

THE MAKING OF AN EXHIBIT

Behind the Scenes of *Clash of Empires*

THIS PUBLICATION REPRESENTS MANY OF THE ARTIFACTS found in *Clash of Empires: The British, French & Indian War, 1754-1763*, an exhibition that debuted at the Pittsburgh Regional History Center on May 1, 2005. It is the first and only comprehensive museum exhibition on the French and Indian War. After April 15, 2006, it travels to the Canadian War Museum/Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, Canada. After a year there, it will then be displayed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Dozens of people have been working behind the scenes for three years to assemble this impressive collection of art, artifacts, dioramas, videos, and historically accurate figures. Museum curators, catalogers, educators, designers, and fabricators worked with the History Center's Development, Marketing, and Library & Archives staffs to coordinate this huge undertaking. Artifacts arrived almost daily: uniforms, weapons, documents, and items that were once part of the everyday life of European, colonial, and American Indian peoples. Museum staff and volunteers spent the months leading up to the opening unpacking and registering the objects, building display cases, making artifact mounts, scanning images, and producing text and caption panels.



Peter Argentine filmed reenactors on the Allegheny River while recreating scenes from the French and Indian War for the exhibit's introductory film. *Peter Argentine Productions*



Curator Scott Stephenson at the History Center's new museum registration room. *Lora Hershey*

Paintings and portraits in the exhibit depict key figures, towns, and battles. Dioramas put the wilderness landscape into perspective by recreating period scenes such as a birch bark canoe being portaged by a Canadian and an Iroquois Indian, or Fort Necessity's shot-through wooden stockade. Films and videos also tell parts of the story, and custom-designed interactive stations help children to understand this important piece of American history.

In this section, you'll meet some of the craftspeople who made this exhibit not only a reality, but an absorbing, informative experience. Much of this information was gleaned from interviews conducted by Paul Prezzaria this past spring.



Craig Britcher works on the exhibit. *Lora Hershey*

FOR MORE THAN A QUARTER CENTURY, **J. Lee Howard** has been painting miniature soldiers and building dioramas. He began by collecting plastic soldiers and military models at age 10. He has built a following in the past decade by painting thousands of miniatures for collectors and war gamers. The museum staff at the History Center asked him to create a small diorama depicting Braddock's mortal wounding at the Battle of the Monongahela. The project has since grown to become an epic display of the entire battle, incorporating more than 600 individual soldiers, wagons, and artillery pieces. Another diorama was commissioned to depict Fort Duquesne under construction.

Howard says the first step is to make sure a diorama tells a story: "Before I even painted a figure or built a structure, the museum and I worked out what we wanted to tell visitors about the subject of the two dioramas." Research came next; the History Center's Library provided a rich variety of primary and secondary sources.

Information on the Battle of The Monongahela came from a number of sources, notably the recently published *Monongahela 1754-55* by Rene Chartrand and illustrated by Stephen Walsh. "It contains topographical maps that show the hour by hour action of Braddock's Defeat that were



Jamie Pennisi transcribes Hugh Mercer's letter that accompanied the Kittanning medal. *Lora Hershey*



