Colonel James Burd

[From a portrait attributed to Gilbert Stuart belonging to Miss Matilda E. Patterson.]
COLONEL JAMES BURD IN THE BRADDOCK CAMPAIGN

LILY LEE NIXON

Colonel James Burd was a Pennsylvanian who played a great and colorful rôle in the history of his country and yet is unknown to the majority of Americans. Doubtless he would have received more recognition had it not been that contemporaries confused him with his brother-officer and relative by marriage, Colonel William Byrd of Virginia. People confuse them today. Since persons corresponding with these two officers even substituted the aerial "Bird" for the English "Byrd" and the Scotch "Burd," the most careful historian is likely to become lost in the hazy flight.

1 Read at Bedford, Pennsylvania, on July 14, 1934, in connection with the third annual historical tour under the auspices of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the summer session of the University of Pittsburgh. Miss Nixon is a teacher of history in the David B. Oliver Junior-Senior High School in Pittsburgh. Ed.

2 Colonel Henry Bouquet, in writing to General Forbes about Colonel James Burd, frequently spelled his name "Bird." In 1759 Lieutenant Colonel Adam Stephen wrote to Colonel William "Burd" of the Pennsylvania troops. See Shippen Papers, vol. 4 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia). In the index (vol. 16) to the Historic Highways of America series by Archer B. Hulbert, "see Byrd" appears after the entry "Burd" and under "Byrd, Colonel," the actions of both men are listed indiscriminately. Francis Parkman did not realize there were two men with similar names from different colonies and he speaks only of a mythical composite, Colonel James Burd of Virginia. Montcalm and Wolfe, 3: 310 (Boston, 1897).
James Burd was born at Ormiston, near Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1726. His family were people of property and of some prominence—his mother was a cousin and a stepdaughter of the lord provost of Edinburgh. One of the oldest in a family of eleven children, James received a good education. He knew his Latin and could make telling references to ancient history. His interest in literature continued into later life; for in 1763 he was a charter member of the exclusive Julianna Library Association of Lancaster, and in 1783, the general assembly, in an act to re-establish the society, appointed him and his son-in-law, Jasper Yeates, to be two of the directors. There is no proof that he had any military training, but, from conditions in Scotland and from his later attainments, it seems highly probable that he had. Two brothers, one an officer under Albemarle, gave their lives in the king's service. There is a tradition that the family was friendly to the Stuarts. Burd was twenty years of age when Culloden was fought, but it seems unlikely that he helped the Pretender in that battle, for just six months later he was living in London and using his own name.

Burd may have gone to America indirectly by way of Jamaica, since he had business connections with that island and later made at least two trips there. At any rate, the young Scot was in Philadelphia by the spring of 1748. He rented a storeroom from Samuel Carpenter for forty-five pounds per annum and became a merchant. He soon married the only daughter of Edward Shippen and thus allied himself with three of the

3 In Edmund H. Bell and Mary H. Colwell, eds., *James Patterson of Conestoga Manor and His Descendants*, 161 (Lancaster, Pa., 1925), it is stated that Jean Haliburton, Burd's mother, was a daughter of the lord provost, but a letter from Mr. Bell to the author states that examination of records in Scotland in 1932 and perusal of Walter Scott's memorial of the Haliburtons proved to him that her father was Thomas Haliburtion of Morehouse-law, who was killed in a duel and whose widow later married his cousin, George Haliburton, the lord provost.

4 Charles I. Landis, "The Julianna Library Company in Lancaster," in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 43:42, 50 (January, 1919); London board bill, October 20, 1746, Shippen Papers, 1:63. Unless otherwise noted, the Shippen papers referred to in this article are those in the possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Shippen manuscripts including Burd papers may also be found in the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia, in the Pennsylvania State Library at Harrisburg, and in the Library of Congress.

