

1796 \* 1883

HISTORY  
OF  
BUTLER COUNTY,  
PENNSYLVANIA.

---

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

OF SOME OF ITS

PROMINENT MEN AND PIONEERS.

---

CHICAGO:  
WATERMAN, WATKINS & Co.  
1883.

One of the most remarkable and best authenticated narratives of adventure and suffering among the Indians of Western Pennsylvania is that which has been related by a woman, Massy Harbison.\* The story of her captivity and escape, thrillingly interesting in itself, has an especial claim to a place in the history of Butler County, from the fact that it was near the present limits of the county that this pioneer wife and mother was made a prisoner by the Indians, and within its limits that she made her wild flight for freedom, with a babe at her breast.

Mrs. Harbison, with her two children, were among the number who sought safety at James Paul's, on Pine Creek, after the perpetration of the murders on the night of March 22, 1791, above the mouth of Bull Creek. From Pine Creek these people proceeded to a point on the left, or eastern bank, of the Allegheny, a mile below the mouth of Kiskiminetas (opposite the site of Freeport), and there erected a block-house, to which all the families who had fled from the neighborhood returned within two weeks. Here they remained in safety during the summer, although several atrocities were committed along the river, and David McKee and another young man were killed and scalped within seven miles of the block-house. Soon after the several families were provided for at the block-house, which received the name of Reed's Station, the husband of our heroine, John Harbison, enlisted in the six-months' service, in Capt. Guthrie's corps, and went out in the expedition against the Indians, commanded by the unfortunate Gen. Arthur St. Clair. He did not return until the 24th of December, and brought home a memento of St. Clair's defeat in the shape of an ugly wound. On his recovery from this wound, Harbison was appointed a spy, and ordered to the woods on duty in March, 1792. The inhabitants, having great faith in the spy system as a protection against the Indians, moved out of the block-house in which they had been so long confined, and scattered to their own habitations. Mrs. Harbison lived in a cabin within sight of the block-house, and not more than two hundred yards distant from it. The spies, in their long detours through the forest, saw no Indian signs, and nothing to alarm them. They frequently came to the Harbison cabin to receive refreshments and lodging. Mr. Harbison came home only once in seven or eight days. On the night of the 21st of May (1792), two of the spies, James Davis and a Mr. Sutton, came to lodge at the Harbison

cabin, and, at daybreak on the following morning, when the horn was blown at the block-house, they got up and went out. This was the morning when Mrs. Harbison's terrible apprehensions were to be realized. She had long been fearful that the Indians would come upon them, and had entreated her husband to remove her to some more secure place. She was awake when the spies left the cabin, saw that the door was open, and intended to arise and shut it, but fell asleep again. While she slumbered, Davis and Sutton returned, and, after fastening the door, went to the block-house. The woman awoke to find herself in the hands of a band of savages. She was aroused by their pulling her by the feet from the bed. In her narrative,\* she says: "I then looked up and saw the house full of Indians, every one having his gun in his left hand and tomahawk in his right. Beholding the dangerous situation in which I was, I immediately jumped to the floor upon my feet, with the young child in my arms. I then took a petticoat to put on, having only the one in which I slept; but the Indians took it from me, and as many as I attempted to put on, they succeeded in taking from me, so that I had to go just as I had been in bed. While I was struggling with some of the savages for clothing, others of them went and took the two children out of another bed, and immediately took the two feather beds to the door and emptied them. The savages immediately began their work of plunder and devastation. What they were unable to carry with them they destroyed. While they were at their work, I made to the door and succeeded in getting out with one child in my arms and another by my side; but the other little boy was so much displeased at being so early disturbed in the morning that he would not come to the door."

"When I got out, I saw Mr. Wolf, one of the soldiers, going to the spring for water, and beheld two or three of the savages attempting to get between him and the block-house; but Mr. Wolf was unconscious of his danger, for the savages had not yet been discovered. I then gave a terrific scream, by which means Mr. Wolf discovered his danger, and started to run for the block-house. Seven or eight of the Indians fired at him, but the only injury he received was a bullet in his arm, which broke it. He succeeded in making his escape to the block-house. When I raised the alarm, one of the Indians came up to me with his tomahawk, as though about to take my life; a second came and placed his hand before my mouth and told me to hush, when a third came with

\*Massy White, daughter of Edward White, a Revolutionary soldier, was born in Amwell Township, Somerset Co., N. J., March 18, 1770. After the establishment of peace in 1782, the family removed west and settled on the Monongahela at Redstone Fort (now Brownsville). In 1787, Massy White was married to John Harbison, with whom she removed two years later to the headwaters of Chartiers Creek.

