

PIONEERS OF PITTSBURGH THE ROBINSONS

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“**Y**OU cannot successfully navigate the future unless you keep always framed beside it a small clear image of the past,” observed Mrs. Miniver. The past of a city is the story of the activities of its pioneers in an environment which they strove to mold to their use and the “small clear image” must consist of an authentic picture of a representative group of these pioneers. The authentic picture can be obtained from original sources and a representative group from a study of all individuals with a common surname. One of the most common surnames in the 1790 census of Allegheny County included many unrelated families which were remarkably representative of the County in nativity, religion, occupation, and economic position. This surname is ROBINSON with its spelling variants, Robertson, Robeson, etc.¹ Tangible evidence of these Robinson pioneers has been preserved in Robinson Street, Robinson Court, General Robinson Street, Robinson Run and Robinson Township.

The earliest Robinsons in the area were frontier Indian fighters. Fortunately one of these, Robert Robinson, was a chronicler as well as a famous Indian fighter. His grandfather had come from Derry, Ireland around 1730 with his six sons. They settled at Hanover, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and there the eldest son, Philip, built the first “Robinson’s Fort.” In 1753 George Robinson, one of Philip’s sons moved west with his first cousin, Robert Robinson, a young man of twenty-one. They crossed the Susquehanna and built a second “Robinson’s Fort” in Shearman’s Valley, Cumberland County. Robert Robinson described some of the frontier fighting in western Pennsylvania. In the Battle of Sidling Hill which was

Mrs. Coleman, a resident of Washington, D. C., is a niece of Mr. Charles K. Robinson, member of this Society, granddaughter of Jesse Hamilton Robinson who was with Andrew Carnegie in the Military Telegraph Corps during the Civil War, and great granddaughter of the William V. Robinson mentioned in the article who was born in Ireland and presumably was a relative of General William Robinson, Jr.—Ed.

¹ The same man spelled his name in a variety of ways in the early years.

the first battle after Braddock's defeat, Robert's brother, James, was slain and in a later skirmish three brothers, probably cousins of Robert, were all killed on a scouting expedition.

Robert Robinson's daughter, Margaret, moved into the Pittsburgh area after she was married in 1792 and lived near her "Uncle John Robinson." Robert Robinson's nephew, Thomas Robinson born 1773, left Pittsburgh in 1797 and moved into the frontier area around Lake Erie. Thomas and his six sons returned to Pittsburgh occasionally to buy supplies. His eldest son was William Andrew Robinson born 1795, and all of his sons eventually settled in Pittsburgh.

A Lieutenant Andrew Robinson of a Highland Regiment under Major Grant was with Forbes' Army when they captured Fort Duquesne. He was among the survivors of the battle of Grant's Hill, fought September 14, 1758.

Fort Pitt was first a frontier fort and second a trading post placed strategically at the confluence of three rivers. A map of Pittsburgh made by Colonel John Campbell in 1764 shows the beginnings of a town with eight streets marked out and a boat yard on the Monongahela River. John Robinson, batteaman, told his story through his accounts preserved in the "Fort Pitt Trading Post Day Book" for 1766 and 1767. The records indicate that John did not live in the tiny settlement around Fort Pitt but visited there for trading purposes three or four times a year. His purchases of a powder horn, cutteau (knife), and two matchcoats suggest the frontiersman. He paid only a pound for each matchcoat (the anglicized version of the Indian word "Matchigod" meaning a fur coat). George Washington on December 26, 1753 when a few miles west of McKeesport wrote in his diary, "I pulled off my clothes; and tied myself up in a match coat." In contrast to these items were John's purchases of a ruffled shawl, linen handkerchief, milk, and mechlenburgh (probably lace) which cost more for four and a half yards than a matchcoat. These suggest the presence of women in the vicinity and a gentler life.

In June 1767 John ran out of money and had to borrow fifteen shillings in cash to pay his expenses home, but he returned to Pittsburgh in September seemingly with plenty of money probably because meanwhile the harvest had been sold. He paid for some of his purchases with flour. In the 1783 census a John Robinson lived in nearby Franklin Township on a farm of 150 acres with his family

of five and "a horse and two cattle." There is no proof, however, that these two John Robinsons were the same.

Settlers came not only from Pennsylvania but also from Virginia. Prior to the Revolution both Pennsylvania and Virginia claimed and exercised jurisdiction over the area now in Allegheny County. In 1774 Captain John R. Robinson commanded a company in Dunmore's War which was fought in the Ohio Valley. At about this time or earlier Captain Robinson, his Lieutenant, George Vallandigham from Fairfax County, Virginia, and others settled on Robinson Run which was presumably named for Captain Robinson. Life was rugged out here in the savage wilderness for those growing up in the civilized areas of Virginia. Vallandigham bought 1,000 acres of land, but he said, "I don't live at all: I breathe on Robinson Run"; and even breath was denied some of the settlers when on September 4, 1780 two of them were slain by Indians.

The court of Augusta County, Virginia moved from Staunton to Fort Dunmore (Pittsburgh) in February 1775. Alexander Robinson (Robertson) and George Vallandigham received a writ dated December 6, 1774 regarding this move. The Court records contain the following entries about these Virginia settlers:

February 22, 1775 John Robinson was appointed a Commissioner of Peace and ordered to view a road from Fort Dunmore to Becket's Fort.

February 24, 1775 Andrew Robinson took oath of Constable. (The preceding year, 1774, an Andrew Robinson had signed a petition asking John Penn for protection against the Indians; he was probably a Pennsylvania settler.)

May 17, 1775 Andrew Robinson witnessed a warrant for the sale of land received by Peter McCachney as a disbanded soldier of the forty-second Regiment . . . under . . . the proclamation of 1763.

September 11, 1775 Andrew Robinson of Pittsburgh Taylor . . . (mortgaged for) forty Pounds seven shillings and one penny . . . a messuage a stable and four lotts of ground situate in the town of Pittsburgh . . . whereon the said Andrew Robinson now lives.

The Court of Yohogania County was established December 23, 1776; and from August 25, 1777 until Virginia relinquished its claims to this area, it was held at the house of Andrew Heath near what is now West Elizabeth, Allegheny County.

