



TREE ON BIGGER PROPERTY

*Tour Of
Fort Dillow Area -
Murdocksville*



FT. DILLOW SCHOOL

*and The
Thomas Bigger Property
April 1971*



THOMAS BIGGER STONE HOME 1840



BIGGER LOG HOME BEFORE 1840



WINTER SCENE ON "THE NARROWS"

A TOUR OF FORT DILLOW AREA, MURDOCKSVILLE
AND THOMAS BIGGER PROPERTY

From Burgettstown go to Florence via Rt. 18. Turn right on Rt. 22. Proceed to underpass beyond the Ranch Motel. Turn left on the gravel road beneath the underpass. (This road is usually referred to as the "Haulage Road".)

Site I. Here on the left is the general area of a tract once owned by Robert Wallace and known as Wallace's Bower. On February 10, 1782, Robert Wallace's cabin was attacked and burned by Indians during his absence. His wife and children were taken prisoners by the savages. Mrs. Wallace, her little son Robert, two and one half years old, another son, ten, and an infant daughter were led by the Indians toward Ohio. Finding the mother and her infant troublesome, the Indians tomahawked and scalped them. The two boys were taken to Sandusky where the elder one died. Robert was sold to the Wyandots by whom he was held captive for about two and one half years. He was later restored to his father, and eventually married Miss Mary Walker of Robinson Township, Pennsylvania. (Crumrine's History p.805) Joe Wallace of Midway is a great grandson of Robert Wallace. The tract, Wallace's Bower, was later divided and owned by Sarah, wife of Samuel McConnell and John Burns.. (See Bower Hill Farm on Caldwell's map of Hanover Township.) No stop will be made here.

Continue on the "Haulage Road" to the William Tarr property. (This is a brown insul brick farm house high on the left. It has been in the Savage family for over 100 years.)

Make a right turn on a gravel road which leads to the Fort Dillow area.

Site II. The Fort Dillow area is located on the old Robert Coventry farm, most of which lies on the right hand side of the road about a half mile from Tarr's. A stop will be made here to see the general area of the old fort, the remains of the Coventry spring, and an old tulip tree.

According to a sketch written by Judge Thomas Bigger of Columbus, Ohio and presented at a Donaldson-Bigger reunion August 24, 1929, at Robinson Church, the site of Fort Dillow was on the "south bank of Dillow's Run, a tributary of Raccoon Creek." Judge Bigger writes, "This little fort was built by Thomas Bigger and (Matthew) Dillow whose home was there and at least two other men... It was built after the usual pattern of such Forts with a stockade surrounding it. Its location was about a mile or a mile and a half up the stream from its mouth."

Two stories come down to us about the fate of Matthew Dillow. The first is told in Crumrine's History. The second is narrated by Judge Bigger who grew up in a household of two aunts and an uncle, all children of the pioneer Thomas Bigger. Judge Bigger heard the tales reiterated on many occasions. It would appear to be authentic having come down so directly.

According to Crumrine, Matthew Dillow, who settled on the Fort Dillow tract, and his son John were at work in a clearing when Indians in ambush shot the father and took the son prisoner. The son saw them secrete the body of his father near a large log before starting on their march. The boy was kept a prisoner for several years and upon his return was questioned as to what became of the body of his father. He recalled and narrated the incidents of his capture. A number of

friends gathered together and after a search found the skeleton of the elder Dillow. It was brought to near the old fort and buried. (Crumrine's History p. 804.)

In Judge Bigger's account he tells of four families who took refuge at Fort Dillow. among them were Thomas Bigger and his family and the Dillow family. During the night at the fort Thomas Bigger related to the others that a man named Quinn, whom he had known in Ireland and who lived farther to the east, had ridden by and called over the stockade saying that a large party of Indians was crossing the Ohio, and that the settlers should leave the little fort and escape to the east. No one else in the fort had observed this. When Bigger informed the others of what he had heard, they said he must have been asleep and that it was only a dream. He insisted that he was awake and urged them to leave the fort. This they refused to do. As soon as it was light enough to travel, the Bigger family started to a stronger fort located 12 or 15 miles to the east on Miller's Run. Sometime during the day Fort Dillow was surrounded by a large body of Indians who soon captured it and took all the inmates prisoner. The Indians then led them toward the Ohio River. One the way, in one of the deep ravines which lead down to the Ohio, they massacred the entire party except one of the Dillow children, a boy about 14 years of age whom they carried with them and adopted into the tribe. This boy remained with the Indians 10 years. When he returned to the settlements, the people on the frontier learned the fate of those at Fort Dillow. The young man said that he believed he could find the place where the massacre occurred and took the party to the spot where the bones of the unfortunate inmates of Fort Dillow were scattered upon the ground. Thomas Bigger and his wife and children had escaped safely to the Fort on Miller's Run.

