

THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

VOLUME 18

DECEMBER, 1935

NUMBER 4

McNAIR CORRESPONDENCE: LAND PROBLEMS IN NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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CERTAIN aspects of the land problem in northwestern Pennsylvania in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, more particularly, of the activities there of two brothers, David and Dunning McNair, are revealed in a number of letters, articles of agreement, and miscellaneous memoranda, of the period from 1793 to 1826, in the McNair Papers, a collection recently acquired by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.² Incidental information on other matters of general interest and on the personal affairs of various individuals is also included, but the papers are primarily important for their revelations on land speculation in the region and on the division into counties of the northwestern corner of the state.

In the long, involved drama of the march of America westward the land speculator played an important rôle. He was at the same time the hero and the villain in the opening of more than one frontier region: the hero because his land purchases gave stimulus, however artificial, to other purchases; and the villain because he automatically excluded better-intentioned men from taking up lands. Such was his dual

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² For detailed descriptions of the collection, which extends chronologically to the year 1849, see *ante*, 17: 140, 208; 18: 156.

rôle in northwestern Pennsylvania in the years immediately following the passage of the land law of 1792. Ostensibly, this law was designed to check speculative activity and to encourage actual settlers. In reality, the land speculator found a fertile field for his operations in the region opened thereby—all the section lying north and west of the Ohio and Allegheny rivers and Conewango Creek. The law provided for the sale of land at the rate of seven pounds and ten shillings for each hundred acres. A warrant for any tract not exceeding four hundred acres in size might be secured on submitting a description of it to the secretary of the land office, but the warrant did not vest title to the land “unless the grantee has, prior to the date of such warrant, made, or cause to be made, or shall, within the space of two years next after the date of the same, make, or cause to be made, an actual settlement thereon”; in default of such settlement, it would be lawful for the state to issue new warrants to actual settlers on the land. If the grantee, however, should be prevented by force of arms of the enemies of the United States from making settlement and should persist in his endeavors to do so, he was to be entitled to the land as though he had been completely successful in settling thereon. “Actual settlement” was defined as “clearing, fencing and cultivating at least two acres for every hundred acres contained in one survey, erecting thereon a messuage for the habitation of man, and residing, or causing a family to reside thereon, for the space of five years next following his [*the settler's*] first settling of the same, if he or she shall so long live.”³

The ease with which warrants to lands might be secured under this law was an open invitation to speculators, and there was a lively scramble to make initial claims for as many tracts as possible. Two land companies plunged into the field, the Pennsylvania Population Company, organized by a group of Philadelphians headed by John Nicholson, and the Holland Land Company, composed of Dutch bankers who hoped to secure lands that they could later resell at greatly advanced prices. So energetic were these companies that within a year the former had secured warrants to all the lands in the Erie Triangle that were not re-

³ The official title of the law was “An Act for the Sale of Vacant Lands within This Commonwealth.” Pennsylvania, *Laws, 1700-1810* (Smith's Laws), 4:133-138.

served by the state, and within a very short time thereafter it had also entered claim to hundreds of acres in the southern part of Erie County and in Crawford County. In order to secure settlers its agents were authorized to offer free land as well as other inducements to the first few settlers in a given region. Concurrently, the Holland Land Company purchased several million acres in northwestern Pennsylvania south of the Triangle and in New York. A number of fortune-seeking individuals also became interested in the region and took out warrants, but they were not able to function effectively in competition with the land companies.⁴

Because of Indian raids, settlement in the region was practically impossible before 1795 and rather precarious for a year or so after that date. The land companies, unable to get their lands settled within the first few years after taking out their warrants, found in the 1792 law a loophole by which to escape the settlement requirement altogether. They had been prevented by "force of arms of the enemies of the United States" from making settlements, they said, and they were therefore released forever from the obligation. Actual settlers went into the region, however, just as soon as the danger from Indian raids was reasonably remote, built cabins on lands warranted to the companies, and claimed that the companies had forfeited their rights and that they, the actual settlers, should be issued warrants. The result was a tangle of disputed titles.

Prominent among the speculators who entered the field in competition with the land companies were the McNair brothers, sons of a Scotch-Irish farmer of Cumberland County, Pennsylvania. Dunning McNair had emigrated to Allegheny County in 1786 and had purchased a large tract on Nine Mile Run in what is now Wilkinsburg. He had become a leading citizen of that settlement, and his home, "Dumplin Hall," which he had built in 1790 on what is now the corner of Hay and Kelly Streets, had become an important social and cul-

⁴ A full account of the Holland Land Company appears in Paul D. Evans, *The Holland Land Company* (Buffalo, 1924), which also contains incidental information on the Pennsylvania Population Company. Brief statements of the activities of both companies and of the land problem appear in various Erie County histories.