December 23, 1777 John Robinson was ordered to view a road, the nearest and best way from Pittsburgh to Andrew Heath's ferry on the Monongahela River, and from thence to Becket's Fort.

1779 John and Andrew Robinson were both Jurors.

November 1, 1779 George Wrey an orphan of sixteen years was bound to John Robinson . . . sd. John to give him a horse and Saddle at the expiration of his time.

May 23, 1780 John Robinson . . . to be added to the Commission of Peace.

In 1775 Colonel Robinson, Barrack Master General for America, wrote a letter concerning the sale of Fort Pitt to Alexander Ross and William Thompson. Colonel Robinson stated that the Fort had been dismantled and evacuated by the King's Troops. In October 1775 Pittsburgh decided to uphold the people of New England in their struggle with the mother country.

Captain John Robinson was a professional soldier as well as an Indian fighter. He had fought under Lord Dunmore; and on February 12, 1777 the Executive Council of Virginia ordered that two companies of men be raised to garrison Forts Pitt and Randolph under Captains John Robinson and Robert Campbell. Captain John Robinson signed at Pittsburgh in April 1781 the petition protesting the high-handed conduct of Colonel Brodhead, Continental Commander of Fort Pitt. After the War in 1784, John Robinson was Captain of Militia. Other Robinsons also served here in the Revolution; in 1781 Lieutenant William Robinson, a Quaker, joined a volunteer company from Fayette County and marched to Mingo Bottom between Pittsburgh and Wheeling where they encamped. During the month of January 1783, Private John Robinson of the First Virginia Regiment was stationed at Fort Pitt. The following July he received the equivalent of \$6.60 for this service.

The settlers from Virginia brought slaves and purchased large tracts of land in an effort to duplicate the eastern plantation life. The 1790 census did not list a single slave in the town of Pittsburgh. They were nearly all in the southern part of Allegheny County which had 159 slaves in 1790; 79 in 1800; and only 24 slaves in 1810. Between October 1784 and December 1786 Captain John Robinson obtained warrants for over 1200 acres. In 1787 he signed the petition requesting the formation of Allegheny County. He was one of the wealthiest Robinsons in the County in the eighteenth century. In 1790 he owned four slaves, and in 1798 his property in Mifflin Township alone was assessed at \$2,587.99. When he died (his will was probated January 11, 1809) he left property in several States, owning land as far away as Kentucky where he had 1,000 acres. One provision of his will was that his slaves should be freed at his death. His wife's name was Sylvia and he left three sons, Thomas, Washington born 1781, and Andrew; they remained gentleman farmers in this area. He also had three daughters, one of them

a natural daughter.

Six other Robinsons signed the 1781 petition against Colonel Brodhead; they were James, Samuel, William, and three Andrew Robinsons.

The Andrew Robinsons also bought large tracts of land after the Revolution. Among many other land purchases, on August 29, 1785 Andrew Robinson, Sr., Andrew Robinson, Jr., Sarah Robinson, and Mary Robinson each obtained warrants for three hundred acres. Some of the Andrew Robinsons moved west into Ohio County, Virginia, where the estate of one Andrew Robinson was administered in 1781. Another Andrew Robinson obtained warrants for over two thousand acres between 1787 and 1801.

Only one Andrew Robinson signed the 1787 petition for the formation of Allegheny County and only one Andrew Robinson was reported in the 1790 and 1800 censuses. He was born before 1755, but the age of his children suggest that he was too young to have been the Andrew mentioned in the Virginia Court records. On the 1787 petition his signature was adjacent to one of the two James Robinsons. The 1786 tax return for Pitt Township lists his tax as one shilling and two pence. In 1798 Andrew Robinson of Pittsburgh owned and occupied a log house 20'x30' with two floors and eight windows. (Because there was a tax on each window and because glass was a great luxury in this remote area, therefore houses had few windows.) There were two outhouses,—a kitchen and a stable. The land contained 14,400 square feet, and the total assessed value for land and buildings was \$1,650. He also owned a house in Fayette Township valued at \$1,608 which he rented to William Logan. In Plum Township Andrew owned two parcels of unseated land valued at \$168.75 and \$377.50. The Jailer of Allegheny County in 1793 was A. Robinson who might have been this Andrew Robinson.

In 1784 a new plan of lots was laid out for Pittsburgh. *Niles Register* reported that in 1786 Pittsburgh contained only thirty-six log houses, one stone house, one frame house, and five small stores. These dwellings and stores were mainly along the Monongahela River.

There were only seventy-seven families living in Pittsburgh Town in 1790; and two of these were Robinsons, one Andrew and the other George. George Robinson represents another type of pioneer, the industrial pioneer. As late as 1792 it was necessary to erect a stockade for protection against the Indians. This stockade.

called Fort Fayette, was built on the banks of the Allegheny River about a quarter of a mile from Fort Pitt. After Wayne's victory in 1794 the threat of Indians ended, and the era of industrial frontiers began. André Michaux recorded August 6, 1793, "Saw on Monongahela River opposite Pittsburgh a coal mine of fifteen foot thickness." In 1802 on another visit Michaux reported, "Within the last ten years these advantages (beginnings of commerce and industry) increased ten fold the population and price of articles in town." The census reports show this observation to be exaggerated, but the direction is as indicated.

George Robinson was a pioneer of one of the earliest industries in Pittsburgh, namely the glass industry. He was born about 1762; married Mary — and they had two sons, George V. and William E., born between 1784 and 1794. On May 19, 1794 Pittsburgh had its first Borough election and George Robinson and Josiah Tannehill were elected chief Burgesses. This same year the Whiskey Rebellion occurred. On the night of November 12, 1794 General Irvine arrested George Robinson and seventeen others for treason. At two a.m. George was aroused and forced from his home before he had time to dress. The prisoners were driven through snow and rain at a trot before a troop of horses for seven miles out of Pittsburgh and then back for several miles to a "waste house" where they were incarcerated for five days. Ten days later they were taken before a judge and at the trial it was learned that General Irvine's list had made no distinction between prisoners and witnesses. After this harrowing ordeal George Robinson was incapacitated for several months as a result of exposure.²

The 1798 tax list shows that George Robinson owned and occupied a brick³ house, 22'x30' with three floors and fourteen windows. There were two outhouses,—a kitchen and a shop. All of this was on a lot 9,600 square feet. The assessed value was only \$800 which seems low when compared with the smaller log house of Andrew assessed at more than double this value. George Robinson also owned two other houses in Pittsburgh, one a one-story log cabin occupied by Pompey, a negro, and valued at \$160 and the other a house occupied by Henry Perry and valued at \$350. It seems prob-

² This incident is from *Pittsburgh, the Story of a City*, by Leland D. Baldwin, 1938, p. 109.

