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The Death of Major Samuel McColloch: Historical Record and Oral History

by

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Perhaps no historical figure of the Upper Ohio Valley during the Revolutionary War period evokes more admiration as a model of frontier heroism than Major Samuel McColloch. The McColloch family was among the early settlers of West Virginia's northern panhandle. Emigrating from the south branch of the Potomac in 1770, four McColloch brothers settled in the Short Creek area, approximately eight miles above Wheeling and six miles east of the

Ohio River. (1) The McCollochs were active in the early frontier settlements, filling the ranks of the militia and serving in leadership positions. Samuel and his brother, John, sons of John McColloch, became militia officers and respected community leaders. Samuel was commissioned as a Major in 1777. His brother John became a Captain in 1787. (2) Samuel served as a member of the early court at West Liberty and commanded Fort Van Meter, styled the "Courthouse Court" because it was the site of the first civil court in the northwest wilderness after Ohio County separated from West Augusta in 1776. (3)

While the McColloch family certainly contributed to the early settlement of the northern panhandle and the defeat of the British on the western frontier during the Revolution, Samuel's place in history as a frontier hero was secured as a

result of an incident that occurred in Wheeling. During the attack on Fort Henry by a combined force of British and Indians on September 2, 1777, Major Samuel McColloch arrived with a company of horsemen from Short creek to reinforce the defenders. Directing his men into the fort, Major McColloch was cut off by the attacking Indians, leaving him no choice but to flee in the direction of Fort Van Meter. Riding up "Wheeling Hill" he met another group of Indians arriving to join the battle for Fort Henry. With Indians pursuing him from the rear and facing a large war part in front, McColloch chose a desperate maneuver. He spurred his wild eyed and bucking steed over the precipice of the hill, which slants at nearly a ninety-degree angle to Wheeling Creek below, a distance of several hundred feet. As bullets from the rifles of the Indians clipped the branches around him, he guided his horse between the trees, crashed through the underbrush and maintained his balance while his horse slipped and stumbled down the hill. The anger of his enemies soon turned to awe as the Indians watched McColloch emerge unhurt from the tree line below and ride away to safety across Wheeling Creek. (4)

Today a monument commemorates the site of "McColloch's Leap" along the highway traversing Wheeling Hill. For years, people debated which of the McColloch brothers, Samuel or John, made the famous leap. The debate began when historians first wrote about those terrible years when the pioneers battled the British and Indians for control of the upper Ohio Valley. In the absence of

much written documentation, early writers relied on the testimony of the pioneers themselves, or their descendants, to piece together the history. Inevitably, conflicting accounts emerged, the result of memories clouded by the passage of time and tempered by prejudice and exaggeration.

In 1851, Wills De Haas addressed the issue of who jumped over the hill to escape the Indians. Relying on the testimony of Colonel (Archibald) Woods and "all the older citizens," De Haas concluded that Samuel was the frontier hero who made the leap. De Haas clinched the argument by pointing to the fact that Samuel was commissioned a Major in 1775 and John in 1795 (even though Ohio County Court records reveal that John received his commission in 1793) (5), so the Major McColloch who escaped death or torture on September 2, 1777 had to be Samuel McColloch. (6)

While it took nearly seventy years to validate the heroism of Samuel McColloch, the circumstances surrounding his death are still unclear. Generally, historical writers agree that Major Sam was killed on July 30, 1782, while on a scouting mission with his brother, John. However, accounts differ regarding the details of the scout and the story of McColloch's death.

Throughout the summer of 1782 the pioneers expected attacks from the Indians as a result of recent raids in

the West Liberty area. In the early spring of 1782 Simon Girty captained a war party of Wyandots from the Upper Sandusky who crossed the Ohio River at Mingo Bottom and fanned out in two separate groups to kill or capture any settlers they found. One group, led by the chief Scotosh, captured Thomas Edgerton who was on his way to borrow a log chain from a neighbor not far from Wellsburg, West Virginia. The other war party, led by Girty himself, invaded the home of Zachariah Spriggs, near West Liberty, and captured John Stevenson of the militia and a black slave who later escaped. Girty and his Indians escaped across "Girty's Point," a prominence rising above the mouth of Short Creek, arriving back to their villages with the unfortunate Stevenson on April 8, 1782. (7)

In June, 1782, Colonel William Crawford led a frontier army, comprising numerous militiamen from the upper Ohio Valley, to an ignominious defeat by the Indians in northwest Ohio, resulting in the torture and death of Crawford. (8) The capture of Edgerton and Spriggs, so close to Fort Van Meter, and the defeat of Crawford's army, caused the people on the frontier to remain vigilant throughout the summer of 1782. It was during this period of heightened tension that Sam McColloch and his brother left the security of Fort Van Meter to scout for signs of Indians. After the McCollochs left Fort Van Meter on their scout, their neighbors ventured out to work the surrounding farms in teams, guarded by armed militia. (9)

It is not clear where the McCollochs began their mission. Major Sam commanded Fort Van Meter, but two forts on the tributaries of Short Creek were variously called Van Meter, one at West Liberty and one at Clinton. (10) From either fort, the McCollochs could scout for signs of impending Indian attack.

