

FORT PITT

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Beer Here? Beer and Brewing in Early Pittsburgh, 1758-1803

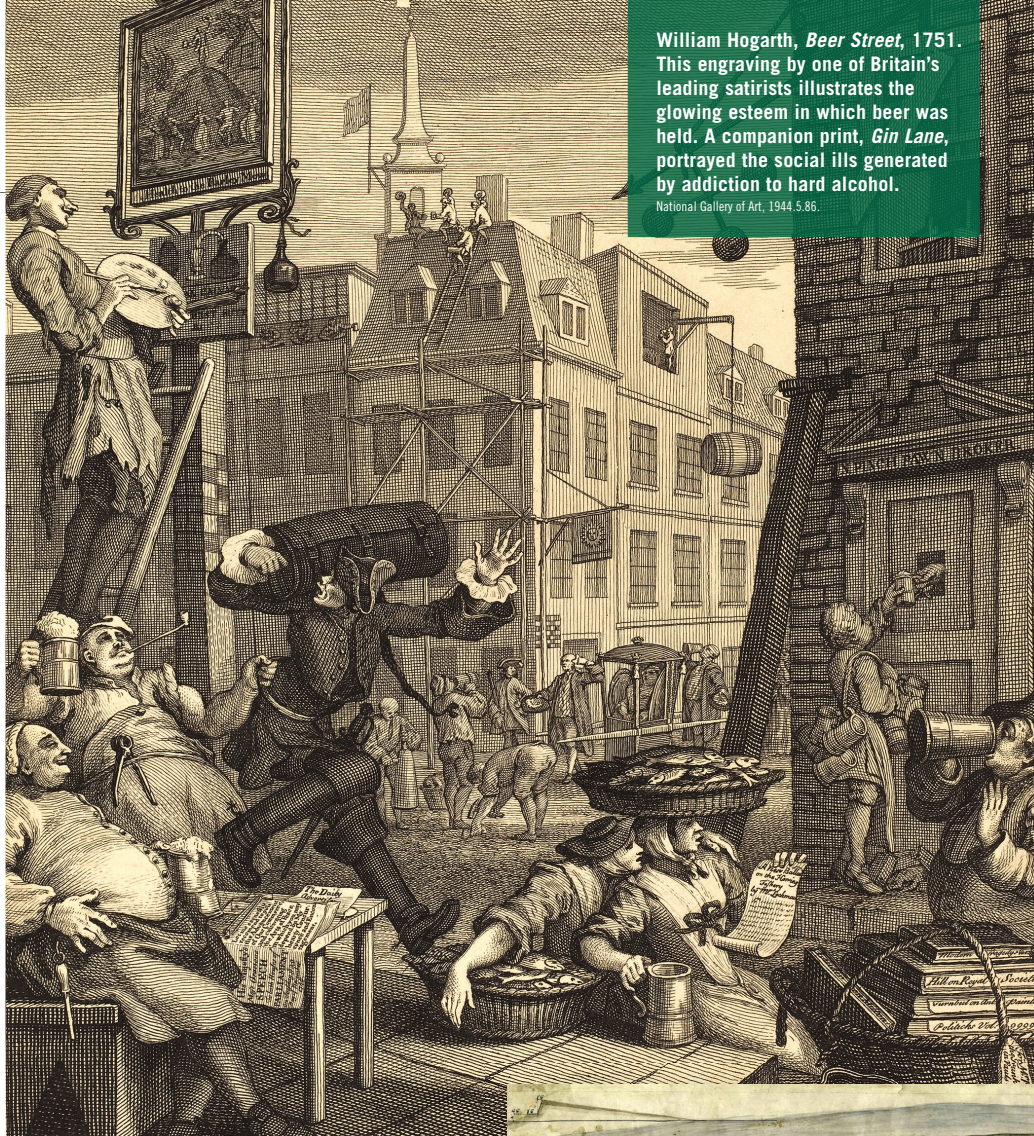
Pittsburgh has long enjoyed a reputation for beer and brewing, but how far back does this heady tradition extend? Given the mission of the British army in the Ohio Valley, life in the fledgling community of Pittsburgh, which grew in the shadow of Fort Pitt, was deeply entwined with the military presence. In the earliest years, the produce, commerce, and even the free time of its residents were intensely regulated, and the town's fortunes rose and fell with those of the army. Situated at the far western end of a narrow military road, Fort Pitt was connected to Philadelphia by a fragile lifeline on which personnel, supplies, and information traveled. It was on this road that the story of beer in Pittsburgh began.

