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JOHN FRASER, WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA  
FRONTIERSMAN\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

JOHN Fraser, early western Pennsylvania frontiersman, has been neglected in the history of western Pennsylvania. While the frontier of Pennsylvania was gradually pushed westward, certain individuals went ahead of a more organized movement. These individuals had to fight hostile Indians, the weather, loneliness, and other conditions that, at times, made their situation very dangerous. As the frontier became more populated, these individuals became important persons. Such an individual was John Fraser. In the matter of the actual settlement of society in western Pennsylvania he occupied a place as important as George Washington, George Croghan, and others who played a role in western Pennsylvania history. The reasons for this statement will unfold briefly in the introduction and more fully in the article which follows. During a quarter of a century on the Pennsylvania frontier John Fraser gave valuable service to the settlement of western Pennsylvania. First of all English speaking frontiersmen he observed the hostile movements of the French. This he was able to do because his trading post at Venango was situated at the Junction of French Creek and the Allegheny River. Both streams were heavily traveled by Indians who respected John Fraser and who wished that more white traders had Fraser's honesty

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and fairness. Moreover, John Fraser served against the French with Captain William Trent, George Washington, General Braddock, and General Forbes. His participation in these campaigns has been ignored by many writers on the history of this period. Later in 1768 he and William Thompson were nominated by Lieutenant-Governor Penn to go to Redstone Creek to "warn off the settlers." Although he was not so large a land speculator as George Washington, John Fraser not only secured outright extensive acreage for himself, but also bought and sold land applications that involved additional acres of land. The most important feature of his career, however, was that of Justice of the Peace of Bedford County, Pennsylvania, from March 11, 1771, until his death in 1773 at the age of fifty-two. It can be asserted that John Fraser is one of the least understood persons in western Pennsylvania history. This article is an effort to give the story of his life.

## II. FROM SCOTLAND TO FORT CUMBERLAND, MD.

A brief outline of the life of John Fraser from 1721 to 1755 shows that he was born in 1721, came to the colony of Pennsylvania when he was fourteen, settled for a short time in Paxtang Township, Lancaster County (now Dauphin County), Pennsylvania, migrated to Venango (Franklin, Pennsylvania), moved to Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania, fled to Virginia, and in 1755 settled near Fort Cumberland, Maryland. He was a gunsmith, an Indian trader, a guide and lieutenant in the British army, and participated in the English expeditions against the French and their allies.

### John Fraser at Venango

Born in 1721<sup>1</sup> in the Scottish Highlands, John Fraser came to the colony of Pennsylvania in 1735<sup>2</sup>; and by 1737<sup>3</sup> he was living on an 122 acre farm along the Susquehanna River in Paxtang Township from

1 *National Cyclopedia of America*, Volume 13, page 153, New York, James A. White and Company, (1906).

2 *The Ohio Company Papers, 1753 to 1817*, 83n, edited by Kenneth P. Bailey, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Edward Brothers Incorporated, Lithoprinters, (1947).

3 *History of Indiana County, Pennsylvania*, page 53, Newark, Ohio, J. A. Caldwell, (1880); Egle, William Henry, *Notes and Queries*, Volume II, page 305, Harrisburg, Harrisburg Publishing Company, (1895); Hanna, Charles A., *The Wilderness Trail*, Volume 1, page 179, New York, G. P. Putnam and Sons, (1911).

which he migrated in 1740<sup>4</sup> to Venango. George Croghan described Venango as situated in a large fine bottom on the bank of the Upper Ohio River (Allegheny River), with much clover and wild timothy in the area. The Venango Trail that led from Venango via the French Creek Valley to Presque Isle (Erie, Pennsylvania), was rich in fur bearing animals and abundant in elk, deer, buffalo, wild turkey, grouse, and countless carrier pigeons. The brooks bordering this trail abounded with trout, sturgeon, bass, and other fine fish. At Venango John Fraser established his fur trading business. Here he built his trading-house, the first English house<sup>5</sup> in the wilderness and served as a gunsmith for the Indians with whom he traded.

Although John Fraser was trading with the Indians in 1740, he was not a licensed trader until 1748.<sup>6</sup> He traded his gunsmith services for the furs and pelts of the Indians who considered his services very valuable to them. They thought him a magician and his tools the mysterious helpers which made wonders as he moved his hands and fingers. John Adams, a writer on Indian traders, described Fraser as an honest and upright trader who used his intelligence, integrity, and energy to better himself.<sup>7</sup> John Fraser had a profitable fur trading business until the French showed interest in northwestern Pennsylvania.