All the stories conclude that the brothers headed in an easterly direction toward the Ohio River, a favorite crossing point for war parties invading the frontier. However, historical accounts differ regarding the route taken by the McCollochs once they reached the river. One writer sends the brothers south, toward Wheeling, (11) and another north in the direction of the fort at Beech Bottom. (12) One author asserts that the McCollochs traveled as far north as Holliday's Cove Fort, spent the night, and returned to Short Creek. (13) Most sources have the McCollochs ascending the hill rising near the mouth of Short Creek to its apex at Girty's Point. (14)

The accounts of the ambush that took the life of Samuel McColloch differ somewhat. All agree that he and John were ambushed by a part of unknown Indians while following the trail near Girty's Point, and Major Sam fell dead from his horse. It's unclear whether Major Sam was shot by a horde of warriors lying in ambush (15), a few scouts hiding in trees (16), or advanced scouts hiding in the underbrush along the trail. (17) All accounts agree that John rode

ahead of his brother when the shots were fired, missing John and killing Sam. At some point in the confusion, John shot and killed an Indian scalping his brother, and then escaped amidst a hail of gunfire, his clothing perforated by bullets. One account says he suffered a slight wound to his hip. (18)

The next day, John led a group of men from Van Meter's to the fallen Major where they discovered his heart missing from the viscera. (19) Major McColloch was brought back to Fort Van Meter (either at West Liberty or Clinton) and either buried in the fort (20) or near the fort. (21) Some time later the settlers were told by an Indian who witnessed the death of Samuel McColloch that the war party paid the Major a grisly tribute by eating his heart so that they might become as brave as Major McColloch. The Indians remarked, "...they (the McCollochs) had killed a great captain (the Indian shot by John McColloch), but we killed a greater one." (22)

It is difficult to verify the accuracy of historical events that depend on stories told by people who were not present at the time. DeHaas relied on the testimony of John Yarnell, whose aunt often spoke of the story. (23) Narcissa Doddridge, who spent much of her life collecting information for an update of her father's famous work, one of the earliest histories of the upper Ohio Valley and written by an eyewitness of the early frontier, relied on the memory of John McColloch's widow. Narcissa Doddridge corroborated her facts with "Col. Moorhead, of Zanesville, and the

Hon. T. Smith of Chillicothe, Ohio. (24) John McColloch, the only eyewitness, other than the Indians, left no written account, although DeHaas was told by John McColloch's family that Sam's brother kept a "regular journal of his personal movement..." (25) DeHaas presumed that McColloch's journal was destroyed. (26)

The account of David McColloch, John's son, which was recorded by Lyman Draper in 1845, corroborates much of the information in the literature but also provides a different slant to the story. Draper wrote: "... (John McColloch) had been with Major Sam to the mouth of Short Creek. Their little dog growled and seemed uneasy. John suggested that Indians might be around. Two Indians presented themselves. Two guns were fired, one at each. John was ahead and escaped unhurt, but the other was shot down. John rode on a few steps, looked back, and saw an Indian on his brother in the act of scalping him. John wheeled and shot the Indian through the head. The other Indian fled. John rode to his brother's aid, saw he was dead. Hearing several Indians yelling down the hill, he put off for the fort. This happened just at night. Next morning a party with John McColloch went and brought in the body of Sam McColloch. His heart was missing, and he leaned against a sugar tree, recently cut down with the initials of name engraved." (27)

David McColloch told Draper another interesting aspect to the incident. David said that he heard his father tell how he communicated the news of Major Sam's death to the people in the fort. Overcome with grief, John was so distraught that he dreaded having to tell people face to face, so, instead, he arrived at Fort Van Meter with half his face painted black, Indian fashion, and leading his brother's horse, the Indian sign for death. (28)

