The True Story That Inspired *West of the Alleghenies*

By Craig Pennington

Fergus Moorhead was a real man.

In 1777, he was captured while traveling home through the Pennsylvania frontier. What followed was a year-long journey that nearly killed him—one that would take him deep into Native territory, into the chaos of the Revolutionary War, and eventually into British captivity.

The full truth of his story has never been completely documented. What survives is fragmentary, scattered across early histories, local accounts, and family records. Yet for more than a century, his story has remained central to the early history of Indiana County.

The account of Fergus Moorhead has been told by historians such as Arms and White, Stewart, and in numerous newspaper articles, but much of his life remains uncertain. Little is known about his early years in Chambersburg, his profession, or even the birthdates of his children. Like many frontier families, the details of his life were only partially recorded, leaving gaps that later historians attempted to fill.

His journey into Indiana County, Pennsylvania, follows the familiar pattern of early pioneer life—marked by hardship, danger, and loss. The struggles faced by Fergus, his wife, Jane, and their family were undoubtedly real, as many others endured and documented similar experiences along the frontier.

There is some documentation placing his brother, Samuel Moorhead, at Kittanning during the early years of the war, and it is generally accepted that Fergus was captured while traveling home from the fort. Beyond that point, however, the historical record becomes vague.

Earlier accounts claim that Fergus was taken to Canada by Native Americans and traded to the British, where he remained a prisoner for eleven months before being exchanged and sent back to the American lines. According to those versions, he eventually made his way to New York and then returned home to Chambersburg.

But when these claims are compared against the known timeline of events following his capture on March 16, 1777, several problems emerge.

The Seneca—often suggested as his captors—were not operating as far south as Kittanning at that time. The Delaware, who were more likely responsible for his capture, would not typically have taken him far north. To reconcile these issues, I have interpreted that Fergus was initially taken by the Delaware near Blanket Hill and, through a series of events, passed into the hands of the Seneca, who then carried him north toward the Mohawk Valley.

This timeline aligns with a significant historical moment: the Great Council Fire at Oswego. In the months following his capture, members of the Iroquois Confederacy—particularly the Seneca—were traveling there. This provides a plausible setting for Fergus's movement through Native territory and places him within the broader events of the war.

From there, it is possible that Fergus would have been present during key moments such as the siege of Fort Stanwix and the Battle of Oriskany. In such circumstances, he could have encountered well-known figures including Cornplanter and Joseph Brant—men whose influence shaped the course of the conflict on the frontier.

Following St. Leger's failed campaign at Fort Stanwix, many of the Iroquois returned home, while others followed Joseph Brant east to join Burgoyne's forces. This movement offers a more likely explanation for how Fergus ultimately came into British custody in Canada—not through direct transfer by Native Americans, but as part of the shifting alliances and campaigns of the war.

The traditional claim that Fergus was held in Canada for eleven months and then exchanged also raises questions. After Burgoyne's surrender, American forces moved British prisoners away from contested regions, while the British withdrew northward into Canada. Prisoner exchanges during this period were limited, and even George Washington expressed reluctance to pursue them.

Moreover, had Fergus been released through an exchange, it is unlikely he would have been sent to New York, which remained under British control. A more plausible scenario is that he and a companion, Rolf, made their way south from British territory, leading to the account of their escape near Fort Ticonderoga.

The horrors described aboard British prison ships in New York Harbor are well documented. The only suggestion that Fergus may have been among those prisoners comes from the claim that he passed through New York after his supposed exchange. To explore this possibility, I have drawn on the documented experiences of Christopher Hawkins, adapting his timeline so that he might plausibly intersect with Fergus's journey.

All accounts agree on one final detail: when Fergus eventually returned to Chambersburg, he was nearly unrecognizable—bearded, starving, sick, and close to death. It is said that only his wife, Jane, knew him at once.

As Fergus says in the novel:

"You know, old Daniel Boone was right. There is no story of this land, or war, or pioneering, or Indian attacks, or cruel winters, or breathtaking sunsets across an open prairie, without a good woman. My story begins and ends with Jane."

The challenge in telling a narrative of a real person's life is knowing where the truth stops and the legend begins. But, as the newspaper editor in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* says, *"When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."*

Fergus Moorhead was James Stewart's great-great-great-grandfather.

West of the Alleghenies is my attempt to bring that story to life.