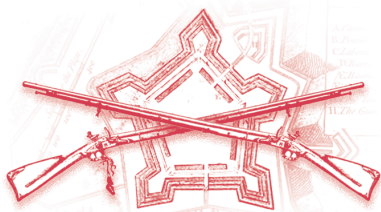


UP FRONT



FORT PITT MUSEUM

By Andrew Gaerte
Education Manager, Fort Pitt Museum

Fishing at Fort Pitt for Food and Fun

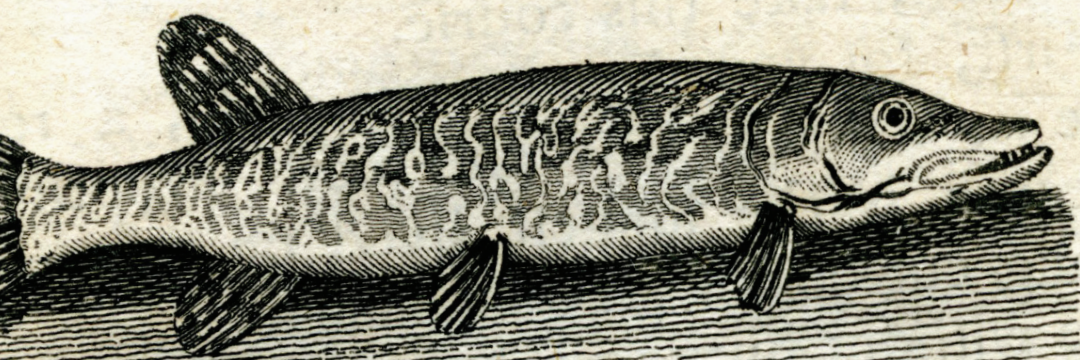
The ruins of Fort Duquesne were still burning in 1758 when Colonel Henry Bouquet wrote Pennsylvania Chief Justice William Allen to notify him of the British success and to order supplies, which were urgently needed now that the Point was in English hands. Bouquet advised that “Fish Netts and Hooks would likewise be of great use for people reduced to Salt Meat, and some Rice, barley &c. to prevent the Scurvey among the men.”¹ Bouquet’s letter highlights what would become one of the major problems in keeping an army at the Point—supplying the troops with fresh food.

Fort Pitt’s location at the forks of the Ohio was of great strategic importance in the British control of the American frontier. Unfortunately, the distance and mountainous

terrain between the Point and more settled areas back east made transporting food both costly and slow. Officers at Fort Pitt hoped to alleviate the supply problem by utilizing the resources available around the fort. Planting large gardens provided the soldiers with vegetables and fruits to prevent scurvy; however, fresh meat was always lacking. Henry Bouquet’s earlier request for nets was answered, and the rivers soon provided “a great plenty of Fish both good and large” for the garrison.² Throughout the spring, summer, and fall, catfish, perch, pike, and buffalo fish provided the soldiers with an excellent source of fresh meat, allowing them to save their limited salted rations for winter.

Pike, among other types of fish, were known to grow to “uncommon size” in the waters of the Ohio. One caught at the Point in 1759 measured four feet long and weighed 20 pounds.

The Complete Angler. Author’s collection.



The author fishing with 18th-century tackle in the Monongahela River outside Fort Pitt Museum. The recently renovated wharf walkways in Point State Park provide anglers with easy access to the rivers.

Courtesy Andrew Gaerte.



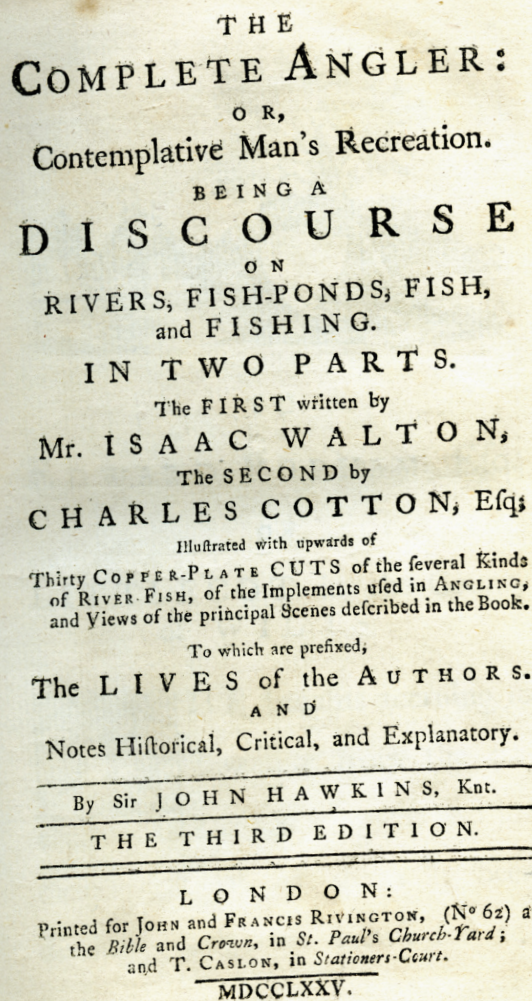
Pennsylvania has been known for its excellent trout streams since the 18th century.