\*"A Narrative of the Sufferings of Massy Harbison from Indian Barbarity," communicated by herself, and edited by John Winter; first printed in 1825; fourth edition in 1836. The truthfulness of the narrative has been attested by many who were familiar with the contemporaneous history, and who well knew Mrs. Harbison's reputation for truth and veracity. Robert Scott, a pioneer of Butler Borough, who was upon the Allegheny in 1790 and subsequent years, strongly certified the correctness of the story as published.

a lifted tomahawk and attempted to give me a blow; but the first that came raised his tomahawk and averted the blow, and claimed me as his squaw."

The Commissary and his waiter, who had been sleeping in the store-house, near the block-house, being aroused by Mrs. Harbison's scream and the report of the Indians' guns, attempted to make their escape. The Commissary succeeded in reaching the block-house amidst a rain of bullets, one or two of which cut the handkerchief which he wore about his head. The waiter, on coming to the door, was met by two Indians, who fired at him and he fell dead. "The savages then set up one of their tremendous and terrifying yells, and pushed forward and attempted to scalp the man they had killed," but they were prevented by the heavy fire which was kept up through the port-holes of the block-house.

"In this scene of horror and alarm," says Mrs. Harbison, "I began to meditate on escape, and for that purpose I attempted to direct the attention of the Indians from me, and to fix it on the block-house, and thought if I could succeed in this I would retreat to a subterranean rock with which I was acquainted, which was in the run near where we were. For this purpose I began to converse with some of those who were near me, respecting the strength of the block-house, the number of men in it, etc., and, being informed that there were forty men there, and that they were excellent marksmen, they immediately came to the determination to retreat and for this purpose they ran to those who were besieging the block-house and brought them away. They then began to flog me with their wiping sticks, and to order me along. Thus what I intended as the means of my escape was the means of accelerating my departure in the hands of the savages. But it was no doubt ordered by a kind Providence for the preservation of the fort and its inhabitants, for, when the savages gave up the attack and retreated, some of the men in the house had the last load of ammunition in their guns, and there was no possibility of procuring more, for it was all fastened up in the store-house, which was inaccessible.

"The Indians, when they had flogged me away along with them, took my eldest boy, a lad about five years of age, along with them, for he was still at the door by my side. My middle little boy, who was about three years of age, had by this time obtained a situation by the fire in the house, and was crying bitterly to me not to go, and making bitter complaints of the depredations of the savages.

"But these monsters were not willing to let the child remain behind them; they took him by the hand to drag him along with them, but he was so very unwilling to go, and made such a noise by crying, that they took him up by the feet and dashed

his brains out against the threshold of the door. They then scalped and stabbed him and left him for dead.

"When I witnessed this inhuman butchery of my own child, I gave a most indescribable and terrific scream, and felt a dimness come over my eyes next to blindness, and my senses were nearly gone. The savages then gave me a blow across my face and head, and brought me to my sight and recollection again. During the whole of this agonizing scene, I kept my infant in my arms.

"As soon as their murder was effected, they marched me along to the top of the bank, about forty or sixty rods, and there they stopped and divided the plunder which they had taken from our house, and here I counted their number, and found them to be thirty-two, two of whom were white men painted as Indians.

"Several of the Indians could speak English well. I knew several of them well, having seen them go up and down the Allegheny River. I knew two of them to be from the Seneca tribe of Indians, and two of them Muncies; for they had called at the shop to get their guns repaired, and I saw them there.

"We went from this place about forty rods, and they then caught my uncle, John Currie's, horses, and two of them, into whose custody I was put, started with me on the horses toward the mouth of the Kiskiminetas, and the rest of them went off toward Puckety. When they came to the bank that descended toward the Allegheny, the bank was so very steep, and there appeared so much danger in descending it on horseback, that I threw myself off the horse in opposition to the will and command of the savages.

"My horse descended without falling, but the one on which the Indian rode who had my little boy, in descending, fell, and rolled over repeatedly, and my little boy fell back over the horse, but was not materially injured. He was taken up by one of the Indians, and we got to the bank of the river, where they had secreted some bark canoes, under the rocks opposite to the island that lies between the Kiskiminetas and Buffalo. They attempted in vain to make the horses take the river. After trying for some time to effect this, they left the horses behind them and took us in one of the canoes to the point of the island, and there they left the canoe.

"Here I beheld another hard scene, for, as soon as we landed, my little boy, who was still mourning and lamenting about his little brother, and who complained that he was injured by the fall in descending the bank, was murdered.

