THOMAS HUTCHINS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA*

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The success of His Majesty's arms at the forks of the Ohio, under the command of Brigadier General John Forbes, was the occasion for great rejoicing. Exultantly the British boasted of the superior wisdom and skill which had won for them the choice Ohio Valley. But reality fell far short of the vision and after General Forbes formally took over the charred ruins of Fort Duquesne, he hurried the army off to winter quarters as soon as possible, leaving a detachment of only two hundred to keep the hard earned gains. He was forced to this decision by the destruction of the fort, the imminence of a severe winter, and the difficulties of getting provisions through to this outpost. Colonel Hugh Mercer, who was left in command of the detachment, was colonel of the Third Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment. To him fell the task of fortifying the strategic position, keeping a watchful eye on the French and their satellite Indians, and feeding and clothing his little band of men so far from the source of supplies. In solving the problem of maintaining himself and his men he had the able assistance of Lieutenant Thomas Hutchins who was provincial quartermaster of the Third Battalion.

Little is known about the early life of Thomas Hutchins. Contemporary accounts agree on Monmouth County, New Jersey as the place of his birth and set 1730 as the approximate date. He was left an orphan while still very young, but preferred to look after himself rather than to be dependent on his relatives who were respectable citizens of New York. Even at such an early age he showed his lifelong preference for the frontier and the outdoor life it necessitated. Before he was sixteen he went to the "Western Country." What formal training or education he received is unknown, but his well-written letters indicate a consid-

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erable degree of proficiency, and his later positions as engineer, surveyor, and map-maker, all show mathematical and scientific prowess. No known portrait or description of Hutchins is in existence today, and a chance remark by Hutchins furnishes the only indication of his slender physique. Hutchins wrote of an infection which caused his leg to swell to the size of his waist, which, he jocularly added, though not very big was still enormous for his spindle shank.

The first known official record of Thomas Hutchins occurs on November 1, 1756, when he received his commission as ensign in the Second Battalion of the Second Pennsylvania Regiment. The very next year he received his commission as lieutenant, when he was noted as being stationed west of the Susquehanna. Within six months he became quartermaster of the Third Battalion, and it was in this capacity that he served in the Forbes expedition and in the first permanent English garrison to be stationed in the Ohio Valley. The task of supplying a remote outpost west of the Alleghenies in a period when Pennsylvania was merely garrisoning a frontier "westward of the Susquehanna" was a tremendous one. Practically all of the supplies had to come over the mountains to Fort Bedford and Fort Ligonier, and after surviving the hazards of swollen streams and broken axles, still had to escape marauding Indians along the routes of communication to Fort Pitt. The great quantities of supplies needed for such a small garrison were out of all proportion to the number of white men stationed there, but were scarcely adequate for the large number of Indians who visited the fort and required gifts with which to cement their friendship. It required real ingenuity to stretch the supplies from convoy to convoy.

Lieutenant Hutchins had charge of all of these supplies and handled them so well that Colonel Mercer recommended him to Colonel Henry Bouquet, who promptly sent a certificate so that Hutchins might be paid a bonus out of the contingency fund.

The English post at Fort Pitt could never really be secure as long as the French held the posts in the upper Ohio Valley at Venango, LeBoeuf, and Presque Isle. Fortunately, the defeat of the French at Niagara made these posts untenable and the French departed after demolishing the forts. Colonel Bouquet felt that before any attempt was made to take over the abandoned French
forts, an inventory should be made of the equipment and iron which might have been left there. One of the men sent was Thomas Hutchins, who, delegating the handling of the supplies at Fort Pitt, visited the three forts between Lake Erie and the Ohio River, took plans of the ruined forts and made a sketch of the country round about for 150 miles. While neither the sketches nor the plan made by Hutchins are now known or so identified, the account of the journey is still extant.

According to their own account, Hutchins and Patterson set out from Pittsburgh on Friday, October 5, 1759. Although the two men made the trip, there can be little doubt that Hutchins kept the Journal, for the style and kind of information are typical of his other writings. An average day’s march ranged from ten to fifteen miles, and they lost their way only once on the trip to Venango and LeBoeuf. The final day’s travel over swamps and a road bridged with logs, brought them to Presque Isle where the demolished fort, a few gun barrels and scalping knives, together with seven canoes with holes cut in them, gave evidence of the thoroughness with which the French had accomplished their evacuation. Having obtained the necessary information the British officers started back to Fort Pitt which they reached on October 26. The trip to Presque Isle had taken ten days of travel, while they accomplished the return trip in only seven days.

This taste of adventure had spoiled Hutchins for the steady routine of checking supplies and balancing accounts, and he resigned his position as “forage master and store keeper for rum and King’s stores in the barracks.” A list of officers who served in the Third Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment in 1758 and 1759 shows that Lieutenant Thomas Hutchins was promoted to the “Regular Service” in 1760. However the records show that Hutchins did not receive a commission in the British Army until March 2, 1762, when he became an ensign in the Sixtieth or Royal American Regiment. During the two year interim between his commissions as a provincial officer and as an ensign in the British Army, Thomas Hutchins became assistant to George Croghan, the deputy Indian agent. With the expulsion of the French from the Ohio Valley, Hutchins felt that the opportunities for military advancement in the service of Pennsylvania were meager indeed. But the British still had a lively Indian problem on their hands.
and Hutchins thought he saw a golden opportunity for himself in that field.

