

## JOHN ORMSBY, PITTSBURGH'S ORIGINAL CITIZEN

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THE following epitaph, inscribed on one of the few remaining tombstones in Trinity churchyard, Pittsburgh, serves well as an introduction to the founder of the large and distinguished Ormsby family of western Pennsylvania:

On the 19th day of December, A.D. 1805, the remains of the venerable John Ormsby, aged 85 years, were interred, agreeably to his desire, with the ashes of his beloved wife. Mr. Ormsby migrated to Fort Duquesne about the time the British took possession of it, at which time he was commissary of provisions and paymaster of disbursements for the erection of Fort Pitt. Subsequently he entered largely into the Indian trade, and in the year 1763 was plundered of all his property, his people murdered, and himself shut up in Fort Pitt during the siege. Mr. Ormsby was a large stockholder in the Indian grant ("Indiana"), which would have remunerated him for all his losses by the Indians, had not the revolution taken place. Notwithstanding, he was a staunch Whig and gloried in our independence.

In most cases, the name Ormsby is derived from Ormsby Parish, County Lincoln, and sometimes from Ormsby St. Michael, or Ormesby St. Margaret, in County Norfolk, England. There also is found an Ormsby Parish in the North Riding of County York. The meaning of all these is the dwelling of Orme, a common name among the Danes who settled in the east of England. The name of Robert de Ormesby is found in the Hundred Rolls of County Lincoln, and that of William de Ormesby in those of County Norfolk.

Robert Ormsby was the fifth in descent from Thomas Ormesby who came to Ireland early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth and married

<sup>1</sup> The author, who at the time of writing was a student of history at the University of Pittsburgh under the tutelage of Dr. Alfred P. James, has here followed the general story of Ormsby's life as given by Oliver Ormsby Page in *A Short Account of the Family of Ormsby* (Albany, N. Y., 1892), but has filled in the picture, and to some extent altered it in detail, by extensive study of all known sources of information on the subject.—Ed.

a daughter of Henry Malby, whose father was Sir Nicholas Malby, chief commander of the English forces at Connaught. Robert married Mary Blakeney, a descendant of an ancient family, one of whose members was said to have "lost his leg in the wars of Flanders." That prevaricator, tradition, relates that having had his leg "lopped off, he picked it up and used it as a war club, thus doing violent service." Whatever may be the truth in this matter, it seems likely that the Ormsby family must have rendered valuable military service, because the family coat of arms shows a mailed hand holding a leg in threatening fashion. It also contains in Latin: "More courage than prudence."

The son of Robert Ormsby and Mary Blakeney was Oliver. This Oliver Ormsby was the father of John Ormsby, with whom we are concerned. John's mother was Deborah Barry, a member of still another family of warriors.<sup>2</sup>

Our John Ormsby was born in Ireland in the year 1720. There is little information dealing with the early years of his life, but we do know that he spent some time at Trinity College in Dublin and later joined the army to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious forbears. With these sparse items in mind, we must skip through thirty-two years of Ormsby's life, which brings us to the year 1752. It was at this time that he decided to go to the New World where his country was soon to be engaged in a conflict against the French for the possession of the Ohio valley.

The letter that gives us the date of his removal to the colonies also casts light on another interesting fact. While in England, Ormsby had been very intimate with several of the relatives of Sir William Johnson, His Majesty's Indian Agent in North America. On several occasions, Ormsby attempted to strike up correspondence between Sir William and himself, but we do not know whether Ormsby received any encouragement from Johnson Hall or not.

In 1753, Ormsby was in Philadelphia. It was in that city that he opened a school. Among other things he offered instruction in dancing and swordsmanship. This venture proved to be well worth his while for later he was able to write, "the young people came to my Seminary in numbers so that I had uncommon success." In 1754 he was engaged in

<sup>2</sup> John W. Jordan, *Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania*, 4:442 (1932).

the same kind of business at Lancaster and York, Pennsylvania, and at Alexandria, Virginia.

In 1755, while Ormsby was operating his school at Alexandria, General Braddock appeared in Virginia, in preparation for his ill-fated expedition against the French who were at that time in possession of the Ohio valley. Deciding to abandon his teaching duties in the East, John Ormsby offered his services to General Braddock and was given the commission of captain in view of the fact that he had had previous military training in the British army. While the army was engaged in its preparation for the long expedition into the French and Indian country, a sudden misfortune fell upon the thirty-five-year-old Ormsby. A sudden attack of nervous fever and ague overcame him and he was forced to remain in the East.<sup>3</sup> So weak was the sick man that he was unable to continue his school. For three years he was engaged in nursing himself back to good health. It is quite probable that during this period he began to incur a rather large debt that later hung over him. Although this illness was first looked upon as a misfortune, it soon became apparent that it really had been good fortune. For soon reports began to filter through the foliage that gave the easterners a picture of the horrible fate that had befallen the over-confident Braddock and his fine army as they marched proudly and showily over the terra incognita of western Pennsylvania. We can picture a fortunate Mr. Ormsby as he folded his hands and lifted his eyes heavenward in a prayer of thanksgiving for this act of intervention that Providence had engineered on his behalf.

