Rocks. Captain Lazarus Stewart and his Paxton Boys ambushed Plunkett's column at Harvey's Creek (near the intersection of Route 11 and Route 29) as they attempted to cross the creek.

The Pennamites were defeated. It was at this time that the Yankees gave McKerachan a role of heading one of the six companies formed to defend the town:

List of Companies and Leaders -

1st Company - Capt. Stephen Fuller, Lieut. John Garrett, Ensign Christopher Avery

2nd Company - Capt. Nathaniel Landon, Lieut. George Dorrance, Ensign Asahel Buck

3rd Company - Capt. Samuel Ransom, Lieut. Perrin Ross, Ensign Asaph Whittlesey

4th Company - Capt. Solomon Strong, Lieut. Jonathan Parker, Ensign Timothy Keys

5th Company - Capt. William McKerachan, Lieut. Lazarus Stewart, Ensign Silas Gore

6th Company - Capt. Rezin Geer, Lieut. Daniel Gore, Ensign Matthias Hollenback

Skirmishes between the two sides continued. But, by 1778, settlers were called to ban together in a common cause, to fight against the greatest military force of its time, the British Army.

On July 3, McKerachan was among the Pennamite and Yankee settlers who joined forces and marched out of Forty Fort and headed North to where they would battle British forces.

One can only imagine what was going through the mind of William McKerachan as he participated in the heated discussion between Lazarus Stewart and Zebulon Butler and Nathan Denison at Forty Fort on the morning of July 3, 1778. Was he in agreement with Stewart that members of the colonial militia go out and engage the British troops advancing toward the Wyoming Valley or did he see the merits of Captains Butler and Denison decision to wait for reinforcements. We'll never know, but what we do know is that the outcome of the early morning encounter decided McKerachan's fate that day.

A Fateful Decision

The garrison at Pittston Fort had fallen to the British and a compliment of Continental Army Troops from the southern end of the valley had not yet arrived at Forty Fort. On the morning of July 3, British Colonel John Butler sent a message to Colonel Nathan Denison of the Continental Army at Forty Fort, demanding that all forts, troops, and other premises in the valley be surrendered. In return, he guaranteed the safety of all inhabitants. Denison returned a message saying he would consult with Lieutenant Colonel Zebulon Butler. He then sent orders out to all militiamen to join him at Forty Fort. By noon, some 375 men including McKerachan and his men joined Denison at the fort.

Once there, McKerachan made a fateful decision to turn over his unit to Captain Lazarus Stewart a member of the Paxton or Paxtang Boys, a group of vigilantes who were accused of the massacre of the Conestoga Indians in 1763. According to *History of Wyoming*: in a series of letters from Charles Miner to his son, By Charles Miner, Adam Hubley; McKerachan said to Captain Stewart, “My pursuits in life have thus far been those of peace, you have been used to war and accustomed to command. On parade I can maneuver my men, but in the field no unnecessary hazard should be run. A mistake might prove fatal. Take you the lead; I will fight under you with my men as an aid, or a private in the ranks. Your presence at the head of the Hanover boys will impart confidence.”

Stewart insisted the best plan of action was to have the troops meet the British on the battlefield. Denison and Butler wanted to wait for the reinforcements known to be on the way. We can only imagine that as a teacher, McKerachan must have listened intently to both sides. Most of the militiamen agreed with Stewart as they were witness to fires consuming properties to the north. They argued that the whole valley could be devastated if they waited. Stewart reportedly questioned both officers’ bravery. Colonel Denison gave in to the demands and by 3 p.m. most of the garrison left the protection of the fort.

Still considering it rash to attack, Denison and Butler halted at Abraham’s Creek, a mile or so northeast. Another argument occurred, and again both were questioned as to their bravery. Under immense pressure, Butler and Denison agreed to proceed, advancing toward Wintermoot’s Fort. Colonel Zebulon Butler led 484 men to meet the enemy along with Continental Army Captains Durkee and Ransom. A line of battle was formed. Colonel Butler ordered his men to keep firing into the British line. Butler's men advanced, pushing back the British but the American's were swarmed by Indians who had been hiding in the woods. In a few moments many men lay dead. The line was forced to retreat with the Indians right behind them taking scalps. Those who were able to outrun the Indians made their way back to the fort. Many men were captured and put to death. Forty-four men led by Asaph Wittlesey tried to defend the women and children at Forty Fort. How and where William McKerachan fell in battle is unknown, but his name along with Lazarus Stewart and others is inscribed on the Wyoming Monument marking a burial site of just some of those killed that day. He traveled from his home in Ireland to escape the threat of war, but ended up fighting for a cause in a new land. A struggle that would eventually give rise to the freedoms we experience today. Therefore, we label him a hometown hero.

[To Read more about The Battle of Wyoming: Visit the Mill Memorial Library](#)

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