The Historic Pittsburgh Point

By William H. Stevenson

"The Point" is the triangular shaped piece of land between the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers where they unite their waters to form the Ohio, which the French named the LaBelle River or the "Beautiful River." The spot is well named not only because of its physical shape, the land there tapering to the end of a triangle, but also because it was the point or place where great historic events culminated which changed the destiny of this great nation.

The Indians, we know, definitely were the first to settle on or near the Point. Probably they were preceded by the Mound Builders of whom some evidence is thought to have been found at McKees Rocks a short distance below the Point. We do know that the Indians had a village or settlement at Shannopin's Town on the Southeast side of the Allegheny about two miles above the Point and no doubt visited the latter.

In 1748 Conrad Weiser was sent by the Governor of Pennsylvania as a messenger to the Indians on the Ohio at their request and he probably saw the Point. On this visit he found George Croghan had established a trading post at the mouth of the Beaver and he had also probably seen the Point. The next year Celeron sailed down the Allegheny River, planting plates at various places, claiming the territory west of the Allegheny for France. He, however, did not see the Point, although he passed it and entered the Ohio, for his canoe passed beyond Smoky Island, which was opposite the Point and near the Allegheny or North Side of the River and so he missed the confluence of the two rivers, the Monongahela and the Allegheny. Had he noted the Point he would doubtless have stopped and buried one of his metal plates.

In 1748 the Ohio Land Company was formed in Virginia to take up 500,000 acres of land for the Ohio. George

A paper read at the October 25th, 1927 meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
Washington’s brother Lawrence was a member of this company. In 1749 there were a number of English traders in this vicinity. In 1750 Christopher Gist blazed the trail over the mountains from Virginia, following the Potomac, the Juniata, Kiskiminetas down the Allegheny into the Ohio below the Point. The next year he repeated his trip to the Point and to Logs Town on the Ohio. In 1752 the dispute began between Virginia and Pennsylvania as to the ownership of the Point and the whole of Western Pennsylvania.

In November and December 1753, George Washington and Christopher Gist with five attendants visited the Point on their way to deliver the message to the French at Venango, from Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia, ordering them to quit the country. The French with a view of dominating all the territory west of the Alleghenies had begun to establish a line of forts from Lake Erie down the Allegheny and the Ohio. They realized that the possession of these streams and of the Mississippi would give them control of the vast Mississippi and of the vast empire west of the Allegheny. Washington delivered his message at Fort Le Bouef, now Waterford, Erie County, Pennsylvania. On the site of this fort the Pennsylvania State Historical Commission and the citizens of Waterford and Erie Counties dedicated the only statue there is of Washington portraying him as a young man and arrayed in the uniform of a Virginia Colonel.

On returning from Fort LeBoeuf Washington made a providential escape from drowning when he and Christopher Gist were crossing the Allegheny River about two miles from the Point. Today the “Washington Crossing Bridge,” so named by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, an imposing and beautiful structure built by the City of Pittsburgh, commemorates this journey fraught with hardships and danger.

The journey to Fort LeBoeuf was the first public service of Washington’s long and notable career and the incidents in that journey through the wilderness furnish the most thrilling and dramatic chapters in the romantic history of our early settlements linking the life of Pittsburgh inseparably with the early life of the nation’s greatest hero.
In speaking of his visit to the Point, Washington in his *Journal* said:

"The excessive raining and vast quantities of snow which had fallen prevented our reaching Mr. Frazier's at the mouth of Turtle Creek on the Monongahela river till Thursday the 22nd (November). We are informed here that expresses had been sent a few days before to the traders down the river to acquaint them with the French General's death and the return of the major part of the French army into winter quarters. The waters were quite impassable without swimming our horses which obliged us to get the loan of a canoe from Frazier and to send Barnaby Currin and Henry Steward down the Monongahela with our baggage, to meet us at the forks of the Ohio, about ten miles below, there to cross the Allegheny. As I got down before the canoe I spent some time in viewing the rivers, and the land in the forks, which I think extremely well situated for a fort, as it has the absolute command of both rivers. The land at the point is about twenty-five feet above the common surface of the water, and a considerable bottom of flat well timbered land all around it very convenient for building."