In 1758, in spite of the disaster that had befallen the Braddock expedition, John Ormsby apparently decided to live by the motto that graced the coat of arms adopted by his fighting forbears. In this year General John Forbes was preparing to lead an expedition into the same country that now marked the final resting place of so many of Braddock's brave crew. The reader may seek some motivation that stirred Ormsby to such persistence in attempting to get to the West. It could hardly have been love for adventure because Ormsby was now in his thirty-eighth year—too old to be prey for that temptress of youth. Events of his later life lead

<sup>3</sup> Page, *Short Account of the Family of Ormsby*, 13-15. The letter referred to above was burned in the fire that swept the New York State Library some years ago.

us to believe that the thing which most influenced Ormsby was a desire to acquire some land in the virgin transmontane country and to establish himself in those surroundings where every man started from scratch.

Ormsby joined the Forbes forces and was made commissary of provisions. Mayhap his none-too-strong constitution necessitated his taking this rank rather than one that might have demanded a more rugged specimen. It is certain that the commissary was ill-pleased with his duties because he later said, "It was wretched employment; the provisions were so scarce that I could barely supply the General's table." The soldiers were extremely low in spirit. When the army reached Turtle Creek a council of war was held to determine what future action to take. The consensus was that the men should go no farther. Concerning this, Ormsby tells us that "the General swore a furious oath that he would sleep in the Fort or in Hell the next night."

About midnight of the same day a loud explosion sounded from the direction of Fort Duquesne. Forbes surmised that the French, aware of the superior forces of the British, had blown up their magazine. The soldiers hoped the general was correct as it "revived our drooping spirits a little."<sup>4</sup> The army moved in upon the smoldering ruins of the former "nest of robbers" and found itself in a most uncomfortable position; there was no food to supply to the hungry soldiers. Ormsby and his detail were employed in bettering this situation, which already had irked the commissary.

Now that the British had recaptured the forks of the Ohio, they determined to establish themselves and protect what they had gained. General Forbes left Pittsburgh on December 3, 1758, and only 280 men under the command of Colonel Hugh Mercer were left to garrison the place. John Ormsby was one of the men who remained in the wilderness. He kept his former post of commissary of provisions and also took on the duties of paymaster for the erection of the new stronghold.<sup>5</sup>

Although the French had been forced to surrender Fort Duquesne, there still remained many hardships to overcome in the year that followed. A letter written by Ormsby and dated May 28, 1759, furnishes

<sup>4</sup> Neville B. Craig, *The Olden Time*, 2:1-2 (1848).

<sup>5</sup> Solon J. and Elizabeth H. Buck, *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*, 96 (Pittsburgh, 1939); Page, *Short Account of the Family of Ormsby*, 14.

us with a very clear description of the situation.<sup>6</sup> From this letter we learn that the fort at the confluence was "very scant of provisions." The Indians still presented a problem and the French might attempt once more to come down from the North and strike at Fort Pitt. Ormsby's graphic picture leads us to believe that it would have been no difficult task for the French to turn the tables on the English. In the letter mentioned above we read:

We have nothing but murdering and scalping going on in this Neighborhood dayly. A party of Virginians consisting of a Hundred Men under the Command of Capt. Bullet, escorting some waggon's from Bedford which contained 14,000# of Pork were attacked by a party of French and Indians within four miles of this Fort, and after a few minutes Skirmish the Virginians abandoned their posts, took to their Heels and left about forty of their men behind who were either killed or taken. The Savages you may be sure lost no time to plunder, burn, and destroy everything they could. There were fifteen teams destroyed which were upon an average appraised at 70 pounds Virginia Currency. All the Horses except five that were shot were taken to Winango loaded with Bacon and pork. The Remainder of the pork that was not taken away or Burnt, I Received into the store which amounted to 5,197#, and 312# of Bacon.

'Tis not advisable to send anything up without an Escort of two or three Hundred men or you may be assured that the Savages will swarm down from the lakes finding their Brethren make such havock among us.

In spite of the difficulty of getting supplies and of the fear of loss of life around the fort, Ormsby had an optimistic outlook on the whole matter for he prophesied, "I don't despair if we can maintain our Posts for a short time but we will have our day in Mowing down these Miscreants."

Toward the middle of 1759, the French and Indians in the North were preparing for an expedition against the English at Fort Pitt. Colonel Mercer was informed from Venango that about fifteen hundred French regulars and a strong body of Indians were making ready to descend the Allegheny in an effort to drive out the English. The people in and around Fort Pitt were panic-stricken and our friend Ormsby "made sincere application to the Almighty to pardon my sins and extricate us from this deplorable dilemma." His prayers were answered, for the French were

<sup>6</sup> In the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is not known to whom this letter was addressed.

driven from Niagara and the attack on Fort Pitt was countermanded, "to the great joy of poor Ormsby and his associates."

