HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

DIGGING UP FORT PITT

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Introduction

The motorist hurrying across the overpass at Point State Park and the pedestrian sauntering along the park walks may find it difficult to believe that less than a yard under Fort Pitt Boulevard are the actual remains of old Fort Pitt, but it is so. The old is there as well as the new.

Those who use the Point, whether motorists or pedestrians, are part of the stream of history that is centered there. It is the presence of people and the things they do that make human history. Those who use the Point are part of the past and the future as well as the present: heirs to the Indians, the French, and the English who desired it; actors in the bustling, industrial world that surrounds it; part-architects of what it will be and mean to future generations. For the area of which it is a part is a natural site for a settlement, and it is likely that men will live there as long as the Point exists.

The rivers make the location so desirable. From Pittsburgh and its Point, one can move hundreds of miles on the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio. We live here now largely because even numerous modern highways have not erased the importance of the rivers for the transport needs of the business on which our livelihoods depend. In the olden days before automobiles and concrete roads, other folk found the rivers even more useful, even more necessary, for their transport.

The Settlement at the Point

While we cannot prove it, it is unlikely that the Indians did not camp at the Point. The nearest Indian village of whose location we have acceptable evidence was Shannopin's Town, which was not so far away, for it was well within the city limits at Thirtieth Street.

In 1753, the Ohio Company of Virginia determined to erect a fort at the Point. It was intended to serve as a secure headquarters for the Ohio Company's trading operations and as a focus of British

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power on the western waters to combat expanding French influence in the region. Work on the fort was begun in February 1754. It was named Fort Prince George in honor of the future George III. On April 17, 1754, a French force descended upon the crude and hastily erected palisade, hardly worthy of so grand a name as "Fort," and compelled its surrender.

On the day of their seizing the Point, the French began building Fort Duquesne, so named in honor of the Marquis Duquesne, governor of Canada. For four years Fort Duquesne was a thorn in the flesh of English colonists. When these, and the British government, could no longer bear what they considered a presumptuous and unwarranted invasion of British territory as well as a bastion from which French troops and French Indians could raid into the colonies, expeditions were mounted against the fort.

The first of these military ventures aimed at Fort Duquesne was that of the militia colonel, George Washington, which was turned back by the French at what is now Fort Necessity on July 4, 1754. The second, that of Major General Edward Braddock, was decisively defeated on the north shore of the Monongahela River in what is now the Borough of Braddock on July 9, 1755. The third, led by Brigadier General John Forbes, was successful. His army marched into the smoking ruins of Fort Duquesne, which the retreating French had blown up and fired on November 24, 1758. By December, the garrison left by Forbes to guard the Point was at work on the second English fort at the Point. It was a simple fort compared with the mighty structure to be raised later, and was finished by July 1759. It is known as Mercer's Fort after Colonel Hugh Mercer, the officer in command of its construction.

On September 3, 1759, the building of Fort Pitt began. It was named in honor of William Pitt, the king's first minister, for whom, of course, Forbes also named the site for settlement he knew would grow around the fort. Fort Pitt was completed, to all intents and purposes, by 1761, although additions were made to it from time to time, notably the Blockhouse erected by Colonel Henry Bouquet probably in 1763. The restored Blockhouse is the only remaining visible complete structure of the original fort, although segments of the restored walls to be seen in Point State Park are original.

Short History of Archeological Work at the Point

Documents are the foundation of historical knowledge. Generally documents are thought of as written accounts, diaries, letters, tax rolls,
and the like. But there are other kinds of documents, too — non-literary documents, tools, weapons, coins, building remains, and other tangible products of the hands of people.

It is this latter sort of documents, or artifacts and physical remains, that archeologists applying the specialized techniques of their trade are particularly fitted to find and interpret. Seldom so fully in-
formative as written records, artifacts are a valuable supplement to written records; they provide physical evidence to illustrate and confirm passages in written works.

Realizing this fact, the city of Pittsburgh required that archeological research be included in preliminary studies relative to establishment of a park at the Point at the time of the creation of the Pittsburgh Point Park Commission on October 10, 1940.

The first such research began on January 21, 1941. It was conducted by the Works Progress Administration under the direction of Eugene Murphy, the whole being supervised by the Department of City Planning. Its task was locating extant portions of the original Fort Pitt. Places for excavation were chosen by orienting maps of Fort Pitt prepared in 1761 by Lieutenants Bernard Ratzer and Elias Meyer on current street plans of Pittsburgh as information gathered by the Department of City Planning in 1936-1938 allowed.

Six test pits were excavated by Murphy during the period January 21, 1941, to February 5, 1942, when Wesley A. Bliss, on leave from the Pennsylvania Historical Commission in Harrisburg, arrived to take charge of further archeological work. Murphy exposed a section of the moat and part of the stone footing of the wall on its south-east side along what was then Liberty Avenue, and another portion of the moat on the north side of what was then Penn Avenue.

Bliss worked at Fort Pitt through 1943. Part of the time was spent in excavating at the Point, part in preparing the archeological portion of part one of the Report of the Point Park Commission, copyrighted by the commission in 1944. This mimeographed report of 260 text pages and many figures including maps, photographs of fort features, drawings, and the like, is basic to study of the site. Only twelve copies were made. Generally called the "Bliss Report," it is also affectionately known among aficionados of Fort Pitt as the "Fourteen Pound Report" because of its weight.

Bliss directed the digging of twenty-nine numbered test pits. In most of them he found remains of Fort Pitt. Everywhere he used the Ratzer and Meyer maps as guides, and everywhere he found them accurate within reason. We, in turn, checked Bliss's reports of what he found as we worked with structures he had recorded, and we were convinced his excavations were well done and his reporting accurate.