tural center. He is credited with having laid out the first plan of lots for Wilkinsburg—his village was known as “McNair Town” and later as “McNairsville.” David McNair had followed his brother westward and had also purchased a farm on Nine Mile Run. He had moved to Erie County, however, and by 1795 was working there as a surveyor under Thomas Rees. It was in 1794 or early in 1795 that the brothers began their speculative careers. Like many others, they soon became involved in disputes with the Pennsylvania Population Company, and when the company in 1797 offered to compromise with joint ownership of the disputed tracts, they readily accepted. They were to have the responsibility of settling the tracts at a common expense with the company, which advanced a loan of twenty-three thousand dollars to finance the work.⁵

The first two letters here reproduced were written to Dunning McNair by Judah Colt, who in 1795 left his home in the Genesee country in western New York to take up claims in Erie County, Pennsylvania. He was persuaded by the Population Company to become its agent and in 1796 succeeded Thomas Rees in that capacity. He established his headquarters, which came to be known as Colt’s Station, at a point nine miles south of Lake Erie in the present Greenfield Township.⁶

JUDAH COLT TO DUNNING MCNAIR⁷

Prisque Isle 13th November 1797

DEAR SIR

I am now winding up the business of my falls agency in Order to return to my family in the Genesee Country, who among other conserens of life, claim my first attention—could I dispense with that duty I owe to my family and the grate propensity of paying them a Visit this fall, I should go from this Station with my people to attend on the actions which are depending at Pittsburgh, Dcember Term, as I shall feel estreemly anxious, untill the several Cases, which

⁵ James B. McNair, comp., *McNair, McNear and McNeir Genealogies*, 123–145 (Chicago, 1923); Harry C. Gilchrist, *History of Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania*, 19–23 (Pittsburgh, 1927); Evans, *Holland Land Company*, 118, 130.

⁶ Colt’s memoirs, which contain an interesting record of his activities, are published in *History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 221 (Chicago, 1884).

⁷ The original spelling used by the writers of the letters has been retained throughout, but for the sake of clearness punctuation has been changed in some instances. *Ed.*

are now depending, are brought to a conclusion⁸—and was it not for the dependence, which I put in your Agency,—John Banon Esquire & Thomas Collins,⁹ who were present and privy to all my proceedings with the *Lowreys*,¹⁰ and others conserved with them, I should feel myself very inexcusable not to attend personally at Court, but the Testimony which I should give in Court in those Actions of the Lowreys, are no more than can, & will no doubt, be given by *You Mess*¹¹ Banon & Collins, with many Others, who will attend as witnesses from this Quarter. On Reflection you cannot but recollect, what overtures of Reconciliation I made the Lowreys from time to time, all of which were rejected. In regard to my proceedings with M^r Miles¹¹ and his Settlers, you are not so immediately acquainted—only that I have uniformly advised my Settlers to treat the People (who have taken up Lands under Miles) with Sevility, and upon no pretence whatever to insult them with abusive Language or personal harm—which advise has been strictly attended to; from the Short, but spirited and friendly Aid, which you have given me this Summer when Requested in attending to the Conserens of the Company, I have no reason to doubt but that you will, whenever in your power Use all *possible Assistances*. Among other things I flatter myself you can render the Company assential service in paying particular attention *at Court* when those Trials are brought forward. As you are acquainted with the *Counsell* the Company have Employed also with the Honable Judges, and with the People who generally compose the petty Jurors, and such of them who from flying reports, have framed unfavourable Opinions, in regard to the title of our Lands, and proceedings of the Popu-

⁸ Many cases of disputed titles were brought before the courts in 1797. Colt writes in his memoirs, "The opposition of advance settlers caused me much trouble. I had to keep from forty to one hundred men in service to defend settlers and property. More than once mobs of twenty to thirty assembled for the purpose of doing mischief. Went to Pittsburgh with witnesses and had a number indicted by the grand jury of Allegheny County." See *History of Erie County*, 221 (1884).

⁹ Thomas Collins was a prominent Allegheny County lawyer.

¹⁰ George Lowrey appears to have gone to Erie County in 1795 and settled near North East; the following year his mother and nine brothers followed him. James Lowrey was said to have sixty settlers under him, and together the brothers are supposed to have claimed twenty-eight hundred acres. When the titles to land in dispute with the Pennsylvania Population Company were awarded to the company, John Lowrey committed suicide. John Miller, *A Twentieth Century History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 1:511 (Chicago, 1909); Evans, *Holland Land Company*, 131.