After the building of the fort had progressed to the point where the English could feel more secure in case of a counter-attack by the French, John Ormsby decided to strike out on his own, in an attempt to make some profit in his new environment. It was in 1760 that he began his trade with the Indians. On October 19 of that year Adam Hoops wrote to Bouquet requesting that the colonel permit Ormsby to withdraw from service at Pittsburgh in an effort to mend his fortune by establishing a trading activity with the inhabitants of Presque Isle, Detroit, and other points. Up to this time Ormsby had been in the service of Hoops and had asked permission to leave several times before, but Hoops had said he could not see his way clear, and Ormsby had remained with this employer. But now in view "of his long and faithful service I could not denie him and he has got the General's permission," and "I'm therefore to request you'll countenance him as much as the nature of his Majesty's Service will admit and do hope from what you have seen of his Behaviour, you'll judge him to be as proper a person to be advanced in that trade as any other that had Liberty to go." Apparently *Mon Colonel* approved of the venture, for soon Ormsby was one of the many traders engaged in northern and northwestern areas.

For July 25, 1762, James Kenny has the following entry in his diary: "The Collonel has sat up ye Common Prayer & Littiany to be read on ye first Days ye Week. Jn<sup>o</sup> Ormsby Reads the Prayr's."<sup>8</sup> Could it be that a premonition of the dreadful uprising of the following year had appeared before the inhabitants of Fort Pitt, and that they were appealing to heaven for deliverance? Whatever may be the case, we may feel certain that these prayers uttered by Ormsby were mainly concerned with the perilous position of the men who were on the frontier.

Further evidence that the Pittsburghers of 1762 felt that they were on the verge of a dreadful attempt at destruction on the part of the Indians is found in a letter written by Ormsby from Pittsburgh to Bouquet who

<sup>7</sup> British Museum Add. Mss. 21645.

<sup>8</sup> "Journal of James Kenny, 1761-1763," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 38:163 (1913).

was then in New York. The missive is dated December 30, 1762, and reads in part: "There is a rumour prevailing that the Indians intend to renew their old Trade in our neighborhood soon." But the settlers around Fort Pitt felt certain that help would come from the East, for Ormsby continues, "we all flatter ourselves with hopes of seeing a strong reinforcement here early next Spring and hope they will come in time enough to strike Terror into those Infernal Blood-hounds."<sup>9</sup>

The Indian trade progressed rather satisfactorily until the terrible year of 1763. Then it was that Pontiac and his cohorts fell upon the western posts in a vain attempt to hold back the irresistible tide of whites. Ormsby had Indian stores "at Salt Licks, Gichaga, and Fort Pitt." When the Indians descended upon these stores, they seized Ormsby's goods and horses and applied the tomahawk to his employees. For this loss sustained at the hands of the red men Ormsby became involved in debt to the easterners who had helped him launch his trading enterprise. The amount of the debt incurred at this time was 3,500 pounds in the currency of Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup>

We know that ten years later Ormsby still owed this debt, for in a letter to James Wilson of Carlisle, later of Philadelphia, and famous for his role in the establishment of the federal government, we learn that Ormsby had empowered one Robert Hooper to sell some of the land that Ormsby had acquired at Bedford. The men whom he hoped to pay with the receipts from his land sales were Mr. Farlan and Mr. Graham. Apparently Wilson was the man appointed to receive the payment, for in a letter addressed "To James Wilson Esq. Attorney at Law, at his House in Carlisle," we read: "What Success Mr. Hooper has had in selling the land I know not, but this I can assure you Sir, that they must be sold soon for what they will bring, as I am very anxious to be out of debt."<sup>11</sup> This letter, dated March 29, 1773, shows clearly the plight of anyone who became indebted to easterners with a promise to pay the loan as soon as some degree of profit was reaped in the golden harvest of the West. Like Ormsby, those who started out with nothing but a loan nearly always

<sup>9</sup> British Museum Add. Mss. 21648.

<sup>10</sup> Page, *Short Account of the Family of Ormsby*, 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> In Darlington Collection, University of Pittsburgh.

had the loan above their heads for many more years than was at first expected. Therefore, we may believe with some degree of justification that many were the letters from West to East which said as did Ormsby's "I am very much obliged to you Sir, for your kind forbearance, and hope you will continue your Indulgence a little longer, as you may depend on my doing everything in my power to Satisfie you in some way or other in a very short time." Forbearance and indulgence, then, was the answer of the debtors to the demands of the creditors.

But in Ormsby's case the creditors were satisfied. Upon consulting the records of Bedford County we find that from 1779 to 1785 Ormsby was disposing of his land and buildings in and around Bedford.<sup>12</sup> Upwards of seventeen hundred acres were disposed of by Ormsby and enough profit was realized to pay back the money he had borrowed from the easterners. Thus we see that the uprising of 1763 spelled disaster for Ormsby's venture into the trading business.