"One of the Indians ordered me along, probably that I should not see the horrid deed about to be perpetrated. The other then took his tomahawk from his side, and, with this instrument of death, killed and

scalped him. When I beheld this second scene of inhuman butchery, I fell to the ground senseless, with my infant in my arms, it being under, with its little hands in the hair of my head. How long I remained in this state of insensibility I know not.

"The first thing I remember was my raising my head from the ground, and my feeling myself exceedingly overcome with sleep. I cast my eyes around and saw the scalp of my dear little boy, fresh bleeding from his head, in the hand of one of the savages, and sank down to the earth again upon my infant child. The first thing I remember after witnessing this spectacle of woe was the severe blows I was receiving from the hands of the savages, though at that time I was unconscious of the injuries I was sustaining. After a severe castigation, they assisted me in getting up, and supported me when up.

"Here I cannot help contemplating the peculiar interposition of Divine Providence in my behalf. How easily might they have murdered me! What a wonder their cruelty did not lead them to effect it! But instead of this, the scalp of my boy was hid from my view, and, in order to bring me to my senses again, they took me back to the river and led me in, knee deep. This had the intended effect. But 'the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.'

"We now proceeded on our journey by crossing the island, and coming to a shallow place where we could wade out, and so arrive to the Indian side of the country. Here they pushed me in the river before them, and had to conduct me through it. The water was up to my breast, but I suspended my child above the water, and, through the assistance of the savages, got safely out.

"From thence we rapidly proceeded forward, and came to Big Buffalo.\* Here the stream was very rapid, and the Indians had again to assist me. When we had crossed this creek, we made a straight to the Connoquenessing Creek, the very place where Butler now stands, and from thence we traveled five or six miles to Little Buffalo, and crossed it at the very place where Mr. B. Sarver's mill now (1836) stands, and ascended the hill."

[The foregoing paragraph is quite obscure and misleading. The Indians, of course, did not go to "the very place where Butler now stands," and then retrace their way to the Little Buffalo. They crossed the stream on their way to the Connoquenessing at the place where Sarver's mill stood in later years, and where is now Sarversville. They undoubtedly crossed the Connoquenessing where the Cunninghams afterward built their mill, and where now stands the George Walter mill. At this place

\*Buffalo Creek empties into the Allegheny just below Freeport. Its head waters are in Fairview and Donegal Townships, Butler County, but most of its course in Armstrong County.

the rocks originally projected far over the water, and the narrow chasm could be easily spanned by a log. The crossing was a favorite one with the Indians, and the rocks on either side of the creek bore hieroglyphic inscriptions.]

The journal continues: "I now felt weary of my life, and had a full determination to make the savages kill me, thinking that death would be exceedingly welcome when compared with the fatigue, cruelties and miseries I had the prospect of enduring. To have my purpose effected, I stood still, one of the savages being before me, and the other walking on behind me, and I took from off my shoulder a large powder-horn they made me carry, in addition to my child, who was one year and four days old. I threw the horn on the ground, closed my eyes, and expected every moment to feel the deadly tomahawk. But, to my surprise, the Indians took it up, cursed me bitterly and put it on my shoulders again. I took it off a second time and threw it on the ground, and again closed my eyes with the assurance that I should meet death; but instead of this, one of the savages again took up the horn, and, with an indignant, frightful countenance, came and placed it on again. I took it off a third time, and was determined to effect it, and therefore threw it as far as I was able to over the rocks. The savage immediately went after it, while the one who claimed me as his squaw, and who had stood and witnessed the transaction, came up to me and said, 'Well done; that I did right, and was a good squaw, and that the other was a lazy — — — —; he might carry it himself.' I cannot now sufficiently admire the indulgent care of a gracious God, that, at this moment, preserved me amidst so many temptations from the tomahawk and scalping-knife.

"The savages now changed their position, and the one who claimed me as his squaw went behind. This movement, I believe, was to prevent the other from doing me any injury; and we went on till we struck the Connoquenessing at the salt lick about two miles above Butler, where was an Indian camp, where we arrived a little before dark."

[This camp was in the ravine which opens into the valley near the Kearns farm. The distance from Butler is considerably less than two miles.]

"The camp was made of stakes driven in the ground, sloping, and covered with chestnut bark, and appeared sufficiently long for fifty men. The camp appeared to have been occupied for some time. It was very much beaten, and large beaten paths went out from it in various directions.

