THE VENANGO FORDS AND TRAILS

WILLIAM YOUNG BRADY

Old Venango owes its importance in pioneer history in no small way to three fords, one across the Allegheny River and two across French Creek. These fords attracted numerous travelers and became the focus of the early travel system in northwestern Pennsylvania.

The strip of bottom land, which forms the site of the present town of Franklin, extends crescent-shape northward along the west bank of the Allegheny and northwesterly along French Creek. The Allegheny ford is near the foot of Sixth Street and the French Creek fords are at Tenth and Thirteenth Streets, approximately.

When Washington and Gist traveled from Logstown to Venango in 1753 they made their destination the cabin of John Fraser, an Indian trader whose home had been appropriated by Captain Joncaire and a party of Frenchmen after its owner had fled. Two traders, John Trotter and James McLaughlen, had lately been waylaid and captured at the ford. This cabin was undoubtedly situated at the Allegheny River ford, or on the trail from that ford back to the hill in the direction of what is now Pittsburgh. It stood very near the site of the French Fort Machault which was built the following year near the foot of Sixth and Seventh Streets.

In support of this view, reference is made to Washington's map showing the route of his journey in 1753, published in the January, 1932, issue of the National Geographic Magazine, by courtesy of the Library of Congress. On this map the line indicating Washington's route is drawn with a sharp quarter turn, ending in an arrow point in the direction of the junction of the creek and river and of a house below the junction. This is the most detailed feature of the entire map. Evidently Washington had taken the fork of the Venango trail which led to the upper

1 Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck, Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania, 70 (Pittsburgh, 1939).
2 Pennsylvania Archives, first series, 2:131.
French Creek ford and had detoured southward along the bottom land to the Fraser cabin, most likely traversing a part of the present Liberty Street of Franklin.

The first definite reference we have to the Allegheny River ford is in the journal of Christian Frederick Post, the Moravian, who was sent by the Philadelphia Quaker government on the dangerous mission of winning the western Indians away from the French cause, preliminary to Forbes’s campaign against Fort Duquesne. With several friendly Indians, all mounted, Post traveled the trail through Clearfield bound for the Kuskuski towns below the site of New Castle and came to the Allegheny ford about dusk, hoping to cross without detection.

The French fort, Machault, was planted squarely at the western end of the ford, approximately at the foot of Sixth Street as now laid out, while the eastern end of the ford was farther down stream and accessible only by a trail along the water’s edge for some distance. The fort was evidently located to command the approaches from the English-controlled territory both in the east and in the southeast. An old map of the fort has the notation “a good fording” opposite this crossing. In his journal entry of August 7, 1758, Post records as follows:³ “We came in sight of fort Venango, belonging to the French, situate between two mountains, in a fork of the Ohio [Allegheny] River. I prayed the Lord to blind them, as he did the enemies of Lot and Elisha, that I might pass unknown. When we arrived, the fort being on the other side of the river, we hallooed, and desired them to fetch us over; which they were afraid to do; but showed us a place where we might ford. We slept that night within half gun shot of the fort.” [August 8] “This morning I hunted for my horse round the fort within ten yards of it. The Lord heard my prayer and I passed unknown till we had mounted our horses to go off, when two Frenchmen came to take leave of the Indians, and were much surprised at seeing me, but said nothing.”

While the French garrison consisted of only six men and one officer, had they known the significance and portent of Post’s mission they would

³ As quoted in [Charles Thomson], An Enquiry into the Causes of the Alienation of the Delaware and Shawanese Indians from the British Interest, 134 (London, 1759). The old map previously referred to is one found among the papers of the Shippen family in 1825.
undoubtedly have made an attempt to take him prisoner, for Forbes’s success at Fort Duquesne depended very largely on the pacifying work done by Post along the Beaver valley.

The importance of the Allegheny ford at Venango is brought clearly to light by this incident. Post’s journey was not in a direct line with this ford, for he turned directly south and traveled the trail from Venango to within twenty miles of Fort Duquesne before turning west to Kuskuski. Furthermore, Venango was the only point fortified or garrisoned by the French on the Allegheny River above its mouth, but there are no records of any other traveled fords with connecting eastern trails north of the vicinity of Kittanning which Post might have used. On his return he crossed the Allegheny at a ford about eight miles above Kittanning and was hotly pursued by French Indians.  

Scull’s map of 1770 delineates a long Indian trail leading from the Indian village of Franks Town, near the site of the present Hollidaysburg, to Venango, crossing the Allegheny River at that point. This trail is the only one indicated on this and other early maps as traversing the vast area lying between those points. It undoubtedly led to the Allegheny ford which had been commanded by the French fort, and later by the English fort Venango. It was known to early settlers as the “Old Venango Road,” crossing the Clarion River at “the Bullocks Ford,” near the site of the present town of Callensburg, and crossing Red Bank Creek at the old Indian town of Lycamahoning, or “Oldtown,” a point about two miles east of the present town of New Bethlehem, Clarion County, but on the south bank of Red Bank Creek.

It is reasonable to assume that the detailed course of this Frankstown trail, after leaving the Venango ford, was followed thirty-six years later by the pioneer wagon road from Franklin toward the southeast which was “brushed out” by court order near the present village of Cranberry, past the site of old Hall’s Mill on the run by that name, down the steep hill of East Sandy Creek to a fording about two miles below the present bridge at Van, up a steep hill and past the sites of the present towns of Nickleville and Monroe to “the place known by the name of the bullock

4 Thomson, 167.
The continuation of this old road on the south side of Toby's Creek (Clarion River), which was then (1806) in Armstrong County, passes about one half mile east of Callensburg and still goes locally by the name of Bullocks Ford Road.

Charles A. Hanna, in his excellent work, *The Wilderness Trail*, quotes a reference to this trail as "the path from Frankstown to Chenango" and there is evidence that the trail continued westward from the Allegheny ford through Mercer County, having passed by the French fort, up the ravine at Seventh Street, Franklin, and over the hill about one mile to a crossing of the path from Pittsburgh to Le Boeuf. Thence the "Chenango" path passed to the north of Sandy Lake and on to the easternmost bend of Shenango River, known as the "big bend," which stream it crossed twice. At the second crossing, about five miles west of the first, was located the Indian town of Pymatuning. From Pymatuning the trail ran southwest about eight miles to the old Indian town of Shenango on the Shenango River in the vicinity of West Middlesex in old Shenango Township, Mercer County, at a point stated to be twelve miles from the Indian village of Kuskuski (Edinburg).

The Seventh Street over-hill route in Franklin is substantiated by Thomas Hutchins' plan of Fort Machault, made in the autumn of 1759 following the evacuation by the French. The drawing shows a trail directly to the hill back of the fort with the notation "road to Pittsburgh," also a trail northward to the French Creek fords. This verifies an opinion, or rather a belief, expressed to the writer many years ago by Judge Christopher Heydrick, a student of Pennsylvania history, that the path from Pittsburgh to the Venango forts came down the ravine at the head of Seventh Street in Franklin.

Probably the most colorful traveler of all those who are known to have journeyed along the Venango path in early days was the famous Indian character, Madame Montour, whose family has left its name imprinted on the maps of at least three states. In the summer of the year before

---

5 Venango County Court road docket.
6 Thomas Hutchins' Map, 1764.
7 Sylvester K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent, eds., *Wilderness Chronicles of Northwestern Pennsylvania*, 166 (Harrisburg, 1941).
Washington made his frontier visit she left her home near the present Pittsburgh and, blind as she was, set out on horseback, guided by her son Andrew Montour, on the long trail to Venango to visit her relative Nicholas. 

When David Mead, his three brothers, and six other pioneers approached from Sunbury over their blazed trail leading through the present towns of Curwensville, Brookville, and Strattanville, they emerged from the forest on the east bank of the Allegheny River near the Venango ford. Their route to the site of the future Meadville was over the Allegheny ford and up through the future town of Franklin along the trail from the Venango fort to the upper French Creek ford where they crossed to follow the east bank of the creek to their destination, using Washington's trail. From that year, 1788, Mead's trail and the Allegheny ford provided the principal routes of communication for fifteen years with eastern Pennsylvania. Until a spur of the first state road from Milesburg was laid out in 1804, and improved from Fryburg to Franklin in 1812 as a war measure, Mead's trail was a chief traders' path which became somewhat broadened and improved under the traffic of pack horses.

