THE SITES OF FORBES' LAST THREE BREASTWORKS

Harold A. Thomas

Every schoolboy knows that during the summer and autumn of 1758 a British army under General John Forbes engaged in an epic struggle to build a two-hundred-mile wagon road across the mountainous wilderness of western Pennsylvania for the purpose of implementing an attack on the French fort at the site of present Pittsburgh. Among many wise policies followed by General Forbes was that of constructing fortifications along his route, spaced at intervals of one or two days' march. These structures varied in size and character from simple log breastworks to the elaborate wooden forts at Raystown (Bedford) and Ligonier.

Three of the breastworks built by Forbes — those at the Four Redoubts Camp, Washington's Camp and Bouquet's Camp — were located in the extreme western portion of his march, between Chestnut Ridge and the site of present Pittsburgh. A century-and-a-half ago the remains of these old log structures were presumably in plain sight right beside the early Forbes Road. The presence of these decaying relics was a matter of such commonplace knowledge among the rural population that nobody (or almost nobody) took the trouble to make a map or write a description giving their exact locations. Some of the descendants of the early farmers retained a knowledge of the exact breastwork sites as a matter of family tradition, but this source of information, so precious to the historian, is now drying up and is almost completely gone. For many miles east of Pittsburgh, nearly all the old farmhouses along the route of the early Forbes Road have been purchased by real-estate promoters and have been demolished or left as windowless ruins inhabited only by nocturnal ghosts. Their former residents are now dispersed far and wide, and the old fields are being

---

Relocation, rediscovery, or, as Mr. Thomas has expressed it, "recovery" of historic sites is more important at the present time than ever before. Physical changes taking place around us are so transforming the landscape that permanent records such as this article will serve future public interest far beyond pure historical interest, so that our heritage may be preserved. See also note 5.—Ed.

1 Niles Anderson, "The General Chooses a Road," WPHM, XLII, 114 (citing Forbes to Pitt, June 17, 1758, in A. P. James, The Writings of General John Forbes, 117), hereinafter cited as Anderson, WPHM, XLII.
occupied by endless rows of modern brick dwellings whose inhabitants are totally uninformed regarding the history of the region.

Because it is now becoming so extremely difficult to obtain reliable information on the exact locations of Forbes' former three breastworks in Allegheny and western Westmoreland counties, it is thought that this description of the writer's investigations on this topic will be of interest both to present readers and to future historians.

The various fortifications built by Forbes were intended to fulfil three principal functions: (1) to serve as protection against enemy attacks during the period while the army was advancing troops and supplies in order to consolidate a forward position; (2) to protect wagon trains and other military units engaged in transporting supplies and (3) to afford one or more rallying points in case the army should suffer a reverse which might necessitate a retreat.\(^2\) The actual experience of the campaign afforded ample proof of Forbes' wisdom in providing these fortifications. On October 12th,\(^3\) the British army, partially assembled in the newly built Fort Ligonier, easily repelled a major attack by the main French and Indian army. Had this attack occurred in the unfortified forest, it seems quite possible that, because of basic British inability to cope with the Indian tactics of woodland fighting, the army of Forbes might have suffered another defeat similar to the ones which had been inflicted upon Braddock and Grant.

The following list gives the names of the principal roadside fortifications occupied or built by Forbes' army during its march across the mountains east of Chestnut Ridge: Forts Loudon, Littleton, Juniata Crossing, Raystown (Bedford), Dewart, Edmunds' Swamp, Stony Creek, Kickenapaulins, Dudgeon and Ligonier. West of Chestnut Ridge the fortifications were known as "Breastworks."\(^4\) They differed from the fortifications farther east in that their construction was done under conditions requiring extreme haste. The army's final advance from Fort Ligonier to Fort Duquesne was turned into a race against time by the consideration that the onset of winter might reduce the army to starvation by causing breakdown of transportation across the mountains. Because of the progressive weakening of the French garrison during this period, due to departure of its Indian allies, none

---

2 Anderson, \textit{WPHM}, XLII, 118.
of the three breastworks west of Chestnut Ridge was ever called upon to withstand an enemy attack.

Before taking up discussion of the exact breastwork sites, mention may be made of some related topics. (1) The first of these is the relation of the army's marching route to the ridges separating adjacent watersheds. The topography of western Pennsylvania is characterized by the existence of watershed-boundary ridges which extend for many miles at fairly constant elevation. Such ridges formed natural routes for Indian trails which were later used by traders and by armies (such as that of Forbes), still later by roads of the pioneer settlers and finally by modern highways. Presumably the fundamental reason why the Indians and traders located their routes along the ridges rather than along the valley bottoms was because the latter tended to be swampy and clogged by impenetrable growths of bushes. A suggestion of this condition is given by early stream names such as "Bushy Run" or "Brush Creek." Along the ridge lines the woods were more open and easily traversed. From the standpoint of a military commander, the high-level route also had the advantage of being safer against ambush or assault.

