THE FRONTIER GUNSMITH AND INDIAN RELATIONS

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The roar of the forge, the shower of sparks, the hiss of tempered metal—all these wrought a kind of magic to the primitive Indian of the American frontier. Although he was subjugated, seduced and prostituted by his insatiable craving for European goods, the Indian was slow in learning the rudiments of skill to mend the gun or hatchet and to repair planting tools. He was familiar with copper and other metals, but for so many years, the mechanical understanding for metal repair eluded him. And lacking such capabilities for metal working, he sought out the one person who could give him this technical service.

The smith, as he worked in the flickering glow of his rude forge, took on a magical, godlike quality to the Indian. Since the smith made it possible for the Indian to cultivate his crops, to pursue the hunt or his enemy, he was liked, respected, feared and protected as a special person. John Fraser, the famous gunsmith and trader of Venango (Franklin), was such a person, and Fraser, who was thought a magician by the Indian, did little to dispel this illusion. With the Scotsman's playing of his bagpipes, the Indian thought him, indeed, of another world.¹

The special position that the smith held in the mind of the primitive, pragmatical Indian made the smith a valuable asset in Indian diplomacy. An examination of the role of Fraser and others of his trade on the frontier as well as the role of the smith in the Lewis and Clark expedition will show their contribution to Indian affairs at some junctures of the American past. In this way the unique contribution of the smith in Indian relations may, perhaps, be made clear.

As the Frenchman, Céloron de Blainville, approached Venango

¹ For a full account see "John Fraser Frontiersman," Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, XXXVIII, 83-93: XXXIX, 165-175. The gunsmith and trader furnished gun flints to the Indian also.
in 1749, John Fraser and his Indian friends fled to the woods. They did not know, but Céloron came only as a diplomat to secure the Ohio Indians in the French interest. He was ordered to plant lead plates proclaiming the French ownership of the Ohio river system, and he was ordered to warn the English from the valleys. The French saw the Belle Rivièrè (this they called the Allegheny also) as the source of "all the troubles which prevail among the savages." John Fraser had been on the Allegheny since 1740 and was the center of the English influence there. He was not aware of the exact intentions of Céloron, and he removed himself to await developments.

Céloron was unable to meet the English traders or the important Indians until he reached Logstown (called Chinengue by the French). There he held a conference to make known the aims of his mission. In face to face contact he warned the English traders to leave French soil, and he admonished the Indians to trade only with the French in French territory. The Indians showed contempt for his words and told him that "to separate them from the English would be like cutting a man into halves." How can we maintain ourselves, the Indians asked him, if the French have no trade goods and the English traders are gone? Especially they asked, how can we survive the winter without the services of the gunsmith, Fraser? The tenacious logic of the Indians embarrassed Céloron, and immediately he promised to send a smith to them the following year.

With the departure of Céloron, Fraser returned to Venango to operate his forge and to continue trade with the Indians. But the next year the skilled Indian manager for the French, Chabert de Joncaire, came to the Allegheny with the promised smith. Joncaire came for a three-year stay, and by 1753, Fraser was forced to move to Turtle Creek. By that year also, the English traders had been driven from


3 From the report of Francis Bigot (governor of New France) to the French Minister. Cited from S. K. Stevens and Donald Kent, editors, Wilderness Chronicles of Northwestern Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Historical Commission, Harrisburg, 1941), 40. Hereinafter cited as Wilderness Chronicles. See also New York Col. Docs., X, 179, 187.

4 Logstown was located on the Ohio about eighteen miles below Pittsburgh.


6 Ibid., 210.

the Ohio, and the French started the construction of a chain of forts to occupy effectively the river system. Fraser reported the French activity by letter to the colonial authorities, and he sent a French deserter to Captain William Trent of the Virginia militia. Such intelligence service endangered his life, and he spoke from time to time of leaving the area. Fraser's remarks so alarmed the Indians that they asked at the Logstown conference of 1753 that he be replaced at once if he made good his threat. Yet with the advance of French military power into the Ohio country in 1754, Fraser was forced to discontinue his services to the Indians at Turtle Creek.

