Some Historical Notes of South-West Pennsylvania

By James Lowry Bowman

(James Lowry Bowman of Brownsville, Fayette County, Pennsylvania, born June 23rd, 1794, at "Nemacolin", the old home of the Bowmans, situated on the site of the "Old Fort", and at a time when the present Brownsville was still quite generally known as "The Redstone Old Fort", was always much interested in the tales of the settlement of "The West". His father, Jacob Bowman, Esq., was an early settler in that region who, by reason of his location at "The Fort" and through his close business and social relations with Colonel Robert Elliott and other pioneers of the Redstone Country, had a large and wide-spread acquaintance with the early settlers hereabout, and much direct knowledge of them. Closely associated with his father all his life as James Lowry Bowman was, he had many opportunities to discuss with his father this interesting subject, and to note the incidents related by his father from time to time in the course of conversation. He also lived early enough to know himself some of the actors in these scenes, and availed himself of every chance to question them whenever he met them. As a result he collected quite a few notes of historic value, and in his day had a reputation locally for his knowledge of his section of the country.

The accompanying notes are taken from a manuscript written in October 1846, and in the handwriting of James Lowry Bowman. More than fifty years ago this manuscript disappeared and was recently found together with some of Mr. Bowman's papers in the Bowman house at Brownsville. In typing it care was taken to make copy just like the original. Part of Mr. Bowman's manuscript was missing, the missing papers having in some way been detached, and I fear lost. Mr. Bowman was evidently not entirely familiar with the history of the Gist family and his failure to place Christopher Gist was probably due to the fact that that gentleman, who was the father of Thomas, Nathaniel and Nancy Gist, passed away according to the best information obtainable, in 1757, in either South Carolina or Georgia. It was Christopher Gist who took up the tract of land at the Western base of the mountains later owned by his children, and his three sons, Thomas, Nathaniel and Richard, all appear to have been with him at the time of Braddock's defeat. It has been stated that Thomas, Nathaniel or Richard, there seems to be some doubt which one, was taken prisoner there by the French and carried to Canada where he was compelled to remain some years. Nathaniel moved on to Kentucky as stated by Mr. Bowman, and became a leader on that frontier. General Washington made him Colonel of one of the Continental regiments during the Revolution and he had a creditable record in that struggle, in which he took active part until taken prisoner by the British at Charleston, South Carolina, 12th May 1780.

His brother, Richard, was killed attacking the British line at the famous fight at Kings Mountain, North Carolina, 7th October 1780.

Thomas Gist, who remained in Pennsylvania, was one of the Justices of the County of Cumberland, west of Laurel Hill, appointed in 1770, and present at a court held at Robert Hanna's Esq.
in October 1773. (See West. Penna. His. Mag. Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 146) I have reason to think he died at some date between 4th of June and 6th of September 1790. Edmond Hayes Bell)

That part of Pennsylvania now embraced within the limits of Fayette County, was visited at a very early period by traders for the purpose of trafficking with the Indians. We have seen it stated somewhere that as early as 1722 persons of that description had a trading house near the mouth of Redstone Creek. The probability is, that it was on the site of the old Fortification where Brownsville now stands. The first successful attempt at a permanent settlement for agricultural purposes was made in 1752 by Thomas Gist, Nathaniel Gist and their sister Nancy Gist, or as they were more familiarly known as Tom, Nat, and Nancy Gist.

The location made by them was immediately at the Western base of Laurel Hill now known as the Mt. Bradford farm. There appears to be some discrepancy in the christian names of one of the above mentioned settlers. The person who was sent by the Ohio Land Co. for the purpose of exploration has been called Christopher Gist. Washington in his journal to Le Beuf invariably names his guide as Mr. Gist. He therein states that “upon his arrival at Wills Creek he met with Mr. Gist who had commenced a settlement the year previous at the western base of the mountains.” In 1754 when Washington was dispatched to the West with a military force he states in his account of that expedition, that Mr. Gist his old Pilot who resided near the crossings of Youghiogheny etc.

