

## PRESLEY NEVILLE<sup>1</sup>

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PRESLEY NEVILLE was so prominent in the early history of Pittsburgh that a record of his life is almost a record of the city. Moving to western Pennsylvania when Pittsburgh was a mere frontier post, he was permitted to see that post grow into a city and to participate in its development as a borough officer, a legislator, a militia officer, and in numerous other capacities.

Neville was born at Winchester, Virginia, on September 5, 1755. His father, John Neville, was a descendant of an old English family that traced its lineage back to the Earl of Warwick. His mother, Winifred Oldham, was a descendant of John Oldham, who had settled in Virginia in 1635. The Winchester of 1755 was a town in name only and was the last western outpost of civilization. Braddock had passed through the town when on the road to meet his ill-fated army, and after his defeat the entire frontier was left exposed to Indian attacks that continued at intervals until 1767.<sup>2</sup>

Neville received the best education that his parents could afford. As a boy he was sent to an academy in Delaware, and in 1775 he was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, where he had achieved a reputation as a classical scholar.<sup>3</sup> Upon the outbreak of the Revolution he enlisted in the Virginia line and served throughout the war. From 1775 to 1778 he was aid-de-camp to Lafayette, and a close friendship sprang up between the two young men, who were nearly the same age. They

<sup>1</sup> Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 28, 1935. Mr. Hogg is a teacher of history in the Crafton High School, Crafton, Pa. *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> William H. Egle, *Genealogies: Chiefly Scotch-Irish and German*, 541, 543 (Harrisburg, 1896); Katherine G. Greene, *Winchester, Virginia, and Its Beginning, 1743-1814*, 44 (Straesburg, Va., 1926).

<sup>3</sup> James Hall, *Letters from the West: Containing Sketches of Scenery, Manners, and Customs*, 143 (London, 1828).

corresponded frequently after the war, and when Lafayette visited Pittsburgh in 1825 he asked to be shown Neville's home. Neville participated in all the battles in which the Virginia line was engaged, including those of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Monmouth. In 1780 he volunteered to serve under his father in the South and was captured at the surrender of Charleston, but he was exchanged in time to take part in the battle of Yorktown.<sup>4</sup>

At the close of the war Neville married Nancy Morgan, daughter of General Daniel Morgan, and removed to western Pennsylvania, where his father had settled previously at Woodville on Chartiers Creek.<sup>5</sup> There he found himself on the frontier, for Indian attacks were still common and continued to threaten the region for another decade. The Nevilles settled on land that had been granted to them by the state of Virginia before the outbreak of the Revolution, but when the Pennsylvania and Virginia dispute was settled in 1780 the titles were registered in the Pennsylvania land office. Most of the land along Chartiers Creek was patented under Virginia rights and by Virginia settlers. The Neville home at Woodville was built sometime before 1784.<sup>6</sup>

Presley Neville was not suited to the rigors of agricultural pursuits, although he and his father were the largest slaveholders in Allegheny County.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, slavery was an unprofitable venture when a staple crop was not raised. In 1792 Neville removed to Pittsburgh, where he occupied a house on Water Street between Wood Street and Cherry Lane. The Pittsburgh of his day did not present a favorable appearance: a number of ponds were scattered over the triangle, and from one of them a low ugly drain, running parallel to Wood Street, extended to the river. A traveler in 1806 observed that "the town is, however, dirty,

<sup>4</sup> *Lafayette in the American Revolution*, 23 (*Old South Leaflets*, vol. 4, no. 97); James Graham, *The Life of General Daniel Morgan*, 403 (New York, 1856).

<sup>5</sup> Louise P. Kellogg, *Frontier Retreat on the Upper Ohio, 1779-1781*, 333 (*Wisconsin Historical Collections*, vol. 24—Madison, 1917); Graham, *Morgan*, 403.

<sup>6</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, third series, 3:498. The house at Woodville is still occupied by descendants of the family.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin N. Schenkel, *The Negro in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, from 1789 to 1813*, 86 (University of Pittsburgh master's thesis, 1931).

consequent on the richness of the adjoining soil, the narrowness of the streets and the profuse use of coal.”<sup>8</sup> Evidently Pittsburgh early gained its reputation as a smoky city.

