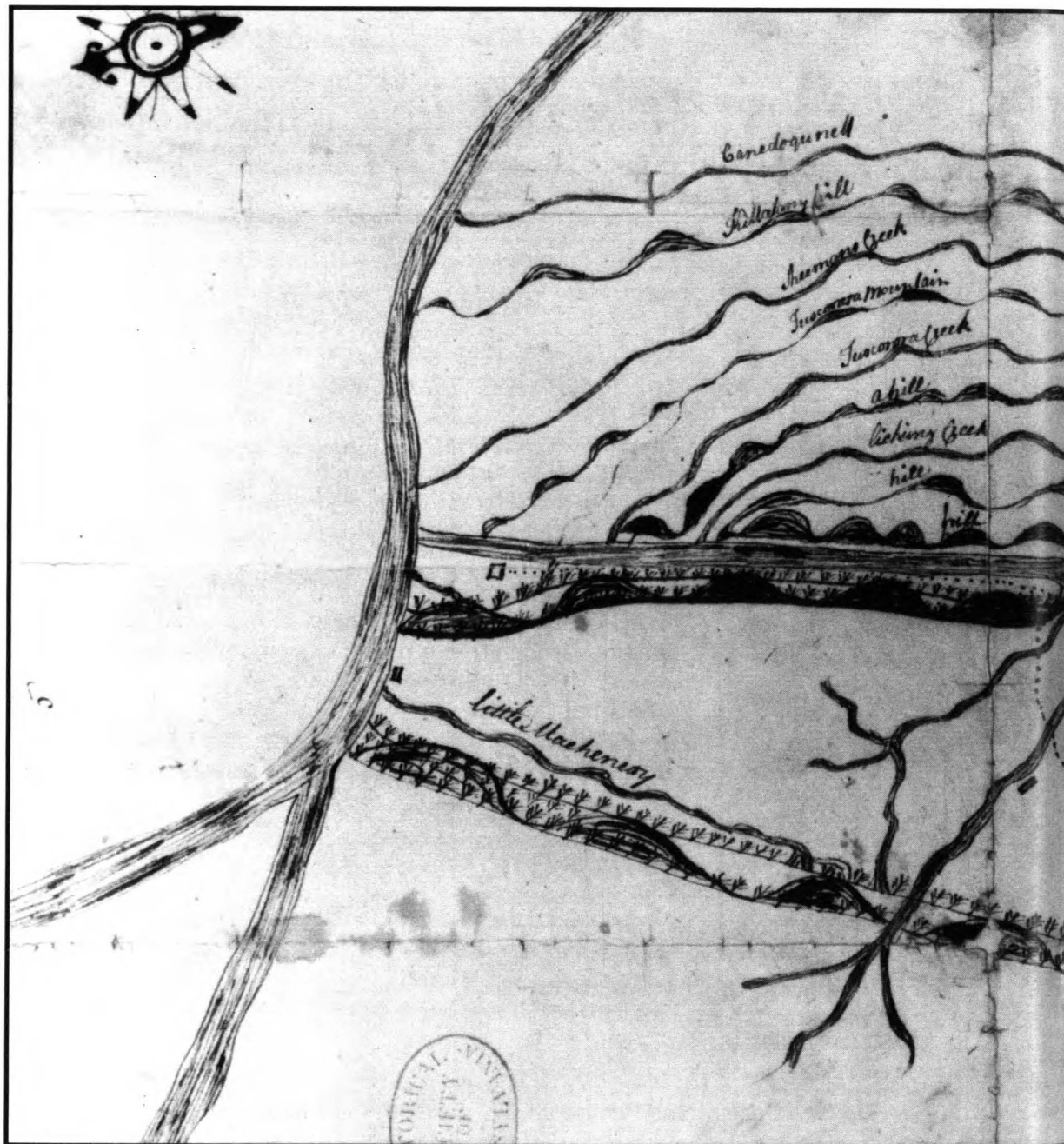


Like "The French Letter" found at Fort Granville, this map of the site near present-day Lewistown, Pa., remains a mystery. It was probably done in the late 18th century, but its creator is not known.