¹¹ William Miles made a business of bringing settlers to the region. He also became involved in disputes with the Holland Land Company, which were settled so satisfactorily that he became its agent. *History of Erie County*, 225 (1884).

lation Company, to take measures to remove them, as in wisdom you may think advisable. Whatever may be the result of those Actions, I will not take upon me to determin, but I cannot prevail on myself to believe, that one single action has been brought, through Malice, Invy or with intentions to rong, or distress a Single Person of his *just Rights*, and I have the Consolation to think, that when my proceedings are more fully Canvassed, it will appear to Court & Jury that I have no desire or intent to infringing on any Mans Right, or trample under foot the good and wholesome Laws of Pennsylvania—and while on the one hand I have reason to Regret (with the rest of my fellow Citizens) that we have so many lawles and turbulent people to contend with. In this Infant Country on the other hand I rejoice that we have Men of Knowledge, firmness and strict Integrity for our *Judges*, and other executive Officers. I can never think or Speak of Judge Addison,¹² but in the highest Respect. The Gentlemen, who composed the *Grand Jury* at the last Court, appeared to be Men well informed, & whose proceedings were sufficient Proof they had the Good of the County much at Heart. Less attention is generally paid by the Sheriff in selecting people on the petty Jurors—of course, we cannot expect in generaly men so well informed—and as the Citizins of Allegheny County are made up of People from the Southeren as well from the Atlantic State, It is not to be expected that the Sheriff can at all times, make choise of Jurymen, who are so well informed, as could be wished for. Altho a Sheriff cannot be too Cautious in selecting Persons who have Resided in the County long enough to have some knowledge of it[s] Laws and Customs.

Resting assured that you will lend all your possible Aid in regard of what has been suggested which will be for the Interest of the Company, I will not trouble you to follow me any further on the Subject.

I have Anticipated on having an Interviu with you again before I left the Country, but am disappointed with many other of your friends in Not seeing you. Many hard things have been said on account of your not paying your Settlement a Visit this fall, and those of them, who have taken up Lands under your Agency are really disappointed in not receiving their respective Articles of agreements—& this will be attended with some inconvenience and perhaps the Loss of some good Settlers. You Can readily judge what a Spring it gives to a Settlement to have the *Principal* residing among the People, by the short time you was at Conecut¹³ this Summer; another Visit at the close of the Season,

¹² In 1791 Alexander Addison became a judge of Allegheny County, the first lawyer to do so. In 1803 he was impeached, found guilty, and removed from office because of his actions toward a colleague on the bench, John B. C. Lucas.

¹³ Probably McNair's post on Conneaut Creek, near the present Albion.

would no doubt had a salutary effect on the Mines of People who have gone to their respective homes, to prepare to come out early the insuing Spring. I cannot close this Letter (which has already drawn out to considerable length) Untill I *Congratulate* you on so favourable a Change in our *Members of Assembly* the Characters I have heard of Judge Wallas and Cap^t Herings¹⁴ flatters me to believe, They will pay perticular attention to the Interest and general good of the Citizens of Allegheny County, which heretofore, we have reason to believe has been Grossly neglected—or at Least some parts of it by former Representatives.

Make my Best Respect to your Good Lady and believe me Unfaindly Your frind

JUDAH COLT

Col^l Denng McNear

JUDAH COLT TO DUNNING MCNAIR

Meadville 14 July 1798

Co^l DUNING MCNEAR

D^r Sir, I flattered myself of the pleasure of Seeing you in this Quarter before this time, with your good Lady and Famaily, butt am much disappointed.

I arived at Erie with my Famaily the last of May and am Now living at the Station I resided at the last Season. M^{rs} Colt is well pleased with the Country and as yet enjoys good health. I am going on Rapidly with the Vessel at the 4 Mile Creek it will be ready for Launching the first of September, I Purchased all the Sails & Rigging, Iron Tar Nails &c. at New York, and every other Article Appertaining which was Necessary to lay in, in that Quarter.¹⁵

As there Was No Written Agreement between us, in regard the Building of Said Vessel, I am At a loss to Know what Share (if any) you wish to hold in

¹⁴ George Wallace was a judge of Allegheny County, who served from 1788 to 1814, with the exception of a brief interval in 1798 when he resigned, probably because of his election to the legislature. He was also a prominent landholder. James G. Heron was the county's other representative. The land question became entangled in politics, the Federalists favoring the land companies and the anti-Federalists the actual settlers.

¹⁵ The vessel was the sloop "Washington," the first to be built in the vicinity of Erie; it served the Pennsylvania Population Company for twelve years. Colt records in his memoirs for 1797: "During the season, the building of a vessel of about thirty-five tons was commenced at the mouth of Four Mile creek"; and in the following year he relates that "the vessel, begun the year before at the mouth of Four Mile Creek, was completed in time to make a trip to Fort Erie." *History of Erie County*, 221 (1884); Miller, *History of Erie County*, 1: 204.

her. She will Cost when ready to Sail About two thousand dollars. I have Advanc'd Already towards her one Thousand Dollars, principally in Cash. I have divided her into Eight Shares and reserved for you two of them, which will Cost, Say 250 Dollars pr Share, Equal to 500 Dollars the two Shares, if you are desirous to be Considered a Partner with me as formerly proposed you will please write me by my Brother Jabez Colt the Bearer of this whom I beg leave to Introduce to you and by whom I have taken the Liberty to draw on You for one hundred and Fifty Dollars on Account of the said Vessel and if Convenient and Agreeable to your Ideas being Considered a Share holder you will please to honour the Draught, and it shall be placed to Your Credit.