Besides this loss of money, Ormsby almost lost his life in the siege that occurred at the western post. As soon as word came that the Indians were on the warpath, the few inhabitants around Fort Pitt fled inside the fort and prepared to hold off the attack. Ormsby was one of those who assisted in the defense of the fort while the "Copper Gentry" proceeded to exhibit their wilderness version of terpsichorean endeavor at the same time that they kept up the siege of the citadel. Once more the supply of provisions plagued Ormsby, for his duty it was to see that food was made available. But food was not to be found, since the Indians had virtually imprisoned the defenders until "there was not a pound of good flour or meat to serve the garrison and a number of the inhabitants who joined me to do duty."<sup>13</sup>

But the food and help to which Ormsby had referred in his letter to Bouquet were on the way. Colonel Henry Bouquet was ordered to march from Carlisle with relief for the inhabitants of the western country. Everything progressed very well until the army of the Swiss colonel reached Bushy Run. There was fought the now well-known battle that

<sup>12</sup> Deed Book A, Bedford County. See also Ellis, *History of Bedford, Somerset and Fulton Counties* (Chicago, 1884).

<sup>13</sup> Page, *Short Account of the Family of Ormsby*, 15.



bears the name of that place. After doing away with the savages, Bouquet proceeded to Fort Pitt and the rescue of its desperate population. But Bouquet did not deserve the gratitude and praise that were heaped upon his head, at least so thought John Ormsby. The man whom Ormsby would have the people thank for their deliverance was a certain obscure Captain Barret. According to the commissary, it was in the brain of this Barret that the successful *ruse de guerre* used by the army of Bouquet had its birth. Bouquet was to thank only because he was the leader of the forces and had agreed to the plan formulated by this subordinate. Craig would have us believe that this hatred for Bouquet was due to the facts that Ormsby had known Barret while still in the East and that Bouquet had interfered in one of Ormsby's trading schemes.<sup>14</sup>

Now that the Indians had been quieted for a while, Ormsby took to other interests. He was now in his forty-fourth year and felt that he needed a mate. The girl he chose to be his wife was Jane McAllister, a seventeen-year-old descendant of an old Scotch family that had settled in Cumberland County and had later seen action in the War for Independence. The two were united in marriage at Fort Pitt in July, 1764.<sup>15</sup> Soon after the ceremony the Ormsbys removed to Bedford where Ormsby acquired land from the Penns at a low price. These lands were the same that were later sold as a means of securing the money with which to pay the creditors that plagued poor Ormsby. Perhaps the young bride felt that Fort Pitt and its environs was no place for a respectable young lady who had been accustomed to the more settled areas, or perhaps she preferred to be near her father who also held land on Diver's Run near Dunning's Creek.<sup>16</sup> During his stay at Bedford, Ormsby operated a general store, and there the Ormsbys were blessed with the births of three children, John, Jr., Oliver, and Jane. But John Ormsby's interests were in Pittsburgh, and in 1770, after an absence of six years from that town, he and his family returned. It was there that he owned several thousand acres of land and it was there also that the enterprising Ormsby was planning to operate a ferry and a tavern. Contrary to the statements of

<sup>14</sup> Craig, *Olden Time*, 2:4.

<sup>15</sup> Page, *Short Account of the Family of Ormsby*, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Deed Books A, B, and E, Bedford County.

Page and others, Ormsby did not hold his lands in Bedford for long, but disposed of them in the period from 1779 to 1785, as has been mentioned.

To the forks of the Ohio Ormsby returned and here he remained. It was here that his large landholdings were located and here he determined to make his permanent home. Nearly opposite the town of Pittsburgh, in the section that is now known as the South Side, Ormsby owned more than 2,400 acres of land. Part of this had been given to him for his military services and part of it had been bought by the owner from the Penns after 1769.<sup>17</sup> This land lay between the Smithfield Street bridge of the present day and the borough of Hays. Ormsby's land became known as Homestead Farms. In 1784 Dr. Johann David Schoepf, on visiting Pittsburgh, commented on this land, saying that Ormsby had rented it to eighteen families. The rent that these eighteenth-century tenant farmers had to pay was one-third of what was gleaned at harvest time.<sup>18</sup> These people were very careless about the amount they harvested because they had no competitors to fear and could easily move to the holdings of the many other landlords in this area. This land included all the area that later came to be called the borough of South Pittsburgh, Birmingham, East Birmingham, Lower St. Clair Township, and the borough of Ormsby.

Today's visitors may still see traces of John Ormsby in that section of the city. Streets bearing such names as Mary, Josephine, Jane, Sarah, Sidney, and Wharton received their titles from members of Ormsby's family. At one time many more streets were thus named for Ormsby's relatives but have since been changed. Oliver Street has been changed to South Sixth; Gregg, to Seventh; Ormsby, to Thirteenth; Joseph, to Nineteenth; John, to Twentieth; Page, to Twenty-second; Phillip, to Twenty-third; and Caroline, to Twenty-fourth.<sup>19</sup> Ormsby Park remains to the present day. The surveys of some of these lands name the original patents. We find Barry Hall with 269 acres; Mount Oliver,

<sup>17</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, third series, 3:518.

<sup>18</sup> Johann D. Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation*, 274 (Philadelphia, 1911).

<sup>19</sup> From a typewritten account of the holdings of John Ormsby, in the files of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. This is based on records of Allegheny County and was written by S. H. McKee.

