THE VENANGO TRAIL IN THE FRENCH CREEK VALLEY

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If you journey from the city of Franklin to the city of Erie, Pennsylvania, by the Lakes-to-Sea Highway, you will very nearly follow one of the ancient trails of the country. These trails or paths, possibly made by the game of the region in their semi-annual migrations, were used by the aborigines in the dim past in passing from one part of the country to another. The paths generally followed convenient valleys and easy elevations at the divides. Several connected the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes area with the Ohio Valley. Of these not the least important was the one from Presqu'Isle on Lake Erie to Venango (now Franklin) by the way of Lac Le Bœuf and the Venango River (French Creek). It was known as the Venango Trail.

Little is known today as to the exact location of this trail, but from the records of the French and those of the English officers and of the pioneers certain definite sites on it can be identified, and the intervening country over which the path ran can be judged by the topography of the land and the estimated distances between known locations.

During the five or six years that the French occupied the country, the trail was undoubtedly used, as well as French Creek, for the transportation of troops and supplies. After the evacuation by the French, the English garrisoned the important posts, and they also used the trail as well as the stream for the transportation of troops and supplies. In a letter to General Monckton of July 9, 1760, Colonel Henry Bouquet says: "No Body without exception knows any thing of the Country, or distances, except the Indians, who have been constantly drunken.

1 This paper was read by the author, a resident of Meadville, on July 15, 1932, during the historical tour conducted by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the summer session of the University of Pittsburgh. Ed.
The Path is very narrow, full of fallen Trees, and requires many repairs to make it passable." Under date of July 13, 1760, the same writer says: "The stockadoe Fort here [Venango] is burnt to the ground, and the few Huts round it pulled down. No Iron to be seen but a few trifles. The saw mill is hardly worth repairing. The two saws are gone, and the Dam fallen down."

George Croghan in his journal under date of July 12, 1760, gives the earliest picture that we have of Venango: "Venango is situate in a large fine Bottom, on the bank of the Ohio, the food all Clover & Wild Timothy, the works are all destroyed except the Saw mill which is standing, but that appears as if it would be attended with as much trouble to repair it as to build a new one." The testimony of Major Washington and of Christopher Gist, as well as that of Colonel Bouquet and Captain Croghan, fixes the point of Venango on the Venango Trail. By the evidence of the same people, we find that the trail crossed French Creek a little above its mouth. On July 13, 1760, Croghan recorded in his journal: "Crossed French Creek a little above the Mouth, and Marched....Sixteen Miles to Custaloga's Town, which is situate near French Creek in a Pleasant Savanna, fine Land all about it, well Timbered and Watered....In this Town is about 40 Houses, and when all are at home, there is about 120 fighting Men." The site of Custaloga's Town was near French Creek on Deer Creek, not far from the present village of Carlton in Mercer County. It is the writer's opinion that the Venango Trail, after crossing French Creek a short distance above the present city of Franklin to the east bank, went up the valley, crossed Sugar Creek near its mouth, and from there crossed by the shortest way to a point near French Creek about where the village of Carlton is. From this point north, the trail probably very nearly followed the location of the present highway as far as Meadville. On July 14, 1760, Croghan, at Custaloga's Town, entered in his journal: "Colonel Bouquet and the Troops Marched by the Town, with whom I went up the Creek about two Miles to a Six Nation Village and Returned at Night." This location was undoubtedly about the position of the present town of Cochranton. Croghan recorded in

* Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, fourth series, 9: 265, 268 (Boston, 1871).
his journal on July 15 that he left Custaloga's Town after the conference and with Colonel Mercer "marched Two Miles to a Six Nation Village where we Encamped." On July 16 he "decamped early and passed by another Six Nation Village and from thence through a tolerable good Country, Seventeen Miles, to where we crossed French Creek." The Six Nation village referred to was undoubtedly Cussewago, and it is certain that Croghan crossed French Creek at the point that Christopher Gist designates as the big crossing. In the writer's opinion, this crossing of French Creek by the Venango Trail was at a convenient ford about where the present town of Venango is situated, or a little above. Under date of July 17 the journal of Captain Croghan continues: "Decamped early and Marched through a Swampy Country and a Bad Road, to Le Beauf, Thirteen Miles."

