General John Gibson

GENERAL JOHN GIBSON

By

JOHN B. GIBSON

Pennsylvania has no great men. The compelling reason is that Pennsylvanians have the ever gracious and endearing gift of remembering and reciting with microscopic clarity and exactness the misfortunes and regretful phases of their great men's lives.

Had Massachusetts, Virginia, Kentucky or Ohio such giants as Muhlenberg, Wilmot, Curtin, Speaker Randall or "Pigiron" Kelly these states would be studded with memorials in their honor.

Pittsburgh is highly endowed with this beneficent talent and achieves sometimes complete obliteration of all remembrance of her notables. It names its newest and presumably its finest hotel William Penn: poor old Arthur St. Clair—Major General United States Army—President of the Continental Congress—Governor of the Northwest Territory, in his old age left to eke out a miserable existence keeping tavern at Ligonier, is forgotten now, as he was then by a grateful constituency. Wayne Street has a number; Hand Street has a number: St. Clair Street has a number and so on down the line like stalls in the market house.

Boston can have its Choate; Philadelphia its Binney and Dougherty and Cassiday but how many Pittsburhgers of this generation ever hear of Walter Forward or William Wilkins or James Mountain or Thomas Mellon or George Shiras or Wilson McCandless or Thomas M. Marshall or Robert M. Gibson or James P. Barr or James Mills or John I. Nevin or Samuel P. Langley or Otto Wuth or William Metcalf or Stephen C. Foster or Richard Realf.

I am led to these reflections by the various references of late in the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine to General John Gibson who played a not inconspicuous part in the early history of the town and the western country.
John Gibson was born at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, May 23rd, 1740. His father, George Gibson, a Scotchman from Antrim, in the north of Ireland, came to this country prior to 1730 and his location and "Hickory Tree" tavern on the banks of the Conestoga was known as Gibson's Ford before it grew into the town and now city of Lancaster.

Lancaster was the frontier; the trade in peltry and Indian supplies centered there and moved thence to and from Philadelphia and the ports on Delaware and Chesapeake. George Gibson's petitions to the Quaker government for road improvements are not unlike those we read today. He was one of the petitioners for the erection of Cumberland County from a part of Lancaster to the end of making quicker and at less cost the securing of justice.

Clad in homespun, armed with a flint lock and a woodsmen's axe, men labored in the fields and cleared the forests; alert days filled with dauntless courage and clear eyed forward looking faith; homespun men, living in log huts with puncheon floors, in the heat of summer and the dread cold of winter clearing the forests and sowing and reaping their crops from between the stumps. These were the men who a little later achieved Bushy Run and Point Pleasant and stretched the Saxon domain from the Savage Mountains to the Mississippi; battles not less dominant in their influence than were Lexington and Yorktown.

The shattered and panic stricken forces of Braddock retreating under Dunbar to Fort Cumberland, "going" in the words of old Governor Dinwiddie, "going into winter quarters in the middle of the summer", a Scotch boy speeding through the forests spread the news of the great disaster that the frontier might arm against the French and Indian foe. This is his message and one has only to pause a moment to feel the breathless, anxious haste and anguish in which the note was penned:

July 17, 1755

Sir: I thought it proper to let you know that I was in the Battle where we were defeated. And we had about Eleven hundred and fifty private Men beside officers and others. And we was attack'd the 9th. day about Twelve o'clock and held till about Three in the afternoon. And then we were forced
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to retreat when I suppose we might bring about 300 whole Men besides a vast many wounded or killed. Gen. Braddock is wounded but I hope not mortal. And Sir John St. Clair and many others but I hope not mortal. All the train is cut off in a Manner. Sir Peter Halket and his son, Capt. Polson, Capt. Gethen, Capt. Rose, Capt. Tatten killed and many others. Capt. Ord of the Train is wounded but I hope not mortal. We lost all our artillery entirely and everything else.

To Mr. John Smith and Buchannon and give it to the next post and let him show this to George Gibson at Lancaster and Mr. Bingham at the sign of The Ship and You'll oblige Yours to command John Campbell, Messenger.

P. S. And from that to be told the Indian King. N. B. The above directed to Mr. Smith and Buchannon in Carlisle.

“Show this to George Gibson at Lancaster and Mr. Bingham at the sign of 'The Ship' and from that to be told at the 'Indian King'”.

