

## Reclaiming the Cushetunk Settlement: My Journey to the Edge of the Frontier

### By Eric S. Frazer UE

It is a rare and surreal experience to walk into a living history museum and realize the story being told is your own. As a direct descendant of **Joseph Skinner**, the proprietor of the Delaware Company, and the **United Empire Loyalist Benjamin Skinner**, I traveled to Narrowsburg, New York, with a specific purpose. I went to Fort Delaware seeking a connection with the pioneers who carved civilization out of the Upper Delaware River Valley wilderness.

My journey took an unexpected turn while speaking with the fort's reenactors. There, I met a blacksmith who shared not only his craft but also a deep knowledge of local history. He pointed me away from the reconstructed walls of the fort and toward the site of the actual, original Cushetunk Settlement.

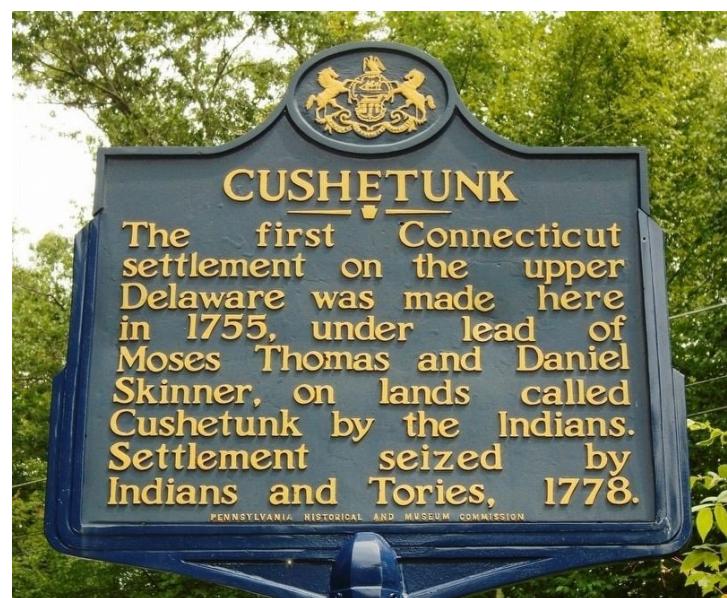
The drive along the rugged border of Pennsylvania and New York was nothing short of breathtaking. Following a narrow, winding road that likely traced an ancient Indigenous path, I moved through a landscape defined by steep mountainsides and the rushing Delaware River. Then, the terrain broke. Below the road lay a vast, vibrant green flat, a fertile expanse of land that stood out against the wild slope.

I pulled over, eager to stand on the soil my ancestors once tilled and to "breathe in" the history of the frontier. But the sense of awe was short-lived. Standing there, amidst the beauty of the valley, I encountered a historical marker that felt less like a tribute and more like a slap in the face.

### The "Whitewashed" Frontier: Correcting the Record

The plaque claims the settlement was founded by **Daniel Skinner** and was later "seized by Tories." This is a sanitized, one-sided history a narrative written by the victors that ignores the grit of the men who built and maintained this place as a Loyalist stronghold.

Through my research, I've uncovered a far more complex and heroic story: one of a frontier bastion held by a network of



**"Friends of Government"**<sup>1</sup> who stood on the very edge of the wilderness, loyal to the King, aiding the men of Butler's Rangers and Brant's Volunteers.

### **The True Foundation: Joseph Skinner's 1754 Pioneer Party**

The plaque's first error is the founder. While Daniel Skinner became famous for his timber rafting, it was his father, Joseph Skinner, who led the first party into this wilderness in 1754.<sup>2</sup> Joseph and his associates from the Connecticut Delaware Company established a strategic foothold. By 1755, under the looming threat of the French and Indian War, these pioneers built defensive blockhouses. These became the "Watchtowers of the Delaware,"<sup>3</sup> designed to protect the settlers and expand the King's influence into the interior long before the rebellion began.

### **Benjamin Skinner: From Refugee to Ranger**

The most compelling evidence of my ancestor's commitment to the King lies in primary records preserved in Loyalist petitions, specifically a sworn statement by **Allan McDonald**, a Sergeant in **Butler's Rangers**. Through McDonald's firsthand account, we move beyond family lore and into the operational realities of the war.

Benjamin Skinner was known to be a Loyal Subject from the outset of hostilities in 1775.<sup>4</sup> However, his service escalated dramatically in the critical summer of 1778. We know that by **early June 1778**, Benjamin had made his way to **Onaquaga**, the strategic base of operations for the legendary Mohawk leader Joseph Brant. His presence there places him at the "Grand Central Station" of the frontier war during the planning of the massive offensive against the Pennsylvania border.

By **July 1778**, Benjamin's role shifted from refugee to active logistical support. Sergeant McDonald reports that Skinner was attached to **Butler's Rangers** on "foraging parties."<sup>5</sup> In the context of July 1778, this was no simple farm work. Following the Battle of Wyoming, Butler's Rangers had captured over a thousand head of cattle to feed the Crown's forces. Benjamin, leveraging his intimate knowledge of the rugged terrain, likely assisted in the massive, high-stakes cattle drives required to move these resources north to Niagara an operation essential to the survival of the Loyalist army.