The points mentioned in Christopher Gist's journal, as well as the points designated by Captain Croghan, fix the approximate location of the Venango Trail in the French Creek Valley. Christopher Gist says in his diary of 1753 that after encamping at Sugar Creek, five miles from Venango, he set out on Saturday, December 8, "and travelled twenty-five miles to Cussewago, an old Indian town." This town was undoubtedly the present site of Meadville. On Sunday, December 9: "we set out, left one of our horses here that could travel no further. This day we travelled to the big crossing, about fifteen miles, and encamped, our Indians went to look out logs to make a raft; but as the water was high, and there were other creeks to cross, we concluded to keep up this side the creek." At the big crossing because of the high water Washington's party left the Venango Trail and proceeded to the French fort on the east side of French Creek. Assuming that the big crossing was at about the present location of the town of Venango, the next day's journey of the Washington party, December 10, would have taken them in eight miles about to the crossing of the "very deep" creek (undoubtedly what we now know as Muddy Creek). From this point on the eleventh the party traveled about fifteen miles to the French fort. The distance from Muddy Creek to Le Bœuf


is approximately fifteen miles. Colonel Henry Bouquet in a letter to General Monckton, written from Presqu' Isle on August 15, 1760, inclosed a rough draft of the wild territory with the route from Fort Pitt to Presqu' Isle outlined, showing the trail on the west side of French Creek from Custaloga's Town to Fort Le Bœuf, although a path is also marked on the east side of French Creek. In a letter of July 14, 1760, to Monckton, the colonel gives the position of his command, composed of Royal Americans and Virginia militia, as near the Mingo Town on Beef River, and states that he has marched 104 miles from Fort Pitt and that he is yet 39 miles distant from Presqu' Isle. This location indicates that his position was about at the Indian town of Cussewago, shown on the Washington map on the east side of French Creek (approximately the location of the present town of Meadville). The reference to the French Creek as "Beef River" is one of two the writer has found. The first use of the name "French Creek" known to the writer is in the entry of December 4, 1760, in the diary of Major Washington. Washington so designates the stream on the map of which he was undoubtedly the author, which accompanied the report to England of his expedition to Fort Le Beuf, and which was eventually deposited in the British Museum. An earlier map executed in 1749 by Father Bonnecamps, a Jesuit priest with Celoron's expedition to the Ohio Valley, names what we know as French Creek as La Rivière aux Bœufs. The Indians called the stream the Venango, and so it was designated by the English. The stream therefore would seem to have the distinction of having been named "French Creek" by Major George Washington.

In a letter from Colonel Bouquet to General Monckton, written from Fort Pitt on March 20, 1761, the colonel says: "Beef River would be one of the best Communications if cleared of the Loggs & Trees; But they are so intangled & heaped in some narrow Places, & the Channel so deep there, that it would require a great number of hands to do it effectually, as it continues from Place to Place for about 50 miles ... the Trees ... will be daily falling in & form new obstructions ... the best way for this year will be to open only the Beaver dams, & a narrow channel for one Batteau." 5 Only one acquainted

5 Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, fourth series, 9: 396.
with primeval forests can picture the giant trees, usually water maples and sycamores, weighted down by a luxuriant mass of vines, creepers, and mosses that cover the valleys of the northern Ohio and its tributaries—conditions readily making obstructions in river channels. The writer's father well remembered a drift pile on the channel back of Cussewago Island as high as a house and perhaps two acres in extent.

General David Mead, the first permanent settler in the French Creek Valley, said that the old Indian trail followed about what is now Water Street in the city of Meadville—it followed the east bank of French Creek north to what was known as the Great Crossing, then the west bank to Lac Le Bœuf, and crossed the divide to Presqu' Isle on Lake Erie.

Among the noted valleys of America none surpasses French Creek Valley in pastoral beauty or in historic interest. Today its upper reaches surround rich farms with woodland, meadow, and cultivated field, and the sources of the stream spring from six glacial lakelets. Geologists say that French Creek with its valley is very young and that it was born since the receding of the last ice cap from the continent. Major George Washington, evidently impressed by the scenery in this wilderness, recorded in his diary, "We passed over much good Land since we left Venango, and through several extensive and very rich Meadows; one of which...was near four Miles in Length, and considerably wide in some Places." He thought the open meadows of sufficient importance to record on his map, where they may be seen designated by dotted lines. The writer believes that the site of Meadville and Cussewago Island was on one of the extensive open spaces.

The old Venango Trail was sufficient for the few Indian travelers, war parties, the lonely Jesuit, and the trapper. All the French traffic including the supplies for the erection of the forts at Venango, as well as of Fort Duquesne, either went over the trail or was floated down the stream in the valley. In 1760 when the English garrisoned the forts at Venango, Le Bœuf, Presqu' Isle, and Detroit, they carried their supplies, munitions, and provisions for the permanent forces over the old

Correspondence of the British officers indicates that detachments of troops were frequently traveling the trail from Fort Pitt to Presqu’ Isle conveying live stock and provisions for the garrisons for considerably over a year.