In Washington's journal to the Ohio river in 1770 he names him Thomas Gist. There can be little doubt that the Gist who accompanied him in 1753 and the one who gave the army information in 1754 is the same who had made the settlement as above stated. If he was the same person that was employed by the Land Co., and mentioned in the transactions thereof, he is therein misnamed Christopher instead of Thomas. There are persons yet living in the County of Fayette, who well recollect Tom Gist.
An old gentleman who is now living and resides on the Ohio, came to the West in 1770 when a small boy and settled about two miles from the Gists. He stated to the writer in October last that their names were Thomas, Nathaniel and Nancy—that he had frequently been at their home and knew them well. Nat and his sister went together to Kentucky at an early day, when the brother participated in the Indian Wars of that section and became a Col. Thomas never married and died on the tract of land where he first settled. It may be of little consequence to the public at this day, whether his name was Chris or Tom, all must award to him the character of a persevering adventurous man in whom Washington reposed confidence as a safe companion and guide in perilous excursions to the West.

In 1753 Windle Brown made a settlement about four miles South West from Union Town. His location was very near to an Indian village and he became familiar and friendly with the occupants. In 1754 the Indians told him there was going to be war that he had better leave with his family lest they might be killed. He accordingly set out for Wills Creek. In the mountains he met with the approaching army and participated in the engagement of Fort Necessity. In 1756 he returned to his abandoned settlement and made it his residence until his death, fifteen or twenty years ago. His son Adam, though young at the time, had a recollection of the battle, he died a few years ago on the original improvement of his father.

There was a transaction between Windle and the Indians which he and his son Adam frequently related to persons yet living. From their familiarity with the Indians and the proximity of their residence to the village, they had frequently seen the Indians, after an absence of a few days, return with as much lead ore as they were disposed to carry, which was smelted in their fires and then run into bullets. Windle felt disposed to find out from whence it came, and in one of their trips, secretly followed them. In ascending Laurel Hill, they had set down to rest, and the pursuer unexpectedly ap-
proached so near, as to cause his discovery. They were aware of his object and told him he must go back—if he attempted to follow them they would kill him. Fearful of the consequences he reluctantly obeyed. If this be correct, and we believe those acquainted with Windle Brown put full confidence in his story, there must be a quantity of that mineral in our mountain region.

There is also a circumstance relative to silver ore, which has often times been related to me by one of the parties. A boy by the name of McCoy whose father resided near Union Town, but who had spent many of his boyish days with his grandfather old Mr. Slack, who kept a small tavern on the summit of Laurel Hill, on the old road, and was well known to most of the travellers of that day. He had accompanied his grandfather in many of his hunting excursions through the mountains. McCoy in ascending a hill in an excursion of that kind, came across a peculiar kind of stone, the weight of which attracted his attention. Supposing it to contain, from the weight of it, some mineral more valuable than that of iron with which he was familiar, he put a piece into his picket, for the purpose of having it tested on his return to town. Nathaniel Mitchell who was learning the blacksmithing and reputed for ingenuity, was applied to as the associate of McCoy, under an injunction of secrecy, to be the assayer of the piece in his possession about the size of an unhulled walnut. Mitchell succeeded in extracting therefrom silver to the value of 75 cents. It was agreed that McCoy was to conduct Mitchell to the spot, where it was represented to be abundant, they were to secure the title to the land and to be equal participants in the gains arising therefrom. Both being apprentices, had little leisure except on Sundys. The following one was appointed for their journey to the hidden treasure.

It was in the month of August and an exceedingly warm day. They set out together feeling elated with the expectations of accomplishing the desired object. In ascending Laurel Hill McCoy was overheated and became so unwell that he was unable to proceed further. They returned, with the understanding that at a future day
they would proceed thither. McCoy reached the residence of his father with difficulty and a few days thereafter died. Mitchell had no doubt of the existence of the silver ore, and has unsuccessfully traversed the mountains in the direction pointed out by his companion, when about to return from their Sabbath ascension of Laurel hill. The writer had the piece of silver in his possession twenty-five years ago and which he was assured by Mitchell was the same that was extracted from the ore found and presented to him by McCoy.

Mitchell is still living and within the present month (October 1846) has repeated the foregoing account to the writer hereof. He is a man of veracity and no doubt exists as to the existence of this valuable mineral in the mountain tract embraced within the limits of Fayette County. At the last above mentioned interview with Mitchell, he stated that the stone containing the silver which he extracted, had a dull appearance, no shining particles, and would not be suspected, except from the weight for containing mineral.

After the successful campaign of Gen. Forbes in 1758 the voluntary abandonment of Fort Duquesne by the French and its occupancy by the British troops, less danger was apprehended from the Indians, inasmuch as the few troops therein stationed intimidated the Savages and prevented their incursions to this section—fearful that their retreat might be cut off. It is certain, murders were committed on the South West side and at the head of the Monongahela river long after that period, but the inroads were made by a more Southern route crossing the Ohio below Wheeling and reaching this district by the head waters of the river and the tributaries putting in from the Southwest.