294 acres; Bergen Op Zoom, 370 acres; and Ormsby's Villa, 345 acres.<sup>20</sup> The records of Allegheny County disclose the fact that the section of Pittsburgh known as Mount Oliver received its name from Oliver, the son of John Ormsby, and not from the prominent Oliver family of Pittsburgh, as many people have been led to believe.

The records of Westmoreland County show that Ormsby acquired land amounting to several hundred acres near Brush Creek in that county.<sup>21</sup>

John Ormsby felt that to be a land baron was to be a gentleman. Mrs. Barbara Anna (Winebiddle) Negley, in describing him said he was "a fine-looking man of aristocratic and military bearing, a gentle-man of the old school, noted for his immaculate breast and sleeve ruffles, the brightness of his shoe and knee buckles."<sup>22</sup> When he walked the streets of the frontier community Ormsby carried himself with an air of pride. At his side hung "Sweet Lips," his shining sword, which we know he could use very well for he had used it in the army while still in the British Isles and had taught the art of handling the weapon at his school in Philadelphia. He looked upon himself as a gentleman of polish and refinement among the rough element of the frontier.

Recently much writing has been done on the intellectual life of western Pennsylvania and credit has been given to Hugh Henry Brackenridge, John McMillan, and others. Solon J. and Elizabeth H. Buck call such men "pioneers of culture" engaged in the "transit of civilization" to western Pennsylvania.<sup>23</sup> In a sense we may call John Ormsby the pioneer of these pioneers since he was probably the first permanent settler in this area who had studied within the walls of an institution of higher education and who was endowed with those attitudes and ideas that are characteristic of men whose intellectual abilities have been developed. It is true that Ormsby wrote no books or pamphlets, but that is not to say that his intellectual influence was not felt by the people with whom he came

<sup>20</sup> Pennsylvania, Department of Internal Affairs, *Warrantee Atlas of Allegheny County*, 17 (1914).

<sup>21</sup> Deed Book 10, Westmoreland County.

<sup>22</sup> Annie Clark Miller, "Old Houses and Estates in Pittsburgh," *ante*, 9:138 (July, 1926).

<sup>23</sup> Buck, *Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*, 373.

in contact. As will be seen later, Ormsby associated with Brackenridge, McMillan, and others. With men such as these he exchanged ideas on government and religion. To the wilderness inhabited by beast and savage had come, in 1758, this man of intellect, this flower in the trans-Allegheny desert. For years he fought the red man and did his share to settle the country and await the arrival of other intellectuals. Then it was that he felt that he had men around him with whom he could carry on enlightened conversation.

The period of Dunmore's War and of the boundary dispute between Pennsylvania and Virginia was one of trouble for Ormsby, as it must have been for the other settlers in the disputed area. Ormsby had received authorization for the operation of his ferry in 1773 from the colony of Pennsylvania and was upholding the interests of that colony in its southwestern region. When His Excellency Lord Dunmore visited Pittsburgh he lodged at Ormsby's house. He inquired as to the attitude of the population in regard to the dispute of authority and threw out certain bold insinuations as to the rewards that Ormsby might claim if he looked upon the quarrel in the same light as Dunmore.<sup>24</sup> But Ormsby's sympathies were with the Pennsylvanians. This attitude in opposition to Dunmore soon brought the wrath of that governor down upon Ormsby's head. Dunmore "let loose his Depredatory Crew in distressing the Inhabitants of Pennsylvania then settled at Pittsburgh and its Visinage" and, "a certain Doctor Connolly, his Lordship's *Inquisitor General* Harrass'd the said Inhabitants by setting his Banditti loose in Destroying their Cattle, Hoggs &c., the Property of your Petitioner in particular, whom the said Doctor Connolly treated with the greatest Severity on account of his attachment to the Government of Pennsylvania."<sup>25</sup> Connolly ordered his "Banditti" to pull down the house that Ormsby had raised for the accommodation of the people who were using the ferry that he operated across the Monongahela River.

Here Ormsby clashed with a rival ferryman, Jacob Bausman. When Connolly tore down the house on Ormsby's property he appointed this Bausman to run a ferry in place of the one Ormsby operated. All this

<sup>24</sup> Craig, *Olden Time*, 2:4.

<sup>25</sup> Revolutionary Papers, 34:63, in Pennsylvania State Library, Harrisburg.

was done in consequence of Bausman's joining Doctor Connolly as captain of militia under the government of Virginia. Ormsby coaxed and warned Bausman but the Virginia sympathiser stubbornly retained the ferry. Ormsby felt that his right to operate the ferry was more just than that of Bausman, because of the authorization by Pennsylvania, and attempted to continue his business. But here the "Sheriffe of Yoghogania" stepped in and "served no less than fifty writs" on poor Ormsby for trespassing. A petition addressed to John Penn on June 25, 1774, shows that Connolly and his adherents were bringing severe damage to nearly all the people of Pittsburgh who were not willing to join up with the Virginians. From the petition we learn, "That a number of Subscribers, &c., have been very severely treated by Mr. Connolly for our adherence to the Pennsylvania Government, which for brevity sake must be omitted." Signed by Aeneas Mackay, Devereaux Smith, John Ormsby, William Butler, James O'Hara, and others, this petition states that these inhabitants are loyal to Pennsylvania authority but are desirous of having that government do something to remedy the situation, instead of assuming its heretofore passive attitude.

