WASHINGTON'S SKETCH MAP
From The George Washington Atlas.
WHEN, in the late fall of 1753, George Washington stopped at Logstown on his way to Fort Le Boeuf, carrying Virginia’s summons to the French to leave the country, he learned from the Indians that “the nearest and levellest Way was now impassable, by Reason of many large mirey Savannas.” He and his party, therefore, were obliged to go round by way of Venango (Franklin). They were aided on this part of their journey by a natural phenomenon known today as the terminal moraine of the Wisconsin Glacier. It provided them, for a good part of the way, with a well-drained path and, best of all, with a firm-bottomed ford of Muddy Creek—Butler County’s Muddy Creek, which is to be distinguished from a second Muddy Creek they had to cross in Crawford County.

North of Venango, which they left on December 7, nature proved less accommodating. French Creek at the “big crossing” was found to be impassable, and the swamps adjacent to Crawford County’s Muddy Creek took an extra day to negotiate. The waters of some of the lesser streams were so swollen that they were unfordable. The travelers had to swim the horses and carry the baggage across on tree trunks. They did not reach the French fort until December 11.

That they lost half a day at each of these tree crossings is not surprising, for there were now sixteen men in the party, with horses, food, and equipment. There had been twelve when they left Logstown: Washington and his guide, Christopher Gist; four “servitors”; four Iroquois Indians—the Half King (Tanacharison),
White Thunder, Jeskakake, and Guyasuta; two interpreters, Jacob van Braam and John Davison. On leaving Venango, the party was increased by a French military escort consisting of Quartermaster La Force and three soldiers.

It took them five days (not four, as Douglas Southall Freeman asserts) to travel from Venango to Fort Le Boeuf. On December 7 they crossed French Creek a little above the present Thirteenth Street bridge in Franklin, turned left along the bottom lands for a mile, and then ascended a shoulder of Oak Hill to escape the precipice that borders the creek. Five miles from Venango they reached Sugar Creek, probably at a point opposite the mouth of Warden Run. Finding the water too deep for fording, they swam the horses, carried the baggage over on trees, and camped for the night.

Next day, following a fairly straight course over undulating hills to what is now Carlton, and from there paralleling French Creek (at no great distance) through present Cochranton and Shaws, they made twenty-five miles and reached the Indian town of Cussewaga (Meadville).

It is at this point that doubts arise about the route. It has been suggested that Washington's party, after leaving Cussewaga, crossed French Creek near what is now Cambridge Springs and went on up the west side. (See Plate 29 in The George Washington Atlas.) That is certainly an error, for both Washington and Gist assert in their journals that they tried to cross French Creek on this leg of their journey but failed to do so.

It has been suggested also that the party tried to ford French Creek at a "big crossing" in the vicinity of the present town of Venango, which is about ten miles north of Meadville. That there was some such ford, used by the French, is shown on Nicolas Bellin's map of 1755, based on surveys by Le Mercier and others. But such a crossing is not hinted at in Washington's and Gist's journals. Gist asserted that the crossing they came to was "about fifteen miles"—not nine or ten—from Cussewaga.

Admitting that Washington and his party were forced to keep to the east of French Creek, some authorities would have them

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cross Muddy Creek near its mouth—forgetting that the sixteen men with their horses would then have to plow their way through miles of marshes. As if to add to the confusion, Washington's map of the journey, whatever version of it be used, fails to show accurately where they went at this stage. Most scholars, in consequence, bring in the *deus ex machina*, pick up Washington at Venango and set him down straightway at Fort Le Boeuf.

The problem of his itinerary is, however, not insoluble. The present writer, after examining the ground, studying maps and journals, and conferring with local people familiar with the terrain, has come to this conclusion: *Washington and his party, unable to use the "big crossing" in the vicinity of Cambridge Springs, made a detour that brought them as far east as the site of Little Cooley, where they picked up a good trail over the hills to Fort Le Boeuf.*

For evidence, we submit first of all the journals of Washington and Gist. Washington dismissed the unpleasant five days between Venango and Le Boeuf in two sentences:

7th. . . . At 11 o'Clock we set out for the Fort, and were prevented from arriving till the 11th by excessive Rains, Snows, and bad Travelling, through many Mires and Swamps. These we were obliged to pass, to avoid crossing the Creek, which was impossible, either by fording or rafting, the Water was so high and rapid.⁶

What Washington remembered best about that part of the journey was that they were defeated in their attempt to cross French Creek at the usual fording place. Gist is even more explicit:

Sunday 9.—We set out [from Cussewaga], left one of our horses here that could travel no further. This day we travelled to the big crossing, about fifteen miles, and encamped, our Indians went out to look out logs to make a raft; but as the water was high, and there were other creeks to cross, we concluded to keep up this side the creek.

