

Simon Kenton -- Frontier Hero

In the decades before Ohio achieved statehood, the territory above and below the Ohio River was the setting of an epic clash between the native peoples intent on protecting their home and hunting grounds, and the newcomers eager to settle the vast and promising wilderness.

Like every epic drama, this struggle produced heroes whose feats of courage and endurance have become legendary. Simon Kenton was one of those legendary characters, and he truly embodied the ideal of the frontier hero. He was wise in the ways of the wilderness and extraordinarily strong in body and spirit. He was a loyal friend and a dreaded enemy. Even in the company of scoundrels, he stuck to his principles.

Despite his fame, he remained modest and good natured. Over the course of his long and eventful life, Simon Kenton helped transform the dangerous and violent Ohio frontier into the comfortable home Ohioans have enjoyed for 200 years.

Simon Kenton's own transformation from an ordinary teenaged farm boy into a famous frontiersman started in the spring of 1771 with a misadventure. At the age of 16, Kenton fled his family's farm in Virginia after an impassioned fight with a man who stole away his sweetheart.

Simon beat the man senseless and, presuming that he had killed his romantic rival, escaped into the wilderness without money, food or provisions. When Simon finally reached a distant settlement, he adopted the alias of Simon Butler for a time, went to work for the local miller to purchase the essentials for survival, and after several weeks, resumed his travels.

A remarkably strong and tall youth, Simon adapted well to the rigors of life in the wilderness. His status as a fearful fugitive quickly faded from memory as he pursued a dream to find and explore the fabled "Can-tuc-kee" lands, incredibly rich hunting grounds jealously guarded by the Native Americans, and the mysterious "Middle Ground" they inhabited.

In the fall of 1771, Simon caught his first glimpse of the beautiful Ohio River and the intriguing land beyond while traveling with a pair of fur traders. A few miles below Little Beaver Creek, the group put ashore and paid a friendly visit to Chief Logan's Mingo village on nearby Yellow Creek (near present day Jefferson Lake State Park). Simon must have made quite an impression, as Chief Logan would later intervene to save Simon's life.

Simon and his two companions drifted down the uncharted Ohio for more than 500 miles without finding the dense fields of cane that they were seeking, and became convinced that they had somehow passed them.

For the next two years, Simon and his friends would travel up and down the river, exploring streams and rivers along the way in the Middle Ground between the Ohio and the legendary great lakes. Simon knew that he was an intruder in hostile territory, and he became particularly adept at finding and interpreting the subtle signs in the woods that Native American hunting parties had come this way and may still be in the area. He was eager to assist the trappers and traders who occasionally drifted by, and earned a widespread reputation as an outstanding wilderness scout.

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In the spring of 1774, Chief Logan's family, who had so graciously welcomed Simon three years before, was brutally murdered by a party of malicious frontier explorers. The grief-stricken Logan took his revenge against settlements in the Virginia territory, escalating the clashes between settlers and Indians dramatically. Simon decided to exercise prudence and head for the relative safety of the large secured settlement at Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania).

At Fort Pitt, Simon met and befriended Simon Girty, a scout and translator who was mistrusted by many for his close association with Indians. Simon also met George Rogers Clark, the Virginia militia leader whose brother, William Clark, would later lead the famous expedition to explore the interior of the continent with Meriweather Lewis.

Simon was recruited to serve in the campaign led by Lord Dunmore, governor of the colonies of New York and Virginia appointed by the King of England, to quell the Indian threats to pioneers on the frontier. After a week's deliberation, Simon joined them as a spy and scout alongside his new friend, Simon Girty.

During Lord Dunmore's War, Simon criss-crossed the Ohio territory as a courier between Lord Dunmore's troops and the backwoods volunteers under the command of Captain Andrew Lewis. Simon had just left Lewis' camp at Point Pleasant where the Great Kanawah River empties into the Ohio, when the Shawnee chief Cornstalk led his surprise attack. After a vigorous fight, Cornstalk eventually retreated and the colonists claimed victory, although they suffered much greater casualties than the Shawnee.

A few weeks later, Dunmore set up temporary headquarters which he dubbed Camp Charlotte on the outskirts of Cornstalk's town on the Scioto River (south of present-day Circleville, near Great Seal State Park), and invited the Shawnee leaders and Chief Logan to negotiate a peace treaty. Logan, who was still depressed over the murders of his family and his own bloody revenge, had retreated to a small camp of his own on nearby Congo Creek, and refused to take part in the treaty negotiations.

Dunmore sent Simon along with Simon Girty to Logan's camp to bring back a message from Logan. Simon witnessed Logan's outpouring of emotion, while Girty translated the heart-rending speech that concluded with the immortal lines "Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one."