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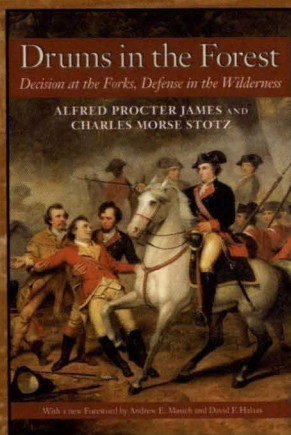
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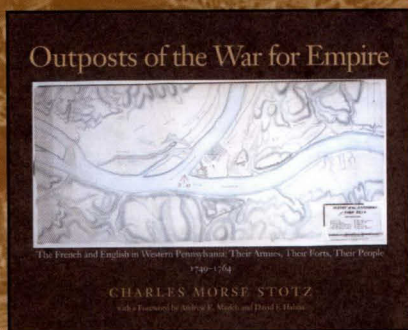
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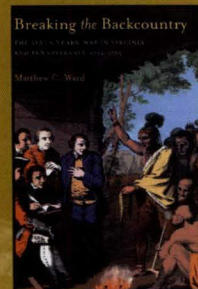
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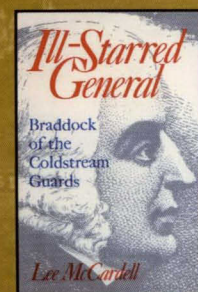
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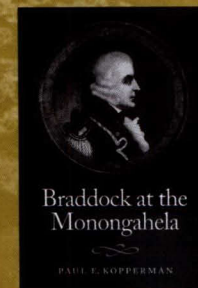
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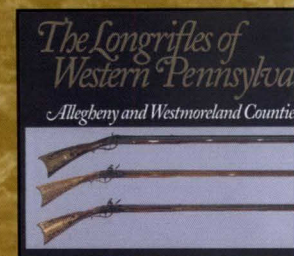
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Lee Howard painting figures in his studio.

indispensable for designing the diorama. Fred Anderson's *Crucible Of War* was very helpful as well. *Guns At The Forks* by Walter O'Meara was a good general source for the actions fought around the Pittsburgh area."

Fort Duquesne likewise had one outstanding resource: "I practically wore out my copy of *Drums in the Forest*, which includes "Defense In The Wilderness" by Charles M. Stotz. Not only does it include numerous eyewitness descriptions of all of the forts built at the Point, but is loaded with period maps and drawings. Stotz also authored *Outposts Of The War For Empire*. It is *the* source for anyone with an interest in this subject." The History center worked with the University of Pittsburgh to reprint both books for this anniversary.

Howard has his own library of reference materials on uniforms from various periods. A series of military dress publications from Osprey Publishing are aimed at wargamers and miniature hobbyists. But getting the colors or number of buttons right isn't always enough: "I looked at several companies and chose Pendraken Miniatures to represent the bulk of my figures. [Theirs] have personality to them as well as a wide variety of

poses. The Canadian Militia and Indians, for example, have many figures posed crouching or kneeling which represents the way that they fought, taking advantage of available cover or skulking about waiting for the right moment to fire from ambush."

The Battle of The Monongahela is the more ambitious, depicting the fording of the river, the road, the profusion of trees and ground cover, and the rising ground to the right of Braddock's column. But it is not a frozen moment in time: if the diorama were accurately scaled, it would be 32 feet long and have over 3,000 figures. Instead, each figure represents five actual persons, and the areas represent different events over the four hour battle. Purists may balk, but Howard says it's aimed at a general audience: "By presenting it in this way we hope to better explain how the French and Indians, outnumbered almost two to one, were able to defeat such a superior force."

Among the more famous figures represented are General Braddock, falling back on his horse at the moment of his mortal wound. Next to him is young George Washington, reaching out from his horse to keep Braddock from toppling off of his. Two other miniatures recall a story, perhaps apocryphal, of the father/son Halketts. When Colonel Peter Halkett was hit and fell to the ground, his son James kneeled over him, was also hit, and fell across his father's body. "Both of them died in that position," says Howard. "If you look closely at the diorama, you'll see them near the line of supply wagons."

The diorama includes not only men. "Despite being ordered to stay behind, many of the soldier's wives and sweethearts continued to march along with the column. I was fortunate to find a manufacturer who made women wearing colonial dress in that scale." Visitors will also see cannons, limbers, supply wagons, and horses, as well as trees adapted from model railroad kits. "Glue is spread on the branches and they're dipped into a container holding small pieces of shredded and dyed foam rubber to represent foliage. My wife and I literally made hundreds of trees."