Paths followed by the Indian and the pioneer were well located. In later days the first permanent settlers constructed rude roads, often following the ancient courses; and finally in the days of advanced civilization railroads and modern improved highways find the general direction of the old trails most convenient to follow. The Venango Trail carried George Washington to the farthest point northwest he ever reached in this country. We are indebted to him for one of the earliest detailed maps of the territory, as well as for the complete diary of his expedition to Le Bœuf in November and December, 1753. His account of the expedition, with the supplemental details furnished by Christopher Gist’s diary, enables us to identify several points on the path.7

The country over which the Venango Trail passes was very rich in fur-bearing animals and abundant with game. Brooks abounded with trout — French Creek and its tributaries and lakes were haunts for the sturgeon, muskellunge, bass, and other food fish. Elk, deer, buffalo, bear, wild turkey, grouse, and countless passenger pigeons furnished Indians and pioneers with food. In the earliest known time, this territory was the hunting ground of the Indians belonging to the Erie and Kahkwas tribes, and after the extermination of these bands by the warlike Iroquois the latter made it their hunting preserve.

No road in this country crosses a more extensive or important battlefield than the old Venango Trail. The mythical Alligewi perhaps drove out the mythical mound builders, only to be conquered in turn by the western tribes which afterwards formed the confederation known as the Six Nations. Unknown races, tribes of red men, French, English, and early American colonists were in bitter strife over possession of this rich territory. In historic times it has been under the dominion of the Six Nations, the French and English empires, and finally the United States. Virginia, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania claimed it.

7 Information concerning the 1753 journals of Washington and Gist may be found in Lawrence A. Orrill, “Christopher Gist,” ante, 15: 193, 194, note 6, 202, note 31.
Warriors, traders, pioneers, explorers, and statesmen have all passed through this territory and over the Venango Trail. The first expedition of which we have a detailed record is that of the party of sixteen who accompanied Major George Washington from Venango (Franklin) to Le Bœuf in December, 1753. Captain La Force, the commissary of French stores at Venango and one of the party accompanying Washington to Le Bœuf, appeared the following spring at the first engagement in the French and Indian War, where he was taken prisoner by Colonel Washington and sent to Virginia. John Davidson, the Indian interpreter of Washington's party, was with General Braddock at the time of his defeat, and the following year appeared at a council at Philadelphia, where he testified relative to the Indians in that campaign. Captain Jacob Van Braam, another of the party, was with Washington at Fort Necessity. Chief Tanacharison, the Half-King, one of the four Indians with the expedition, was with Colonel Washington in the campaigns of 1754. The Hunter, so designated in Washington's diary, was Guyasuta, an Iroquois. It was he, evidently, who killed the five bears on the trip from Venango to Le Bœuf. After Braddock's defeat, this chieftain supported the French. He led the Indian forces at the time of the diastrous defeat of Major Grant's detachment on September 12, 1758. He was a personal friend and a co-conspirator of Pontiac's, and possibly led the Indians at the burning of the forts at Venango, Le Bœuf, and Presqu' Isle in 1763. George Washington met Guyasuta for the last time in October, 1770, at the mouth of the Muskingum River. On that occasion Guyasuta presented Colonel Washington and Colonel William Crawford (for whom Crawford County was named) with a quarter of buffalo. He died about the end of the eighteenth century and was buried at Custaloga's Town on the west side of French Creek in Mercer County.

Christopher Gist, one of the ablest and most experienced of the explorers of the country west of the Allegheny Mountains, a surveyor, of good education for the times in which he lived, and a rugged frontiersman, was secured by Major Washington as a guide for this important expedition. Washington had become well acquainted with him at the time he was engaged in the services of the Ohio Company. He was
the chief scout for General Braddock's army and was present at the time of defeat. His descendants became very prominent in the affairs of Kentucky. Montgomery Blair, a great-grandson, who became an eminent lawyer, was counsel for the defendant in the noted Dred Scott Case and was appointed postmaster-general in Lincoln's cabinet. The foregoing were some of the men who shared the hardships of the Venango Trail in Major Washington's expedition.