Under the Camp Charlotte Treaty in October 1774, the Shawnee agreed to allow settlement by pioneer families in the Can-tuc-kee (Kentucky) lands south of the Ohio River, and to allow boats to navigate the Ohio River unmolested. Soon, Simon was living his dream of exploring and settling in the canelands (near present-day Maysville, Kentucky), where the wild game was as rich and plentiful as he had hoped.

The peace with the Native American neighbors was tenuous, though, with the Revolutionary War brewing in the colonies and the British stirring up the hostilities on the frontier. Before long, clashes between the settlers and the Indian hunting parties resumed and escalated as both sides sought revenge for each death. The Kentucky settlements were fortified and guards were posted to protect the settlers as they stepped outside to tend to crops or haul water. Simon and a few other brave souls would venture out at night to hunt for meat to feed entire communities.

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On these dangerous forays Simon developed a talent for which he became famous - shooting, reloading his rifle, and shooting again with dead-on accuracy while running at full speed. This extraordinary ability saved Daniel Boone's life when Simon picked off a warrior who was about to tomahawk Boone as the pair of frontiersmen dashed toward the gate of the Boonesborough settlement while it was under siege by warriors commanded by the Shawnee chief Black Fish in April 1777.

In 1778, Simon snuck across the Ohio River and into Indian territory to recover horses that were lost or stolen in raids. His first escapade at the Shawnee village on the Scioto River at the mouth of Paint Creek (near Scioto Trail State Park) went without a hitch.

Simon's next adventure over the river was a trip he would never forget, and one of the most pulse-pounding episodes of constant danger, narrow escapes and incredible turns of events in all of frontier lore. This time, the destination was the large and bustling Shawnee town of Chillicothe ⁽¹⁾ (at present-day Oldtown, south of John Bryan State Park) on the Little Miami River.

After a two-day ride, Simon and two companions reached the outskirts of the town, and managed to steal away that night with several fine horses and gallop feverishly to the banks of the Ohio River near present-day Ripley. Skittish horses and stormy weather hampered their river crossing, though, and before Simon could safely usher the horses across, he was overtaken by the Shawnee warrior Bo-nah and taken prisoner.

For the trip back to Chillicothe, Simon was bound and tied to the back of a wild, unbroken colt that slammed him into trees and raked him through underbrush on a terrifying ride. Simon's reputation among friends and adversaries made him a prized captive, and over the next several weeks, Simon would be paraded before the Shawnee nation, enduring relentless torture along the way.

Just outside Chillicothe, Simon was forced to run the gauntlet, a perilous quarter-mile dash between parallel lines of villagers armed with sticks and clubs to rain down harsh blows. He survived the punishment only to learn from another captive, an African slave named Caesar (namesake of Caesar Creek State Park) that his ultimate fate was to be burned at the stake at the village of Wapatomica on the Mad River (near present-day West Liberty, not far from Kiser Lake State Park). Simon's torture at Chillicothe was witnessed with distaste by at least one young Shawnee - ten-year-old Tecumseh, who was destined to become one of the Shawnee's greatest leaders.

Over the course of two weeks, Simon endured five gauntlets and endless torments on the tour of the Mad River valley towns. Despite his misery and pain, Simon was so inspired by the beauty of the landscape that he dared to escape.

As he poised to run his sixth gauntlet at Moluntha's Town, a few miles from Wapatomica, he leapt over the ranks of eager tormentors in one of his celebrated feats of superhuman strength, speed and agility, and ran for his life into the nearby woods. Amazingly, he succeeded in slipping away from the stunned Shawnee, but ran headlong into the renowned warrior Blue Jacket who returned him to the village.

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Miraculously, just hours before Simon was to be killed at Wapatomica, his old friend Simon Girty, who was working now for the British and their Shawnee allies, arrived with a party of warriors bringing home more prisoners and scalps. Girty recognized Simon, and made a compelling argument to save his life. In Simon Kenton, the Shawnee saw all the qualities they most admired; skill and cunning, strength and courage, perseverance in the face of adversity and a tendency toward uncanny good luck that must reflect favor of the Great Spirit. Simon was given the name "Cutta-ho-tha" (the condemned man) and adopted into the tribe by a motherly squaw whose own son had been slain.

For the next three weeks, Simon toured the area with Simon Girty and memorized the lay of the land. Meanwhile, the Shawnee had a change of heart about the fate of their great enemy, and once again, Simon was bound, tortured and condemned to death. This time, the execution was to take place at the British trading post at Upper Sandusky, 50 miles to the northeast, where the Shawnee and neighboring tribes traded for supplies and ammunition.

