

Monroe County Historical Society

Archaeological Dig at Cook's Fort in Greenville

By Fred Ziegler

The Cook's Fort site is about one quarter mile west of Greenville and across Indian Creek from Cook's Old Mill. In June, evidence of its exact location and shape was determined by a team led by Drs. Stephen and Kim Arbogast McBride. This team, originally from Lewisburg and White Sulphur Springs, has been active examining numerous forts in the area for over 30 years, initially while on the staff at the University of Kentucky and subsequently while at various historical organizations. The archaeology shows that the fort had a stockade of vertical logs that formed a square, 82.5 feet on a side and with bastions, or projections, at the east and west corners. This dimension is equivalent to five 'poles', a standard unit in surveying at the time. A drone photo taken by Howdy Henritz, is included in this brochure, and it shows the outline of the trench dug through the plow-zone to expose the undisturbed base of the logs that formed the walls. This two-bastion structure is like that found by the McBrides at Arbuckle's Fort near Alderson, and Fort Donnally, in Rader's Valley near Williamsburg. The bastions allowed the defenders clear views along all four walls of any potential attackers.

There were about 30 forts constructed along the Greenbrier and middle New River valleys and most of them were built around 1774 in response to a directive by the last colonial governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, in response to worsening relations with the Indians. This episode ended on October 10th with the Battle of Point Pleasant on the Ohio River, in which the Indians were forced to live on the west side of the river. Until this time, Cook's Fort was not the subject of any attack but during the American Revolution, which began the following year, the situation began to change.

At this time, the British allied themselves with the Indians along the Ohio Valley and incited them to harass the settlers along the frontier, here in western Virginia. Most of the larger forts were defended by embodied Militia Companies and they sent young men, called Indian spies to range from fort-to-fort to defend the local settlers. The idea was for the spies to look for evidence of Indians and to warn the settlers to "get fortified" if they felt there was a danger. Since the forts were about ten miles apart, and since the farms were widely distributed along the way, this was arduous work.

One of the spies, Michael Swoop described his route as follows, "*The nature of his services was to leave Cook's Fort on Indian Creek, descend said creek to its mouth where it empties into New River and thence down New River to the mouth of the Bluestone, thence to Van Bibber's Fort on Greenbrier River (modern-day Lowell), and thence to Jarrett's Fort on (lower) Wolf Creek, making a distance of going and coming of thirty to thirty-five miles.* Fortunately, the Indians confined their forays to the warmer months, so in between there was little danger. While people were fortified, on the other hand, they could camp and grow crops around the forts and then crowd into the stockades when the danger was imminent.

Most of the incidents experienced during this period happened away from Cook's Fort and involved shootings or kidnappings. One of the spies, James Ellison told the following story, "*In the year 1780 he was not called on (as a spy); he was fortified below the mouth of Indian Creek, He and Matt Farley went out of the fort to get corn in their field, the Indians fired at them, he was wounded and taken prisoner. He was taken to the top of the Bluestone Mountain, where they stopped to eat some meal, and continued about 15 miles until it was nearly dark. Some of the Indians were before him and some behind him; he stopped, pretending to tie his moccasin which permitted those before him to get a short distance on, he sprang off down a steep hill, was pursued about half a mile, but escaped and got back to the fort the next morning.*" These men were vulnerable at this point because the cornfield was along the New River, a major thoroughfare for the Indians. Other times, settlers who ignored the warnings of the spies paid the price. Generally, the forts served their purpose and reports of incidents around Cook's Fort numbered just one or two per year.

The archaeological work at Cook's Fort will be presented as a talk to the Historical Society in October. In the meantime, the McBrides are studying the samples collected at the site. For instance, they uncovered a dump, or midden, which was full of animal bones, as well as scattered artifacts in the form of broken dinner plates, shoe buckles, and musket balls. These will be examined for what they tell about life at the fort and the results will be presented at the lecture, on the 31st of October at Ames Clair Hall at 2:00 p.m. This work is being supported by the West Virginia Division of Culture and History, in conjunction with the Summers County Historic Landmarks Commission.

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