When the British army under Brigadier General John Forbes arrived at the smoldering ruins of Fort Duquesne in November 1758, they brought with them a homegrown taste for beer. Made by fermenting the steeped liquor of malted barley and hops, Britons regarded beer in a patriotic, almost medicinal, light.¹ Just as today, several main types were common. Strong beer, high in alcohol as its name implies, was also rich in hops, which enhanced the flavor and allowed it to be stored for long periods. Comparably high in alcohol,

but lower in hops, ales were meant to be drunk fresh. Rounding out the top three, low-alcohol small, or table, beer was regarded as a wholesome choice for families.²

For soldiers, a fourth type was common: so-called spruce beer. Made from the green sprouts of spruce trees, water, molasses, and occasionally hops, the brew was high in Vitamin C, commonly used to prevent scurvy in 18th-century armies.³ Due to its short fermentation period and relatively simple ingredients, it is believed that spruce beer was brewed and administered on the Forbes campaign as the army marched forward.⁴

No sooner had they displaced the French at the Point that the British grappled with the difficulty of supplying troops at Pittsburgh. While crops were soon planted, nearly all supplies for western outposts were carried via packhorse over the narrow military road.⁵



William Hogarth, *Beer Street*, 1751. This engraving by one of Britain's leading satirists illustrates the glowing esteem in which beer was held. A companion print, *Gin Lane*, portrayed the social ills generated by addiction to hard alcohol.

National Gallery of Art, 1944.5.86.



This copy of Bernard Ratzer's 1761 *Plan of Fort Pitt and parts adjacent with both rivers*, made for William Darlington in 1882, shows the scale of the fort in comparison to previous fortifications at the Point. The outline of the French Fort Duquesne, destroyed in 1758, is shown near the confluence of the rivers, while an earlier British fortification, sometimes referred to as Mercer's Fort, is delineated just south-west of Fort Pitt on the Monongahela shore.

University of Pittsburgh, Darlington Digital Library, DARMAP0213.



Joseph Highmore (attributed), *Figures in a Tavern or Coffee House*, c. 1725 or after 1750. Taverns provided food, drink, and entertainment to road-weary travelers, military personnel, and locals alike. Samuel Semple's tavern was a popular gathering place in Pittsburgh by 1770, when George Washington visited the town.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

A journal kept at Fort Littleton—located between Carlisle and Bedford—gives insight as to which goods took priority.

23rd [February, 1759]

Arrived here with 12 horses loaded with Liquor W^m: M Dowell Suttler. Also at 10 OClock AM Passed by here Tho^r: Potts with a Brigade of Pack Horses to the N^o: of 50 loaden with Flour...

...Three suttlers with nine Horses loaden with Liquor cam[e] here on their way to Pittsburgh.⁶

Given subsequent transactions at Pittsburgh, it seems likely that much of the *liquor* mentioned was rum, however, it is worth noting a shift in the definition of the term from the 18th century to today. Whereas modern-day *liquor* almost always denotes hard alcohol, two centuries ago it simply referred to “Any thing liquid,” or “Strong drink: in familiar language,” meaning that a portion of the shipments seen on the road may well have

been beer.⁷ Several entries for the following month listed malt—one of the key ingredients in beer—among the westbound supplies, though the destination was not noted.⁸

That some beer was brought to Pittsburgh was confirmed by Colonel Henry Bouquet, who made several attempts to regulate its consumption, and even its price, in the early years. An order from September 1761 forbade the sutlers charged with provisioning the army from providing “any Rum, Wine, Beer, or other Strong Liquors to soldiers on Mondays,” and from giving them any alcohol during working hours.⁹

In addition to that purchased for recreational purposes, beer was also issued to troops at Fort Pitt, at least on one occasion. On June 5, 1763—near the beginning of Pontiac’s Uprising and the ensuing Siege of Pittsburgh—Captain Simeon Ecuyer ordered “one pint of beer issued” to each man, perhaps as an incentive to good conduct and bravery.¹⁰

After Pontiac’s Uprising, the population

of Pittsburgh contracted greatly as the town—consisting of a lower and upper section—had been destroyed to prevent besieging Indians from seeking shelter within. With their houses razed and trade curtailed indefinitely, many of the civilian residents of Pittsburgh (who numbered nearly 300 prior to Pontiac’s Uprising) retreated to the east.¹¹ In 1765, the long-awaited reopening of the Indian trade, and a plan for a new town, revived the fledgling community.¹²

As traders and tradesmen flocked to Fort Pitt, the rebuilt town of Pittsburgh once again buzzed with activity. It was then that perhaps the earliest known evidence of brewing at Fort Pitt appeared. In March 1765, Devereux Smith—later a prominent trader and founding citizen of Pittsburgh—was listed in the accounts of the trading firm Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan.¹³ Like many of the carpenters, coopers, and other artisans at Fort Pitt, Smith’s occupation, *Brewer*, appeared next to his name on at least two occasions.¹⁴

While beer was brought to Fort Pitt early on, this listing from the daybook of Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan and Fort Pitt is perhaps the earliest reference to brewing in Pittsburgh.

HHC Dietre L&A, MFF 2000.