(2) Mention may also be made of Potts' map showing the entire marching route of Forbes' army from Fort Loudon to Fort Duquesne. This map, prepared by J. Potts, a member or attaché of the army, is still in existence, preserved in the archives of the Pennsylvania Historical Society. A discussion of who Potts was, the nature of his survey methods and the accuracy of his map has been given by the writer in a previous article published in this magazine. In spite of the lack of precision in some of Potts' measurements, much valuable information about the army's route can be deduced from a study of his map. On that map the route is indicated by a dotted line. When the map is enlarged to the scale of the modern U.S. Geological Survey maps, as in Fig. 1b and Fig. 2c, the spacing of the dots seems surprisingly wide.

(3) Mention may also be made regarding military and civilian use of the words "redoubt," "breastwork" and "ravelin." From George Washington's letter, quoted in a later paragraph, it is clear that he

5 Mr. Thomas' observations are drawn from a rich experience in the field of hydraulic engineering. He has been engineer and consultant on many of the important surveys of the watersheds of the nation in relation to the great power and conservation dams as well as water supply for great urban areas. As professor of that branch of civil engineering, he served many years at Carnegie Institute of Technology. Hence Mr. Thomas' comments regarding topography and watersheds are authoritative.—Ed.

6 WPHM, XLVI, 49, 53.
considers the word "redoubt" to refer to a timber structure and "breastwork" to an earthen one. However, this usage is not universal in military or civilian practice. The Standard Dictionary\(^7\) defines these words as follows: Redoubt: "An enclosed fortification, especially a temporary one of any form; — made for an advance-post, and em-

ployed to defend a pass or a hilltop, or to strengthen a position taken up in dangerous territory”; Breastwork: “A low temporary defensive work, usually breast-high”; Ravelin: “A detached work having two faces meeting in a salient angle at the front end and open at the rear.” Potts’ sketch of the fortification at the Four Redoubts Camp, enlarged to the scale of the modern U.S. Geological Survey map (Fig. 1a), is shown in Fig. 1b. This sketch indicates that the four V-shaped outworks were not enclosed but were open at the rear. Thus, according to the dictionary definition, they should be called “ravelins” rather than “redoubts.” However, the latter designation was apparently in general use by contemporary officers. The abovementioned fortification should be known technically as a “cluster of four ravelins” but in later years the country people and even educated historians referred to such fortifications as merely “breastworks.”

Breastwork at the Four Redoubts Camp. The Four Redoubts campsite of Forbes’ army lies on the old Forbes Road slightly more than three miles north by east from Greensburg. Local knowledge of the whereabouts of the former breastwork here has passed into oblivion, but reliable information on the exact breastwork site can be obtained from a study of the Potts map (Fig. 1b) in connection with the modern U.S.G.S. map (Fig. 1a), aided by inspection of the actual topography in the field. In contemporary writings the place was variously referred to as “the Three Redoubts,” the “Four Redoubts” and “Armstrong’s Camp.” The latter name derived from Colonel John Armstrong, commander of the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment.9

Forbes’ westward route was here following the crest of the ridge which separates the watershed of Loyalhanna Creek from that of the Youghiogheny River. In general the crest of this ridge is fairly broad, but near this particular place the headwaters of four small creeks — two running north and two running south — have eaten so far back into the summit ridge that the traveller along this ridge, as indicated in Fig. 1a, is forced to follow a zigzag route. Approaching from the east in a southwesterly direction the route makes a sudden right-angle turn toward the northwest, proceeds about a quarter of a mile and then

8 A full explanation of the application of all of these names is found in Anderson, WPHM, XLII, 393-394; J. C. Fitzpatrick, The Writings of George Washington (Washington, 1931), II, 306-307 (hereinafter cited as Fitzpatrick, Writings of Washington).

9 John Armstrong was Colonel Commandant of the First Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment, commission dated May 7, 1758. Penna. Archives (5th ser.), I, 178. He was later a brigadier general in the Revolution and died in Carlisle in 1795. Ibid. (5th ser.), 571.
turns abruptly again toward the southwest. This jog in alignment, followed of necessity by both the early trail and the modern highway, is clearly apparent on Potts' map, thus pin-pointing the breastwork site with much accuracy. As shown on the Potts map (Fig. 1b) Forbes' marching trail passed right through the middle of the fortification, which was at the second bend where the route turned southwest again.