From 1760 to 1770 a number of settlements were made, the names of some of the prominent ones I give below,—some of whom afterwards became somewhat conspicuous in their endeavors for the subjugation of the Western Indians. The first settlers were from Virginia because they supposed they would still be within the limits of that state and were not undeceived until the line was
run. The history of the controversy between the colonies of Pennsylvania and Virginia for Territorial limits has been ably and satisfactorily given by the Editor in the October No. of the Olden Times. It was natural that the locations and improvements of the early settlers should approximate each other as closely as circumstances would permit in order that they might aid and assist in their labours and more easily concentrate their forces in case of an hostile attack by the Indians.

The early settlements made by the Gists at the place where Braddock descended from Laurel hill into the valley and the road opened by his army from thence to the crossing of Yough, had their influences in causing the first settlements to be made in that quarter. William Crawford, afterward the unfortunate commander of the forces sent against the Sandusky towns and his half brothers, the Stevensons or Stinsons as they were called, made their settlements at the crossings before mentioned. These persons were the playmates of Washington and were even competitors in the athletic exercises of that day. He had a great regard for them and made the house of Col. Crawford his home in his visits to the West. Near by George Paull, Col. Isaac Meason, Thomas Rogers and Joseph Torrance made their settlements and not very far distant the family of Girtys—Notwithstanding the sociability and friendship which is conspicuous in new settlements, the family of Girtys were looked upon with suspicion and not welcomed to the hilarity gatherings of the neighborhood. After events showed that it was not without cause. The history of the treacherous conduct of Simon Girty is familiar to almost every school boy. Rheuben his brother was strongly suspected of dishonest acts. They found themselves so unacceptable in their intercourse with their neighbors and probably smitten with a guilty conscience, that they abandoned their small improvements and removed hence to the waters of Chartier's Creek. The cause of the abandonment of the whites by Simon Girty and his adherence to the Indians we have never seen noticed.

Mr. Jno. Dawson who died in Oct. 1845 at Urbana,
Ohio at the advanced age of 97 years and 8 months, has stated to a relative of his that he was stationed at Fort Pitt in the year 1775 when Simon took his departure to the Indians. It appears that Girty had obtained a subordinate commission in a Virginia Regiment and upon the death of an officer higher in grade he claimed promotion. That Girty was unpopular with the officers and men, and a representation having been made to the commissioning power, Girty was superseded by the promotion of another. Girty was greatly displeased and swore he would be revenged—a few days after he sought an opportunity to disappear and never returned. After the treaty of Greenville, this renegade took refuge in Canada where he lived to the advanced age of nearly one hundred years. One of his sons became the high Sheriff of a County in upper Canada. In 1809 a gentleman of Kentucky visited that part of Canada where Girty resided and called to see him. Girty appeared to be penitent, shed tears, and expressed sorrow for his abandonment of Country and friends.

Jacob and Henry Beeson, Philip Shute, Samuel and Alexander McLean selected the vicinity of where Union Town stands for their respective locations. Col. Jno. Hardin, Mark Hardin and another brother with their families chose the southern part of the county on the waters of George’s Creek. It is still known as the Hardin settlements. When the tide of emigration was flowing to Kentucky one of the brothers went thither and conspicuously participated in the trouble there. He was the ancestor of Col. Ben Hardin.

Capt. Cresap had secured from Virginia the title to the tract of land on which old Redstone Fort and Fort Burd were built, having made some improvement thereon, disposed of his claim to Thos. and Basil Brown, they with their relatives, the Brashears were early settlers, also Andrew and John Linn, the latter of whom was a distinguished Indian fighter and a Capt. of the spies.

Samuel Jackson settled at the mouth of Redstone creek and a mile below had for his neighbors William Forsythe and two miles distant therefrom, on the waters of little Redstone Creek were Mrs. Ann Hutten, her son-
in-law Capt. Macgruder and their relatives William Goe and Richard Noble. This connection of settlers were from Maryland and possessing means were enabled to fix themselves comfortably and live in a stile different from most cf new settlers. They either took up or purchased the tomahawk rights of several valuable tracts and having brought with them some twenty or thirty negro slaves, were enabled in a short time to make large openings. Capt. Macgruder erected previous to the Revolution on a small stream which passed through his farm, a powder mill, from which the inhabitants were supplied for a time with that necessary appendage without resorting to the East of the mountains. Mrs. Hutten and Capt. Macgruder died previous to the year 1800. Mr. Goe lived; to the advanced age of 98 years. He came from the immediate neighborhood of Baltimore and has told the writer that he recollected when the ground now occupied by that City contained but a few fishermens' huts, to which the people of the adjacent country resorted for their supply of fresh shad and herring.

