Josiah Davenport at Fort Pitt

The story told of the settlement of Western Pennsylvania is often one of self-made men and hardy pioneers. We retell this history as a way to encourage our own self-reliance and hard work. However, not every character in our story made it in Pittsburgh through their own merit. In the 18th century, family connections sometimes mattered more. Such is the case of Josiah Davenport, who oversaw Pennsylvania’s colonial trading post at Fort Pitt from 1760 to 1765.

Josiah Franklin Davenport was born in Boston in 1727 to Benjamin Franklin’s elder sister Sarah. In 1749, Davenport moved to Philadelphia, perhaps hoping to follow in the same successful path as Benjamin. Like his uncle, Davenport initially struggled financially. Franklin wrote that Josiah and his wife Sally were an “industrious saving young couple,” but that “they want a little more stock to go on smoothly in business.” Like his uncle, however, Davenport seems to have lacked the self-motivation and business skills to succeed. Fortunately, at the end of the 1750s, a profitable new market opened on Pennsylvania’s western frontier, and family connections would help the failing businessman succeed.

In 1758, after four bloody years of the French and Indian War, British troops marched across Pennsylvania and recaptured the forks of the Ohio River. Within days of the victory, Native Americans began arriving at the Point to trade with the British. Scores of traders hoping to take advantage of the fur business headed west from Pennsylvania. In the rush to turn a profit, not all traders conducted their business ethically. Dishonest and unscrupulous traders not only put their own lives in danger, but also the lives of nearby settlers and travelers. Pennsylvanian officials, in an attempt to prevent abuses in the trade and make money for the colony, created a Commission for Indian Trade in 1759. In May 1760, this nine-man commission appointed three agents to travel to Pittsburgh to represent the colony’s interest there. One of the three to receive the coveted political appointment was Josiah Davenport.
Given Franklin’s well-known pattern of giving government jobs to family members, it is not a stretch to think that his influence with the Pennsylvania Indian Commissioners helped Davenport secure his position.

It is unclear if Davenport made it to Pittsburgh in 1760. The first notice of him reaching Fort Pitt is in August 1761.1 Davenport performed well at his new job, the following year receiving an additional important appointment from the colony. Throughout the French and Indian War, Native Americans had taken hundreds of Europeans captive. Following a treaty held in Lancaster, captives began to be returned at Fort Pitt. Josiah Davenport and James Burd were given a joint commission in September 1762 to “receive all such prisoners as shall be brought to Fort Pitt.”2 Following Colonel Bouquet’s campaign into the Ohio Country in 1764, hundreds more captives were returned to Pittsburgh.

The success that Davenport enjoyed at Fort Pitt eluded him upon his return to Philadelphia. Josiah found himself wholly dependent on the charity of his relatives. In February of 1773, Benjamin Franklin wrote him, “I was sorry to hear of your failing business. I hear you now keep a little shop, and therefore send you four dozen of Evans’ maps, which, if you can sell you are welcome to apply the money towards clothing your boys.”3 Later that year, his cousin William Franklin, the governor of New Jersey, gave him work as his personal secretary. Josiah Davenport never returned to Pittsburgh or reclaimed the prestige he had while holding one of the most important positions on the frontier.