³ Fort Pitt had been built of local bricks and some of the houses were built of bricks from the demolished Fort.

able that the "shop" which George Robinson had adjacent to his home in 1798 may have been in connection with the production of glass. The 1798 tax list recorded only the following establishments in Pittsburgh:—

Potters Shop.....	Thos. Bracken
Hatters Shop.....	David Davis
Tan Yard.....	Francis Freer
Cabinet Makers Shop.....	Robert Giffin
Coppersmith Shop.....	John Hampshire
Saw Mill.....	James Patterson
Brewery.....	Peter Shiras
Silversmith Shop.....	Isaac Craig

In 1797 Isaac Craig and James O'Hara built a glass works at Birmingham on the Monongahela River opposite the Point. In 1800 William Price of Stourbridge, England, became the superintendent of this plant. He built a flint glass furnace, but it appears to have been a failure. Harris' *Journal* in 1803 states, "Two glasshouses have been lately erected and are wrought to great advantage. They make window glass, bottles, etc." It is possible that the other glasshouse referred to by Harris could have belonged to George Robinson, or it could have been the glassworks erected by Anthony Beelen in 1800 on the north bank of the Allegheny River as reported by one source. Beelen later owned a foundry and there is no other known connection with the glass industry. The first successful flint glassworks in Pittsburgh was built by George Robinson and Edward Encell, an English glassblower, in 1807 at the foot of Ross Street. Cumings' *Tour of the West* in 1807 lists two glass manufactories,—“One green glass on opposite side of Monongahela, another just erected for white glass on the town side of the same River.” Cramer's *Pittsburgh Almanac* for 1809 mentions the glassworks of Robinson and Encell as being the second one in Pittsburgh. The *Pittsburgh Commonwealth* for February 24, 1808 contained an advertisement for potash, "Wanted at the new glass house." Potash was obtained by leaching wood ashes. André Michaux when he visited Pittsburgh in 1802 commented: "Expenses occasioned by clearing land are always covered by the produce of pearl ashes extracted from the ashes of trees and burned and that persons undertake to clear it on the sole condition of having the pearl ashes. This economy does not exist in the East." In 1808 George Robinson sold his interest in the glasshouse to Benjamin Bakewell and the

next year Bakewell bought out Encell. According to one historian, Sarah Killikelly, Robinson was forced to sell due to lack of capital. If this were true, he very soon recovered financially, for about 1809 he built a bigger and better glassworks on the south side of Water Street above Grant. Miss Killikelly quotes the 1812-13 Directory as saying that George Robinson's glasshouse was on Water Street between Grant and Smithfield which was his address given in the 1815 City Directory. This might have been a third plant erected by George Robinson or the original "shop" on the same lot as his home.

George Robinson was a man of political as well as industrial eminence. Besides being one of the first Chief Burgesses, he was a member of the Legislature and on June 3, 1814 he was appointed Associate Judge for Allegheny County, a post which he held until he died February 6, 1818. He was buried in the Episcopal churchyard. In 1808 George and James Robinson were managers of the lottery of the First Presbyterian Church. George Robinson was also a Bank Director; he and his two sons signed the petition asking for a bank in 1817. His son, George V. Robinson, served as a private with the Pittsburgh Blues in the War of 1812. He was mustered in on September 1, 1812. On April 30, 1842, he was chosen to be one of the pallbearers for General Richard Butler. Neither of George's sons had any children, but there may have been collateral descendants, for John Robinson, Sr. founded the Stourbridge Flint Glassworks in 1823 at Ross and Second Street, only two blocks from the glassworks built by George Robinson. The Stourbridge Works employed eighteen men and the total value of manufactures was \$22,000 in 1826. The 1826 City Directory stated that some very beautiful and highly finished articles were produced at the Stourbridge Works. Mrs. Anne Royall when she visited Pittsburgh in 1829 wrote, "Mr. Robinson pursues the same way as Bakewells and also engraves and had some very handsome specimens of purple glass." John P. Bakewell obtained the first patent on mechanical pressing of glass in 1825, the second patent was obtained by Enoch Robinson of Cambridge, Massachusetts. A pressed glass plate from the Stourbridge Plant marked, "J. and T. Robinson" (John and Thomas were the sons of John Senior, the founder of the plant) dates back to at least 1830.⁴

⁴ George and Helen McKearin, *American Glass*, 1941, p. 350.

It is unfortunate that the origins of such a prominent person as George Robinson should remain unknown; however, certain clues suggest that he may have come from around Stourbridge, England, a place associated with other early flint glass manufacturers in Pittsburgh. The fact that George was buried in the Episcopal churchyard also suggests a Church of England background.

Joshua Robinson, glassblower and alien, represents the workman in the early Pittsburgh glass plants. He came to Pittsburgh before 1820 when he was about forty years old. He had a large family of five sons and several daughters. In 1826 they lived on the north side of Front Street between Grant and Ross Streets, close to both the Bakewell and the Stourbridge Glassworks. His eldest son, Joseph Robinson, may have been the Joseph who married Elizabeth Phillips in the Catholic Church on February 23, 1830.