The Complete Angler. Author’s collection.

By the time of the American Revolution, the nets had apparently worn out and it was again a challenge to properly feed those stationed at Fort Pitt. In May 1779, Col. Daniel Brodhead wrote to inform General George Washington that the soldiers at Fort Pitt had been without meat “upwards of twenty days.”³ Though plenty of wild game inhabited the nearby woods, it was often too dangerous to send out hunting parties for fear of Native American attacks. Once again Fort Pitt’s commander looked to the rivers and ordered a large seine, or net, from Philadelphia that could be used to catch fish under the protection of the guns of the fort.

When the net arrived, almost a year after it was ordered, a carefully chosen fishing detail immediately put it to daily use. Fish caught were weighed and distributed to the different regiments manning the fort. The addition of fish into the daily rations of the soldiers was so important that the net was guarded each night by the officer of the guard who was “not to deliver it to any person.”⁴

Fishing at Fort Pitt was not done solely for the purpose of feeding the garrison. The size and abundance of fish in the rivers also attracted recreational fishermen. General Peter Muhlenberg, visiting the



Isaac Walton's *The Complete Angler*, 1775 London edition. This widely printed treatise on fishing was popular with many anglers in the colonies during the 18th century. The two fish engravings come from this particular edition.
Author's collection.

UP FRONT

fort following the Revolution, recorded that "part of my leisure I employ in preparing my lines, and trying to catch some Ohio fish, which according to report, are very large."⁵ James Kenny, a trader at Fort Pitt in the 1750s and '60s, and perhaps one of the sources of these "reports," wrote frequently about fishing with "with a Rod & Line." Kenny also recorded the size of some of the fish being caught at the Point, including a catfish he caught weighing 45 pounds and another he knew of weighing 100 pounds.⁶ Other anglers recorded catfish large enough to break hooks, and sturgeon weighing more than 30 pounds being caught within seven miles of the Point.⁷

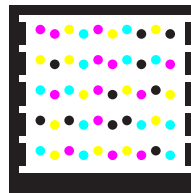
Fishing remains a popular activity at the Point thanks in part to recent campaigns improving water quality in the three rivers. Walk along the rivers outside the Fort Pitt

Museum on any summer day and you will see people fishing, perhaps hoping to catch one of the 100-pounders that might still reside in Pittsburgh's rivers.

Andrew Gaerte is the Education Manager of the Fort Pitt Museum.

- ¹ Henry Bouquet to William Allen, Fort Duquesne, November 25, 1758, in *The Papers of Henry Bouquet*, ed. S.K. Stevens (Harrisburg: PHMC, 1951), 2:611.
- ² James Dow to Henry Bouquet, Pittsburgh, September 7, 1759, in *The Papers of Henry Bouquet*, ed. Louis M. Waddell (Harrisburg: PHMC, 1978), 4:47.
- ³ Daniel Brodhead to George Washington, Pittsburgh, May 22, 1779, in *Pennsylvania Archives*, vol. 12, ed. Samuel Hazard (Philadelphia: Joseph Severns, 1856), 114.
- ⁴ Louise Phelps Kellogg, ed., *Frontier Retreat on the Upper Ohio 1779-1781* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1917), 457.
- ⁵ Henry A. Muhlenberg, *The Life of Major-General Peter Muhlenberg of the Revolutionary Army* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1849), 429.
- ⁶ James Kenny, "Journal of James Kenny, 1761-1763," ed. John W. Jordan, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 37, no. 1 (1913), 7.
- ⁷ James Nourse, "Journey to Kentucky in 1775," *The Journal of American History* 19, no. 2 (1925), 123.

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An 18th-century cookbook.
<http://nourishedkitchen.com/cookery-made-plain-and-easy>



Smithsonian Connection

Calumet Stem, c. 1753

This calumet, or peace pipe, was given to George Washington by an Indian leader during Washington's trip to Western Pennsylvania in 1753. In particular, he sat in council with Tanaghrisson and visited Queen Aliquippa, both of the Seneca Nation. The calumet stem is on display in the *Pittsburgh: A Tradition of Innovation* exhibition at the Heinz History Center until January 2013.

Courtesy Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History.

