



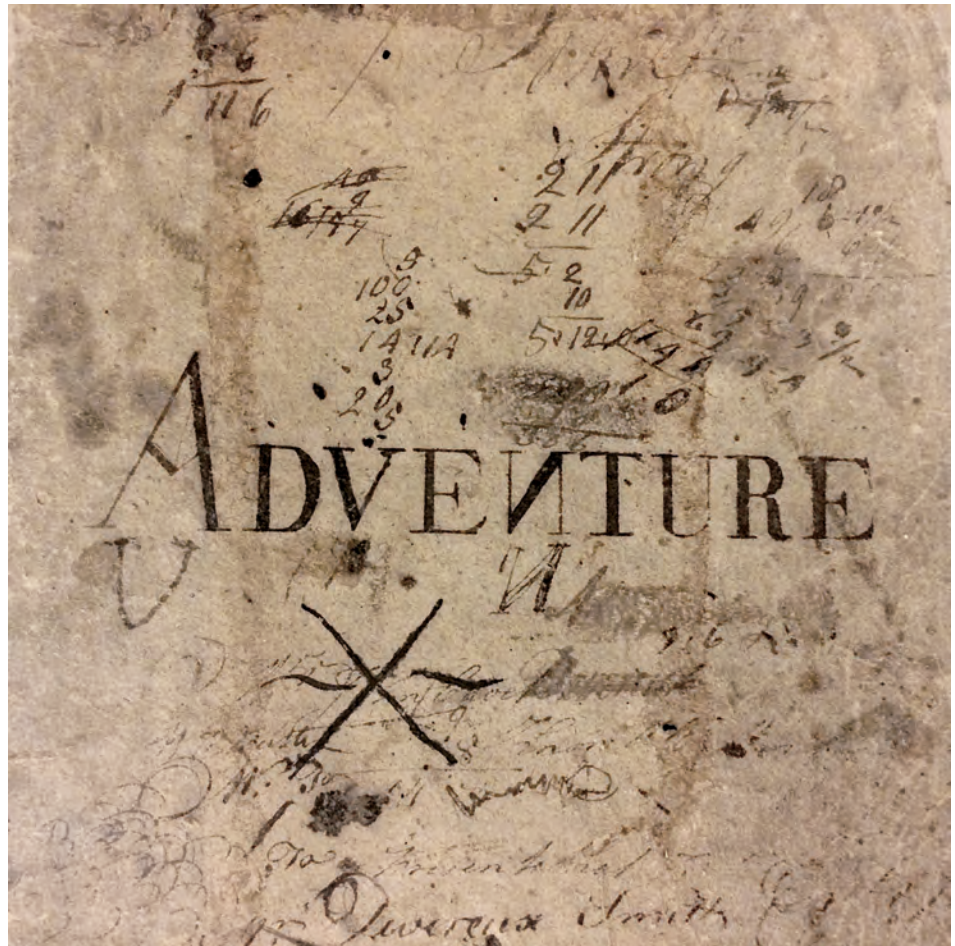
FORT PITT MUSEUM

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Adventure to Caskusking: Accounting for Women in an 18th-Century Trade Ledger

Part 1 of 2

Beginning at manufacturing centers as far away as India and China and ending deep in the interior of North America, the 18th-century fur trade linked thousands of individuals in a network so vast that those at either end could scarcely conceive of its complexity. In the river valleys around Fort Pitt, near one end of the supply chain, British and American Indian communities worked in concert to ensure that a steady harvest of furs and skins were exchanged for much-needed consumer goods originating hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away. In addition to a staggering variety of available trade goods—from silk ribbon to horn combs and silver brooches—a clearer picture of women's lives and their work in the 18th-century Ohio Country can be found in the pages of several Pittsburgh trade ledgers that survive from the period. One unpublished manuscript, housed in the collection of the Fort Pitt Museum and titled simply *Adventure*, is unusually rich in such material. Its pages provide a snapshot of a multitude of women of diverse experiences and ethnicities—Delaware, British, German, and African—linked by their interaction with the Pittsburgh trading firm of Devereux Smith and Ephraim Douglass from 1771 to 1776.¹



Detail of the cover of the 1771-76 *Adventure* ledger, showing an array of tabulations and doodles by various clerks. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Collection, Fort Pitt Museum. Photo by Mike Burke.