Sometime after this occurrence Thomas Bigger met Quinn and inquired of him how he came to be at the fort that night and was informed that he was never there. Judge Bigger adds, "We have frequently heard these old people in our family say that their father always insisted as long as he lived that on that night he was as wide awake as he ever was in his life when he heard Quinn's voice."

In the history of the Thomas Armor family written by Mrs. Cora Jean Armor Leggo, there is mention of a man named Anderson who was shot by Indians while he worked in his field. Thomas Armor, a strong man, whose lands joined those of ^{Matthew} Thomas Dillow, carried Anderson who was wounded but not killed, on his back to Fort Dillow. Meanwhile Mrs. Anderson had heard the shot, and fearing Indians, had fled to the forest with her infant child. There she hid in the bushy part of a fallen tree. Fortunately the baby made no noise and the Indians passed her by. Her two sons, however, were taken captive and never heard from again.

Thomas Armor, who carried Anderson to Fort Dillow, is said to have owned a female slave, Grace Fuller, who lived to be 117 years of age. According to Crumrine (pg. 804) she remembered being in Dillow's Fort when she was about 17 years old during an attack by the Indians.

An occurrence which is mentioned again and again by old timers in the Dillow region concerns the girl who rode horseback to Fort Dillow. Upon dismounting she stuck her riding whip into the ground. It later took root and grew into a tree. Some say it was a poplar, others an oak, and again a tulip tree. Judge Bigger remarks about "a tree of unusual variety" that marked the site of Fort Dillow. Crumrine mentions a "yellow poplar". Old timers point out a tulip tree and claim that the present one is at least an offshoot of an earlier tree that grew from the riding whip.

On February 10, 1792, David Redick wrote a letter to Governor Mifflin of Pennsylvania requesting that an advancement of a month's pay be made to those who would volunteer to patrol the borders of the frontier. Redick explains that it was difficult to get recruits because the pioneers did not want to leave their families unprotected while they went elsewhere to protect the settlements. He refers to a "gap on the settlements of Raccoon and especially about Dilloes Fort (where) the enemy perpetually made their attacks." (Historical Files W. & J. Library).

Two schools, each called Fort Dillo School, were later built on land near the old Fort. The latter began operation in 1902 and was finally torn down in 1952.

Leave Fort Dillow area and drive past the Handick Farm on the left.

Site III. This is the site of old "Buster City", a village of the oil excitement days. Only a few houses and several wells marked this spot in the early 1890's. Nothing remains today to remind us of the anguish or triumph which came with a dry well or a gusher.

A story comes down to us of a violent explosion that occurred here. Mrs. Nancy Burns and Miss Nettie Barnes were chatting near a little telegraph office in 1892, when a boiler in connection with one of the wells exploded. Mrs. Burns was killed. Nettie Barnes was blinded for the rest of her life. (Miss Barnes was an aunt of Mrs. Frances Lander of Raccoon, a member of the Fort Vance Historical Society.)

Continue to the Frankfort Murdocksville Road. Here turn right toward Murdocksville where we will view the stones of the old mill.

Site IV. Murdocksville was, and is, built on two levels. On the upper level were Gardners' Blacksmith Shop and Inglefields' Cobbler Shop and several houses. On the lower level near the bridge over Raccoon Creek was the general store and post office combined and several other dwellings. Across the bridge to the left was the grist mill. The mill was first established by John White, and the village from 1780 until after 1800 was known as "White's Mill." Later the little community took the name Murdocktown or Murdocksville after James Murdock, an early settler who is said to have been one of the earliest postmasters. On the bank overlooking the mill and bridge was the one room school.

Murdocksville is peculiarly located being at a point where three counties and five townships meet. The counties are Washington, Beaver, and Allegheny. The townships include Hanover and Robinson in Washington County; Findlay in Allegheny and Hanover and Independence in Beaver County. A marker remains above the road not far from the schoolhouse site. The school was in an Independent District.

After the flood of 1912, the mill was converted from water to steam power. It was originally built near where Potato Garden Run empties into Raccoon Creek. On the old Withrow property across the bridge traces of the mill race may be seen. Stones from the mill still remain.