5 The original agreement is in the possession of Mr. Edward Shippen Thompson of Thompsontown, Pennsylvania.
most influential Pennsylvania families—the Shippens, the Willings, and the Allens. These families were friends of the proprietors, and Burd was soon given important assignments in provincial affairs. The canny Scot had chosen more wisely than he knew. Of gentle breeding and fine education, Sarah Shippen assisted him in the duties of social life in Philadelphia and later made one of the best wives a frontiersman ever had. She bore him eleven children, eight of whom lived to maturity; she managed his indentured servants, slaves, and plantation when he was away on a campaign; she received supplies for him and forwarded them wherever he was; she ordered his regimentals; she sent him frontier dainties such as gingerbread and pickles; and finally, she wrote him cheerful letters with the salutation “Dear Mr. Burd” and the complimentary ending “Your ever affectionate and dutiful wife.” In 1752 Burd and his wife moved to Shippensburg, a frontier village, where Burd managed a plantation for Edward Shippen, aided that gentleman in the fur trade, and soon had his finger on the pulse of international affairs in the Indians’ country.6

This pulse now had a quickened beat. The peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 had settled few questions between France and England, particularly those relating to America. Portents of coming conflict could be seen daily along the Canadian border or on the western frontier. The great Mississippi Valley was in dispute. The French tried to hold it by burying leaden plates and by building forts; the English by building trading posts, lonely cabins, and a settlement at Mount Braddock—“the first English-speaking trans-Appalachian farm-group settlement.”7 Din-widdie, the energetic Scotch governor of Virginia, was determined to foil every effort of the Marquis Duquesne, the French governor of Canada. The subsequent efforts of Washington, Trent, and Ensign Ward are familiar history.

When James Burd visited George Croghan at Aughwick in September, 1754, that trader asked him to acquaint the governor with the fact that a red man had brought the rumor that the French and Indians in-

6 Pennsylvania Archives, second series, 2: 33, 263; Edward Shippen to Joseph Shippen, May 7, 1752, Burd and Shippen Papers (Pennsylvania State Library).
7 Alfred P. James, “The First English-Speaking Trans-Appalachian Frontier,” in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 17: 58 (June, 1930).
tended striking at the "back inhabitants." England, not waiting for a formal declaration of war, soon sent General Braddock to take Fort Duquesne. Braddock reached Virginia in February, 1755. A few days later Sir John St. Clair, his deputy quartermaster-general, who had arrived earlier, asked Governor Morris of Pennsylvania "to open a communication" between the settlements and the head of the "Yougheagany," or a place nearer to the French forts. He indicated that the success of the expedition was contingent upon the work of Pennsylvania in two particulars: "No General will advance with an Army without having a Communication open to the Provinces in his Rear, both for the Security of his Retreat and to facilitate the Transport of Provisions, the supplying of which we must greatly Depend on your Province." The Pennsylvania assembly was slow to assume an additional expense, and it was almost a month before Governor Morris replied that he had ordered the country between Carlisle and the Turkey Foot to be reconnoitered "by Persons best acquainted with those Parts, with whom I sent a Draughtsman, and if it be possible to make a Road that Way I will recommend it to the Assembly to enable me to do it." 8

Meanwhile, William Allen, the wealthiest and probably the most influential merchant and lawyer of Philadelphia, was trying to purchase supplies for Braddock from southeastern Pennsylvania, the "bread basket" of the colonies, and James Burd was one of his agents. Burd wrote Shippen about getting the farmers' proposals in writing for Allen. Two years in the country had enabled Burd to acquire the farmer's point of view—that he should sell flour for cash at the time of sale because he could spare neither time nor horses to travel miles to the paymaster. This attitude of the farmers was the crux of much of both Braddock's and Forbes's troubles. Had Burd's suggestion, that the province hire wagons to go directly to the mill for the flour, been followed, much time and dissension might have been saved. Again, Burd voiced the agrarian viewpoint when he wrote that, whereas the Indian trader did not consider the killing of horses and other risks, the farmer who had anything to lose would be more prudent and would object to hauling over hazardous roads. 9

