

# *The Erie Triangle: The Final Link Between Philadelphia and the Great Lakes*

**D**URING THE IMMEDIATE post-Revolutionary years, Pennsylvania government officials developed an almost fanatical zeal to link the state and national capital, Philadelphia, with as large a hinterland as possible. The efforts of these officials in terms of economic goals were competitive with those of officials in New York and Maryland. Internal improvement schemes unfolded in Philadelphia during the late 1780s and early 1790s. The planners proposed to develop canals on Pennsylvania's rivers, build roads across the state's Endless Mountains, attract produce into Pennsylvania from newly opening farm country in the rival states of New York and Maryland, and, ultimately, draw future products from the lower Great Lakes region through a "window on Lake Erie." The key objective of their last goal was to secure furs, other forest products, and agricultural products to the market center at Philadelphia.

The "window on Lake Erie" was Presque Isle harbor in the Erie Triangle, a tract of federal land purchased on April 23, 1792, after a half decade of negotiations, by Pennsylvania officials from those representing the new Washington administration. (See Map 1.) This 202,187 acre addition to later Erie County had previously been claimed by four other states. The claims were turned over to the Confederation government between 1780 and 1785 as part of the general cession of western land claims by many of the original thirteen states.

That Pennsylvania officials were interested in acquiring the Triangle is a matter of record. Less clear has been the reason for their interest. The Erie Triangle became a vital part of plans for a state-wide system of internal improvements during the late 1780s and early 1790s. The substantial effort exerted by Pennsylvania government officials to add this region to the Commonwealth is explained almost exclusively by their having anticipated an urgent need for a final link

between areas scheduled to be served by planned intrastate improvements and key trading areas on the Great Lakes.<sup>1</sup>

Pennsylvania officials first became interested in purchasing this isolated tract as the Revolution was ending. They devised a plan to use the state's western lands generally for distribution to Pennsylvania veterans of the Revolutionary War in repayment for military service, since money was then in short supply. A major tract that was organized in northwestern Pennsylvania came to be known as the Donation Lands. Surveys of these lands were begun in 1785 in order to make them available for distribution. The first surveying activity in the Triangle was an accidental and erroneous one. The return by surveyors David Watts and William Miles for the lands farthest north, the Tenth District, was made in February 1786, six years before completion of Pennsylvania's acquisition of the Erie Triangle.<sup>2</sup>

Watts's and Miles's surveying error brought to the authorities' attention the need to improve field accuracy. Because the bounty lands were not contiguous with other surveyed areas, the location of base lines and meridians was needed. Once established, a geographic grid could be expanded, lots surveyed and units of land distributed. The most logical axes for the geographic grid were the state's northern and western boundaries. Thus in order to provide dependable knowledge about the location of the lands to be distributed the General Assembly authorized the survey.

The surveying crews devoted the field seasons of 1785, 1786, and 1787 to running these boundaries. In addition to serving as a basis for

<sup>1</sup> There is controversy about the role of land speculation as a factor motivating Pennsylvania officials in their pursuit of annexation of the Erie Triangle. The sources indicate that the Supreme Executive Council, the Society for Promoting Improvements in Roads and Inland Navigation, the General Assembly, and others pursued development of a progressive road and canal network out of a sense of enthusiasm and responsibility as public servants. While land speculation was not what drove them, many of these promoters did become involved in land speculation later. The strongest argument for land speculation as an ulterior motive based on the evidence is that it may have been in the backs of officials' minds as a possible later venture. Initially what drove the Triangle annexation issue was the internal improvements connection. Internal improvements were pursued to develop commercial opportunities.

<sup>2</sup> "An Account of the Donation Lands in Pennsylvania," in William H. Egle (ed.), *Pennsylvania Archives* (hereafter, *Pa. Archives*), 3d series (30 vols., Harrisburg, 1892-1899), 3:591-592. Sherman Day, *Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania* (Port Washington, 1843), 762.

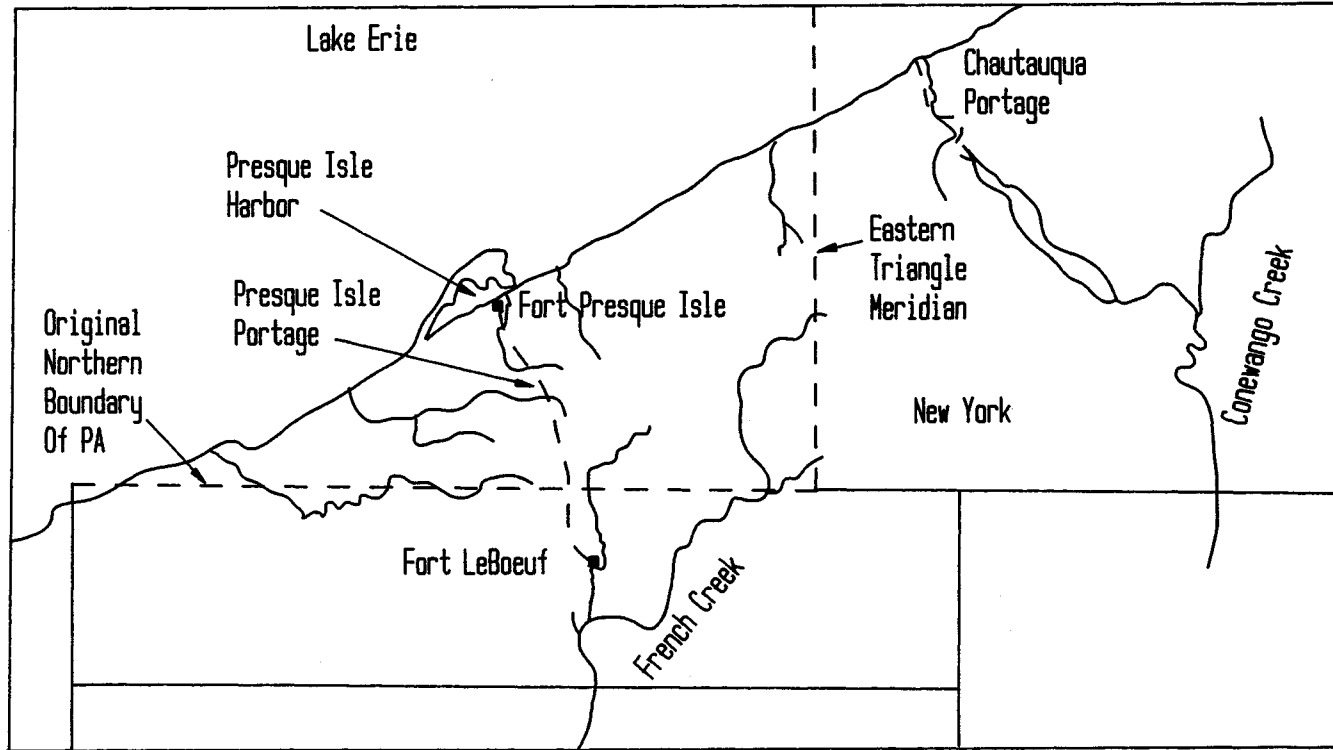
continued and more accurate surveying of the Donations Lands, their findings by 1787 provided accurate information about the state's remaining outer limits. Indeed, the survey team's findings provided state officials with the first alert that Pennsylvania's only contact with Lake Erie was along a straight, four mile stretch of unindented shoreline. The well-known and needed Presque Isle harbor lay just out of reach to the east of the intersection of Pennsylvania's northern boundary with Lake Erie.<sup>3</sup> (See Map 1). This impetus to annex the Erie Triangle with its protected natural harbor resulted from the planning of an ambitious state-wide internal improvements program. Successful completion of targeted improvements came to be seen in Philadelphia as requiring the ownership of Presque Isle harbor which, after the 1787 boundary survey returns, was considered to lie in the Erie Triangle just beyond the state's boundaries.

