On a warm evening a few summers ago, I visited a friend in Pittsburgh who lives on a one-block-long, one-way street of densely packed duplexes and single family homes. The modest dwellings, separated from each other by only a few feet on uniform 30- by 100-foot lots, date from just after World War I. So small are the front yards that John’s words carried easily beyond the friends and neighbors gathered inside, out the screen door and into the quiet street; passers-by may well have heard what he read aloud that night. And the exotic anecdotes may have stuck with them as long as they have with me.

There was a “great rock upon which were to be seen several figures roughly graven,” and a dinner in a hollow sycamore tree “in which twenty nine men could be ranged side by side,” and a diplomatic meeting along the Ohio River with Queen Aliquippa at a village the French called “Rocher Écrite,” or “Written Rock.” Since then, I have learned that the

Stephen Finegold, a 1986 graduate of Columbia College in New York, is currently researching the history of shopping malls in Western Pennsylvania as part of a project to document artifacts of cultural succession in the region. The author wishes especially to thank Father Edward McSweeney of the Catholic Archives and J. Hamilton Beck in Pittsburgh for their assistance, and J. Schulman and S. Sheon for inspiration. Illustration: Beneath the “Indian God rock” on the Allegheny River near Franklin, Pa., the French explorer Céloron put one of the six lead plates that he buried on his expedition in the Ohio River country. From Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Archives of Aboriginal Knowledge (Philadelphia, 1860), plate 17.
“great rock roughly graven” is Indian God Rock, on the Allegheny River nine miles south of Warren, Pa., and the markings were made by Indian natives to the valley. The diplomatic session took place in what is now Pittsburgh’s Lawrenceville neighborhood. Since then, I have learned a great deal more, and there are a few things that I never did find out.

John was reading the chronicles of a French explorer and his Jesuit mathematician partner who journeyed during the summer and fall of 1749 down the Allegheny and Ohio rivers, seeking to claim for France — or to re-claim, according to the French — territory along the Ohio River and its tributaries as far west as present-day Cincinnati. The Jesuit was named Bonneccamps; the explorer was Captain Céloron. And John’s street, miles from either the Ohio or the Allegheny in a residential landscape described at best as pleasing in its humility, is named Celeron. A year after the reading, I decided to find the intersection between Captain Pierre Joseph Céloron, the Seur de Blainville, and Celeron Street. If he were important enough to be remembered, why was he memorialized with such a minor thoroughfare? By then I had an additional reason for my interest in the French explorer: I too had become a resident of Celeron Street.

My search for a link between the historical Céloron and the Celeron of public memory was, in the end, fed by my discoveries about how the memory of figures made minor by historical events — unlike major figures, such as George Washington — reflects the unique human agency behind their perpetuation. A number of amateur historians have managed to recreate Céloron’s journey and to certify the reasons for him being historically important. “Patriotic” organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution have erected stone and metal monuments along his route. Streets, cities and even picnic groves have been given appellations in his honor. In Western Pennsylvania, the struggle between the French and the British ended with the French renouncing their claim in 1758 and the early English and Scotch-Irish colonists setting the pattern for European culture in the region. The legacy of this domination is highly visible today, with the main thoroughfares from the east into Pittsburgh bearing the names of the leading English general of the era (Forbes) and the English Lord of the state (Penn). Many other streets in the city memorialize English military celebrities, but if the French had won the struggle for the continent, Forbes Avenue might very well have wound up as Boulevard de Céloron. Instead, Celeron is spelled the English way and is one tiny street in the east end of town.

Aside from such generalities, what especially fascinated me was that I found out that the “discovery” of Céloron began well after his journey and the colonial conflicts that had any bearing upon the lives of the residents of Western Pennsylvania. Once I learned this, my search changed markedly: I became interested in why these amateur historians championed the memory of Céloron. I was captured by their enthusiasm, so this article is about both the way they choose to retell the story of Céloron and my own curiosity about him.

My first step was a telephone call to the City of Pittsburgh’s Construction and Engineering Department, from which I learned that Celeron Street was surveyed, graded, and named as part of a land subdivision called Forbes Manor. The Joseph E. Harmon Co. of Brooklyn, N.Y., a company which specialized in converting undeveloped lands into housing lots, prepared the plan. The Pittsburgh City Council officially accepted Celeron Street and the rest of the plan on April 4, 1915.

