THE MYTH OF FORT POMFRET CASTLE

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ACCORDING to several statements by Governor Morris of Pennsylvania, Fort Pomfret Castle was erected in January, 1756, on the Mahantango, about fifteen miles from Fort Granville and twelve miles from the Susquehanna river. It appears on several contemporary maps; it was fired on by the Indians on March 29, 1756; and a letter headed "Fort Pomfrett Castle" still exists. Yet, despite all this evidence, no such fort was ever built.

While the editors of *Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania* deny the existence of Pomfret Castle, they present no evidence to support their statement; many people, especially Pennsylvanians, still believe that the fort was an actuality. An explanation of how the myth came into existence, together with all the available evidence, may therefore be useful.

Pomfret Castle was one of a chain of projected forts laid out in the winter of 1755-56 along the frontier between the Susquehanna river and the Maryland line, extending through what was then Cumberland county. There was some uncertainty as to how many forts would be required to protect this western flank of Pennsylvania's frontier. The provincial commissioners first decided on three, and they accordingly issued instructions to George Croghan to lay out that number of "Stockadoes, vizt., one back of Patterson's, one upon Kishecoquillas, and one Near Sideling Hill."  

The plans were apparently only tentative, however, for Governor Morris, making an inspection tour through the frontier counties, reported from Carlisle on January 15 that five forts were to be erected.

2 *Pennsylvania Archives*, first series (Philadelphia, 1852), vol. ii, p. 536. There is no date given, but it was probably in December, 1755. Since Croghan had already built a fort of his own at Aughwick, the commissioners may have intended four forts altogether.
The Commissioners and I have agreed [he wrote the council] to engage three hundred Men for the Protection of the Western Frontier, who are to be stationed in Five forts, extending from the Sugar Cabins near Sideling Hill to a place within about twenty miles of the Susquehannah. . . .

Six days later the governor informed the council from Lancaster that there were to be four forts, stretching from the Sugar Cabins to the Mahantango. Three “are already in hand, and I hope will soon be finished,” he declared, and “the fourth I have ordered to be laid out as soon as possible and expect it will be complete in about ten days.”

Presuming that the fortifications would be completed according to his directions, Governor Morris on his return to Philadelphia immediately began reporting his accomplishments to officials of other colonies. On January 29 he wrote Governor Sharpe of Maryland that the proposed forts were “already erected,” including Pomfret Castle “at a river called Matchitongo.” Three days later he informed Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia also that Pomfret Castle—on the Mahantango—was completed. In describing the forts in a letter to Colonel George Washington on February 2 the governor rather significantly omitted mention of the Mahantango and located Pomfret Castle only as “between that [Fort Granville] and the Susquehanna.” A week later he advised General Shirley, commanding the British forces in America, of his fortifications, stating, again with no reference to the Mahantango, that Pomfret Castle had been erected “From Fort Granville towards Susquehanna at the distance of fifteen miles, and about twelve from the River.” In another letter written to Shirley on February 24 he inclosed a map of the province west of

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*Colonial Records*, vol. vi, pp. 776-777. These four forts were Forts Littleton, Shirley, Granville, and Pomfret Castle. It would appear from later evidence that Pomfret Castle was the one still to be laid out.
*Pennsylvania Archives*, vol. ii, pp. 556-557; original manuscript in “Provincial Papers,” vol. xiv, p. 12, Archives Division, Pennsylvania State Library.
the Susquehanna showing the location of the forts. Presumably on the basis of this information a map was prepared at the general's order showing all these frontier outposts and locating Pomfret Castle on the Mahantango. A list of "Troops in the pay of the Province of Pennsylvania and Where Posted," prepared on February 23, showed Captain James Patterson stationed with his company of seventy-five men "At Pomfret Castle about 15 miles from Fort Granville & 12 from the River Susquehanna."

Governor Morris may have learned early in February that no fort had been built on the Mahantango. Reminding Major James Burd on February 3 that the braves involved in an Indian massacre on the Juniata near what is now Thompsontown must have passed close to where Pomfret Castle should have stood, the governor complained:

[I] am equally surprised & concerned to find (notwithstanding ye pressing Orders I gave so long ago yt you should immediately proceed to the Fort at Kishkequiller, & should afterwards go wth Capt Patterson & some of yours & his Companys to Matchitongo and lay out a fort there) That you were gone to ye Suggar Cabbins, and that nothing is yet done in pursuance of these orders.