Presque Isle was the only significant harbor on the south shore of Lake Erie between the mouth of the Cuyahoga River in the Northwest Territory, and present-day Dunkirk, New York—a distance of 150 miles. If Pennsylvania sought a transportation link between Philadelphia and the Great Lakes, it was obvious after 1787 that the connection would have to be at Presque Isle.

In addition to its advantage as an excellent natural harbor, Presque Isle Bay was connected by the most frequently used portage between Lake Erie and the Ohio watershed. The southern terminus was only thirteen miles away on Le Boeuf Creek at present-day Waterford. This route had been known for over half a century by the time of the Revolution. An alternative Chautauqua connector also led to the Ohio

<sup>3</sup> Good accounts of the boundary surveys can be found in Daniel Agnew, *A History of the Region of Pennsylvania North of the Ohio and West of the Allegheny River, of the Indian Purchases, and of the Running of the Southern, Northern, and Western State Boundaries* (1887; reprint ed., New York, 1971), 62-65; William A. Porter, "Sketch of the Life of Andrew Porter," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 4 (1880), 270-84; James L. Murphy (ed.), "Alexander McClean's Journal of the 1786 Survey of the Western Boundary of Pennsylvania," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, (October 1980); *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania* (hereafter, *Colonial Records of Pa.*), (16 vols., Harrisburg, 1853), 14:454; 15:16, 102, 108, 201, 245, 358. Also *Pa. Archives*, 1st series (12 vols., Harrisburg, 1852-1856), 11:458, 653-54; 10:74; 11:203; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 30, 1786 (Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, [hereafter, WPHS]); and *Minutes of the First Session of the Tenth General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 13-14 in Charles Evans, *Early American Imprints* (Hereafter, *EAI*), no. 19888.

MAP 1



The Erie Triangle.

Valley by way of Conewango Creek, running from Lake Chautauqua into the Allegheny River at Warren, Pennsylvania. But the harboring facilities at the Lake Erie end of the Chautauqua portage—at present-day Barcelona, New York—were inferior to Presque Isle's.

The 1788 minutes of the General Assembly and of the Supreme Executive Council repeatedly stress that official interest in the acquisition focused on annexation of the harbor. Efforts to purchase the Erie Triangle began in 1788. Yet at that time it was still somewhat blindly assumed that Presque Isle was located within the Erie Triangle and not farther east within New York. The location of New York's western meridian remained shrouded in uncertainty until 1791. The size of the Triangle region was also unknown until then. Estimates of its area ranged upward to a million acres. It was not until almost four years later when the final surveys were finished that the actual acreage could be computed. Then the purchase was made.<sup>4</sup>

Land speculation does not explain the annexation of the Erie Triangle even though Pennsylvania's Comptroller General, John Nicholson, formed a land speculation corporation, the Pennsylvania Population Company, almost simultaneously with the purchase. Frequent references to interest in acquiring the Erie Triangle for its harbor, as opposed to simply annexing more land, appear in communications between the Assembly and the Supreme Executive Council from 1788 to 1792. The annexation of even a million additional acres hardly seems in itself a probable goal of Pennsylvania officials at a time when many states had just relinquished distant western lands and before other lands that were known to lie within the state's borders had been identified, surveyed, applied for through the Land Office, or settled. It does seem probable that if Pennsylvania officials were primarily motivated by personal opportunities for land speculation that there would be references to an interest in annexing more land. The record reveals none.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sample citations include "Report to and Resolve of the General Assembly regarding the purchase of Erie," 1788, *Pa. Archives*, 4th series (12 vols., Harrisburg, 1900-1902), 11:252; Proceedings, February 29, 1788, *Minutes of the Second Session of the Twelfth General Assembly of Pennsylvania*, 116, *EAI*, no. 45328.

<sup>5</sup> Various resolutions in a House Ways and Means Committee report by the General Assembly to the Supreme Executive Council, September, 1788, *EAI*, no. 21371.

A 1789 letter from a Supreme Executive Council committee to the General Assembly reporting on the Donation Lands reveals how Council's internal improvements rationale was linked to Lake Erie:

The proposition which Council have in view is to open the Land-office for the sale of the lands lying on *French Creek*, and in the neighborhood of *Lake Erie*, from which it is conceived that the state will not only derive the advantage of sinking a great part of the public debt, but its population will be beneficially increased, and a door be eventually opened for securing the fur trade to the inhabitants of *Pennsylvania*.<sup>6</sup>

When state officials in Philadelphia first considered using the sale of the state's western lands to help pay Revolutionary War debts, they were also becoming aware of the commercial potential of western lands. The fur trade had developed across the mountains from Philadelphia as early as the 1720s. Pennsylvania's forests were rapidly being depleted of game. By 1763 trappers were already beginning to move west, beyond the colony's boundaries. The trans-Appalachian fur trade was dominated by several key Philadelphia entrepreneurs at the time of the French and Indian War. By the 1780s government officials had had a half century of exposure to the lure of business opportunities originating in the West. Unfortunately for the Philadelphia entrepreneurs of that era, most of the exportation of furs followed the natural downstream course of the Ohio River leaving Pennsylvania markets. The geographic circumstances of that natural commercial channel to the southwest and of the Appalachian barrier to the east diverted the hinterland's most sought-after natural commodity away from Philadelphia, in spite of the fact that many of the western trading operations were backed by Philadelphia investors. It was evident well before the Revolution that the fur trade of the lower Great Lakes and the upper Ohio Valley, if left to the natural course of geography, would increasingly be directed away from Philadelphia, the state's commercial center.<sup>7</sup>

Pennsylvania's fur trade also suffered from continued occupation by British trappers of strategic sites on the Great Lakes. Trade that

<sup>6</sup> Supreme Executive Council letter, November 19, 1789, 49, *EAI*, no. 45556.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 148-51.

did not go down the Ohio River tended to be drawn toward the seven British Great Lakes fur posts. The British continued to control these disputed posts until after Jay's Treaty in 1795.<sup>8</sup>

After the Revolutionary War, General William Irvine, the surveyor, Fort Pitt commandant, and Pennsylvania's agent appointed to explore the Donation Lands, contemplated eastern access to western opportunities:

I am persuaded the State of Pennsylvania might reap great advantages by paying early attention to the very easy several communications with lake Erie from the Western parts of their country, particularly Conewango, French Creek and the West Branch of Beaver, from a place called Mahoning to where it is navigable for small craft is but thirty miles to *Cayahuga R*—, which empties into the Lake.<sup>9</sup>

While General Irvine does not supply details, one might safely assume that he was thinking of produce of the Great Lakes because of the reference to the Cuyahoga River which drains into Lake Erie at present-day Cleveland. Even though two of these contemplated Lake Erie termini were outside Pennsylvania's borders, links between them and termini within Pennsylvania would have been possible. New York officials were believed willing to cooperate with Pennsylvania's in such arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

The westward movement in Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, accelerated after the war. As these frontier areas began to produce surplus crops, they looked for access to markets. Philadelphia merchants wanted to attract these agricultural and other natural products of the western frontier to their market. It was that ambition that led to Pennsylvania's initially farsighted internal improvements program. The purchase of the Erie Triangle came to be a consequent part of this program. It was evident that the market center could attract commerce from within

<sup>8</sup> Wayne E. Stevens, *The Northwest Fur Trade* (Urbana, 1928), 26.