In 1768 Josiah and James Crawford selected a large body of fine lands on the Monongahela river five miles above the Old Fort and Alexander Davidson six miles above them on the same stream. The Virginians—Arnolds and Conwells—came in intermediately. Thos. Scott who was imprisoned by Connolly for acting as an officer under the authority of Pennysyl. (see Octr. No. of Olden Times) was in that neighborhood.

In 1769 George Clark purchased the tomahawk right to a tract of one thousand acres on the waters of Little Red Stone Creek five miles East of the Old Fort for the consideration of a small horse and a quart of rum. He settled on the tract and subsequently subdivided it amongst his five sons.

In 1769 Nicholas Dawson and the succeeding year his brother John Dawson and their connections of the same name came to the West and located near Gists.

In 1770 Gen. Washington made an exploration trip to the West accompanied by his friend Doct. Craik. He lodged at Col. Crawford’s by whom he was accompanied to Kenhaway.
At that time he examined the tract of sixteen hundred acres which had previously been "taken up" for him by his friend Col. Crawford. It is still known as Washington's bottoms. It is on the Yough, and occupied in part by the town of Perryopolis. When he made the trip to Venango in 1753 it is more than probable that he passed over this tract of land as it is nearly in the direct line from Gists to Fort Duquesne, if so he was doubtless pleased with its quality and level appearance contrasted with the mountain region, which he had before passed over, and when the proper time arrived had it secured for him by Col. Crawford. Soon after his return to Virginia in 1770 he sent out Gilbert Simpson with a few negroes to make an improvement on it. The house built by Simpson is still standing. This tract of land he owned for some years and disposed of it to Col. Shreve who was known to him during the Revolutionary war as the commander of a N. Jersey Regiment. James Ross, Esq. of Pittsburgh was the agent of Washington. His object in the disposal of it was to meet expenses over an above his salary during his Presidency, and in his letters to his agent, he complained of the want of punctuality on the part of the purchaser. Doubtless Mr. Ross has now letters to that purport in his possession.

Washington also secured the tract of land on which Fort Necessity was built and therein was exemplified his foresight and good judgment. In the proper note to the schedule of his property he states this tract to be valuable on account of its location and suitableness as a public stand. It has always been and is now valuable for that very purpose, and as such has been occupied being a convenient exchange stand ten miles East of Union Town.

As everything relating to that great and good man is interesting I will relate an incident relative to the same tract of land. In the schedule of his property and the value thereof, this tract is appraised by him at fourteen hundred and four dollars. After his decease, it was purchased by a gentleman who subsequently failed, and at the disposition of his property by a forced sale, about the
year 1816, without concert on the part of bidders this tract was bid off for a sum, within a few dollars of the value set upon it by Washington.

In 1774 Simon Kenton and George Rogers Clark came to the west and were sojourning with their friends, the Stinsons and Crawford, when the Northern division of Dunmore's army crossed the mountains. They united themselves to a company of volunteers raised in the neighborhood, commanded by Capt. Minser and participated in that campaign, both of whom afterwards became conspicuous leaders in the Indian warfare of the West.

The first improvement on the West side of the Monongahela river, immediately opposite Redstone Fort was made by Indian Peter. He was a full Indian and had taken unto him Polly Baffington, a white woman for a wife. This Indian was something of a land speculator having "taken up" surveyed and warranted several well selected tracts of land. When his kindred and those of his tribe found it necessary to go westward, Peter chose to remain on his tract of land, which he had improved by the erection of a cabin and the clearing of a few acres, these he cultivated by his own labour and that of a negro slave, whom he had purchased. He had his domestic animals about him, and when disposed to have fresh pork, he would go into the woods, shoot one of his hogs and when secured to the tail of his poney would thus drag it to his cabin. Peter has been represented by those who were personally acquainted, to possess strong natural abilities. He certainly evinced a good deal of foresight in the selection of his land, and very well knew how to have the lines so run, as to embrace within, the largest portion of acceptable land. He died about the year 1780 and his wife some years after.

(To be continued)