Persons living near the creek at Murdocksville suffered greatly in the 1912 flood. Buildings were washed as far as the Ohio River.

Not far from the mill a pump station operated under South Penn Oil Company for many years in the early part of this century.

Upon crossing the Murdocksville Bridge, turn right on a blacktop road leading to Thomas Bigger's. As you near the Bigger house you

will see overhanging rocks on the left. These have been called by some the "Indian Rocks".

Site V. At Biggers the group may view the stone house from the outside, trek down to the old house where the Bigger family lived until 1840, when the stone house was built, and tramp across a field to see the remains of a giant tree measuring 29 feet in circumference, and which could hold in its great trunk two horses standing side by side. Thomas Bigger present owner, will also show the visitors the burrs from White's Mill and an old coal stove from the Murdocksville General Store. At some distance from the house is a large stone from an old tannery which a Bigger ancestor once operated after learning the trade from one of the Burgetts.

The Bigger stone house, owned originally by Thomas Bigger and presently occupied by his descendant Thomas Bigger and his wife Elizabeth Witherspoon Bigger, is built of sandstone blocks quarried on the farm. Pits from which the stone was taken are still evident not far from the house. Chips of rock and sand were left on the hillside in front of the house making it difficult even today to landscape the yard. The house was built on one solid rock five feet thick. The builders, Standish and Swearingen, have imprinted their names into the stone on the gable end of the house.

The dwelling originally had six rooms and was somewhat L shaped. Porches were of solid stone. Between 1902 and 1920 additions were made which involved a new kitchen, bath and breakfast room. The house then became rectangular. White shutters adorn the windows. Four grates and two huge fireplaces for wood, one in the basement and one in the living room, provided heat.

The Biggers tell that workers were housed in the old log house during the building of the stone one, and that they were instructed to work from the time the figures on their squares could be seen in the light of early morning until the marks were no longer distinguish-

able at dusk. The pay was seventy cents a day with board. Neighborhood girls arrived to help with meals for the workers.

The old log house has two rooms downstairs and three up. In it is a grate, and a stairway leads to the upstairs.

Leave Biggers and continue on the blacktop road to the crossroads. Here, weather permitting, follow the Creek Road straight ahead to the "Narrows."

Site VI. "The Narrows" is a spot which in years past evoked both fear and delight in those who attempted to travel along its precipitous course. On one's left rises a high bank of projecting rock and pine trees. To the right a sheer cliff drops downward to where Raccoon Creek winds amid dense vegetation. Today the road has been widened greatly to permit automobiles to travel it in safety. In the early days a horse and buggy could barely crawl along the narrow shelf.

Elizabeth Bigger's grandparents in their buggy toppled over this cliff into Raccoon Creek. Elizabeth herself remembers riding over the road when it was icy. Her father would snap at the horses with his whip so they would take the glassy surface in a wild frantic rush. I recall as a child hanging on to the seat of our Model T. Ford, my head held down, while I prayed silently but fervently that we would make it over "The Narrows".

Site VII. Beyond "The Narrows" a bridge crosses Raccoon Creek. Here a grist mill was established by Joseph Scott. His son Joseph sold the mill to Robert Withrow in 1835. Withrow sold it to Richard Donaldson. The Mill was in operation till about 1879 and was then owned by James Donaldson, Not far from the bridge is an imprint of the millrace. (No stop will be made here).

Site VIII. Bear to the left up the hill past the old "Dick Donaldson home" which stands high on the right. Continue to the Cramer farm. On a flat across the road, Fred Moore, one of the Ft. Vance Historical Society members, tells us there were many arrow heads and bits of Indian pottery found throughout the years. It would seem that the spot might have been an Indian campground.

Site IX. Within view of Route 22 and Bavington a bridge crosses Raccoon Creek. In this bottom land another mill operated for many years. It was first built about 1787 by John Bavington as a grist mill and operated later as a saw mill. Upon Bavington's death the mill was inherited by his son Daniel who sold it to James Clark. Later it was owned by William Clark, D. G. McBride and Edward Hindman. (Crumrine p. 928).

Upon arriving at Route 22 continue west toward Florence where the Ft. Vance Historical Society will hold its April meeting at the Presbyterian Church.

Katherine A. Pyle

Assisted by

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Bigger

Mr. and Mrs. Fred Moore

Mr. and Mrs. William Tarr

Mrs. Anna Bolser

Mr. James Kerr

A. D. White

Mrs. Arthur Stout

Mrs. Frances Lander

Mrs. Paul Smiley