On this second painful march to meet his fate, Simon's arm and collarbone were broken by blows inflicted by his frustrated captors. For two days, Simon and his escorts rested at Chief Logan's winter hunting lodge above present-day Indian Lake State Park.

Despite all that had transpired, Logan renewed his policy of friendship with the white settlers and heaped his hospitality on Simon. Logan even sent a courier to Upper Sandusky to plead for Simon's life.

All hope seemed lost when Simon was tied to the stake the morning after arriving at Upper Sandusky. Before the sparks could leap through the bundles of wood heaped around him, though, a sudden drenching rain fell inexplicably from the cloudless sky and soaked the wood.

Some of the Shawnee considered this bizarre coincidence ominous, but the execution was merely delayed until the kindling dried. The next morning, just in the nick of time, yet another powerful intervention saved Simon's life - this time orchestrated by Chief Logan and Simon Girty.

Logan's envoy, the influential trader and interpreter Captain Peter Drouillard, arrived dressed in the impressive scarlet and gold uniform of the British Army, laden with gifts to trade for the prisoner. Drouillard convinced the Shawnee to surrender Simon so he could be taken to the British fort at Detroit for interrogation concerning the revolutionary activities on the frontier. Simon was quickly whisked away to Detroit, still a prisoner in the hands of the enemy in the midst of war.

It took months for Simon to formulate an escape plan and stealthily amass and hide provisions for the long and hazardous journey from Detroit back to Kentucky. Rather than flee directly south, where the Shawnee would certainly have pursued him, he slipped west to the Wabash River and blazed through 400 miles of untracked forest and prairie in one month's time.

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In 1779, the year after Simon's escape, the British and the Indians began an assault on the Kentucky settlements to squash the revolution and end the invasion of the hunting grounds. In response, George Rogers Clark assembled the Kentucky militia to rout the Indian towns along the Little Miami, as well as harass British forts.

Newly appointed to the rank of captain and placed in charge of the militia's scouts and spies, Simon was once again at the forefront of a dangerous mission into Ohio. Just before the militia's arrival, Chillicothe and the other towns Simon had visited during his captivity had been abandoned. To ensure the Shawnee would stay away, the towns were burned along with the corn crop ripening in the fields nearby. Within two years, the same scenario played itself out again; British and Indian forces attacking settlements, and the militia retaliating with raids on Shawnee towns on the Great Miami along with Peter Loramie's trading post (namesake of Lake Loramie State Park) that served as their principal supplier. For a decade, this cycle of mutual destruction persisted.

During this time, Simon courted and married Martha Dowden and started a family at his own little Kentucky settlement, Kenton's Station.

While chaos reigned in Kentucky, the Revolutionary War concluded in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris, and the new nation turned its attention to the orderly settlement of the land north and west of the Ohio River. Two treaties negotiated in 1785 defied the native American concept of communal land use, and attempted to confine the Ottawa, Delaware, Chippewa, Wyandot and Shawnee tribes to the northern portion of the Ohio territory, while opening the remaining two-thirds of the area to settlement.

Rather than resolving the land disputes, the Treaty of Fort McIntosh and the Treaty of Fort Finney increased tensions, as they were rejected by the indignant Shawnee who held their ground, and violated by determined pioneers who claimed land above the treaty line. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 met with more success, providing the framework for governing the Northwest Territory (which included all of present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and parts of Michigan and Wisconsin), and setting the stage for statehood.

In 1792, Simon, the middle-aged veteran of more than 20 years of frontier warfare, first tangled with Tecumseh, the up-and-coming young Shawnee leader whose skill and reputation rivaled his own. Like Simon, Tecumseh possessed the heroic characteristics of strength, courage, perseverance and insight, and he had grown into a formidable opponent.

In April, Tecumseh and 100 Shawnee warriors, including Blue Jacket and Black Fish, set up camp on Little East Fork, just outside what is today's East Fork State Park, as a base to steal horses from the Kentucky settlements. Simon was soon on their trail, and with a much smaller party of frontiersmen, snuck up on the Shawnee camp at midnight. Simon hoped to catch the Indians off-guard and frighten them into abandoning the camp, but rather than running away, Tecumseh leapt from his tent with a war whoop and led the camp in an energetic skirmish, turning the tables on the attackers.

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A year later, Simon met Tecumseh again as Simon led a retaliatory charge against a Shawnee hunting camp on Paint Creek (near today's Paint Creek State Park).