Whenever I hear of your Arrival at Coneout Shall make it a point to Call and See you on Account of those interferences with those Persons who Articled under me in 1796 for the Settling those Lands in your Quarter, a few of Which Tracts have Since been disposed of by you in 1797, a Business which Ought to be Attended to as Soon as we Can, with Convenience—and what would be Very Gratifying to me would be to have the pleasure of waiting on you at my Station at Mount Pleasant. Mean time I am with respect

Sir your most Ob^t

Co^t D M^cNear

JUDAH COLT

Dunning McNair was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature in October, 1799, and took his seat the following December. Several letters written to him between December, 1799, and March, 1800, contain interesting information not only on his activities as an assemblyman but also on land speculation and on minor happenings in Pittsburgh. With James Sample, he represented Allegheny County, which at that time also embraced the northwestern section of Pennsylvania. Both he and Sample were Federalists and supported the party minority in its obstructionist activities during the session, but McNair also served his constituents in more positive ways. On December 11 he presented to the House a petition "from a number of the inhabitants of the borough of Pittsburgh, praying permission to erect at their own expense a market-house on the bank of the river Monongahela, at the end of market-street." Early in January he was appointed chairman of a committee to report on the petition and two weeks later reported a bill for the erection of the market house. On January 30, however, his colleague from Allegheny County

presented a petition against the project, and McNair's bill was not even given a second reading.¹⁶

McNair's chief interest was in the lands to the north of Pittsburgh, and it was as the representative of that region that he made his principal contribution during the session: his sponsorship of the bill for dividing the northwestern section of the state into eight new counties. His interest in this problem was evident from early in the session, and on January 9, as chairman of a committee appointed for the purpose, he presented a plan outlining the boundaries of eight new counties, with the recommendation that a committee be appointed to bring in a bill incorporating the proposals. The plan was given a second reading on January 17, the proposed committee was agreed upon, and McNair was made its chairman. This committee reported a bill on January 28 that retained in general the boundaries suggested in the original plan and added details on such matters as county seats, the machinery for drawing the boundaries and for organizing the counties. The House passed the bill on February 17, and it became a law on March 12, 1800.¹⁷

ADAMSON TANNEHILL TO DUNNING MCNAIR¹⁸

[December 20, 1799]

D^R SIR,

An opportunity offers by M^r Ewalt¹⁹ to write you, which I embrace with pleasure. I am informed that a petition has been put into your hands by M^r Wallace praying a market house to be built on the Bank in Pittsb^e—this was a

¹⁶ Pennsylvania, *House Journal*, 1799, p. 21, 74, 129, 180. Pittsburgh's first market house, authorized in 1787, had been built at the corner of Second and Market Streets, and after the erection of the courthouse on the "Diamond" (on Market Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues) it had been moved to the space in front of the courthouse. The problem of a second market house was before the people of Pittsburgh until 1832, when it was finally agreed to erect one on Liberty Street between St. Clair Street and Cecil Alley. Sarah H. Killikelly, *The History of Pittsburgh, Its Rise and Progress*, 105 (Pittsburgh, 1906); Erasmus Wilson, ed., *Standard History of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*, 701 (Chicago, 1898).

¹⁷ Pennsylvania, *House Journal*, 1799, p. 76, 94-96, 137, 173, 234, 238, 243-246, 250, 251, 257, 263, 359, 369, 372, 389.

¹⁸ Adamson Tannehill, prominent innkeeper, was a leading Republican of Pittsburgh.

¹⁹ Probably Samuel Ewalt, first sheriff of Allegheny County and a state assemblyman in 1796. Postage from Pittsburgh to Lancaster, where the legislature was sitting, was seven-

matter contemplated the session before the last, but the petition going forward too late, was put off untill a good, & Convenient opportunity might offer, to bring it forward with success; we consider this as the moment to have the business brought before the house with energy—& I have the greatest confidence of its meeting with your approbation and Support, when you consider that the building will not be a Corporative tax, but on the Contrary quite at the expense of Individuals by Subscription, & that the present market is at so great a distance, when those who are convenient have every advantage both of marketing, & every kind of business, consequently makes their property more valuable, while those on, & near the bank, are greatly deprived of those advantages, as well as their property of a considerable less value, merely on that account. I lay these down as a few hints, and rely on your wisdom as to the propriety. I am informed that M^r Woods²⁰ will not oppose the petition in the Senate, which I consider as a liberal sentiment; as his interest would otherwise lead him to an opposition of the measure; his property generally, being more contiguous to the other market,—shall be glad to hear from you what progress is made in this business, together with any other matters, of a public nature.

