When he returned to Mount Vernon from Philadelphia, where he had presided at the Federal Convention, George Washington directed a Carlisle attorney to collect some moneys due him “in the Western Country.” Thomas Smith, formerly of Bedford, since 1782 a resident of Carlisle, had served Washington before in this capacity. A Carlisle lawyer, Washington thought, was conveniently located to handle legal business “in the western country,” for Carlisle was in some sense at this time part of the West itself. Thomas Wallcut of Massachusetts, for example, who visited Ohio in 1789 to inspect the lands of the Ohio Company in which his soldier’s pay was invested, spoke of Carlisle, Pittsburgh, Marietta, and Albany in the same phrase.

Wallcut’s appreciation of Carlisle’s western character was certainly well founded. The town once lay at the farthest edge of settlement. It was laid out only in 1751. Threats of Indian attacks were real at least until 1763. That summer Colonel Henry Bouquet, preparing to march westward, wrote that it was impossible to describe “the despair of those who have lost their parents, relations and friends” or “the cries of distracted women and children who fill the streets” of Carlisle. Here, where he and his wife had fled from the “killing, scalping and butchering,” a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel reported that “every hut is filled with helpless women and children and . . . we expect almost every moment an invasion from our enemies.”

Carlisle had other characteristics of a frontier town. It was raw and crude and uncompleted, striving desperately to build up in a few years.

1 A talk made on the occasion of the summer tour of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the Summer Sessions of the University of Pittsburgh to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on July 19, 1952. Dr. Bell is the Boyd Lee Spahr Professor of American History at Dickinson College, Carlisle, as well as historian of the college.—Ed.


3 Most of the material on early Carlisle that is cited here comes from documents reprinted in D. Wilson Thompson and others, eds., Two Hundred Years of Cumberland County (Carlisle, 1951), and from Thomas G. Tousey, Military History of Carlisle and Carlisle Barracks, 12-55 (Richmond, Va., 1939).
institutions which had been centuries evolving in Europe. The process was not always orderly. The Carlisle republicans sometimes broke open the letters of Dr. Charles Nisbet, president of Dickinson College, whose sentiments were strongly anti-democratic; while even at the racetrack, which someone laid out before 1778, clubs were pretty freely used in the inevitable differences of opinion over horseflesh, until a guard had to be summoned to preserve the peace.

Carlisle was thus a typical example of one of the striking movements of American history—the expansion of the British and other peoples into the great interior valleys of North America. The movement began at Jamestown and Plymouth, took on its characteristic features in the eighteenth century, and has only just ceased. Carlisle was the symbol of another characteristically American movement—one that began in the eighteenth century and is still going on—the amalgamation of many races, nationalities, and religions into an American type. The melting pot first began to boil on the Pennsylvania frontier; here Hector St. John de Crévecoeur observed the remarkable process, something happening before his very eyes in the American wilderness which had required centuries to achieve in Europe. It is of some interest and it may be of some significance as well that Crévecoeur completed his Letters from an American Farmer and wrote its preface in Carlisle in 1782:

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country ... He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater.

The fact that Carlisle was once a western town makes its history in many respects similar to that of places farther west, like Pittsburgh, for example, which, although founded later, underwent a like experience. John Wilkins, when he went to Pittsburgh in 1783, noted that even the “appearance of religion, morality, regular order” was lacking there, while the town was so newly settled there was no sign of a market house “to encourage the farmers to bring in their produce.” If Carlisle had been the point of departure for Bouquet’s expedition against the Indians in 1763, Pittsburgh served Anthony Wayne in a similar role thirty years

4 Edward Burd to Jasper Yeates, Tinian, June 28, 1778, in Dreer Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
later. Both towns and their citizens were deeply involved in the Whiskey Rebellion. And both towns eventually became wealthy and respectable and acquired an aristocracy. Hugh Henry Brackenridge remembered that in the Pittsburgh he knew there was "a degree of refinement, elegance of manners and polished society not often found in a frontier town." Of Carlisle at the same period Judge Hamilton recalled that it "always partook of an aristocratic character in a class of its population," that class being the professional men of the town and the officers at the Barracks. Carlisle, Pittsburgh, Bedford, Washington, and Greensburg were all pretty much alike in their early days, and men like Thomas Smith, originally of Bedford, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, who settled finally at Carlisle, moved their homes and offices easily from one place to another.

