

Indians Capture Silas Bowker—1781

by Margaret Thompson

When I inherited the Bowker family research there were references to Silas Bowker having been taken prisoner in New York State by Indians during the Revolutionary War. Over a period of many years I have tried to find more about this.

There were two men by the name of Silas Bowker, father and son, who both served during the Revolution from New York State as Indian Scouts. [Note that in some records this older Silas is confused with a slightly older cousin of the same name who stayed in Massachusetts.] Silas Sr. was born in Hopkinton, MA, in 1739, and his son in Concord, MA, in 1763.

My first resource was the Pension application papers of Silas Bowker, Jr.¹ Then, in a variety of libraries, I checked out the county and local histories for the areas of New York state that were Ulster Co. during the Revolutionary War. This includes Ulster, Delaware, and Sullivan⁶ counties. I visited a local history archive near the site of the “battle” at which Silas was captured. There I located a locally published booklet, *The Indians: or Narratives of Massacres and Depredations on the Frontier, in Wawasink and its Vicinity*, by Abraham M Bevier⁴. I have also been in contact with other cousins who have provided additional information. The results of these searches are summarized below.

There are a number of accounts of capture of a Silas Bowker (Buyker, Bugher,...) at about the time of the Revolution. These appear to refer to two different incidents. The one connected with the attack by Indians and Tories at Wawasing in 1781 seems fairly well documented. There is also a New York State Historical Marker near the corner of Mettakahonts Road and US Route 209 in Ulster Co., NY. Its message is: “Colonial Tavern—Silas Bouck, scout taken in Indian and Tory raid, 1779, to Fort Niagara, came back here.” There appears to be a problem with the date; otherwise this apparently refers to the capture of Silas Sr. in 1781, which is documented below.



Silas, Jr., in his affidavit for pension application in 1832, stated that his father Silas was captured at Wawasing along with Hains at the time of the Indian attack in Aug. 1781.¹ The statement also stated that Silas Jr. was in the group of militia who defended the town and then

pursued the Indians, recovering much of the plunder, except the livestock that the Indians had shot. They did not recover either prisoner.

The earliest documentation is found in the *'Public Papers of George Clinton'*² This was found in an historical collection at the Elting Library, New Paltz, NY. There are several letters to and from G. Clinton, referring to the scouts Bugher/Buyker and Hyne/Hine who were captured before the Indians and Tories attacked Wawasing on 12 August 1781.

Joanne Doster (a distant cousin, originally contacted online) in *Pioneer Families of Barry County, Michigan*³, reports some early probate papers found in Chenango County Surrogates Office in Norwich, NY. Among these records was an inventory of the estate of Silas Bowker, taken 2 March 1792. In June 1793, the widow, Esther Bowker, swore that the inventory was a just one. The inventory contained the following item: "10 to 15 months' pay due to Silas Bowker for service while a prisoner of the enemy." Thus, from his capture in August 1781, he would have returned between June and November 1782.

In an 1846 booklet by Abraham G. Bevier (about 70 pages) found at the Elting Library, *The Indians: or Narratives of Massacres and Depredations on the Frontier, in Wawasink and its Vicinity*, Narrative VI⁴ is a tale of the "Burning of Wawasink...Capture of Hine and Bouck-Their sufferings and Escape". It appears that Bouck and Hine were captured as the result of a Tory sympathizer's report of where they were to be scouting for Indians beginning shortly before the raid on Wawasing actually occurred. The Indians and their Tory commanders questioned the prisoners about the defenses of several towns in the valley. They were then securely tied and "left for the most part of three days and nights without any thing to eat or drink, until the Indians returned."

The attack on Wawasing took place on Sunday, August 12, 1781. On Monday, the Indians left the town heavily laden with spoils consisting of stock, bedding, wearing apparel, etc. The Indians got to Peenpeck along the Delaware. An accidental firing of a gun by the pursuing militia alarmed the Indians, who fled, leaving the Tory commander and his men with the prisoners Hine and Bouck. Bouck was taken to Montreal and kept in a log hut with two other prisoners, on scant provisions. They succeeded in raising up one of the boards of the floor and dug a hole under the side of the building, resting by day and digging by night. One night expecting that their execution was imminent, and the night dark, they slipped out. Bouck was the only one who made it across the river, and that barely. After much suffering he arrived at a public house where the freemen of Rochester Township were assembled. When he was recognized, great joy was expressed by all, for he was believed dead. This was some 14 to 15 months after his capture, and the war was about to end.

The October 1993 (vol. 7, no. 4) issue of *The Accordian* contains the first of several articles⁵ relating to the New York State Historical Marker. "The Ordeal of Silas Bouck" is based on an account in Sylvester's *History of Ulster County*. James Eldridge Quinlan, in "History of Sullivan County"⁶, also gives an account, based on the Narrative cited above. (p. 463): "On their way to the settlement, they captured two scouts whose names were Silas Bouck and Philip Hine. These men were scouting in the Neversink about twenty miles south-west of Napanoch, when they discovered the invaders. The leader, whose name was Caldwell, caused Bouck and Hine to be bound and left in the woods until he returned, when he took them to Canada as prisoners. They subsequently escaped and rejoined their friends." He tells that the plunder was found sometime later by scouts not by the pursuing force.

So, the capture of Silas Sr. in 1781 is well documented, and the various accounts are fairly consistent, with the exception of the earlier date for his capture used by the New York State Historical marker.

Notes:

1. Pension Application File of Silas Bowker, Jr. NARA M804, #303, File No. W21684.
2. *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1771-1795-1801-1804*. 10 Vol. with Index. Vol VII, pp. 190-192, 193-196, 198-199, 225-226.
3. Joanne M. Doster, *Pioneer Families of Barry County, Michigan* (Amundson Publishing, 1995) p. 14.
4. Bevier, Abraham G., *The Indians: or Narratives of Massacres and Deredation on the Frontier, In Wawasink and Its Vicinity*, (Town of Wawarsing, 1975, reprint of 1846 ed.) Narrative VI, pp. 42-62.
5. *The Accordion*, Vol 7, No. 4, October 1993; Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1994, Vol 9, No. 1, 1995. Note that much of the personal information about Silas Sr. actually is that of his Massachusetts cousin.
6. *History of Sullivan County*, James Eldridge Quinlan, (G. M. Beebe & W. T. Morgans, 1873) pp. 463-464.