<sup>9</sup> William Irvine, "Notes . . . American Army," *Pa. Archives*, 3d ser., 3:590-91.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Duane, *Letters Addressed to the People of Pennsylvania respecting the Internal Improvements of the Commonwealth by means of Roads and Canals* (Philadelphia, 1811), 56. William Duane was chairman of the Pennsylvania House Committee on Roads and Inland Navigation during the 1809-1810 session of the legislature. He stated in a foreword that he sought, by that late date, to explain and "to ascertain some of the causes of backwardness of Pennsylvania in undertaking works for internal improvements" in the light of the momentum that had begun more than twenty years earlier.

the state, so it was likely that by extending commercial horizons beyond state boundaries additional trade could be attracted from farther afield.

The state's road system in the late eighteenth century still consisted of primitive trails and pack horse routes that succeeded Indian paths through the forest. The system of roads had been developing slowly for a century. The state's two main routes were made during the French and Indian War for the campaigns of Generals Braddock and Forbes. Their roads across southern Pennsylvania both terminated at Pittsburgh. (See Map 2.) As the frontier spread westward and farmers looked back toward eastern markets as outlets for their surplus products, settlers petitioned the General Assembly for financial assistance to construct better roads over which to transport their goods. By 1785 the Assembly passed its first legislation for the construction of public roads to improve the route between Chambersburg and Pittsburgh. Maryland's roads were probably better than Pennsylvania's in the 1780s. This assumption must have further stimulated the rivalry with Maryland for the Pennsylvania planners.<sup>11</sup>

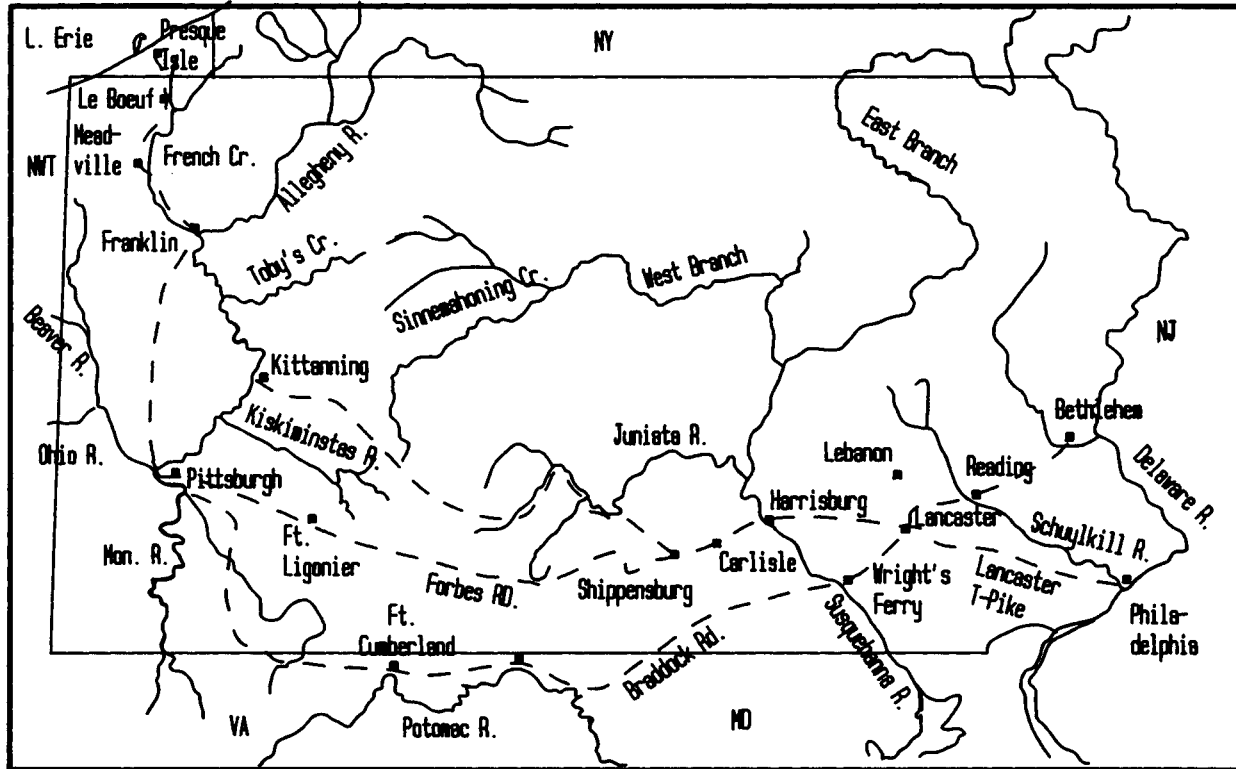
While information gathered on the surveys of the Donation Lands and the western and northern state boundaries contributed directly to the determination by state officials to purchase the Erie Triangle, additional subsequent petitions to the Supreme Executive Council requested tax allocations to support the building of new roads and to improve segments of old routes across southern Pennsylvania and along a newly developing route that followed the Juniata River and its tributaries toward the northwest. General Irvine was right. The Erie Triangle was practically inaccessible from any settled part of Pennsylvania. General Assembly debates about the possibility of connecting the anticipated acquisition on Lake Erie with the southeast by a continuous road brought the following advice, early in 1789, from President Thomas Mifflin of the Supreme Executive Council:

The improvement of the public roads being under the consideration of the General Assembly, the late purchase of land on the south side of Lake Erie will naturally call their attention to that quarter.

<sup>11</sup> George Swetnam, *Pennsylvania Transportation* (Gettysburg, 1964), 11; Archer B. Hulbert, *Historic Highways of America*, (16 vols., Cleveland, 1902-1905), vol. 13: *The Great American Canals*, 168-69, 174.



MAP 2



Late eighteenth-century trans-Pennsylvania overland routes.

A communication between Presque Isle (which is included in that purchase) and the city of Philadelphia will, in our [Council's] opinion, prove of the greatest utility to the public.

That communication may be best effected by joining the heads of the west branch of Susquehanna with the sources of the Allegheny river, between which it is said there is a short portage.<sup>12</sup>

The specific beginning of state officials' awareness of the strategic and commercial potential of the Lake Erie tract came on September 4, 1788, when the Supreme Executive Council signed a patent for the purchase of the Erie Triangle from the Confederation government. State officials wanted to incorporate the window on Lake Erie into their internal improvements scheme. This strategy was just then emerging as state government policy. The transportation network was to be made up of many segments, the aggregate of which would provide a major channel trending from northwest to southeast with many tributary routes. Philadelphia was the ultimate destination of traffic along the system. The attraction of western produce to Philadelphia markets was the reason for the scheme. The opposite terminal, intended to provide access to the Great Lakes hinterland, was to be the harbor at Presque Isle which, it was hoped, would prove to lie within the Erie Triangle.

