

HOW THEY NAMED THE WESTERN

If you stand high up on Wills Mountain in Cumberland, you can look down on “The Narrows” mountain gap and imagine pioneer families in their covered wagons, driving west through the gap in the early 1800s. You can picture runaway slaves as they may have traveled through the Narrows, hidden in wagons driven by black teamsters who were hauling cargo to Pennsylvania. You can imagine private coaches and stagecoaches rumbling through in the other direction, carrying presidents and other political leaders east to Washington.

A 1755 map showed Wills Creek; and Charles Mason, of the Mason-Dixon surveying team, mentioned “Will’s Creek Mountain” in his 1760s journal. Early travellers used the Wills Creek name for what soon would be called Cumberland.

W. H. Lowdermilk, in his 1878 *History of Cumberland*, said the creek was named for an Indian named Will who lived nearby “with his family and a few followers.” Pioneer Thomas Cresap surveyed for Maryland colonial governor Thomas Bladen, a tract of land called Will’s Town at the place where Wills Creek meets Jennings Run (today’s Corriganville). A 1940s authority, William Marye, gave 1745 as the date of Cresap’s survey. While it’s not clear whether that survey and a later land patent covered the place where Will and his family actually lived, writers have used the Will’s Town name for their village.

“Will” certainly doesn’t sound like an Indian name. But English settlers sometimes used nicknames for Indians they knew, probably because they found Indian names hard to pronounce and spell. Lowdermilk didn’t mention Will’s tribe, nor call him a chief; but others later called him Chief Will. Lowdermilk presented Will as a benign fellow who gave “a kindly greeting” to English settlers and lived in “intimate friendship with them.” He said the settlers gave Will “some trifle as a pretended compensation” when they obtained grants to his land. He indicated that Will died in the early 1780s and was buried on top of Wills Knob, a hill near Wills Mountain.

Two other accounts, though, present a sharply different portrait of Will. Thomas Scharf’s 1882 *History of Western Maryland*, suggests that Will tolerated the years-long captivity of two pioneer boys at Will’s Town. According to Scharf, Delaware Indians attacked a group of settlers near today’s Williamsport, Md., in the 1740s. They killed five men, including a Mr. Clemmer, and captured Clemmer’s wife and two of their sons. When Mrs. Clemmer escaped, they recaptured and killed her. They brought the boys to Will’s Town, where they “were held prisoners for nine years.”

Gordon C. Baker of Rockville, Md., a Clemmer descendant who has done much research on the family,

The legendary “Lover’s Leap” area of Wills Mountain.

MARYLAND MOUNTAINS ▸ PART III

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confirms that Indians killed Ludwig and Elizabeth Clemmer and captured their sons Valentine and Lawrence. But he says this took place in August, 1756 (during the French and Indian War) and that the boys apparently were released within four years of their capture. *The Pennsylvania Gazette* of September 2, 1756, reported several Indian attacks in the area where the Clemmers lived and said the Indians had killed at least 32 settlers. It didn’t name the settlers, nor the Indians’ tribe or chief.

In March, 1907, writing in the Bedford, Pa., *Gazette*, J.H.P. Adams said Will—whom he called “Chief Wills” and “the old chief”—was a Shawnee who led a raid in what is now Bedford County, Pa., near the Maryland border. (Adams gave no date for the raid, but French-allied Indians were targeting the entire border area for raids when the Clemmers and their neighbors were attacked.) The Indians captured five settlers’ wives, including a Mrs. Perrin. Carrying an infant, she couldn’t keep up with the fast pace the Indians set as they hurried the captives away. So they killed and scalped her and her baby on Tussey Mountain, near the Perrin’s Rocks of today. Adams said seven settlers pursued the Indians, following them westward to Wills Mountain (which runs into Pennsylvania). Many of the Indians traveled further west with the captives, while others headed north. Chief Will, traveling alone, went south to Wills Knob.

Following him there, settler George Powell shot and killed him. Powell apparently scalped the old man and buried him on Wills Knob.

