

WHERE DID GEORGE CROGHAN DIE?

GEORGE SWETNAM

THOSE who would write on history — professionals as well as amateurs — need to exercise great care in the use of documents and personal statements (which when reduced to writing have much the same force) to make certain that the materials really mean what they are taken to be saying.

Perhaps some examples from writings about Pittsburgh district history will point up the validity of at least a few of the absolutely minimal safeguards to be employed in order to avoid falling into error. This is particularly important where new evidence appears to contradict generally accepted beliefs or the statements of recognized authorities on the subject.

For example, a recent article¹ in this magazine states:

A recorded deed of historical significance reveals that the heroic, amazing Irishman, George Croghan, drew his last breath at his Croghan Hall plantation near the Allegheny River in the Pittsburgh area. This will be surprising news to those who have read through the years in various publications, that he died at his residence in Passyunk near Philadelphia. The revelation that George Croghan died in the Pittsburgh area is contained in a deed which was executed in 1788 by one of Croghan's friends, Henry Heth, a Virginia captain, in favor of his eldest son, William Heth.

The portion of the deed quoted in support of this "surprising news" runs:

A certain tract of land lying and being on a run which empties into the Allegheny River about five miles above Pittsburgh and *contiguous to the plantation whereon Colo George Croghan died*, formerly lived . . . [Italics are mine.] (The preceding three words are part of the quotation.)

The article continues:

The pertinent statement in the deed that the land conveyed was "contiguous to the plantation whereon Colo George Croghan died, formerly lived" is certainly

Dr. Swetnam, a writer for the *Pittsburgh Press* and an authority on local history, has contributed many times to this magazine. The writer states that he is indebted to Director Nicholas B. Wainwright of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, author of *George Croghan, Wilderness Diplomat*, for supplying and checking references to cited material on Croghan in the Philadelphia area. —Editor

1 Margaret Pearson Bothwell, "Some Pioneers and Some of Their Descendants," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 53 (1970): 139-44.

factual. It is obvious that Captain Henry Heth, a very intelligent man, wanted to make a lasting record of the exact place where his friend, George Croghan, had died.

And further :

Henry Heth's aforesaid deed *leaves no doubt* that Croghan died at Croghan Hall . . . (Italics are author Swetnam's.)

Another, unrelated, statement in the same article concerns Benjamin Kuykendall :

The minutes of the Court of Yohogania County *prove that he was in the area that became Pittsburgh* as early as 1754. (Italics are author Swetnam's.)

The citation in proof :

Benjamin Kuykendall . . . being sworn Sayeth, that in the Spring of the year 1754 he saw Maj. Edward Ward on his march to Virginia from what is now Fort Pitt, that the sd. Major Ward had command of the party with him & that he understood that he was the commanding officer of the post at the aforesd. place as an officer of the Virginia line & Surrendered to the French.

A third example to be considered in our search for historical accuracy is the oft-quoted statement of Judge John F. W. White in regard to the grounds of the impeachment of President Judge Alexander Addison for his actions in regard to his colleague, Judge John B. C. Lucas :

He was a Frenchman and intensely hostile to Judge Addison. As soon as he took his seat on the bench, he commenced to annoy and provoke Judge Addison. *Although a layman* he would frequently differ with the Judge on points of law, . . .² (Italics are author Swetnam's.)

Judge White's source, although not given in his article, is evidently the passage on the same subject in Neville Craig's *History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1851) which he paraphrases and quotes at length in his discussion, without giving credit.

A fourth example is the statement of Russell Errett in regard to the population of early Pittsburgh that,

In 1788, Dr. Hildreth, then on his way to Marietta . . . says that "Pittsburgh then contained four or five hundred inhabitants."³ (Italics are author Swetnam's.)

Again there is no citation, but the context discloses that Errett, too, was quoting from Craig's *History of Pittsburgh*.

For our fifth and final example, let us consider a recent account of

² "The Judiciary of Allegheny County," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 7 (1883) : 157.

³ *History of Allegheny County* (Chicago, 1889), 1 : 621.

the widely heralded but utterly counterfeit "Charter Oak," supposed to have once marked the southwest boundary of Pennsylvania with Virginia. It runs:

For the Penns the time of definite action had arrived. They summoned to Philadelphia David Rittenhouse, surveyor-general of Pennsylvania, and Provost William Smith, an official of the school which became the University of Pennsylvania. To these men the Penns assigned the task of a westward survey. Starting from a point on the Delaware River just north of Philadelphia, they noted the position of the stars and began their long trip toward the unknown goal of "five degrees of longitude."