The principal western artery in Pennsylvania's plan was the east-west route between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Another proposed road, promoted by Governor Mifflin, was to extend from the northwest through Reading on the Schuylkill to Philadelphia. In March 1789, the General Assembly authorized the Supreme Executive Council to appoint six commissioners to survey these overland routes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Message from President Mifflin to the General Assembly, February 6, 1789, *Colonial Records of Pa.*, 15:24. By referring to the "late purchase" of the Erie Triangle, Mifflin meant that the Pennsylvania government intended to follow through with its initial proceedings with the Confederation government then in progress. These proceedings were completed in April 1792. The distance between Philadelphia and Presque Isle was computed by chain measurements at between 524 and 561 miles depending on the river route followed. Walter Lowrie and Walter S. Franklin, eds., *American State Papers, Documents, Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States*, vol. 1 *Miscellaneous: Report of the Secretary, Albert Gallatin to the Tenth Congress on Roads and Canals* (1808), 835-36 (hereafter, *Gallatin Report on Roads and Canals in Pennsylvania*).

<sup>13</sup> An Act of the Assembly, March 28, 1789, *Minutes of the Thirteenth General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in their Second Session*, 197, EAI, no. 45554.

Also in March 1789 the Assembly authorized a survey to reserve a shoreline tract at Presque Isle for the state. The precise location of this shoreline is uncertain. The records simply identify its corners as a maple tree in the northeast, a hickory in the southeast, an ash by a walnut in the southwest, and a white hickory in the northwest. The diagonal configuration however suggests that the tract conformed to the south shore of Presque Isle harbor which was the object of Pennsylvania planners.<sup>14</sup>

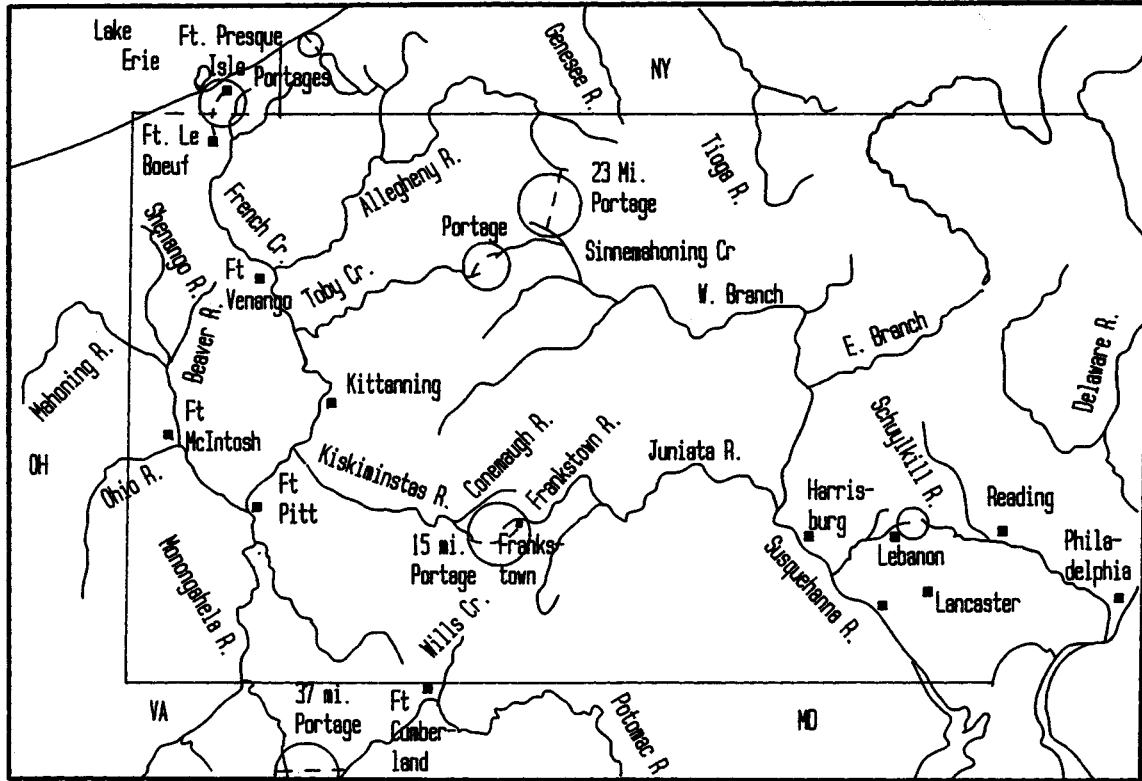
During 1789 the Supreme Executive Council refined its emerging grand plan to improve inland transportation. In September the General Assembly authorized Council to appoint an additional commission to conduct a study of the state's inland waters in order to determine which ones could be made navigable and what such improvements would cost. Council appointed field commissioners to evaluate the state's three principal rivers, the Delaware, Schuylkill, and Susquehanna. In March 1790 they completed the study. A committee of the General Assembly, soon to become known as the Committee on Inland Navigation, reported on the field commissioners' findings, with the optimistic conclusion that the rivers of Pennsylvania could be made navigable as readily as any in the United States. (See Map 3.)<sup>15</sup>

The field commissioners observed that although their initial surveys were completed, further knowledge of the riverine geography of northwestern Pennsylvania was needed before actual improvements could begin. They wished to determine the best places to connect by portages the three eastern river systems that they had studied (the Delaware, the Schuylkill, and the Susquehanna) with the Allegheny River, Lake Ontario, and Lake Erie. In addition, they were considering possible locations for portages that would offer the best landing places and road connections. The committee in the General Assembly, expressing hope that Pennsylvania's natural communication advantages were actually destined to make her territory the principal corridor for future internal

<sup>14</sup> Theodore B. Klein, *Extracts from Part One of the Annual Report of the Department of Internal Affairs for 1904: The History and Growth of Carlisle* (Harrisburg, 1905), 60.

<sup>15</sup> Committee reports, March 21, 27, 1790, *Minutes of the Second Session of the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (hereafter, *Minutes*, 14th Gen. Assy., 2d Ses.), 226, *EAI*, no. 45958. Clearly the committee underestimated the state's formidable topography. Ralph H. Brown, *Historical Geography of the United States* (New York, 1948), 106.

MAP 3



Pennsylvania's inland waterways in the late eighteenth century.

commerce between the eastern and western United States, urged that this natural advantage be utilized and not neglected.

The General Assembly accepted the commissioners' initial recommendation and resolved that Council should appoint additional field commissioners to locate the best portage sites. This second group was to journey from Philadelphia westward along the Schuylkill River following the courses of the Tulpehocken, Quitapahilla, and Swatara creeks and heading north up the Susquehanna River taking its West Branch to Sinnamahoning Creek at Driftwood, which was then known as Canoe Place. There they were to portage over to Toby's Creek (now the Clarion River) to follow the Allegheny River, French Creek, Le Boeuf Creek, and the old French portage to Presque Isle. They were instructed to return downstream on the Allegheny to the Kiskiminitas, the Conemaugh, Stoney Creek, the Juniata, and the Susquehanna, inspecting prospective portage sites along the way. (See Map 3.)<sup>16</sup>

In February 1791 the General Assembly's committee on transportation reported on the findings of the second group of commissioners to explore the routes to northwestern Pennsylvania. At this time the group assumed identity as the Committee on Inland Navigation. Its members were committed to the establishment of a well-regarded stream network between Philadelphia and the northern and western parts of Pennsylvania. They argued that the streams:

are by nature formed for producing the most desireable effects at an expense astonishingly trivial, when compared with the magnitude of the object and extent of country which they embrace. In addition to the domestic convenience to be derived by accommodating the various parts of the state with easy and cheap carriage, your committee extend their views to very distant regions, which by means of the western lakes, invite our minds to anticipate a boundless and beneficial trade, at a period not very remote

<sup>16</sup> As of August 31 the Supreme Executive Council had not heard from the surveyors of the Quitapahilla, Swatara, Susquehanna, Juniata, the headwaters of the Delaware, east branch of the Susquehanna, Lehigh, or Schuylkill rivers. Council was to appoint other commissioners to explore the Delaware and northeastern Pennsylvania links. Committee reports, March 27, 21, 1790, *Minutes, 14th Gen. Assy., 2d Ses.*, 227-29, *EAI*, no. 45958. *An Historical Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Canal Navigation in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1795), 3. Howard W. Higbee, *Stream Map of Pennsylvania* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1965).