In his new capacity as assistant to George Croghan, Hutchins again made the trip to Presque Isle, this time accompanied by a party of Indians. He was to find out whether the British troops expected at Presque Isle had arrived from Niagara according to plan. A detachment from Fort Pitt was to march north to relieve the garrison at Niagara, and this plan could be successfully carried out only if the boats were waiting at Presque Isle to transport the troops across Lake Erie. Hutchins arrived at Presque Isle on July 5, 1760, just after the troops from Niagara had arrived with their boats. He hastened back in record time, arriving at Fort Pitt on the tenth with the news that all was well. This marked the completion of his second successful mission to Presque Isle.

But the need for haste was so great that the detachment under Colonel Bouquet had set out from Fort Pitt three days before Hutchins' return. On July 10, the very day he reached Fort Pitt with the report, Hutchins set out for his third trip to Presque Isle and caught up with the slower moving British forces at Venango on the thirteenth. Compliance with official orders seemed likely to make Hutchins the British version of the Greek Phidippides. Bouquet was glad to see Hutchins and wrote that to have Hutchins make it a happy day for the troops, since they were in danger of losing the way with their drunken Indian guides. Because of the services Hutchins rendered on the march Bouquet recommended him for a reward.

On January 12, 1761, Thomas Hutchins was reported as an assistant in the "Department of Indian Affairs to the Westward" together with Edward Ward, and Thomas and Alexander McKee. These men each received twelve shillings, six pence a day and were on duty at Venango, LeBoeuf, and Presque Isle. In addition to maintaining friendly relations with the Indians, it was the duty of Hutchins to encourage the Indians to keep the posts supplied with fresh meat and the necessary grain. Since many of the supplies for the forts at LeBoeuf and Presque Isle had to be transported by way of Venango, it was necessary to seek help from the Indians to keep the supplies moving. Floods, ice, and low water prevented year round water transportation, and as a result, pack
horses were kept plodding overland from fort to fort. None of the posts could supply either the horses or the escort needed, so Hutchins spent much time among the Indians encouraging them to hire out their horses, and their time. With the exception of a short trip to Fort Pitt in May 1761, to look after some private business, Hutchins remained at the northern posts for more than a year, alternately cajoling and scolding the Indians into co-operation with the British.

In the autumn of 1761, Hutchins was recalled to Fort Pitt for service there, and Bouquet was again impressed by the ability of Hutchins; as a result he recommended him as an “intelligent active young man” who would make an excellent ensign in His Majesty’s Service. While waiting for his commission to materialize, Hutchins performed his greatest service for the Indian Department. Because of the constant reports of Indian unrest and dissatisfaction around Fort Detroit, Sir William Johnson, the British Indian agent, decided to send an agent to that region for a first hand report. Hutchins was selected to inquire into the behavior of the Indians, and to promote the crown’s interest and influence among them. The story of his journey through three thousand miles of wilderness and of his valuable map of the lakes and of the country through which he traveled are beyond the scope of this paper. When the news of his commission as ensign in the sixtieth or Royal American Regiment arrived, Hutchins was away on this mission to Detroit and the Great Lakes. With his return to Fort Pitt after the fatiguing western trip, Hutchins doffed his frontier garb for the British regimentals and assumed duties that corresponded with his military uniform.

For the next few years, Ensign Hutchins was stationed at Fort Pitt. He returned from a short recruiting trip to the southward to find that a general Indian uprising was in the air and that atrocities were being committed closer and closer to the fort and with greater boldness. The Indians, suffering from lack of food, insulted by empty handed talk of friendship, and threatened with the loss of their hunting grounds, decided on a concerted drive against their white enemies. Hutchins acted as engineer during the siege of Fort Pitt in 1763, and though it was garrisoned by only one hundred and fifty men, he helped to make it impregnable against the attack of six hundred of the enemy. His superior officer marvelled at Hutchins’ feat of performing his regular duties and
at the same time overseeing the works without taking any rest. Fort Pitt was one of the few major British forts that did not succumb to the concerted Indian onslaught.

The following year, Colonel Bouquet was ready to chastise the Indians by carrying the war into their own country, and he asked Hutchins to draw up the plans for his proposed punitive expedition. Hutchins submitted four plans to Bouquet, showing the camp, the line of march, the disposition of the troops to receive the enemy, and the general attack. Bouquet expressed his satisfaction with the plans and ordered Hutchins to accompany him against the Indians in the Muskingum region of which Hutchins had valuable first hand knowledge. The anonymous publication of *An Historical Account of Bouquet's Expedition Against the Ohio Indians in 1764*, in Philadelphia in 1765, containing maps which were plainly marked as being the work of Hutchins, led many to assume that Hutchins was the author of the entire work. The subsequent discovery of a letter from William Smith, provost of the University of Philadelphia, to Sir William Johnson, dated January 13, 1766, proves beyond a doubt that Smith was the compiler or editor of the account.