David McColloch's story suggests that the brothers were ambushed by scouts for a larger body of Indians and not a horde of warriors. The second Indian could have been fleeing to summon the main war party which arrived shortly and fired upon John who sped away in the direction of Fort Van Meter. It is still unclear whether the Indians who felled the Major were a small war party or Indian army of one hundred warriors intent on attacking Fort Van Meter as some authors suggest. (29) Regardless, the attack never came. (30)

Presumably, many people of that time knew the exact spot where Major Samuel met his death since men from Van Meter retrieved his body and then retreated to the safety of the fort. Even after the deaths of Major McColloch's contemporaries, however, people in the area near West Liberty and Short Creek probably knew about the location. As time wore on, only the oral histories of local families kept the story alive until the late nineteenth century when two histories published a description of the ambush site. In the *History of the Pan-*

Handle, the authors reported the 'fatal disaster' as occurring "on the farm now (1879) owned by James Ridgely, on the road known as Girty's Point road, about two miles from the mouth of Short Creek, Brooke County." (31) In 1882, John Gabriel Jacob, a Brooke County historian, reported the death site as two miles from the river on lands owned by James Ridgely. Jacob reports: "The sugar tree upon which the initials "S.McC." were cut at the time, died thirty years ago, but a grove of young walnuts exists as this time at the precise spot." (32) The initialed sugar tree corresponds to David McColloch's 1845 tale that "...he (Sam McColloch) leaned against a sugar tree, recently cut down with the initials of name engraved." (33) The discrepancy between Jacob's belief that the tree was cut down in 1851 and David McColloch's statement that it was cut down about 1845 indicates that for at least sixty three years, the death site was known to the local people in the vicinity of West Liberty and circulated among family members.

Recent information corroborates Jacob's contention that Sam McColloch was killed on the James Ridgely farm and accurately pinpoints the spot of the Major's demise. A McColloch family tree notes that Major Samuel McColloch "was killed by Indians on the hill above Girty's Point about 100 yards east of the point where the road coming down from Waddles Mill on Short Creek intersects the Girty's Point and West

Liberty Road.” (34) Samuel Sprigg Jacob, a McColloch descendant and local historian, wrote in a letter to the *Wheeling News Register* in 1916:

“In regard to this spot (Major Sam’s death site), I have the evidence of two old native citizens of this section—old when I was comparatively young. I remember once previous to the Civil war, of standing upon the top of the hill on the Brady farm, back of West Liberty, in company with John Brady, a son of Captain Brady, another noted Indian scout of pioneer days, and who is buried in the West Liberty cemetery. Mr. Brady, pointing towards the Ohio River, asked if (I) saw a sugar tree standing in an open field. I replied, I did. He then said the tree was near the spot where Samuel McColloch was killed by the Indians, and his bowels hung upon the limb of a tree nearby.” (35)

Sprigg Jacob asked Mrs. G. (Greenbury) D. (Dorsey) Bonar whose family farm was adjacent to the Ridgely farm if she could locate the spot where Major McColloch was killed. She replied: “I can, where I have always understood it to be.” Then she described the location as near the “bars” (presumably gates) leading into the Jim Ridgely farm. The Brady and Bonar accounts locate the spot at approximately the same place. (36)

In his book *McColloch Family of Ohio County, WVA.*, Samuel W. McColloch constructed a “topographic profile depicting the hills and valleys as seen from the hill on the Brady farm looking west to the spot of Maj. Sam’s

death.” (37) McColloch concluded: “There is obviously a clear, unobstructed view to the sugar tree which if 50-60 feet tall would have been quite visible (as described to Sprigg Jacob by John Brady sometime before the Civil War).” (38)

In 1930 the Brooke County Historical Society planned to erect a monument commemorating the location of Major McColloch’s death at a spot on the farm of William McColloch Bonar, a grandson of Mrs. G. D. Bonar who established the location for Sprigg Jacob in the late nineteenth century. (39) Here is where the historical record and family history intersperse. The author’s father, Glenn, heard about the location from his father, William McColloch Bonar, who presumably heard it from his father and grandparents. The family oral history coincides exactly with the historical record. The old Waddle’s Run road is gone, a victim of construction for the Wheeling-Ohio County Airport and the mining in the area. The West Liberty/Girty’s Point Road still connects to West Liberty, two and one-half miles east. The intersection of the Waddle’s Run and West Liberty roads described by Mahala McColloch in her family genealogy (40) now corresponds to the overlook of the Wheeling-Ohio County Airport, just east of the main building. In 1963 a National Geodetic Survey marker (KY3204) was placed on the brow of the hill just above the death site. The marker is located eight miles north-northeast of Wheeling, two and one

half miles west-northwest of West Liberty, two and one-quarter miles east of the Ohio River (41), 0.1 mile north of the Ohio-Brooke County line, on a hill just east of the Wheeling-Ohio County Airport and on the property owned by the family of William McColloch Bonar. (42)

The location of Major Sam's death in 1782 is 100 feet directly north of the marker, down the hill, just above the current West Liberty-Girty's Point Road. While the sugar tree marking the spot is long gone, Glenn Bonar remembered his father saying that the "old timers" talked about plowing up parts of the roots while cultivating the field. Walnut trees still populate the area, and the Bonars once harvested sugar from trees near the location.