Investigation into Céloron himself and the context in which he
undertook his expedition lead back to three primary sources: his and Father Bonnecaumps’s journals of the expedition; the recovered fragments of the six lead plates that the expedition buried to signify the French claim to the territory; and the various sites where the plates were found. Bonnecaumps, in addition to his duties as priest, mapped the course of the rivers and commented on the people and geography of the region. Burying the plates and wooing the local tribes to join with the French to expel the English traders in the territory were the main activities that Celoron would record in his journal. Most written accounts of the trip, by both 19th century amateur historians and 20th century professionals, rely on these journals. And taken with the artifacts and the land sites, the basic skeleton of the 3,000-mile canoe trip can be sketched:

On 15 June 1749, Captain Celoron, the Sieur de Blainville, left La Chine, south of present-day Montreal on the St. Lawrence River, with 27 military men, 180 French Canadians, and about 30 Indians (probably Iroquois) to claim the lands abutting the banks of La Belle Riviere — “the beautiful river.” By this name, the French described both the Allegheny and the Ohio which they thought a single river. Embarking from Lake Erie, the group paddled and portaged their way to Lake Chautauqua in western New York and then to a tributary of the Allegheny River called Conewango Creek. It was at the confluence of this creek and the Allegheny, several miles south near present-day Warren, Pa., that Celoron buried the first of the lead plates inscribed with the French claim over the territory. A town in this area, in western New York, bears his name.

De la Galissoniere, governor of New France (French Canada), conceived of the mission as the first step in re-establishing French sovereignty over the Ohio Valley, with the eventual goal being a string of forts that would link New France in the North with French territory on the upper part of the Mississippi. Traveling down and along the Allegheny through present-day Western Pennsylvania, and then west into Ohio, Celoron and his crew would place the last of the plates at the intersection of the Ohio and the Miami River. Then, traveling north on the Miami, east of present-day Cincinnati, the expedition would make its way to Fort Pontchartrain (Detroit) on 6 October 1749. Only three men were lost during the four-month expedition.

In 1884, Francis Parkman published his account and interpretation of Celoron’s expedition in Montcalm and Wolfe, his epic history of the conflict between the French and English. There Parkman describes the mission as both an impressive physical feat and a failure for French imperial diplomacy, using this entry from Celoron’s journal:

Father Bonnecaumps, who is a Jesuit and a great mathematician, reckons that we have traveled twelve hundred leagues; I and my officers think we have travelled more. All I can say is, that the nations of these countries are very ill-disposed toward the French, and devoted entirely to the English.²

Even self-proclaimed revisors of Parkman such as Francis Jennings, or accounts sympathetic to the French such as Donald Kent’s, still provide the same basic outline of the route and events of the expedition.³

Even recent public history endeavors perpetuate one reading of Celoron’s journey as explorer and imperialist, mainly because they rely upon Parkman’s interpretation of the journey. In 1991, the Indiana Humanities Council, in cooperation with the humanities councils of the five states sharing the Ohio River, sponsored a history conference, a volume of essays entitled Always A River,⁴ and a museum barge with an exhibit by the same name to celebrate the culture and promise of the region defined as the Ohio River Valley. Three mentions of Celoron’s travels in these educational materials relied on Parkman’s accounts so much that they even repeated his most glaring error — calling Celoron “Seur de Bienville” instead of the correct “Sieur de Blainville.” (The title refers to the manor in France from which the bearer of the title’s family originated; in Celoron’s case, the reference is to the town in western France called Blain. The Seur de Bienville was governor of the Louisiana territory during the 1740s.)

More importantly, the “Always a River” exhibit exemplified a standard presentation of Celoron as an historical first — his explorations making him one of the first Europeans to record his impressions of the Ohio River — and nothing more; the exhibit made no mention of the larger purpose of his journey: to expel the British and to try to pursue native inhabitants of the region to align themselves with the French. Celoron’s and Bonnecaumps’s journals are filled with descriptions of the substantial populations of Delaware and Iroquois peoples in the Upper Ohio Valley. Celoron’s journal, in particular, records at length the speeches made by local leaders who responded generally unfavorably to his proposals. Four years later, the local Iroquois and Delaware would reverse
their positions and support the French in their claims to the Ohio Valley, setting the stage for the French and Indian War (1754-1763) that ended with the French relenting in their claim to Western Pennsylvania.