The committee concluded that it would be wise for the state to utilize its potential western resources.<sup>17</sup> The committee's optimism appeared to be increasing.

Its members next turned to specific proposals. First, it recommended that development of the Delaware and its tributaries be accelerated, partly because they linked the northeastern parts of the state with Philadelphia but also because the system could then be connected by several short portages (the longest of which was nineteen miles) with Lake Ontario, thus allowing diversion of produce from New York. Commodities presently passing beyond reach through central New York might thereby be drawn through Pennsylvania to Philadelphia instead of passing east to the Hudson River and then south to rival New York City. In a state of nature the Delaware afforded small boat and raft navigation from the northeast corner of the state to Philadelphia. The Committee recommended appropriating additional funds for improvements to make navigation easier as well as for the development of portages and the clearing of tributary streams.

Second, the Committee on Inland Navigation considered the Schuylkill which, centered in Philadelphia, offered distinct opportunity for commercial activity. Prior patterns of usage had already caused the particular segment of the Schuylkill River that led from Reading to the southeast to be considered a "great natural channel." From Reading on the upper Schuylkill westward overland to Harrisburg the country was favorable for the construction of a good road that would connect the Susquehanna with the Schuylkill. The Committee estimated the expenses both for improvements on the Schuylkill and for building the proposed road. The road idea led directly to the construction of the Lancaster Turnpike, completed somewhat to the south in 1795.

Third, the Committee on Inland Navigation reported on an even better means of crossing the hydrographic divide between the upper Schuylkill near Reading and the Susquehanna. It pointed out the

<sup>17</sup> The Committee on Inland Navigation was appointed in the General Assembly on December 13, 1790. Proceedings, December 19, 1791, *Journal of the First Session of the Second House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 33, EAI, no. 24667; Report of the Committee on Inland Navigation, February 10, 1791, *Journal of the First Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (hereafter, *Journal, House Rep., 1st Ses.*), 201, EAI, no. 23675.

potential for "canal and lock navigation" from the mouth of Tulpehocken Creek in the Schuylkill, up this stream to the Quitapahilla, and then across the short Schuylkill-Susquehanna divide near Lebanon to Swatara Creek and downstream to the Susquehanna. (See Map 4.) Should this project alone have been completed, Philadelphia would have been connected by water with the headwaters of the Susquehanna in western Pennsylvania. The Committee offered an estimate of costs for completing this project.

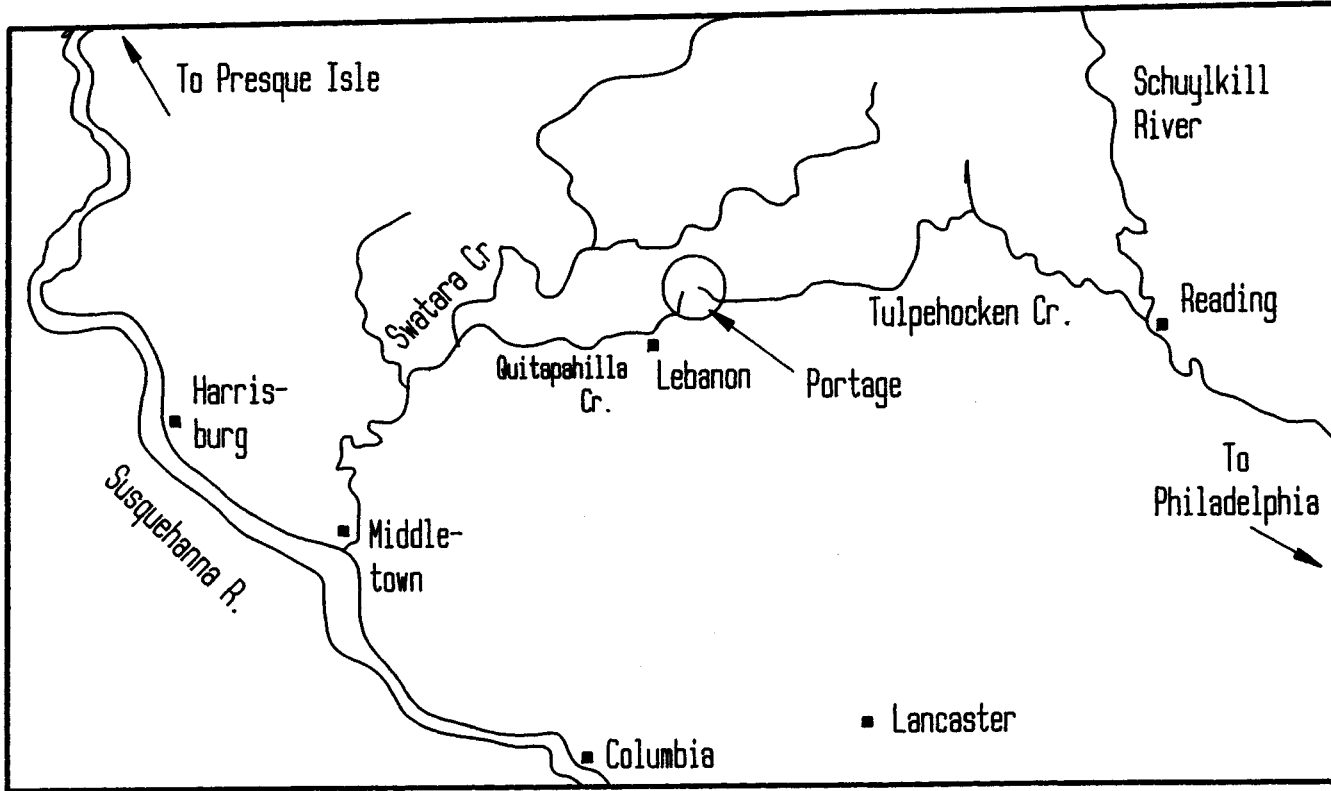
Next, it pointed out that the north branch of the Susquehanna reached within twelve miles of New York's Mohawk River, which communicated by a short portage with Lake Ontario. Improvements to Pennsylvania portions of that stream could be accomplished for a modest amount of money. The Committee also noted that the Tioga branch of the Susquehanna extended into the Genesee country of New York. This region was then being settled rapidly. The Tioga was passable in large canoes for a hundred miles from its mouth and, although most of it lay in New York, it was important as an extension of and an added justification for improving the Susquehanna. These latter alternatives afforded access to the hinterlands of New York and Lake Ontario. The advantage to Pennsylvania of any improvements along these New York routes was the promised diversion to Philadelphia markets of products from both central New York and the lower Great Lakes. (See Map 3.)<sup>18</sup>

The Committee on Inland Navigation finally turned to the West Branch of the Susquehanna, concluding that it promised "bold and prominent marks of a most extensive and lucrative navigation." It detailed two proposed major western routes and a lesser one linking the upper West Branch with both the Allegheny River and Lake Erie watersheds, and it then rendered an estimate of the costs of making these routes navigable. This proposal was the specific one that sought to link the pending Erie Triangle purchase with the internal improvements program.