Before this local dispute progressed much further, the Revolutionary War interrupted and attention was given to this larger problem. Ormsby and Bausman patched up their differences and in 1782 in a memorial to to the representatives of Pennsylvania in the general assembly asked that Bausman be given exclusive ferry rights on the southwest side of the Monongahela and that Ormsby receive the same right to operate a ferry on the northeast or Pittsburgh side of that river.

Concerning Ormsby's original ferry, many different dates are given as the year in which Ormsby began its operation. Anywhere from 1775 to 1784 has been assigned as the proper date, but this writer sees fit to place the date as 1773, for in a letter to the president and executive council of Pennsylvania, Ormsby continually refers to his ferry authorized in that year.<sup>26</sup>

During the Revolutionary War, John Ormsby was not particularly active. He was on the standing committee of correspondence, which passed strong Whig resolutions four weeks after Lexington, but as far

<sup>26</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, first series, 4:64, 80, 527.

as active participation in the war itself is concerned, Ormsby took little or no part. Ormsby's name appears on the roll of fifty-two officers and privates who began a three months enlistment period on May 1, 1778, under General Hand.<sup>27</sup> But since no expeditions were undertaken in that period, and since we find no subsequent enlistment by Ormsby, he cannot be said to have engaged in the actual fighting. No doubt he felt that since he was in his fifty-eighth year and had already seen his share of campaigning, he would leave the fighting to those who were more able.

During the time that Ormsby was operating his ferry he also kept a tavern. Tavernkeeping was not what it may be thought to have been. The noted traveler, Dr. Johann David Schoepf, tells us that "one must not be deceived by the bare name of taverns. The people keep tavern if they have anything over and above what they need; if not, the traveller must look about for himself." Henry Marie Brackenridge, writing at a later date than Schoepf, says, "The landlords or tavern-keepers are, in reality, the only lords we have in Pennsylvania; they possess a degree of intelligence and respectability of character which justly gives them an influence *dans la chose publique*." John Ormsby and his tavern may be described by both these statements. His public house received highest rating among the inns of Pittsburgh, but that said little in favor of it. Schoepf says: "In Pittsburg we were directed to the best inn, a small wooden cabin set askew by the Monongahela, its exterior promising little; but seeing several well dressed men and ladies adorned we were not discouraged." That inn was John Ormsby's.<sup>28</sup>

Many and varied were the meetings held in John Ormsby's Water Street tavern. There men met to talk over business, politics, and social affairs; the board of trustees of Pittsburgh Academy held its early meetings there, and in 1785 the Rev. Wilson Lee, a Methodist missionary in Pittsburgh, preached at that inn. In the journal of Dr. John McMillan's first tour into the western country is found: "Saturday (Sep't. 9, 1775) preached at Josiah Richards', on Robeson's Run, and rode about thirteen

<sup>27</sup> Reuben G. Thwaites and Louise P. Kellogg, *Frontier Defense on the Upper Ohio*, 303 (Madison, Wis., 1912).

<sup>28</sup> Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation*, 237, 242; "Pittsburgh as Seen by Early Travelers," in Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, monthly *Bulletin*, April, 1902—June, 1906, p. 341; Post-Revolutionary Papers, 19:60, in Pennsylvania State Library.

miles to Fort Pitt, and lodged at Mr. Ormsby's."<sup>29</sup> Interesting to note is the fact that no expense is noted by McMillan for that day.

Here it was, also, that such men as John Neville, Hugh Brackenridge, Isaac Craig, James Ross, Richard and William Butler, James O'Hara, Henry Baldwin, Tarleton Bates, Michael Huffnagle, Joseph Ashton, and other prominent Pittsburghers met to discuss such political questions as were current at the time. Here Brackenridge thought out his plans for making the "Whiskey Boys" take the middle course instead of the plan of radical action they had in mind. Political cronies and their advice to the frontier barrister were never lacking at Ormsby's tavern.

Now that the dispute with Virginia and the Revolutionary War were over, Ormsby began to think more and more about local affairs and about his business. As early as 1787 Ormsby, John Gibson, Devereaux Smith, and Dr. Bedford were named trustees "of the Congregation of the Episcopal Church, commonly called the Church of England." Although Trinity Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh was not incorporated until 1805, there was a church in the town a number of years before that date. To this church, through the medium of the above trustees, was conveyed the land on Sixth Avenue where now stands Trinity Episcopal Church.<sup>30</sup>

In 1786 John Scull set up his printing apparatus and began publishing his *Pittsburgh Gazette*. In the files of this frontier organ we are able to find many of the advertisements that Ormsby inserted as a means of selling his land, renting his houses, and disposing of his manufactures. Here we learn that Ormsby owned a small boatyard on the south side of the Monongahela. In 1783 this boatyard and the house adjoining it were rented by Jacob Haymaker. For five years this place was operated by Haymaker but we note that in 1788 Ormsby was again trying to rent it.<sup>31</sup> From the same issue we learn that about six hundred yards up the river from the boatyard was a brick manufactory where Ormsby carried

<sup>29</sup> *Centennary Memorial of the Planting and Growth of Presbyterianism in Pittsburgh and Parts Adjacent*, 319 (1876).