A city needs not only men to defend it and to give it industry, but also men to build its homes and plants. The third family of Robinsons in Pittsburgh was John and Richard, two brothers, who first appear in the 1798 tax list when John Robinson, a twenty-six year old carpenter, owned and occupied a one-story frame house 10'x16', with only three windows. There were no outhouses and it was on a tiny lot, 2,400 square feet. The assessed value of the property was \$200. In 1805 John and his older brother, Richard, built the "Round Church" which was the first building occupied by Trinity Episcopal Church. The church stood on a three-cornered lot at Liberty, Sixth Avenue and Wood Street. The Robinson brothers worked sixty-nine and a half days to build the church and received three hundred fifty-six pounds, eight shillings and nine pence for labor and materials.⁵ On August 9, 1805 John and Richard each brought their four children to be baptized together at Trinity Church. Before 1815 and until he died, April 21, 1835, John Robinson lived on the south side of Second Street between Wood and Market Streets. His obituary states that he "Has always sustained the character of an upright, honest and industrious man." Richard Robinson in 1815 lived on the east side of Penn Street between Cecil's Alley and St. Clair Street. He was the first Councilman of Pittsburgh in 1816. Both John and Richard were Directors of the Farmers' and Mechanics' Bank of Pittsburgh. The sons of John and Richard appear to have left Pittsburgh after they grew up. One son, George Sheed Robinson, was a printer and moved to New

⁵ *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 9, p. 282.

Orleans; another son, Lewis G. Robinson, fought in the Mexican War.

The 1790 census of Allegheny County reported David, three Jameses, two Samuels, Peter, and Joseph Robinson in addition to Captain John, Andrew, and George Robinson. As late as 1800 ninety per cent of the people living in Allegheny County were outside Pittsburgh Town. Besides the Robinsons already discussed the following adult Robinsons lived in Allegheny County in the eighteenth century:

David and his son John of Elizabeth Township	
William of Elizabeth Township	} These could be
William of Versailles Township	
James of Versailles Township	
Isaac of Versailles Township	
Mathew of Versailles Township	
Henry of McKeesport	
Hugh of Plum Township	
Samuel of Plum Township	
Samuel of Mifflin Township	
Alexander of Fayette Township	
Joseph of Moon Township	} These could be
Joseph of Pitt Township	
James and his brother William of Pitt Township	
James of Pitt Township	
Thomas of Pitt Township	

The oldest Robinson in the area was David, born 1728. He was a farmer and in 1783 lived with his family of six on three hundred acres. They had four horses, three cattle, and nine sheep. On March 16, 1785 he obtained a warrant for four hundred more acres. His son, John, born before 1765 did not marry until after 1791. In 1798 John was Superintendent of Elizabeth Township and had property there valued at \$855.60. He also had one slave. On January 1, 1795 a John Robinson of Pittsburgh Militia had service at Cussawagoe, and in 1796 Private John Robinson of the Pennsylvania State Militia was stationed on the frontier of Allegheny County. John Robinson of Elizabeth Township appears to have been too young to have served in the Militia which usually had older men, but the only older John Robinson known to be in this area was Captain John Robinson.

As early as 1788 a shipyard was established at Elizabeth by

eastern carpenters. Here as well as in Pittsburgh sea-going sailing vessels were constructed. Either William or John of Elizabeth Township had a son, William, who was a ship's carpenter. James of Versailles Township also appears to have had a son who was a boatbuilder.

James of Versailles was a farmer but less affluent than David and John. In 1783 he also had a family of six but he had only one horse, two cattle, and one sheep. In 1798 his property was assessed at \$255.60.

Alexander of Fayette Township was even less affluent than James of Versailles. In 1798 he owned only forty acres, valued at \$120 and his family consisted of five boys and six girls.

The following tax table gives a picture of the relative affluence of some of the Robinsons in 1791:

Name	Township	Tax	
		Shillings	Pence
David Robinson	Elizabeth	19	9
Thomas Robinson	Pitt	10	- (1795)
Joseph Robinson	Moon	7	4
Samuel Robinson	Mifflin	5	5
James Robinson	Pitt	5	- (1795)
James Robinson	Pitt (Reserve Tract)	4	9 (1795)
John Robinson	Elizabeth	4	5
Peter Robinson	Pitt	2	9
James Robinson	Versailles	1	9

Before 1800 Pitt Township included not only the area east of Pittsburgh between the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers but also the vast area northwest of the Allegheny River, where the most famous Robinson family of the entire area settled. There were three brothers, William born 1747, James born 1750, and Andrew. They were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians from Armagh County, Ireland. James appears to have arrived first. He was probably the James Robinson who signed the petition against Colonel Brodhead in 1781. In the 1783 census he was living in Pitt Township as a single man with one horse. On October 23, 1784 at Fort Stanwix a deed, commonly called "The Last Purchase," was made which opened up lands northwest of the Allegheny River for settlement. Reputedly the first man to settle in the north side area was James Boggs. One source states that he moved with his family across the Allegheny as early as 1760. In 1783 he received permission to settle and improve

the Reserve Tract of land opposite Fort Pitt. In 1785 Martha Boggs, the widow of James Boggs, wrote a letter stating that her husband had died since 1783 and seeking the right to his property. This was duly granted her on the fourth of March 1785. A short time prior to this, James Robinson had married the widow Boggs who was six years older than he, and they settled on the Boggs property. He obtained a charter to operate a ferry in 1784 or early in the following year. This ferry ran from present School Street in Pittsburgh. However, because the landing was found unsuitable, it was changed to St. Clair Street and across the river to Franklin Road. In the *Pittsburgh Gazette* May 13, 1803, James Robinson put the following advertisement of his ferry, "All persons going to and returning from sermons and funerals ferriage free." Near the ferry landing James built a log cabin which was also used as an Inn. There on December 17, 1785 William Robinson, Jr. was born, reputedly the first white child born west of the Allegheny. He was called Junior to distinguish him from his uncle, William Robinson, living on Franklin Road. One day while Martha Robinson, his mother, was in the log cabin, it was attacked by Indians, but she kept them out until help arrived from Pittsburgh. In 1793 James Robinson gave \$3.00 to distressed citizens of Philadelphia during the pestilence epidemic.

The several tax records indicate the rapid rise in wealth of James Robinson. In 1783 he owned one horse; in 1786 he was taxed nine pence; and in 1795 he owned twenty acres opposite Pittsburgh on which he paid four shillings and nine pence. In 1798 he appears to be the James Robinson of the fifth assessment district with a town lot 14,400 square feet, valued at \$120; in 1801 the Pine tax list records James Robinson with two slaves, four horses, six cows, and two oxen. The brick house which he built in 1803 was the first brick house in Pine Township. At about this time Tarleton Bates bought land adjacent to James Robinson. Robinson attended the First Presbyterian Church and in 1808, he and George Robinson were managers of the church lottery. He died August 14, 1814. Later his remains were moved to the New Allegheny Cemetery where his tomb is now located.