Massachusetts writes odes and builds piles to the memory of Paul Revere: glorious John Campbell of Pennsylvania unhonored and unsung lies forgotten in the dust from which he sprang.

In 1758 when General Forbes assembled his troops at Carlisle to retrieve what Braddock had lost, John Gibson, 18 years old, was in the ranks.

Descending the Ohio below Ft. Pitt—there was at that time no distinction between the Ohio and Allegheny either by the settlers or Indians, the name “La Belle Riviere” given it by the French being merely a translation of the Iroquois “Ohio,” or Delaware “Allegheny,” both meaning “Fair or Beautiful River”—Gibson with a number of companions was captured by a band of Delawares and carried off to the Ohio country. A number of the captives were burned at the stake, Gibson escaping a like fate by being adopted by a squaw in lieu of her warrior son killed in battle. He remained with his foster parents a number of years.

In 1764 Col. Bouquet approaching the Delaware camp in
his march into the Ohio country received the following message:

Camp at Tuscarrawas. Oct. 14 1764
Col. Bouquet: We are glad to hear the good speeches which you made and also that our brother Capt. Pipe and Capt. John are alive and salute us. We now salute you with a good heart and shall be more glad when we meet you at Tuscarrawas; if we see our brother Pipe and John at a small distance we should think that you mean nothing but good Linecheque, Wilopachikin, Simon Girty, Neachblan, Wininum, Neclaw, Sunfish, Capt. Wise, Capt. Jacob, Jescessa, Thomas Hickman, Capt. Killbuck.

The above wrote by Mr. Gibson a prisoner among them. All of the captives, including Gibson, some 200 in number held by the Delawares, Senacas, and Shawanese were surrendered to Bouquet and eventually reached Pittsburgh.

The Scotch of the Cumberland Valley were in almost constant turmoil with the Quaker government owing to the latter’s neglect and oft times refusal to bear an equitable share in the defence of the frontier and their contention that being “proprietaries” under King Charles’ charter they were exempt from taxation, and with the King’s soldiers who were accused of engaging in illicit trade with the Indians, selling them rifles and other warlike supplies. More than once the settlers threatened to turn their rifles against Philadelphia and when a Quaker asked Robert Fulton, father of Robert Fulton of steamboat fame, if he thought they would do such a thing, the old gentlemen replied: “They certainly will; they are the kin of the bloodthirsty Presbyterians who cut off King Charles’ head.” The situation grew so tense in 1765 the settlers assaulted Fort Loudoun, captured and held its commanding officer for ransom.

When released from captivity with the Delawares Gibson located at Pittsburgh and engaged in the Indian trade. Wishing to transport a stock of goods to his posts in the west he received the following “passport” from the settlers committee who had taken matters into their own hands:

June 1st, 1765.

Viz. 3 caggs wine 20 loads dry goods
1 cagg sugar 1 load of trunks
34 caggs rum & spirits 23 weeding hoes.

We the subscribers being chosen by John Gibson with the consent and approbation of John Allison and John Rannalls Esqrs. to Inspect a quantity of Licquors. Dry goods &c which goods the said Gibson is about to carry to Ft. Pitt, In pursuance whereof we have examined all the loads included in the above invoice and have found no warlike stores or any article that in our opinion can be any advantage or enable the Indians to point their arms against the frontier inhabitants.

Robert Smith
Francis Patterson

Cumberland County, SS.

To all his Majestys Liedge subjects to whom these presents shall come: with the concurrence and approbation of John Allison and John Rannalls Esqrs. you are hereby and in his Majesty's name to permit ye above named John Gibson with seven drivers and forty-one horses and Loading to pass unmolested as far as Ft. Bedford and to ye Alleganea mountain on his way to Ft. Pitt they behaving themselves soberly and inoffensively as becomes loyal subjects. Given under my hand and seal

Wm. Smith
being one of his Majestys
Justice of the Peace for said
County this 1st. day of June 1765.

