Cumberland County during the French and Indian War

Group members: Scott Switaj, Aaron Schafer, Kyle Marquartt, and Jennie Iler

The French and Indian War

Lasting from 1753/4 until 1763, the French and Indian War is the name given to fighting that took place in North America as part of a global conflict known as the Seven Years’ War. This conflict saw the French and her colonists and Native American allies in the new world fighting against Great Britain and her colonists, as well as a few Native American allies. As a fight for control of global empires was waged between the two sides, the territory between the coastal settlements of the British and New France to the north and west soon turned into a battle zone, as armies fought over the contested territory. What started out as a conflict in the backcountry of modern Pennsylvania (around Pittsburgh) soon spread throughout North America and over to Europe, and from there the globe. At first the French and their Native American allies were able to pull off a series of victories over the British, but by 1756 the British, under William Pitt as Secretary of State, were able to defeat the French and reap the rewards of victory: New France (Canada) for themselves and forcing Louisiana from France to Spain, driving the French off of the continent and establishing British control over the vast majority of eastern North America.

Native Americans

The local Native Americans located in the Cumberland County region were the Susquahannocks and the Iroquois. These tribes were able to cooperate, if somewhat forced into it, with the colonial government in Philadelphia, and would sometimes receive the help of the local governments with issues such as squatters on their lands as well as trade. However, these groups divided themselves during the French and Indian War, with the Iroquois fighting alongside the British, while the other tribes mainly sided with the French. In fact, tribes from as far away as Ohio, who had sided with the French, would enter into the Cumberland Valley to raid British settlements and farms.
**European Settlers**

Most of the white settlers in the region were Scots-Irish immigrants who left the home country in the pursuit of a better life in the Americas. Following a fall in linen prices in Ireland, as well as high rent, poor harvests, and religious strife, these settlers arrived in Philadelphia or New Castle, Delaware and moved into the interior of Pennsylvania, along the Susquehanna River and into what is now Cumberland and Perry counties. These settlers gained a reputation as roughnecks and fighters, both against the colonial authorities and the Native Americans in the area.

**The Squatters**

Despite the treaties that the Pennsylvania government in Philadelphia made with the local Indian tribes, many white settlers moved and settled on lands that had not been signed over. For a time, the lands to the west of the Susquehanna River and to the north of the Kittatinny, or Blue Ridge, Mountains were off limits to white settlers. This land, in what is now Perry County and at the time governed from Carlisle, would see settlement from intruding settlers, often referred to as “Squatters”. Before the French and Indian War, there was cooperation between the local Iroquois Indians and the authorities in Carlisle with removing these illegal settlers from the lands they occupied. One such occurrence took place on May 22, 1750, when a group of settlers living on “some of the best hunting land” for the Indians were evicted from their cabins, which were burned to the ground (H H Hain). Such cooperation continued until the French and Indian War began, when the peaceful existence changed into open warfare when the Indians sided with the French in 1753.

**Forts in the Cumberland and Sherman’s Valleys**

With the onset of the French and Indian War, and following the British defeats at Fort Duquesne and Fort Necessity (also known as the Battle of the Great Meadows), the settlers of Cumberland County were worried about Indian raids into their settlements. Having petitioned the Governor for help, the settlers of Cumberland Valley established a series of five forts for their protection, with two of these forts being Fort Morris in Shippensburg and what would later be called Fort Louther in Carlisle. Besides these main forts, smaller forts and blockhouses were created on private property to defend those who lived too far away from the few towns in the area. Some of these included McCormick’s Fort near Newburg and George Robinson’s Fort, also known as Fort Robinson, outside of modern-day Loysville in Perry County along Shermans Creek.
Indian Raids on British Settlements

During the French and Indian War, many of the smaller forts and blockhouses in the area were attacked by Native American raids. Attacks took place in the Cumberland Valley as over on the other side of the Kittatinny Mountains as well. Fort McCormick had a raid take place nearby in 1757. The raids had some settlers move into Shippensburg or Carlisle, with some even evacuated as far away as Lancaster or along the Susquehanna River. Attacks took place in what is now Perry County as well, with Indians coming from the west as well as from just south of Shamokin. One such raid took place in 1756, when the Woolcombers, a Quaker family, stayed away from Fort Robinson because they felt safe. The entire family, with the exception of the young son, was tomahawked to death in their home, while the boy ran to Fort Robinson to raise the alarm. In all, countless raids were carried out in both Cumberland and Shermans Valleys.

The Paxton Boys

Raids in the area were not limited to Indian attacks on white settlements. Towards the end of the war and for a time afterwards, a group of Scots-Irish settlers from modern Dauphin County raided Native American settlements themselves, feeling the colonial government was not adequately protecting them. They took part in several killings of the local Susquehannock (or Conestoga) Indians in what is now the Susquehanna Valley, killing 14 of the remaining 16 members of the tribe in what was called the Conestoga Massacre. Seeing the government’s seeming favoritism of Indians over whites, they marched on Philadelphia in 1764. They were stopped outside of the city by British regulars and Philadelphia militia, raised by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin negotiated with the Paxton Boys and was able to bring an end to the crisis.