

MEADOWCROFT

By John M. Boback, Ph.D

Forting on the Western Pennsylvania Frontier

Pioneer families on the Western Pennsylvania frontier faced many challenges, particularly the need to periodically move into forts, or “fort up,” whenever angry Indian war parties came near. The resident Shawnees and Mingoes had good reason to be hostile: starting in the early 1770s, hundreds of settlers poured across the mountains, clearing trees and building cabins as they went. By taking private possession of communal Indian hunting lands, settlers undermined the Indians’ ability to provide for their families and communities. In the spring of 1774, the entire region erupted into chaos with the outbreak of Dunmore’s War, which pitted land-hungry settlers and speculators against the Shawnees. Then in 1776, many Shawnees and Mingoes joined the British in a loose alliance against the Americans. The specter of angry war parties prompted hundreds of settlers to flee eastward. Some even abandoned personal property and livestock in their haste. Frontiersman

Gilbert Simpson observed more than 500 families leave during a single week.¹

“Safety in numbers” became the mantra of those pioneers who remained. The slightest hint of danger prompted neighbors to move in together. One settler recalled how frightened families even took up residence at his father’s mill.² Dozens of privately built refuge forts sprung up throughout the settlements as woodsmen skilled in the art of tracking patrolled the surrounding forests.³ The discovery of a war party, or even a suspect footprint, transformed these scouts into runners who quickly spread word from cabin to cabin that danger was near. Settler Joseph Doddridge recalled how runners sometimes woke his family in the dead of night telling them to “fort up.” His family quickly gathered food, clothing, and other provisions, then made their way through the dark forest to the closest fort. Additional families arrived by dawn where together they prepared to resist any attack.⁴

Forting tended to be a seasonal activity associated with the warmer months. Winter

weather hindered fighting and generally kept warriors close to home. Settler Jacob Parkhurst characterized frontier life in Pennsylvania as “forting in the summer and staying at home in the winter.”⁵ Following a summer filled with turmoil, the first cold winds of November signaled temporary relief from Indian attacks. But on occasion the weather brought “Indian summer”—a term pioneers began using for a warm spell late in the fall that gave war parties a final opportunity to raid the settlements.

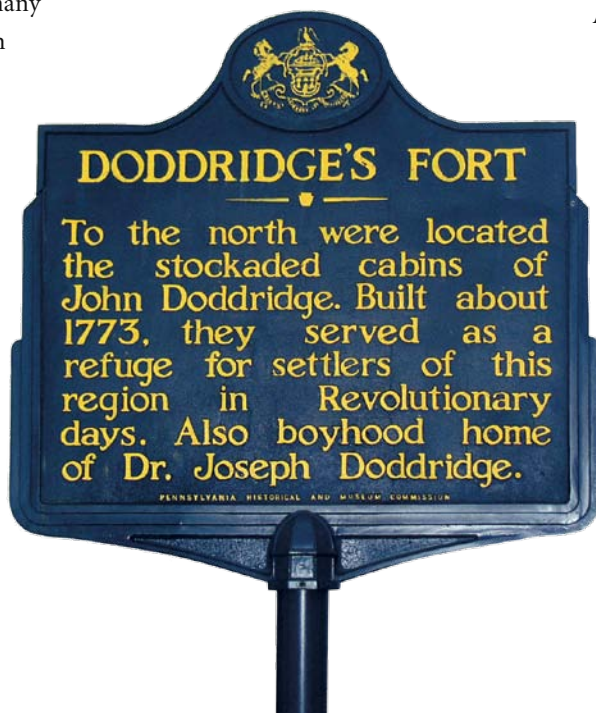
Forts provided pioneer families with effective protection; however, the very act of fortifying removed settlers from their farms during the busiest times of the agricultural year. While away from home, crops and animals went untended. Doddridge lamented that unprotected livestock fell prey to wolves while cattle and hogs broke through fences into gardens and cornfields. Thus, after working so hard to clear their land and plant crops, settlers often made the hard choice of sacrificing economic security in favor of physical security. A partial solution to this dilemma lay in the use of communal work parties that went out to the various farms.

Armed guards positioned themselves to watch over workers as they performed necessary chores. An imperfect solution at best, some work parties fell victim to Indian ambushes.

The violent struggle between settlers and Indians in Western Pennsylvania lasted for an entire generation. One of the final Indian attacks to occur in the region took place in May 1792 when a war party kidnapped 22-year-old Massy Harbison and two of her young

A state historical marker marks the site of Doddridge’s Fort, four miles from Meadowcroft along Pa. Route 844 in Independence Township.

Photo by John Boback.





Alert by Andrew Knez, Jr.
Image courtesy of Andrew Knez, Jr.

children from their home near present-day Freeport. After plundering the house, the warriors took their barefoot captives north toward a camp near Butler. Along the way an Indian killed Massy's 3-year-old son for crying too much. Shortly after arriving at the camp, Massy escaped from her captors and made her way back home with her surviving child. Attacks such as this continued until 1794 when General "Mad Anthony" Wayne dealt the Ohio tribes a demoralizing defeat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers near present-day Toledo, Ohio. At that point in history, the

frontier shifted westward beyond the borders of Pennsylvania. Over time, stories of the pioneers and their exploits became the stuff of legend.

To learn more about this formative period of Pennsylvania's history, visit Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village, where a new 1770s frontier interpretive area opens in May.

John M. Boback, Ph.D., is director of education at Meadowcroft.

¹ Allan W. Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 836.

² Donald F. Carmony, ed., "Spencer Records' Memoir of the Ohio Valley Frontier, 1766-1795," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 55 (December 1959): 330.

³ One of the best known forts is Doddridge's Fort, which was located four miles from present-day Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village.

⁴ Joseph Doddridge, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars* (1912: reprint, Parsons: W.Va.: McClain, 1976), 95.

⁵ Quoted in Earl L. Core, *The Pioneers*, vol. 2 of *The Monongalia Story: A Bicentennial History* (Parsons, W.Va.: McClain, 1976), 31.