In 1754 Fraser was commissioned a Lieutenant of the Virginia militia to serve under Captain Trent who was to build the Virginia fort on the Ohio. However, his duties were unclear, and when the French came to take the fort, he refused to leave his work at Turtle Creek. For this inaction, the Virginia governor sought to have him court-martialed. No action was taken, and although discredited for a while, his reputation was restored in time for him to take part in the campaign of General John Forbes.

He came to Forbes' attention because of his first-hand knowledge of the region and his acquaintance with the Ohio Indians. He was made captain of the guides and was an aide in interpreting intelligence reports. Forbes sent him to Colonel Bouquet, and Fraser served the campaign well.

Another smith on the Ohio frontier, similar to Fraser, was Thomas Burney. His forge was on the Muskingum River where he became, through the years, a confidant and friend of the Indians. Burney was on the Muskingum in 1750 when Christopher Gist made a tour of the region.

Gist was the representative of the Ohio Land Company and


9 Fraser had accepted the commission from Captain William Trent with the understanding that he could conclude his business on Turtle Creek. In the absence of Trent, fort construction at the Forks was under Ensign Ward. When the French arrived, Ward appealed to Fraser. Fraser refused to leave Turtle Creek, and Governor Dinwiddie tried to have him court-martialed.


11 *Mercer Papers*, 292.
visited the Ohio Indians as an advance agent of the company. Since
the Ohio Company hoped to establish a trading house on the Ohio at
an early date, Gist wanted the Twightwee (Miami) Indians to learn
of their future trading opportunities. At the Twightwee town of
Pickawillany, Gist learned of the Indians' desire for a smith. Their
request was made in these words: "We hope that you will order a
smith to settle here to mend our guns and hatchets, your kindness
makes us so bold to ask this request." The answer to the request was
the removal of Burney to Pickawillany where he stayed until 1752.

In June of that year French Indians came to the Ohio to discipline
the recalcitrant Twightwees. They and their Canadian leaders took
the town, killed several English traders, and killed the principal
chief. Other traders were taken to Canada as prisoners. Fortunately,
Thomas Burney and a friend were hidden by the Twightwees and so
escaped the French Indians. Evidently the Twightwees valued the
smith more than they feared the revengeful Canadians.

Following his escape from the atrocities, Burney brought a letter
from the Twightwees to Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia. The letter
reported the happenings and asked for help from the English. Burney
was also able to give an eyewitness report of the results of the first
overt act of hostility in the Anglo-French rivalry. Later Burney
served William Trent and George Washington as a regular courier to
the Indians. He served as a diligent agent for the English until he lost
his life on the Monongahela at the defeat of General Braddock in
1755.

One other frontier smith, who surpassed Fraser and Burney in
historical renown, was Daniel Boone. As a wagoner and blacksmith,
he, too, was on Braddock's road. At the defeat along with other
wagoners, he cut a horse from the harness and escaped the fate of

12 See Christopher Gist's first journal in Ibid., 98-121. The extended plans of
the Ohio Land Company called for a smith to be located at the company
fort on the Ohio. Lawrence Washington was ordered to procure in Eng-
land a good smith and the necessary tools, Ibid., 169.
13 Pickawillany was the principal town of the Twightwees located near the
present town of Piqua, Ohio.
14 The Indian request for their guns and hatchets to be mended was a standard
request at most Indian-white conferences. See Pennsylvania Colonial
Records, IV, 705.
15 Charles A. Hanna, The Wilderness Trail (Putnam's Sons, New York, 1911),
I, 86.
16 Pennsylvania Colonial Records, V, 599-600.
17 Mercer Papers, 492.
18 Reuben Gold Thwaites, Daniel Boone (Appleton-Century, New York, 1935),
21. See the depositions of the wagoners in Pennsylvania Colonial Records,
VI, 482-484.
Thomas Burney. He lived to be one of the most accomplished smiths of the American advance westward. Although the fact is often overlooked, Boone’s success with the Indians, their liking and respect for him and the similar regard by all frontier folk, were due, not in small measure, to the skill of his hands at his forge. As he moved from North Carolina to Kentucky and finally to Missouri, the legend of this honest, courageous man outgrew the knowledge of the skill that made it possible for him to prosper on so many frontiers. Few frontiersmen ever would or could surpass Boone in his understanding of the Indian and in his knowledge of Indian diplomacy.¹⁹