In the fall of 1802, Edward Patchell, owner of a six-acre field of corn below his little dwelling in the lower part of the village of Franklin near the bank of the Allegheny River at the "fording place," had an experience typical of life there in those days. As his precious crop was ripening, he found that an old she bear had commenced night raids upon it, destroying far more than she devoured. For a while he kept her at bay by leaving out his dog till at length the bear, growing bold, pursued the dog even to the door step. In a desperate frame of mind Patchell ran out with a boy and a rusty gun to attack the intruder about two o'clock one morning. The bear took refuge in a tree whence she was soon dislodged by the smoke of a fire kindled beneath. She fell near Mr. Patchell and after a short contest with the trio, man, boy, and dog, retreated to ano-

10 A. J. Davis, ed., History of Clarion County, Pennsylvania (Syracuse, N. Y., 1887).
11 Crawford County Court road docket.
other tree. She was dislodged from four trees, one after another, by the kindling of fires beneath, when, more powder having been obtained, a lucky shot so disabled the bear that she fell from a tree. Fallen, but unconquered, the bear, unable to stand, fought upon her haunches, keeping the dog at bay, and skillfully parrying the thrusts of her assailants until finally her great shaggy hide became a trophy of the owner of the cornfields.  

The Allegheny River ford was used by the white man as a pack-horse crossing for many years. When the road from the vicinity of Callensburg was opened in 1806, a ferry became necessary near the ford for wagon travel. When the state road was opened from the east a raft or ferry was put into operation above the ford. The ferry was later used by the Bellefonte turnpike until 1838–40, when the first bridge was built across the Allegheny River at Franklin.

The two French Creek fords, though scarcely a half mile apart, were separated on the eastern bank by a high hill which descends precipitously to the water’s edge so that travel in the early years between the two fords on that side of French Creek was difficult and during high water practically impossible. For that reason, all trails up French Creek were by the upper ford while travel up the Allegheny River was by use of the lower French Creek ford.

Washington, when he set out from Venango for the French fort at Le Boeuf (Waterford), found the upper French Creek ford impassable due to flood and in his diary recorded that they were compelled to raft over. The French, in their land travel between Venango and Le Boeuf, made full use of this ford, going up along French Creek past the site of Meadville and crossing to the west bank at a point some distance above that site. Washington followed that route but was baffled at the upper crossing by the flood and was compelled to proceed along the eastern bank over an untrodden, miry route to Le Boeuf with great difficulty.

There is evidence that in the following year, or later, the French opened a road from the upper French Creek ford due north on the watershed or ridge between the waters of French Creek and Oil Creek.

---

12 J. H. Newton, ed., History of Venango County, Pennsylvania (Columbus, O., 1879).
passing the sites of the villages of Sunville and Chapmanville in Venango County, crossing the north boundary of Crawford County in the northeast corner of Rockdale Township, and thence to Le Boeuf. This road was probably no more than a pack-horse route and was used during low water in transporting military stores and troops from Lake Erie to Venango and to Fort Duquesne. Thomas Bull, an Indian spy sent by the colonial authorities to ascertain the extent of the French forces, in his report as transcribed by Colonel Hugh Mercer under date of March 17, 1759, made this statement: "The road is trod and good from Venango to Le Boeuf, and from thence to Presque Isle, about half a day's journey, is very low and swampy and bridged almost all the way."

It is interesting to note that in the summer of 1759 there was assembled at Venango a force of more than sixteen hundred French troops and Indian warriors with a large number of canoes, all poised for a descent down the Allegheny River to recapture Fort Duquesne. Only the dramatic and timely news of the English advance against Niagara saved Pittsburgh from again passing under the French flag after Forbes's strenuous campaign. After six years of colonial activity the French vanished almost over night. The English took over Venango, built a fort about forty rods north of the French fort, and held sway for four years.