The tomb of James' brother, William, states that he died September 23, 1812 but his will was not probated until November 4, 1816. The length of time between his death and the probating of the will may be due to the fact that he named his nephew, William,

son of his brother, Andrew, in Armagh County, Ireland as his executor and principal heir. To him he left one hundred fifty acres on Franklin Road provided he came to America. A William Robinson (Robertson) of unrecorded age and nativity landed at Philadelphia September 5, 1816 on the Brig *Hope*, just two months before the will was probated. The identity of the nephew, William Robinson from Ireland, can be established as the William H. Robinson born 1790/1800, nicknamed "Irish Bill," who was the political boss of his era. He married Mary Ann Wilkins July 2, 1817. They had six sons: George L., clerk, born 1823; Andrew L., merchant, born 1824; John; Walter Holmes, druggist, born 1833; James Dale, born 1834; and Wilkins Hollingsworth, born 1835; and three daughters.

On May 6, 1845, Stephen Foster wrote a poem about five of his Pittsburgh friends called, *The Five Nice Young Men*. One of these was Andrew L. Robinson, the second son of "Irish Bill," about whom he wrote:

"There's Andy, who used to be great on a spree.
Whose *duds* (as he calls them) all fit to a T.
But people do tell us
He's got just as jealous
Of Latimer as he can be.
They say that he wishes
The sharks and the *fishes*
Would catch him and eat him when he gets out to sea."

The wife of Andrew L. Robinson was Susan E. Pentland, the girl to whom Foster dedicated his first published song, *Open Thy Lattice, Love* in 1844.

The son of James, the settler, General William Robinson, Jr., for whom the Street was named, was the most famous Robinson of early Pittsburgh. He went to the Western Academy in Pittsburgh and then on to Princeton. In an affidavit made for Mrs. Blennerhasset in her appeal to Congress, William Robinson, Jr. and Morgan Neville stated: "Their boat was driven ashore by wind one mile below the Blennerhasset Mansion as they descended the river on December 13, 1806. Suddenly they were attacked by a well-armed mob of twenty-five men who detained them and took them to the mansion while their boat was surrounded by a guard.—These young men (Robinson and Neville) were detained from Saturday until

Tuesday morning, during all that time there were never fewer than thirty men, sometimes seventy to eighty living in riot on the provisions of Mrs. Blennerhasset."⁶

On July 3, 1810 William Robinson, Jr. married Mary Parker, daughter of Major Alexander Parker. They had eight sons: James, a clerk, born 1811; William O'Hara, a lawyer and United States District Attorney, born 1814, who married Letitia Robinson, daughter of Samuel Robinson; Alexander Parker, a banker, born 1816; Herman, born 1817; Charles McClure, a farmer, born 1820; Henry Baldwin, born 1826, and drowned while skating when only twelve years old; Francis Pringle, born 1830; and three daughters.

William Robinson, Jr. realized that a bridge was needed where he and his father operated the ferry. He was a prime promoter and the first president of the Allegheny Bridge Company which obtained a charter in 1810. The charter lapsed and had to be renewed in 1816, and construction was started in 1818 and completed in 1820. It was a wooden covered bridge 1,122 feet long, 38 feet wide resting on five piers, 38 feet above ordinary low water of the river. It cost \$95,249 to build.⁷ When sailing vessels had difficulty with clearance, teams of horses dragged weights at either end to raise the center of the bridge as much as fourteen inches.

The 1815 City Directory lists William Robinson, Jr. as a commission merchant with two establishments, one on the northeast corner of Wood and Water Streets and the other on the northeast corner of Wood and Front Streets. His home was on the northeast corner of Third and Ferry Streets. Later he moved back across the Allegheny River to his father's property. In 1819 he became one of the Trustees of the Western Academy, and when the Pittsburgh and Allegheny Orphan Asylum was organized April 17, 1832, his wife was chosen one of its first managers.

Pittsburgh changed tremendously during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, and William Robinson, Jr. as well as other Robinsons contributed to this growth. From a village of about one hundred houses it grew to a town of over one thousand houses. There were many reasons for this phenomenal growth. First, cheap living attracted labor. Michaux wrote in 1802, "A person may subsist in Pittsburgh for one third of what he pays in Philadelphia."

⁶ The Nevilles had eighteen slaves in 1790, over twice as many as anyone else in Allegheny County.

⁷ William G. Lyford, *The Western Address Directory*, printed by Joseph Robinson, 1837, p. 76.

Fordham's *Personal Narrative*, 1817, stated, "Whiskey is very cheap. With the labor of an hour a man may purchase as much as will make him ferocious." Second, local natural resources were plentiful. At first they were not fully appreciated as evidenced by the comment in Harris' *Journal* of 1803 regarding petroleum, "In these parts it is used as a medicine for chilblains and rheumatism; it is considered as an infallible specific." Third, transportation improvement was extremely important in this period. In 1802 Michaux said it took wagons about three weeks to come from Philadelphia, and they returned either empty or with fur skins. Harris' *Journal* tells that in 1803 it took six to seven weeks by barge to make the two thousand mile river trip to New Orleans. Moreover the rivers at Pittsburgh were only navigable during the floods in March, April, October, and November. The rest of the year the water was insufficient for sailing boats. In 1804 the first regular stage to Philadelphia was established; it ran once a week. Good horses and coaches were used only entering or leaving cities. As early as 1785 Oliver Evans of Philadelphia had become convinced of the practicability of steam propelled boats on the Western Rivers. Since the earliest days, shipbuilding had been one of the most important industries in Allegheny County, but when the *Amity* built at Elizabeth town in 1801 sailed across the ocean and docked at Marseilles, the officials refused to recognize the validity of her papers because they had never heard of Pittsburgh; they could not believe she came from a place so far inland. But in 1829 Mrs. Royall, after visiting Pittsburgh wrote, "Pittsburgh excels New York by a long ways in building steam-boats." The fourth and final reason for the growth of Pittsburgh during the first two decades of the nineteenth century was the War of 1812 which forced the United States to develop its own industries. The war years provided new markets for domestic goods. As early as the 1815 City Directory, Pittsburgh was referred to as the "Birmingham of America." In 1815 George Cochran, woolen manufacturer of Pittsburgh advertised that he warranted, "The color and durability of his Cloths equal to that imported from Great Britain." In 1817 Elias Fordham wrote of the Bakewell glass, "His cut glass equals the best I have seen in England."

Cuming's report on his *Tour of the West* in 1807 gives a picture of the background of the lives of the Robinsons and of the other residents before the advent of steam and the changes caused by war. There were two market days a week. Meat cost three to four

cents a pound with a choice of beef, pork, veal, venison, and fresh fish. Chickens cost 25 cents a pair and turkeys as much as 75 cents each. Eggs cost 10 to 18 cents a dozen. Indian meal was used to a large extent and cost 40 cents a bushel, flour cost \$1.75 to \$2.00 a hundredweight. The only vegetables available were potatoes, corn, turnips, white beans, and onions; except for a limited period dried apples and peaches were the only fruit. Local maple sugar, sold in large loaves up to ten pounds at seven to ten cents a pound, was the only sweet available. Salt was a real luxury costing \$2.50 a bushel. It was brought via keel boats from Onondaga, New York. Most of the people drank tea or coffee. Tea was imported from the Orient, but restrictions were so lax that considerable amounts of sawdust and plain dirt were sold as tea. Because of the poor quality many tea drinkers began to drink coffee instead. However, whiskey was the beverage consumed in the greatest quantity. People drank water from the rivers rather than spring water which was nauseous due to impregnation of bituminous and sulphurous particles. The furniture in the homes was made of local black walnut, wild cherry, or yellow birch, and included several Windsor chairs, there being five Windsor chair factories in 1807.

The Robinsons continued to hold representative places in the development of Pittsburgh, but, as the city grew, they became too numerous to follow individually. By 1830 hundreds of Robinsons, in scores of different occupations, had made contributions large and small to Pittsburgh.

A few of the most important contributions they made should be noted. On July 23, 1810 there was an advertisement in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* for the sale of the iron works on Ten Mile Creek, three miles from the Monongahela, property of Captain James Robinson. In the 1815 City Directory the address of James Robinson, iron founder, was the corner of Front and Ferry Streets, where the great Pittsburgh Steam Engine Company was located. This plant was started by Oliver Evans and his son George in 1812 and the "foundery and smithery" completed in 1814. Besides the steam engine factory where steam engines of Oliver Evans' construction were made for the principal plants in Pittsburgh, and the foundry and smithery, there was an anvil and anchor factory which produced many of the anchors for Commodore Perry's squadron on Lake Erie; a brass foundry which specialized in the production of castings for machinery and large bells; a butt hinge factory; a pat-

tern maker's shop and a boring and turning shop, as well as a screw making plant. In addition to all these, Oliver Evans started in 1812 to build one of the first steamboats. His boatyard was on approximately the same site as the boatyard in Campbell's map of 1764. Oliver Evans reported on a census return in 1820 that this Company employed 150 men in prosperous times. This is a colossal number when compared with the fact that there were only about 600 houses in Pittsburgh in 1810. In 1815 Bakewell employed 60 men in his glasshouse. One of the first jobs of the Pittsburgh Steam Engine Company was the production of engines and machinery for the first rolling mill in Pittsburgh, located on the west side of Penn Street at the corner of Cecil's Alley. They had the old fashioned tilt hammer and produced knives, scythes, nails, etc. It was a small plant and employed only twenty-one people in 1826. The Pittsburgh Steam Engine Company also made the engines for the second and much larger rolling mill which was partly owned by William Robinson, Jr.; and for the Soft Spring Paper Mill which William V. Robinson bought in 1836.

For a few years after the war business continued to prosper. In 1818 Henry Fearon wrote that a pair of elegant decanters cost eight guineas. "It is well to bear in mind that the demand for these articles of elegant luxury lies in the Western States." But finally a postwar depression came and Edward Patchell reported to the census in 1820: "I would have sold more hats from 1812 to 1818 had I been able to manufacture them. But now I cannot sell more than half what hats I anuly manufacture,—however, this is a plentiful country—and who the devil ought to complain." Most manufacturers were not as philosophical as Mr. Patchell. On February 8, 1821 Benjamin Bakewell wrote: "The import on glass at present is less than it was fifteen or twenty years ago. It is introduced into our market by means of steamboats at less than one fourth of the former expense of transportation from the seaboard. The late allowance of bounty paid by the British Government on glass exported to the United States is more than the amount of duty on importation. To these causes combined is attributed the enhanced depression of our business and until they are removed no improvement in the demand for the articles of our manufactures can be expected." On December 21, 1816 there had been a citizens' meeting which produced a plea for government aid and restrictive tariffs to protect manufacturing. Finally in 1824 Congressman Henry

Baldwin succeeded in getting a tariff bill passed which somewhat offset the bounty of two and three-quarters cents a pound paid by the British Government on all glass exported from England.

This same Henry Baldwin was a business partner of William Robinson, Jr., Daniel Beltzhoover and Mr. M'Nickle. In 1819 they built the Union Rolling Mill, "The most extensive establishment of its kind in the west," according to the 1826 Directory. It was located in Kensington at the corner of Ross and Third Streets. The engines and machinery, made by the Pittsburgh Steam Engine Company, consisted of two rolling mills, one forge, and two steam engines of one hundred horse power. It produced bar, sheet, boiler, and nail iron; and employed 76 people in 1821. It seems to be about the only plant that reportedly was in a "flourishing condition" in 1821. Harris reported in 1803 that terms of credit were nine to twelve months, but in the prosperous war years cash or short credit was used for everything. When the depression came, merchants were loath to extend credit or barter and trade. Perhaps the following incident may explain why the new rolling mill was flourishing when other establishments were failing. Morgan Neville, the companion of William Robinson, Jr. on the Blennerhasset episode, and editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* printed the following story:—During the hard times following the panic of 1819, one day a country friend came to town with produce to buy things he needed. Merchants on Market Street would not sell without cash, "I then hauled him half stupid to the rolling mill; here William Robinson soon struck up a trade for what iron he wanted and took a quantity of produce for his workmen."