Gibson had trading posts not only at Pittsburgh but throughout the western country. In 1765 he received permission from Col. Reid, Commandant at Ft. Pitt "to occupy and build upon a Lott in the New Town of Pittsburgh on payment of Twenty shillings yearly subject to such regulations as may be ordered by the Commander in Chief or by the Commanding officer of the District for the good of his Majesty's service." He was at Logstown (about where Economy now stands) in 1769 and in 1771 built a house and cleared 30 acres of land opposite Logstown; this 30 acres being part of 300 acres which he won in a lottery and which embraced the "old Indian Corn field." He had a home and a Delaware wife at King Newcomers Town on the Musking-
um and with the Delaware Chief White Eyes accompanied John Lacy thereto in 1773.

Gibson was present at the Indian council held near the present town of Chillicothe, Ohio, following the crushing defeat of the allied tribes by Gen. Andrew Lewis and his Virginia frontiersmen at Point Pleasant, Virginia. (West Va.) Oct. 10th. 1774.

Logan-Tagajute—a Delaware Chief whose terrible reprisals against the frontier for the murder of his family by Daniel Greathouse the previous May had opened the war, refused to attend the council. Gibson was dispatched to bring him in, when Logan, under an oak in the forest delivered the famous address referred to by Jefferson in his “Notes” as the most eloquent of all the Indian speeches.

I appeal to any white man to say if he ever entered Logan’s cabin hungry and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked and he clothed him not. During the last long and bloody war Logan remained idle in his cabin an advocate of peace. Such was my love for the white man my countrymen pointed as they passed and said ‘Logan is the friend of the white man’. I had even thought to have lived with you but for the injuries of one man. Colonel Gresap (x) the last spring in cold blood and unprovoked murdered all the relations of Logan not even sparing my women and children. There runs not a drop of Logan’s blood in the veins of any living creature. This called on me for revenge. I have sought it. I have killed many. I have fully glutted my vengeance. For my country I rejoice at the beams of peace; but do not harbor the thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. Logan would not turn upon his heel to save his life: for who is there to mourn for Logan now? Not one.

One cannot read these proud stately sentences without thinking the man who received and translated them from the dark gutteral Lenno Lenape (True Men) to the dignified easy flowing Anglo Saxon was no mean master of both.

The rumblings of the coming storm had reached the valley of the Scioto. Before leaving their mountain homes the Virginians had heard of Dunmore’s dissolution of the
House of Burgesses for resolving to keep the day of the closing of the Port of Boston as a day of fasting and prayer. Their work having been done; their object accomplished and their dead buried on the banks of the Ohio at Fort Gower (Hockingport, Ohio) in the brown autumn, with none to witness save the silent river, the reddening forest and the gray skies above, the officers of Lewis’ little army met and “having concluded campaign with honor and advantage to the Colony” and further “that we are a respectable body is certain when it is considered we can live weeks without bread or salt; that we can sleep in the open air without any covering but the canopy of heaven and that our men can shoot with any in the known world” unanimously resolved:

“That we will bear the most faithful allegiance to his Majesty King George the Third while his Majesty delights to reign over a brave and free people; that we will at the expense of life and every thing dear and valuable exert ourselves in support of the honor of his crown and the dignity of the British Empire, but as the love of Liberty and attachment to the real interests and just rights of America outweigh every other consideration, we resolve that we will exert every power within us for the defence of American Liberty and for the support of her just rights and privileges.”

These resolutions were printed in the *Virginia Gazette* and no one knew better than Dunmore what privations they would endure and no one knew better than he how straight they could shoot.

Returning to Pittsburgh, Gibson, recognizing the sovereignty of Virginia accepted from Governor Dinwiddie an appointment as Justice of the Peace for West Augusta as all of Pennsylvania west of the mountains was called by those who adhered to the Virginia side of that controversy and with his fellow Justices George Croghan, John Campbell, John Connolly, Dorsey Pentecost and Thomas Smallman organized Feb. 21st, 1775, the first court held in Pittsburgh. The court remained in session only four days and adjourned to Staunton, Virginia. The next “Court Day” was May 16th. 1775, on which day the citizens formed a Committee of Correspondence of which Gibson was a member and on the
same day he was elected Colonel of the Virginia Regiment enlistment for which began at once in the wide territory in which he traded.

He and his command served under Washington in New York and in the retreat through the Jerseys and later, on account of his knowledge of the Indian character and language, he was transferred to the Western Department then under command of Brig. Gen. Lachlan McIntosh with headquarters at Fort Pitt.