But even after Carlisle had ceased to be western and had achieved permanence and tranquility, it remained for a time a gateway to the west. It was the seat of Cumberland County, which for more than twenty years extended from the Susquehanna to the western boundaries of the colony. The courts at Carlisle once handled most of the legal business between Harris' Ferry and the Ohio. For a time Carlisle lay at the end of the road west from Philadelphia—not until 1805 was a stage route opened west of Chambersburg. As he looked westward from Carlisle in 1758 a note of awe came into General John Forbes' report to William Pitt when he observed that "in Raestown there is not one single house . . . nor indeed is there either Inhabitants or houses from this to the Ohio (except at Forts Loudoun and Lyttelton which are only two or three houses each . . .), the whole being an immense Forest of 240 miles of Extent, intersected by several ranges of Mountains, impenetrable almost to any thing humane save the Indians, (if they be allowed the Appellation) who have foot paths, or tracts through those desarts, by the help of which, we make our roads."

Until the nineteenth century Carlisle was still virtually at the beginning of the arduous and often dangerous crossing to the Ohio country, and travelers like Winthrop Sargent, going west to survey the Seven Ranges, stopped at Carlisle to purchase packhorses and supplies. He thought the traders robbed him, taking advantage of his necessities.

5 Alfred P. James, ed., Writings of General John Forbes, 140 (Menasha, Wis., 1938).
This was a charge often made against the citizens of Carlisle and Shippensburg; perhaps it explains the recommendation given a patient on his discharge from the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia at this time, that he was an honest man, "although a residenter of Cumberland County."

There were other ways of reaching western Pennsylvania than from Carlisle through Shippensburg and Bedford, of course—by the Juniata, for example, or through Maryland. But the most frequented route ran from Philadelphia through Lancaster to the Susquehanna and Carlisle and thence over the mountains through Bedford to Pittsburgh. Of Carlisle a Pittsburgh newspaperman wrote:

In 1760 Carlisle was the most advanced Post of the State. Loading their pack-horses with blankets, whisky and powder, the Indian traders climbed the gloomy Alleghenies to the little-known region beyond. It was no easy thing to make progress along the narrow trails. Newly-fallen trees continually blocked the way, and the boughs of the overshadowing forest eternally switched the traveler in the face. By 1770 the footpaths had become broader, smoother, and harder. The click of the iron-shod pack-horse had grown familiar to the wilderness. The forest in places had shrunk back from the bridle-path, and a cabin nestled in an occasional clearing. Other paths were cut out. The tide of western immigration set in. Long trains of pack-horses loaded with stores and agricultural implements, with furniture and cooking utensils, moved towards the setting sun. The chatter and laughter of white children were mingled with the gruff voices of the pack traders. In the year 1790 there were only six freight wagons engaged in hauling goods to Pittsburgh from over the mountains. Groceries, liquor, salt, iron, etc., all entered the town on the backs of horses. Eastern merchandise was hauled by wagon as far west as Shippensburg or Chambersburg, in Pennsylvania, and as far as Winchester, in Virginia, and from there packed the remainder of the journey. On the return trip from Pittsburgh, the horses were loaded with furs, skins and ginseng. A pack train numbered between ten and twenty-five horses. . . . Up to 1796 all the salt used in this region was packed across the mountains.8

This in effect was the route the Wilkins family followed, for example—Robert, the immigrant from Wales, landing at Philadelphia, taking up several farms in succession in Philadelphia and Chester counties until he bought land in Donegal Township in Lancaster, then moving on to Carlisle and Virginia; his grandson John farming at Donegal, where he was born, keeping a store and tavern in Carlisle, farming at Bedford, finally in 1783 settling at Pittsburgh where, as at Carlisle, he

7 F. A. Michaux, "Travels," in Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., Early Western Travels, 3:140-141 (Cleveland, 1904).
8 A. H. Reed in Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, July 29, 1886.
was a principal founder of the Presbyterian Church.

Military forces were the first to pass through this gateway to western Pennsylvania. From 1754 until the Revolution, Carlisle served as a rendezvous for troops and a depot for supplies. In 1756 many of the troops that marched against Kittanning came from Carlisle, and their commanding officer was John Armstrong, a Carlisler. A portion of the Forbes expedition rendezvoused at Carlisle in the early summer of 1758, and three regiments of Highlanders wintered there on their return from the successful march against Fort Duquesne. In 1759-60 the town is spoken of as a "grand magazine"; and such indeed was the character the post bore for many years. When the Indians made their final desperate stand on the Pennsylvania frontier in 1763, Henry Bouquet assembled troops at Carlisle; and to Carlisle next year he brought back some of the Indians' captives, delivering them to their families, as the pleasant legend has it, on the Carlisle public square.