General Contrecoeur of the French army led an expedition into this territory in April, 1754, to erect Fort Machault at Venango and Fort Duquesne at the forks of the Ohio. He embarked about the middle of April on the flood waters at Lac Le Boeuf with twelve hundred men in three hundred canoes and eighty bateaux, in which were carried all munitions and impedimenta for the erection of the forts. For several years following, close communication was kept between Forts Duquesne and Presqu' Isle and supplies and dispatches were constantly on the trail and on the river between these points. At the termination of the French and Indian War, when the posts were occupied by the British, constant communication was kept between them, and prominent English officers, including Colonel Bouquet, Colonel Mercer, Major Rogers, and Captain Campbell, were frequently on the old trail.

John Fraser, who conducted the first trading post in this territory at the old Indian town of Venango, must have been personally familiar with the old trail, for his lucrative and large trade came principally from the French Creek Valley. Captain George Croghan, next to Sir William Johnson, was the most prominent Indian commissioner in the colonies. His extensive knowledge of the character of the Indians, as well as his tact in managing and treating them, gave him a wonderful influence and led to his being intrusted with many delicate missions in colonial times. In his long career he acquired large tracts of land and at one time had an Indian title to most of the land in the French Creek Valley. Croghan's frequent trips into Indian country caused him to make many excursions over the old trail. He was a friend of Washington's, and on one occasion entertained him at Croghan Hall on his estate near Fort Pitt.

Cornplanter, Pontiac, Guyasuta, Flying Cloud, Custaloga, Wire Ears,
Twenty Canoes, and other Indian chieftains undoubtedly traveled the old trail. General David Mead and his hardy followers traveled the Venango Trail from the fort at Venango, at that time known as Fort Franklin, when he made the first permanent settlement in this country north of Pittsburgh and west of the Alleghenies on the twelfth of May, 1788, at the place known as Cussewago, which afterwards, in memory of the founder, bore the name of Meadville. Among the first to travel the trail after Mead's settlement were Andrew Ellicott, the astronomer, and General Irvine, who laid out the towns of Waterford, Erie, Franklin, Mercer, and Warren. In 1791 Chateaubriand, the celebrated French statesman and author, passed through the French Creek Valley and Cussewago on his way to Pittsburgh. There is a strong probability that in the summer of 1794 the famous French statesman and diplomat, Prince de Talleyrand, traveled through the valley on the way from the Ohio to the Genesee in New York, in company with Mr. Jan Huidekoper, the oldest brother of Mr. Harm Jan Huidekoper, later the agent of the Holland Land Company in Meadville. John James Audubon rode down the Venango Trail in 1824 and stopped for a three days' visit in the village of Meadville; and the next year on the second of June the village was in gala attire to welcome the nation's hero, General Lafayette, who traveled through the valley.

During the War of 1812, Meadville was made the mobilization point for the militia from northwestern Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. After a few months' training, all these troops marched over the trail to take their position in defense of the Niagara frontier. In the early summer of the year 1817 Joseph Bonaparte, once king of Naples, afterwards king of Spain, brother of the great Napoleon, with a retinue of attendants in wagons and carriages is supposed to have passed along this highway. General Anthony Wayne, who led the last campaign in the East against the Indian forces, did not follow the old Venango road on the march to the West; but, after making the Treaty of Greenville in 1795 with the Indians, he started on his homeward journey and was taken sick at Presqu' Isle, now Erie, where he died and was buried.

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8 From an address by the late Andrew White McCullough, September 29, 1905, at the Centennial of the Mt. Nebo Church, Butler County, Pennsylvania.
In 1808 his son, Isaac, with two slaves, went to Erie, exhumed the body, and on the way back to his old home in Chester County, Pennsylvania, passed over the Venango Trail through the French Creek Valley.

In the early eighteen twenties the trail was followed by one whose strong and positive views on human rights were destined in the future to precipitate the bitterest civil war the world has ever seen. The mind of John Brown matured and his ideas and convictions became deeper rooted during his residence in Richmond Township in the French Creek Valley, and when he trekked away on the old trail, he carried the fire which burned out only when peace was declared after the Civil War.

The narrow trail of the Indian, worn deep by centuries of travel, is now superseded by the railroad and the hard-surfaced motor-way. The sturdy pioneer emigrant and his descendants have cleared the land of the primeval forest and with the schoolhouse, the church, and the factory have civilized the former frontier and made this country what it is today. The rule and dominion of the red man have gone, but certain names he gave to prominent landmarks will last forever. Reminders of the sovereignty of mighty France have entirely disappeared save a few names she has left on streams and lakes, which recall her dream of a western empire. Little if anything is left to mark the Venango Trail followed by George Washington on an important mission of his life, but the name he bestowed on the stream in this beautiful valley will be everlasting and the legend of the Venango Trail which he followed will be historic.