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<sup>1</sup> The term **"Friends of Government"** was a self-identification used by Loyalists at the Cushetunk settlement who remained steadfast in their allegiance to the British Crown during the American Revolution. From The Nathan Skinner Manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Cushetunk The First White Settlement in the Upper Delaware River Valley by James Burbank 1952 pg 6

<sup>3</sup> The term "Watchtowers of the Delaware" is a modern historical designation used by historians and reenactors of Fort Delaware, adapted from the description written in The Nathan Skinner Manuscript

<sup>4</sup> C-2805 pg 465

<sup>5</sup> C-2805 pg 466

## **Cushetunk the Southern Citadel: The Wyoming Massacre**

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Benjamin's service is who he was living beside before he left. The Skinner homestead at Cushetunk was situated directly next to **Robert Land**<sup>6</sup> and near **Joseph Ross**. These families were not random neighbors; they were the operatives in the King's frontier network and the backbone of a Southern Frontier Citadel.

The Public Papers of Governor George Clinton, number 1299, titled The Wyoming Massacre; details how the residents of Cushetunk were involved in the planning of the raid going back as far as February 1778. The evidence depicts how the King's Men namely the Land's, Ross's, Michel's Cain's (Kane), Allan's, Wood's and Skinner's were to be spared. The witnesses speak about how frequently and freely the Indians moved among their neighbors while hatching the "Diabolical Plot".<sup>7</sup>

Robert Land arrived in Cushetunk in 1763 and served as Justice of the Peace<sup>8</sup> long before he became a courier and spy for British General Sir Henry Clinton, while Joseph Ross was a personal friend and guide to **Joseph Brant**<sup>9</sup>. They were joined in this dangerous allegiance by other prominent families, most notably **Bryant Kane** and his brother **Jonathan Kane**. Like the Skinners and Lands, the Kanes were steadfast in their loyalty to the Crown, a devotion that would ultimately cost them everything. While Robert Land and Benjamin Skinner managed to escape to British lines, the Kane family was brutally massacred in their home a stark reminder of the violence that targeted this specific circle of "Friends of Government."

While history claims the settlement was "seized," it ignores the reality that these men **were** the settlement. These men utilized their strategic position to support the Crown until it became impossible to stay. Living in such proximity these Loyalists did not merely live in a "Tory stronghold"; the King's Men at Cushetunk created and operated a Southern Citadel for the forces of the Brant and Butler. This was not a settlement that was captured; it was a forward operating base that was eventually evacuated.

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<sup>6</sup> Cushetunk The First White Settlement in the Upper Delaware River Valley by James Burbank 1952 pg 2

<sup>7</sup> Public papers of George Clinton : first Governor of New York, 1777-1795, 1801-1804 Clinton Vol III No 1299.

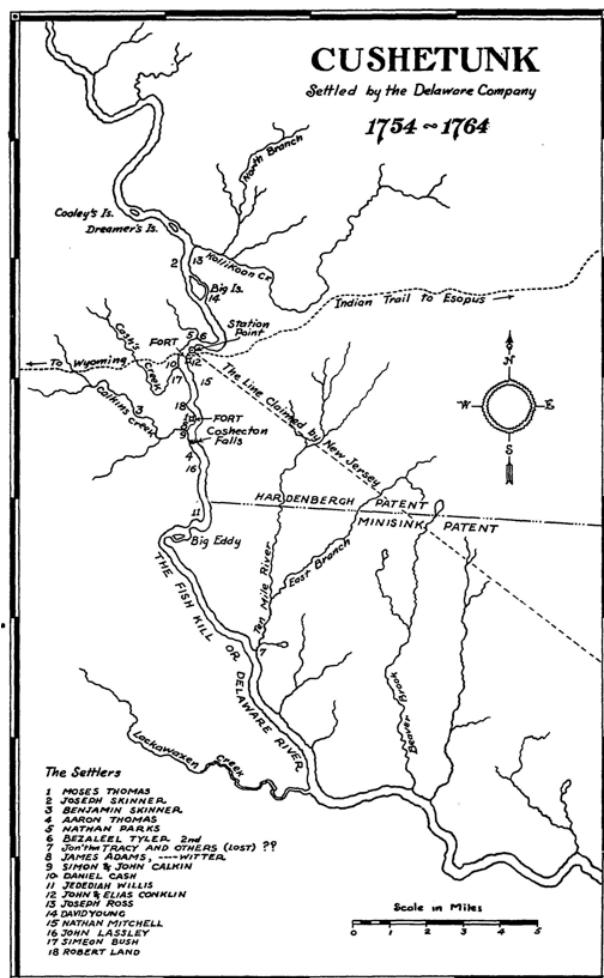
<sup>8</sup> Cushetunk The First White Settlement in the Upper Delaware River Valley by James Burbank 1952 pg 12

<sup>9</sup> "A Settlement Divided" – Fort Delaware Interactive Exhibit and Youtube.