The traders were not far behind the soldiers, when, in fact, they were not ahead of them. George Croghan had a trading post a few miles north of the town, one of several that linked his fur-trading interests in Ohio with his stores in Philadelphia. Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan had sheds and storehouses in Carlisle; and George Morgan's brother John, a Philadelphia physician who first saw western Pennsylvania as a surgeon-ensign under Col. James Burd, made what was probably his first land purchase in Carlisle—a town lot—continued to invest in western lands, and died in 1789 owning several thousand acres in southwestern Pennsylvania, where George ultimately settled and built a home at Morganza.

Carlislers as well as Philadelphians saw in western Pennsylvania an area to develop, resources to engross and profit by. By the end of the century, when they had a bit of capital, they were going out to Pittsburgh to look into business opportunities there. Such a one was William Brown Parker, whose family were merchants in Philadelphia and Carlisle. The journey from Carlisle, he wrote his uncle on September 12, 1811, was

... one of the most unpleasant rides I ever had in all the places I have ever been, having frequently, as well as the other passengers, to get out of the Stage, going over the Mountains and walk 4 and 5 Miles, and the accommodation on the road very bad, both in Beds

9 William Brown Parker to John Brown, Pittsburgh, September 12, 1811, in Parker, "Notes of a Visit to Pittsburgh, 1811," in Hamilton Library and Historical Association of Cumberland County, Carlisle.
and everything else. Between Greensburgh and this place the Stage upset, going down a Steep Hill, and one of the passengers got his Sholder put out of joint, and I got my arm a little hurt . . .

During the few days Parker was at Pittsburgh he made brief notes of what he saw:

Sept. 7. Arrived here this day in the Mail Stage at one oClock from Philada. Put up at the Stage House, kept by Robert Spencer, the best Public House in the Town. Met with Judge Tilghman from Philada, who stays at the same house. It is situated on the Bank of the Maningahoe River, a most beautiful situation. Went to the Court House where I heard Mr. Ross the Lawyer. Judges Tilghman, Yeates and Brackenridge presided. From thence took a walk through a part of the Town, find it laid out on a Similar plan to that of Philada. The Streets are very narrow and not generally paved, intersect each other at Right angles. The Town is a Smoky, and must be a very disagreeable, place in wet weather as the Inhabitants burn nothing but Coal, which they get at this Season for 4/100 pr Bushel, but in winter it rises to 6 and 8/100. There are 3 market Houses in the Town. Mondays, Wednesdays & Saturdays are their market days. Beef, Mutton and Veal is all the Same price, say 6/100 pr lb. One of the Market Houses is Shapt like a half moon (. I find on enquiry that house rent is nearly as high in this place as it is in Philad. and Lots is out of all Calculation owing to most of them belonging to a few Rich Men. say Genl O'Hara & Wilkins &c. It was told me that 14$ pr foot Ground rent was given a few days ago for a Small Lot on Market Street.

Sept. 8. Went to Church with Judge Tilghman. The house is in the form of a Sugar Loaf—8 Squares with a Cupola on it. Went to meeting in the afternoon with Mr. Magnus Moony [?]. This is quite a Genteel Congregation and the House a handsome one. Mr. Fulton has built a Steam Boat that will carry 300 Tons of Goods. She is 150 feet long. She lays at this place at present owing to the lowness of the water in the Ohio, which prevents her going down. She is to ply between this place and Wheeling, a distance of 100 Miles by water, but only 50 by land. The Boats on the Ohio are Built Something like a Chinese Junk, all covered with a wooden Roof of Shingles. Some of them will carry from 50 to 60 Tons. They are not constructed with Sails and masts like our Boats on the Delaware. They must be Poled, as they are all flat Bottoms, without Keels. The Kentucky and Ohio Merchants bring their Goods from Philad. & Baltimore this far in waggons, and Send them down the River in these Boats. There was one Boat arrived here this morning that Came from St. Lewis, a distance of 1500 miles. There are Several Ferrys at this place to Carry the people & waggons across the Moningahila to the Ohio Side. The Town Stands on a point of Land formed by the Alleghany and Maningahaly Rivers, which empty into and form the Ohio at this place, thus . . .