8 James Burd to Edward Shippen, September 25, 1754, Shippen Papers, 1:159; Pennsylvania Colonial Records, 6:301, 337; Pennsylvania Archives, fourth series, 2:374.
9 Burd to Edward Shippen, February 21, 1755, Shippen Papers, 1:169.
The persons whom Governor Morris appointed on March 12, 1755, to survey the proposed road were George Croghan, William Buchanan, John Armstrong, James Burd, and Adam Hoops. It is likely that Allen’s influence had much to do with Burd’s appointment. He had asked Burd to deliver an important letter to Captain Clark at Wills Creek. It is also very probable that Burd was the draftsman mentioned by Morris to Braddock, for he later presented Shippen with a draft of the road, which started at Shippen’s stone house “at the back branch” just out of Shippensburg. Led by Indian scouts and followed by the patient pack horses, the five men pursued an old Indian trail and traders’ path. How they managed to travel as fast as they did is a mystery. They had left Carlisle on the twenty-ninth of March; the date of their departure from Shippensburg is not given, but they reached the waters of the “Yohiogain” on the eleventh of April, just fourteen days after leaving Carlisle.10

There was already a rough wagon road as far as the Conococheague Creek, where Chambersburg now stands. The commissioners surveyed a road, therefore, from a place called McDowell’s Mill, about twenty miles west of Shippensburg in Franklin County, toward the west. They followed Raystown Creek part of the way. With one eye on trade and the other on their Virginia rivals, the commissioners tried to keep the road near the heart of their own province—as near as was consistent with the topography of the land and with the location of the intended terminus. On arriving at a point eighteen miles from the three forks of the Youghiogheny, or Turkey Foot, as it was called (now Confluence), the commissioners feared to go farther, because they had heard of the proximity of large scouting parties of French and Indians. From that point they ran the survey southward to Fort Cumberland at Wills Creek, and thus really made surveys for two roads.11

The reception given these Pennsylvania commissioners at Cumberland on the sixteenth of April by Sir John St. Clair was not cordial, although it was exceptionally warm. He swore and stormed like “a Lyon Rampant.” He said that the work should have been started upon receipt

10 Pennsylvania Colonial Records, 6: 318, 368; Allen to Burd, March 14, 1755, in the possession of Mr. Edward Shippen Thompson; Burd to Edward Shippen, April 27, 1755, Shippen Papers, 1: 179.

of his January letter, that it was now too late, and that "the Want of this Road and the Provisions promised by Pennsylvania has retarded the Expedition, which may cost them their Lives because of the fresh Numbers of French that's suddenly like to be poured into the country." Threatening that he would march his army into Cumberland County and compel the inhabitants to do the work, he so frightened the commissioners that they took the liberty to write the representatives of their county to inquire what provision the assembly had made about the road and to urge immediate action. Braddock himself was much more temperate, though quite as insistent as his subordinate. From Frederick, Maryland, he wrote Governor Morris on the twenty-fourth of April that he could not "with safety" proceed farther than Fort Cumberland until the road was at least near completion. Knowing the trouble Morris was having with his pacifist assembly, Braddock added that if that body would not bear the expense Morris was to proceed with the road anyhow and he, Braddock, would charge it to the public account. St. Clair's threats, however, had the desired effect upon the assembly. That erstwhile stubborn body immediately supplied Richard Peters, secretary of the province, with two hundred pounds, which he sent to John Armstrong, and each commissioner was later paid seven pounds ten shillings and expenses for twenty-five days' service.