During the remainder of his life Presley Neville engaged in a number of activities, mostly of a public nature. In a region threatened with Indian attacks almost all able-bodied men were members of the militia, and by 1791 Neville was a lieutenant in the Allegheny County militia. Upon the reorganization of the militia in 1793 he was appointed brigade inspector of Allegheny County.<sup>9</sup> As Indian depredations on Pennsylvania frontiers were numerous during this period, and various expeditions sent against the Indians had met with defeat, Neville was consequently engaged in the employment of patrols for defense. It was not until Wayne defeated the Indians at Fallen Timbers in August, 1794, and forced them to sign the Treaty of Greenville that western Pennsylvania really lapsed into a feeling akin to security.

Pennsylvania had purchased the Erie Triangle from the federal government in 1792, and in order to facilitate the settlement of the region the general assembly in 1794 ordered that a colony be established at Presque Isle. Upon Neville fell the responsibility of recruiting the militia to carry out the undertaking. But before it could be completed the Indians, at the instigation of the British traders at Niagara, who were fearful of losing control of the Iroquois fur trade, protested on the ground that the United States had had no right to dispose of the land without consulting them. The federal government requested the state to stay its action. As a result the project was not completed until 1795, after the United States agent had concluded a treaty with the Indians at Canandaigua. When war threatened with France in 1798 the Allegheny County militia was called into service, and the brigade inspector requested the necessary commissions from the governor, but as the affair was settled peaceably the militiamen's sole claim to glory rested in their

<sup>8</sup> "A Sketch of Pittsburgh," reprinted from the *Literary Magazine and American Register*, October, 1806, *ante*, 13: 21.

<sup>9</sup> William P. Clarke, *Official History of the Militia and the National Guard of the State of Pennsylvania*, 149 ([Philadelphia], 1909).

skirmishes with the red men.<sup>10</sup> In 1799 Neville was promoted to the office of major general of the militia, which he held until 1811.<sup>11</sup>

As were most frontiersmen, Neville was interested in the land problem. For a number of years he was the land-office surveyor of Allegheny County, but as the county was quickly settled there was not much surveying for him to do, and the office came to have little value. He also served as a land agent. Settlers on the frontier secured applications from the surveyor's office and gave the purchase money to Neville, and he obtained the patent in the land office at Philadelphia. Certain men in the East who had large holdings on the frontier also placed the disposal of their lands in Neville's hands. If his connections with the land interests had ceased there he would have been fortunate, but he could not resist the temptation to speculate; consequently at one time or another he owned over seven thousand acres of land in Allegheny County alone. It has not been possible to ascertain his holdings in other counties, or even in other states, but in the failure of those ventures lay the reason for the financial embarrassment of his later years.<sup>12</sup>

To mention the name of Neville is to conjure the thought of the Whiskey Insurrection. As the son of John Neville, the inspector of revenue, Presley Neville at once became involved in the affair. His political inclinations were on the side of law and order, and it was only natural that he should take a stand in opposition to those who forcibly objected to the excise. When his father notified him that the insurrectionists were about to attack "Bower Hill," his father's home, he requested of Samuel Ewalt, the sheriff, that a posse be sent to defend the place, but the sheriff declined. Then Neville attempted to get John Wilkins, general of the Allegheny County militia, to call out a company for the same purpose, but his request was again refused. Undoubtedly both measures would have been impossible as well as unwise, for the office of inspector was unpopular. On the morning of the seventeenth of July, 1794, Neville and the United States marshal rode out to "Bower Hill," only to be taken

<sup>10</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, June 21, 1794; July 7, 1798.

<sup>11</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, ninth series, 3:1635.

<sup>12</sup> Allegheny County Archives, Deed Book, 1786-1814, vols. A1-U20, inclusive.

prisoners by the insurrectionists, and Neville was forced to watch the burning of the house without being certain of the fate of the occupants.<sup>13</sup> After his release he returned to Pittsburgh.

A few days later the mail was held up, and certain letters from Pittsburgh were taken. One of these was from Presley Neville, and it described the rebels in uncomplimentary terms. The next step of the insurrectionists was to call a meeting at Braddock's Field, where it was determined that the letter writers should be banished from the country. During the invasion of Pittsburgh by the "whiskey boys," Neville and his companions in disfavor with them remained in Fort Fayette. Within a few days Neville received a passport guaranteeing his safety from the leaders of the insurgent group, and he left for Philadelphia. When the federal army invaded the West to put down the insurrection he returned in company with his father-in-law, Daniel Morgan, who commanded a division of the army. One interesting feature of the affair was the quarrel that arose between Hugh Henry Brackenridge and the Neville connection. On July 22 Presley Neville had requested Brackenridge to intercede for him at a meeting of the insurrectionists at Mingo Church and had furnished him with companions for the journey. But when Brackenridge's attendance at the meeting was questioned by federal officials Neville did not speak out in his defense, and an acrimonious dispute began that lasted many years and involved succeeding generations.

