

MARX ROOM RECOMMENDS . . .

FIRST OFFICER DOWN Subtitled - The true story of the murder of Northampton County Deputy Sheriff Nathan Ogden on January 20, 1771.

BY WILLIAM B. HILLANBRAND

In 1681, King Charles II of England granted an enormous tract of land, comprising today's Pennsylvania and Delaware, to William Penn, son of the late Admiral Sir William Penn. When the King and his advisors drafted the necessary documents, they carelessly included in Penn's grant some land along the Susquehanna River, in the vicinity of today's Wilkes-Barre and Wyoming Valley - land that the King had already granted to Connecticut, in 1662. The mistake led to a sad outcome - it would cause the first line-of-duty death of a Pennsylvania law enforcement officer, when Northampton County Deputy Sheriff Nathan Ogden was killed on January 20, 1771.

Connecticut had assigned the land to its Westmoreland County (which no longer exists) for 19 years, but had done little to occupy or utilize it. Eventually, in the 1750s, a shortage of productive farmland in Connecticut itself drove potential new settlers to explore it. Around the same time, Pennsylvanians (who had assigned this land to Northampton County when it arrived as part of the colony considered it available for settlement. The area seemed to be poised for growth, but the entire process was then interrupted for almost ten years by the French and Indian War, which diverted many of the more-ambitious Connecticut and Pennsylvania men of military age out of the economy.

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After the war ended, the momentum toward settling the area returned, at least in a disjointed fashion. Both colonies had eager potential settlers moving into the area. Clashes were inevitable, and the large number of combat-experienced and armed veterans meant that fighting could become serious at any moment. (The settlers coming from Pennsylvania were identified as "Pennamites"; those from Connecticut were identified as "Yankees".) Both sides built forts and then attacked those of the other side. Both sides also turned to the legal system for support. The back-and-forth was extensive and complex, and is well-described by the author, as is the actual murder of Deputy Ogden. (He engaged in a rather sad conversation with one of the Yankees, who he knew from earlier times.)

For those with an interest in local history, the cast of characters is colorful, as well-known early area residents appear in the author's narrative or in the records that he includes. William Parsons makes a cameo appearance, as does King Teedyuskung, the colorful Native American diplomat. John Jennings plays an active part as the sheriff of Northampton County - his father was Solomon Jennings, famous for (unsuccessfully) participating in the Walking Purchase. Peter Kachlein and Robert Levers pass through. Mr. Hillanbrand includes extensive official records from various legal proceedings.

Among the Pennamites were Amos and Nathan Ogden, part of a large family originally from New York State; they were prominent participants on the Pennamite side who engaged in trading with the Native Americans in the Wyoming Valley area. They were allies of Sheriff Jennings.

On the Connecticut side was the Lancaster-based Scots-Irish gang known as the Paxton Boys, led by Lazarus Stewart, who engaged in particularly ugly - in fact, murderous - attacks on pacified Indians being sheltered by the Moravians. Even Ben Franklin and the Philadelphia authorities were concerned about the Paxton Boys' ability to intimidate those who were attempting to protect the Indians and their supporters.

The death of Deputy Ogden is still remembered, and honored today. An award named for him has been presented annually for the last 23 years, by the Northampton County Chiefs of Police Association, to a police officer "who demonstrates consistent, integrity, professionalism and dedication throughout their career." The current honoree, named in 2025, is Bethlehem Police Lt. Michael DiLuzio.