Leaving the angry St. Clair, the commissioners turned back to Pennsylvania, and James Burd arrived home at Shippensburg on the twenty-seventh of April. Two days later he received the governor's orders and instructions to start building the roads, and he replied on the same day. He first gave an account of the surveying of the roads, sent the drafts thereof, and furnished an account of the disbursement. The commissioners must have had more difficulties in getting men and supplies for the construction than they had anticipated. The work did not commence until the sixth of May and then with only ten or fifteen men. By the fifteenth, however, seventy were employed. Burd was left in full charge of the actual work. Buchanan and Hoops had private affairs to keep them busy, Armstrong was preoccupied with his duties as deputy surveyor, and Croghan had charge of the contingent of Indians who were to assist

Braddock. The governor sent Secretary Peters to the front to see how the project was progressing. On May 20 an important meeting was held at the Sugar Cabins in Aughwick. Besides Peters three commissioners were present—John Armstrong, Buchanan, and Burd. Joseph Armstrong and John Smith were also present. The minutes of this meeting contain a summary of what had already been done and of what supplies were needed for the continuance of the work. Peters was to report to Braddock as well as to Morris. Besides the overseers and wagoners, 108 men were on the pay roll. The road had been built thirty-eight miles beyond Shippensburg. It had been made thirty feet wide, but since it required sixty men a day to make one mile that width, it was now proposed to make the width twenty feet, and in stony or marshy places, only ten feet. The urgent need of more workmen was stressed. This need was to be supplied by issuing advertisements, by applying to Braddock for the use of some of his men, or, if necessary, by compulsory measures on the part of the governor. No workman would be compelled to serve more than two weeks or to enlist in the army. More supplies were ordered, and the requisition of an armed escort was considered. Three days later Governor Morris replied to Peters' report of this meeting. He wrote that he had ordered more advertisements to be printed in English and in "Dutch." The new laborers were to report to Shippen at Lancaster and then to follow the road to Burd's party. Peters was given authority to do what was necessary, and in just a week's time better results were noticeable. By the twenty-sixth 120 men were working in companies of twelve or fifteen. A commissary was established. Instead of purchasing silk laces and scarlet cloaks, Burd was now ordering more shovels, picks, blankets, wagons, food, and forage. The price of wagons was fixed at twelve shillings sixpence per day, whiskey at two shillings sixpence per gallon, and bacon at sixpence per pound.¹³

By the end of May, therefore, the prospects seemed much brighter for Burd and hence for Braddock's army. Whereas Peters had written on the seventeenth of May that "at the rate they go on, & Mr. Burd does

¹³ Pennsylvania Colonial Records, 6:377, 401-403; "Accounts of the Commissioners for Burd's Road to the Ohio" in the Norris of Fairhill Manuscripts (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); Burd to his wife, May 15, 1755, Shippen Papers, 1:183; Pennsylvania Archives, first series, 2:320, 325.
his best, they will not finish this Six months, seven miles being only cut in ten days," Morris now wrote on the twenty-sixth that the road would reach the forks of the Youghiogheny in a month at the most. The next day Peters, who had just talked with Braddock, wrote Burd that the general and St. Clair "mightily approve" of the work done and added, "It is a road of the utmost consequence, as he expects his provisions by this road, and has ordered a magazine of stores to be laid in at Shippensburg, and to be carried to him in July through this road." Burd was not to attempt the "road to the camp" at this time but was to expedite the main road, because Braddock "would not march one foot to the northward, until you came up to him, and assured him of a good wagon-road to the Yhioagany." Had Braddock stuck to this resolve the outcome of his expedition might have been very different.

Burd had started to cut the mountain road on May 27, and he wrote that he intended making it in such a manner that good horses could haul sixteen hundredweight over it. His description of the turns in this road, built "with a large Swipe for the Waggons" reminds one of a similar feature of modern roads. He now had 150 men, all in good spirits, but "anxious to have arms." In fact, he told Peters that they would not be willing to pass Raystown (Bedford) unless they had arms or the general's cover. By the twelfth of June the morale of the men must have been low. No arms had come. The weary woodcutters were not only fearful of the lurking, unseen foe, but they were also actually in need of food. As Burd lay out under the dense pines with not even the friendly stars for comfort, he must have questioned the fate that had left him at the head of two hundred defenseless, hungry men who must ever press forward, farther from homes and civilization, into an unknown land inhabited only by enemies. Some of the men had not even the consolation of sufficient work: enough digging tools were lacking to hinder the construction of the ford of the Juniata. Perhaps the knowledge that Braddock and all his army had marched from Wills Creek strengthened the hearts of the crew, but for Burd the news added the fear that his road would not be finished in time for its intended use.\*\*\* \n

