

## FORT PITT

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### Deluge at the Point: Fort Pitt's Food Supply During the Flood of 1762

In April 1762, two missionaries stopped at Fort Pitt in search of flour to make bread for their journey. What they found, however, “to [their] great disappointment,” was that Fort Pitt’s “magazine had been overflowed by a tremendous inundation, and no flour was to be had. Neither could any be procured from the surrounding country, as there were no farms within hundreds of miles.”<sup>1</sup> After Fort Pitt’s completion late in 1761, the Point flooded twice in just over a year: once in January 1762, and again in March 1763.<sup>2</sup> The British, in their quest for land and economic power, had occupied the Forks of the Ohio River since 1758. Though strategic, Fort Pitt’s location—on a narrow, low-lying plain at the confluence of three rivers—came with dire consequences.

During the winter of 1761–62, heavy snowfall gave way to steady rains, which caused massive flooding at the Point. Fort Pitt and all of its supplies were in jeopardy. The British outpost relied heavily on provisions sourced from colonial settlements hundreds of miles away, primarily from Philadelphia and Virginia. Contractors, traders, and soldiers transported thousands of pounds of goods westward to Fort Pitt by foot, horse, and



Samuel Scott, *Men Loading a Boat with Barrels*, undated, watercolor and graphite on paper.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B2001.2.1181.

wagon.<sup>3</sup> The frontier fort received droves of cattle, sheep, and hogs, as well as goods that could withstand long-term storage, such as flour, grain, and salted beef and pork.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1761, less than three months before the flood, commander of Fort Pitt Colonel Henry Bouquet wrote to two contractors,

We have actually here upwards of 300 Oxen & I am informed of 340 more coming up.... We have yet Ten Months Salt Beef & Pork (of last year) for 200 men; which with this prodigious Stock & the Hogs ordered from Virginia, will indeed form a Magazine for a Small Army.<sup>5</sup>

While Fort Pitt had an adequate supply of meat, it appears that the King’s Garden had not yielded a good crop in 1761.<sup>6</sup> Without nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables, the troops were in danger of developing scurvy, a disease caused by vitamin C deficiency. In October, Arthur St. Clair wrote to Bouquet about a possible solution: “I shall give to Adam Hoops some Scurvey Grass seed which you may sow at any Season of the Year, it grows in Winter and ... it is as good as Spinage dressed in the Same way; no frost can hurt it.”<sup>7</sup>

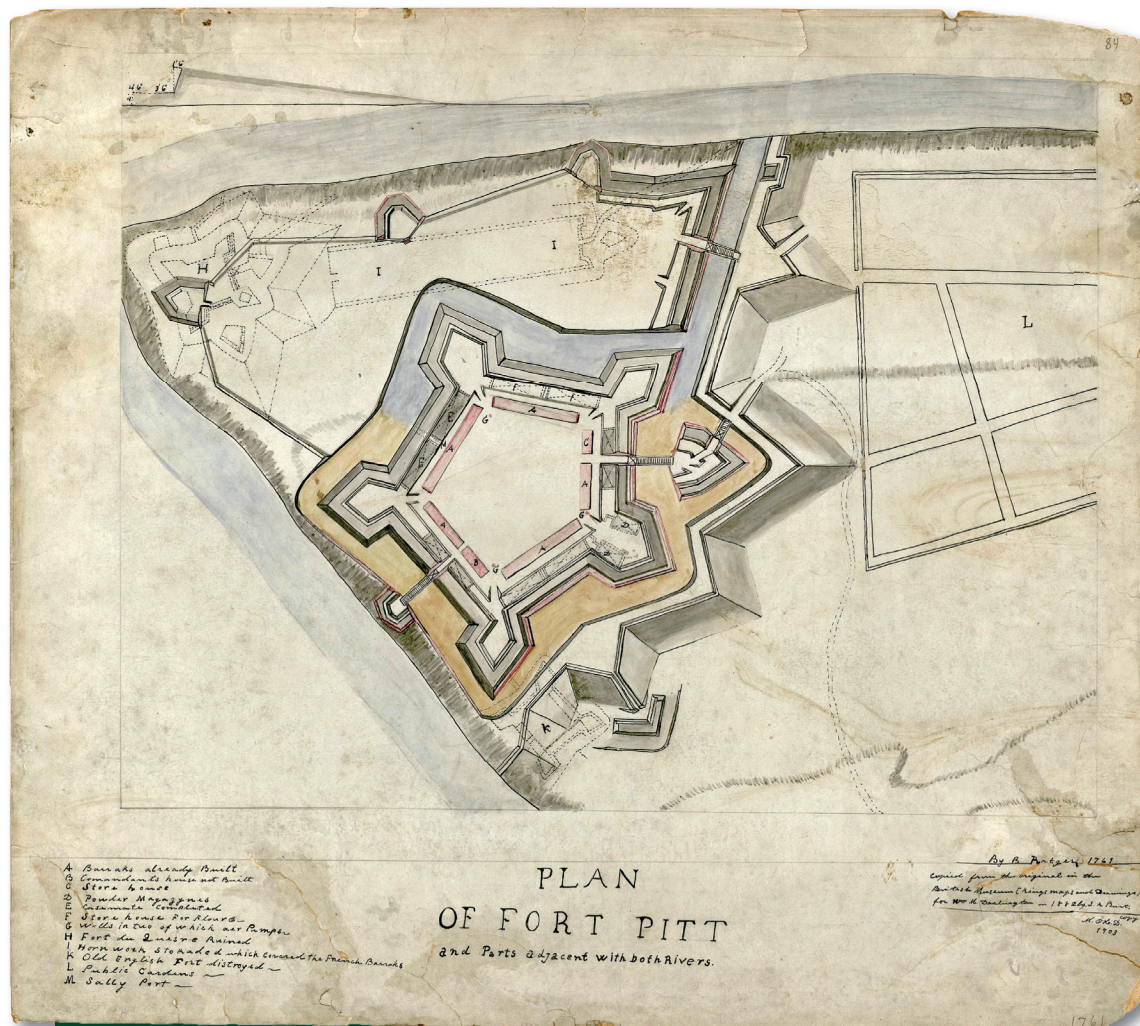
Well supplied from the east, Fort Pitt seemed to have enough provisions to endure a

