

## JOHN BUTLER AND THE ATTACK ON WYOMING

WHEN?  
1778

WHERE? Wyoming Valley



EVENT  
British and Natives attack  
Wyoming

VOCABULARY

John Butler grew up between two cultures—British and Native. Although born in 1728 in Connecticut, Butler's family moved near Albany, New York, to Fort Hunter when he was about one year old. (His father was a British military officer.) This would be a defining time in his life as he learned not only loyalty, duty, and responsibility from his father, he played with Iroquois children learning their words and ways. This knowledge of both cultures would stand him in good position later on in his life.

Butler's prowess was used well by Sir William Johnson the first head of the British government's Indian Department. Johnson had hired Butler as an assistant several years before when Johnson was a trader. Now Butler became his most important advisor (Dziak 257). The two worked together to develop better relations with the Iroquois as Butler's job was to negotiate treaties while treating the Natives with respect. When the French and Indian War broke out, Johnson and Butler played key roles in obtaining the help of Natives against the French.

During the meeting with the Iroquois at Fort Stanwix in 1768, the Natives were persuaded (some say forced) to give up their lands that included Wyoming Valley. That area was considered to be the southern gateway to their longhouse. The Natives loathed that deal though Butler was praised by his government.

Butler had a solid position in the British government. He was a soldier, diplomat, and family man with six children. Then, in 1774, his mentor Sir William Johnson died, and Butler was thrust into the responsibilities of negotiations between colonists and Natives. By then the American colonists were already responding to the taxes placed on them by the British government. Riots, protests, and attacks on British officials were becoming more commonplace. Butler, too, was threatened by the Patriots and had to flee to Canada (Dziak 258). His family was captured in 1776 and temporarily held as prisoners in Albany, New York. They were later exchanged for other prisoners.

As ordered by the British government, Butler gathered a contingent of Tories, Natives including Senecas led by Old Smoke, and British Rangers to attack the frontier settlements. The Natives had been convinced to take up the hatchet by Joseph Brant. This included Wyoming Valley which had given five times its quota of men to Washington and was considered to be the breadbasket for the Patriot army. In late June and early July of 1778 Butler and his allies came into Wyoming seeking the surrender of the forts there. Instead, a battle ensued with the colonial militia that resulted in the massacre of over 200 Patriots. In the following days, families fled east back to Connecticut. Nearly 200 family members died in the Shades of Death—the tangled forests on the trail. Butler and Denison signed the Articles of Capitulation on July 4, 1778 in Forty Fort after the horrible night of killing.



Butler died in 1796 revered by the British and loathed by the colonists.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

#### PRINT RESOURCES

Dziak, Mark. Battle of Wyoming. Pittston: Our History Initiative. 1999.