I shall not depart from my promise in writing you as often as anything worthy of notice may arise, & shall expect a reciprocal return.

I do not recollect any thing of moment to Communicate from this quarter, except that the peoples minds appear to become more calm after the election storm, & I am happy to see it.²¹ Miss Nancy Lukins has taken hold of the chain of Matrimony, & this night closes the link, with Lawyer Armstrong.

Any communications that you can make me on the score of Politicks will be thankfully rec^d, & if necessary, confidentially retained by Sir

Your M^t H^la Ser^t

A. TANNEHILL

Pittsbg 20 Dec. 1799

P. S. a merry Christmas, & a happy new year to Close the 18th century. I am just informed that David Mead has made a Sale of Meadville to the Holland Company; the truth of which I cannot vouch, but if it should be the case there will be a better prospect of its becoming a Site of Justice on A division of the County.²²

A. T.

teen cents for a single sheet, and carriers were therefore used whenever possible. This letter, however, was eventually sent by mail.

²⁰ John Woods, a Federalist, was Speaker of the state Senate. He represented the district composed of Allegheny, Greene, and Washington counties.

²¹ The bitterly contested election of October, 1799, had given the state its first Republican governor, Thomas McKean.

²² Such a sale did not take place.

And. Jack applied to me to bring suit against you for the reward of taking up a stray horse—I have got him put off until I hear from you—those things I promised to inform you of, when under my notice.

DAVID MCNAIR TO DUNNING MCNAIR

Nine Mile Run thursday night Jan^y 16th—1800

DEAR DUNNING:

Haveing Spent the Evening with Sister Anney²³ & Her Little family I think it my Duty to State to You that they are as Happy as Your absense will admit of all other friends are Likewise well there is nothing new amongst us Except a Robbery of a wagon that was Committed at Robert Stewarts Tavern²⁴ on Sabath night Last which Has been the Gennaral topic Since. M^r Stewart & wife, was much alarmed on the ocation and Has not Left one Stone unturned or Spared any Pains in their Power in order to find out the agressor the first Step that was taken was to Secure W. Moran a suspected Person who turned Evidence & Swore the theives was a Certin George Elliott that Lived at Mr Pollocks & M^r M^cDowels Jacob those Two as well as Moran was Imediately Committed & will Lye in Prison till March term Part of the Goods was found Hid in Your Barn & there Yet Remains £28 "o "o worth missing the unfortunate wagoners Name is George Griffy. I flater myself M^r Stewarts Conduct on the ocation will Prevent it from Operateing against the Credit of the House. My Reason for mentioning the matter is Least you might Hear it in a wrong Coller [color] & Consequently would be alarmed.

I Have Been Down Two weeks & will Return if the Roads will admit in ten or twelve Days I have not Received a Line from You Yet I Hope I will Get one Shortly Do Pleas write me the Purticulars of the Present Sesion. I wrote You Last Post which You must Have Got Ere now. I then mentioned & will also now State you all I Know or Could Do Respecting Rob^t M^cNair²⁵ Relinquishing the Twelve Mile Creek /Viz/—When I aplied to Him in order to acomedate the matter Between Him & Colt Rob^t informed me that unless the Six Hundred Dollars was advanced in Cash He Could not Give up the Place for there was Such Debts Standing against Him He might as well Give up the

²³ Dunning McNair's wife, the former Anne Steuart.

²⁴ Probably in Wilkinsburg, which boasted four taverns. See Gilchrist, *History of Wilkinsburg*, 54.

²⁵ Robert McNair was the brother of David and Dunning McNair; his rôle as a land speculator was a minor one, but it appears here that he had claims to tracts on Twelve Mile and Four Mile creeks in Erie County. He eventually settled in Missouri.

four mile Creek & all He Had as to Relinquish the other without this much Cash therefore I Could Say no more I Promised Colt to write to You on the oca-tion. I hope You will be able to make Such Sale to the Company as will eneable You to acomedate all your Little Difficulties & also Help a friend—Pleas write me on this also, M^r Johnston Has Declined Going Down But Cap^t John Elliott is Going Down Shortly & will take Your Papers. I am with affection Your Brother &c.