During 1791 a group of Philadelphia entrepreneurs and government officials formed a Society for Promoting Improvements in Roads and Inland Navigation in Pennsylvania. Robert Morris served as its

<sup>18</sup> Report of the Committee on Inland Navigation, *Journal, House Rep., 1st Ses., 202, EAI*, no. 23675.

MAP 4



The Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla divide between the Schuylkill and Susquehanna watersheds.



president. This organization became active in petitioning the state government between 1791 and 1793 to direct its attention and financial resources to emerging parts of the transportation scheme. Their interest was commercial opportunity. "Commerce, between the inhabitants of different countries . . . is the surest means of uniting all mankind, in one happy bond of civilization, peace and prosperity."<sup>19</sup> The Society's early mission statement explains its members' rationale:

A number of Gentlemen of the city of Philadelphia, and of various other parts of the State of Pennsylvania, impressed with a strong sense of the great importance to the State, of roads and inland navigation, and convinced in their judgment, that the present moment is, at least, favourable to the execution of rational and well formed plans for their improvement, if not critically so, with respect to the trade westward of Susquehanna, and all the northern parts of the United States, met together in the said city, on Friday the 28th day of January, 1791, to derive means for promoting the general interest of every part of the State, by forwarding as far as may be in their power, an extended plan for improving roads and amending inland navigation which the Legislature of the State appear to have in view.<sup>20</sup>

A year later, on the occasion of the establishment of rules of order, the Society elaborated on its interest:

This Society [was] instituted with a view to the improvement of the natural advantages of Pennsylvania and the encouraging [of] useful designs and undertakings for promoting its trade, agriculture, manufactures, and population, by means of good roads and internal navigation.<sup>21</sup>

The Society met weekly in the upper room of the State House for the purpose of supplying the legislature with intelligence about internal improvement possibilities. Their help took the form of memorials, or proposals, that were drafted by committees, presented to the whole membership, voted on, amended, and, when adopted, passed on to

<sup>19</sup> *An Historical Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of The Canal Navigation in Pennsylvania*, iii.

<sup>20</sup> Journal of the Society for Promoting Improvements in Roads and Inland Navigation (hereafter, Society Journal), April 13, 1791, Diaries and Journals Collection, Pennsylvania Society for Promoting Internal Improvements, 1791-1793, 57 photostat sheets, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. On occasion the Society left out of its title, "for Promoting . . ."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, January-March, 1792.

the appropriate house of the legislature. Various Society members served on committees as field commissioners who investigated stream courses, hydrographic divide crossings, and various overland routes. On occasion they hired consultants. Committee members reported back to the whole Society at the weekly meetings.<sup>22</sup>

The Society's first memorial reported estimated costs of stream improvements along the routes studied by the stream commissioners sent out by the Committee on Inland Navigation. They also published mileages and estimated the volume of traffic on the state's rivers. One such report stated that in 1790 approximately 100,000 bushels of grain were shipped down the Susquehanna and passed through Middletown on the way to Philadelphia. A large quantity, perhaps as much as one-fifth the total, was shipped down the then-remote Juniata branch, even though "the lands of this river are but in an infant state of cultivation."<sup>23</sup>

The Society's foremost concern was the segment of the transportation scheme that proposed the linking of the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rivers by a canal that would join tributary creeks, the Tulpehocken and Quitapahilla. (See Map 4.) Morris chided the Assembly:

the magnitude and immense importance of the system of roads and inland navigation projected, and now in rapid progress through the various parts of the State, as tending to the increase of our commercial and agricultural interest, to the general prosperity of our citizens of every class and degree, and strengthening the bands of their union to the most distant part of the State, need not be mentioned to an enlightened Legislature.<sup>24</sup>

The Society's opinion reflected that of the General Assembly's Committee on Inland Navigation that Pennsylvania offered more resources than any country on the globe. Awareness of the state's excellent climate and soil and the variety of its produce combined with the purportedly advantageous river system to convince officials that they

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; *An Historical Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Canal Navigation in Pennsylvania*, 3-4; "Chart showing estimated costs to clear streams for navigation from Philadelphia-Pittsburgh."

<sup>24</sup> Robert Morris to the Senate and House of Representatives of Pennsylvania, n.d. (est. mid 1792), *Gallatin Report on Roads and Canals in Pennsylvania*, 852.

had an opportunity to exploit resources that was unequalled in any other state or country. According to a feasibility study, "the canal which is to connect the Schuylkill and Susquehanna navigation, is the chief link in this vast chain, a link on which the success and utility of the whole must necessarily depend."<sup>25</sup> The Society's expressions of optimism about the state's internal improvements projects were even greater than those of the Assembly's Committee on Inland Navigation.

Governor Mifflin exerted considerable effort to get the construction of the proposed canal started. The General Assembly gave the canal bill priority. In April 1791 its members authorized Governor Mifflin to negotiate for a contract to construct the proposed canal and locks. Delegated committee members went into the field to gather data on the "middle ground," the divide separating the headwaters of Tulpehocken and Quittapahilla creeks. They prepared a map to go with their survey. Members considered their field findings at a subsequent meeting and appointed a committee to draft a bill for the legislature intended to attract subscribers. But it quickly became evident that individual contractors were not going to respond to this expensive and risky engineering challenge. Indeed, no contractors expressed interest.

The memorialists recommended the establishment of an incorporated company that could risk larger amounts of capital than could individual contractors. Such a company might be organized by act of the Assembly. The memorialists expressed confidence that such a plan was "perfectly feasible." The House was requested to bring in a bill providing for their suggested change in technique for financing a canal. By the end of October, all reading and debate was concluded, and both houses as well as the governor signed the bill.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Mr. Weston, the London engineer hired by the Society, estimated on January 15, 1794, the probable cost of the canal at £308,000. *Ibid.*, 852, 856.

<sup>26</sup> Society Journal, September 5, 1791. The Memorialists asked the House of Representatives to approve their drafting of a bill "to be enacted into a law for opening a navigable canal between Susquehanna and Schuylkill rivers and by means of the waters of the Tulpehocken and Quittapahilla creeks in the Counties of Berks and Dauphin in this State." *Ibid.*, August 28, 1791. Committee reports, September 6 and 13, 1791. The large volume of proceedings in the House dealing with internal improvements and the constant inclusion of references to them in messages from the governor to the legislature indicates that internal improvements were a high priority in 1791. *Journal of the Second Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (hereafter, *Journal, House Rep.*, 2d Ses.), 476, 502-20, *EAI*, no. 23676. Proceedings, September 19, 22, 23, 24, 27, 29, 1791; message from Governor Mifflin to the Legislature, September 29, 1791, *ibid.*, 518, 532, 536-37, 539, 548, 562; "An Act to Enable the Governor of this Commonwealth to incorporate a Company for opening a

While deliberations on the proposed Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal were underway, the Assembly also authorized the governor to appoint a commission to survey the best route for an overland turnpike between Middle Ferry on the Schuylkill and the borough of Lancaster. (See Map 4.) The turnpike and the proposed Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal were targeted as the main components of the system because of their eastern convergence on the commercial capital, Philadelphia. Completion of these improvements was closely linked to the legislators' rationale for purchasing the Erie Triangle. Such improvements were needed to provide ultimate carriage to the market center, Philadelphia, for commodities that would enter the state's transportation system at Presque Isle.<sup>27</sup> Governor Mifflin vigorously supported the objectives of the Society for Promoting Improvements in Roads and Inland Navigation in Pennsylvania. His associates continued to assure him that the proposed costs for internal improvements would be more than compensated by commercial benefits once the improvements were completed.