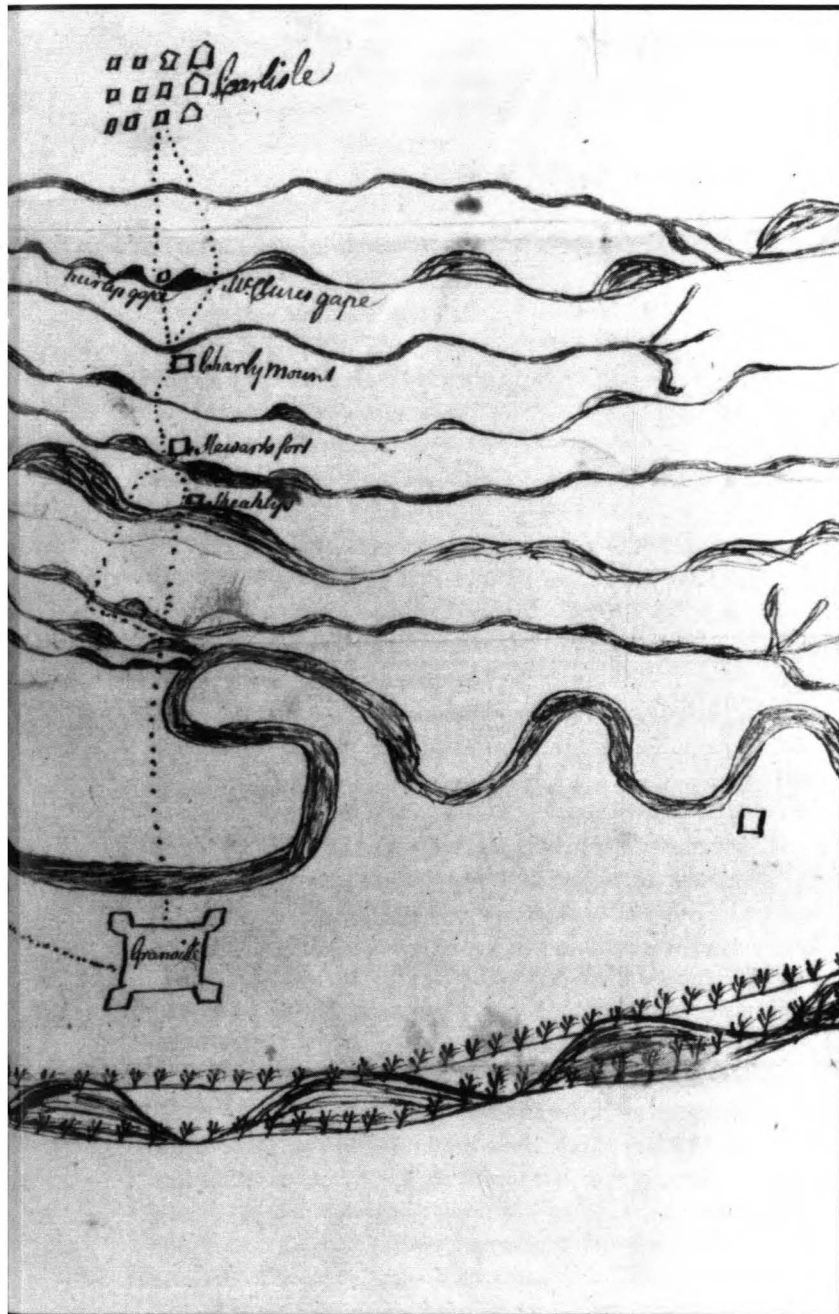


The Fall of Fort Granville, 'The French Letter,' & Gallic Wit on the Pennsylvania Frontier, 1756

by James P. Myers, Jr.

HISTORICAL EVENTS DESCRIBED as "momentous" or "dramatic" often seem to inspire a singleness or simplicity of response by those affected or by those who interpret the events. The mind tries to make sense of things by ignoring complexities and subtleties that undermine simple, overwhelming emotional responses. Historians, as well, seek continuities which reinforce their culture's belief in the cause-and-effect of history. Incidents that seem "to make no sense" are frequently omitted from historical accounts. An historiographic tradition which owes so much to Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and even Scots-Irish attitudes does not equip most commentators to deal well with figures nurtured on other values and perspectives. Until recent times, for example, most American and English historians have largely ignored the ways in which Native American attitudes and cultures helped to shape the continent's history.¹ Similarly, the bloody record of 18th-century border warfare illustrates how the received historical tradition assesses French actions while tending to ignore the culture and attitudes which underlie those deeds.