### French Activity in the Upper Ohio Valley

The French in Canada had for western Pennsylvania, especially the Upper Ohio Valley, a different plan from that of the English speaking settlers along the Atlantic Coast. They, by 1749, were alarmed at the progress of the Pennsylvania traders and the Ohio Company. Deciding to claim the entire Ohio Valley, French authorities sent Celoron de Blainville on an expedition to re-assert the French claim over the disputed region and to establish French influence over the Indians. This expedition of 250 French and Indians left La Chine, near Montreal, June 15, 1749, in 23 canoes. When Celoron arrived on the southern

<sup>4</sup> Dinwiddie, Robert, *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie*, Volume III, page 74, Richmond, Virginia Historical Society, (1843).

<sup>5</sup> *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Volume 17, Number 1, page 57, (1934).

<sup>6</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series, Volume II, page 14, edited by Samuel Hazard, Harrisburg, Joseph Severns and Company, (1853).

<sup>7</sup> Adams, John, "The Indian Traders of the Upper Ohio Valley," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Volume 17, Number 3, pages 165, 166, (1934).

shore of Lake Erie, most of the Indians fled to the woods. After he had assembled them, Celoron warned the Indians that the English were planning to settle on their land and demanded the expulsion of all English traders from that region. Celoron, however, was warned by the Indians that if he tried to expel John Fraser from the area, he, Celoron, would have difficulty maintaining himself until spring. To receive the gifts offered by Celoron, the Indians consented to his demands although they were dependent upon English traders for supplies. Several times Celoron gathered up English traders, ordered them to withdraw, and threatened confiscation of their goods if they returned. When Celoron arrived at Venango, John Fraser and the majority of the Indians fled to the woods. The first obstacle to John Fraser's fur trading business at Venango had arisen.<sup>8</sup>

The Pennsylvania traders had been warned by Celoron to stay out of the Upper Ohio Valley or face financial losses, but they did not heed this warning. On May 26, 1750, two of John Fraser's employees, Maurice Turner and Ralph Kilgore, were captured 25 miles from Miami Town. Turner and Kilgore had been trading with the Twightee Indians from whom they had obtained a large amount of furs. They had made one trip with furs to the Forks of the Ohio River and were returning for the remainder of the furs when they met seven French Indians. Turner and Kilgore gave them food and meat and talked in a friendly manner. The Indians examined the guns of the traders. One picked up a tomahawk, and other asked for knives to cut their tobacco. Maurice Turner and Ralph Kilgore were then made captives. They were taken to Fort Detroit where the commander gave the Indians a ten gallon keg of brandy and 100 pounds of tobacco. He sent the captives to a farm one mile from the fort where they worked three months and where Indians mocked and teased them. The commander, recalled to Quebec, took the captives with him on his eastward journey. At Niagara they saw Jean Ceur, an influential person among the Indians, distributing gifts, worth fifteen hundred pounds sterling in Philadelphia, to Indians. Here, also, they learned that the French had offered a reward for the scalps of George Croghan and James Lowry, the two chief

8 Ambler, Charles Henry, *George Washington and the West*, page 39, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, (1936); Buck, Solon J. and Buck, Elizabeth H., *The Planting of Civilization In* burgh Press (1939; Sipe, Chester Hale, "Principal Indian Towns of *Western Pennsylvania*, pages 58, 60, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, *Western Pennsylvania*," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Volume 13, Number 2, pages 121, 122, (1930).

Pennsylvania traders in the Miami Country. The prisoners saw Joncaire set out with 500 men and provisions on an expedition for an attack on Indians still friendly to English traders. Making their escape while their guard slept, Maurice Turner and Ralph Kilgore made their way to Colonel William Johnson in New York. This experience of his two traders did not divert John Fraser from the continuation of his normal activities at Venango.<sup>9</sup>

He had to experience personally the determination of the French to expel all English traders from the Upper Ohio Valley. On November 24, 1750, on the east side of Lake Erie, the French chased John Fraser and his helper. Both men escaped, but goods belonging to both Fraser and his partner James Young were lost. These losses were considerable.<sup>10</sup> This was not to be the last and worst action of the French, for in 1752 new and more severe instructions were ordered from Quebec.