Sept. 9. The weather was so Cold this morning that a fire was made in the room where the Gentlemen Sets.

Sept. 10 and 11. It has rained these 2 days and nights without intermission.
Sept. 12. Went across the Monongehela this morning with two gentlemen, opposite the Town. Had a most delightful prospect of the Town and the 3 Rivers. Called at a man’s House on the Bank to Shew us and go with us into a Coal pit, which he did. He took a lighted Candle in his hand and we went upwards of 200 feet from the entrance. From thence we went to Genl. O’Hara’s Glass factory, but as they were not working, could not see them make the Window Glass, as it is the only kind they make at this furnace. Intend Starting for Beaver in the morning should the weather permit.

In his letter Parker added a few details. The steamboat he saw lying at Pittsburgh had cost $30,000, “altho built at this place and where all the Machinery was made.” He noted that there were “3 extensive Breweries” at Pittsburgh, two air foundries, where a great variety of castings were made, and three glass factories, one for window glass, the other two for cut glass decanters and tumblers. “Oliver Evans of Philada. has a Steam Grist Mill here on the Bank of the Monongahela, which makes from 70 to 80 Barrels of Super fine flour in 24 hours.”

Still another wave crossed the mountains to western Pennsylvania. These were the ministers, teachers, physicians, and lawyers. There was something symbolic about the change from coach or wagon to packhorse which invariably took place at Carlisle at the end of the eighteenth century. As the traveler lightened his physical baggage, he cast off other things as well. In Crèvecoeur’s sense (if it is not to speak too dramatically), to pass through Carlisle westward in 1800 was to pass through the gateway to America. Not all the civilization of Europe or even of Philadelphia made the first transit of the mountains. While it is easy to exaggerate the selective influence of the frontier, it is nevertheless true that on the long passages from Europe to America, from Philadelphia to the Susquehanna, and from Carlisle to trans-Appalachia a good deal had to be jettisoned, ideas as well as household furniture. Ships were large enough to carry furniture, wardrobes, libraries, even building materials; and, since friends or at least coreligionists often came together, they were big enough to carry some of the social patterns of the homeland. But for the most part men crossed the mountains individually by trails and narrow roads. A packhorse cannot carry a sideboard or even a dower chest; while a man afoot will select from his library only the books he may need most—the law and the prophets, Blackstone and the Bible.

Yet if some portions of one’s inherited culture were laid aside, they
were not forgotten. As soon as the roads were made and the community could afford them, they were sent for. If men got on in the west without schools and painters and the theater, this was a matter of necessity, not choice. As soon as they could, they welcomed itinerant schoolmasters, got a press established, found work for artisans to do. As early as 1761 James Kenny noticed that the more sober sort at Pittsburgh seemed to long for meetings for public worship. The Carlisle Gazette began publication in 1785, the Pittsburgh Gazette in 1786. A book store was opened in Pittsburgh in 1789, the Carlisle Library Company was formed in 1797. A grammar school and academy were founded in Carlisle in 1773 or shortly afterwards, the Pittsburgh Academy was established in 1787. And John Wilkins was the second largest contributor to the building of the First Presbyterian Church in Carlisle in 1763 and one of the principal supporters of the first Presbyterian congregation at Pittsburgh more than twenty years later.

Here was a singularly close tie between Carlisle and Pittsburgh. In a striking degree Dickinson College, where classes began in 1784, provided western Pennsylvania with many of its local leaders in the generation after 1790. Ministers, teachers, and lawyers particularly, educated at Carlisle, found employment in western Pennsylvania. Most of these were born in the eastern part of the state and migrated westward, like Francis Herron, of the class of 1794, who, licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Carlisle, was minister at Rocky Springs, but was finally called to the church in Pittsburgh in the Presbytery of Redstone. A few pioneer Pittsburghers, however, who had once been Carlislers, like John Wilkins and Ebenezer Denny, sent their sons back to Dickinson to be educated.