## Conclusion: Reclaiming the Flat

Standing on that fertile green flat, I realized that my ancestors were not the villains of a "seizure" as described on a cold metal plaque. They were the builders, the defenders, and the survivors of a frontier that demanded everything from them.

Helen Merrill UE articulated, in her address to the Royal Society of Canada in 1914, the responsibility of the society is to rescue from oblivion the history and traditions of loyalist families before it is too late.<sup>10</sup> As Descendents of Loyalists, we have a responsibility to reclaim these sites, not just for our family trees, but for the integrity of history itself. The "Watchtowers of the Delaware" may be gone, but the spirit of the Friends of Government remains rooted in the soils of the Cushetunk. It is time to tell their story with the honor they earned.



<sup>10</sup> Journal of the Royal Society of Canada, Series 111, 1914.

knows, least such atrocious offenders should escape, and the public Stores fall a sacrifice to their Villany. I am as before,  
Your most Obt.

H. H.

His Excellency Governor Clinton Poughkeepsie.

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[No. 1299.]

#### THE WYOMING MASSACRE.

*Evidence to Show it was Planned as far Back as February, 1778—  
Tory and Indian Plots.*

The Deposition of the following Persons made before the Committee of Mamacotten Precinct April the 17th 1778: Josiah Parks being Duly sworn, Deposeth and saith: That about the midle of Feb'y Last past Cap't John so Called—a Tuskarora Indian was coming thro the woods to go to one Robt. Lands at Cashithtown and being overtaken with fear, turn'd about from Said Lands to Shohauken and employ'd one John Harris to go to said Lands with an Express of Letters for said Land to go to York with, and soon after said Land went off and is not yet appear'd Home or been seen here since, and that the Tories says 'the said Land is gone to New York and they are afraid he is taken. The said deponent farther saith that by the best Information he can get of one Dav'd Vaneveran of Shohauken is, That the Indians and Tories mean to strike first on Sisqueannah about Wyomah [Wyoming] and take that place first; with the Number of four thousand men, and then come through to the North River. The same Deponent farther saith that Francis Elswert told him not to tell the Damn'd Rebels at Cashithtown about the plot for fear they would move off. Said Elswert sells provision to the Indians and takes Orders on the Kings Quarter-master for pay. The said

ponent farther saith that Francis Elswert; Nathan Parks; Barton De Witt; and Hank Bush, are gone to the Indians.

The Evidence of Joseph Gordens is as follows. He says he heard Francis Elswert and Joseph Gooding—Both of Shohawken—Say that they would Come about five Weeks hence with the Indians and Tories to take all the Wigs at Cashithtown,—Namely—Bezaleel Tyler; John Lashly; in short all the Wigs. And the persons which would not be hurt that were Kings men. Viz. Joseph Ross, Nath'l Michel, Brian Cain, one Allan, Robt. Land, Dan'l Skinner, Jonas Wood, Haggai Skinner. The said Deponent farther saith that the said Elswert and Said Gooding are going Back and forwards to the Indians Greatest part of the time: And the Indians are among them Great part of the time and that he has seen the Indians among them—they seem to be of one mind and opininon and agree very well.

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May it please your Excellency, We of the Mamacotten Precinct and part of Goshen Precinct that took the Deposition of the aforesaid Deponents took it under Character of Committee 'tho we are not certain wether the power and use of Committee be not expired now the Magistracy has taken place. Nevertheless we thought it our Duty to the State, as well as Safety to ourselves to take from under Oath the Deposition of persons filled with the Greatest Anxiety and fear of their Persons and Familes falling a Prey to their worse than Savage Neighbours. And we beg Leave to Lay before your Excellency this their and our Situation from this Diabolical Plot which we have Reason to beleive or it is the opininon of most of the Inhabitants both of this and range County about the Minnisink that our Enemy is more

formidable and our danger Greater than from last Years Design. One of the Deponents Declared on Oath that 300 Men would not be sufficient to take them, so great their Numbers and Beg'd it to be kept Secret for Should it Transpire before help they would be on them and us before we could Remove. We Beg you Excellencys acceptance Judgment and Consideration of the Premises.

And beg Leave to assure your Excellency we are Devoted to your Commands.

In behalf of the Inhabitants Mention'd

J. R. D'Witt.

Philip Swartwoud.

Benjamin Depuy.

Peenpeck Mamacotten precinct 19th April 1778.

To His Excellency George Clinton Esqr., Governor.

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[No. 1300.]

*General McDougall Not Disposed to Concede All Governor Clinton's Demands.*

Fish Kills 19th April 1778.

Sir, I am honored with your Favor of yestarday. The Letters I received from the Commander in chief, preceding the one on which your Opinion was asked informed me of Vanschaick's, Hazen's & Livingston's Regiment being ordered to this Post. When Graton's & Alden's were ordered to repair here, 'tis prob directed Livingston's from Johnstown, was for it Order from the Board of war was founded on Jon's importunity to have them all down, with intention stated to us. If I should be mistaken in i, & any misfortune should happen to this Post,