Again, Simon hoped to surprise the Shawnee hunters at dawn as they assembled around the campfire, but the plan was preempted by a premature shot in the night. The Indians quickly disappeared into the darkness as the frontiersmen plundered the camp, but Tecumseh hid nearby and boldly rounded up their horses, leaving Simon and his raiders without transportation.

By 1795 it appeared as though the frontier land conflicts would finally be resolved. George Washington had placed the tenacious General Anthony Wayne in charge of the "Indian Wars" and Wayne had soundly defeated a coalition of 1,500 Indians at the battle of Fallen Timbers. A new treaty was to be signed at Greenville, and each of the affected tribes was to be represented by the principal chief who had the authority to speak for his people. Simon was at hand to witness the opening of negotiations in the Treaty of Greenville, which essentially reaffirmed the boundaries of the treaties ten years before. This time around, surveyors wasted no time plotting out new towns where the Indian villages had stood.

In 1796, tragedy struck at home when Martha Kenton died in childbirth, leaving Simon a widower, and their four children motherless. In 1799, after marrying a family friend, Simon brought his growing family into the heart of the Ohio country and settled on a 1,000-acre tract at the lovely spot he recalled from his captivity 21 years before. Soon, a new town was soon laid out at the foot of Simon's property, and his second wife, Elizabeth, named it Springfield for the lush natural springs in the area. Simon busied himself with plans to build a mill on Buck Creek (outside today's Buck Creek State Park), and to make a proper road, Kenton's Trace, from the ancient buffalo trail that he had followed so many times from the Ohio River to his new home. Simon's passion for the land sometimes clouded his better judgment, and in 1802 Simon asked Tecumseh, who refused to acknowledge any of the official treaties with the white government, to make a deal with him for the Shawnee lands between the Great Miami River and the Wabash River. With a straight face, Tecumseh agreed and accepted Simon's generous payment for the land neither man could ultimately own.

On March 1, 1803, Ohio was declared the 17th state. For a time, all seemed well in the young state, but Simon's razor sharp instincts from his scouting and spying days told him something was afoot. In March 1806, Simon was out riding with a friend near Urbana when he stumbled upon a secret Indian encampment where a war council was being held by Tecumseh. Simon sounded a general alarm among his neighbors, and alerted Governor Edward Tiffin of his concerns. When Tecumseh was confronted, first by Simon and a delegation from Springfield, a few days later in a letter from Governor Tiffin, and again at a banquet in the new state capital of Chillicothe where he was an honored guest, Tecumseh assured the Ohioans that his intentions were peaceful. However, Simon's instincts were right; Tecumseh was biding his time until his preparations were complete for his master plan.

Trouble was brewing for the new state and the young nation, on the sea as well as on the frontier. The British had set up blockades that were preventing trade with France, and the situation had grown intolerable. Meanwhile, Tecumseh had been building a coalition of Indians from Ohio, as well as Indiana and Illinois who were awaiting the auspicious signs that the time had come to take their stand. In November 1811, a fiery comet seared the heavens and a month later the Earth

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shook and trembled, just as Tecumseh had predicted, and the Indian offensive began with random attacks around the state in the spring of 1812. In June, Congress officially declared war with Great Britain.

Simon would have left the fighting to younger men, but he had heard a rumor that his son Simon Kenton Jr., who was serving under General William Henry Harrison, had been captured by Indians. So in 1813, at the age of 58, Simon joined General Isaac Shelby's forces on their march to Canada to join Harrison's army and engage the British General Henry Proctor and his Indian allies. Harrison cornered Proctor on the Thames River in southwestern Ontario, 25 miles east of Detroit. The battle was over quickly, and there were few casualties except for the advance line of a mounted battalion that was charged by a fearless Indian leader and a thousand hidden warriors. Harrison was sure that Tecumseh had been fatally shot leading the charge and asked Simon to identify the body of his long-time adversary.

Tecumseh's death, which collapsed the Indian resistance in Ohio, ended Kenton's fighting days. Simon and Tecumseh both loved the land beyond all else, and therein is the essential tragedy of the frontier; it was simply not large enough for the two nations to peacefully coexist. Simon Kenton Jr. had returned from the war unharmed, and Simon was free to live out his years in peace, reminiscing about his incredible adventures on the Ohio frontier. The great frontier hero who conquered the formidable wilderness, and fought for more than 40 years to make Ohio a safe place to live, died quietly in 1836 at the age of 81.

- Jean Backs, Editor

- (1) Chillicothe was the Shawnee word for town, and several Shawnee towns were given this name over time. The Shawnee nation was divided into five subgroups called septs, and each sept had its own chief and hometown, chillicothe.

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