The comforting sight of Fort Pitt was five miles behind them when the surveyors stopped. This was the point they sought — the uncharted "five degrees" that King Charles II had so casually mentioned nearly a century before

Exactly five miles and three rods west of Fort Pitt the Oak stood, . . .⁴

None of the wrong conclusions embodied in these examples would have appeared in print if the authors had taken certain minimal precautions in the use of material — precautions that all who profess to write history owe to their reputations and their readers. Let us consider a few tests to use in employing documents or statements.

1. Is the text accurate in the form being used (particularly in regard to recopied or reprinted sources)?

2. Is it certain or highly probable that the source actually means what it appears to say? Does it necessarily mean all that is supposed? And is there a possibility that over the years there have been changes in word meanings and manners of expression that the exact force of the words involved is in danger of misunderstanding?

3. Is it certain that the writer or speaker was telling the exact and accurate truth? Did he have actual knowledge, or merely report hearsay? If he was writing or speaking some time after the event, was his memory accurate? And may he have had some motive — gain, self-protection, revenge — for twisting the truth? (Particularly in regard to memory, this writer has been much impressed by some recent experiments he has made. Historians are often disposed to give great weight to eyewitness statements, even when made years afterward. "X," it is argued, "was a trained observer, and although Y number of years had passed, he was still young enough for his mind to be clear on the point." To test this thinking, I have proceeded to write from memory accounts of "big" stories I have covered as a newspaperman — stories so important I was certain I could never forget their details. I believe I would qualify as a trained observer, still of clear mind, and with no reason to impugn what I,

4 Alice Crist Christner, *Here's to Thornburg* (Pittsburgh, 1966), 15.

myself, had previously written. But when I compared these accounts from memory with the stories I had written only ten to fifteen years before, I was amazed at how far they were from being accurate.)

4. Is the statement or account in harmony with the general historical surroundings? (This is the touchstone which first warns the good historian of many possible errors — that makes the apparent “fact” stand up and cry out: “Check me! Check me!”)

5. Are there other accepted documents or statements which contradict or tend to discredit it? (If so, then every bit of available knowledge should be mustered so as to arrive at a judgment as to authenticity.)

6. Is the statement of the speaker or document physically possible in the light of other known facts?

Let us examine the previously stated examples of misreadings of facts in their reverse order. We are forced to admit that in spite of the many historical errors it contains, the “Charter Oak” story is hardly worthy of consideration. Yet it has been and is — from this most recent mention to that of previous ones — widely accepted. It has given its name to a community, a large business enterprise, and in part to a recent school jointure (Keystone Oaks). The stump of the alleged “historic” tree has been publicly displayed. And although the account has been given repeated publicity in newspaper stories, advertisements, and on radio and television, it has never — at this writing⁵ — been publicly denied or controverted. Surely something ought to be done to distinguish such folklore from historical fact.

Despite a long search, I have been unable to find any evidence that the story was known or told — much less printed — even as much as forty years ago. The first trace I have been able to find is in a 1938 story quoting the late John R. Haudenshield, who knew a great deal of Pittsburgh district folklore and history, and who sometimes had some trouble in distinguishing them. Apparently a blaze on a hollow, old black oak tree had given rise to some kind of story that it had once marked a historic corner connected with the Pennsylvania-Virginia border controversy of the early 1770s. Probably the catalyst was some statement of the well-known fact that after Surveyor General John Lukens had spent two months measuring the movement

5 Since the article was written, Dr. Swetnam has impugned the story in an article, “The Charter Hoax,” *Pittsburgh Press*, April 18, 1971.

of Jupiter's satellites, Smith and Rittenhouse made a determination from his data that Fort Pitt was "at least six [not five] miles inside the western boundary of Penn's grant"⁶ — a fact that the proprietors quickly sent to Lord Dunmore, who paid it no attention.

In the first published account of the "Charter Oak" I have been able to locate, Haudenshield stated that, "Provost Smith of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a survey in 1769 [*sic*] locating the western boundary on a parallel five miles west of Pittsburgh. His survey was astronomical, based on the stars."⁷ (A paraphrase by the writer, not a direct quotation.)