O.H. Marshall, who in 1878 wrote the first complete account of Céloron's journey, is credited with discovering the explorer's journals in the 1850s in the archives of the Department de la Marine and Grandes Archives of the Dépot de la Marine in Paris. Bonneccamps's more literary descriptive travelogue was published later, in 1897.

Prior to these texts, it appears that knowledge of the lead plates' existence had stimulated interest in the journey, and the history of their discoveries remains interesting today. Plates buried on the Muskinghum and Great Kanawha rivers in Ohio are widely reported to have been found in 1798 and 1849 respectively, with the discoverers in each case being boys playing along the river banks. De Witt Clinton, a governor of New York, provided in 1836 the earliest known English language description of any of the plates — for the one found on the banks of the Muskinghum at Marietta, Ohio. His language seems to capture the sense of mystery that many of his contemporaries must have felt about the plates:

> From inspection of this plate, it appears that considerable number of them were made at a time, probably in Canada, or perhaps in France, leaving many blanks in the inscriptions, to be filled up with names of commandants or detachments who carried them along with them to be deposited near a river, &c. Thus in the medal, "Céloron," "Rivière," "Yenanague," "Aug. 15.," buried in a formal ceremony at the spot, marked by nailing to the closest tree a sheet metal sign with Louis XV's coat of arms. It appears that the explorers carried several plates, and, as the New York governor noted, they simply filled in the blank spaces with appropriate details at the site before sinking a plate there.

Of the six plates, four have not been found and two others are in museum collections. One of them, the plate buried at the junction of the Ohio and Muskinghum rivers at Marietta, Ohio, eventually wound up in a cupboard at the Massachusetts Historical Society. The plate that Céloron left along the Ohio at the Great Kanawha River, in Point Pleasant, W. Va., was recovered there in 1849. A plaque embedded in concrete overlooking the river today at Tu-Endi-Wei park (a.k.a. Point Pleasant) supposedly marks the spot where the plate was dug up. There isn't much there about Céloron's purpose, but the text of the plate is reproduced and there is also a translation in English. Since prior to the Civil War West Virginia had been part of Virginia, the actual plate now belongs to the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond (and the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh owns a good facsimile of it). While visiting the DAR cabin at Point Pleasant in Spring 1991, the guide voiced to me some resentment that the plate still remained in Virginia. Other West Virginians have voiced similar sentiments.

A plaque similar to the one at Tu-Endi-Wei rests in stone at a downtown riverside park in Warren, Pa., called Heritage Point, memorializing the place where the first plaque was buried at nearby Conewango.
Creek. French, British, American, and Seneca Indian flags commemorate the four nations that claimed sovereignty over the land.

Merle Deardorf, a Warren banker and an amateur historian, investigated Céloron’s expedition and the location of all the plates in the 1940s and ’50s. In his correspondence and writings, he often included anecdotes about Céloron. One incident, which Deardorf related in the Warren County Almanac, occurred when O.H. Marshall, discoverer of Céloron’s journal, came to Warren to search for the plate buried at the foot of an oak tree at the mouth of Conewango Creek. Marshall, Struthers (a local lawyer), and Cogswell (“an old riverman”) set out to find the spot Céloron cites in his journal. The year was 1882, and the old riverman remembered a tree that had stood near the bank years before; the river, though, had widened its channel over the years, by “20 feet or more.” Cogswell knew the river so well that he could recall that a tree “approximately opposite the old mouth of the creek... had been undermined in the Spring of 1826 or 1827,” whereupon Struthers recollected a tree lying in the river at that point when he came to Warren in 1828. “It went out,” Struthers thought, “the following Spring.” Deardorf summarized: “The party concluded that this was the oak mentioned by Céloron and that the plate had gone down the river with it, entangled in its roots.”

