

The gristmill in Little Falls, built between 1722 and 1725 by Johan Joost Petrie, was one of the very first mills along the Mohawk River.

It was located on a site near the confluence of Furnace Creek and the Mohawk River, in the general area of the powerhouse on West Mill Street once owned by Forbes Whiteside. At that time there was a long island in the river, and Furnace Creek emptied into the channel just north of the island. It should be noted that in the history of Little Falls, the outlet of Furnace Creek has been moved three times. The Petrie gristmill was the first “industry” in Little Falls.

With the destruction of mills in German Flatts in 1781 and 1782, the gristmill at Little Falls was one of the few remaining near the end of the war. It was an important source of much needed wheat to feed Washington’s Army. Live taverns, gristmills were gathering places in the sparsely settled upper Mohawk Valley.

On a warm, early summer evening in June 1782, more than 20 people had thronged together in the log gristmill. Included were the two millers, Gresham Skinner and Frank Cox, the owners of the gristmill, Jacob and Daniel Petrie, both descendants of Johan Joost Petrie, and eight farmers who had brought their grain to be ground: Peter Wooleaver, Christian Edick, Frederick Getman, Mark Rasback, John Rasback, Thomas Shoemaker, Lawrence Hatter and Peter Orendorf. Guarding the mill were seven militia men under Captain McGregor. Also at the mill were an unknown number of women and children who had accompanied the farmers, most likely their wives and offspring.

Unknown to the occupants of the mill, a large war party of nearly 300 Loyalists and Iroquois Indians surrounded the mill hell bent on revenge.

They had bypassed Fort Herkimer when they misinterpreted a noisy wedding party as being a large garrison of militia. They moved on the wagon path to the Little Falls gristmill a few miles further east. The Tories must have been former residents of the area as they called out the mill occupants by name to surrender and save their lives. Surrender was not on the mind of the patriots! Flaming arrows from the Indians set the log building on fire and the overwhelming enemy force quickly forced the brave patriots, most of whom were unarmed, into submission.

Skinner and Cox, being intimately familiar with the layout of the gristmill, hid under the water wheel and escaped. Getman was discovered hiding in the water raceway and was captured. Wooleaver was able to make his escape and proceeded to Fort Dayton near Herkimer to sound an alarm. Daniel Petrie and several of the militia and farmers were killed in the attack. The others, including the women and children, become captives and were marched off to Canada. Most of them returned to the valley one hostilities ended.

Daniel Petrie met a particularly gruesome death. During the battle, he repeatedly discharged his firearm and fought with the butt end of his musket until being subdued. After being overpowered, he was scalped, bound on the rocks in the Mohawk River and tortured to death by arrows, tomahawks and scalping knives. It was reported that soldiers from Fort Dayton buried the bodies of Daniel Petrie and the other brave gristmill defenders at the scene of the conflict. This skirmish, right here in our backyard, in 1782 — nearly 237 years ago — was one of the last battles or armed conflicts of the Revolutionary War.

In July 1783, nearly a year after the attack, Gen. George Washington made a tour of the Mohawk Valley. On July 26, he stopped at the home of Gen. Nicholas Herkimer to thank the valley residents for their stellar efforts and many sacrifices made during the War for Independence.

To commemorate the noteworthy even of the attack on the gristmill in Little Falls, the Little Falls Historical Society has committed to putting a historical marker in the general vicinity where we believe the gristmill massacre occurred. *Louis Baum is a member of the Little Falls Historical Society.*