DAVID MCNAIR

Col^l D M^cNair

DAVID MCNAIR TO DUNNING MCNAIR

Bullock Pens²⁶ January 26—1800

BROTHER DUNNING:

After waiting Either three or four Post, I this Evening Rec^d Yours of the 18 Instant Which Has made amends for your former Neglect, By Giveing in it So full an acc^t of the Business I was so anxious to Hear viz/—the Devision of the Counties I will now Go Home Prepared to inform our Inhabitents of the Probability of their wishes Being in Some Measure Satisfied in Point of the Devisions. I must in Justice to my owne feelings Give my wormest thanks to the Spirited minority of your Honorable House for their Noble & Independent Sentiments in their answer Prepared to Governors address which I assure you Has Gave Gennaral Satisfaction to your friends in this Country in So much that we find Although you Lost the motion it will Shew to all of any Liberality of Sentiment that True federal Princables will Stand the test through Good Report & Bad Report, being Neither Subject to Duplicity or Intimidation²⁷—being satisfied as to the Proposed Devision of the Counties I now Request you to write me as Soon as Possible whether the Sate of Justice²⁸ will be fixed for all

²⁶ Bullock Pens, more commonly known as Bull Pens, was a small section within the present Wilkinsburg. It was so called because the government had kept cattle for the army there.

²⁷ The reference is to a motion that the reply of the Federalist minority to Governor McKean's address to the legislature on December 17, 1799, be substituted for that of the Republican majority. Pennsylvania, *House Journal*, 1799, p. 46, 58, 72-74.

²⁸ Erie, "Beavertown," Warren, and Franklin were named as the county seats for Erie, Beaver, Warren, and Venango counties respectively. Meadville was to be the county seat of Crawford County provided the inhabitants subscribed four thousand dollars for a seminary of learning. The seat of Butler County was to be within five miles of the center of the county, and that of Armstrong County within five miles of Kittanning Town. Temporarily, until the division could be effected, Meadville was to be the seat of an enlarged

the Counties wherein the State Has Property & if so where you think our Sate for the most Northerly County will be fixed & also Give information as Early as Possible Respecting Your Business with the P. P. Comp^{ny}

I Have Inclosed You the Papers You wrote for Viz/—the warrant Bot of Widow Daugherty with Her Deed and Perchmants Certificate I will inclose the acc^t of the Conoquennessing Lands By Next Post.²⁹

I will Just Mention that a Certin Joseph Johnston that Lives on your Buckhart Place Has Proven by a Certin David Hull that You Gave Him Privalidge to Sell Your Wheat & Rye Stacks at David Torrence^s in order to Get Pay for His Creature that s^d torrence Kill^d in consequence of which He Put it to Constables Sale & Has thereby Put Sister Anny to a Great Dale of Trouble, as Rob^t Stewart Had to Go forward & Purchase them at 17 or 18 Dollars which Cash they are now obliged to make up. However Rather than See Her Vexed about it I have Spoke to Brother Alex^r Who says He will furnish it untill You Can Remit it.³⁰ I offer You the Respects of all this family & your sister Peggy in Particular whilst I Remain your Sincere Brother & friend

DAVID M^cNAIR

Colⁿ Dunning M^cNair

DAVID MCNAIR TO DUNNING MCNAIR

Bullock Pens Jan^y 30 1800

D^r DUNNING

I Have Rec^d and Shewed the Plan of the Devisions of the New Country into Counties (which You inclosed me in your^s of the 18 Instant) unto Numbers of Your friends and they are Gennaraly Satisfied With the following Exception /viz/a few of them Complain that the old County is not left large Enough or Rather that it Do Not Run farr Enough North Your friend Gen^l Wilkins³¹ is the Princable of those objectors and Says He Will Petition against it, for my owne Part I think the makeing of it any Larger would one Day Prove Injurious to it by Giveing a Chance of another devison. I am Hapy to find that Your friends in this Country is fully Convinced that You Have Been the whole Pro-
Crawford County that was to consist of Erie, Beaver, Crawford, Venango, and Warren counties.

²⁹ These lands were in Butler County.

³⁰ Alexander McNair became the first governor of Missouri and served from 1820 to 1824.

³¹ General John Wilkins, an influential citizen of Pittsburgh, was the treasurer of Allegheny County in 1800. He was the father of William Wilkins.

moter & Planer of those Devisions which is so most Igeniously Studied and Draughted or Laid off. Your Enymies of Pittsburgh is Endeavouring to make a Handle of the New Market which the[y] Prayed for in order to Injure You; they Say You took up the Business and afterwards Wrote Home to People in Pittsburgh to Petition against it, this arose from Cap^t Reed Haveing Rec^d a Letter from a member on the Subject and Secreted the Name, But this will Do You no Injury with them that ware your friends. I Have now to Suggest my Ideas on the Business of our Devision from Alleghany, whether thare Could not be a Law Past Eneableing us to Levy Collect & Retain our tax for our owne use By apointing or authorising us to apoint the Necessary officers in Each County for Raising & Retaining s^d taxes I Have mentioned this to Some Gentlemen of Pittsburgh which aproves Highly of it Gen^l Wilkins and Major Denny³² Goes so farr as to say there ought to be a Law Past to Retain the Present tax that the Commisoners of this County is now Laying and if officers Can Not be apointed in time, then Have it fixed By Way of a Lone to this County Liable to a Drawback when we want it.³³

I will take another Liberty in mentioning to you that your friend, George Washington Elliott, wishes to be appointed an Ennumerator for a Part of this old County if you Could Effect Some thing of this Kind for Him I think you will be Serving a young man that would Go as farr to Serve You as any other and will fill the appointment with integrity & accurecy.