Monday 10.—Set out, travelled about eight miles, and encamped. Our Indians killed a bear. Here we had a creek to cross, very deep; we got over on a tree, and got our goods over.

⁶ Hugh Cleland, *op. cit.*, 20.
Washington's Route to Fort Le Boeuf, 1753.
ROUTE FROM VENANGO TO FORT LE BOEUF

Tuesday 11.—We set out, travelled about fifteen miles to the French fort, the sun being set.⁶

Washington’s map of the journey⁷ supports, in general, the evidence of the journals. It shows the path from Cussewaga keeping east of French Creek until the final crossing near present Waterford. It must be observed that the first creek crossing shown on the map north of Cussewaga is Muddy Creek. The second is French Creek. [See Frontispiece.]

Further evidence in support of this route is found in Christopher Gist’s mileages. He was an experienced traveler in the woods and is usually a good judge of distances. When he says that the “big crossing” of French Creek was “about fifteen miles” from Cussewaga, we have something to work on. If an arc be drawn with its center at Meadville and with a radius of somewhat less than fifteen miles to take into account the vagaries of the trail, it will be found to touch French Creek a little east of the present town of Cambridge Springs, somewhere in the vicinity of what is known locally as the Third Sand Bar, a few hundred yards above the Erie Railroad trestle bridge. Here the creek has a hard bottom and good, firm approaches. In normal weather it would be fordable. But the banks on the north side are low and, in extreme weather, subject to flooding.

Support for the view that, although there were other possible crossings, the one referred to by Gist was east of Cambridge Springs and at or near the Third Sand Bar is found in the Hutchins-Johnson map of 1764, from which detail is here sketched.

Washington and his party, unable to use the normal crossing of French Creek, had to make a long detour to avoid the marshes that guarded the lower course of Muddy Creek. They lost a day over this. The marsh has since been partially drained, but it is still dangerous if one leaves the roads, which are built on artificially raised ground.

The first good crossing was where the town of Little Cooley

⁶William M Darlington, ed., Christopher Gist’s Journals (Pittsburgh, 1893), 82.
Detail sketched from the Hutchins-Johnson Map of 1764. Courtesy of the William L. Clements Library
stands today. That is the conclusion the present writer came to after scouting about for several days in the neighborhood looking for good fords. It is also the opinion of local men who have known the swamp from childhood, in particular C. J. Holcomb of Little Cooley, whom I met on July 20, 1960, and of Vernon Landers, whom I called upon next day at Foxburg Corners in Rockdale Township.

Mr. Holcomb said, "If Washington came from Meadville or Cambridge Springs, this is the first place he could cross Muddy Creek."

Mr. Landers, who was within a few days of his ninetieth birthday when I interrupted him at work in his cornfield, talked about younger days when he had hunted and trapped all over the swamp. "I could take you through places now," he said, "where no one else could come through alive." He had not heard of Washington's visit to these parts, but he was interested in his problem: how to get safely past the swamps of Muddy Creek.

"In my estimation," said Mr. Landers, "knowing what I know of these swamps, they would have had to go by Cooley if they crossed to this [the north] side. It would be impossible in a wet season until they got to Cooley."

Little Cooley holds the key to Washington's route. In normal seasons, there are several good fords here. Even in bad weather the creek is almost always fordable at the east end of town, where there is a hard, pebbly bottom and the banks are high and firm. Besides that, Little Cooley is in line with Gist's mileages. They traveled, wrote Gist, "about eight miles" from the "big crossing" to the "very deep" creek which they crossed on a tree. From the Third Sand Bar it is about eight and a half miles to the east end of Little Cooley. From camp at the deep creek, Gist estimated it to be "about fifteen miles to the French fort." As nearly as can be calculated, it is fifteen miles by trail from Little Cooley to the site of Fort Le Boeuf at Waterford.

