

## FORT PITT

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### James Kenny's Journal and the Frightful Winter of 1761-62

"Ye Hardest Winter y<sup>e</sup> Indians say they  
have seen here"

Though the onset of another bleak Pittsburgh winter may seem like just cause for curling up indoors to await the return of spring, the region's mid-18th century residents were as active in the cold weather season as any other. The writings of an assiduous Quaker merchant who spent considerable time in and around Pittsburgh in its earliest days shed light on the activities that broke the monotony of the particularly grueling winter of 1761–62.

Three years earlier, in November 1758, the long-coveted Forks of the Ohio were seized by Brigadier General John Forbes, triggering an almost immediate response from Philadelphia merchants, anxious to do business with the "Western Indians" at the newly-occupied post of Pittsburgh. In December, Quaker commissioners hired a capable assistant named James Kenny to supervise a shipment of goods bound for the West.<sup>1</sup>

Arriving at Pittsburgh in April 1759, Kenny witnessed the droves of tradesmen, sutlers (traveling civilian merchants who sold goods to military outposts), soldiers, and their

families who would become the nucleus of the new settlement. Though he returned home to Philadelphia soon after, Kenny returned to Pittsburgh in 1761, again employed in the Indian trade. His journal includes a wealth of information on daily life at Fort Pitt, including vivid descriptions of many of its key personalities. It also provides important information on his daily routine, which, like many aspects of colonial life, varied according to the time of year. Despite the cold, he and his contemporaries had plenty to keep them busy, and his entries for the winter of 1761–62 provide a snapshot of an unforgiving, but not uneventful, season at this far-western outpost.

Based on a "List of Houses and Inhabitants" compiled in April 1761, the settlement at Fort Pitt at the time of Kenny's return included—in addition to soldiers living in barracks—approximately 219 men, 75 women, and 38 children settled outside the walls of the fort. Clustered in two areas known

as the Lower and Upper Towns, respectively, they consisted of Indian traders, soldiers, camp followers, artisans, and their families.<sup>2</sup>

As new arrivals poured in, their desire to establish familiar institutions at Pittsburgh increased. In early December 1761, they hired a Presbyterian schoolmaster who also served as a preacher, reading "y<sup>e</sup> Littany & Common Prayer ... to a Congregation of different Principals."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to its permanent residents, Fort Pitt and its associated settlement were frequent destinations for American Indians of several nations, including Delaware, Shawnee, and Mingo (Iroquois residents of the Ohio Country) who traveled to Pittsburgh on commercial and diplomatic business. While in town, these Indians often stopped at Kenny's store, where cultural knowledge was traded as freely as furs and blankets. In his entry for December 24, 1761, the Quaker merchant described their interest in colonial religious



In the wake of the British capture of the Point, settlers, soldiers, and merchants flocked to Pittsburgh from the eastern settlements.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

In 1761, many residents of Pittsburgh consisted of soldiers and their families.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.





Ohio Country Indians such as the Shawnee, Delaware, and Mingo were frequent visitors to Kenny's store.

Private collection.



Traders at Pittsburgh awaited a break in the ice to ship goods down the Ohio.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



customs in typically plain, but evocative, language.

[December] 24th. It snow'd last night & today so that y<sup>e</sup> Snow was in y<sup>e</sup> plains I think above Two foot deep & in other places a yard ... Many of y<sup>e</sup> Indians have been inquiring when Christmass would come & one young Man a Cossen of Delaware George's ask'd me something y<sup>e</sup> Reason of it. I told him [that] y<sup>e</sup> white people took notice of y<sup>e</sup> time ... that y<sup>e</sup> Son of y<sup>e</sup> Good Spirit came in y<sup>e</sup> form of a Man & liv'd many Days amongst y<sup>e</sup> people, done Many Maricles ... shewing Men by his example that they should not War nor fight but suffer as he did ... at which he seem'd much Affected....<sup>4</sup>