"That night, they took me from the camp about three hundred yards, where they cut the brush in a thicket and placed a blanket on the ground, and permitted me to sit down with my child. They then pin-

ioned my arms back, only with a little liberty, so that it was with difficulty I managed my child. Here, in this dreary situation, without fire or refreshment, having an infant to take care of, and my arms bound behind me, and having a savage on each side of me who had killed two of my dear children that day, I had to pass the first night of my captivity.

"The trials and dangers of the day I had passed had so completely exhausted nature that, notwithstanding my unpleasant situation and my determination to escape if possible, I insensibly fell asleep, and repeatedly dreamed of my escape and safe arrival in Pittsburgh, and several things relating to the town, of which I knew nothing at the time, but found to be true when I got there. The first night passed away, and I found no means of escape, for the savages kept watch the whole of the night, without any sleep.

"In the morning, one of them left us to watch the trail or path we had come, to see if any white people were pursuing us. During the absence of the Indian, who was the one that claimed me, the one who remained with me, and who was the murderer of my last boy, took from his bosom his scalp and prepared a hoop, and stretched the scalp up on it. \* \* \* \* I meditated revenge! While he was in the very act, I attempted to take his tomahawk, which hung by his side and rested on the ground, and had nearly succeeded, and was, as I thought, about to give the fatal blow, when, alas! I was detected."

The Indian who went upon the lookout in the morning became Massy Harbison's guard in the afternoon, asked her many questions concerning the whites and the strength of the armies they proposed sending out, and boasted largely about the Indians' achievements the preceding fall at the defeat of St. Clair. He gave the woman a small piece of dry venison, but, owing to the blows she had received about the face and jaws, she was unable to eat, and broke it into pieces for her child. On the second night (May 23), she was removed to another station in the same small valley or ravine, and there guarded as she had been the night before. When day broke, one of the Indians went away, as upon the preceding morning, to watch the trail, and the other fell asleep.

Then Massy Harbison concluded it was time to escape. She thought of vengeance, but found it was impossible to injure the sleeping savage, for she could effect nothing without putting her child down, and she feared that if she did it would cry and defeat her design of flight.

She contented herself with taking from a pillow-case of plunder the Indians had stolen from her house a short gown, handkerchief and child's frock, and so made her escape. The sun was about half an hour

high. She at first, to deceive the Indians, took a course leading in an opposite direction from her home, and then went over a hill and came to the Connoquenessing about two miles from the place where she had crossed it the day before with her captors, and went down the stream till about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, over rocks, precipices, thorns, briars, etc., suffering great pain, as her feet and legs were bare, but fleeing on unmindful of it, to put as great a distance between herself and the savage enemy as was possible. She discovered, by the sun and the running of the stream, that she was going from, instead of toward, home, and changed her course. She ascended a hill and sat there until the evening star made its appearance, when she discovered the way she should travel the next morning, and, having collected some leaves, she made a bed, lay down and slept, although her feet, being full of thorns, caused her much pain. She had no food either for herself or child. At daybreak, she resumed her travel toward the Allegheny River. Nothing very material occurred during the day.

"In the evening" (we again quote from Massy Harbison's narrative), "about the going down of the sun, a moderate rain came on, and I began to prepare for my bed, by collecting some leaves together, as I had done the night before, but could not collect sufficient quantity without setting my little boy on the ground; but as soon as I had put him out of my arms, he began to cry. Fearful of the consequence of his noise in this situation, I took him in my arms and put him on my breast immediately, and he became quiet. I then stood and listened, and distinctly heard the footsteps of a man coming after me, in the same direction I had come! The ground over which I had been traveling was good, and the mold light. I had therefore left my foot-marks, and thus exposed myself to a second captivity. Alarmed at my perilous situation, I looked around for a place of safety, and, providentially, saw a large tree which had fallen, into the tops of which I crept, with my child in my arms, and there I hid myself securely under the limbs. The darkness of the night greatly assisted me, and prevented me from detection.

"The footsteps I heard were those of a savage. He heard the cry of the child, and came to the very spot where the child cried, and there he halted, put down his gun, and was at this time so near that I heard the wiping stick strike against the gun distinctly.

"\* \* \* All was still and quiet; the savage was listening if, by possibility, he might again hear the cry he had heard before. My own heart was the only thing I feared, and that beat so loud that I was apprehensive it would betray me. It is almost impossible to conceive or to believe the wonderful effect my situation produced upon my whole system.

"After the savage had stood and listened, with nearly the stillness of death, for two hours, the sound of a bell, and a cry like that of a night owl—signals which were given to him from his savage companions—induced him to answer, and, after he had given a most horrid yell, which was calculated to harrow up my soul, he started and went off to join them."