The Brook County Historical Society never erected the monument. However, it is clear that the historical record and the histories of the McColloch and Bonars, pioneer families of West Virginia's northern panhandle, establish the location of Major Samuel McColloch's death. Jacob lamented that after the initialized sugar tree disappeared, a 'more enduring monument should be erected to mark the place.' (43)

Few edifices have been erected to honor the pioneers of the upper Ohio Valley or to pinpoint the location of significant events during the Revolutionary War era. While another monument to commemorate a hero and soldier such as Samuel McColloch and to preserve a bit of West Virginia history

would certainly serve a good purpose, the early settlers deserve a larger tribute. Americans are the custodians of their pioneer legacy, and each generation must understand the importance that the first generation played in the settlement of the west and the founding of America. As long as we remember and appreciate the sacrifices that the pioneers of the old northwest endured to make life better for us, their monument to greatness will transcend mere brick and mortar for it will live on as a kindred spirit, alive in the hearts and minds of every American.

NOTES

1. Joseph Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND WARS OF WESTERN VIRGINIA AND PENNSYLVANIA** (1834: Reprint, Parsons: McClain Printing Co., 1960),274.
2. Samuel McColloch, **MCCOLLOCH FAMILY OF OHIO COUNTY, WVA** (Katy, Texas, 2002), 59.
3. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 275.
4. Wills De Haas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS OF WESTERN VIRGINIA** (Wheeling: H. Hoblitzell, 1851), 338-341.
5. McColloch, **MCCOLLOCH FAMILY**, 59.
6. De Haas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT**, 343.

7. Consul Wilshire Butterfield, **HISTORY OF THE GIRTY'S** (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Company, 1890), 141.
8. Charles McKnight, **OUR WESTERN BORDER** (Philadelphia: J.C. McCurdy and Company, 1876), 454-467.
9. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 276.
10. Richard Klein, "The Two Van Metre's Forts," **UPPER OHIO VALLEY HISTORICAL REVIEW** 4, No.1 (Winter, 1975) in McColloch, **MCCOLLOCH FAMILY**, 39
11. DeHaas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT**, 342.
12. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 276.
13. Allan W. Eckert, **THAT DARK AND BLOODY RIVER** (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 412.
14. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 276; DeHaas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT**, 342; Lyman C. Draper, **DRAPER MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION** (Microfilm edition) State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 2S275-276. Hereafter cited as **DRAPER MSS**, with relevant internal citation (s).
15. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 277; J.H. Newton, ed., **HISTORY OF THE PAN-HANDLE** (Wheeling: J.A. Caldwell, 1879), 124.
16. John Gabriel Jacob, **BROOKE COUNTY, BEING A RECORD OF PROMINENT EVENTS OCCURRING IN BROOKE COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA FROM THE SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTY UNTIL JANUARY 1, 1882** (Wellsburg: **WELLSBURG HERALD**, 1882), 19; S.S. Jacob, **A HISTORY OF THE CLINTON COMMUNITY** (Bethany College: Upper Ohio Valley Collection) in McColloch, **MCCOLLOCH FAMILY**, 32.
17. **DRAPER MSS**, 2S275-276.
18. DeHaas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT**, 342.
19. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 277.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Jacob, **BROOKE COUNTY, BEING A RECORD OF PROMINENT EVENTS**, 19; Eckert, **THAT DARK AND BLOODY RIVER**, 413.
22. De Haas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT**, 342-343. It is interesting to note that Samuel Sprigg Jacob who wrote the manuscript **A HISTORY OF THE CLINTON COMMUNITY** said that Vincent Vanmeter told him the story of the Indians' eating Major Sam's heart. Mr. Vanmeter said that after the Indian wars ended, some warriors came back to West Liberty and told people they ate the Major's heart to make them brave like McColloch. Jacob claimed that Vincent Vanmeter was his neighbor and a truthful and responsible citizen.
23. DeHaas, **HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT**, 342.
24. Doddridge, **EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS**, 274.