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Modern inquirers, indeed, may acknowledge the military skill and expertise of men like the French-Swiss Henry Bouquet and Simon Ecuyer, or those of Huguenot descent, such as Lewis Ourry, who fought for the British, or of, say, Louis Joseph Montcalm, who expertly opposed British policy on the battlefield. Usually, however, historians have attended but little to the distinctive Gallic wit and irony of these men, or, indeed, to their self-conscious theatricality and gamesomeness.² In significant ways, these attitudes continue to perplex the contemporary reader, even as they often confused and challenged the English and Scots-Irish actors in the French and Indian War (1755–1763).

Interpreters often exhibit difficulty in appreciating that participants in the bloody mayhem of frontier warfare sometimes played out their roles with anything but a style inspired by the high seriousness of their deeds and fate. In addition to warping the appreciation of certain events, the expectation more generally leaves those inquiring with what seem to be irrelevancies.

The so-called “French letter” found at Fort Granville, near present-day Lewistown, Pennsylvania, after French and Indian forces destroyed it in 1756, illustrates how a kind of cultural tunnel vision may produce such irrelevancies — history’s teasing “loose ends.” For motives that defied the understanding of colonial authorities who discovered the letter and of historians who later wrote about the event, the commanding French officer ordered a “love letter” displayed conspicuously at the burning fort. This essay attempts to resolve a relatively minor puzzle associated with an otherwise momentous upheaval. Yet, close inspection of the French letter sheds light not only on cultural attitudes that separated the warring parties but also on the complex motives that frequently inspire men caught up in the grim urgencies of war. To place the letter and events at the fort in context, however, this essay will first examine the Pennsylvania frontier in 1755–56, the role Fort Granville played, and the movement of military forces that culminated in the fort’s destruction.



During the summer of 1755, a British army commanded by Major General Edward Braddock set out to seize Fort Duquesne, the French stronghold at the junction of the Allegheny and the Monongahela rivers, on the site of present-day Pittsburgh. As nearly every schoolchild knows, Braddock’s army, advancing north along the Monongahela, was ambushed and scattered and its commanding officer mortally wounded on July 9, 1755. A disaster for Braddock’s combined colonial and royal army, the defeat also plunged Pennsylvania’s frontier into chaos, for the French and their Indian allies subsequently were able to use Fort Duquesne to raid with impunity the settlements recently established on the western margin of the Susquehanna.

The settlers wasted no time in requesting aid from Governor Robert Morris. Thwarted by a legislature that was dominated by the pacifist Quaker faction, however, Morris could not immediately obtain the militia and supply bills needed to meet the emergency. As a stop-gap measure, Morris invoked powers he enjoyed under royal charter to raise volunteer units of militia known as “associated companies.”³

In addition to forming companies of militia, the region’s inhabitants urged the building of a chain of fortifications from the Delaware River west and southwest to the Maryland border. In his November 2, 1755 letter, John Armstrong of Carlisle expressed a typical feeling:

I’m of opinion that no other means than a Chain of Block Houses along or near the South side of the Kittatinny Mountain, from Susquehanna to the Temporary Line [the unsurveyed border with Maryland], can Secure the Lives and properties even of the old Inhabitants of this County, the new Settlement being all fled except Sherman’s Valley, whom (if God do not preserve) we fear will suffer very soon.⁴

Throughout the Allegheny region, France resorted to a policy of constant harassment by small guerrilla parties of Indians and French militia.

A few days earlier, on October 30, 1755, Sheriff John Potter of Cumberland County had already summoned a meeting in Shippensburg. Augmented with “Assistant Members” from York County, the General Council of Cumberland County resolved that five “large forts” should be constructed at the following locations: “Carlisle, Shippensburg, Collonell

Chambers’s [today’s Chambersburg], Mr Steells Meeting House [near present-day Mercersburg], & at Will^m Allison’s Esq^f. [today’s Greencastle].”⁵ Additionally, to meet the emergency and later to reinforce the thin line of provincial forts, individuals erected their own fortifications. In short time, these and other stronger posts secured the defensive “wall” that men like Armstrong had argued would reduce enemy infiltration and provide protection during attacks.