Throughout his entire residence in Pittsburgh Presley Neville was interested in politics. Hugh Henry Brackenridge said that the Nevilles suffered from an "avidity for office, which seems to possess them, as if there were no persons out of their family, capable of holding offices."<sup>14</sup> Politically the Nevilles were Federalists, and Pittsburgh, as a commercial center, became the stronghold of the Federalist party.

In 1793 Presley Neville was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives from Allegheny County, and he served for three consec-

<sup>13</sup> The material in this and the following paragraph is from Hugh H. Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794*, 7, 12, 23, 60 (Philadelphia, 1795).

<sup>14</sup> Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, 145.

utive terms. In the House he was the only Federalist from the West and as such was looked upon as the spokesman of his party in that region. Because of the meagerness of the House records of those years it is difficult to determine his stand on the various questions of the day, but there is enough evidence from which to draw some conclusions. His knowledge of frontier land problems and of the militia was sufficient to place him on almost all the committees concerning those questions. He very early allied himself with the advocates of education and aided in drawing up bills for the relief of various academies. He supported with his vote the bill "to provide for the instruction of youth by establishing schools throughout this Commonwealth so that the poor may be taught gratis." He recognized the need for building roads in the western counties and supported all bills for that purpose. He was regular in his vote and supported his party on all questions. The election for his second term came in the midst of the excitement aroused by the Whiskey Insurrection, which seems to have had no particular effect on his political fortunes at the time. In the midst of Neville's second term the antagonism aroused in the East by the insurrection flared up. The Federalist House voted that the elections in the western counties were not legal and the members not entitled to their seats. The move was undoubtedly a party measure, but it placed Presley Neville in the same boat with his Democratic enemies, among whom was Albert Gallatin. The banished legislators then went back home, and all but one, who refused to run, were reelected. At the end of his third term in 1796 Neville notified his constituents that business interests would prevent him from further active participation in politics. He was then at the height of favor in the House, and if he had further political ambitions the move was decidedly unwise.<sup>15</sup>

In 1798 the pressure of business must have decreased, for Neville consented to become a candidate for the national House of Representatives. In so doing he almost caused a fatal split in the Federalist party. John Woods, who also desired the support of the Federalists, had in Hugh Henry Brackenridge an implacable enemy, and Brackenridge, in

<sup>15</sup> Pennsylvania, *House Journal*, 1792-94, *passim*; 1796, p. 235; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 10, 1796.

his desire to defeat Woods, forgot his quarrel with Neville and worked for the latter's election. But before the election an accommodation was reached between the two factions, and Neville withdrew. This so enraged Brackenridge that he turned Republican and brought John Israel to Pittsburgh to become editor of the city's second newspaper, the *Tree of Liberty*. Whatever the nature of the agreement in 1798, which was left to the public to imagine, Presley Neville was the Federalist candidate in 1800. He had a strong opponent in Albert Gallatin, however. Neville was unsuccessful in the election and did not even carry Allegheny County.<sup>16</sup> His failure to win is not at all difficult to understand—as long as he confined his activities to Allegheny County the Federalist party of Pittsburgh had ensured his success, but failure was certain when he extended his activities into the democratic agrarian counties of Washington and Fayette. Neville was unfortunate in that he was the representative of a disintegrating party.

After 1800 Neville confined his political activities to local affairs. He had been a member of the legislative committee in 1794 that drew up the bill incorporating the borough of Pittsburgh. The charter provided for two burgesses with four assistants to advise them. Whenever an expression of the popular will was desired a town meeting was called. In 1803 Neville was elected one of the burgesses, and when the town government was reorganized in 1804 with one burgess and a council he was reelected.<sup>17</sup> In addition Neville later served one term on the council. As burgess he had many serious problems to face: People persisted in permitting their horses to wander through the streets, and when the constable attempted to stop the practice the owners of the animals retaliated by throwing stones through his windows at night. Dogs were so numerous that the borough was forced to place a tax upon them. Traffic presented problems even at that time, for an ordinance had to be passed against obstructing the streets in any way. Sunday quiet had to be preserved. The rule against bathing in the river in the daytime had to be enforced. The smoke nuisance was another problem that arose quite early, for the bur-

<sup>16</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 11, September 29, 1798; October 25, 1800.