Detailed inspection of the topography here, in relation to Potts' map, indicates that Forbes' trail at this place must have been about sixty feet north of the present pavement. Here there is a spur of the flat-topped main hill, pointing westward and commanding the narrow saddle in ridge (between the headwaters of the two small creeks shown in Fig. 1a) over which any enemy following the trail from the west would have to approach. Comparison of Potts' map with this actual topography makes it certain that the Four Redoubts fortification was built on this spur. Presumably the strength of this position against attack from the west was a leading consideration in the mind of military-engineer Gordon when he chose this place for his fort.

Regarding the exact size of the fort we have no information. As indicated in Fig. 1b, the size obtained by enlarging Potts' symbol to the scale of the modern U.S.G.S. map is unreasonably large. Aside from the two forts at Bedford and Ligonier, the only one of Forbes' roadside forts of which traces still remain is Fort Dewart (on top of Allegheny Mountain), where there is an earth embankment enclosing a sixty-foot square. From this we get the suggestion that Forbes' roadside forts were not made large enough to shelter the main body of troops but were merely intended, in case of attack in force, to serve as centers of resistance and shelters for supplies. For the purpose of mapping the Four Redoubts fort on Fig. 1a, the writer has assumed that the vertices of the four ravelins would lie approximately on the corners of a 70-foot square.

To reach the Four Redoubts site by automobile, proceed north 3.2 miles from the center of Greensburg on Route 819, turn right at the "Hannastown" historical marker and go east 0.3 of a mile. Fig. 1a will serve as a permanent record of the exact fortification site.

Colonel George Washington, commanding the 1st Virginia Regiment and other troops, arrived, during the morning of November 18, at this spot which was then known as the "Three Redoubts" or "Armstrong's Camp," where an advanced position had been laid out by

10 Anderson, WPHM, XLII, 388 and note.
a. Vicinity of Washington's Camp. (From modern U.S. Geol. Surv. map)
b. Ancient Torrance property map of same area, reduced to same scale.
c. Potts' map of same area in November 1758, enlarged to same scale.
engineer Harry Gordon. Washington’s road cutters went ahead and returned at dark. The remainder of the men helped with the new fortifications. While staying at this camp Washington wrote a letter to General Forbes containing these sentences: “I found three redoubts erected for the defense of this camp. Mr. Gordon thinks that it will be sufficiently secured by this means; but for my own part, I do not look upon redoubts alone, in this country, to be half as good as the slightest breastwork; indeed I do not believe that they are any security at all where there are no other works.” 12 This letter makes it clear why the terms “Three Redoubts” and “Four Redoubts” were both used to designate this place. The letter also confirms our understanding that Forbes’ fortifications west of Chestnut Ridge were made of logs rather than of earth.

Breastwork at Washington’s Camp. The site of Washington’s Camp is located on the hill about 1.3 miles southeast of Newlonsburg on the paved highway which leads from Newlonsburg toward Harrison City. That there was a fortification there is shown by the Potts map and by a dot marked “breastworks” on an early farm map mentioned in the following paragraphs. The writer has not been able to find a mention of this fortification in any written or printed document. The exact breastwork site, as determined by the writer, is shown on Fig. 2a, which is traced from the large-scale U.S.G.S. map. Knowledge about the exact location of this breastwork was undoubtedly possessed by local farmers, but this source of information has now vanished completely. In this portion of the march Potts’ map is not sufficiently accurate to serve as a primary source for making a precise recovery of the breastwork site, though it serves as a useful check.

The fundamental source now available for recovering the exact site of the timber breastwork at Washington’s Camp is an old warantee map now in possession of James F. Torrance of Export, Pennsylvania. A portion of this map, reduced to the same scale as that used for the U.S.G.S. map, is reproduced in Fig. 2b, the names of the old property owners being omitted. The Torrance map is a tracing of a very old map whose original has apparently been lost. It shows the property lines of the original farm patents in a portion of Westmoreland County lying southward of Newlonsburg and Export. In scale (1 inch equals 100 rods) and general make-up the Torrance map closely resembles similar maps in the Warantee Atlas of Allegheny County, based on the original

land surveys made mostly between 1769 and 1790. Like the Allegheny County Warantee Atlas maps, the Torrance tracing shows portions of the original Forbes Road where it crosses various farm plots. Although the Torrance tracing carries no title there is abundant internal evidence of its authenticity. Near Washington's Camp the Torrance tracing shows a short portion of the early Forbes Road, and a short distance north of this there is a dot marked "breastworks." This dot is reproduced on Fig. 2b. There can be no doubt that the timber breastwork was still in existence at the time of making of the pioneer surveys which formed the basis of the Torrance map.