\*\*\*Pennsylvania Colonial Records, 6: 403, 433.
By the seventeenth of June Burd knew that the "Quaking Assembly," as Morris wittily put it, found the furnishing of arms inconsistent with its principles of nonresistance. He heard, however, that Braddock had remembered his promise and had sent Captain Hogg with one hundred men to act as a guard or cover for the road builders. Delivered from one dilemma, Burd was yet confronted with a greater. He wrote Peters from "Allogueepy's Town," an Indian village near Raystown, where his advance crew now was, that he had only three days' provisions for his own two hundred men and that he expected the addition of Captain Hogg's one hundred soldiers that night. Burd was forced therefore to plead with Peters not to send additional workmen until more provisions arrived. He himself hastily departed for the Conococheague in quest of wagons to carry provisions to his camp. With the aid of his father-in-law, Burd must have advanced considerable money, for Peters later wrote: "as you have had more trouble and are likely to have the weight of all upon you, I am instructed to tell you that all reasonable expenses will be paid, and all moneys or victuals, or necessaries advanced, will be honorably allowed for. Public faith will not admit of any one doubting this."16

Before the question of food supply was settled, another difficulty arose. The wagoners, hearing that Braddock paid better wages than the commissioners were giving, refused to work unless this disparity was removed. It is likely that the strikers won, because, as Peters wrote, "the work must be finished at all events, and if one price is objected to another must be fixed on, so that there be no obstruction to the work." Peters expressed these generous views after Braddock had written to Morris on June 30 reiterating the importance of the project and begging him to use all dispatch in having the road finished to the Turkey Foot of the Youghiogheny. The general wrote that people near Fort Cumberland had been attacked by Indians, and that the army would therefore depend chiefly upon the province of Pennsylvania, "where the Road will be secure from Insults or Attacks of that kind." One wonders why Braddock expected the northern route to be less subject to Indian attacks than the southern. Burd knew better. The activity of the French agents was showing results. In fact, by July 9 the road builders themselves, then in the heart of the mountain region, were being molested. Thirty of the

crew left because they had no firearms. They could not even hunt their horses without guards, and fourteen soldiers of Captain Hogg's guard deserted while Burd was riding back in desperation to Chambers' Mills in search of wagons. The road and all trails were watched by the hidden foe in order to cut off Burd's provisions, of which he had only enough for three days' rations. 

It will be remembered that the commissioners, when surveying the roads, went only within eighteen miles of the Turkey Foot. As Braddock moved on into the wilderness he became very anxious about the exact place where Burd's road should intersect his. Several letters on the subject were exchanged by Braddock, Morris, Peters, and Burd. Finally Morris gave Burd the authority to make the decision and to notify the general immediately thereafter. From his camp on the top of the Alleghenies Burd, on the seventeenth, not yet knowing of Braddock's tragic defeat on the ninth, wrote Morris of his tentative plans. The road was now completed to within fifteen miles of the farthest point west that the surveyors had reached. Considering their position, it seems incredible that the road builders did not fare as did Braddock's army. Burd wrote that the Indians were bothering them, that the men needed arms, and that, "Before this Relief came to Us we have lived 6 Days upon Bread and Water." 