On January 1, 1752, a new governor and lieutenant-general of New France was appointed. His commission was dated March 1, 1752. The Marquis Duquesne had different plans for the Upper Ohio Valley than the former governor. He adopted a plan to send all captured English traders to France, and he asserted that the English had no right to the Upper Ohio Valley because La Salle had explored the region late in the seventeenth century. The Marquis Duquesne was determined to keep open communications between the French possessions on the Mississippi River and Canada via the Ohio River. He planned to build a string of forts from Canada southward to the sea; this would confine the English to the sea coast and give the interior to the French. His immediate plans were to construct forts from Canada to the Forks of the Ohio River. In the spring of 1753 he commenced his plans with 400 regulars, 5,000 militiamen, and 600 Indians. He also had a few cannon. By August, 1753, the fort at Presque Isle and another fort 21 miles further south in French Creek Valley had been completed. In the fall, fifty soldiers commanded by Joncaire took possession of Fraser's trading post at Venango. Work started there on Fort Machault was not completed until the spring of 1754. This was the limit of French expansion for 1753,

<sup>9</sup> Buck and Buck, *op. cit.*, pages 60, 61; Darlington, William M., *Journal of Christopher Gist*, page 122, Pittsburgh, J. R. Weldin and Company, (1893); Walton, Joseph, *Conrad Weiser and the Indian Policy of Colonial Pennsylvania*, pages 241, 242, Philadelphia, George W. Jacobs and Company, (1900); *Minutes of the Provincial Council*, Volume 5, pages 480 to 483, Harrisburg, Theo Fenn and Company, (1851).

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A. (To be published later.)

but plans were made for further expansion in the spring of 1754.<sup>11</sup>

The activity of the French directly affected John Fraser at Venango. On May 7, 1753, George Croghan and others on Pine Trail, that led from Logstown to Venango, received a letter from John Fraser. In it was important information about the movements of the French. On May 16, 1753, John Fraser wrote that some French and Indians had been at his trading post to trade skins and furs and that he considered them spies. On June 17, 1753, Fraser found a French deserter whom he sent to William Trent. When Trent was told that the French had 800 regulars and 1600 militiamen ready for an attack against the English, he called the deserter a liar. On the night of August 16, 1753, a Mohawk Indian who had come from Venango to Logstown related that a party of seventy-five French and Indians had captured an English trader, John Trotter, and his helper, and had chased John Fraser and another Englishman eight miles down the river. Both men escaped. By now conditions at Venango made it impossible for Fraser to reside there.<sup>12</sup>

By August 27, 1753, John Fraser was established at the forks of the Ohio River where he traded with the Indians. He sent to his partner, James Young, a letter describing the conditions of the Upper Ohio Valley. Fraser wrote that he had sold only "eight bucks worth" of corn and goods that were taken by Custologo, a Delaware Indian. He also described the escape from the French of his employee William who was returning to Venango when he met several Frenchmen. They told William everything was all right, but he did not believe them. He left during the night; and, at the break of day climbed to the top of a hill overlooking Fraser's former trading post. Here he saw one hundred French soldiers, all under arms, and the captives, John Trotter and his helper. Some of the French chased William fourteen miles, but he escaped. He

11 Buck and Buck, *op. cit.*, page 61; Dahlinger, Charles W., "The Marquis Duquesne, Sieur de Menneville, Founder of the City of Pittsburgh," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Volume 15, Number 2, pages 121 to 129, (1932); Garneau, Francois X., *History of Canada from the Time of Its Discovery to the Union Year, 1840-1841*, Volume 1, page 466, Montreal, (1862).

12 Darlington, Mary Carson, *History of Colonel Henry Bouquet*, pages 38, 39, Privately Printed, (1920); Hanna, Charles A., *op. cit.*, Volume 1, pages 271, 361, 370; Slick, Sewell Elias, *William Trent and the West*, pages 33, 36, 39, Harrisburg, Archives Publishing Company, (1947); Thayer, Clarence R., "George Croghan and the Struggle for the Ohio Valley, 1748 to 1758," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Volume IV, Number 4, page 251, (1921).

continued his journey to the Forks of the Ohio where he and Fraser began to sell goods belonging to the partnership of Fraser and Young. John Fraser also wrote that he had not obtained a single pelt or fur from the northern Indians because the French had prevented any hunting by them. Fraser also stated that William Trent had been at the Forks of the Ohio to locate a good site for a fort. Thus by the fall of 1753, John Fraser had been compelled to leave Venango and had settled at Turtle Creek where the Indians feared him because he played a bag pipe. They thought that any one who made such a noise was more than human.<sup>13</sup>

### English Attempts to Drive Out the French

At Turtle Creek John Fraser participated in several English attempts to drive the French out of the Upper Ohio Valley. He was destined to assist, indirectly, the mission of George Washington to Fort Le Boeuf in the winter of 1753-1754. Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia had heard about the French expansion. He appointed George Washington to deliver a message to the French commander to withdraw from the region. On November 15, 1753, George Washington left Williamsburg, Virginia. At Wills Creek he engaged Christopher Gist as his guide. The members of his party increased the further he traveled. On Thursday, November 22, 1753, Washington's party remained overnight at Fraser's cabin. Turtle Creek was swollen by excessive rains and a vast amount of fallen snow and was impassable. Fraser loaned the party a canoe to carry the baggage to the Forks of the Ohio River, about twelve miles away. At Fort Machault (Venango), George Washington asked Joncaire why John Fraser had been forced from Venango. Joncaire replied that Venango was French territory; and that if John Fraser had been captured, he would have received the same treatment as the other captured English traders. Joncaire directed George Washington to Fort Le Boeuf where the French commander refused to withdraw. On December 29, 1753, on their return trip, after George Washington was jerked into Allegheny River when his "setting pole" caught in the ice, they made their way to Fraser's cabin where they remained until January 1, 1754. Shortly after their farewell, George Croghan arrived at

<sup>13</sup> *Colonial Records, op. cit.*, Volume 5, 659, 660: Volwiler, Albert T., *George Croghan and the Westward Movement, 1741 to 1782*, page 47, Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Company, (1926); Pittsburgh Press, January 15, 1933.

Fraser's cabin. Fraser told him that Washington's mission had not succeeded.<sup>14</sup>

John Fraser participated directly in the second attempt of Governor Dinwiddie to drive the French out of the Upper Ohio Valley. After he had heard Washington's report, Governor Dinwiddie more actively supported the Ohio Company's plan to build a fort at the Forks of the Ohio. In January, 1754, he called for two companies of 100 men each to build a fort immediately. William Trent, brother-in-law of George Croghan, was made captain of the first of these two companies. John Fraser, not too enthusiastic, accepted a commission as lieutenant with the reservations that he be not required to stay at the fort and come only once a week or whenever necessary to the fort. Edward Ward was made ensign. Christopher Gist was empowered to purchase supplies for the expedition which Colonel Fry and George Washington commanded. Captain Trent and Ensign Ward were to take a small number of men to the Forks of the Ohio River immediately. Re-inforcements would come later. The Virginia House of Burgesses had appropriated ten thousand pounds sterling and ten cannon. Later the number of men was increased to 300 with a special bonus of 2,000 acres of land for each recruit. On February 3, 1754, Trent's journey to the Forks of the Ohio began. George Washington requested Trent to ask Fraser to supply bear and venison meat. The latter, however, provided very little. The Indian hunters around the proposed fort likewise provided little meat, and Captain Trent had to pay seven shillings six pence per turkey killed by them. John Fraser, who resided at his trading post at Turtle Creek, was too concerned with his Indian trade to think about the progress of the fort. The proper conditions for the construction of the fort did not exist.<sup>15</sup>

On January 15, 1754, the French force of five hundred militiamen and regulars left Quebec with Captain Claude de Contrecoeur in command. At Montreal three hundred more militiamen joined Contrecoeur

<sup>14</sup> Washington, Major George, *Journal of Major George Washington*, pages 3, 17, 21, 22, 26, edited by William Hunter, Williamsburg, (1754); Darlington, William M., *op. cit.*, pages 80, 86; Hanna, Charles A., *op. cit.*, Volume 1, pages 372, 374; Ambler, Charles Henry, *op. cit.*, pages 43, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Dahlinger, Charles W., "The Marquis Duquesne," *loc. cit.*, pages 132 to 134, 169; Killikelly, Sarah H., *History of Pittsburg*, page 14, Pittsburgh, B. C. and Gordon Montgomery Company, (1906); Volwiler, Albert T., *op. cit.*, page 82; Slick, Sewell, Elias, *op. cit.*, pages 51, 53, 54.



on his southward march via the northern shore of Lake Ontario. By April 14, 1754, the army arrived at Fort Machault (Venango), where men, cannon, stores, and ammunition were loaded into three hundred canoes and sixty batteaux for the journey down the Allegheny River. On April 18, 1754, the French force found conditions favorable to attack the English fort under construction at the Forks of the Ohio.