In the vicinity of Washington's Camp the farm-boundary lines on the modern property map are so different from the original boundary lines shown on the Torrance map that, at first sight, hardly any resemblance can be detected between the two sets of lines. However, by careful study in the field it is possible to recover a few of the original property lines shown on the Torrance map. In some cases these old property lines are marked by existing fences. In other cases they can be recognized by remains of ancient fence rails or by low ridges of soil which mark the edges of former plowed fields. The modern large-scale U.S.G.S. map shows so many details — houses, barns, lanes, etc., located with high precision by aerial photography — that it is possible to plot the recovered ancient property lines on this map without doing extensive surveying work. On Fig. 2a, which is traced from the U.S.G.S. Murrysville Sheet, the writer has indicated by rows of crosses several old property lines which appear on the Torrance map and can also be recovered in the field at the present time. Similar crosses have been placed on the corresponding lines of the Torrance map, Fig. 2b.

By tracing the Torrance map, Fig. 2b, on transparent paper and superimposing the tracing on the U.S.G.S. map, Fig. 2a, it is found that the two sets of lines carrying crosses check each other very satisfactorily, thus verifying the accuracy of work done by the pioneer surveyors who presumably preceded the first settlers in this area. By this process of superposition it is a simple matter to transfer to the U.S.G.S. map the dot marked "breastworks" on the Torrance map, thus furnishing an accurate present determination of the site of the former breastwork.

Fig. 2c shows the Potts map in the vicinity of Washington's Camp, enlarged to the scale of the modern U.S.G.S. map. From this it is apparent that only one ravelin of the fortification was constructed
at the time when Potts made his sketch. It is not known whether the remaining ravelins were ever completed. The first units of the army moved into this camp on the afternoon of November 19, and all three brigades of the army united briefly at Washington's Camp on November 22 and departed westward. The northward offset in Potts' line indicates the initial movement of Washington's brigade (which Potts accompanied) as that brigade moved northward to take its place on the right flank of the army.

The earliest version of the Forbes Road, as it existed while the pioneer land surveys were being made and before settlers had moved in, was presumably a mere trace through the woods, following approximately the marching route of Bouquet's brigade on the left.

13 Anderson, WPHM, XLII, 394.
flank of the army. According to Fig. 2b, this was a little south of the later version, which passed close to the breastwork.

The site of the timber breastwork at Washington's Camp, recovered as described above, is 20 feet off the north edge of the pavement of the highway which leads from Newlonsburg toward Harrison City, the exact distance from Newlonsburg (intersection with new U.S. 22) being 1.32 miles. The site is 200 feet west of the entrance driveway of the old farmhouse formerly occupied by Hoey, then by J. W. Wilson and now by R. Putkovich. Fig. 2a will serve as a permanent record of the exact site.

*Breastwork at Bouquet's Camp.* The site of Bouquet's Breastwork is located near the Old Frankstown Road 1.5 miles east of Universal, Pennsylvania. In the vicinity of this site the route of the Old Frankstown Road approximately coincides with that of the early Forbes Road. That there was a breastwork at Bouquet's Camp is indicated by Forbes' letter, written from "Camp Cross Turtle Creek on Nov. 22," directing Bouquet to take measures to strengthen his advance position. Existence of the breastwork is also confirmed by the following annotation on the original warranty of the farm patented to William Bousman: "at the breastwork on the Old Road," and also by the following annotation on the warranty of the adjacent farm on the east, patented to John Sutton: "On Forbes Road near Bouquet's breastworks." 14

The general location of the breastwork site has long been a matter of public knowledge. For a considerable period of years the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission has maintained a historical marker on the south side of the Old Frankstown Road, stating that the site of Bouquet's Breastwork is near by. In the face of all this publicity the disappearance of all oral or written information which might lead to precise recovery of the actual spot where the breastwork stood is indeed surprising. However, the writer found this disappearance to be real indeed. Descendants of the old farm families which might have first-hand knowledge of the breastwork location seem to have vanished from the region. However, the writer at last had the good fortune to interview an aged man, Frank Holmes (still living in 1963), who has

14 A letter of Dr. Paul A. Wallace to the author, dated October 25, 1963, states that on the original survey plats in the Land Office, in Harrisburg, Pa., in addition to the descriptions given above, appears the information that follows.

On the Wm. Bousman tract A2-170, Warrant 103, January, 1769, (named) "Blunderbush."

exact knowledge of the breastwork site as a matter of family tradition. Since his birth, shortly after the Civil War, Mr. Holmes has lived (until recently) in a house a quarter of a mile to the north. During his lifetime no physical trace of the former breastwork has existed, but he knows the exact place of its location and has in his possession two spherical lead musket balls and a brass bullet-pouch button which he picked up on this spot. He states that other musket balls were found there by the former owners of the property. For the benefit of future historians it seems well worth while to record, in Fig. 3, Frank Holmes' identification of the exact site of Bouquet's Breastwork. The place where this structure stood is on the upward slope south of the creek (east branch of Thompson's Run) 300 feet measured southeast perpendicular to the Old Frankstown Road from a point on the latter 400 feet east of where the Logan’s Ferry Road comes in from the south.