After the retreat of the Indian, Mrs. Harbison, concluding that it was unsafe to remain where she was until morning, lest a second and more thorough search should be made, which would result in her recapture, with difficulty arose and traveled on a mile or two. Then, sinking down at the foot of a great tree, she rested until daybreak. The night was cold, and rain fell.

On the morning of the fifth day of her suffering and strange experience, Massy Harbison, wet and exhausted, hungry and wretched, started again on her way toward the Allegheny. About the middle of the forenoon, she came to the waters of Pine Creek, which falls into the Allegheny about four miles above Pittsburgh. She knew not at the time what stream it was she had reached, but crossed it and followed a path along its bank. Presently she was alarmed at seeing moccasin tracks, made by men traveling in the same direction she was. After she had walked about three miles, she came to a fire burning on the bank of the stream, where the men whose tracks she had seen had eaten their breakfast. She was in doubt whether the men were white or Indians, and determined to leave the path. She ascended a hill, crossed a ridge toward Squaw Run, and came upon a trail. While she stood meditating whether to follow the path or seek her way through the underbrush, she saw three deer coming toward her at full speed. They turned to look at their pursuers. She looked, too, and saw the flash of a gun. She saw some dogs start after the deer, and, thinking that the chase would lead by the place where she stood, fled, and concealed herself behind a log. She had scarcely crouched in her hiding-place before she found that, almost within reach of her outstretched hand, was a nest of rattlesnakes. She was compelled to leave, and did so, fearing that she would be apprehended by the hunters, whom she supposed were Indians.

The woman now changed her course, and, bearing to the left, came to Squaw Run, which she followed the remainder of the day. During the day it rained, and so cold and shivering was the fugitive that, in spite of her struggles to remain silent, an occasional groan escaped her. She suffered also intensely from hunger. Her jaws had now so far recovered from the blows of the Indians that she was able to eat

food, if she could have procured it. She plucked grape-vines and obtained a little sustenance from them.

In the evening, she came within a mile of the Allegheny, but was ignorant of it. There, under a tree, in a tremendous rain-storm, from which she sheltered her babe as well as she could, she remained all night.

Upon the morning of the sixth day (Sunday, May 27), she found herself unable, for a considerable time, to arise from the ground, and when, after a long struggle, she gained her feet, nature was so nearly exhausted, and her spirits so completely depressed, that she made very slow progress. After going a short distance, she came to a path, which, as it had been traveled by cattle, she imagined would lead her to the abode of white people; but she came to an uninhabited cabin. Here she was seized with a feeling of despair, and concluded that she would enter the cabin and lie down to die; but the thought of what would then be the fate of her babe spurred her courage. She heard the sound of a cow bell, which imparted a gleam of hope. Pushing on with all of the strength she could command in the direction from which the sound came, she arrived at the bank of the Allegheny, opposite the block-house, at Six-Mile Island, and was safe. Three men appeared on the opposite bank, and, after some delay, caused by the suspicion that she was sent there as a decoy by the Indians, one of them, James Closier, came over in a canoe and took her to the south side of the river. Closier had been one of the nearest neighbors of Massy Harbison before she was captured by the Indians, but so greatly was she altered by the horrors she had witnessed, the cruelty practiced upon her, and by exposure, fatigue and starvation, that he did not know her.

When she landed on the inhabited side of the river and found herself secure, the brave woman, who had endured so much, gave way under the terrible strain, and was carried to the fort by the people, who came running from it to see her. During the terrible six days, in which she had seen two of her children murdered, had herself been severely beaten by the inhuman savages, and had suffered the keenest anguish and despair, she had not shed a tear; but now that danger was removed, the tears flowed freely "and imparted a happiness," reads her narrative, "beyond what I have ever experienced before, or expect to experience in this world."

After careful treatment, Massy Harbison recovered her health and senses. Two of the women in the fort drew the thorns from her feet, and Mr. Felix Negley, who had the curiosity to count them, found that 150 had been removed. Afterward, more

were taken out at Pittsburgh. At this settlement, Massy Harbison made deposition, at the request of the magistrates, detailing the atrocities committed by her captors, and it was soon afterward published throughout the country in all the leading newspapers.

Mrs. Harbison met her husband in Pittsburgh, and went with him to Coe's Station. After the lands northwest of the Allegheny were opened to settlement, they removed to Buffalo Township, Butler County, where John Harbison carried on, for a number of years, a mill. The descendants of Massy Harbison still reside in the neighborhood of her old home, only a few miles distant from the place where she was captured and her children murdered, upon the 22d of May, 1792.