The most vital link in the entire internal improvements project remained the construction of the proposed Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal. Yet its completion, the need for access to distant commodities, and the long, complicated steps leading to the purchase of the Erie Triangle were all separate issues. Governor Mifflin repeated the rationale that by the completion of the eastern segments of the proposed transportation system, "a certain foundation will be laid for connecting the western waters with the *Delaware*, in the neighbourhood of Philadelphia." In saying this the governor indicated his understanding that comprehensiveness in the state's approach to the internal improvements program would assist citizens in achieving commercial opportunity.<sup>28</sup>

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Canal and Lock Navigation between the rivers Schuylkill and Susquehanna by the waters of Tulpehocken, Quittapahilla, and Swatara, in the counties of Berks and Dauphin," October 29, 1791, *Gallatin Report on Roads and Canals in Pennsylvania*, 843-47.

<sup>27</sup> Proceedings, September 27, 1791; House resolve, September 30, 1791, *Journal, House Rep.*, 2d Ses., 546, 571, *EAI*, no. 23676. There were three commissioners.

<sup>28</sup> Message from Governor Mifflin to the Legislature, December 10, 1791, *Journal of the First Session of the Second House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (hereafter, *Journal, 2d House Rep., 1st Ses.*), 12, 13, *EAI*, no. 24667; General Assembly estimates for navigational improvements; grants of public money for the improvement of roads and waters by the legislature of Pennsylvania, April 13, 1791; £400 appropriated for improving French Creek; £400 for the Presque Isle portage, *Gallatin Report on Roads and Canals in Pennsylvania*, 840-41.

Other stream improvements were planned to connect with the proposed Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal. One was to improve the navigation of the Susquehanna River between Wright's Ferry and the state's northern boundary. Road improvements between the middle counties and Philadelphia were also planned. Mifflin hoped that the report of recently appointed commissioners to the Philadelphia-Lancaster turnpike survey would result in a general system of well-constructed and well-regulated roads. The governor also stated that the absence of a good, permanent road was the principal defect in the state's transportation network.<sup>29</sup>

The Society also became interested in other transportation alternatives that might attract business to Philadelphia. New York's sources of raw materials were never far from the attention of Society's participants. While the extensions of various routes into New York were obviously beyond the jurisdiction of Pennsylvania officials, the Society referred idealistically to a "happy rivalry between the cities of Philadelphia and New York," observing that the parts of these routes that were within Pennsylvania were in need of little improvement and already were drawing off a substantial amount of New York's trade. Had New York officials improved their own parts of the routes, Philadelphia would probably have lost trade. The Society realized that they ultimately could not control the direction of New York's commercial traffic. Securing the Erie Triangle for Pennsylvania would give the state certain access to the Great Lakes at a point farther west than Lake Ontario and would not require dependence on a transportation segment outside of the state's own boundaries. It would then remain only to see that the Triangle in the northwest corner of the state was linked by a reliable and economical transportation system with the far southeastern commercial capital of Philadelphia in order for the Society to achieve the comprehensive objectives of its internal improvements scheme.<sup>30</sup>

Pennsylvania officials were expressing increased interest in establishing trade opportunities at a time when commercial competition with

<sup>29</sup> Message from Governor Mifflin to the Legislature, December 10, 1791, *Journal*, 2d House Rep., 1st Ses., 12, 13 EAI, no. 24667.

<sup>30</sup> Message from the Society for the Improvements of Roads and Inland Navigation in Pennsylvania, February 7, 1791, signed Robert Morris; *Gallatin Report on Roads and Canals in Pennsylvania*, 837.

New York and Maryland appears to have been reaching the level of an interstate commercial crisis. Indeed, the crisis led to the collapse of the Confederation government and the birth of the Constitutional government during the late 1780s. During the transition period between governments, Philadelphia economist Tench Coxe expressed concern about the importance of connecting western Pennsylvania with the capital. Writing to Governor Mifflin in February 1789, Coxe observed that there was as yet no new Congress. He feared the new federal government's interference in Pennsylvania's interests. He urged immediate construction of a transportation link between the southeast and northwest corners of the state, observing that "the probable course of events in the Southwestern country, renders it highly advisable to move on it this spring."<sup>31</sup> The impetus behind the accelerated pace of field investigations and subsequent considerations by Pennsylvania government officials clearly reflected a desire to maintain control of all commerce that was physically accessible to the Commonwealth. The Society continued to focus attention on the Susquehanna navigation, "which we may properly call our own," for the Susquehanna passed through the most inhabited central part of the state, where there was no commercial competition. According to the Society, if this system were improved, "opening such numerous sources and channels of inland trade, all leading to the port of Philadelphia, as perhaps no other nation or seaport on the whole globe can boast of," Pennsylvania's prosperity would be assured.<sup>32</sup>

But the fact that the lower Susquehanna led away from Philadelphia and toward Baltimore was a problem. The Society was concerned about this critical geographic inconvenience as well as one that was caused by the out-of-state direction of the upper Monongahela River. (See Map 3.) The Susquehanna led directly to Chesapeake Bay. Travel southward from Pittsburgh up the Monongahela led to a portage to the upper Potomac River; this route was thereby connected with the Chesapeake and Baltimore also. The proposed Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal would solve this problem.

<sup>31</sup> Tench Coxe to President Mifflin, Erie, February 1, 1789, *Pa. Archives* 1st ser., 11:542-43. Presumably Coxe referred to the growing lure of various Mississippi tributaries to trans-Appalachian frontier farmers.

<sup>32</sup> Message from the Society for the Improvement of Roads and Inland Navigation in Pennsylvania, February 7, 1791, *Gallatin Report on Roads and Canals in Pennsylvania*, 837.

The distance from the Allegheny River at the mouth of its Kiskiminitas tributary to Philadelphia was about 400 miles, the same as from the Allegheny River at Pittsburgh to the mouth of the Potomac River by the Monongahela River route. The all-Pennsylvania route had the advantage of only the steep eighteen mile portage across the Allegheny-Susquehanna divide compared with a thirty-seven mile portage across the Monongahela-Potomac divide. (See Map 3.) The Society anticipated a canal system on the Conemaugh-Juniata connection, along part of the eighteen mile distance. As they saw it, "there can be no doubt but that the transportation of all kinds of goods and merchandise from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh may be at a much cheaper rate than from any other sea-port on the Atlantic waters."<sup>33</sup> The Society's position was that

by no other methods than by opening easy communications, can the settlers in those vast Western countries be made useful to the Atlantic States, and comfortable in their own situation. Nor can we expect by any other means than by inviting their trade, and making it their interest to be connected with us, that we can long secure such connexion.<sup>34</sup>

Thus the Society viewed their projected internal improvements as having political as well as economic benefits for eastern Pennsylvanians.