Clearly, the possibility of finding one of the plates has helped maintain interest in Céloron. A treasure hunt ethic has probably motivated most seekers, but the text on the plates (translated from the one found in 1899 on the Kanawha River) does remind us of the journey’s goals:

The year 1749 in reign of Louis XV, king of France. We, Céloron, commander of a detachment sent by my lord the Marquis of La Galissonière, commander-general of New France, to reestablish peace in some barbarian villages of these districts, have buried this plaque at the mouth of River Chinodashhichetha, on August 18, near the River Oh-yo, otherwise Belle Rivière, as a memorial of the renewing of possession which we have taken of the said River Oh-yo and of all those [rivers] which fall into it, and of all the lands on both sides as far as the sources of the said rivers, which previous kings of France have thus enjoyed or should have enjoyed, and which they have maintained by arms and by treaties, especially by those of Ryswich, Utrecht, and Aix-la-Chapelle.11

This inscription is more elaborate than the lead plates other French explorers buried to claim lands in North America. But the intent was the same. La Salle buried a plate with a Latin text to claim Louisiana for
France in 1682. In 1743, the sons of the explorer La Vérendrye signed the back of a lead plate stamped with **fleur-di-lis** before burying it at the confluence of the Missouri and Bad rivers in South Dakota.\(^1\)

A fascination with the plates has a certain 19th century flavor to it, and many historical organizations were started last century to take possession of the remaining traces of colonial history. In the late 1870s, when the first published works on Céloron began to appear and the Ohio Valley began to industrialize, changes in the region began to gain the notice of its older residents, including those in Allegheny County. In 1879, an Old Residents Association formed among those who had lived in the area for 50 years or more. Five years later, in the spirit of Pope Leo XIII's 1833 "Letter on Historical Studies," a prominent Pittsburgh priest, Father Andrew Arnold Lambing (1842-1918), organized the Ohio Valley Catholic Historical Society.

Father Lambing belonged to one of the oldest Catholic families in Pennsylvania and was born and raised in Manorville, Pa., just south of Kittanning on the Allegheny River. The French called the place Attique, and in his journal Céloron placed a sizable Delaware village there, which a Pennsylvania Historical Commission marker note today. For Father Lambing, the history of Catholicism in Western Pennsylvania began with the mass that Father Bonne-camps celebrated during his visit to Attique with Céloron in August 1749.\(^2\)

After eight years at St. Mary of Mercy Church in Pittsburgh, during which time he dedicated the altar to "Our Lady of the Assumption at the Beautiful River" and gained credit for saving the Pennsylvania Rail Road Freight Depot during the 1877 civil insurrection,\(^3\) Father Lambing became pastor of Saint James Church in Wilkinsburg. The church sits two miles from Pittsburgh's eastern border with Wilkinsburg, and Céloron Street is only one block into Pittsburgh from this boundary, in a neighborhood called, then as now, Park Place.

In 1885, the Catholic Historical Society disbanded due to lack of interest. Lambing threw in his lot with the successor of the Old Residents Society, the grandmother of this publication's sponsor, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. However, during 1884 and 1885, before the Catholic Historical Society's demise, Lambing published his translation of Céloron's journal in his magazine, *Catholic Historical Researches*. Earlier Lambing had lectured at the HSWP on the contents of the journal, generating much interest among the membership.\(^4\) By 1896, Lambing had already been president of the HSWP, and as a trustee, appointed by Andrew Carnegie, of Carnegie Institute.

In an 1897 lecture before the Dauphin County Historical Society, Lambing assessed his own accomplishments, especially regarding his study of Céloron. The lecture was intended as a sharp rebuttal to a claim advanced in a Pennsylvania Historical Commission publication that Céloron buried a plate at the forks of the Ohio, the present site of Point State Park in Pittsburgh. Rev. Lambing explained that he had managed to secure a copy of Céloron's journal from the archives in Paris "at considerable expense in money, and a very liberal use of red tape."\(^5\) Possession of this document and a copy of Bonne-camps's journal, said Lambing, "go to prove that I am in a position to make statements regarding Céloron's expedition and the depositing of leaden plates that is

\[\text{French, British, American, and Seneca Indian flags at "Heritage Point" in Warren, Pa., above, flutter on land claimed by four nations at the time of Céloron's travels. Father Andrew Lambing of Pittsburgh traced Catholicism's roots in Western Pennsylvania to Céloron's journey. His 30 years of studies on Céloron resulted in scholarly works almost always cited in modern references to the French explorer.}\]
method of financing home purchases — substituting a bond for the title to the land — that reduced risks for the developer while allowing buyers to make small initial payments on the property. The Pittsburgh agent for the Harmon Co. was the Porter Beck Co., which remained in operation until 1990. J. Hamilton Beck, son of Porter Beck, described the company's subdivision of undeveloped land from its early effort on the city's eastern fringe to the rapid expansion of the city's northern suburbs, as always being geared for the "working man."  