From the foregoing it may be perceived that these frontier gunsmiths had found a level of communication with the Indian. This fact, with its end product of good Indian relations, was recognized by clear-thinking British and French colonial authorities. And as the Anglo-French rivalry intensified in the early 1750’s and moved toward subsequent conflict, each nation sought to transfer its Indian relations into a definite advantage. For the Indian held the power position on the Ohio, and to utilize and to sway this balance of power was the aim of each nation in its communications with him.²⁰ Since the British lacked any central authority in Indian affairs until 1755, each colony groped its way toward the best possible utilization of the Indian. In Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin grasped the significance of the frontier smith as a factor in the power struggle.

From close observation, Franklin understood the English need for the allegiance of the Indian. He knew well the efforts of the French toward the control of the Indian on the Pennsylvania frontier. He showed a marked degree of perception concerning the smith in a letter in 1750. He wrote:

Every one must approve the proposal of encouraging a number of sober discreet Smiths to reside among the Indians. They would doubtless be of great service. The whole subsistence of Indians, depends on keeping their guns in order; and if they are obliged to make a journey of two or three hundred miles to the English settlement to get a lock mended; it may, besides the trouble, occasion the loss of their hunting season. They are people that think much of their temporal, but little of their spiritual interests; and therefore, as he would be a most useful and necessary man to them, a Smith is more like to

¹⁹ Thwaites, 11, 32, 34.
²⁰ Pennsylvania Colonial Records, V, 31-32. See also New York Col. Docs., V, 571. Gipson, IV, 185, says “that if the establishment of trading houses throughout this region, with here and there blacksmith shops, could be taken as prima facie evidence of possession — as the French themselves claimed for the Great Lakes region — then Great Britain was in a position to affirm that her claims to it [Ohio Valley] were superior to those of her rival— . . .”
influence them than a Jesuit; provided he has a good common understanding and is from time to time well instructed.\textsuperscript{21}

Franklin's ideas were strengthened by the experience of the Massachusetts factory system where the colony built a trading house, regulated and carried on the Indian trade, and sent a smith to render services to the Indian.\textsuperscript{22} His ideas were reiterated at a later time by Edmond Atkin, the first southern superintendent of Indian affairs.

For more than thirty years while in the Indian trade of the southern frontier, Atkin studied Indian relations and Indian problems. In 1754 out of his vast experience, he wrote a report on the southern tribes and included a formalized plan for their control. He submitted the report and plan to the Board of Trade in 1755. The plan was detailed and specifically stressed the use of a smith in these words:

We [the English] furnish the Indians with Guns enough in exchange for their deer skins and Furs; but the French mend them and keep them in repair Gratis.

When an Indian after undergoing the mortification of having a Gun (perhaps from trial and use become a favorite one) suddenly by some slight accident to the Lock, or Touch hole, render'd entirely useless to him, I say when he sees it afterwards as suddenly restored to its former state, and as useful as before, it gladdens his Heart more than a present of a new Gun would. He then looks on our Trader and the Frenchman with different Eyes. The former only sold him the Gun (perhaps at an extravagant price); the latter when it is spoiled, hath as it were new made [it] for nothing. This endears the Frenchman to him.\textsuperscript{23}

Atkin's report terminated in a plan for Indian management that proposed a smith for the use of each Indian nation. He recommended:

That in each Fort or Blockhouse, that is in each nation there be fixed a Gunsmith inlisted [sic], and to receive besides his Soldiers Pay an extra adequate allowance out of the Provincial Fund; who shall be obliged, without any reward whatever from the Indians, to repair and mend their Guns, and Grind their Hatchets. The same Men to act as Armourers and Gunners of the Forts.\textsuperscript{24}

And furthermore, Atkin's plan actually went into detailed specifications as to the kind and the amount of tools the smith should have at the frontier forge. In London the combined report and plan so impressed the Board of Trade that Atkin was awarded the position as superintendent of the southern tribes.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} Papers of Benjamin Franklin (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962), IV, 121.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., V, 111-112.


