

CHAPTER XXV - GABRIEL RAGAINS

“GABRAL RIGGEN’S” name is found on the December 13, 1754 Craven County, North Carolina list of “Gentleman Soldiers.” As a result of his soldiering, Gabriel would be killed in the service of the Province, almost four years later.

America’s French and Indian War raged from 1750, when George Washington surrendered Fort Necessity until the French surrendered at Montreal, almost ten years later. The issue was a simple one – the French claimed America’s continental interior and the British Colonies wanted to expand west of the Alleghenies.

An important part of this war was General Forbes’ march on the French stronghold, Fort Duquesne in 1758. To accomplish this, the British raised a 6,000 man army. This army consisted of two Virginia Regiments, three Pennsylvania Regiments, one Hyland Regiment and one Royal American Regiment. The North Carolina militia was attached to the Virginia Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George Washington.

General Forbes practiced a tactic called “Protective Advance.” His army was building a road through the wilderness to Fort Duquesne and was establishing protective forts, at regular intervals, along the route.

By September 9, 1758, Forbes Army had advanced as far as the outpost Loyal Hannon, which was only about 30 miles east of Fort Duquesne. The British fortified Loyal Hannon and renamed it Fort Ligonier. From Fort Ligonier, Forbes sent Major James Grant and a force of about 800 Highlanders out to reconnoiter Fort Duquesne. Instead of following orders to quietly conduct his reconnaissance mission in secret, Major Grant decided to taunt the French with battle drums. Drums had long been used by the British to sound assembly, signal military maneuvers and strike fear in the heart of the enemy, while strengthening the resolve of their own troops. The French rose to the challenge and emerged victorious either killing or capturing most of Grant’s men.

This disastrous setback almost killed Forbes campaign. General Forbes held a war council and it was decided to hold up at Fort Legonier for the winter. Since General Forbes’ army was only funded through December his decision to hold up for the winter was the same thing as admitting defeat.

As fate would have it, the luckless French were also having problems. Enlistments were running out and provisions were in short supply. Their Indian allies were also disgruntled. Both the Louisiana and the Canadian militias had left for home and their Indian allies were returning to their villages. Only a token force of French regulars, were left to man the fort. To mask their weakness, the French feigned an attack on the British near Fort Legonier. They hoped that their boldness would make Forbes think their forces were far greater than they really were. Forbes reacted to the French tactic by ordering the drums to beat general assembly. He then sent George Washington and 500 Virginia and North Carolina troops off to pursue the French. He also sent Colonel Mercer with another 500 Pennsylvanians in another direction to encircle the French patrol. Colonel Washington’s forces came upon a small party of French and Indians around a campfire. They killed one French soldier and captured a man named Johnson, and a couple of Indians. It was quickly determined that Johnson was a British subject and as such was a traitor to the Crown. In a prelude to his interrogation, Johnson was told that if he was truthful he would be pardoned and rewarded with gold but if he lied he would suffer death in an extraordinary

manner. He testified that the French at Fort Duquesne were scarce of provisions and weak in men. In a separate interrogation, the Indians verified this information.

Meanwhile the sun had set and it was becoming very dark. Colonel Mercer, leading his militia continued encircling what he thought were the French forces. Colonel Washington, having safely secured his three prisoners, had then resumed his search for the elusive French.

Washington and Mercer, neither aware of the other's position, caught up with what each thought was the enemy. A hot and determined battle raged for some time. Both sides were taking heavy casualties. This continued until Washington, hearing the other side shouting orders in English, realized that they were firing at their own men. Washington immediately ordered a cease fire but many of the combatants couldn't hear him over the noise of battle. He finally ended the encounter by forcefully throwing up the muzzles of their guns with his sword. Much later, George Washington looked back on this night as the most harrowing of his life. Fourteen of his men had been killed by friendly fire.

Gabriel Ragains was one of those killed that night. Gabriel was survived by his widow, Susannah Gandy and five year old son, Thomas. Thomas was my 4th great grandfather.