The closest that these subdivision planners came to brushing up against Father Lambing, who by 1915 was working on a new history of Allegheny County, was through the W.G. Wilkins Engineering Co. This firm, two of whose principals were part of the small membership at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, surveyed the land and drew up the plan of Forbes Manor, which included Celeron Street.

The precise connection between the street and the historical Celeron probably was lost in 1980, when Porter Beck Co., the land agent associated locally with the New York-based Harmon firm, destroyed all the plans for the subdivision it had accumulated over the past 80 years.  

I never did find out how my street got its name. Yet, the legacy of where I live — in fact, of most of the area surrounding Park Place in what is known as Regent Square — cannot be mistaken: in the twentieth century, the estates of wealthy industrialists and their genteel neighbors were gradually replaced here by single-family homes often built by their workers — the railroaders, clerks, and trolley car operators who became America's sprawling consumer class.

Father Lambing died in 1918. A few years later, in 1921, his translation of Celeron's journal would be reprinted in a volume almost always cited afterward in any discussion of Celeron. The English spelling of his name would prevail on the streets and towns of this country named for him.

And the mystery of the plates and the historic Celeron would continue to capture the imagination.
CAPTAIN CELORON DE BIENVILLE on orders of the Marquis de la Galissoniere, Governor-General of New France, voyaged down the valleys of the Allegheny and the Ohio in the summer of 1749. Here and there he buried leaden plates which claimed the territory in the name of Louis XV of France.

ONE of these plates Celoron buried a few miles below Franklin; one at the mouth of the Monongahela; one at the mouth of the Muskingum, and another at the mouth of the Great Kanawha. The last plate was buried at the mouth of the Great Miami. Celoron left his canoes there and went back to Canada by way of Detroit.

IT WAS the burial of these plates along La Belle Riviere which paved the way for the war between England and France in America.
of seekers of historical treasure. At the “Always a River Public History Conference” in Louisville, Ky., in Spring 1991, I met a husband and wife searching for the sixth plate Céloron buried near the Miami River in Ohio. She related to me the vision of a local pastor and his wife “who have this gift.” In a vision, the pastor had seen the lead plate caught in a tangle of tree roots in the mud beside the Ohio River. In a later vision, she recounted, he had seen the roots but the plate was washed away. (I heard about this vision well before I read about the event mentioned earlier, said to have happened 160 years ago in Warren County, Pa.)

As with those who seek the plates, the evidence needed to end my search for the confluence of Céloron and his street had been washed away — 10 years ago by someone at Porter Beck Co. Still, this humble street reveals a part of the rich history of Western Pennsylvania. The markers and chroniclers of Céloron’s journey planted the seeds of an appreciation of local history in our region — whether it be a plate waiting to be found or a new perspective on the physical and cultural foundations of our daily lives. My search for Céloron emmeshes me in a dialogue that continues when I walk down my Céloron Street every day.

1 C.B. Galbreath, ed., Expedition of Céloron to the Ohio Country in 1749 (Columbus, 1921), 67.
3 Francis Jennings, Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America (New York, 1988), 16; Donald H. Kent, The French Invasion of Western Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, Pa., 1953), 5-10.
6 Galbreath, I-A.
7 De Witt Clinton, “Description of A Leaden Plate or Medal,” American Antiquarian Transactions and Collections 2: 540.
8 Marshall, 127-150.
10 Warren County Pennsylvania 1940 Almanac. Although Merle Deardorf is not listed as author of these almanacs, published annually for several years by Warren Bank and Trust Co., he is known to have been the author. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh has copies.
11 Tomkies, 223.
15 CHR 1: 436, 437; Galbreath. 12.
16 Andrew Arnold Lambing, “An Inquiry into the Burying of the Plates at the Forks of the Ohio,” in Two Historical Essays (Wilkinsburg, Pa., 1898), 25.
17 Ibid.
19 Pittsburgh Sesqui-Centennial Committee, Pittsburgh Sesqui-Centennial Celebration: Official Account (Pittsburgh, 1908) — Lambing listed on Art Committee, 105; photograph of Jas A. Henderson as Céloron, 54; program for sesquicentennial marine parade.
20 Andrew Arnold Lambing, unpublished personal diary, 1884-1916, Catholic Historical Archives collection, Pittsburgh.
24 Ibid.
26 See, for instance, Galbreath’s Expedition of Céloron.