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 78, 79. Atkin's thesis was that since "the French preserve the friendship of their Indian allies by the judicious use of presents and gunsmiths under the direction of a centralized Indian administration" . . . , the English could do the same. Ibid., xxxi.

\textsuperscript{25} Pennsylvania Archives, First Series (Philadelphia, 1852-1856), III, 155.
A year previous to Atkin's appointment, Sir William Johnson of New York was assigned the Indian superintendency of the northern tribes — mainly the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. Johnson, a Mohawk by adoption, was one of the most astute Indian managers of the colonial frontier. His major aim was to bring the six nations into direct military alliance with the English, or failing in this, he wanted to neutralize their influence for the French. In 1750, like Franklin, Johnson advocated sending smiths to the Indians. He followed his recommendation with the assignment of one William Printup to the Onondaga castle as a smith. In March 1754 he wrote to George Clinton, governor of New York, and recommended that a number of smiths be sent to every Indian nation "to repair and keep in order their arms and planting utensils." His specific assignment at this time was a smith to Oswego — an advanced outpost for the fur trade on the New York frontier. In 1755 Johnson sent a smith to the Senecas and Cayugas with instructions that stressed the intelligence function of the smith in time of war. He wrote: "You are to send me from time to time all the intelligence you can get at any moment, by express whom I shall pay." Thus the smith, with access to the Indian at unguarded moments, could serve a vital function in the war effort. Any news or rumors of French or Indian activity was necessary intelligence. In the use of the smith, Johnson set a high example at his home where the forges burned and the anvils rang far into the night in the service of the Indians.

To counteract Johnson's tremendous prestige and influence with the Iroquois, the French sent Chabert de Joncaire into western New York. He had been successful on the Ohio, and now in an effort to thwart Johnson, he took with him the most powerful incentives at his command. These were presents for the Indians and "some armorers [gunsmiths] to be paid by the King and established in their villages." Thus in the field of Indian relations, two skillful Indian managers tried to best each other.

The results of this trial of diplomatic strength were essential to the conduct of the war. Johnson was able to bring the Mohawk nation into

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27 Ibid., IX, 127.
28 Ibid., I, 765. In 1764 Johnson set up a plan for the management and control of the Iroquois. At that time he established that eleven paid smiths were necessary to render adequate service to the Indians of the six nations. See Ibid., IV, 562.
30 Ibid., 202.
military alliance with the English, and these Indians proved to be the critical factor in the victory at Lake George in the Crown Point campaign and, later, at the fall of Fort Niagara. Johnson's further success lay in keeping the other nations neutral and of little use to the French. Meanwhile Joncaire was unable to develop a French alliance with any of the six nations, but he was able to entice the younger Indians to carry on small raiding parties to harass the English. These younger Indians gave no heed to the council of the older Indians of the Confederation. Through their use, Joncaire kept the blood flowing on the colonial frontier throughout the war. But in the final outcome, Johnson's more successful Indian relations must be accorded a definite part in the victory of the English.

The full story of the French and Indian War is too well-known to be repeated here, but the lessons in Indian diplomacy of the war did not become common knowledge. For both the British and the Americans, the revolutionary struggle postponed the development of the Indian superintendencies or any other concrete policies. And for both the use of a smith as a tool in Indian relations had small meaning. It was not until 1804 on the upper Missouri River that the Lewis and Clark expedition would rediscover the vital services of a smith on the frontier. The experiences of that expedition, especially at the Mandan villages, would re-introduce the smith in such a way that the use of his services would be emphasized in Federal Indian relations in subsequent times.

In so many ways the winter of 1804-1805 at the Mandan villages was a testing time for the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition. The ability to survive the cold and frost under primitive, frontier conditions, and the capability of providing food and clothing from a harsh environment were tests that must be met. But most of all, it would test the full measure of their skill with the Indians. Survival and success that winter were integrated and finely drawn, and survival and success, throughout the expedition, were hinged on the significant and delicate Indian relations. Here is where the smiths would play their vital role.

For the needs of the expedition, Lewis engaged two metal smiths. Alexander Willard, originally of New Hampshire, was the blacksmith. His skill was such that he would be employed in later years as a smith to Indians of the Missouri territory. John Shields, of Kentucky, would prove to be the highly skilled gunsmith so vital to the
success of the expedition.\textsuperscript{12} Both men labored long and hard in service to the Indians — producing results in Indian relations that surprised and gratified Lewis and Clark.