But this would not account for the blazed tree. So he added, "Later as the survey was marked through the wilderness, the Charter Oak was blazed." (Again, not in quotation marks in the newspaper.) According to the story, Haudenshield had photographed the tree "a few" years earlier, and after it fell he preserved the stump in his capacity as historian of the local Sons of the American Revolution. It was exhibited at the Allegheny County Free Fair as genuine and placed in the museum at South Park, where it may still be, for all I know.

The story, of course, violates the easily ascertainable facts that neither Rittenhouse nor Smith (whose careers are well known) was ever west of Harrisburg prior to the American Revolution; that no such survey was ever run; and that had it been run from anywhere near Philadelphia, it would have ended near present-day Brownsville, not at Pittsburgh. Also neglected was the physical fact that the alleged "Charter Oak" location was not anywhere close to "five miles . . . west of Fort Pitt" — more like four — although it was approximately five miles *southwest*. The extra "three rods" appear to have been added somewhere along the way as an afterthought — "corroborative detail, to give verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative," to quote Pooh-Bah in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. Such detail is characteristic of folk history.

When we look at Errett's blunder, the facts are more simple. In his political haste (as a founder of the Republican party) to blacken

6 Perhaps from the Memorial by William Smith and David Rittenhouse, *Burd-Shippen Papers*, 2: 64, American Philosophical Society, cited by Brooke Hindle, *David Rittenhouse* (Princeton, N. J., 1964), 93.

7 "District Community Named for Historic Charter Oak," *Pittsburgh Press*, May 22, 1938.

the reputation of Hugh H. Brackenridge, this area's first prominent Democrat, he went back and cribbed from Neville Craig, his victim's personal as well as political enemy. But he didn't even check, much less follow, his obvious source. Craig simply says, "Dr. Hildreth, of Marietta, gives the following account . . . 'Pittsburgh then contained four or five hundred inhabitants.'" ⁸ And if Errett had taken the trouble to look at the historian's "Note 15," he would have seen the quotation correctly attributed to Dr. Samuel Prescott Hildreth's *Pioneer History*, which was written late in life and published in 1848. Even Craig was omitting the fact that Hildreth was writing hearsay. As is well known, far from being with the group that passed through Pittsburgh in 1788, Hildreth first went to Marietta in 1806 on horseback, by way of Albany and Erie.⁹

Against such carelessness as these two instances exhibit, the inexperienced reader has no defense. But the expert should find little difficulty in spotting such errors by sight and odor.

Judge White's error comes rather under the second of the six minimal safeguards I have suggested. He simply read into his source more than it stated, failing to check whether or not his interpretation fit the facts. Craig¹⁰ simply referred to Addison's being "not sufficiently courteous to his demagogical colleague." But Judge White — apparently oblivious of the fact that lawyers as well as laymen can be "demagogical," — stated flatly that Judge Lucas was a layman, and this error was followed in every subsequent history of Pittsburgh for fifty years. As a matter of fact, Judge Lucas was one of the most highly educated lawyers of Pittsburgh's early history. He studied law at Honfleur and Paris, took his degree at Caen in 1782, and had been a Pennsylvania legislator for several years before becoming a judge.¹¹ Judge Addison, a Scottish university graduate in theology, according to White, had read law at Washington, Pennsylvania, after being rejected as a preacher. Lucas refused to accept the position of president judge after Addison's ouster and moved to St. Louis, where he became very prominent. Reviewing their differences, most present-day at-

⁸ *History of Pittsburgh*, 192.

⁹ Albert P. Mathews, "Samuel Prescott Hildreth," *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1933), 9: 21.

¹⁰ *History of Pittsburgh*, 286.

¹¹ "Melvin J. White, John Baptiste Charles Lucas," *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1933), 11: 485.

torneys would feel that Lucas was ahead of his time, Addison behind it.

And once again, the statement and interpretation in regard to Benjamin Kuykendall appear to be simply a case of not looking carefully enough at the quoted authority to see what it did *not* say. To see Major Ward "on his march to Virginia from what is now Fort Pitt," Kuykendall would not have had to *be present* "in the area that became Pittsburgh." He might have seen the troop at Wills Creek, for instance, in the most limited possible meaning of the words describing the march; or in the probable sense, even at Winchester or beyond. The last part of the quoted statement reveals that Kuykendall definitely was *not* at Fort Pitt at the time of the French arrival, for while he alleges his *knowledge* that "Maj. Ward had command of the party with him," he only says he "*understood* that Ward was commander of the post . . . and Surrendered to the French." (Italics are author Swetnam's.)