25. DeHaas, HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT, 339.
26. Ibid.
27. DRAPER MSS, 2S275-276.
28. DRAPER MSS, 9ZZ52.
29. Doddridge, EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INDIAN WARS, 278; Jacob, BROOKE COUNTY, BEING A RECORD OF PROMINENT EVENTS, 19.
30. Other versions of the ambush of Major McColloch have been reported. Isaac Leffler, a descendant of the Leffler family, early settlers on Buffalo Creek, told Lyman Draper a story that differs in several details. Leffler said McColloch was killed on Girty's Point by "a band of Indians under Simon Girty," and the brothers left "Gibson's Fort" on Short Creek to begin their scout. Leffler said the ambush took place during the middle of the day, and the people at the fort cooked a turkey dinner, saving a part of the meal for the scouts. Leffler said the Indians took out Major Sam's heart and impaled it on a pole. (DRAPER MSS, 6E85; DRAPER MSS, 6E16-17). A local historian reported that Samuel McColloch was murdered "... while doing picket duty near 'Court House Fort' in 1782..." (Charles A. Winegerter, HISTORY OF GREATER WHEELING Vol 1 (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1912),316. Another story of the ambush reports that the incident took place in the autumn of 1782, along a well known road, and the brothers were shot at from both sides, killing the Major and John's horse. John then made his escape on Sam's horse after killing one of the attackers (FRONTIERSMEN, PIONEERS, AND SCOUTS, N.D., N.P., 133-34).
31. Newton, ed., HISTORY OF THE PAN-HANDLE, 135.
32. Jacob, BROOKE COUNTY, BEING A RECORD OF PROMINENT EVENTS, 19.
33. DRAPER MSS, 2S275-276.
34. Mahala Rebecca Jacob McColloch, MCCOLLOCH FAMILY TREE, in McColloch, MCCOLLOCH FAMILY, 265.
35. S.S. Jacob, "Unmarked Graves of Early Pioneers of Ohio County" (WHEELING NEWS REGISTER: 21 May, 1916) in McColloch, MCCOLLOCH FAMILY, 139.
36. Ibid., 140.
37. McColloch, MCCOLLOCH FAMILY, 150.
38. Ibid.
39. WHEELING SUNDAY NEWS, 19 October, 1930
40. McColloch, MCCOLLOCH FAMILY, 148.
41. "National Geodetic Survey" (PIDKY3204 <<http://www.ngs.noaa.gov/ims-cgi-bin/Craig/map ds.pr1>>(June 4, 2003).
42. This corresponds almost exactly to Jacob's estimate: "The place where he (Samuel McColloch) was killed is, as near as can be identified, about two miles from the river, on lands owned by James Ridgely (1881)." (Jacob, BROOKE COUNTY, BEING A RECORD OF PROMINENT EVENTS, 19). Newton pinpoints the spot as "two miles from the mouth of Short Creek...")

Newton,ed., HISTORY OF THE PAN-HANDLE, 135.

43. Jacob, BROOKE COUNTY, BEING A RECORD OF PROMINENT EVENTS, 19.

**ANNUAL MEETING
PLANNED FOR EARL
RAY TOMBLIN
CONVENTION
CENTER
CANCELLED DUE
TO HURRICANE
IVAN**

The WVHS Annual Meeting which had been scheduled for September 18, 2004 at the Earl Ray Tomblin Convention Center at the Chief Logan State Park near Chapmanville, WV. was cancelled because of heavy rains in Southern West Virginia caused by the remnants of Hurricane Ivan.

Though the meeting was cancelled, new officers were elected by the executive board. Out-going President Cheryl Withrow announced that Michael Shock had

been elected President and Joe Geiger had been elected First Vice President. Other officers are Frederick Armstrong, Secretary; William McNeel, Treasurer; Rodney Pyles, Scott Williamson, Kenneth Bailey, Bill Dean, Larry Legge, Bob Conte and Margaret Brennan as regional Vice Presidents. This group, along with Cheryl Withrow, past president, constitute the executive board of the Society.

COMING IN JANUARY

‘Honest, I couldn’t make up this stuff.’

Quarterly editor, Kenneth Bailey has put together an issue made up of actual stories from the *Charleston Daily Mail and The Charleston Gazette* from the early part of the 1900s which provide a look at what West Virginians were reading in their newspapers.

TIME TO RENEW

If the date on your label is earlier than October 1, 2004, it is time for you to renew your membership in the West Virginia Historical Society.
(For international mail, please add \$5.00)

Individual \$10.00

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