After the depression Pittsburgh started on a long period of unprecedented prosperity, and some of the Robinsons grew rich. In 1836 William Robinson, Jr. was appointed the first President of the Exchange Bank. The steamboat *William Robinson*, built at Pittsburgh, 172'x26'x6'6" and 277 49/95 tons was enrolled January 16, 1839 with William Robinson, Jr. as the owner. The following year, 1840, he became the first Mayor of Allegheny Town. In the 1845 fire he lost five brick houses worth \$9,000. During the Mexican War, he received the rank of General in the State Militia. After the war he took some of the property which he had inherited from his father and divided it into lots, naming the streets after battles in the Mexican War. By 1850 the census reported his property value as half a million dollars. In 1856 he was President

of the Ohio and Pennsylvania Railroad. He died February 25, 1868.

The steamboat was one of the most important factors in the early development of Pittsburgh and the Thomas Robinson family built, owned, and were Masters of early steamboats. Thomas Robinson was born in Ireland 1770/5 and appears to have landed at Philadelphia on August 31, 1811 in the ship *Prosperity*. In 1818 he and his daughter, Mary, were members of classes in the Methodist Episcopal Church, where her marriage in 1821 was recorded. In the Pittsburgh Directory for 1826 Thomas Robinson was listed as a grocer on the east side of Wood Street second door below Fourth Street. He died in February 1837, leaving three sons, William C., born 1805 in Ireland; John; and Thomas G., born in 1820 in Pittsburgh; the house on Wood Street was mentioned in his will. All three sons suffered considerable losses in the 1845 fire.

William C. Robinson married Ann Holdship, daughter of Henry Holdship who in the three years, 1818-1820 erected buildings in Pittsburgh costing over \$75,000. In 1829 Anne Royall described Henry Holdship, then head of the largest paper making establishment west of the mountains, as, "One of the most enterprising and wealthy men in Pittsburgh and among the most worthy of her citizens." William C. Robinson was a member of the firm Robinson and Minis, founders and engine builders. This firm built the steamboat *Valley Forge* in 1839 which, according to the eminent authority, Mr. Lytle, was the first iron hull built on western rivers. William C. Robinson remained a part owner of the vessel until she was sold September 7, 1842. She was finally abandoned in 1845, a short life but as long or longer than that of the average wooden hull. He not only built steamboats and their engines, but he also owned a large operating fleet of river boats. National Archives' records show thirty ships which were partly owned by him between 1835 and 1847. (Prior to 1840 some of the records were burned and therefore are incomplete.) In politics William C. Robinson was one of the very early acting Republicans being affiliated with this party in 1852.⁸

The brother John Robinson, was Master and part owner of the steamboat *Oceola*, built by his brother in 1839, but he died a short time later.

⁸ *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 26, p. 181.

The youngest brother, Thomas G. Robinson, married Maria Miltenberger, daughter (or granddaughter) of George Miltenberger who manufactured copper and tinware as early as 1803 in Pittsburgh. Thomas Robinson lived in the household of George Miltenberger who in 1837 was co-owner of the Pennsylvania Rolling Mill situated at Wayne Street and Duquesne Way which employed 110 men and had an annual capacity of 3,500 tons; in 1850 he was worth over a quarter of a million dollars. Thomas G. Robinson was a steamboat captain and part owner of the *Telegraph*, built in Pittsburgh in 1840.

At the United States arsenal on the Allegheny River just north of Pittsburgh, in 1819 the steamboat *Western Engineer* was built for an expedition to the Yellowstone. *Niles Register* for July 24, 1819 gives the following account of the appearance of this boat: "The bow of the vessel exhibits the form of a huge serpent, black and scaly, rising out of the water from under the boat, his head as high as the deck, darted forward, his mouth open vomiting smoke and apparently carrying the boat on his back, From under the boat at its stern issues a stream of foaming water dashing violently along; all machinery hid—Her equipment is at once calculated to attract and to awe the savage."

In 1829 Anne Royall's description of the steamboats on the Monongahela River suggests that great changes have been made; she describes the steamboats, "Two stories high many of them and two tiers of windows precisely like a house and with gable ends."

Virtually all boats carried both freight and passengers, but passenger accommodations had improved greatly since the early days of steamboats. Cabin passengers paid one to one-and-a-half cents a mile including private stateroom and meals. The meals were fantastically elaborate. The bill of fare on the *Telegraph* in January 1849 (probably a later *Telegraph* than that of Captain Thomas Robinson) was as follows: "Soup, five kinds of fish, six kinds of boiled meat several with sauces, eleven entrees including fricasseed kidneys and spiced pigs head, nine roasts, five kinds of game including venison, wild turkey, and squirrel, fifteen kinds of pastry and dessert and fruit and nuts."⁹