<sup>30</sup> Charles W. Dahlinger, *Pittsburgh; a Sketch of Its Early Social Life*, 78 (New York and London, 1916), and "A Place of Great Historic Interest, Pittsburgh's First Burying-ground," *ante*, 2:233 (October, 1919).

<sup>31</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, April 19, 1788.

on that business. In 1788, in Ormsby's sixty-eighth year, he offered this plant for rent through the medium of Scull's *Gazette*. The advertisement represents the clay thereabouts as being of excellent quality for the manufacture of brick and pottery. So fine was the product, Ormsby tells us, that "emigrants have frequently taken brick into their boats to carry to the new settlements down the Ohio, &c." Wilson says that since Ormsby had come to this area as early as 1758, it is quite possible that he may have helped to make the brick used in the construction of Fort Pitt.<sup>32</sup> Although it is possible that this is true, this writer does not feel that Ormsby had at that time developed his side industries such as brickmaking and boatbuilding.

An interesting and humorous item appears in the issue of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of September 5, 1789. It happened that a stray horse had wandered into Ormsby's rich pasture lands on the bank of the Monongahela opposite the town of Pittsburgh. Ormsby describes the animal and informs the owner that the same may be had after identification has been made and the charges for keeping the beast have been paid. This latter part seems to have inspired in Ormsby an idea for providing himself with another source of revenue, for following this advertisement we read: "N.B. The subscriber has this day began to take horses to pasture on his after grass meadow situate on the west side of the Monongahela river, nearly opposite to Pittsburgh. Price six pence per night, or one dollar and a half per month." Here indeed was a frontier jack-of-all-trades who took opportunity "by the horns" every time that it presented itself.

John Ormsby also exercised some influence in the establishment of local government and of law and order in general. In 1780 John Ormsby and his old rival ferrykeeper, Jacob Bausman, were the two overseers of Pitt Township.<sup>33</sup>

In 1782 Ormsby, Devereaux Smith, Sam Ewalt, Jacob Haymaker, David Duncan, Andrew Robertson, and several others affixed their names to a petition asking the executive council to intervene in an irregular election that had taken place in Westmoreland County.<sup>34</sup> It

<sup>32</sup> Erasmus Wilson, *Standard History of Pittsburg*, 197 (Chicago, 1898).

<sup>33</sup> Post-Revolutionary Papers, 17:61.

<sup>34</sup> Revolutionary Papers, 56:48.



seems that Edward Cook had ordered an election only five days before the event was to take place. The plea says that on the thirteenth of July, Hannastown had been burned by the Indians and that the country was disturbed. According to the petitioners, then, Edward Ward, one of the men elected at this polling date, would never have received the greater number of votes if the election had been true to form.

Another victor at the polls, one Fowler, was said by Ormsby and his fellow-petitioners to have been ineligible because he had not been a resident and never expected to be. In order to make his candidacy appear more regular, this Fowler had bought a house only a few days before election time. Against these irregularities did Ormsby and his associates protest.

In 1784, John Ormsby again petitioned the executive council. Among other names attached to this petition we find those of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Oliver Ormsby, and the old reliable Devereaux Smith. It seems that Smith signed his name to nearly every petition that was presented to him. This time the petitioners urged that Thomas Richardson, who was accused of burglary, be given mercy because circumstantial evidence indicated that he was merely an accomplice or "underling" and not a genuine criminal.

In June, 1785, Ormsby, Michael Huffnagle, Robert Galbraith, and John Preston were designated as the people to whom possession of Fort Pitt was to be delivered upon the departure of the commanding officer.<sup>35</sup>

On the petition for the creation of Allegheny County in 1787, we find Ormsby's name heading the list of signatures. Also listed are the names of his two sons, John Ormsby, Jr., and Oliver Ormsby.<sup>36</sup>

On April 28, 1789, one of Ormsby's closest friends passed away. This man was Thomas Hutchins, who had seen service in the British army as a captain and who later joined with the American cause. Ormsby and Hutchins had become fast friends while both were serving their time under General Forbes; Ormsby, as we have noted, was commissary, while Hutchins was employed as geographer and mapmaker. Hutchins had been assigned to duty in Florida and in the Northwest. Before his

<sup>35</sup> Post-Revolutionary Papers, 8:39, 17:61.