D^r Dunning I find that it would be best for me to sell my farm near this and as I wish you to owne it, Try and make your Arangement to take it this Spring—in Case you Sell to the P P Com^y Let me Know the first Opertunity and for God Sake Sell if Possible—your Dear family is well I Leave them on Monday next for Walnut Creek farms where with the Blessing of Kind Providence Continued I Can Live Without the favour of Governor McKean Receive the Love of your sister Peggy & believe me to be with affection and merited Esteem Your Brother

DAVID M^cNAIR

Colⁿ Dun^e M^cNair

³² Major Ebenezer Denny was a commissioner of Allegheny County and in 1816 became Pittsburgh's first mayor.

³³ Section 16 of the act as passed provided that "all the county taxes which have or shall be assessed for the current year by the commissioners of Allegheny county, in that part now struck off and included within the lines of the several counties now formed, shall be and remain for the use of the county in which such sum is or shall be assessed." *Pennsylvania, Statutes at Large, 1682-1809*, vol. 16, p. 465.

DAVID MCNAIR TO DUNNING MCNAIR

Walnut Farms³⁴ March 1—1800

DEAR DUNNING:

Being once more Settled with my little family on this my favourite Spot and all my Little Domestick Concerns Going on as well as the Present Season will admit I Know Nothing that I am as anxious for as to Hear from You as it appears to me that much Depends on Your intended Sale of Land which You mentioned to me in the Last I Rec^d from You, You thought was in Your Power I hope the next will inform me of it taking Place I wish you to write me Respecting Your Purchasing my farm on the Nine Mile Run which I am Determined to let You Have

I Have not Seen any thing that Has Give Such a universal Satisfaction as your Plan of Deviding the Counties this I assure You is a Poppular thing and is ascribed to You. I Have nothing worth mentioning the Snowe is a modarate Depth the weather is Clear & Good Roads A Number of families is now on their way to this Country in Slays on the Ice.

M^r William Baird taylor of this Place Has Requested me to write you that if in your arangements you Could find it Conveinent to Lay Him an asortment of fine Cloaths & Casimores together with Some Waistcoat Patrons and Trimmens Suitable for the Same to the amount of Two or three Hundred Dollars He Can assure you that He will make Short & Punctual Remittens³⁵ &c

I Have made out to Pay Judah Colt Esq^r 150 Doll Cash and a fat ox towards my Walnut Creek Lands—I Have Seen Your friend I Postlethwaite the other Day & His family is well I am with much Esteem your affectionate Brother & friend—

DAVID MCNAIR

JOHN KERR TO DUNNING MCNAIR³⁵Nine mile run March 9th 1800

SIR,

I had a few days ago come to a determination to Visit the mouth of the great Kenhawa and had waited some time in Town to find an opportunity of descending the River by water but the Weather became too severe and last evening I returned to this place to wait the first favourable moment for a passage

³⁴ David McNair's tract on Walnut Creek in Erie County.

³⁵ John Kerr appears to have handled land matters for McNair and others.

which I presume I shall find in 6 or 8 days. If Prior is not dead, bankrupt or runaway we may be able to procure something from him, but his long silence has really given cause to suspect the fairness of his intentions, your land and lots in that quarter are I presume become Valuable in consequence of their obtaining a County there, the seat of Justice of which I believe is at Point Pleasant. . . .³⁶

I have no doubt but you will sell to the Population Company this Spring if it is the case I wish you may sell to advantage but the time is Certainly inauspicious if money be as scarce in the City as here, if you absolutely dispose of Your right in the Conyaute lands. Remember I will endeavour to Occupy N° 2 in the fourth and fifth ranges, this is a property I am become attached to make some engagements with the Company on my account So that I may have a tolerable prospect of paying them or take the debt into your own hands and I will pay you the uttermost farthing for those two tracts. I should certainly be vexed to lose the land, and lose it I must without a change of fortune or greater indulgence than my article gives. . . .

M^r Horner³⁷ is as usual he is averse to all business but that of attending to his domestic concerns the cleaning of Twenty bushels wheat is equally important with him to the settlement of an outstanding debt of Two thousand Dollars he is really a good man my greatest wishes is that his happiness may not be interrupted by his Situation in business, but Making preparation for the Worst and hoping for the best is Judicious in all persons.