With few guns, the Indians of the Missouri wanted the iron goods that formed the basis of their weapon system and furnished tools for the hunt. They wanted their hatchets sharpened and mended. They wanted war axes made, and they wanted widths of iron for scraping and dressing the buffalo robes.\textsuperscript{31} For all such goods and services the Indians had a great supply of corn to trade. Since the corn was a necessity to the diet of the expedition, Lewis readily gave his consent to the trading. He permitted the smiths to dispose of an iron stove that was of little use. For four square inches of this iron, the Indians traded seven to eight gallons of corn.\textsuperscript{34} "The blacksmiths have proved a happy resource to us in our present situation as I believe it would have been difficult to have devised any other method to have procured corn from the natives," wrote Lewis in his journal.\textsuperscript{35} And as long as they received corn, the smiths were ordered to give the Indians what they requested.

The most frequent request was for the manufacture of a battle axe. Lewis thought the axe a novelty and described and drew one for his journal. But he saw the weapon as of little use in actual battle.\textsuperscript{16} In making this article, the skill of the smiths did impress most of the visitors to the camp.

Among the visitors who came to see and assay the strength of the expedition was a Gros Ventres chief.\textsuperscript{37} The chief was not awed by the men of the expedition, and he felt that his young men would have little difficulty in subduing them. However, he was quoted as saying that "there are only two sensible men among them, the worker of iron and the mender of guns."\textsuperscript{38}

The traders of the Northwest Fur Company who visited that winter were also perceptive. Laroque of that company observed that the expedition had expert smiths who worked for the Indians and

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  \item \textsuperscript{31} Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., \textit{Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806} (Antiquarian Press, New York, 1959), I, 255.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, 254.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, 243n.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}. The Gros Ventres were Minnetarees of the upper Missouri who were in close trade relations with the British Northwest Fur Company.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}, 227n.
\end{itemize}
that the Indians seemed very fond of them.\textsuperscript{39} Without a doubt the
visitors to the winter camp, whether white or red, were singularly im-
pressed with the skill of the smiths and their fine relations with the
Indians. So perhaps with more luck than premeditation, the leaders
of the expedition found one of the secrets of successful Indian
diplomacy.

At two separate entries in the journal, the gunsmith is given credit
for his skill in mending and repairing guns. According to Lewis, with-
out the ingenuity of Shields, most of the guns would have been useless
throughout the expedition. In summarizing the work of the men of the
expedition, Lewis asked for extra compensation for Shields' work and
reviewed his usefulness in this manner:

[Shields] Has received the pay only of a private. Nothing was more peculiarly
useful to us, in various situations, than the skill and ingenuity of this man as an
artist, in repairing our guns, accoutrements, &c. and should it be thought proper
to allow him something as an artificer, he has well deserved it.\textsuperscript{40}

The Lewis and Clark expedition in its two years on the western
frontier followed a pattern of near starvation, constant danger and
bare survival closely analogous to the life of the primitive Indian. Since
the services of the gunsmith were paramount in the survival of the ex-
pedition, Lewis and Clark were convinced that the smith and his
services were of similar value to the Indian on most frontiers. And in
1808, Lewis sent Willard to the Sauks and Foxes as a smith paid by
the Federal Indian service. In like manner in 1809, Clark assigned him
to the Shawnees and Delawares for the same purpose.\textsuperscript{41} By 1822 the
Indian service was employing annually twenty-one smiths for service
to the Indian.\textsuperscript{42} And so until the Indian learned the skills of the forge,
the smith was an everyday necessity for the Indian and remained an
essential factor in good Indian relations.

\textsuperscript{39} Francois-Antoine Laroque was the head of the Northwest Fur Company.
See Letters of Lewis and Clark, 214n.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 367.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 372n.
\textsuperscript{42} House Document 110, Seventeenth Congress, First Session (April 8, 1822).
This technical aid to the Indian to establish better relations anticipated
the Peace Corps program of technical aid to undeveloped peoples by about
150 years.