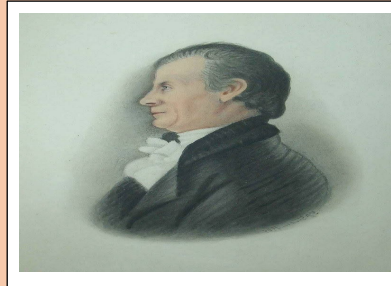


MATTHIAS HOLLENBACK

ENTREPRENEUR, REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIER, AND JUDGE

WHEN?
1752-1829

WHERE?
Wilkes-Barre, PA



EVENT
Hollenback as businessman,
soldier and judge.

VOCABULARY
entrepreneur
flank

People are often acquainted with famous generals and politicians, but places are also shaped by those who arrive at their destinations quietly. This young man arrived in the Wyoming Valley when he was about 18 years old looking to begin a business. No one then could have known that Matthias Hollenback would become one of the most influential settlers in Wyoming Valley—at one time owning 10,000 acres of northeastern Pennsylvania wilderness. Nor would they recognize a young man willing to fight the British over control of his adopted Wyoming Valley though six years after his arrival he would do just that. Certainly, no one would be able to see a future county judge, either, though he would fill that role for many years up to his death.

Matthias Hollenback, unknown to the world until February 15, 1752 (some sources say February 17) was born during what was dubbed as the Little Ice Age in Lebanon, Lancaster



County, Pennsylvania, when winters were harsh and unpredictable. His parents, Johannes Hollenback and Eleanor Jones Hollenback, welcomed him as their third child who joined an older brother and sister. Eventually the family would have five children.

After moving to Wilkes-Barre, he opened his first trading post in 1771 in the young town. That proved to be quite a successful venture. However, just a few years later in July of 1778, Hollenback found himself in the midst of a hastily called meeting in the fort at Forty Fort. Already two years old the Revolutionary War now threatened the frontier settlements including the rich Wyoming Valley who had not only provided men for Washington's army, but valued supplies as well. The British and their Indian allies, supported by Tories--those loyal to the King, now threatened the residents. More than a few of the Tories were former residents of the Wyoming Valley who now came to take the valley away from their former neighbors and friends.

Hollenback and his neighbors now gathered together under the authority of Lt. Col. Nathan Denison and Colonel Zebulon Butler. Hollenback had already been serving in the militia and held the rank of ensign (similar to a 2nd lieutenant.) The question before the group seemed simple: attack the enemy in what is now Exeter, or wait to be attacked? The commanders wanted to wait for reinforcements (only a day or two away) as they did not know the size of the

enemy, but the men were stirred up to go on the attack particularly as they could see the smoke from the fires burning their fields and homes. Arguments grew hot. Ultimately, several hundred mostly untrained older men and younger boys marched in a column of two into battle. It would prove to be a disaster.

Hollenback would be one of the survivors of what is known as the Battle of Wyoming. Though retreat was not ordered, it happened anyway as the Patriot line was crushed from the flank. The roar of gunfire, the murderous cries of the attackers left very few options to escape. He jumped into the Susquehanna with musket balls splashing around him. One ball struck him causing a gold coin to drop into the bloody river that he had been holding between his teeth. Nonetheless he made it to safety. He was also a veteran of the battles of Millstone, Princeton, Brandywine, and Trenton. His insight and leadership drew Washington's attention; he appointed him to serve on various commissions as well.

After the war, rather than abandon the wilderness Hollenback expanded the number of trading posts from Wilkes-Barre along the Susquehanna to the Chemung River into New York. Tioga Point (now Athens) and Elmira near the confluence of Newtown Creek and the Chemung River were part of the chain of his stores. Each was run by an associate and visited by Hollenback who kept check on his inventory. The stores sold much of the usual fare for trading outposts such as guns and gunpowder, blankets, cloth, and flour (Janowski). Both Indians and settlers were frequent customers. Those who visited traded not only goods, but politics and stories. According to Janowski, celebratories such as Col. John Butler and native leaders such as Red Jacket, Joseph Brant, Queen Esther not only frequented his stores but often invited Hollenback to treaty signings.



Hollenback owned or partnered with others in a variety of enterprises such as sawmills, grist mills, coal mines, paper mills, and stores. He was well-known in the area and beyond. That would explain his election as the first treasurer of Luzerne County, later elected as Mayor (Burgess) of Wilkes-Barre and a justice of the peace. He was also elected as an associate judge of Luzerne County a position that he held for thirty-eight years.

According to Tony Brooks, Hollenback married Sarah Burritt Hibbard having three daughters, Elanor, Mary Ann, Sarah, and one son, George Matson Hollenback. He died on February 18, 1829 and is buried in the Hollenback cemetery which was started with his

donation of 15 acres. Though his journey began as an outsider when he was 18, his life is remembered and celebrated as one who shaped the valley.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Matthias Hollenback by Janowski](#)

[Matthias Hollenback by Brooks](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Spear, Sheldon. *Chapters in Wyoming Valley History*. Jemags & Co: Shavertown., Pa. 1989.