

John Harris, Historical Interpretation, and the Standing Stone Mystery Revealed

In the early spring of 1754, John Harris, operator of a trading post and ferry on the Susquehanna River, described for the provincial government two paths of travel through the Pennsylvania wilderness to the Native American village of Logs Town (present-day Ambridge) on the Ohio River. Titled “An Acct. of the Road to Logs Town on the Allegheny River, Taken by John Harris, 1754,” his sketch provides marvelous details of the natural and man-made features of backcountry Pennsylvania on the eve of the French and Indian War. Recorded as a deposition before Provincial Secretary Joseph Shippen, Harris’s description is one of several made for the government by frontier traders, among them Andrew Montour, Hugh Crawford, and Phillip Davies.¹ But Harris’s deposition in particular would later cause historical confusion about the dimensions of one of the landscape features he listed—the Standing Stone.

The traders interviewed provided in their depositions various routes from east to west, but Harris’s description of the two routes to Logstown is long and quite detailed, listing many features of the landscape, and thus is helpful for researchers interested in reconstructing and studying the frontier at that time.² Giving written instructions and the number of miles to each stopping place, this document provides the contemporary equivalent of Google mapping. Harris’s two routes, like those described in the other depositions, are along established Indian trails, ideal for a small party traveling by foot or horse. One follows in part the Raystown (Bedford) Path to the south, and the other in part the Frankstown (Altoona) and Kittanning Paths to the north.³ Harris begins by describing

¹ In the spring of 1754, the government, needing to verify if French incursions were indeed within Pennsylvania’s borders, was keenly interested in the number of miles to the western parameter of the colony. The western border of Pennsylvania was specified as “five degrees of longitude” west of the Delaware River in William Penn’s 1681 charter for Pennsylvania.

² Harris’s deposition is #177 in Miscellaneous Papers (ser. 21.9), Record Group 21, Records of the Proprietary Government, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA. All depositions, including Harris’s, were later printed in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ed. Samuel Hazard et al. (Philadelphia and Harrisburg, 1852–1935), 1st ser., 2:133–36. Paul A. W. Wallace relied on many of these documents in his *Indian Paths of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA, 1965).

³ Although Harris states Logstown is on the “Allegheny,” by present standards it sits on the Ohio River. The Allegheny is the main tributary of the Ohio, and both names were given for the river in the early eighteenth century.

a course from his ferry, past George Croghan's and Andrew Montour's homes along Sherman's Creek, to a junction around present-day Concord in Franklin County. The two routes then diverged, one branching toward Raystown and the other to Frankstown. He enumerates the distances between landmarks along the Raystown Path to the Forks of the Ohio and down the river to Logstown, calculating the total distance of this "Old Road" at 246 miles.⁴ Then the lengths of the Frankstown/Kittanning Path are described; although Harris does not provide a total distance, adding the lengths of the segments reveals the second route to be 220 miles. This last total is surprisingly accurate, for a simple internet search today reveals that the distance between Harrisburg and Ambridge via various interstates is 221 miles.

The Harris deposition is particularly significant for the fact that it records the physical dimensions of the Standing Stone along the Frankstown Path, the only contemporary record known to do so. The Standing Stone was a long, thin rock, erected by Native Americans at the junction of Standing Stone Creek and the Juniata River at what would become the borough of Huntingdon. Harris gave the dimensions as "abot 14 ft. high, and 6 inchs square." The rock had stood there for many years previous to his description; likely of spiritual importance to the Indians, it was also a guidepost to any traveler on the Frankstown Path. The stone was said to have been removed by the Lenape people around 1768, after the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, and taken west with them.

The original Harris deposition, retained by the Pennsylvania government, eventually became part of the records of the Provincial Council now at the Pennsylvania State Archives. The document was recognized for its value by I. D. Rupp and published in part in his 1847 *History and Topography of Northumberland, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Centre, Union, Columbia, Juniata and Clinton Counties*.⁵ In 1851, it was cataloged as document #640 by Samuel Hazard, who had been hired by the government to arrange and catalog many of the unorganized provincial and state records. Harris's deposition was published the next year in its entirety in volume 2 of the first series of *Pennsylvania Archives*, edited by Hazard, increasing awareness of the record among historians, who recognized its

⁴ Later adapted as part of Forbes Road in 1758, the route of the South Penn Railroad in the nineteenth century, and, eventually, the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