One of the features of Fort Duquesne that Howard wanted to emphasize is how small and cramped it was. "I built

frames for the buildings from foam core. Tiny strips of balsa wood were then glued onto the foam core frames to represent squared logs. Balsa was also used for the window frames and doorframes and the doors themselves. I topped the interior buildings with poster board covered with a pattern representing wooden shingles in raised ink similar to that used on business cards. The structures were then painted.”

The model depicts the fort under construction, with workers cutting, sawing, and laying the logs, digging the dry moat surrounding the fort, and constructing stockade walls. The surrounding land includes a bakery, livestock, crops, and a small Native American village. Small pup tents, fences, and cornstalks – cast in resin – were purchased from Musket Miniatures. An arriving flotilla of canoes represents the victorious French and Indian forces returning from the skirmish at Fort Necessity.

VISITORS TO THE EXHIBIT WILL ENJOY MAPS that are new yet curiously at home among artifacts from 250 years ago. These detailed drawings are the work of **Fred Threlfall**, whose creations are historically accurate in a number of ways. He uses only materials that would have been available in their time period; for this project, that meant pencil, quill, ruler, T-Square, paper, watercolor, cotton paper, and inks such as brown-hued walnut ink. He makes the ink himself by boiling black walnuts and mixing the mash with ingredients like oil and vinegar.

Threlfall grew up just southeast of Pittsburgh in Homestead. An uncle there inspired his love of history: “He only went to third grade, but he always read afterward. We used to sit on a rock overlooking the river and Braddock’s field, and he used to tell me, ‘This is where they crossed’ or ‘this is where so-and-so was supposed to be.’” Threlfall had little training in art other than blueprint classes, but his interest and skill grew while working at Fort Necessity.

The hardest part, he says, is not making a mistake: “It’s tough to erase. You have to take your time; you can’t rush. And they made mistakes back then. Often they would use guidelines to keep things straight, which you can still see even if they tried to take them off.”

The original mapmakers were able to be accurate, despite not having airplanes, satellites, and cameras, by using triangulation; that is, viewing or measuring the same object from two different places and then using math to determine distances. The trick then and now was to make it accurate and artistic: “What’s challenging to me are the technical things; how to get on a piece of paper what is required, you know the distance and area, and have it somewhat presentable as a piece of art.... It takes a lot of head work or eye work.”

Threlfall always puts a little trivia on his work to make it interesting. His favorite part is adding vignettes in the tradition of the originals. For example, the map of the Braddock campaign has an Indian pointing his tomahawk towards the site of the Battle of Monongahela. Another portrays the difficult, 20-mile portage of canoes from Lake Erie to French Creek. Each vignette conveys a lesser-known aspect that Threlfall thought was important to tell: “One of the vignettes I have on that map is Reverend Post talking