Later on the same day, perhaps just a few minutes after Burd had written the letter to Morris, he received word from Governor James Innes, who was at Fort Cumberland, telling of Braddock's defeat and desiring Burd to retreat immediately. What a fearfully long and dreadful night Burd's people must have spent and what a sickening sense of futility Burd must have felt. Early the next morning, Wednesday, the eighteenth of July, Burd and Captain Hogg started for Wills Creek, which they reached at noon on Sunday. All their tools and provisions were lost or destroyed. They tried to drive the cattle with them but lost them on the way, for the men would not go after them. Burd reported to Sir John St. Clair at Fort Cumberland, but that gentleman referred him to Colonel Dunbar. Burd offered to open a road from Raystown to

17 Pennsylvania Colonial Records, 6:436, 466, 475; Balch, Letters and Papers, 43-45.
18 Pennsylvania Colonial Records, 6:452, 484.
Cumberland in three weeks’ time, but Dunbar, anxious to get back to Philadelphia, said that the troops could use what road there was while the wagons could go by way of Winchester. Burd then offered to build a fort at Raystown to close his new road and to protect the back inhabitants. Again Dunbar refused. He asked Burd to dine with him and talked of the defeat that had sapped his courage. Burd got back to Shippensburg on the twenty-fourth of July and wrote an account of his actions to Morris the next day. Dr. George Donehoo believed that if Burd’s plans had been carried out, particularly in relation to the building of the fort at Raystown, the lives of hundreds of frontier settlers would have been saved, besides thousands of pounds of money. The fort had to be built later at a great expense, although Dunbar with his fifteen hundred men could easily and safely have supervised it at this time. Frontiersmen would have doubled his number in any effort against the enemy. The French, with all their Indian allies, numbered only eleven hundred effective men at Fort Duquesne, and they greatly feared an attack by Dunbar. From this time on, thinking all Englishmen cowards, the Indians flocked to the French standard and began such fearful raids on the Cumberland Valley that, whereas at this time it had three thousand men fit to bear arms, a year later it had not, except for garrisons, a hundred. Donehoo’s prognostication might have been correct: “Braddock’s defeat and Dunbar’s retreat were two of the greatest disasters in the history of Pennsylvania, and both of these could have been avoided with such a man as James Burd in command. He was thoroughly familiar with the situation and could have successfully met with it.”

What Burd had accomplished, however, was a signal victory in itself. He had cut away the sturdy timber, hewn the hard rock without the aid of dynamite, found a suitable grade over such mountainous heights as Sideling Hill, and made a good wagon road through sixty-five miles of wilderness country. With a crew of men that was constantly changing in personnel, and at best was never larger than two hundred in number, Burd had done this work in a little more than two months’ time. It cost Pennsylvania about three thousand pounds, an amount that, it must be

admitted, the province was very slow in paying. Although the road was never used for its primary purpose, it was the first Pennsylvania road to the West and, after being used part of the way by the victorious army of Forbes, it became the route over which many pioneers traveled to the Ohio. In the later territorial dispute with Virginia, Burd's road was instrumental in binding the Monongahela country and the Pittsburgh district to Pennsylvania.

The James Burd who went back to Shippensburg on July 24, 1755, had become well and favorably known throughout the whole colony. A man not yet thirty years of age, he had conducted his enterprise in such a manner as to receive the approval of all contemporary officials and to carve for himself a niche in the affairs of Pennsylvania. For the next twenty years little of importance transpired in which he was not consulted or in which he did not actually participate. His defense of the frontier in the Cumberland Valley, his management of the Iroquois fur trade for the English at Fort Augusta, his victory over the French and Indians at Ligonier during the Forbes campaign, his later road building in 1759, his gathering of patriot forces early in the Revolution—all these contributions were vastly important. But if, as Macaulay says, excepting only the alphabet and the printing press, those things which abridge distance have done most for civilization, then Burd's road building during the Braddock campaign was not the least of his accomplishments.

20 "Accounts of the Commissioners for Burd's Road to the Ohio," Norris of Fairhill Manuscripts. These accounts include closely itemized statements made out by Burd and many bills countersigned "Examined by the Commissioners and found Right, James Burd." Burd's own account stood thus: thirty pounds for one hundred days of service divided into twenty-eight days "Surveying Road," sixty-six days "Opening Road," and six days "Settling Accounts" and ten pounds "Allowed Burd for his extraordinary trouble."