The summer of 1760 saw much activity at the upper French Creek ford when an English force, including ten companies of Royal Americans and provincial troops, passed over in July on the march to attack the French at Montreal. Captain Thomas Hutchins in his journal of this march gives the first detailed description of the road from Fort Pitt to Venango which, after crossing Slippery Rock Creek, followed the course of the present Route No. 8 very closely. Both he and George Croghan recorded that they encamped at a run sixteen or seventeen miles from Venango. This coincides apparently with the spot where Washington and Gist encamped seventeen years before and may be identified as the present roadside resort and spring near the village of Barkeyville, Venango County. Farther back, several miles on the road to Pittsburgh, was the spring which Croghan mentioned and which can be as-

14 Newton, History of Venango County.
sumed to be the well known Oak Spring (or springs) located near the Butler-Venango county line in Butler County.

Croghan, who traveled with the troops as a trader, recorded in his journal on October 27, 1760, his experience at the upper French Creek ford, as follows: "I halted at Venango as the French Creek was very high, to assist in getting the Pack Horses loaded with Pitch and Blankets for the King's service."

After crossing French Creek the trail followed a northerly course near the creek, passing the rich lands mentioned by Washington and crossing again to the west bank some distance above the present site of Meadville at the same ford which had baffled Washington and which Hutchins described as being twelve miles from Le Boeuf and "eighty yards over but extremely shallow."

From Hutchins' description, and after a personal examination of the ground and the existing paths, I am convinced that in leaving Venango the trail crossed French Creek above the foot of the present Thirteenth Street in Franklin and turned into Pacific Street to the Third Ward, following that street's general course to Missouri Street. There it veered to the right and ascended the creek hill over its brow (but not over its top) so as to clear a precipice overlooking the creek, thus having had "low ground for a mile," as Hutchins stated. Passing this precipice the trail would descend gradually to the mouth of "a small run," Patchel Run. It would then follow the bank of French Creek to Sugar Creek.

After the tragic capture of the English fort at Venango by Pontiac's Indians in 1763 the region around Venango became a no-man's-land for nearly twenty-five years. When David and John Mead in 1788 marked their trail eastward from the Susquehanna they crossed French Creek at the upper ford and used this same trail, going, no doubt, up the northeast bank of that creek to their future settlement at Meadville. From that time it became a trader's pack-horse trail, known as the Creek Road, and after the Franklin-Meadville turnpike was built, the Lower Road.

That same year, 1788, the State of Pennsylvania began the construc-
tion of Fort Franklin. It was not built at the site of the former French and English forts, but a mile further upstream, at the western approach to the upper French Creek ford, to serve as a protection against attack from the Indian country of the north and northwest. As the shallow creek bottom extended some distance upstream, a rifle trench was built some distance along the bank of the creek to cover the fording. General Harmar in his journal entry of May 3, 1788, noted his arrival at this fort, Captain Hart in command.

Three years later the fort was of signal aid as a haven of refuge for pioneer settlers incident to St. Clair's campaign against western Indian tribes, although the Six Nations remained at peace. Mead's settlement was abandoned in flight to Fort Franklin. About the first of August, 1791, Darius Mead, the father of David and John Mead, but still in vigorous middle age, was ploughing in a turnip patch along French Creek below the upper ford when he was taken prisoner by two Indians. He was taken along the western trail to a point near Shenango Creek in Mercer County where he was found dead the next day by a friendly Seneca chief who sent word to Fort Franklin. By his side, when found, was the body of one of his captors whom the Seneca recognized as a Delaware chief, Captain Bull. From appearances, Mead, during the night, had got Bull's knife and killed him with it, but was himself overcome and killed by the other Indian. The latter is reported to have died soon after from wounds he received in the fight.