This proof dispels the arguments favoring Hutchins as the author of the book. However, the book is plainly a compilation and the question remains of how much of the material, if any, can be attributed directly to Hutchins. There is no doubt that the maps and the sketches are the work of Ensign Hutchins. The drawing of the four plans to show the details of Bouquet's proposed expedition against the Indians and the accompanying explanation of the plans are proven beyond a doubt, through his correspondence with Bouquet, to be the work of Hutchins. It is also quite likely that a journal of the expedition kept by Ensign Hutchins furnished the material for the narration of that expedition. The terse, journalistic style corresponds with that of other works that are known to be by Hutchins, and the frequent references to topography and the measurement of distances in miles and perches point to Hutchins with his surveying and engineering experiences as the source of information. His *Map of the Country on the Ohio and Muskingum Rivers, Shewing the Situation of the Indian Towns with Respect to the Army under the Command of Colonel Bouquet* is of special interest because it included not only the route of the march made by Bouquet but also
the route from Fort Pitt to Presque Isle which he drew earlier and for which no original has come to light. Hutchins also added his survey of the Bushy Run Battlefield, which he had drawn sometime after the battle at the request of Bouquet.

The next phase of the life of Hutchins has no place in this paper. His trips to the Illinois Country and his services as engineer at Fort Chartres and later at Pensacola took him out of the Pennsylvania scene. The early years of the American Revolution found him in England publishing his map and pamphlet of the Western Country and while he was there he became so implicated in treasonable correspondence with Samuel Wharton, that the British cast him into prison. When nothing definite could be proven against him, he was released and secretly departed for France where he sought the protection of Benjamin Franklin. Armed with his newly taken oath of allegiance to the United States and a memorial to Congress for an office in the new government, Hutchins finally returned to the land of his birth in 1781. The struggling young nation had need of capable men, and upon the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin, Congress appointed Hutchins to be a geographer of the United States and in this capacity he was ordered south to join General Nathanael Greene. The war was over, however, before the geographer could accomplish much more than to acquire a mild case of malaria.

Immediately following the close of the war, the United States had little need for the services of a geographer and Hutchins was glad to receive gainful employment from Pennsylvania until the national government should again require his services. The state of Pennsylvania, eager to establish a permanent boundary line between itself and Virginia, employed Reverend John Ewing, provost of the University of Pennsylvania, David Rittenhouse, treasurer of the state, John Lukens, surveyor general of Pennsylvania, and Thomas Hutchins, geographer of the United States, to survey the southern boundary. These commissioners started from the place where the Mason and Dixon line had been interrupted by the Indians, and ran the line westward, planting posts to mark the boundary and making a clearing twenty to thirty feet wide on all of the larger ridges along the boundary. After completing the southern boundary, the commissioners returned home with a detailed report of their survey for the state of Pennsylvania. In
addition, Dr. Ewing and Thomas Hutchins gave detailed descriptions of the land through which they had passed en route to the West. The Pennsylvania Assembly later appointed these two men to work in conjunction with the commissioners of Virginia to ascertain the western boundary of the state. But Congress needed the services of Hutchins immediately, and Pennsylvania was obliged to appoint other commissioners.

The new government of the United States needed money and sought to obtain some by the survey and sale of the lands in the Northwest which had so recently been ceded to it. The work of Hutchins and his surveyors was hindered by the hostility of the Indians in the land northwest of the Ohio, and the men were able to complete the survey only through the seventh range. While awaiting safer working conditions in the West, Hutchins was asked to survey the small triangle of land fronting on Lake Erie, north of Pennsylvania and west of New York, which Pennsylvania was desirous of buying from the national government. In order to ascertain the boundary line for the United States, Hutchins found it would be necessary to do part of the work from the Canadian side. Some congressmen feared that difficulties might arise if the name of Hutchins appeared on a communication to the Canadian governor, since Hutchins was regarded by the British as an officer who had deserted in time of war. This theory was unnecessary, since Hutchins was called back to the West, and the survey by which Pennsylvania acquired 202,187 acres of land in the Erie Tract at a cost of seventy-five cents an acre was completed by his deputy, Andrew Ellicott.

The delay in making a new Indian treaty which would enable the surveyors to work safely in the Western Lands, forced Hutchins to wait at Pittsburgh, from which place he dreamed and schemed of ways of furthering his self interest by becoming a Spanish subject and acting as geographer for Spanish America. But that, too, is another story. Before any of these schemes could be put into operation, Hutchins, who had been ailing for some time, died at Pittsburgh and was buried there. It was a curious twist of fate that Hutchins in 1789 should complete the cycle of his existence in the Fort Pitt area which he had helped to bring into existence in 1758. It was also a kindly twist of fate which brought his life to a close as he stood on the brink of disaster.