During the period the ledger was kept, the British military ended its costly mission at Fort Pitt and fallout from Lord Dunmore's War ravaged the countryside. Devereux Smith, who also served as a Pennsylvania Justice for Westmoreland County, was jailed by Virginians under John Connolly in 1774 and later arrested—but never tried—for the murder of partisan militia captain, George Aston.² By the time the last entries were made in September 1776, the fur trade itself had collapsed amid the throes of revolution, and the firm shifted its efforts to supplying various American military

units stationed in and around Fort Pitt. Despite the tumultuous backdrop, the ledger contains numerous glimpses of two communities, one Delaware and one Anglo-American, that tried to make the best of their challenging circumstances. During the period of the ledger, one of those communities ceased to exist, ultimately unable to stave off the many external threats against it. Getting to know the women of both, however, allows us to see beyond the conflicts that punctuated their lives to the everyday rhythms of trade, interaction, and interdependence that were most familiar to them.

Cornelius Krieghoff, *The Basket Seller*, early 19th century. Active participants in the trade that sustained their communities, Algonquin women traded a variety of products, including moccasins, maple sugar, and baskets to British traders and settlers in the Ohio Country.

Bonham's auction listing, May 2010.

The period covered by the ledger, roughly 1771 through 1776, was one of upheaval for the peoples of the Ohio Country, especially the American Indians who called the region home. Recently re-settled at their old village site of Kuskusky (or “Caskusking,” present-day New Castle, Lawrence County) a community of Delaware Indians was attempting to balance the unbridled expansion of British settlement in the region, which exploded following the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, against important relationships with Pittsburgh-based traders on whom they depended for commercial goods.³ While most of the transactions at Kuskusky involved native men, several women also did business with them, including a “little woman [that] lives over the Creek” who hoped to sell a milk cow, with calf, to trader Henry Geiger, and an adopted female captive who purchased “2 fathom of blue Penistone” cloth in exchange for maple sugar and the loan of a piece of blue stroud cloth she owned.⁴ Also present at Kuskusky was the unnamed wife of the Delaware chief, Captain Pipe, who handled a number of transactions on behalf of her husband. Working to ensure that the family’s furs and skins made it to market, she forwarded large quantities of deerskins to the traders at Kuskusky, and delivered a quantity of “Red” (summer) deerskins to Pittsburgh.⁵

Descending the Beaver River to the Ohio and moving upriver to the Forks, the ledger picks up the accounts of those who did business with Smith and Douglass in Pittsburgh. There, the activities of another community, and another group of Ohio Country women linked to the trading venture at Kuskusky, come into sharper focus. We’ll look at that in Part II. 



¹ Douglass, Ephraim, Devereux Smith, et al. *Adventure*. 1771-1776. MS Ledger Book. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Fort Pitt Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. FP95.2.1.

² Bothwell, Margaret Pearson, “Devereux Smith Fearless Pioneer,” *Western Pennsylvania History*, December 1957, pp. 278-283. Never tried by the Virginians, Smith was exonerated by the Pennsylvania courts in 1784, nine years after the incident.

³ McConnell, Michael N. “Kuskusky Towns and Early Western Pennsylvania Indian History, 1748-1778,”

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, January 1992, p. 54-58. During the French and Indian War, the Delaware had occupied several sites known collectively as the Kuskuskies. Returning in the late 1760s, they may have resettled multiple village locations, though the *Adventure* ledger appears to refer to a single site, called “Caskusking” or “Caskusky” by the traders.

⁴ *Adventure*, notes for transactions dated March 8, 1774.

⁵ *Ibid.*