Among the fortifications constructed by the province once the assembly passed the supply and militia bills was Fort Granville, on the west bank of the Juniata River at the site of today’s Lewistown, Mifflin County, and named after John Carteret, Earl of Granville. This was actually one of three defenses built by Captain George Croghan, an Irish Catholic who had conformed to the Church of England and was on his climb to becoming principal deputy to Indian Superintendent for the Northern District, Sir William Johnson. Croghan had been ordered to construct one fort “back of Patterson’s, One upon Kishecoquillas, and one Near Sideling Hill.”⁶ Respectively, these became known as Patterson’s Fort, Fort Granville, and Fort Lyttelton. Croghan was to use the same design on all the forts: “Fifty feet Square, with a Block-house on two of the Corners, and a Barrack within, capable of Lodging Fifty Men.”⁷ Evidence suggests that Governor Morris later revised his plans, substituting sides measuring 83 paces and bastions at each corner instead of the two blockhouses. The larger dimensions permitted the garrison’s force to be increased from 50 to 75 men.⁸

For some reason not at all clear, Fort Granville was erected next to a gully or ravine. Possibly, Croghan felt that this natural ditch offered the protection of a dry moat. Whatever his motive, the ravine was to prove fatal to Fort Granville.

Throughout the Allegheny region, France resorted to a policy of constant harassment by small guerrilla parties of Indians and French militia. During the early spring of 1756, they began striking over the Alleghenies as far east as present-day Chambersburg. On April 1, a band attacked and destroyed a private fortification, McCord's Fort, situated northwest of Benjamin Chambers' fortified mill. Of even greater strategic significance, a French and Indian war party at the end of July 1756 captured and burned Fort Granville.

Initially, the fort provided the protection intended. On July 22, it withstood an attack by about 60 Indians.⁹ Unable to force entrance, the attackers instead destroyed several small farms nearby.

On July 30, to protect harvesters in Sherman's Valley, Captain Edward Ward led most of his command out of the fort, leaving it in the hands of Lieutenant Edward Armstrong, brother to Lieutenant-Colonel John Armstrong. A combined force of French regulars and Indians commanded by the Chevalier Louis Coulon de Villiers¹⁰ — whose brother, Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers, Sieur de Jumonville, had been ambushed and killed at Great Meadows by Colonel George Washington in 1754 — then descended upon the under-protected outpost. Among the surviving accounts is Joseph Shippen's. Overseeing the construction nearby of Fort Augusta, on the east bank of the Susquehanna, Shippen wrote in his journal on August 18, 1756, that Fort Granville

was attacked by 50 Indians & a greater Numb^r. of French Regulars on the 29th July, & after firing from the Trees some-time got possession of a long deep Gully near the Fort, wch was a kind of natural Entrenchmt. and covered them from the Fire of the Garrison, & from thence they threw pine Knots & Fire & burnt a Breach thro' the Stockade, & continuing the Siege till the next afternoon, shot Lieut. Armstrong & 2 men as they were putting out the Fire with Clay. hav^g no Water in the Fort; upon w^{ch}. the Garrison consist^d of 22 rem^s [remaining] surrendered. The French Officer after refreshing himself marched off with the Prisoners, & left Cap^t Jacobs to burn everything with the Fort & set up a French Flag with a Letter....¹¹

An account printed August 19, 1756, in Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* gives more detail, providing names and the fates of those taken prisoner, several of whom later escaped. One of these, a soldier named Barnhold, eventually made his way back to the settlements and provided the intelligence upon which the *Gazette's* story was based.

In the assessment of William A. Hunter, authority on Pennsylvania's French and Indian War forts, "the loss of this fort was a stunning blow."¹² Indeed, just how imperiled the settlers felt after its destruction may be appreciated in a missive the Reverend Thomas Barton sent to Richard Peters, the provincial secretary: "I came here this Morning, where all is Confusion. Such a Panick has seized the Hearts of People in general, since the Reduction of Fort

Granville, that this Country is almost relinquished, & Marsh Creek in York County is become a Frontier...."¹³

Beyond the immediate demoralization that it precipitated, Granville's destruction revealed the weaknesses of what became known at the outbreak of World War II as the "Magenot mentality," that is, of passively relying upon a line of fortifications that were "widely spaced, lightly garrisoned, and difficult to supply and to reinforce."¹⁴ More dramatically, the Indian success inspired the settlers to end their defensive passivity. Carrying the offensive into Indian country, they eliminated Kittanning, the Delaware stronghold north of Fort Duquesne, and killed the dreaded Captain Jacobs, or Tewea, the chieftain who had burned Granville.