Of the nine graduates of the first Dickinson class, that of 1787, we know something of six. Of these, one settled at Bedford, one at Kittanning, and one at Pittsburgh. In the next class were John McPherrin and William Spear, both natives of Adams County, who became Presbyterian ministers at Butler and Greensburg respectively. David Hoge, '89, practiced law at Washington; Robert Callender, 1792, at Pittsburgh; his classmate Robert Whitehill, at Waynesburg; their classmate John Lyon,

10 George L. Reed, ed., Alumni Record: Dickinson College, passim (Carlisle, 1905); George Norcross, "The Influence of the Presbytery of Carlisle beyond its Bounds," in Centennial Memorial of the Presbytery of Carlisle, 2:379-393 (Harrisburg, 1889).
at Uniontown; while James Postlethwaite, also of the class of 1792, was a physician at Greensburg. Every class from 1787 to 1832, when the college closed, had men who settled in western Pennsylvania or Ohio.

Consider Washington College. Matthew Brown, 1794, was the first president of Washington College, as he was later president of Jefferson College. David McConaughy, 1795, was also president of Washington College, as was David Elliott, of the class of 1808, who later served forty years as professor in the Western Theological Seminary at Allegheny. Richard Henry Lee, of the class of 1812, was professor of ancient languages at Washington College. John Holmes Agnew, 1823, taught languages there too.

Or consider the Pittsburgh bar. John Byers Alexander was a Dickinson graduate in the class of 1798; William Wilkins was in the class of 1802 and remained in Carlisle to read with David Watts; Harmar Mahon, born in Pittsburgh, graduated at Dickinson in 1814, and returned to Pittsburgh to practice. Ross Wilkins graduated in 1816. And Harmar Denny’s son James O’Hara Denny was a member of the class of 1842 at Dickinson, as was Charles Patterson Wilkins. The list might go on.

But this dependence of western Pennsylvania on Carlisle ultimately came to an end. The ties between Carlisle and Pittsburgh weakened. This was because Pittsburgh grew larger than Carlisle—their populations had been about the same in 1800; ten years later Pittsburgh was more than twice as large as Carlisle. The lesser could no longer draw the greater. Carlisle ceased to influence western Pennsylvania because, with the opening of the Northwest Territory, Pittsburgh became itself a center of westward movement and the gateway to a still vaster west. The first steamboat operated on the Ohio in 1811; the National Road linked Washington to Wheeling in 1817; the Monongahela was bridged in 1819. At Washington, Canonsburg, and Pittsburgh colleges were established where western Pennsylvanians might receive an education in their own country. The Western Theological Seminary was established in 1825 to provide Presbyterian ministers for the Ohio Valley. Pittsburghers were now looking forward to the Mississippi, to New Orleans, and up the Missouri; not backwards to Carlisle and Philadelphia. Henry Miller Watts, Carlisle-born, a lawyer in Pittsburgh, finally returned to Philadelphia to practice, but his progress was not a common
one. More typical was John Wilkins’ son Ross, for example, who made his career in Michigan; while so many Dickinson graduates were settled at Chillicothe after 1820 they might have had a large and active alumni club.

Western Pennsylvania after 1810 was thus growing rapidly, laying down its own foundations, becoming independent of Carlisle and the Susquehanna. Simultaneously and in some measure because of this, Carlisle began to decline in importance. It was ceasing to be a gateway to the west. It was becoming merely a court and market town for an ever-narrowing area. The legal business done there, though great, was no longer with land titles on the Allegheny; and so the courthouse no longer gave a spring to young men’s imaginations. The State Works passed Carlisle by in 1820s. The railroad, which came in 1837, tied Carlisle to Harrisburg and then to Philadelphia and the Philadelphia capitalists who paid for it; but the railroad went up the valley east of the mountains, linking Carlisle with Hagerstown and Winchester, not with Bedford and trans-Appalachia. The college, suffering from internal commotions, closed in 1832; when it reopened two years later it was under the direction of a sect, the Methodists, which was stronger in Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia than in western Pennsylvania. As a result few western Pennsylvanians any more sent their sons to Carlisle to be educated. The military post, once so important, was almost sold and then fitfully revived as a training school, until the post which saw armies bravely march to battle with the redskins in the eighteenth century was devoted late in the nineteenth to teaching their descendants the civilized arts of printing, carpentry, and football. From having looked out on the west, of which it was briefly a capital, Carlisle now began to look in upon itself. Once the leaders of the town took pride in where they were going; now their children seem to have been proudest of their positions, which they did not wish to change. They no longer feared Indian attacks, but rather newcomers and declining profits. In 1818 James Flint wrote of Carlisle that though it was in a newly settled country, it had “an appearance somewhat antiquated. With so much grass growing in the streets, a suspicion arises that there is not much traffic here.”