<sup>36</sup> *Ante*, 4:86 (April, 1921).

death he returned to Pittsburgh where he died in the home of his former comrade-in-arms.<sup>37</sup>

Now we turn aside briefly to look at the other members of the Ormsby family. Besides Mrs. Ormsby, there were five children: John, Jr., Oliver, Jane, Joseph, and Sidney. John Ormsby, Jr., was the son who originated the hot-headed methods that some would have had used against the Whiskey Insurrectionists in 1794. The Ormsby family, being in the bluebook of Pittsburgh society of that time, adopted ideas very similar to those of the Nevilles and Brackenridges. Young Ormsby and Presley Neville, both endowed with the proud cavalier spirit, were riding with Marshal Lenox to the scene of the burning of Neville's house in order to uphold the argument in favor of submission to the federal government and its evil excise tax. On the way to the field, these three were met by Hugh Brackenridge, who registered surprise at their being armed. Dismissing this with a few words about the necessity of bearing arms when one is not a born orator, the three rode on. At Neville's, young Ormsby was recognized as the son of John Ormsby, the tavernkeeper and landholder, who occasionally had dropped subtle remarks about "Tom the Tinker" to those assembled at his inn. The rabble treated him with every indignity, and muffled threats fell everywhere about him. The same thing happened later at Braddock's Field. On this occasion some of the intoxicated members of the assemblage started after Ormsby and it was only after following a concealed and circuitous route that he finally found his way back to Pittsburgh.<sup>38</sup> Here he stayed until the temper of the mob cooled considerably. John Ormsby, Jr., died the next year.

Oliver Ormsby was one of the children born to John and Jane Ormsby while the young couple were living in Bedford. He was educated at one of the Harrison estates in Virginia. Apparently he had the same businesslike characteristics that his father displayed by his numerous advertisements in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, for young Oliver was soon engaged in the establishment of trade stores as far north as Niagara and Erie, and as far west as Cincinnati. He owned an establishment in Pittsburgh that supplied large stores for Perry's squadron on Lake Erie. In

<sup>37</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 2, 1789.

<sup>38</sup> Henry M. Brackenridge, *History of the Western Insurrection*, 45, 102 (1859).

Cincinnati he owned a steam flour mill, by the burning of which he is said to have lost nearly one hundred thousand dollars. At Chillicothe he owned a cotton factory and a ropewalk. The Brighton industries, comprised of grist and sand mills, forges, and a charcoal furnace located at the present Beaver Falls, belonged to Oliver. Later he was a director of the Pittsburgh branch of the United States Bank. Several positions were also held by Oliver in the Trinity Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh which his father had helped to found.<sup>39</sup>

Oliver's home in Pittsburgh was located on Water Street, near the old Monongahela House, and was inherited from his father. Here he lived with his family of ten and here he entertained frequent guests, many of whom visited him from Cincinnati and Louisville; and from here his daughters rode by carriage and horseback to Philadelphia, where they attended boarding school.

After the death of Oliver Ormsby in 1832, the section of the South Side that still remained in the family comprised a family colony that was unique. The land was divided into five tracts connected by old-fashioned stiles.

One tract was occupied by Josephine, who married Commandant Edward Madison Yard of the United States Navy. On another lived Sidney, who married John Harding Page and founded the Page family, still prominent in western Pennsylvania. Beyond the Pages lived Sarah who married Major Asher Phillips of the United States Army. Mary Ormsby, who became the wife of Lieutenant Elias Phillips, younger brother of Asher, owned the next tract; the last daughter, following the precedent set by most of her sisters, married an officer, Lieutenant Clinton Wharton of the United States Army, and occupied the remaining tract. Each of these homes had large acreage about it and the home of Oliver H. Ormsby even included a gentleman's small race track.<sup>40</sup>

To return now to John Ormsby: his son Joseph met a sad fate when he was drowned on a trading voyage on December 20, 1803; his daughter Jane married Dr. Nathaniel Bedford of Pittsburgh, founder of the borough of Birmingham, which he named for the city in which he

<sup>39</sup> Jordan, *Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania*, 4:443.

<sup>40</sup> *Conference on Racial and Industrial Development of the South Side, Pittsburgh, Pa.*

had lived in England; his daughter Sidney became the wife of Isaac Gregg, who owned a factory on the South Side, operated a ferry, and kept store in Pittsburgh. His wife died in Pittsburgh in 1799, and from that time until his own death in 1805, Ormsby was in the care of his children. During this period he gave or sold at a low price most of his land holdings on the South Side, the principal recipients being his daughters Sidney and Jane.<sup>41</sup>

Why call John Ormsby Pittsburgh's original citizen? Clearly seen. He had come to the confluence in 1758 while the Point was still in the bloody hands of the French and Indians. He had helped to drive away the armed representatives of these allied peoples and he had helped to nurse the settlement and surrounding area through every danger that threatened. Trading posts, stores, farms, a tavern, a ferry, and several manufacturing enterprises were established and operated by the enterprising Ormsby to give stability to the region at the same time that it provided him with a livelihood. Besides his business ventures our citizen had his finger in various civic projects and affairs of government, and altogether, Pittsburgh obviously owes a debt of gratitude to this first of its permanently resident business, industrial, and civic leaders—John Ormsby.

<sup>41</sup> Deed Book 8, Allegheny County.