Fred Threlfall made maps for the exhibit using period techniques.
Lora Hershey



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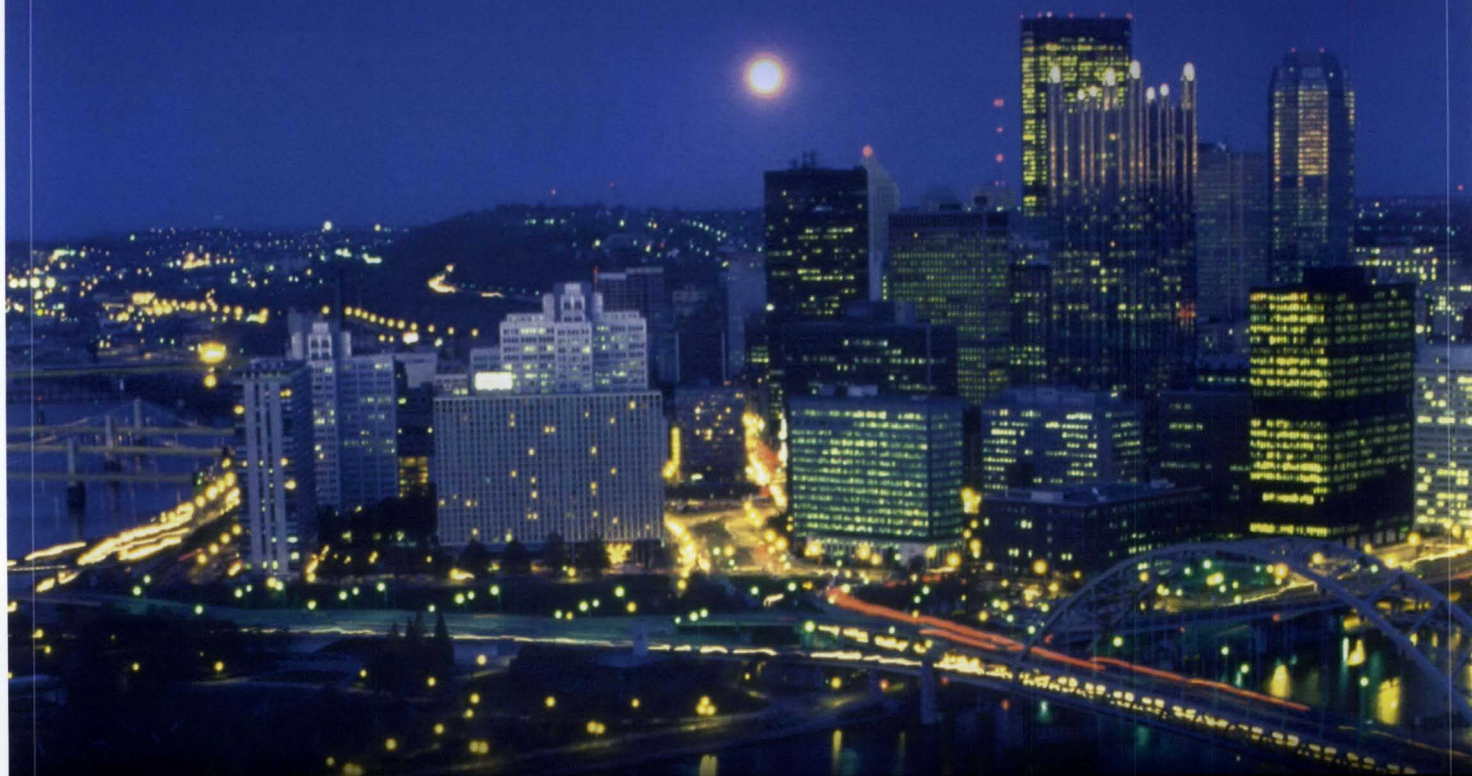


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to the Indians at the Kuskuskey. That was very important, and it was there that they turned on the French. That assisted the success of the Forbes campaign.” Another scene portrays a native family, possibly from one of the French mission villages, coming to upper Ohio: “I’m sketching a family who are on their way, where maybe they’ll have a better opportunity, just to show that families were moving, sometimes encouraged by the missionaries.”

The first map in the exhibit depicts Native American nations in the Ohio Country as the war began. The area had been uninhabited for about 75 years due to Iroquois expansionism, then other native groups come back into the area. “That’s what we’re showing,” says Threlfall. “How they’re coming back in, and where from and how they are. And some are coming for different reasons, but they’re all coming to the rich Ohio Valley. Some of the native groups figure they can get a better deal with the English than with the French, so they start moving closer to this chain of friendship that extended from the east of the Ohio Valley.”

Following that is a depiction of the Trans Allegheny. “I’m showing the campaigns, first the French one, where they send a military expedition from Canada to take possession of the Ohio, then the English response first with Colonel Washington. We’ll follow General Braddock, then we’re going to have Armstrong in there with his attack on Kittanning in 1756, and then Forbes in 1758.” Various events and battles co-exist on single maps by assigning different colors.

ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING OBJECTS early in the exhibit is a 26-foot-long canoe. It’s not an artifact but an amazingly realistic recreation from the hands of **Jan Zender and Rochelle Dale**. The project took two years: the first preparing, including finding the right roots and bark, the second one building. Even the seemingly simple construction requires many complex steps when being done in a traditional manner, from steaming the cedar ribbing to bend it to collecting lots of firewood to heat the pitch.

Zender and his wife make much more than canoes; they produce Native American-style crafts from the Great Lakes region such as trade silver ornaments, wooden utensils, coats from caribou hides, clothing for historical mannequins, and canoe-related items such as paddles. They are helped by their son, 20, and daughter, 13, plus another couple, John and Victoria Jungwirth and their two children. They named their company for the Yellow Dog River, which empties into Lake Superior. From where they live and work, they can see the lake eight miles away.

All their products are made with traditional tools such as axes, butcher knives, and wooden mallets, but this is no gimmick. “There is a deep philosophical reason behind the way we live. We feel that we live in an appropriate way, making minimum impact on the earth while acting as a whole family.” Their art and way of life are really intertwined. “We live in the woods, cut our own logs for our own log house, and we get most of what we need from where we live. We haul water from a spring and shoot deer for their hides. It’s sort of a romantic way of life; we’re not living in an apartment in some city making ‘Native American art.’”

“Canoe building is the most complicated Indian art,” Zender explains, “because it requires the most knowledge. You have to know quill work and how to tan a hide. You have to have knowledge of the materials, the tools. You have to work during the



Jan Zender and Rochelle Dale led the building of a canoe using 18th-century Native American methods.

right seasons; for example, our wives collect the spruce roots at certain times. You need perfect bark and perfect wood.” Rochelle and Victoria also take care of most of the stitching and bark-stripping.

The first step is finding bark and wood that are both free of knots. “For the bark, you need to find a straight birch tree. Then you have to find trees with bark thick enough for a canoe. You test it by peeling it back a little bit. Loggers make it hard to find trees with thick enough bark, because they’re usually cut down too young. We had to look at hundreds of trees to find wood with the right grain for the ribbing.”

The bark on a canoe is inside-out. The visible lines are traced by the pitch, and under the pitch are stitches holding the pieces together. Zender explains that completing the long row of stitches across the boat is very time-consuming: “You need two people, one on the inside of the canoe and one on the outside, to keep feeding the spruce root in and out of the holes. Stitching is pretty tedious anyway, and there is also a lot of time spent just splitting the spruce root in half. The preparation of the seams has the most drudgery. There is also the fact that spruce roots are collected during black fly season; that’s pretty bad in itself.”

Different types of wood were used for different parts of this extra-long canoe: “The gunwales are made from ash, as well as the caps and the forks. The ribbing is made from cedar, as well as the very thin layers of wood that line the floor of the canoe. The stem piece is made from basswood fiber, and of course there are the spruce roots, although they aren’t exactly wood.”

The pitch is found like maple syrup: by cutting trees and collecting the sap that oozes out. “We heat the sap, and then mix it with charcoal and bear fat. How much bear fat we use depends on what the canoe will be used for. More fat will keep it flexible in the winter, while using less will make it harder in the summer.”

Zender’s mother is French Canadian, several of her relatives married Indians, and one of her relatives was a trapper.



“She would tell stories that were just great,” he recalls. “Eventually, she moved to the United States, and lived in the country, where I was born.”

Rochelle also grew up in the country, in the Southern U.S. “She appreciated the fact that we could have a way of earning our living from art while living this way. We spent some time in a tepee and even lived in Pine Ridge,” a reservation in South Dakota.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE EXHIBITION that helps visitors experience the past firsthand are life-like recreations of personalities from the war. Nine figures were meticulously crafted by **Gerry Embleton** of Prêles, Bernese Jura, Switzerland. His sketches for these figures can be seen in this book’s sidebars, one per chapter.

