RECENT HISTORICAL ACTIVITIES
IN THE PITTSBURGH AREA*

BY STANTON BELFOUR**

A GOOD definition of history is the current explanation given by a taxi driver to his fare as they passed the Archives Building in the Federal City. The driver identified this imposing structure as the place where they keep The Constitution and The Declaration. Then, when the passenger discussed the inscription over the columns, “Past is Prologue,” the driver said that that was so much government talk meaning, “You ain’t seen anything yet!”

That is how we feel in Pittsburgh as we rebuild the town, prepare for our bicentennial in 1958, and engage in a civic and cultural renaissance.

Our area has been important for more than two hundred years with geography as the keystone for the Gateway to the West. First, we were Indian country, a veritable happy hunting ground for the tribes who later were willing to don war paint to hold the Upper Ohio Valley. Then came the fur traders to give an economic prelude to dark and bloody days. Next we were the battleground and the site for international, interracial, and intercolonial wars. The 1750's brought George Washington to our valleys, where he first began to write his name on the pages of American history, where he “located” the site of Pittsburgh, and where he cultivated his military career.

The sixth decade in the eighteenth century also brought the French invasion of Pennsylvania, the British regulars and the colonial militiamen, Generals Braddock and Forbes, their trains, and our first roads. It has been decided to mark the founding of Pittsburgh with a grand bicentennial on November 27, 1958, when,

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two hundred years ago to the day, Colonel John Armstrong of Kittanning fame raised the Union Jack on the ruins of Fort Duquesne.

In the meantime we have celebrated the first of our bicentennials to commemorate the coming of the young Washington in 1753, when he made his famous journey from Williamsburg to Fort Le Boeuf (Waterford). The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, accompanied by members of the University of Pittsburgh Summer Session, followed Upper French Creek Valley on its annual tour in July, 1953. The Society also devoted its November meeting to Washington's journey, with Judge Walter Braham of New Castle as the speaker. Then "Location Day" was celebrated at Gateway Center, the new skyscraper area adjacent to Point Park, on November 25, 1953, to mark the day Washington said in effect two hundred years before, "Here is the place to build the fort." Rev. Dr. Clarence Edward Macartney was the orator. Direct descendants of Augustine Washington, Christopher Gist, and John Frazier were present.

The second bicentennial occurred this summer. The people of Uniontown, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. William B. Hindman, commemorated the Battle of Great Meadows at Fort Necessity on July 3 and 4. The Western Pennsylvania Historical Society had already featured Dr. Hindman as its speaker at its April meeting in Pittsburgh. It took its thirteenth annual tour to Laurel Hill, the Jumonville and Braddock Graves, Fort Necessity, Ohiopyle, and Oakland, Maryland, on July 24, 1954.

The third bicentennial will come in the summer of 1955 to commemorate the Battle of the Monongahela, when "Braddock was done so brown." The local people in this area already are making plans. And, finally, the French and Indian War will have its great bicentennial finale in 1958, when it is anticipated the Commonwealth will have completed Point State Park.

This will be our Valley Forge, our Gettysburg; and the Point Park Committee has decreed that all historical treatment shall be devoted to the eighteenth century—nothing after 1800. By that time Pittsburgh was a frontier village with the ordered institutions of civilization established: infant industries, the Pittsburgh Academy (now the University of Pittsburgh), churches, and the Pittsburgh Gazette. Two of the bastions of Fort Pitt will be restored.
Underneath one of them will be a small museum. And, of course, Bouquet's Redoubt, our Block House, still stands as a vestige of the great pentagon (Fort Pitt)—too elaborate, expensive and expansive to restore. The Point Park Committee resolves its own problems and presents unified agreements to State officials. The Committee is a standing one of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, the planning body that has spurred the entire Pittsburgh renaissance in every field, ranging from physical improvements to cultural activities.

The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania has a fine building in Pittsburgh's civic center, adjacent to the Carnegie Library with its Pennsylvania Room and to the University of Pittsburgh with its Darlington Room of Western Pennsylvaniana. These three libraries continue to acquire documents for scholars. The Society holds monthly meetings from October to June, con-
ducts an annual summer tour, maintains a museum, publishes a quarterly journal, and provides bibliographic and clearing house service.

The University of Pittsburgh has enjoyed grants from The Buhl Foundation approximating $500,000 for research, writing, and publication of the history of Western Pennsylvania. These volumes are issued by the University of Pittsburgh Press in handsome format. Some of the titles show the scope and range of research in local history: *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania; Pittsburgh: The Story of a City; Pioneer Life in Western Pennsylvania; Whiskey Rebels: Story of a Frontier Uprising; With Rifle and Plow; Council Fires on the Upper Ohio; The Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania; The Keelboat Age on Western Waters; Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania; Early Western Pennsylvania Politics; George Mercer Papers;* and *A Traveler’s Guide to Historic Western Pennsylvania.*

In the series are special volumes relating to John McMillan, apostle of Presbyterianism; William Penn, horticulturist; Justice George Shiras; David Blythe, artist; and Willa Cather and Louise Homer.


The Sarah Mellon Scaife Foundation has made a grant to the Allegheny Conference on Community Development to finance a series of fifteen brochures about Pittsburgh and written by Pittsburgh school children. They are designed to engender greater civic pride and spirit among children, from kindergarten through high school. Six of the booklets have been issued in attractive format: *Fun in Pittsburgh; Homes in Pittsburgh; From Here to There in Pittsburgh; Workers in Pittsburgh; Pittsburgh Long Ago; and Pittsburgh from Fort to City.* Significant aspects of Pittsburgh life are covered in the project, which is a cooperative venture with the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education.

The complex growth of the Pittsburgh area is coming into its own with a full realization of its historic past and its great future as a fairer, greener town—a better place for our children than it was for us who grew up in its smoke and grime. Now, with smoke
control, stream purification, urban redevelopment, community planning, educational television, university and college expansion, international music and art festivals, cultural activities, new parks, and industrial redevelopment—the climate for a long look back, together with a look around and a look ahead, has never been better.

During World War II a Pittsburgh advertising man, serving as an army colonel in Egypt, asked his chauffeur, an enlisted jeep-driver, where he had obtained his training. After numerous derogatory accounts of his life in Texas, South Carolina, and other places—hot, dry, green, and arid—he asked the boy from whence he came. With twinkling light in his eyes and vivid nostalgia he exclaimed, “Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the garden spot of the world!”

Well, the boy had something. He believed in his home town. This attitude is prerequisite to making it a better place. And one way to believe is to understand what has gone before.