⁵ Israel Daniel Rupp, *History and Topography of Northumberland, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Centre, Union, Columbia, Juniata and Clinton Counties, Pa.* (Lancaster, PA, 1847), 396 and 397.

significance as the only contemporary description of the Standing Stone. The deposition was partially quoted in U. J. Jones's *History of the Early Settlement of the Juniata Valley* (1856) and reproduced, also in its entirety, in J. Simpson Africa's *History of Huntingdon and Blair Counties, Pennsylvania* (1883). Charles Hanna, in *The Wilderness Trail* (1911), provides not only a reprint of the full document but a twenty-one-page explication of each place listed.⁶

By the 1920s, the original document, having broken along fold lines into several pieces, was mended by State Archives staff using glue and strips of paper, standard repair materials at the time. The simple mends generated a controversy that would last nearly seventy-five years among Huntingdon County historians. In 1939, Lefferd A. M. Haughwout, a sometime historian who vacationed in Juniata County, wrote a history of the Standing Stone in two parts for the *Lewistown Sentinel*.⁷ In his narrative, he recounts visiting the public archives in Harrisburg and viewing the original Harris deposition:

An inquiry at the Archives Division of the State Library at Harrisburg proved successful, and the historic document was readily made available for examination. . . . The initial entries are as follows . . . "to the Standing Stone about 4 feet high, 6 inch square. . . ." The discovery of a plainly written "4" instead of 10 [sic] was a great a surprise to the present writer. . . . Members of the Archives staff were called to verify it one by one, and all without hesitation agreed the reading was correct. In order that there may be no doubt of the matter the writer has placed a photostat of the original in the Juniata College Library where it may be consulted by those who are interested. . . . The manuscript itself, indeed, may easily be misread by a careless reader, for the down stroke of the "t" in the word "about" is so close to the "4", and is made in such a way that it looks at first as a numeral one. The crossing of the "t" is faint but unmistakable.

Haughwout criticized Jones and Africa for relying on the published *Pennsylvania Archives* version of the deposition rather than the original, and his claim that the Standing Stone had in fact been four feet tall stood for many years. In 1966, the document, along with the other records of

⁶ U. J. Jones, *History of the Early Settlement of the Juniata Valley* (Philadelphia, 1856), 183–85; J. Simpson Africa, *History of Huntingdon and Blair Counties, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1883), 27; Charles A. Hanna, *The Wilderness Trail; or, The Ventures and Adventures of the Pennsylvania Traders on the Allegheny Path*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1911), 1:252–73.

⁷ *Lewistown Sentinel*, Aug. 17 and 18, 1939. The quote is from the August 18 article.

the Provincial Council, was microfilmed in the condition in which Haughwout had encountered it and became widely used by researchers.⁸

In 2011, Fred Lang and Nancy Shedd, distinguished Huntingdon County historians, approached the State Archives. The pair were suspicious that the paper mends on the document in the 1920s might have obscured a numeral “1” in the original, leading Haughwout to read the height of the Standing Stone as “4” rather than “14.” Close examination revealed that a pencil had been used to fill in portions of text obscured by the paper mends. Lang and Shedd reasoned that a well-intentioned document restorer, assuming the height was four feet, not fourteen, likely inserted a number 4. As Harris’s deposition was significant to the early history of Huntingdon and the only physical description of the Standing Stone, they decided to take action. Through their entreaties, the Isett Foundation of Huntingdon generously provided funding to undo the old mends and re-repair the document. Harris’s deposition was sent to the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia in the fall of 2011. The old paper mends were removed, clearly revealing a number “1” next to the “4.” The document was again repaired, this time using a nearly translucent mending tissue, and was cleaned, deacidified, and encapsulated between two sheets of clear polyester film. With the height of the Standing Stone now restored to fourteen feet, the newly refurbished record was then displayed for ten days at the State Museum (March 9–18, 2012) as part of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission’s annual Heritage Week activities.

Historians are trained to review original sources as definitive and to think of printed versions as secondary sources. In this case, the printed version was the true one, faithfully copied from the original, and the original unintentionally camouflaged, leading to an incorrect conclusion.

Pennsylvania State Archives

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⁸ Haughwout was right to be suspicious about Jones’s work, well known to be spurious on many accounts; Donald H. Kent, project director, *Records of the Provincial Council, 1682–1776, in the Pennsylvania State Archives*, microfilm edition, 26 rolls (Harrisburg, PA, 1966).