The Point, it should be remarked, at the time of Washington's visit was in all probability considerably further back from the spot which we now designate as the Point. At that time there was not only Smoky Island in the Allegheny River opposite it but also an island at the mouth of the Monongahela River upon which wheat was raised as late as 1800. The currents therefore of both the Allegheny and Monongahela were divided by the islands and probably their waters covered more land at the Point than at present. Where the Point then was Washington says was about 25 feet above the common surface of the water and thus the place occupied a much more commanding situation than the present Point. The elimination of the two islands and the filling up of land so as to extend the Point has altered the conditions from former days.

Washington's visit, as is well known, was quickly followed by the attempt of the Ohio Land Company to occupy this district. On February 17, 1754, 40 men in the company's employ under the command of Captain William Trent, of the family after which Trenton, New Jersey, was named, began to erect a fort at the Point. This was not completed when on April 17 of that year, Captain Contrecouer with a large force of French Canadians and Indians equipped with artillery sailed down the Allegheny River and completed the surrender of the garrison without the firing of a shot. Washington tried to take the fort with a force from Virginia, but after surprising and defeating
Jumonville, he was compelled to surrender to the superior force of the French at Fort Necessity on July 4, 1754. Then Braddock tried to take the fort at the Point, which the French had finished and called Fort Duquesne, but he met with disaster on July 9, 1755, on the site of the present Borough of Braddock.

For three years the French possessed the Point. In 1758 General John Forbes organized an army of about 7,000 to take it. His advance guard under Major James Grant suffered an ignominious defeat on the present site of the Allegheny County Court House, within less than a mile of the Point, on September 14, 1758. On October 12, 1758, the hitherto uniformly victorious French and Indians suffered their first defeat at Loyal Hanna, or Fort Ligioner where they were signally repulsed by Pennsylvania, Virginia and their Colonial troops commanded by Colonel James Burd of Pennsylvania. This settled the fate of the Point, as the Indians deserted the French. General Forbes marched in without the firing of hostile shot from Fort Ligonier to Fort Duquesne, which he found abandoned and in flames.

The British flag was raised by Colonel Armstrong in the presence of Colonel George Washington and General Forbes. The same day General Forbes fittingly named the place Fort Pitt, or Pittsburgh, in honor of the great Englishman, William Pitt, whose genius conceived the conquest of the Point. A new fort named Pitt was erected by the direction of Forbes a short distance from the site of Fort Duquesne and a British garrison placed in it. Thus was established the domination of the Anglo-Saxon race over the vast territory between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi, a fact which makes the point forever one of the most historic places in the world. Our great historian, George Bancroft, writing of the capture of Fort Duquesne and the making of the place in honor of William Pitt, says: "As long as the Monongahela and Allegheny shall flow to form the Ohio, as long as the English tongue shall be the language of freedom in the boundless valleys which their waters traverse, his name shall stand inscribed upon the gateway of the West."

Thus at the Point, as we have seen, the destiny of this Nation was changed in 1758, but again the Point
figures prominently in a great national event. In 1763 the great Indian chief Pontiac conceived the idea of driving all the whites from the whole territory between the Mississippi and the Alleghenies and almost succeeded in his attempt. Only Detroit and Fort Pitt at the "Point" resisted the assaults of his warriors. Fort Pitt, then commanded by the gallant Swiss Captain Ecuyer, was closely besieged in June and July 1763, but was finally relieved almost at the last moment by the decisive victory of Colonel Henry Bouquet on August 5th and 6th, 1763, at Bushy Run, about twenty-five miles east of the "Point." The holding of the latter assured that white civilization and not savagery would dominate the country from the Allegheny to the Mississippi, and thus again the destiny of the nation was greatly affected by the events centering at this spot.

In 1774 the dispute between Virginia and Pennsylvania as to the possession of Western Pennsylvania culminated at the Point by the Virginians taking possession of Fort Pitt and naming it Fort Dunmore, after their governor. The Revolutionary War, however, settled this dispute amicably as the chief advocates of Virginia's claim were Tories and when these left Fort Pitt, it was restored to Pennsylvania. Thus at the Point another decision of importance was made.