Adams wrote his account possibly 130-150 years after the alleged event. But he was from the local area, was born in 1832, and was related to Perrins and Powells. Of the seven settlers he said pursued the Indians, Joseph Powell apparently was his grandfather and George Powell his great-uncle. Adams reported that the surviving women captives “were found at Montreal, Canada, and brought home some six years afterward”; perhaps they said Chief Will had led the raid. If the Adams account is true, then Chief Will was not the benign old patsy Lowdermilk suggested. Perhaps he was a fierce old warrior who was trying to protect Indian land by driving English settlers away from the mountains.

One caution, though: Thus far I’ve been unable to find any reference to Chief Will by pioneer leaders who should have been his contemporaries. If he was a chief, he probably was a minor one. It’s conceivable that he played the role of a friendly but not-very-bright fellow in order to avoid notice and to collect useful information about English troops in Fort Cumberland.

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This view is from Backbone Mountain in Garrett County, Maryland. In the far background you can see Deep Creek Lake.

Wills Mountain's high cliffs include a Lover's Leap. In their 1923 *History of Allegany County, Maryland*, James W. Thomas and T.J.C. Williams suggested—with vague citation—that it was named thus because a settler named Jack Chadwick fell in love with an Indian chief's daughter and the chief would not allow them to marry. When they tried to elope, he pursued them to a cliff on Wills Mountain and attacked Jack; and in defending himself, Jack killed the chief. Although still in love, the daughter felt she couldn't marry the man who had taken her father's life. "Then let us leap off the cliff yonder together," Jack proposed, "and end our trouble." She agreed, and they did.

An alternative version of the legend appears in a poem published years ago in an unnamed Cumberland newspaper and reprinted in the 1979 *Journal of the Alleghenies*. In this version, the young man was a chief's son and the young woman belonged to a hostile tribe. Pursued by warriors of her tribe to the cliff, the young man swept his beloved into his arms and leapt from "the cliff to the valley below."

Backbone Mountain, the highest in Maryland, runs through Garrett County from Big Savage Mountain down to the southwest corner of the state and into West Virginia. Its name appeared on a map as early as 1795, and pioneers often called it "the Great Backbone." Jack Caruthers of Grantsville, a veteran student of local history, suggests that if you drive south on Route 219, go up Hoop Pole Ridge, and look over to the southeast at Backbone Mountain, you will understand the name. The mountain is long and fairly smooth, but its little peaks and dips resemble the bumps of a spinal column.

Rev. John A. Grant of Oakland, who has hiked Backbone and other area mountains for many years, adds that early residents probably viewed it as "the backbone of the mountains."

Just before the West Virginia border, Backbone rises to 3,360 feet above sea level—the highest point in Maryland. The peak is named Hoye-Crest in honor of the late

Captain Charles E. Hoye, founder of the Garrett County Historical Society. Members of the national Highpointers Club, whose goal is to reach the highest point in every state, held their 2001 convention in Oakland, and attendees hiked up to Hoye-Crest together. If any were first-timers, this meant they had “bagged” one peak and had 49 to go.

To see “The Narrows” from Wills Mountain, take the Wills Mountain Road up to the Artmor plastics factory. Facing the factory, walk to the left and around behind it to the cliffs, where you can get glimpses and photos of The Narrows below. (But stay away from the edge, because there’s a long and lethal drop down to the railroad tracks.) The road up to the factory is open weekdays from 9-4:30, but gated at other times. The factory’s little museum includes a mural of pioneers headed west, a covered wagon, a display of old Cumberland glassware, and information on the factory itself. The museum is open 9-12 & 1-4 on weekdays; admission is free.

To reach Hoye-Crest on Backbone Mountain, take route 219 south from Oakland to Silver Lake, W. Va. (just over the state line) and the tiny church there; continue on 219 for one mile to the logging road on the left. On foot, follow the “HP” blazes that lead back into Maryland and up to Hoye-Crest.

See www.highpointers.org for information on the Highpointers Club.

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