THE FRONTIER FORTS OF PROVINCIAL PENNSYLVANIA

By Hubertis Cummings

Harrisburg

The very name, "Frontier Fort," carries with it for modern Americans excitement and a sense of romance. But the time was in Pennsylvania history when the frontiersman's crude "blockhouse" represented a stark necessity to the back inhabitant. The Assembly of the Province, on pretense of maintaining William Penn's cherished policy of friendship with the Indians, refused, for decade after decade, to provide a militia or other material forms of defense to protect settlers from either French or aboriginal foes. Not until after the defeat of Braddock, serving at the head of forces under authority of the British Parliament and Crown, in July, 1755, did the Legislature endorse measures for the establishment of a chain of forts extending along the Kittotchinny Hills from the Delaware to the Susquehanna. In the autumn of that year and the winter of the succeeding one, first steps were approved to that end and subsidized by the Assembly and put into effect by Deputy Governor Robert Hunter Morris, aided by Justices of the Peace in the several border counties, Northampton, Berks, Lancaster, and York, and by a few officers of military experience. Then, before the winter of 1756-1757 had definitely set in, a number of variously built blockhouses, with or without stockades, redoubts, and forts were either erected or in process.

These, set up in, or slightly to the north of, the gaps at which the rivers Delaware, Lehigh, Schuylkill, Swatara, and Susquehanna made their way south through Blue Mountain, decreased anxiety and afforded at least partial protection to the frontiersmen. Settlers, who for many bitter months had defended themselves against marauding hostile Shawnees and Delawares, or experienced murder in their own or their neighbors' fields and witnessed massacre of men, women, and children at the homes of their friends, began to take heart. More resolutely they clung to
or returned to their small plantations. Many enrolled as rangers in
the defense of their families and their townships.

The first commander to co-ordinate the measures of defense
along the Blue Range from Delaware to Susquehanna was Colonel
Conrad Weiser, the most experienced man in Indian affairs in the
Province and long the agent for the Proprietaries to the Six Na-
tions. He was appointed to his commission by Governor Morris
in October, 1755. Later his duties devolved upon more professional
military men like Colonel William Clapham and Colonel James
Burd, and in lesser measure upon Captains Frederick Smith,
Christian Busse, Jacob Morgan, Asher Clayton, and Timothy
Green, or upon Justices like Jonas Seeley of Berks or Adam Read
of Lancaster, or even upon that well known 'fighting parson,' the
Rev. Mr. John Elder of Paxton Presbyterian Church. These with
their countryside leaders, lieutenants, ensigns, sergeants, and en-
listed men "watched the mountain"—as it was put in occasional
records of the cost of their services in his account book by the
Rev. Mr. John Roan of "New Side" Derry Church.

According to a plan that was as much Conrad Weiser's as any
man's, they were divided into rosters of sixteen to fifty men at a
fort; and, then in smaller reconnoitring parties of six to ten, they
ranged every day far enough either to west or to east to cover
half the distance between their own fort and the one next to west
or east and near enough to the base station of each group to be
back at it by nightfall. Always they kept keen eyes on outlying
farms, sharp lookout for ambush, and a ready will to come to the
relief of their fellows when attacked or to aid farmers whose
plantations and houses were suddenly raided.

Year after year, until the close of the French and Indian War
in 1763 and to the ending of the Conspiracy of Pontiac in 1764,
different ones of them furnished their service, while the chain of
forts developed more and more links, more and more effectual
types of fortress.

Within the number and variety of these, came into existence
Dupui's Fort on the Delaware above Easton; Fort Allen north of
the Lehigh's passage through Blue Mountain, Fort Lebanon far
up the Schuylkill; Fort Swatara at Swatara Gap; Fort Manada
in Manada Gap; Fort Hunter at the junction of Fishing Creek
with the Susquehanna (six miles above the present City of Har-
risburg).
Supporting these more standardized defenses with magazines and barracks, stockades and occasional wooden turrets, were numerous fortified log farmhouses situated at strategic positions, particularly in what is now Dauphin County, where were enumerated McFarland's, Brown's, Robinson's, Barnett's, Patton's, McClure's, and others in the foothills—occasionally with a diminutive stockade added, more usually provided only with tiny windows or a line of loopholes beneath eaves. Moreover, as in due course of time Provincial authorities in Philadelphia and British authorities at Whitehall realized the need for genuine and competent protection against the encroachments of the French on the Susquehanna and the Ohio, there came into being a Province-wide system of defenses.

In 1756-1757 Fort Augusta rose at Shamokin (now Sunbury) southeast of the junction of the two great branches of the Susquehanna, with flanking stockades, four outlying blockhouses, four great bastions in the main structure with cannon mounting them and parapets for the defenders manning them, commodious quarters and barracks for officers and men within the fort proper, with main gate on the south strongly protected and spacious drill grounds within the enclosure. Far to the southwest, beyond the Susquehanna and over the Ridge, developed during the next few years, with increasing elaboration and means of strength adjusted to topography or diversified according to military theory, Fort Bedford, Fort Ligonier—and at the junction of the Monongahela and the Allegheny, famous Fort Pitt, supplanting there the French Fort Duquesne, which fell to Brigadier General John Forbes in November, 1758.