The Treaty of Pittsburgh, concluded Sept. 17th, 1778, and which preserved the whole western country to the revolting colonies, was negotiated by Gen. Andrew Lewis and his brother Thomas, Commissioners on the part of Virginia, (the Penna. Commissioner was not present at any time during the negotiations) and on the part of the Delawares by

Koquethagechton or White Eyes
Hopocan or Capt. Pipe
Gelemend or Capt. Killbuck

and witnessed by
Lachlan McIntosh  Brig. Gen.
W. Crawford  Col.
John Stevenson
A. Graham  Ensign
Benj. Mills  Ist. Lieut. 8th. North Carolina
Lachlan McIntosh, Jr.  Brigade Inspector

Closing the negotiations Sept. 16th. White Eyes addressed the Commissioners as follows:

Brothers: You desired us in the speech you made to us yesterday, that if we could think of anything for the advantage of both of us, that we would mention it. We now request that the Wise Brethren in Congress may be informed that it is our particular request that Col. John Gibson may be appointed to have charge of all matters between you and us. We esteem him as one of ourselves; he has always acted an honest part by us and we are convinced he will make our common good his chief study and not think only how he may get rich. We desire also that he may have charge of and take care of the
Warriors of our people who may join you in the present expedition. When we were last in Philadelphia our Wise Brethren in Congress may remember we desired them to send schoolmasters to our Towns to instruct our children; as we think it will be for our mutual interest we request it may be complied with.

It would seem from White Eyes remarks that ignoring campaign promises on the part of the Wise Brethren in Congress is not a matter of recent growth.

The reduction of Detroit, the expedition referred to by White Eyes, was a pet project of Gen. McIntosh and one warmly endorsed by both the Pennsylvania and Virginia authorities, but the difficulties encountered in securing an adequate army and supplies therefor for a march of 300 miles through a hostile and sparsely cultivated country forced its abandonment as later it was abandoned when fathered by Thomas Jefferson and George Rodgers Clark. Had Clark succeeded in raising an army and the needed supplies, Gibson would have been second in command as his release for that service was personally solicited by Jefferson from Baron Steuben, with whom Gibson was hastening along the south bank of the James to intercept Benedict Arnold, who had already burned Richmond.

Gibson succeeded Col. Broadhead in command of the Western Department in 1780 and was himself succeeded in the fall of 1781 by Brig. Gen. Irvine. He served to the end of the war and was promoted to the rank of Brig. General by Congressional resolution Sept. 30th. 1783.

Yorktown surrendered and the Treaty of Paris accomplished Gibson beat his sword into a bung starter and returned to his trade at Pittsburgh which in a few years grew to enormous proportions as witness the following from the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Aug. 20th. 1786.

From the 6th. of July last to the 10th. inst. (a period of 35 days) the following peltry was bought up by one trader in this place and mostly paid for in whiskey and flour, notes and other evidences of debt.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3173</td>
<td>summer deer skins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>bear skins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>wild cat skins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>fall deer skins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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84 beaver skins
14 marten skins
17 wolf skins
67 pairs moccasins

There was no money in the country; the money of the United States was worthless and that of the states of Pennsylvania and Virginia but little better. "Pieces of Eight"—the Spanish milled dollar, had long since disappeared. Trade was by barter and if the hunter and trapper did not take the whole value of his "catch" in supplies he was given a certificate in writing by the Trader acknowledging the number and kind of skins received which certificate passed current as a medium of exchange. Army Quartermasters bought supplies and paid for them with certificates expressed in terms of skins instead of money, as witness the following countersigned by Gibson when in command at Ft. Laurens, Ohio (Bolivar, Ohio).

I do certify that I am indebted to the bearer, Captain Johnny, Seven bucks and one doe for the use of the States, this 12th. day of April, 1779.

Samuel Sample,
Asst. Q. M.

The above is due him for pork for the use of the garrison at Ft. Laurens.

Jno. Gibson, Col.

It has been surmised that the use of the term "wildcat", as applied to various kinds of precarious promotion and financing, had its origin with this use of skins as money, and there is not much question that our present slang word "buck," meaning a dollar, had a similar origin.

