

# Battle of Bushy Run

*2025 Reenactment:*

*Bushy Run Battlefield, 1253 Bushy Run Road, Jeannette, PA 15644*

*Saturday & Sunday, August 2 & 3, 2025 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM*

[www.bushyrunbattlefield.com](http://www.bushyrunbattlefield.com)

The Battle of Bushy Run doesn't get the ink in history books that many other battles do, but this two-day battle, fought 25 miles east of Pittsburgh, was historically important, was militarily decisive, and was won by soldiers from the Highlands of Scotland.

In 1763, five years after General John Forbes (from Dunfermline, Scotland) marched his British army across the mountainous wilds of Pennsylvania to wrest control of the Forks of the Ohio from the French, the British were again at risk of losing this pivotal piece of ground. Pittsburgh's three large rivers were the superhighways of 18<sup>th</sup> century access to connect the eastern part of North America to the west and south. Control of the continent's natural resources and trade with native inhabitants meant big money and civilized expansion outside of already-crowded Europe. There had been many years of conflict between Britain, France and Spain to get and keep such control. Let's not forget, however, that this was the very *home* of the Native American inhabitants. They certainly had a lot of skin in the game.

In 1758 the Treaty of Easton was an important agreement between the British and Native American tribes which, among other things, assured the natives that the British would contain their colonists to the eastern side of the Allegheny Mountains, thus leaving the area to the west to be inhabited by the natives. The British would build a fort here to keep the French out and to facilitate trade. In the years since this treaty, however, the Native Americans had been noticing developments which could be interpreted as the British reneging on the treaty and preparing to take complete control of this territory. Settlers from the east continually migrated westward, over the Alleghenies, and built homes, farms, and hunted where the treaty said they did not belong. The colonial government, sometimes supported by the garrisoned British military, made some feeble and ineffectual attempts to deter colonists from settling here but it didn't work – settlers simply rebuilt after their cabins were burned and yet more white people came. The massive size of Fort Pitt, the largest fort in all North America, certainly didn't appear to the Native Americans to be merely a trading post as suggested by the local British officers. It had all the trappings of a military post built to maintain full dominance over anyone who was not British. When General Jeffrey Amherst, commander in chief of all British forces in North America and based in New York City, followed orders from London to cease the custom of giving Native American leaders presents – often being muskets and ammunition for hunting – so as to minimize expenses from the French and Indian War, the natives saw this as just another example where the British were preparing to push them out of this land or destroy them.

Neolin, a Delaware Indian known as a prophet among the Native Americans, told followers that he had communed with the Master of Life who warned him that if the tribes “suffer the English among you, you are dead men”. Pontiac, an Ottawa war chief from the Detroit area and who was aligned with the French, was very concerned about the westward migration of the English and he further became concerned about surprising news of a peace treaty in Paris where the French would surrender their land to the British. These perceived desperate circumstances prompted the Native American tribes to take aggressive action to push the British out of their territories. By late May 1763 there came reports of individual farms and travelling traders being attacked. Garrisons in small forts near Detroit were attacked and held by siege; the fort at Sandusky was burned. Such attacks moved eastward and resulted in the destruction of three small forts north of Pittsburgh - Presque Isle, LeBoeuf and Venango. This widespread unrest became known as “Pontiac’s War”. About 550 people – soldiers and settler families – were crowded into Fort Pitt for protection. Food and supplies were rationed. Living conditions were uncomfortable and unhealthy.

The commander at Fort Pitt sent a letter to his superior, Col. Henry Bouquet at Philadelphia, who immediately communicated with Gen. Jeffrey Amherst, asking for troops to relieve the siege at Fort Pitt. The only troops available were companies of two Highland Regiments: The 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment (aka Black Watch) and the 77<sup>th</sup> Regiment (Montgomery’s Highlanders). These light infantry companies had been sent to North America in 1756 after General Braddock’s devastating defeat on the banks of the Monongahela and they had been campaigning almost continuously ever since, most recently in the Caribbean where yellow fever and malaria claimed 1245 lives. Deaths by disease outnumbered men killed in action 6 : 1. Now in mid-1763, those Highlanders who were able to get themselves out of bed were assigned to assemble on Staten Island, shipped to Philadelphia and routed to Carlisle for further instructions. After horses, wagons, supplies, food and all available men had arrived at Carlisle, they marched westward on July 18 under the command of Col. Bouquet. They reached Fort Bedford on the 25<sup>th</sup> and then Fort Ligonier on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. There had been no news from Fort Pitt since June 26<sup>th</sup>.

It’s not difficult to imagine the summer weather in southwestern PA – we’re living it right now. What we’re *not* doing as we cower in our air-conditioned homes, cars, and workplaces is marching rapidly . . . through difficult terrain . . . for hours on end . . . carrying heavy weapons, equipment and personal rations . . . while wearing wool from head to toe.

On August 4, after having transferred a supply of flour from barrels to bags to be loaded onto pack horses for the final push to Fort Pitt and leaving most wagons behind at Ligonier, they began a fast march westward and after marching about 12 miles they encamped on Laurel Hill. This relief column consisted of 16 Royal Americans, 16 men from a Maryland militia company, 40 packhorse drivers, and 390 soldiers from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Black Watch and 77<sup>th</sup> Montgomery’s

Highlanders Regiments. Knowing that the people inside Fort Pitt would be hungry and low on food, Bouquet took 60,000 lbs. of flour, 100 head of cattle, and 200 sheep plus 32 wagons.

On August 5<sup>th</sup> they continued toward the Bushy Run way station planning to re-hydrate men and horses at the spring there, rest until nightfall, and then march through the dangerous Turtle Creek Valley. That is where they had anticipated a possible Native American ambush and darkness might serve some degree of protection. At 1:00 PM – the heat of the day – the troops were about one mile from arriving at the way station. They were dehydrated, sorely fatigued, and their water canteens were empty when they were engaged by a force of Native Americans whose number is not known but estimated to be as few as 100 or as many as 400.

The enemy first struck the head of the marching column of soldiers, then surrounded them on three sides, working their way to the rear of the column where the supplies and pack animals were positioned. An hours-long battle ensued until evening when Col. Bouquet ordered his men to fall back to a hill where they stacked flour bags in a circle as protection for the wounded men. Typically, Native American warriors did not fight during the night, and this night was quiet except for verbal taunts from a few English-speaking Indians hiding in the forest. Col. Bouquet's assessment of his situation, written in a letter to Gen. Amherst after Day One's battle, was that the loss of many men and horses that day made it seem unlikely that his small army would survive another Indian attack. They were indeed attacked the next morning and for much of that day, but due to an innovative battle plan and a force of tenacious Highlanders, they defeated their attackers. I encourage you to come to the reenactment at the battlefield to learn the interesting details and see the maneuvers in action.

Several days later this relief force arrived at Fort Pitt ending its siege. Bouquet's report to Amherst admitted that, "Our troops . . . [were] distressed to the last degree by a total want of water, much more intolerable than the enemy's fire". He closed that letter with, "The behaviour of the Troops on this Occasion Speaks for itself So Strongly, that for me to attempt their Eulogium would but detract from their merit". He wrote to Lt. James McDonald at Fort Detroit: "The Highlanders are the Bravest men I ever saw, and their behaviour in that obstinate affair does them the highest honor".

I expect to write another part of this story, focusing more on the Highlanders' recruitment, in a future article in *The Thistle*.

Maybe I'll see you at one of the days' battle reenactments at Bushy Run Battlefield on the weekend of August 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>.

- Dale McLeod