<sup>17</sup> *Tree of Liberty* (Pittsburgh), May 24, 1804.

gess was forced to call to the attention of the council "the height of the stove pipes, as people were pointing them into the streets and leaving them so low that there was danger of fire and passers by were offended by the smoke and dirt."<sup>18</sup> Neville was also forced to use his most conciliating manner towards the county commissioners, who would not permit the bell in the courthouse to be rung for civic activities. As this was the only bell in town, Pittsburgh was left in a stupor of silence. Incidentally, the borough expenses for 1805 were only twelve hundred dollars.

As a commercial center Pittsburgh had long felt the need of a financial institution, and when the Bank of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia made a formal proposition to the borough to establish a branch bank, a town meeting was called and the proposition was accepted. The bank, the Office of Deposit and Discount, was established in 1804 in a stone building on Wood Street, then the business center of the town, and John Thaw was brought from Philadelphia as its first teller.<sup>19</sup> Neville served as a director of the branch bank for a number of years. He was also a trustee of the Pittsburgh Academy, which later became the University of Pittsburgh, from its formation in 1787 and served as secretary of its board for a number of years. In 1800 he delivered the oration at the military memorial services held to commemorate the death of Washington.<sup>20</sup>

In 1805 the "Quids," or discontented Republicans, united with the Federalists to elect Thomas McKean governor of Pennsylvania. The contest between the Republicans and the Federalists was bitterly fought, and out of it arose Pittsburgh's only fatal duel, that between Tarleton Bates and William Wilkins, which resulted in the death of Bates. Neville had a special interest in the matter. Bates, the Republican, was something of a *protégé* of Neville, the Federalist, who had recommended Bates for the office of prothonotary. Bates was engaged to Neville's eldest daughter, and Neville served as his second in the duel. After Bates's death

<sup>18</sup> Borough Papers, 1803-1805, in the Craig Papers (Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh).

<sup>19</sup> John T. Holdsworth, *Financing an Empire, History of Banking in Pennsylvania*, 1: 137 (Chicago, 1928).

<sup>20</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 11, 1800.



Neville was appointed prothonotary of Allegheny County.<sup>21</sup> This appointment was quite welcome, for the numerous fees were badly needed by Neville, whose fortunes were none too good at this time. It afforded him only temporary relief, for the Republicans came back into office at the next election, and Neville was removed by the new governor, Simon Snyder.

In 1806 Aaron Burr passed through Pittsburgh on his way to the West and so beguiled Neville and other Federalists that they outfitted a boat, and a number of young men, including Neville's son, sailed to join Burr. When the proclamation against Burr was issued Neville was placed in an unfavorable light.<sup>22</sup>

The usual fate of land speculators on the frontier was bankruptcy, and Neville proved no exception. From 1803 on he was the defendant in a great number of lawsuits, in which the majority of the judgments were rendered against him. To settle his debts he was forced to liquidate his property, and by 1816 his situation had become so embarrassing that he determined to leave Pittsburgh. He owned a large tract of land on the Ohio River near Cincinnati that had been granted to him for his Revolutionary services by the state of Virginia out of the Virginia reservation.<sup>23</sup> A number of years earlier he had caused to be laid out on this tract of land a town, which he called Neville, and it was to this town that he retired to live in a large double log house. To one accustomed to the best of circumstances his later years must have been depressing. There he died on December 1, 1818, in the sixty-third year of his life. His body was brought to Pittsburgh and interred in the Episcopal burying ground.<sup>24</sup>

The student of Presley Neville's life is impressed by the esteem in which his personal integrity was held by his contemporaries. In over twenty

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Craig's Scrapbook, 125, in the possession of James C. Chaplin, of Sewickley, Pa.; *Commonwealth* (Pittsburgh), January 19, 1806.

<sup>22</sup> *Commonwealth*, December 31, 1806.

<sup>23</sup> "Catalogue of Revolutionary Soldiers and Sailors of the Commonwealth of Virginia to Whom Land Bounty Warrants Were Granted by Virginia for Military Services," in *Sons of the American Revolution*, Kentucky Society, *Yearbook*, 1913, p. 245 (Lexington, 1913).

<sup>24</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, June 1, 1819.

years of public life his character was attacked on only one occasion, and then in the midst of a bitter political campaign. A second commendable characteristic was his generosity. His house was open to all strangers, and in his excessive liberality may rest the reason for a large part of the financial difficulties of his later years, for he was often imposed upon. A fitting epitaph for such a man might be: Presley Neville was first and last a gentleman, generous to a fault, possessed of lofty feeling and a proud spirit, and ready to serve his fellow men in peace or war.