North of Little Cooley the terrain is good—unusually good for travelers over this swamp-pocked countryside. At Little Cooley the party picked up a good trail, one later followed in part by the Bald-Eagle-to-Waterford Road. Their path at that season probably crossed Muddy Creek about where the bridge now spans it on Highway 77 from Meadville. The path ran east for about half a
mile to avoid low, wet ground, and then changed direction to a
north-northwest course over firm ground for twelve miles to the
crossing of French Creek three miles south of Fort Le Boeuf. At
points here and there along this last fifteen miles, local tradition
claims Washington to have passed that way.

To consider this day's journey in more detail, it would be rea-
sonable to suppose, judging from the terrain alone, that the path
crossed Federal Run near what is now known as Bidwell's
Cemetery. Thence it went on to Crabs Corners and over Brown
Hill and Mackey Hill. It crossed Kelly Run, which separates the
two hills, very probably where a winding dirt road now crosses it
about two and a half miles north of Ferris Corners, thus avoiding
the marshy patch traversed by the modern Waterford highway.
Keeping on the highlands east of Mill Village, Washington prob-
ably forded French Creek at the Indian village site about a quarter
of a mile above the present highway bridge. This would give him
higher and drier ground. But the path soon came down to the
flats which provide the only approach to Waterford from the south.

It might be objected to the Little Cooley route that when
Washington wrote in his journal of "bad Travelling through many
Mires and Swamps," he meant to say that the party passed
through the great swamp at Muddy Creek. But that is not a
necessary inference. The word many gives the key to his mean-
ing. Many small marshes infest this region wherever one turns,
on the highlands no less than in the low spots. It is a legacy of
the glacier which departed only yesterday, as geologic time is
reckoned—some twelve thousand years ago.

A further objection to the Little Cooley route might be drawn
from Washington's map, which does not show the detour. Although
it does indicate accurately enough the general direction taken by
the travelers, it fails to suggest that the party so much as ap-
proached French Creek at this stage of the journey. That may
have been because of the map's military purpose. It was intended
as a guide to others, and, indeed, for some years to come it was
the best map the British had of this section of the country and
was frequently copied. It would be only natural that Washington,
understanding what use the British Empire would make of his
work, should try to avoid confusion by eliminating reference on
the map to his own mishaps.
What is important is not what is missing from the map but what it contains. It shows the crossing of Muddy Creek to have been made at a point some miles above its mouth. It also shows (in the strokes used to represent marshes) what Washington saw from the summits of Brown and Mackey hills. Anyone can see the same today if he follows Washington's route: on the left hand (facing northwest) a swamp extending for miles along Muddy Creek and French Creek; on the right, smaller swamps at the head of Federal Run and other streams. The path kept to the highland between them.

A curious local tradition—which, if there is truth in it, supports the Little Cooley route—is attached to the last lap of Washington's journey. The writer was introduced to it by Mr. Harry Raber White, who lives between Eaton Corners and Crabs Corners in Rockdale Township. On Washington's way north, so the story runs, one of his men died and was buried beside the path on the west bank of Federal Run, at Bidwell's Cemetery (named for a later inhabitant). The presence of that early grave of 1753 is said to have suggested to incoming settlers that the place be set aside as a free public burial ground, and such it remained for many years. Mr. White took me to see the spot, on the high bank of the run where it emerges from its gorge among the hills.

Lou Geer of Athens Township, from whom Mr. White had the story, is dead; but Harold Geer, his son, whom I interviewed on July 19, 1960, remembers being told that "the trail crossed Federal Run at the graveyard, where one of Washington's men died and was buried. I had this," he added, "from my grandfather, Al [Albert] Geer, who settled here a long time ago."

There is evidence in Washington's journal tending to corroborate, if only in a negative way, the tradition. Washington noted in his journal that at Will's Creek he engaged four "servitors": Barnaby Currin, John MacQuire, William Jenkins, and Henry Steward. He mentioned only three as leaving Fort Le Boeuf with the horses: "Barnaby Currin and two others."8 John MacQuire and William Jenkins turned up again with Washington on the Fort Necessity campaign. "Of Steward," writes Hugh Cleland in *Washington in the Ohio Valley*, "nothing is known."9

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8 Hugh Cleland, *op. cit.*, 5-6, 22.
9 Ibid., 45.
It may seem strange that Washington, even in the haste with which his journal was composed, should have failed to mention the death of one of his men. On the other hand, it should be remembered that he was writing, not a travelogue, but a report on diplomatic and military affairs for Williamsburg and London. All in all, despite Washington's silence in the matter, one cannot help wondering how well Henry Steward kept his health.