Significant as the reduction of Fort Granville was, this essay's purpose is to explore a small detail — the "French letter" — mentioned in virtually every account of the fall. It evidently fascinated many contemporaries but has defied satisfactory explanation.

The *Pennsylvania Gazette* provides one of the most complete contemporary descriptions. The entire account is too long to cite here, but the pertinent section narrates that the French and Indians withdrew "after setting up French Colours near the Fort, on which they left a Shot Pouch, with a written Paper in it."¹⁵ In

this account, the letter was not, as one might have inferred, nailed to the flagpole or simply dropped haphazardly close by: it was protected from the weather in a pouch and intentionally displayed, ensuring that it would be discovered in legible form.

Because few of the Scots-Irish frontiersmen could read French, their suspicion that the "written Paper" might contain military intelligence would not have been unreasonable. They took pains to ensure its survival until someone who knew the language could assess its value. It was certainly because of the letter's implied importance that the Pennsylvania-German commissary Adam Hoops began his August 18 letter to Colonel John Armstrong by explaining that "I hauf Sent express to you woth y^e Frinch Leter... and Copey of what I hauf Sent per Cap^t. Hamilton."¹⁶ In a letter sent the next day,¹⁷ we learn that Hans Hamilton was

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also concerned to draw Armstrong's attention to the enclosed letter: "I have Last night Rec'd a letter by Express from my Lieu^t, which I have inclos'd with the Orriginal of the French Letter, left at Fort Granvil."¹⁸ Hamilton wrote from Hoops', and it is there-

fore noteworthy that both men commented on the epistle in the same mail packet. Moreover, their employing the definite article “the” — “the French letter” — suggests that it had become a topic of note among the militia. The stress each writer gives it also implies that Armstrong may have been awaiting it with some urgency.

That the French letter provided a subject of interest beyond its potential military value becomes evident in the journal of Joseph Shippen. At the conclusion of his entry on Fort Granville, Shippen set down a rough translation that suggests a woman had sent an unwanted lover on his way. Space permits only partial citation:

“There Is no Express”

Dont think that ever I will have any Regard for You, & dont expect ever to get any Mercy from me, for I do not want to see You after You vex me so much[...] Believe go away..... The more you strive to disturb me the more gay I will be, dont you think that I want to persecute You [...] if you don’t want to be kept go off from me, for I dont know how I could resist —

Your Serv^t.

Pinella Cicere

The incoherences in Shippen’s translation intimate not only that the French proved too difficult but also that the “letter” probably consisted only of fragments of the original.

Fortunately, the letter survived among the Pennsylvania Archives, which implies that it had made its way to the governor and his council. In 1844, I. D. Rupp transcribed it along with an interlined version which corrected the original’s spelling. After consulting with “a professor of Modern Languages,” Rupp offered emended versions of each text provided by his expert.¹⁹ Climaxing his scholarly endeavor, Rupp produced a literal translation of the document which appears to have captivated his curiosity:

Do not call on me, for never do I look upon you with pleasure, and never hope for any favor from me, for I have no desire to see you, after the trouble you have caused me. Seek elsewhere. As for me, no longer rely on one inconstant, who thinks only of his pleasure. Believe me, seek fortune elsewhere. For my part, I think only of this, there is nothing which can divert me from my sentiments. Adieu, good evening, it is not late. I set out tomorrow. * * you have always told me. (1) Go away, it is not expedient that you should remain here. It is not proper for you, else the more I shall take the more you take them to divert me from it. Although I am simple, think not that I shall cease to persecute you; you will think erroneously; for I (if you wish not to be distanced, go away from me) could not (2) resist.

Your Servant

Pinella Ciere.

(1) The conclusion of a sentence above.

(2) I should not be able to resist.²⁰

We are fortunate that Rupp expended such care, for apparently someone whose similar fascination transcended scholarly integrity removed it from the archives: in William Hunter’s laconic notice, the French letter “has since disappeared.”²¹

The questions provoked by this event are as many as they are teasing: Did the soldier who received the epistle from Pinella

Cicere (or Ciere) accidentally leave it on or near the flagpole after hoisting the gold-and-white fleur-de-lys banner over the broken and smoking timbers of Fort Granville? Was it a memorial to the French soldier who perhaps had received it but had fallen during the assault — one who, possibly, had preferred not to live after his lover’s rejection? Or was it, as suggested by William Hunter, “a practical joke”?²² — and if so, on whom? — one Frenchman to

another?; a soldier to the woman who had jilted him? Any of these is as reasonable as another explanation.

However, there is still another possibility, one undoubtedly lost on the Ulster-Scots soldiery who discovered the letter and passed it around among themselves. This interpretation allows us to perceive it as the witty reflection of an enemy who deemed himself culturally superior to the Ulster-Scots back-country settlers he had just conquered. To those

“The more you strive to disturb me,” said the love letter left behind at Fort Granville, “the more gay I will be....”

who might object, with Shakespeare’s Horatio, that “Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so,” we can do little better than to reply with Hamlet’s, “No, faith, not a jot, but... follow... with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it; as thus:...”²³

Both Shippen’s and the *Gazette*’s versions unwittingly stress that the letter comprised part of a statement made by the French commander to those who would first see the ruined fortress and who later would ponder the deeper meanings of the fort’s loss. Shippen writes that the Delaware Captain Jacobs was left “to burn everything with the Fort & set up a French Flag with a Letter” (author’s emphasis). We may infer that the flag and the letter were placed at some distance from the smoking ruin both to prevent their destruction and to ensure their being noticed. The same implications in the *Gazette*’s description stand out more clearly: the French marched out with their prisoners “after setting up French Colours near the Fort, on which they left a Shot Pouch, with a written Paper in it” (author’s emphasis). Once “they had marched a little Way from the Fort, the French Commander ordered Captain Jacobs back to burn the Fort, which he did.”

In both accounts, the French flag purposefully displayed as a victorious, patriotic statement is emphatically coupled with a letter.²⁴ The “end-of-the-affair” communication, moreover, may represent a verbal symbol of triumph. That Pinella Cicere had obtained the upper hand over a lover who apparently had treated her badly — “after the trouble you have caused me” (Rupp’s translation) — is transparent in her diction, even in Joseph Shippen’s poorly rendered translation: “dont expect ever to get any Mercy from me”; “go away, Push your Fortune another Way.” Rupp’s version expresses her triumph less ambiguously: “Do not call on me”; “Seek elsewhere”; “Adieu, good evening”; “Go away.” Pinella reached the turning point in an unsatisfactory liaison, and exercised her power to reject.

Insofar as Rupp fails to report that his text had been damaged,

we may assume that what the British saw were fragments of the original sent to an unknown Frenchman. Were the parts translated later deliberately separated from the rest because they so aptly reflected the French officer's sardonic humor? What appears probable is that the commander appropriated parts of a letter sent to him or to one of his soldiers, and turned its insulting romantic *hauteur* into a grimly playful warning to the British.

Thus, Pinella Cicere's lines acquire wonderful irony. "Seek [your] fortune elsewhere," the British rival-turned-victims are admonished. "Go away, it is not expedient that you should remain here [T]hink not that I shall cease to persecute you." The culminating bit of mockery may be that the French commander did not even bother writing his own warning. Instead, he "re-cycled" an old rejection, forwarding pieces of it to the next fool.

Such a reading also invites our seeing a more complexly human dimension in the action of the French. The Chevalier de Villiers, "after refreshing himself," paused amidst the smoking timbers, scalped soldiers, and women and children weeping,²⁵ and saw through it all to a world where, as in Hamlet, death's skull bore a grinning visage: "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her... to this favor she must come, Make her laugh at that."²⁶ A broken love affair, a demolished frontier outpost, men dying heroically on the banks of the fast-flowing Juniata — all contributed to some essentially histrionic impulse: "The more you strive to disturb me," said the love letter left behind at Fort Granville, "the more gay I will be...." ❖

Notes

¹ The work of such critics as Francis Jennings, however, has helped to correct this imbalance. See particularly his *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York, 1988), for an especially trenchant reinterpretation of the French and Indian War which takes into account the decisive influence of Indian culture.

² But see Donald Cornu, "Captain Lewis Ourry, Royal American Regiment of Foot,"

Pennsylvania History 19 (1952): 249-61, for an appreciation of this kind.

³ See William A. Hunter, *Forts on the Pennsylvania Frontier, 1753-1758* (Harrisburg, 1960), 184, and *passim* for a discussion of this measure.

⁴ John Armstrong to Governor Robert Hunter Morris, 2 Nov. 1755, *Colonial Records* 6: 452-53 (cited hereafter as C.R.).

⁵ Minutes of the General Council of Cumberland County, 30 Oct. 1755, Lamberton Scots-Irish Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1:23.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Archives* (1st series) 2:753 (cited hereafter as P.A.).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Hunter, 382.

⁹ Daniel I. Rupp, *History and Topography of Northumberland, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Centre, Union, Columbia, Juniata and Clinton Counties, Pa.* (Lancaster, 1845), 119.

¹⁰ de Villiers had also captured Fort Necessity from George Washington two years earlier. Hunter, 393-94, reprints a translation of the French account of the attack on Fort Granville, dated 23 Aug. 1756.

¹¹ Joseph Shippen, Journal (1756), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹² Shippen, 391.

¹³ Thomas Barton to Richard Peters, P.A. (1st ser.), 2:756.

¹⁴ Hunter, 392.

¹⁵ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1756.

¹⁶ Adam Hoops to John Armstrong, 18 Aug. 1756, P.A. (1st ser.), 2:752.

¹⁷ Hans Hamilton to Adam Hoops, 19 Aug. 1756, P.A. (1st ser.), 2:753. (This letter, which refers internally to "Mr. Hoops," is incorrectly identified in the P.A. John Armstrong is the probable designee.)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Rupp, 122-24.

²⁰ Rupp, 124.

²¹ Hunter, 392, n. 98.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.193-95.

²⁴ Marking a victory by leaving behind some memento appears not to have been that uncommon. For example, following Montcalm's reduction of Fort Oswego, the Abbé Piquet erected a cross to the glory of God and General Montcalm's first victory in North America.

²⁵ The *Pennsylvania Gazette*'s account notes that "3 women, and 5 or 6 Children" were taken prisoner, along with 22 soldiers. Lt. Armstrong and another soldier (Shippen mentions two soldiers) had been killed trying to extinguish the burning curtain wall. No enumeration was made of the numbers of French and Indians killed, but it seems unlikely that they escaped with no losses.

²⁶ *Hamlet*, 5.1.180-81.

(*Director's Gallery* continued from page 147)

Jane Austen's novel *Jane Eyre*. In the novel, it is used by people in the borderland area between England and Scotland and it occurred to me that this expression, so widely used in Western Pennsylvania, could have traveled from Scotland to Northern Ireland and then here with the Scots-Irish who settled the region.

In *Albion's Seed*, historian David Hackett Fischer takes an in-depth look at the transplanting of British folkways by emigration from four distinct areas of the British Isles. The dialects, traditions of vernacular architecture, ideas of family and marriage, attitudes toward gender and sexuality, child-naming and -raising, forms of work and play, customs of food and dress are examined and compared. Our region, Western Pennsylvania, had a predominance of Scots, Scots-Irish, and English borderland settlers. While Fischer looks at Appalachian and Ozark dialects in America as descended from the Scots-Irish speech, I believe Pittsburgh's linguistic pattern can be traced to Northern Ireland as well. For instance, many Pittsburghers tend to emphasize the first syllable in words such as *insurance*, *Thanksgiving*, *umbrella*, as they do in Ulster. The kind of sing-song pattern of asking a question such as

"Have you *seen* the history center yet?" is the same in Ulster.

Utilizing a book called *Some Handlin, the Dialect Heritage of North Ulster*, collected by pupils and friends of Ballyrashave Primary School, we find a number of favorite terms from Pittsburgh speech. For instance, "Don't be so 'nebby,'" derived from the Scots-Irish "neb" (nose); "yinz" (you all) derived from "yin" (one); and the almost universal Pittsburgh habit of dropping the infinitive as in "this needs fixed."

I think it rather fascinating that in Pittsburgh, many people, from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, have adopted the regional speech patterns acquired from one ethnic group whose people settled here in the 18th century. Of course, the Scots-Irish have had many influences on Western Pennsylvania — the number of Presbyterian churches reflects these founding settlers' presence well.

The book *Some Handlin, The Dialect Heritage of North Ulster*, is available in our library, should some of our members or readers want to see words which have not been retained on this side of the Atlantic. As language helps define a people, I was happy to find some clues in the beautiful countryside of Northern Ireland. ❖