The Society was concerned with the increasing population of the state's central counties. It anticipated that the demand for Philadelphia and eastern regional produce would soon surpass the supply. In the words of the Society, "if the staple of the port of Philadelphia is to be supported, it can be best done by conducting the streams of commerce in the article of grain, from the Susquehanna to this city."<sup>35</sup> The commercial capital would need to draw on a greater, more distant hinterland as population increased. Demand for ever greater resources was increasing. This circumstance further stimulated the Society's interest in transportation improvements. Their sights were increasingly drawn to the Great Lakes trade, which in the 1790s still consisted of

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. The Society's goal of canalizing the Conemaugh-Juniata route was not realized for another forty-three years when the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal was completed.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "Remarks and calculations respecting the communications between Schuylkill and Susquehannah," April 7, 1791, *ibid.*, 839.

potential rather than actual commodities, with the single exception of fur trade:

The late information obtained from the commissioners who have viewed the communications with the Allegheny and Lake Erie, make it highly probable, that an immense trade will, one day, be carried on from Philadelphia with the great lakes and fur countries, and with the settlements on the Ohio, &c. The proposed communication between Schuylkill and Susquehanna [the Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal] will serve as a basis to this traffic, whether the route be by the Juniata or the other branches of the Susquehanna.<sup>36</sup>

Eventually the administration of the internal improvements program became so complicated that the General Assembly's Committee on Roads and Inland Navigation, appointed in December 1790, recommended that separate committees be appointed to study roads independently from stream navigation. But by 1792 roads began to supersede canals as first priorities. They cost less to build than canals. Roads allowed the use of private conveyances. They could be built where there were no streams but where transportation was nevertheless needed. They could be developed more quickly to serve backcountry Pennsylvanians whose voices and transportation interests were reflected in Philadelphia. And roads served governmental and commercial interests in Philadelphia. Navigational improvements to rivers and, eventually, the actual construction of canals (beyond the period of this study) assumed a secondary priority. Canals generally involved public conveyances. Their locations were necessarily restricted to stream courses that were often inconvenient. They were conceived by the Philadelphia interests to convey raw materials from hinterlands beyond the state into the hands of middlemen in the capital.<sup>37</sup>

A motion in the House on the Lancaster Turnpike in September 1791 also expressed the state's rationale for developing inland transportation, alluding to the role that the Erie Triangle purchase played in that scheme: "Whereas the improvement of the public roads within this state will effectually promote agriculture, manufactures, and commerce by facilitating the intercourse betwixt the various parts thereof,"

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Proceedings, December 19, 1791, *Journal, 2d House Rep., 1st Ses., 33, EAI*, no. 24667.



the House resolved that the governor be authorized to invite proposals from individuals or companies interested in developing the best route between Philadelphia and Lancaster.<sup>38</sup> The Lancaster Turnpike was completed in 1795.

The farsighted canal building plans required yet another third of a century to implement. The Pennsylvania Mainline Canal was begun in 1825, just after New York's Erie Canal was completed. The Erie Extension Canal connecting the Mainline Canal at the Ohio River just south of Pittsburgh with Lake Erie at Presque Isle harbor was begun in 1834, just as construction of the Mainline Canal was finished. It began service in 1844. The Union Canal connecting the upper tributaries of the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rivers across the Lebanon divide (the Tulpehocken-Quitapahilla canal) was completed in 1827. The idea of linking those watersheds had been considered as far back as William Penn's time. One has to wonder why the impetus declined by the mid 1790s. Perhaps the new federal Constitution was so successful in diminishing interstate commercial competition in trans-Appalachia as well as on the banks of the Potomac that without it the geographic obstacles loomed larger than before.

Thus it was that the concurrent, post Revolutionary issues of Pennsylvania's western lands and the trans-state internal improvements program worked together for approximately a decade to stimulate Pennsylvania officials' interest in purchasing the Erie Triangle. The zeal of Pennsylvania officials to make the most of Philadelphia's hinterland explains both the premature innovative nature of their internal improvements schemes and the push to annex the Erie Triangle. The connection between these two issues in the public documents is indisputable. Because of this connection, the motivations of Pennsylvania officials becomes more clear. Their rhetoric repeatedly states that they were challenged by the same spirit of commercial competition that was widespread in the new nation generally after the war ended. Pennsylvanians' competition focused on harnessing the technology of

<sup>38</sup> House motion, September 28, 1791, *Journal, House Rep.*, 2d Ses., 550, EAI, no. 23676; letter from Governor Mifflin to the Legislature, February 1, 1792, *Journal*, 2d House Rep., 1st Ses., 17, EAI, no. 24667. Message, Governor Mifflin to the Legislature, April 9, 1792; Proceedings, February 15, 1792, March 24, 29, 1792; Message from Governor Mifflin to the Legislature, March 30, 1792; April 9, 1791, *ibid.*, 321, 138, 266, 280-81, 314, 320.

the day to the state's topography in an effort to channel the produce of a developing hinterland to the marketplace.

If Pennsylvania officials were motivated by a desire to speculate in the Erie Triangle lands, their writings do not allude to it. There were only an additional 202,000 acres of unsettled land in the Triangle compared with millions of acres elsewhere in the state and beyond. On the other hand, a large body of documentary evidence reveals the sense of enthusiasm and challenge in developing an innovative system of inland navigation to serve the people of the Commonwealth in competition with their neighboring states. It is difficult to see these references, in all their diversity and depth, as insincere or as a cloak for a more self-serving goal such as the land speculation hypothesis suggests.

Nor is the assumption that Pennsylvania officials wanted the harbor for possible future development explained by the evidence. The public sources show that they wanted the harbor for use right then. An interest in acquiring a Great Lakes harbor for future use was incompatible with the realities and priorities of the 1780s and 1790s. The postwar financial crisis did not allow for the luxury of investing even their energies, let alone material resources, in a possible future need while there were so many real, current needs.

A better understanding of Pennsylvania officials' motivations in the context of a final link offers insights into the *whys* of both the ambitious internal improvements plan and the purchase of the Erie Triangle. These agendas experienced both energetic beginnings and abrupt declines. Both experienced renewals later that indicate that the original planners were on a feasible track. Unfortunately, the planners' attention was diverted to other issues because of changing circumstances. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to see their consistent enthusiasm for public service and their welcome acceptance of challenge.

In 1796 the itinerant Moravian missionary, John Heckewelder, drew a map showing the center one-third of the south shore of Lake Erie including the western part of the Erie Triangle. This map amounted to an annotated landform sketching. It was a result of his many years of travel in the Ohio and lower Great Lakes region. The Triangle purchase having been accomplished four years earlier, Heckewelder inscribed a statement of Pennsylvania's purpose in purchasing the Triangle. The statement reads, "Last Purchase made of Congress and N. York State by Pennsylvania, for the benefit of a

Communication by Water to Lake Erie.”<sup>39</sup> Although this observation was incidental to Heckewelder’s main purpose, the statement reinforces from yet another vantage point Pennsylvania’s purpose in buying the Erie Triangle. Heckewelder’s comment suggests that Pennsylvania’s reason for pursuing the Erie Triangle annexation was fairly common knowledge. The Philadelphians’ goal was more than a harbor for eventual future access to Lake Erie. They wanted immediate access to more distant commodities. Only the Erie Triangle could provide this final link in their ambitious state internal improvements program.

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<sup>39</sup> John Heckewelder, “Map of Northeastern Ohio, 1796” (Cleveland, 1884).