Month from	Feb: 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Devereux Smith / Brewer												
To	Necklace	2/6	1/2	2/6	1/2	2/6	1/2	2/6	1/2	2/6	1/2	2/6

Despite the initial reference to his occupation, and the likely demand for his product, the firm's records show that Smith became deeply involved in the Indian trade. Perhaps to fill the void in the community, another brewer, James Milligan, arrived by 1767. Later listed in the records of the partnership of Devereux Smith and Ephraim Douglass, Milligan paid a portion of his balance in 1769 in "beer &c."¹⁵

In 1772, responding to a variety of economic and political factors, the British army formally abandoned Fort Pitt.¹⁶ By that time, the town supported numerous traders, artisans, and at least one tavern.¹⁷ While rum, and increasingly whiskey, were traded as commodities, the accounts of leather breeches maker Casper Reel for 1775 include payment of at least one debt in beer, ironically that of a Frenchman named Labatt.¹⁸

The American Revolution that followed largely curtailed the rhythms of daily life in Pittsburgh, and a return to cheap imported goods afterward threatened the economic independence of the new nation. Looking to jump-start local manufactures, a political commentator claimed in 1787 that he had seen "pretty good beer in the town of Pittsburgh, and lately excellent beer in the town of Washington."¹⁹ In 1789, a tariff levied on foreign goods—including whiskey and beer—accomplished what pure patriotic zeal could not. It is no small coincidence that in 1792, a brewer and maltster, probably located near the remains of Fort Pitt, appeared among the town's 650 residents.²⁰ Three years later, the partnership of Robert Smith and Peter Shiras noted that they had "purchased the BREWERY at the Point, in Pittsburgh."²¹ And, in 1803, James O'Hara, former assistant to Devereux Smith and Ephraim Douglass, bought them out, recognizing the potential of a brewery at the Forks.²² Having survived its turbulent formative years, the local brewing

industry stood poised for a boom as the new nation pushed west with Pittsburgh as its gateway. ☀

Thanks to Fort Pitt Museum intern Jennifer Motter for her help in combing through the Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan records, and to local historian Kelly Linn for information on the Point Brewery.

¹ George Watkins, *The Compleat Brewer; or, The Art and Mystery of Brewing Explained* (London: Printed for J. Coote, 1760) pp. iii-iv.

² Watkins p. 110-11, 121.

³ "Dr. James Stevenson to Col. Henry Bouquet," c. April 1761 in Sylvester K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent, eds. *The Papers of Col. Henry Bouquet, Series 21646* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1941) p. 137. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015070207595> Accessed Dec. 1, 2017

⁴ Douglas R. Cubbison, *The British Defeat of the French in Pennsylvania, 1758: A Military History of the Forbes Campaign Against Fort Duquesne* (Jefferson, N.C. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010) p. 56.

⁵ John Wilson Huston, *Fort Pitt, 1758-1772*, 1957 University of Pittsburgh, PhD Dissertation p. 79-86.

⁶ Ensign Caleb Graydon "A Monthly Report of the Daily Transactions and Occurrences which happen'd at Fort Lyttleton since the 24th of January to the 1st March 1759," Entry dated Feb. 23, 1759 in Donald H. Kent, et al, eds. *The Papers of Henry Bouquet, Volume III* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1976) p. 159.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (Dublin: Printed by W.G. Jones, 1768).

⁸ *Bouquet Papers*, Vol. III, p. 222-227.

⁹ Louis Waddell, et al, eds., *The Papers of Henry Bouquet, Vol. V* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1984) p. 770.

¹⁰ Mary Carson Darlington, "Orderly Book [Capt. Simeon Ecuyer]" printed in *Fort Pitt and Letters from the Frontier* (Pittsburgh: J.R. Weldin & Co., 1892) p. 151.

¹¹ Huston p. 152, 177-179.

¹² Huston, p. 258-259.

¹³ M.P. Bothwell, "Devereux Smith: Fearless Pioneer" *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Vol. 40, Number 4, 1957, p. 277 <https://journals.psu.edu/wph/article/viewFile/2584/2417> Accessed November 1, 2017

¹⁴ Anonymous, *Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan Company Daybook [manuscript] 1765-1772*, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, MSS 2000, p. 7,9



John Laguerre, *Hob Selling Beer at the Wake* (detail), 1725. In the earliest years, beer and other necessary goods at Fort Pitt were sold by sutlers, or military contractors charged with provisioning the army. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

¹⁵ Ephraim Douglass, *Ledger 1769-1772*, University of Pittsburgh, ULS Digital Collections <http://digital2.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:31735066223250> Accessed November 1, 2017

¹⁶ Huston, p. 271-290.

¹⁷ Samuel Semples tavern, mentioned in George Washington *Remarks & Occurs in October [1770]* Founders Online <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-02-02-0005-0029> Accessed Dec. 1, 2017.

¹⁸ *Casper Reel papers [manuscript] 1769-1835*, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, MSS 0104, p. 22,23.

¹⁹ Censor. "To the Printers of the Pittsburgh Gazette." *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, March 17, 1787, p. 1-2.

²⁰ *The American Museum, or, Universal Magazine for the Year 1792*, Philadelphia: From the Press of M. Carey, Volume 11, May 1792, p. 187-188 <https://books.google.com/books?id=mf1GAAAcAAJ&vq=pittsburgh&pg=RA2-PA188#v=onepage&q&f=false> Accessed Dec. 1, 2017

²¹ "Brewery" advertisement, *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, October 17, 1795.

²² "Pittsburgh Point Brewery" advertisement, *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, March 4, 1803.