When Contrecoeur decided to attack the fort, there was only a small, weak, ineffective force to offer any resistance. Captain Trent had returned to Virginia to procure additional supplies. Christopher Gist had asked Ensign Ward to send men to Redstone Creek for supplies that turned out not to be there. The aid that had been promised from Virginia had not arrived. While Captain Trent was absent from the fort, John Fraser was technically in command. He, however, left the responsibility of leadership to Ensign Ward. On April 13, Ensign Ward received news that the French were coming down the Allegheny River. Ward consulted his superior officer, but received no advice. John Fraser's answer was, "What can I do about it? I have a shilling to lose for a penny to gain by my commission. I have business with my partner that can not be settled under six days." On April 14, 1754, Ensign Ward consulted Half King, a Delaware Indian, who advised the building of a stockade. On April 18, the stockade was almost finished when the enemy appeared. Ensign Ward estimated the enemy to be at least one thousand men. Although he was not the superior officer, Ensign Ward had to surrender at 12 o'clock noon on April 18, 1754. The French commander permitted Ward and his men to leave unharmed with a three day supply of food and their working tools. The cannon had to be left behind. With the French in command of the Forks of the Ohio, the regional English settlements and trading posts were plundered and destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

One reason why Governor Dinwiddie's plan had not succeeded was the failure of George Washington to re-inforce the small English force. The disgruntled men of Captain Trent on their retreat met George Washington at Wills Creek. John Fraser, however, had not left Western Pennsylvania. He continued to trade with the Indians, perhaps with his headquarters at Gist's plantation at Mount Braddock of

<sup>16</sup> Dahlinger, Charles W., "The Marquis Duquesne, Sieur de Menneville, Founder of the City of Pittsburgh," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Volume 15, Number 2, pages 134 to 136, and Number 3, pages 241, 242, (1932): Slick, Sewell Elias, *op. cit.*, pages 54 to 58.

today. On June 1, 1754, George Washington recorded in his diary that an English trader arrived at Great Meadows. This was probably John Fraser. George Washington pressed Fraser's animals into service. Fraser himself was detained so long by George Washington that he was present at the Battle of Fort Necessity.<sup>17</sup> As a result he lost a tremendous amount of his own goods, plus goods owned by him and James Young.<sup>18</sup>

### The Attempted Court-Martial of John Fraser

When George Washington was defeated at the Battle of Fort Necessity, John Fraser was among those who retreated to Virginia. His conduct and the conduct of Captain Trent at the unfinished fort at the Forks of the Ohio River angered the governor of Virginia and the House of Burgesses. Governor Dinwiddie ordered a court-martial to inquire into their conduct and give whatever punishment was necessary. George Washington, however, came to the defense of John Fraser. Washington reminded Governor Dinwiddie that Fraser had accepted his commission with reservations. Washington, furthermore, stated that either he or Colonel Innes should be added to the court-martial because an officer could not be tried by officers in the same regiment. A general court-martial was suggested. Although the Virginia House of Burgesses and Governor Dinwiddie wanted a court-martial, John Fraser was never court-martialed, but on the contrary, received an important position in Virginia military service.<sup>19</sup>

### John Fraser as Adjutant of Virginia Forces

Largely through the efforts of George Washington, John Fraser became the adjutant of Virginia forces. On August 21, 1754, George Washington had requested Governor Dinwiddie to appoint Fraser the adjutant because a good disciplinarian was needed. In November, 1754, Fraser was ordered to accompany the seventy recruits of Captain Stewart and take proper care of them. Governor Dinwiddie wanted him to teach

17 Washington, George, *Diaries of George Washington*, Volume 1, page 90, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, New York, Houghton-Mifflin Company, (1925); *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Volume 18, Number 3, page 277, (1910); *Journal of the House of Burgesses, 1773 to 1776* page 129, edited by John Pendleton Kennedy, Richmond, (1909).

18 See Appendices B and C. (To be published later.)

19 Dinwiddie, Robert, *op. cit.*, Volume III, page 147, 149; Washington, George, *Writings of George Washington*, Volume 1, pages 78, 80, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, Washington, D. C., The United States Printing Office, (1934).

them the proper use of fire arms. Fraser, however, was not too efficient as adjutant. He was supposed to take supplies by boat from Hampton to the Potomac to Captain Waggener. The supplies were not at Hampton when Fraser sailed, and he did not wait for them. Governor Dinwiddie evened the score. Fraser presented some bills, but Dinwiddie refused to pay them. John Fraser, as a result, was not long the adjutant of Virginia forces, for in 1755 he was residing in Maryland.<sup>20</sup>

While Fraser was adjutant of Virginia forces, he traveled throughout Virginia. In Winchester he met and married a young woman named Jean or Jane of unknown family name. Shortly afterwards he and his young bride moved to the mouth of Evitts Creek near Fort Cumberland, Maryland.

(To be Continued)

<sup>20</sup> Dinwiddie Robert, *op. cit.*, Volume III, pages 289, 413, 415, 445, 464; Washington, George, *Writings of George Washington, op. cit.*, Volume 1, page 98.