When they were not sharing knowledge of their own customs or stories about distant Indian tribes, Kenny and his customers traded vast quantities of furs and skins for trade goods, such as guns, brass kettles, and textiles from distant corners of the globe. In pursuit of the trade that sustained them both, cold weather slowed and complicated, but failed to halt their dealings. A typical transaction was described on December 20:

Here was a little Old Delaware Man ... call'd James Mokeson, & his Cossen ... they dealt about £100 worth [of] peltry with us ... [and] promis'd to come to us again in y<sup>e</sup> Spring, being very well pleas'd. Had hard work to put them over y<sup>e</sup> River, y<sup>e</sup> Ice drove so thick.<sup>5</sup>

Even with ice blocking the rivers, people and goods came and went as often as possible. Traders loaded battoes (flat bottomed boats) in hopes of going down the Ohio, while hunters delivered "Skins & plenty of meat." Kenny also noticed a steady stream of travelers from the east "coming in ... & some going notwithstanding y<sup>e</sup> Weather."<sup>6</sup>


By January 1762, a sudden shift in the weather got the attention of all the residents of Pittsburgh. An unexpected thaw and heavy

rain caused the thick ice on the rivers to break up, damming the waters, and flooding the Point. As Col. Henry Bouquet, the fort's commandant, noted, "The Two Rivers intirely [sic] covered with Ice & Trees had joined above the Fort, but the most rapid Current continued on Each Side."<sup>7</sup>

As Kenny and other residents of Pittsburgh scrambled to pack their goods and head for higher ground, the fort's parade ground, barracks, and casemates—which held not only the supply of gunpowder, but also a quantity of recently-preserved salt pork—were submerged. Finding Col. Bouquet and some other officers on the bank, Kenny and his partners "row'd them thro y<sup>e</sup> fort to their quarters."<sup>8</sup>

In the weeks that followed, Fort Pitt's military and civilian inhabitants made repairs and dried out as best they could. On January 19, Kenny observed that the "Bushes [about] Grant's Hill [are] Clad with wet Goods & Peltry." Despite the considerable damage wrought by the flood, however, he noted with satisfaction that several of his closest companions made it through unharmed. "I have a Pet Raccoon a Pet Raven & a Young Spannale [sic] Puppy ... having sav'd them in y<sup>e</sup> time of y<sup>e</sup> Deluge or Inundation."<sup>9</sup>

As the rivers brought destruction, so they infused life into the fort and settlement, and in the aftermath of the "Great flood," soldiers, settlers, merchants, and Indians resumed their

travels to and from Fort Pitt. Though snowy weather continued through much of March, "y<sup>e</sup> Hardest Winter y<sup>e</sup> Indians say they have seen here" eventually abated. Amidst his business dealings, strolls through the surrounding woods, and religious discussions with his patrons, Kenny and his associates replaced their garden fence, which had been "swept away with y<sup>e</sup> flood." By April 1762, the avid gardener and amateur botanist noted that his "Lettuce & Cabbage," the first crops of spring, had begun to come up.<sup>10</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> John W. Jordan, ed., "James Kenny's 'Journal of Ye West-Ward,' 1758-59" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1913), pp. 395-449. N.B. James Kenny commonly used "ye" in place of the definitive article or adverb "the." His journal, like other 18th-century writings, is also peppered with phonetic spellings, which have been essentially kept as Jordan originally transcribed them, with an occasional [sic] added for clarification.

<sup>2</sup> Louis M. Waddell, et. al., eds. "List of Houses and Inhabitants at Fort Pitt, April 14, 1761". Printed in *The Papers of Henry Bouquet*, Vol. V. (Harrisburg: PHMC, 1984), pp. 407-421.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Jordan, ed., "Journal of James Kenny, 1761-1763" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1913), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Journal Entries for December 10, 11, and 15, 1761, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Waddell. "Letter from Henry Bouquet to Jeffrey Amherst," p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Jordan, Kenny Journal, Entry of January 10, 1762, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Journal Entries for January 19 and February 4, 1762, pp. 38, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Journal Entries for February 25, March 3, and March 18, 1762, pp. 42, 43, 45.