As Others See Us
By C. Hax McCullough

Over its two and a half centuries, Pittsburgh has been known by many monikers: Gateway to the West, Iron City, Smoky City, Steel City, and more recently, Renaissance City, and Most Livable City. Visitors’ reactions to the Point have varied widely. Some recorded their impressions, and these writings remain insightful. Perhaps that is what Scottish poet and songwriter Robert Burns (1759-1796) meant when he wrote “To A Louse”:

Oh wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
To see oorsels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.

“As Others See Us” will regularly offer impressions by people who wrote about their visits to Pittsburgh. All the books quoted from below are available for viewing at the History Center’s Library & Archives.

I spent some time in viewing the Rivers, and the land in the Fork; which I think extremely well situated for a Fort, as it has absolute Command of both Rivers. The Land at the Point is 20 or 25 feet above the common Surface of the water; and a considerable Bottom of flat, well-timbered land all around it, very convenient for Building.

— George Washington, from Washington’s Journal of His Tour to the Ohio, November 24, 1753, as quoted in John P. Cower, Great Men: Their Esteem for a Great City (Pittsburgh, 1919) 7.

[Coming from the north in April, 1754], we sent twenty-five men by land ahead to find out if they could discover anything; they reported having been as far as the bank of a river about two leagues from the point of departure; which river flows into the Ohio and has on its opposite bank a great steep mountain that borders this river. We immediately proceeded to this river where we found a site adapted to the erecting of a fort; it was on the fork of this river and at its entrance into the Ohio that we made a plan of construction. We began by felling the trees and cleaning up the ground.


... In the fall of ... 1757, there occurred on the Ohio such a vast swelling of water that it caused a considerable overflow on the territory of Fort Duquesne, where the water mounted twenty-five feet above its ordinary bed.... Opposite the fort, all along the bank in ascending the Ohio, we had formed a sort of little village composed of about sixty cabins of wood, where a part of the garrison lodged; I had also set up there a little cottage where it sometimes happened that I slept.... there turned out to be fifteen carried away by the water.

— Ibid, 40-41.
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