It was only about 30 miles from the Point at Hennastown that what is claimed to have been the first Declaration of Independence was made. From Fort Pitt at the Point General George Rogers Clark secured munitions which aided him in conquering the Illinois country from the French and thus assured the extension of the boundaries of our new nation to the Mississippi.

Only about a half mile east of the Point about 1790 was erected Fort Fayette, where General Anthony Wayne started to organize his legion which signally defeated the Northwestern Indians at the battle of Fallen Timbers and secured the Northwestern territory for the United States after Harmar and St. Clair had been signally defeated by the savage; and so again the destiny of these United States was changed by events which centered at the Point.

Then came the Whiskey Insurrection which tested for the first time the strength of the new Constitution of the
United States, the most stirring events of which centered at the Point and its nearby neighborhood. The promptness with which the government dealt with this incipient rebellion by sending a large military force into the affected region and arresting the insurrectionists had a salutary effect. It taught a lesson of obedience to recognized authority and stabilized law and order in the little town at the "Point" and throughout the frontier.

The Point figured largely in the development of the Western country. Here ended the Braddock and Forbes Roads, the great highways for travel between the East and the West, and here began the great waterway of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers down which the chief wave of emigration went for years. And here, let me say, the waterways of the Nation engaged the earnest attention of George Washington, who was the chief advocate of the use and improvement of our rivers and the construction of canals in his day. During his journey to the French forts he saw the Potomac, Wills Creek, the Youghiogheny, the Monongahela, the upper Ohio and the Allegheny, and through these streams had the vision of connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the rivers at the "Point."

In 1811 at Pittsburgh on the Monongahela about a half mile from the Point, the "New Orleans," the first steamboat to ply the Western rivers, was constructed by Nicholas Roosevelt of the firm of Fulton, Livingston and Roosevelt and in November of that year it made a voyage to New Orleans. In 1911 the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania celebrated the centennial of this event by securing from Pittsburgh's City Council and Mayor an appropriation to build a replica of the boat which repeated the voyage of its namesake between Pittsburgh and New Orleans in November of that year. The original New Orleans, built, as we have said, near the Point, inaugurated the great steamboat traffic on the western rivers which has continued with some interruptions ever since and which now, with the completion of the improvement of the Ohio River, gives promise of becoming very much larger than ever before.

I need not enlarge on the story of the great city of Pittsburgh which owed its beginning to the first settlement at the Point. As is well known, it has been the chief center
of the great iron, steel and coal industries and the greatest freight tonnage in the world originates in the district of which it is the metropolis.

In the war of 1812 the cannon and ammunition with which Perry won the battle of Lake Erie were largely made about a half-mile from the Point. Many soldiers sailed from the Point down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to join our forces in the Mexican War. In 1856 in the old LaFayette Hall within a half mile of the Point, the first National Convention of the Republican party was held, and five years later Abraham Lincoln, on his way to be inaugurated, spoke from the portico of the Monongahela House, almost within sight of the Point. In December, 1860, the citizens of Pittsburgh prevented the removal of the cannon and ammunition from the arsenal to the South and during the Civil War the city did great service in providing the men and munitions and building gun boats for the Union cause. In the Spanish American War and in the World War the citizens of the country surrounding the Point did their full duty and among other things provided nearly fifty per cent of the munitions made in this country during the last-named conflict. So you will see that the Point and the people settled near it had an important influence in forming the destiny of this Nation both in its earlier and its latter days. But it is not only in material things for which the community around the Point has been distinguished. Here were established great theological seminaries, the Western University of Pennsylvania, now the University of Pittsburgh, and the Carnegie Technical Institute. Here originated the great Carnegie Library System; here, the great art museum. Here also music has been cultivated and the songs of Stephen Collins Foster, born within two miles of the Point, are the folk lore of the world.

I have said enough to show you that the Point is a spot of great interest where mighty deeds were accomplished which led to the birth of the nation. The "Point" deserves to rank first in importance with the other three great places of historic interest in Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence was made and the Constitution of the United States formed; Valley Forge, where the crisis of the Revolution was passed; and Gettysburg, where it was decided that this nation should not be divided but should remain one and inseparable forever.