Returning to the initial example, in regard to the place of George Croghan's death, we may note there are a number of matters that might give anyone pause before stating that the Heth deed "leaves no doubt" that the event occurred at Croghan Hall, near the present Lawrenceville area.

It is a charming, but unconvincing, thought that Captain Heth "wanted to make a lasting record of the exact place where his friend, George Croghan, had died." In the first place, a quit-claim deed in the settlement of a legal dispute over property ownership (which in essence the paper was) is hardly the place one is likely to choose for setting up such a record. Nor, so far as I can find, is there any tangible or presumptive evidence of any such close relationship between the two men as this would imply.

Furthermore, there are certain grammatical and historical grounds for questioning the reading found in the present land deed records as having the meaning proposed. "The plantation whereon Colo George Croghan died, formerly lived," is as unnatural a locution in the speech of the late eighteenth century as it would be today. We must bear in mind, too, that there are at least four places where the text as we have it might have been corrupted from the meaning Heth intended.

1. The phrase ". . . died, formerly lived," sounds much more like a man correcting an error of fact, than a tribute to a friend. Heth — an old man for his day, which was one when few had glasses, and many

did not write well — sounds as if he might have been dictating his sworn statement. If he said “died” by mistake, and then corrected it, the amanuensis may have misunderstood and written both phrases.

2. Or if he understood, he may have just neglected to cross out the error.

3. More probably Heth simply used the regular phrase of that day in legal papers for the dead, “Colo George Croghan, dec’d” (for “deceased”). It is easy to mistake “dec’d” for “died” in most handwriting, and this may have been done by the clerk who copied the deed into the early Allegheny County deed book.

4. Or, it could have been an error of the clerk who recopied the records into the present book in the 1880s after many of the records had been damaged by water when the second courthouse burned.

A document dated the day before the deed in question, August 20, 1782, and referring to Heth’s place, states that it was “contiguous to the plantation whereon Colo. George Croghan, decd, then [in 1774] lived.”¹² (To assume a reverse error, “. . . Croghan died, then lived,” would be utter madness.)

But whatever Henry Heth may have said, or any clerk written, there is no question about the facts: Col. George Croghan did *not* die in or near Pittsburgh. On the time and place of his death, the record is crystal clear.

1. As the article correctly stated,¹³ Croghan died on August 31, 1782, and his will was probated in Philadelphia on September 3. In the absence of modern communication and transport, this would have been a physical impossibility if he had died here. With the roundabout course of the road before 1796 the distance was well over three hundred miles, and even fast relay riders would have done well to make it in a week. Who would have spent so much on news of the death of an impoverished old man? His original will has an annotation: “. . . read this 2d day of September, 1782.”¹⁴ Three days would have been an utter impossibility. But two?

2. In May 1808, Susannah Vaux, a Quaker friend of Croghan’s daughter, Susannah Prevost, affirmed that George Croghan “died in or near Philadelphia.” Her husband, James Vaux, stated the same, and “that he has lately examined his tombstone in the yard of St. Peter’s Church.”¹⁵

¹² Ohio Company Papers, file II, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

¹³ Bothwell, 141, n. 4.

¹⁴ File on Croghan’s Will, No. 156, in office of Recorder of Deeds, Philadelphia.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

3. On June 12, 1782, Croghan signed his will at Passyunk, at which time he was described as being bedfast. The three people who witnessed it were present at probate September 3.¹⁶ And his kinsman, William Powell, a Philadelphian and his executor, billed the estate for "cash paid Col. Croghan (just before his death . . .) — £6."¹⁷

Finally, in the transcript of "Records of Christ Church Burials, 1709-1785," it is recorded that George Crogham (*sic*) was buried at St. Peter's, Philadelphia, on September 2, 1782.¹⁸ Had he died at Croghan Hall on August 31, this would have been impossible.

May his bones henceforth rest in peace.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Endorsement on will.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Paper in same file.

¹⁸ The Historical Society of Pennsylvania transcript, 3334.

IN COMMEMORATION

GIFTS

IN MEMORY OF

DR. ALFRED P. JAMES

FROM

MRS. R. J. FERGUSON

JOHN W. HARPSTER

MISS KATHARINE E. SMITH

MR. AND MRS. C. V. STARRETT