Morris continued to mention Pomfret Castle in his later letters probably because Captain Patterson's men were stationed at a fort which not only was called by that name but also answered to one of Morris's three specifications for the site of Pomfret Castle. This fort was fifteen miles from Fort Granville, but, on the other hand, it was twenty miles from the Susquehanna instead of twelve and stood on the Juniata rather than on the Mahantango.

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9 Ibid., vol. ii, p. 583. This may be the map now in the Public Records Office, reproduced in Frontier Forts, vol. ii, opp. p. 80; another copy of this map is in the British Museum (photostat in Archives Division, Pennsylvania State Library).
10 Reproduced in Archer B. Hulbert, The Old Glade (Forbes's) Road (Cleveland, 1903), opp. p. 50.
12 An account of this massacre is given in a letter from Thomas Barton to Richard Peters, February 6, 1756 (Pennsylvania Archives, vol. ii, p. 568), and in the Pennsylvania Gazette, February 5, 1756.
Evidently the military officials had acted with characteristic frontier independence and high-handedness in interpreting the governor's orders. Captain Patterson seems to have decided that his own fort on the Juniata at what is now Mexico would serve the purpose just as well as one on the Mahantango. It may have occurred to him that since his own fort was already erected, he could save time by using it instead of building another; that communication with Fort Granville and with Carlisle would be easier from the location of the existing fort than from that of the proposed one; that the settlements on the Juniata could be better protected by a fort in their midst than by one fifteen miles away; and that he could defend his own property by stationing his men on it.

Whatever his reasons, Patterson kept his forces on the Juniata and called his fort Pomfret Castle. Governor Morris seems to have given his helpless consent to this perversion of his orders, for on March 28 he directed Elisha Salter to go to Pomfret Castle on his inspection tour, and he instructed Major Burd to furnish an escort for Salter "to Pomfret Castle or Patterson's Fort." Salter in turn applied the name of Pomfret Castle to Patterson's Fort; he reported that on March 29 Indians had fired on Pomfret Castle and carried off Hugh Mitcheltree.

Elsewhere this fort on the Juniata is referred to as Patterson's. James Young wrote on July 22 that rangers "on a Scout as far as Shamokin" had stopped at "Patterson's Fort." On October 14 Thomas Lloyd informed the governor that stores of flour had been left "at Captain Pattersons, on the Western Frontier," and asked whether "the House should be burnt & the Flour destroy'd..."

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14 He headed a letter to Burd on February 5 "Fort Pomfret Castle." This letter is published in Frontier Forts, vol. i, p. 601; the original is in the possession of Mr. E. S. Thompson, Thompontown, Pa.
16 Ibid., vol. ii, p. 603; original in "Provincial Papers," vol. xvii, p. 88. Both these drafts are in the hand of Secretary Richard Peters and may not have had the approval of the governor.
17 Ibid., vol. ii, p. 611; original in "Provincial Papers," vol. xviii, p. 3. It is evident that this incident occurred on the Juniata at Patterson's Fort, for that is the location given in the account in the Pennsylvania Gazette, April 8, 1756, in a copy of a letter to George Ross (Pennsylvania Archives, vol. ii, p. 669; original in "Provincial Papers," vol. xviii, p. 6), and by Morris himself (Pennsylvania Archives, vol. ii, p. 617; original in "Provincial Papers," vol. xviii, pp. 16, 17).
or not." The fort must have been destroyed, as there is no further mention of it.

Morris, still clinging to his original plan, had meanwhile made one more effort to establish a fort on the Mahantango. In a letter to Lieutenant-Colonel John Armstrong on June 14 he ordered that Captain George Armstrong be sent "to build Pomphret Castle where it was laid out by Major Burd." These instructions appear to have been disregarded as casually as those previously given to Major Burd, for by November there was still no fort bearing the name of Pomfret Castle. On November 19 Lieutenant-Colonel Armstrong suggested that name for a military post which he had just erected at McDowell's Mill. The new governor, William Denny, however, was apparently not impressed with the old English name, and the stronghold was called Fort Loudoun in honor of the recently appointed commander of the British forces. Thus Pomfret Castle is only a persistent myth in the chronicles of Pennsylvania's defenses.

"Ibid., vol. iii, p. 12.