Pittsburgh winter. The weather in the coming months, however, challenged the garrison and threatened to spoil its precious food supply. By December 24, 1761, snow had accumulated “above Two foot deep & in other places a yard.”<sup>8</sup> Two weeks later, steady rains prompted what Bouquet called “a universal Thaw.”<sup>9</sup> Ice covering the rivers melted, and the waters began to rise.<sup>10</sup>

By January 9, the rivers had risen a total of 34 feet, or 10 feet above the banks. Floodwater poured into the fort at depths of three feet in the barracks and nine feet in the partly subterranean casemates. On January 12, after the waters subsided, Bouquet wrote to Sir Jeffrey Amherst and described the beleaguered state of the fort and its garrison.

All our Casemattes with our Provisions were under Water.... The Water came upon us thro’ the Drains, Gate, and Sally Ports, and boiled in large Springs out of the ground in Several Parts of the Fort. I had the Battoes<sup>11</sup> brought in, and loaded them with Provisions;... As we had just done Salting, The Meat was Still in Bulk, or Barrells without heads. We have got it all out of the Casemattes, & it must be Salted over again.... The Flour in Bulk being in a Granary above Ground is safe, and what is in Barrells can not have Suffered much by the Water.<sup>12</sup>





**Plan of Fort Pitt and Parts Adjacent with Both Rivers** shows roughly what the site looked like at the time of the flood. Copied from the 1761 original by Bernard Ratzer in the British Library (Kings' maps and drawings) for William Darlington by J.A. Burt, 1882, Mary O'Hara Darlington copy 1903.

University of Pittsburgh, Darlington Digital Library, DARMAP0213.

While the meat was indeed re-salted and salvaged, Bouquet later reported a loss of 16,218 pounds of flour, enough for making 20,000 loaves of bread.<sup>13</sup> Bouquet also wrote to Adam Hoops in February, "The last flood of the 9th January has almost ruined us here, & the Provisions have suffered excessively."<sup>14</sup>

The flood of January 1762 was disastrous but not fatal. Fort Pitt replenished its food supply with goods from the east, and that summer the 10-acre King's Garden yielded its first plentiful crop.<sup>15</sup> Having done considerable damage to the fort, floodwaters remained at bay until the following March, when they returned to threaten the western outpost yet again. ☀

<sup>1</sup> Edward Rondthaler, "Life of John Heckewelder," *The Tuscarawas Valley in Indian Days, 1750-1797*, ed. Russell H. Booth, Jr. (Cambridge, Oh.: Gomer House Press, 1994), 51. John Heckewelder accompanied Christian Frederick Post, a missionary, on a journey to an Indian village at Tuscarawas, where they attempted to establish a mission.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Morse Stotz, *Outposts of the War for Empire: The French and English in Western Pennsylvania: Their Armies, Their Forts, Their People 1749-1764* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 127-130.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Procter James and Charles Morse Stotz, *Drums in the Forest: Decision at the Forks, Defense in the Wilderness* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1958, 2005), 89-102.

<sup>4</sup> Stotz, *Outposts of the War for Empire*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Louis M. Waddell, John L. Tottenham, and Donald H. Kent, eds., *The Papers of Henry Bouquet* (Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1994), 5:832-833.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:331.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:792-794.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Jordan, ed., "Journal of James Kenny, 1761-1763," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 37 (1913): 33, accessed at [www.jstor.org/stable/20085624](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20085624).

<sup>9</sup> Louis M. Waddell, ed., *The Papers of Henry Bouquet* (Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1994), 6:36-39.

<sup>10</sup> Jordan, 35.

<sup>11</sup> French for the word boat, *battoes* or *bateaux* were large, flat bottomed boats used by the British to transport men and cargo on the rivers. They were typically rowed by a crew of three to five bateaux-men or soldiers, but could also be fitted out with sails for traveling upstream..

<sup>12</sup> Waddell, *Bouquet Papers*, 6:36-39.

<sup>13</sup> Waddell, *Bouquet Papers*, 6:53-54; Waddell, Tottenham, and Kent, eds., *Bouquet Papers*, 5:691-692.

<sup>14</sup> Waddell, *Bouquet Papers*, 6:42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:90-91.