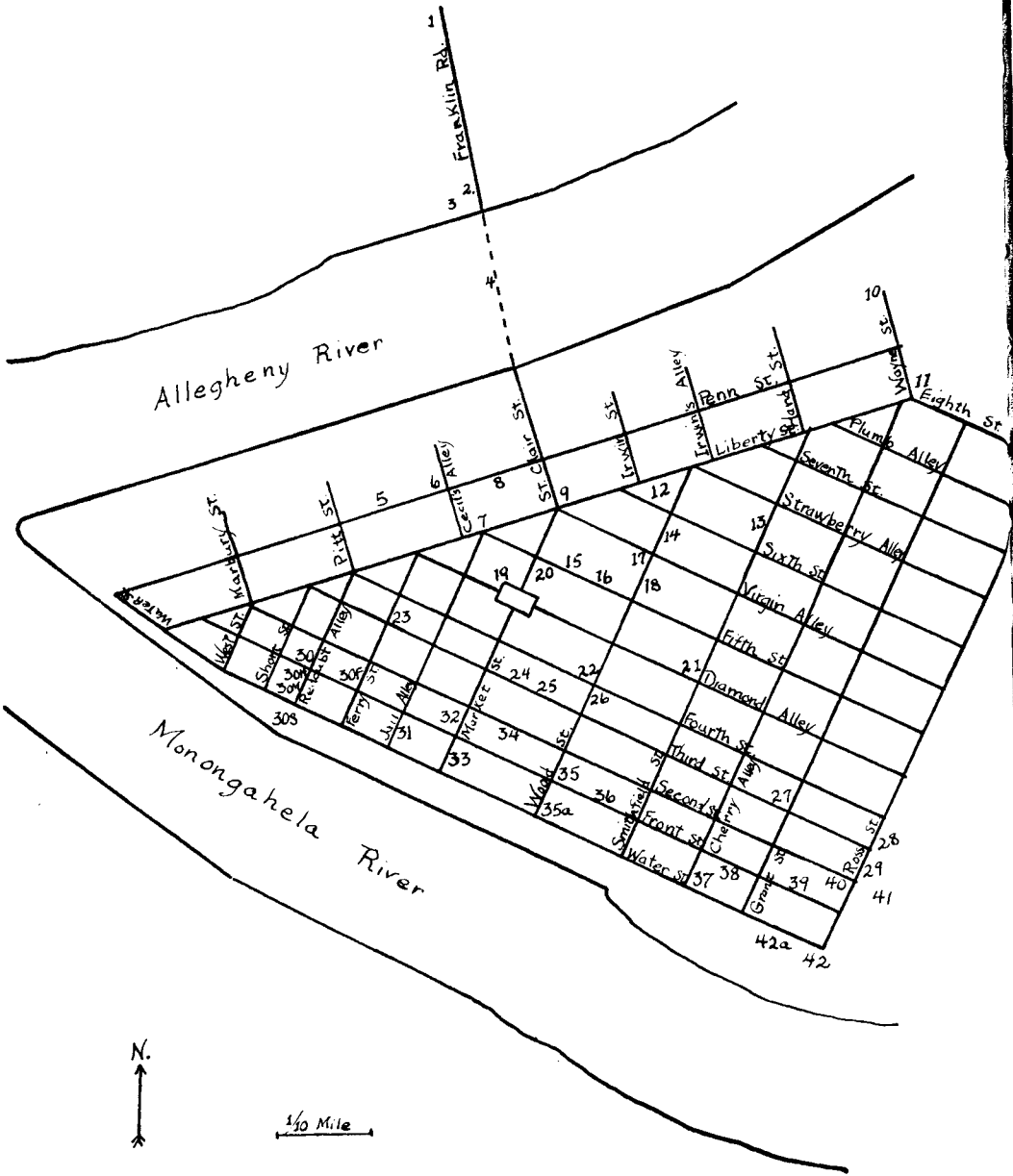
Great changes had taken place since John Robinson, batteau man, had tied himself in an Indian matchcoat, and Captain John

⁹ Louis Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 1949.

Robinson had not lived,—only breathed on Robinson Run. These changes had been wrought not only by the sons of Robin as told here, but also by the sons of John, the sons of Tom, the sons of Stephen and countless others who likewise contributed to the growth of a frontier fort into the great city of Pittsburgh.

PLACES IN PITTSBURGH ASSOCIATED WITH ROBINSONS

1800 - 1830



Principal Sources: 1815 and 1826 Pittsburgh Directories.

Dorothy S. Coleman

KEY TO MAP OF PLACES IN PITTSBURGH ASSOCIATED
WITH ROBINSONS

- 1.* Home of William Robinson, brother of James Robinson
2. Home of James Robinson and his son, William Robinson, Jr.
3. Cotton Factory of Mr. Robinson, an English Gentleman
4. Ferry of James Robinson
Bridge built by William Robinson, Jr.
5. William Robinson, shoemaker
- 6.* Pittsburgh Rolling Mill, machinery made by Pittsburgh Steam Engine Company in which James Robinson was an iron founder
7. Home of father-in-law of Andrew L. Robinson
8. Home of Richard Robinson, builder
9. Brewery of father-in-law of William V. Robinson
- 10.* Pennsylvania Rolling Mill owned by father-in-law of Thomas G. Robinson
- 11.* Catholic Church, Joseph Robinson married here
12. Trinity Episcopal Church, built by John Robinson and Richard Robinson
- 13.* James Robinson, weaver
14. First Presbyterian Church attended by George Robinson and James Robinson
15. James Robinson, shawl weaver
16. Western Seminary attended by William Robinson, Jr.
17. James Robinson, grocer
18. James Robinson, clothier
19. Stewart Robinson
20. Dry Goods store of Hugh Robinson and William V. Robinson
21. Second Presbyterian Church attended by William V. Robinson
22. William Robinson, Gentleman
23. Home of William Robinson, Jr.
24. Home of father-in-law of William C. Robinson
25. Farmers' and Mechanics' Bank, John Robinson and Richard Robinson, Directors
26. Thomas Robinson, Grocer
27. Isabella Robinson, Bakeshop
- 28.* Union Rolling Mill, William Robinson, Jr., part owner and operator
29. Home of John Robinson, glass manufacturer
30. Pittsburgh Steam Engine Company, Oliver Evans' plant at which James Robinson was employed, and which produced the machinery for Rolling Mill of William Robinson, Jr. and Paper Mill of William V. Robinson
- 30F. Foundry
- 30H. Home of George Evans
- 30S. Ship yard, on approximate site of boatyard on 1764 map
- 30M. Flour Mill
- 31.* George Robinson, pilot
32. Saddlery shop of father-in-law of William V. Robinson
33. Home of father-in-law of William V. Robinson
34. Home of John Robinson, builder
35. William Robinson, Jr., commission merchant
- 35a. William Robinson, Jr., commission merchant
36. Methodist Church attended by Thomas Robinson
- 37.* Home of Judge George Robinson and possibly a glass shop
38. Boardinghouse, home of David Robinson
39. Home of Joshua Robinson, glassblower
- 40.* Stourbridge Glassworks, owned and operated by John Robinson and his sons John and Thomas Robinson
41. John Robinson, boatbuilder
42. Flint Glassworks built by George Robinson in 1807
- 42a. Flint Glassworks built by George Robinson in 1809
George Robinson operated these Glassworks for a short time and then sold them to Benjamin Bakewell to become the famous Bakewell Glassworks.

* The exact side of the street is uncertain.