Following the Act of the Pennsylvania Legislature of April 4, 1796, the first wagon road through Franklin was the road from Pittsburgh to Le Boeuf, opened in 1796–7, which was known for years after as the Le Boeuf road north of French Creek. It crossed at the upper French Creek ford and passed through Sunville, Venango County. In Crawford County it passed just east of Townville and through the village of

16 An entry in Pennsylvania State Road Papers, File P, Harrisburg, reads: "April 7th, 1796—Agreement of James G. Heron, Dunning McNair and David Mead with Governor Mifflin for opening the road from Pittsburgh by Fort Franklin to Le Boeuf in accordance with the Act of April 4, 1796, to complete the contract in 12 months; open the said road 16½ feet wide by cutting down the large timber within six inches of the surface of the earth and removing the same together with the smaller trees and grubs out of the way . . . for the sum of Four Thousand Dollars."
Little Cooley, where for some reason it was known as "the old military road." Its course appears to have been a few miles west of the old French trail from Franklin to Le Boeuf, if not directly on it in some places, and probably it is the road now in use, at least to the Crawford County line. Two or three miles south of Little Cooley village is the point where this road intersected another state road, which was also provided for in the Act of 1796, and was laid out from Milesburg in Center County through Clearfield, Brookville, and near Tionesta and Titusville sites, to Le Boeuf. This latter road was reviewed by inspector John Fleming in his report to Governor McKean about 1807.

About this time a pioneer road or pack trail was also opened from the upper French Creek ford by the Holland Land Company in a northeasterly direction through the present Cherry Tree and Titusville locations. Probably an old Indian trail to Tidioute and Warren was used.

Among the adventurers who took up land in northwestern Pennsylvania in the wake of Wayne's triumph over the western Indians were two genteel, well educated young Englishmen—one Thomas Wedgewood of the family celebrated as manufacturers of fine pottery, and the other John Dadford, educated as a civil engineer. They rode two fine blooded horses. Their lands were located near the present village of Cherry Tree, Venango County, where on their arrival in December, 1798, they lodged in the cabin of John Reynolds, a settler who preceded them.

The third day following their arrival they returned to Franklin for a stock of provisions, blankets, etc. The weather was extremely cold and the snow deep. The next day they set out with loaded horses for the cabin. French Creek at the fording place was frozen a third over at each bank with running ice in the middle of the stream. Dadford was taken over first by canoe. Wedgewood was to drive the horses off the ice into the water and Dadford was to catch them at the other side; then Wedgewood was to be taken over by canoe and all were to proceed homeward. The horses were fractious, causing Wedgewood to slip off the ice into the creek, and he returned to Franklin for the night.

17 Mrs. Mary Ann Higby, First Hundred Years of Townville and Vicinity (Rutland, Vermont, 1924).
18 McKnight, Pioneer History of Jefferson County.
Dadford was compelled to travel homeward alone with the loaded horses. Seven miles along the trail from Franklin he reached a stream known as Two Mile Run. It was night and the horses would not cross on the ice. His only alternatives were to take off the loads and remain there with the horses all night, or to walk by himself the remaining five miles to the cabin through the deep snow. He tried the latter but in the first mile, having lost one of his shoes in the snow, he became convinced that to save his life he must return and wrap himself in the blankets. With feet nearly frozen he got back to the horses, wrapped himself up, and sat down with his back against a tree expecting to become a frozen corpse before morning.

About midnight wolves began to gather around him with their fearful howls. In his terror he thought of the camp kettle and frying pan which he hastily seized in the darkness and rattled with such vigor and effect that the wolves became frightened, as much as they had frightened him. The continued agitation of fright, as he said, caused his blood to circulate more briskly and perhaps saved his life—saved by wolves. In the morning he was able to get on one of the horses, but on arriving at the cabin he could not alight. Reynolds had to lift him off the horse and carry him in. It was thought that the other horse became food for the wolves. Dadford eventually recovered and later returned to England.19

The convenient lower French Creek ford, located at the junction of creek and river, and about midway between the two fords heretofore dealt with, is of somewhat less interest in the point of historical importance. It gave easy access to the flats or river bottoms along the west bank of the Allegheny River for ten or more miles northward, but beyond that the terrain was extremely rugged.