I have nothing to request of you but what I have already mentioned this is my greatest concern if M^r Barron is poor [?] enough to buy [?] in cash perhaps he can procure for me the following books which can be sent forward with some of our merchants, goods you may think me foolish to think of turning my money this way; but be assured that to me good books are equal if not superiour to their Value in Cash—the Books are

Rollins ancient History	10 Volumes	Cost	3. 7. 6
Plutarchs lives—	6 Volumes	D ^r	£2. 0. 0
Homers Illiad & Odessy			.11. 3
Sterne's Works	8 Volumes		1.10. 9
			<hr/>
			£7.10. 0

³⁶ Mason County, Virginia, with Point Pleasant as the county seat, was not formally organized until 1804. According to James M. Callahan, *Semi-centennial History of West Virginia*, 84 (Charleston, W. Va., 1913), "the growth of community life [in Mason County] was long retarded by the size and price of the tracts held by absentee landlords, and by the difficulty of establishing titles to lands while at the same time on the Ohio side of the river lands could be bought at a reasonable price and in small tracts suitable for farms for real settlers."

³⁷ Probably James Horner, husband of Dunning's sister Mary.

Perhaps they may cost a little more than this if they do omit Homers Works which may bring all right—I have taken those prices from our old invoice Book.³⁸

If I have any private opportunities I will Write to you and if not I may by post if I am able to pay the postage if not I will be content with silence.

Receive my wishes for your happiness, & believe me to be my good Sir

Yours Sincerely

Dunning M^cNair Esquire

JOHN KERR

A leading problem among settlers in any frontier community was always that of communication with other sections. One phase of that problem in Erie County is discussed in the following letter. The road here advocated by David McNair is the one that later became known as the Waterford Turnpike.³⁹

DAVID MCNAIR TO DUNNING MCNAIR

Erie May 8—1801.

D^r SIR

It is harly Probable that this will Reach Pittsburgh before You Leave it—the Subject on Which I write is of such importene to us Jointly & to me indivialy that I will not omit the opertunity Preadventure it may Come to your Hands Ere you Set out.

We are informed that from Some New arrangement the Garrison at this Place is to be augmented & 150 Men Sent to work on the Road from Le Boeuf to Presque Isle now Sir the Present Road—being about 1½ mile or Perhaps if Straightent in Some Places not more than one Mile further than the Dug Road it is thought by many that the Said Dug Road will be opened by this Public apropriation or assistance of men and I am Convinced attemps will be made By People in this Country to Enduce the Commanding officer or Superintendent of this Business to open this Road in Preference to the Present one; their interest Leads them So to Do & they Have no Grounds of argument to offer in its favour but that it is 1½ mile Nearer it Rests therefore for me to advance the advantages on this Road that will over ballence that of So Small a

³⁸ Perhaps there is some significance in the fact that Kerr was trying to invest in books the exact amount specified by the state as the price of one hundred acres of land.

³⁹ An interesting account of early roads in the county is in Miller, *History of Erie County*, 98–101.

Distance not admitting more than one mile; the Dug or what is Call^d the french Road is now through an unsettled Country & will not accomodate one inhabitant there being none on it from one End to the other it is $12\frac{1}{2}$ miles all to be made through as bad Ground as the Present Road; the Present Road is Setled from one End to the other & intersected almost Every Two miles with Roads Leading from the Large Settlements between it & the Lake on the west; on this Road the inhabitants will work with Cheerfulness So many being accommodated by it So farr the Private . . . interest of this Country is Concerned in the Devision between the Two Roads but the main & Leading Enducement offered the Public is that this Present Road measuring 14 miles or Say $13\frac{1}{2}$ when Straightned the inhabitants will Engage to make 5 miles Compleat on the End next Erie & $2\frac{1}{2}$ on the End next Waterford this will Leave Little more than Six miles of the Road to make; our interest Loudly Calls for the work been Don on the Present Road as it would advantage us from the first Stroke, but if it Did not apear Clear that the Country at Large was bennifitted, I would be Silent on the matter We had not time to taulk on this or harly any other Subject When you were up—& I have as Little now—but from these Scattered Ideas you Can Correct Something that may Perhaps through Some Light on the Subject if You find they are not Needed for the Present Road I will Start next week to the Drawing Yours with affection

DAVID M^cNAIR

Col^l D M^cNair

[*In margin*.:] there is no order of Court for the Dug Road therefore Perhaps the Present will be Established

[*On reverse*.:] if the Boats is not Started Bring Six Large Bells.

Numerous items among the McNair Papers furnish mute evidence of the financial difficulties of the McNair brothers as the years went on. The land market remained at a low ebb and other financial ventures similarly failed to be profitable. Dunning McNair was unable to satisfy his creditors, largely because he could not collect from those owing money to him; complete financial failure overcame him shortly before his death in 1825. David lived on in Erie County for a number of years without greatly improving his financial status.