In 1910 the Bank of Pittsburgh celebrated its centennial anniversary as the earliest established bank west of the Alleghany mountains, forgetting or ignoring the fact that in 1784 at "Falls of Ohio"—Louisville, Ky.—in a house boat, high and dry on the banks of the river where it had been left by a receding flood, and fastened to a stump with a rope, one John Sanders established a bank, or "Keep," as he called it, as witness the following certificate of deposit:

Know all men by these presents, that Daniel Boone hath deposited six (VI) beaver skins in my keep in good order and of the worth of VI shillings each
skin and i have took from them VI shillings for the keep of them and when they be sold i will pay the ballance of XXX shillings for the whole lot to any person who presents this certificate and delivers it up to me at my Keep, Louisville, Falls of Ohio. May 20th. 1784.

John Sanders

Apparently Banker Sanders understood "bank interest" as well as any of his successors. He had however none of the modern aids to banking; no compulsory reserves; no Bank Examiner to throw out collateral or call for new or better endorsers and incidentally no Federal Reserve Bank to which he could pass the "buck", but it is not recorded that he ever failed to promptly meet all his obligations.

Gibson with Gen. Richard Butler as fellow Commissioner in behalf of Pennsylvania purchased from the Six Nations their title to the "Erie Triangle"—the triangular country jutting into Lake Erie surrounding the City of Erie.

He was a member of the convention which framed the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 and on Aug. 17th. 1791 became one of the Lay Judges of the Courts of Allegheny County. This was the court presided over as Law Judge by the famous Alexander Addison whose controversy with J. B. C. Lucas led to the former's impeachment, trial and conviction before the Senate of Pennsylvania. Lucas afterward removed to St. Louis, Mo., and was appointed Judge of the United District Court. The site of Judge Lucas' old home is now the site of the Carnegie Library and one block from St. Louis' "Congested District". When Judge Lucas built he was warned he was too far out; that the Indians would have his scalp within three months.

Quietly pursuing his trade, but ever loyal to the Government he had helped to establish, the Whiskey Insurrection found Gibson in disfavor with those who led that abortive attempt to destroy that which had cost so much to confirm and he was expelled the country.

Pittsburgh, Aug. 4 1794.

This is to certify to all whom it may concern that the bearer hereof Gen. John Gibson has been directed to depart the country by order of the Committee of the Batallions of Washington, Fayette, West-
moreland and Allegheny Counties assembled at Braddock’s Field the 2nd. inst. which sentence the Committee of Pittsburgh was to carry into effect and to furnish him with a guard to a proper distance. Let him therefore pass in safety and without molestation.

James Clow, Chairman.

Bradford’s flight to the French possessions at the mouth of the Mississippi and the collapse of the Insurrection found Gibson again a trader until 1800 when he was appointed by President Jefferson Secretary of the newly formed Territory of Indiana, in which capacity he remained until Indiana was admitted as a state in 1816. He arrived at Vincennes, the Territorial capital, in July, 1800, and was Acting Governor until the arrival in January, 1801, of William Henry Harrison.

Indiana at that time embraced all of the present states of Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan. Vincennes, the capital, was a long established French town with a newspaper and an academy and was the home of many French of Education and refinement. The Territory boasted only about 5000 whites but was inhabited by numerous and warlike tribes of Indians at the head of which was the renowned Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet and Medicine Man Pemsquatawah.

Gen. Harrison’s frequent and prolonged absences from the capital fighting Indians was the occasion of Gibson being often called upon as Acting Governor. He was now over sixty years of age and his fighting days were over. This did not prevent him from taking an active part in all negotiations with the Indians and he was present during the famous interview between Tecumseh and Harrison. When the Indian Chief angrily interrupted Harrison and turned, to harangue his assembled warriors, Gibson who alone understood Tecumseh’s sinister words, ordered up the guard and prevented a massacre. Similarly he was enabled at 72 years of age to relieve Capt. (afterward President) Zachary Taylor beleaguered at Ft. Harrison. Gibson County, Indiana, is named in his honor.
On admission of Indiana as a state in 1816 Gibson returned to Pittsburgh and his home near Braddock’s Field, where he died April 16th, 1822. His remains lie buried in Allegheny Cemetery, Pittsburgh.

St. Louis, Dec. 12th, 1920.