General William Irvine, who was commissioned after the Revolution to examine the newly acquired land, passed the lower French Creek ford on his way to the region around Warren. He reported that from the mouth of Oil Creek, the site of Oil City, to the Indian town of Cushcushing, the site of Tionesta, "the mountain presses so close to the

19 John E. Reynolds, In French Creek Valley (Meadville, Pa., 1938).
river that it is almost impassable and by no means practicable when the river is high." To this day no highway has been constructed along this route. In view of these considerations, it is thought extremely unlikely, especially in the absence of any affirmative evidence, that Colonel Brodhead, in his expedition of 1779, took this river route to Cushcushing, as many worthy persons have assumed.

However, when the Seneca chief Cornplanter was given the land at the mouth of Oil Creek, after the treaty of 1784–5, he and his Indians made frequent trips by another and more direct route between their lands situated in the regions of the present cities of Warren and Oil City, as indicated by the following notation. In 1795, James Rickets, a hunter, passed over the lower French Creek ford to the mouth of Oil Creek and up that creek to the present village of Petroleum Center, then easterly two miles to make the first settlement in Cornplanter Township. A member of his family stated that "Indians were seen daily passing to and from the mouth of Oil Creek."²⁰

This Indian trail probably ran eastward to the Indian burying ground (Tidioute) on the Allegheny River, whence, according to General Irvine, three trails ran west and southwest, and from there the river bank up the Allegheny was favorable for travel toward Warren. David Zeisberger, the Moravian, in his journal of 1767, told of mistaking the overland trail from the Warren to the Tionesta regions by traveling too far west "on an old Indian war trail to Venango." It is to be supposed that he was on this same trail leading from the present Tidioute to the mouth of Oil Creek.

Mary Jemison, the young white Seneca squaw, recited to her historian, Seaver, that she and her Indian family migrated in 1759 from the Ohio country to the mouth of French Creek,(no doubt over the Shenango-Venango trail) and thence up the Allegheny River to Conewango (Warren). Her route was in all probability across the lower French Creek ford to the mouth of Oil Creek, thence up that creek and overland on the trail referred to leading to the Indian burying ground on the Allegheny River and up the river to Conewango Creek, the fording of which in its flood stage was a harrowing experience. Her destina-

²⁰ Newton, History of Venango County, 575.
tion was the Genesee country of New York where she lived as a true Indian to a ripe old age.

The triangular piece of ground lying in the fork of the Allegheny River and French Creek, at the eastern side of the lower French Creek ford, gives a beautiful and inspiring view down the river and was a favorite haunt of Indians. It was the scene of at least one treaty conference by Cornplanter. Even after a few houses had collected around Fort Franklin, "the Point," as it is called, was frequented by Seneca Indian parties who annoyed the whites by their incessant yells and carousals that lasted long into the night.

On one occasion a trio of Indians were returning one evening empty handed from a hunting jaunt up along the flats bordering the Allegheny River. When several miles above the Point they sighted a she bear and two cubs. At sight of the Indians the bear family took flight, the two cubs up a tree and the bear into the brush and woods.

The Indians shot one of the cubs, which came tumbling down to the ground with a thud. Then the hunters bethought themselves of capturing the other cub. One of them climbed the tree and after following the cub out on a limb succeeded in dislodging him. When he struck the ground the two other Indians easily caught him and held him fast.

Then began a game of using the live cub to entrap the mother. Holding the cub firmly, one of the Indians bit or twisted his ear, which caused a squeal. An answering distant growl by the mother came from the woods. Another and more vigorous twist of the ear brought a sharp squeal from the cub and a deep roar from the she bear, this time much closer to the scene of torment. Finally a vicious twist of the poor cub's ear brought the infuriated mother charging into the open when the two waiting Indians shot her dead.

The three Indians then were able to proceed to camp laden with the trophies, including two bear hides and the live cub.21

The treaty of 1784–85 gave the Seneca Indians the right to hunt in northwestern Pennsylvania and they made use of that right long after the country was settled by the whites, but under the restraining hand of Cornplanter their behavior was always peaceable.

21 Newton, History of Venango County, 125.