As part of the general plan for traffic easement in the area, a park was projected at the Point. Included in recommendations to the Department of Forests and Waters of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania concerning the proposed park, was one from the Historical Ad-
visory Committee of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development to the effect that in conjunction with grading operations to be conducted at the Point Park site effort should be made to rescue whatever items of historical significance might come to light and be useful in development of general Point State Park plans. This recommendation was favorably received and made part of the general and specific conditions of the interior Point State Park contract.

From January 15 through September 15, 1953, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History conducted archeological salvage work at Point State Park under a service purchase agreement with the commonwealth. Dedicated to salvaging archeological materials as grading operations exposed them rather than probing at will, Carnegie Museum people worked in five test pits. Three of these had been investigated in part by Murphy and Bliss. Two — one in the center of Liberty Avenue, and one between Liberty and Penn avenues — were in areas not investigated previously. The one between Liberty and Penn was particularly interesting because it exposed a section of the fort's inner wall no one had known existed.

Since 1953, Carnegie Museum has again been called on to work at the site of Fort Pitt. In 1955, efforts were made to locate traces of Fort Duquesne, which was built west of Fort Pitt at the tip of the 1754 Point, which had been about four hundred feet east of where the tip is now. No traces of Fort Duquesne, however, were found.

In 1958, Carnegie Museum worked at the Flag Bastion of Fort Pitt. Authentication as those of the Flag Bastion of remains uncovered by the contractor working at the site, and the orientation of the maps being used to lay the lines for the reproduction of the Flag Bastion, were completed.

From October 23, 1964, through March 31, 1965, Carnegie Museum people again worked at the Point authenticating and determining characteristics of the Music Bastion's walls and foundation, and the orientation of the maps being used to lay the lines for reproduction of the Music Bastion.

**Results of Archeological Work**

Results in terms of artifacts recovered were disappointing. None of the excavations gave up objects certainly datable to the eighteenth century or certainly associated with use of the forts at the Point except such structural elements as bricks, palisade posts, and moat.

This negative result may be due, in part, to the use of power tools during most of the 1953, 1955, 1958, and 1964 work, but the same
lack of finds was true in 1941-1943, when work was done largely by hand. All one can conclude is that the soil of the Point has been so churned by successive industrial developments that artifacts original to the eighteenth century have been broken up, scattered, and rendered unrecognizable.

In terms of fort features, however, archeological work was more fruitful. It was proved that the Ratzer and Meyer maps were accurate and could be relied on for future planning in reproduction of fort features or in laying out fort outlines on the ground by means of walks or other devices.

In 1953, standing portions of the masonry wall were found between the latter and the Music Bastion, and of the Music Bastion itself. A portion of the drawbridge structure between the Grenadier and the Music bastions was found, and the outline of the masonry wall between the Music and the Flag bastions was established.

Standing portions of the log palisade of the log and earth walls that were the fort structure on the "water" side of the fort, the wall from the Flag Bastion northwest to the Monongahela Bastion, northeast to the Ohio Bastion, and east to the Music Bastion, were found between the Flag and the Monongahela bastions. Another stand of palisades was found between the Ohio and the Music bastions. This was interpreted as the inner support of the wall in this section.

In the interior of the fort, the parade ground surface was found at several places. Its average elevation was determined as about 728.0 feet, about two feet below the level of what was in 1953 the sidewalk along Liberty Avenue.

On the "land" side of the fort, from the Flag Bastion northeast to the Grenadier Bastion, then north and northeast to the Music Bastion and beyond to the Allegheny River, the moat was found in many places. The average height above sea level for the moat was established as 717.0 feet. Portions of the sides of the moat and fortification elements associated with it, counterscarp and covered way, for instance, were found.

The manner of turning the corner between the masonry walls and the earth walls was worked out at the Flag Bastion in 1958. The technique employed to turn a corner in a masonry wall was revealed by the Music Bastion work during the 1964-1965 excavations, as well as many features of the masonry walls running between this bastion and the Flag and Ohio bastions.
Conclusion

Further archeological work may be done at the Point as opportunity permits. We have, however, by archeological techniques, established the presence of authentic Fort Pitt remains in numerous places, provided information by which restorers are assured their restorations faithfully reproduce eighteenth-century Fort Pitt elements, and verified the reliability of the Ratzer and Meyer maps and the Bliss records.

The work also proved there is nothing like conducting archeological excavations in a downtown metropolitan area for stirring public interest in history. On every fine day we were besieged by people out for lunch-hour strolls who wanted to know what we were doing. We adopted a policy of eating either earlier than noon or later than one in the afternoon in order to be available to answer queries from lunch-hour viewers. A gratifying number of these people were repeaters and obviously had done some preparation on their own between visits in order better to understand us and our work. There was no doubt that the fact that old Fort Pitt was being laid bare to their eyes was interesting and stimulating to many people who had hardly thought about the fort and Pittsburgh's genesis before.

And, as any who knew him would have expected, we were visited on numerous occasions by "Hizzoner," Mayor David L. Lawrence, who seemed to us to stop for a few minutes every time his limousine was driven past our ditches. He obviously was keenly interested in the progress of our study of the physical remains of the origin of what we in those days always thought of as "Hizzoner's city."

As a result of archeological research at the Point, a visitor to Point State Park can be certain the reproductions of fort features and the walks representing the shape and orientation of Fort Pitt are based on careful field study of eighteenth-century Fort Pitt remains that lie so close beneath the surface of twentieth-century Pittsburgh.

Some Suggested Readings


Swauger, James L., and Hayes, Arthur M. "Archeological Salvage at the Site of Fort Pitt, 1953." Mimeographed. Pittsburgh: