

# The Legend of Middletown

by Robert A. Jockers, D.D.S.

**H**IDDEN IN THE dark and shadowy unknown of the past lies the truth behind the origin of Middletown and the mystery of its early "settlers." Named for its location midway between Pittsburgh and Beaver on the Ohio River, Middletown developed into the present-day city of Coraopolis. The "legend," as it has come to be known, is based on the writings of two 20th century writers who each suggested that the village was settled just after the English forces occupied Fort Duquesne following the French retreat from the Ohio Valley in 1758. Detailed research, however, casts doubt on placing a squatter settlement there at such an early date.

The earliest inhabitants were said to be one Alexander "Sandy" Middleton, who "established a tavern for the accommodation [of] rivermen," and "persons whose names are not recorded living in three smaller cabins." Edward Maurey, in his 1935 publication *Where the West Began*, concluded from his conversation with an old river pilot that Middleton's tavern must have existed sometime around 1760. This date is suspect, as the area was a military zone immediately following the French and Indian War, plus the settlement would have been too close to Beaver, still an Indian town at the time. Maurey also wrote that Washington's journal of 1770 contains mention of two or three log cabins nearby occupied by squatters. However, a careful reading of Washington's journal shows no such mention.

Twenty-five years later, writer Horace Thomas stated, "When the engineers surveyed the tract [in 1769] ... they found squatters living on it in one large log cabin and three smaller ones. The large cabin was owned by one Sandy Middleton...." Again, a current-day reading of the survey finds no mention of squatters.

Were these two authors mistaken or using other sources they failed to identify? This examination analyzes existing primary sources to provide an objective, if not definitive, perspective. Somewhere within this age-old myth is the truth, obscured by time and distorted by human embellishment.

The French and Indian War drew to a close in the Ohio Valley in November 1758, yet the Bouquet Papers document the next

two years as a period of turmoil. Initially, the English military was concerned about a French counterattack from Canada. Intelligence reports regarding the size and location of French military units were the focus of command at Fort Pitt. Still, as demanding as this problem was, there festered an even greater concern. The Delaware and Shawnee chiefs were constantly reminding the English that the lands being fought over belonged to neither the French nor the English, but rather to the Iroquois Nation. This fact, virtually ignored by both European powers, created a feeling of bitter hostility and threatened an Indian war. To seriously consider, without any evidence, that a small isolated squatter settlement existed on the Ohio in this perilous environment, located but a short distance from two Indian villages, cannot be justified at this time.

It was not until the spring of 1761, after many conferences and a promise by the English military assuring the Indians that they would leave the Ohio Valley as soon as the French were totally defeated, that the Indians were pacified. In September of that year, James Kenny, a Quaker Indian trader, and John Bartram, an American botanist, journeyed down the Ohio to the Indian



**The author believes this early log school was built along Plumb Street about 1802.**

village at Beaver. They stopped enroute on Neville Island to examine the foliage and the surrounding area. Despite being in the immediate vicinity of the alleged squatter settlement, they neither saw nor reported the presence of any cabins on the Ohio with the exception of those at the Indian villages of Logstown and Beaver.

The period of 1763 thru 1764 were years of a brutal Indian war (Pontiac Uprising) when the smaller forts along the Communication (a line of military forts extending from the eastern settlements into the western frontier) were decimated, and forts Pitt and Detroit placed under siege. The frontier, ravaged by Indian attacks, once again retreated east beyond the Laurel

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Mountains. The next year, following Bouquet's vanquishing of the raiding Indian tribes, squatters gradually returned to their burnt-out homesteads in the upper Youghiogheny and Monongahela valleys.

In the succeeding years, the Indians were continually troubled with squatters usurping their hunting grounds in the Monongahela valley, and tensions again escalated toward a possible conflict. In May 1766, Assistant Deputy of Indian Affairs George Croghan wrote to General Gage, supreme commander of English forces, that "unless the causes (squatter settlements) be removed the Consequences may be dreadful, and We involved in all the Clamitys of another general War." These tensions continued unabated until 1768 when the Iroquois Confederacy and the Proprietary Government of Pennsylvania, realizing the hopelessness of evicting squatters, negotiated a treaty at Fort Stanwix. This extremely important treaty was consummated only after many weeks of negotiations. The result was that in return for gifts valued at 10,000 pounds sterling, the Iroquois ceded a vast land area known as the "New Purchase" to the English. For the most part, the borders of the "New Purchase" were established by rivers, among them the Ohio — the south side became English while the north remained Indian frontier.

The treaty having been signed, Pennsylvania opened its land office in 1769 and was inundated with prospective purchasers. However, in the Moon Township area, because of the proximity to the Indian frontier, there were only three applicants, among them Indian trader and land speculator Thomas McKee. He applied for a 334-acre tract in what is today the northwestern end of Coraopolis. This tract of land, titled "Corsica," was warranted and surveyed that same year. A thorough examination of the original survey does not indicate the presence of any structures at the time of the survey.

The following year, Washington toured the Ohio Country and kept a journal of his observations. In spite of his passing directly by the Corsica tract, there is no mention or note of a settlement. In the two succeeding two-year periods, eyewitness visitors to the immediate area also do not report the existence of any log cabins in the vicinity. Once again, the facts do not substantiate the presence of a squatter settlement in Corsica prior to 1775.

"Corsica," according to all available early land records, remained unseated until it was leased by Adam Patterson in 1792. Patterson proceeded to erect a storehouse in which the excess grain produced by local farmers was stored until shipped to market. The next year, he established a ferry which crossed the Ohio and gave settlers in the area access to the villages and towns on the north shore.

As Patterson prospered, he decided to purchase Corsica from McKee's heir and, in

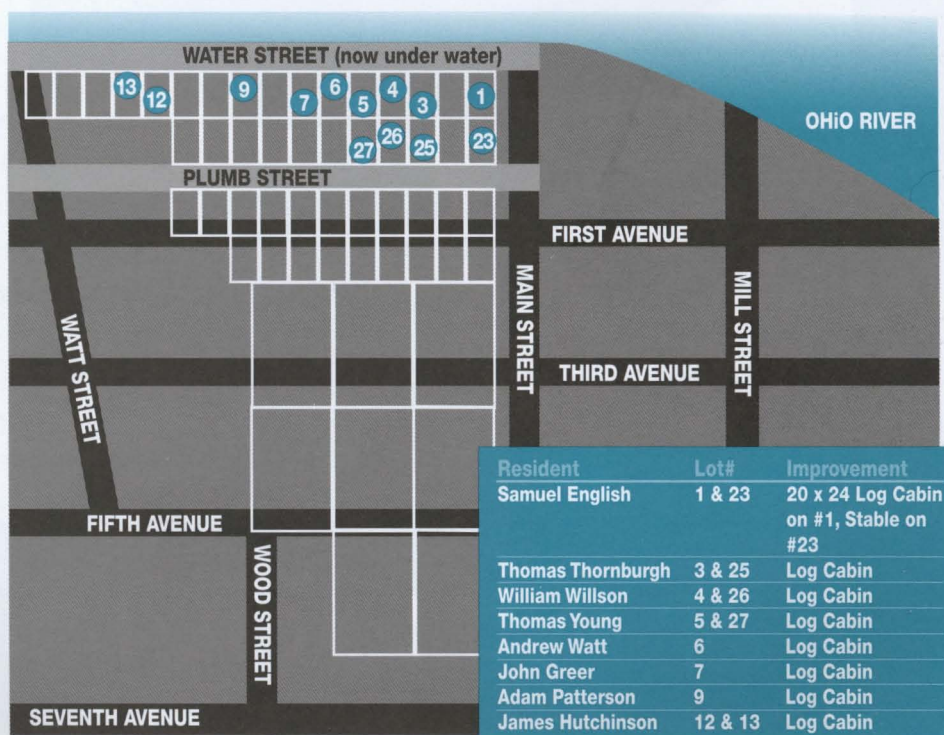
1797, began his plan for a town — Middletown. The 1799 map of Middletown (compiled by the author from numerous deed records) appears to be an accurate plan of the 51 quarter-acre town lots and 8 three-acre "out" lots that comprised the village.

The first two lots sold were to Samuel English in 1797. There is some indication that a 20-by-24-foot log house, identified as being present on the property, actually existed prior to the purchase by Samuel English. A road docket, dated June 1796, identifies a building on that location as being inhabited by one William Chenie, who was thought to have kept a tavern. This is the first inkling we have that squatters may have preceded the "settling" of the Corsica tract prior to the inception of Middletown.

Others followed soon after Samuel English, purchasing prime lots along the Ohio River on what was then known as Water Street. This street no longer exists, as the river's currents over the past 200 years have eroded the original shoreline. Despite Middletown's isolation between the steep hills on the south side of the Ohio, the village continued to grow, and by 1799, it had a total of eight resident families and six non-resident land owners.

The rapid surge of growth gave every indication that the village would prosper, and by 1802, Middletown's population reached a peak with 14 resident families. Adam Patterson died the following year. The unsold properties within the village plan, as well as the 300 remaining acres of the "Corsica" tract, were willed to his sister, Martha Boyd, and upon her death to her youngest son, George.

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Middletown in 1799 overlaid on today's Coraopolis. The spelling of Plumb Street, which became Pennsylvania Avenue in 1886, is found with and without a "b" on old records.

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During the first quarter of the 19th century, the fortunes of Middletown were affected by two unsettling events. First, due to Patterson's inability to settle his financial affairs prior to his death, his creditors forced the estate into sheriff's sale. This legal action stalled whatever sales may have been pending, thereby suppressing the current growth of the village. Second, and more significant, was the untimely arrival of a depressed economy. As hard times came, most of the settlers found themselves faced with financial problems and were forced to sell their homes or lose them. Many of these same properties changed ownership as often as four or five times during this tumultuous period; thus by 1825, there was so little interest in the Middletown properties that George Boyd was able to repurchase them at depressed prices.

The second quarter of the 19th century proved a bit kinder, as the economy improved and the population slowly increased. Small portions of the "Oughsaragoh" tract adjacent to Middletown were sold to a number of tradesmen such as a tanner, blacksmith, shoemaker, storekeeper, and tavern-keeper. Boyd was able to resell a number of the Middletown lots as well as larger acreages of the Corsica tract to new financially stable

individuals. These people became the nucleus of a rejuvenated Middletown.

In land and settlement research, squatter identification poses a complex problem. Conditions on the frontier were transient and unstable. People appeared from an unknown place, stayed an indefinite period of time, and vanished without leaving a trace. Therefore, it is most difficult to be specific about a date of origin; however, the time period attributed to Middletown by both Maurey and Thomas appears early. In deference to both writers, Indian relations during the 1760s tended to vacillate between a mutual hatred and all-out war, negating the likelihood of a squatter settlement as close to the Indian frontier as the Corsica tract. Second, the original land documents, including the survey, despite previous claims, are devoid of any notation regarding the presence of structures or inhabitants in Corsica. Third, Washington's journal of 1770 makes no mention of any log cabins on the tract of land in question. If Sandy Middleton and the other squatters indeed resided in Corsica — and that is not only possible, but likely — it is a more reasonable premise that they would have done so after 1775 but prior to the development of Middletown in 1797. Which still leaves us with many tantalizing questions: Who were these people? When did they come? And why did they leave? \*



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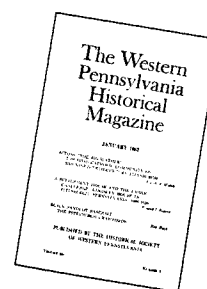
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