Born in London, he began helping his brother Ronald with comic strips and had his first illustration published at 14. A year later, Embleton left school to freelance as an illustrator and comic strip artist. He has illustrated more than 200 books, scores of book jackets, educational artwork, and posters. He also draws and paints purely for the love of doing it, but has exhibited some of it too around the world. He points to a job in 1971 as a turning point when he illustrated *Universal Soldier*. The editor and writer, Martin Windrow, became a close friend and colleague, plus he got to work with some of the greatest experts on military costume. Afterwards, he says, “I researched and painted the uniforms worn

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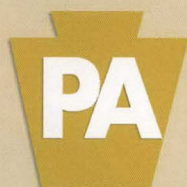


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As a model for one of Embleton's figures, Paul Winnie has alginate applied by Gerry, left, and Alan Gutchess. *Lora Hershey*



Gerry Embleton crafted nine figures for the exhibit.

during the American Revolution which led to a consultancy for the *London Sunday Times* bicentennial exhibition at the Royal Maritime Museum and several major commissions.”

Embleton is a long-time member of the Company of Military Historians (USA), the Society for Army Historical Research (GB), and the Sabretache (F). “I’ve illustrated more than 60 books on military costume, always emphasizing what was *actually* worn rather than regulation dress, and written and illustrated many articles on various aspects of the subject.”

After moving to Switzerland in 1983, Embleton was invited to work for the Swiss Institute of arms and armour at Grandson castle, eventually rising to head of the Creative Art Department. “I made my first exhibition of three-dimensional costumed figures in a very realistic and individual style as part of the total refurbishing of the Castle of Lenzburg in Switzerland, which won a European prize. In 1988 I formed my own company, Time Machine AG.” At the same time, he founded the Company of Saynte George, a Swiss-based internationally recruited living history group, widely known for the accuracy of its presentations.

Time Machine’s recent work ranges from a pirate exhibition in the Bahamas, to nine life-sized dioramas at the just-opened Frazier Arms Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, and has

ongoing work at the largest reconstructed Bronze Age village in Europe.

Another project – a book illustrating the Seven Years’ War in America from the perspective of the British redcoats – dovetails with his work for the History Center.

The nine figures he crafted can be found in eight dioramas (the first one has two people):

- **The Portage:** *An Iroquois Warrior and Canadian Militiaman at Presque Isle, 1753-54* (two figures carry a canoe)
- **Tanaghrisson:** *An Ohio Iroquois Leader Warns the French, September 2, 1753*
- **George Washington:** *Defeat at the Great Meadows, July 3, 1754*
- **John Bush:** *Massachusetts Soldier at Lake George, 1756*
- **Martin Lucorney:** *A Hungarian Red Coat at Braddock’s Defeat, July 9, 1755*
- **Honor in Defeat:** *An Officer of the Royal-Roussillon Regiment at Montreal, September 7, 1760*
- **Jack Tar:** *A British Sailor Toasts the Triumph of Britannia, 1762*
- **Captive or Kin?:** *A Pennsylvania Girl in the Ohio Country, 1764*

Embleton jumped at the chance to create characters of this period, and especially relished the chance to honestly depict

Native Americans. “They are too often still portrayed as a sort of updated version of the cigar store Indian,” he says, “or as politically correct idealized fantasies. I wanted to portray them as the real people that they were, and are still, with human faults and virtues.” Embleton used living Native American models both to help capture them as accurately as possible, and to explain the project and obtain their agreement.

The costumes are made incorporating unusual details such as field adaptations to uniforms, known physical descriptions, wear and tear, and weather conditions. The basic figures are then constructed from a wide variety of materials, from bio-resins and acrylic plaster to metal and wood.

“We mold all faces, hands and some body parts from live models, assemble, paint, cloth, and then equip them. By this time they have taken on personalities of their own and I sometimes get the feeling that *they* are telling *me* what they want to look like!”

One of the intriguing figures is John Bush, portrayed carving a powder horn. With little known, and no image available, Embleton crafted him to represent the many African Americans caught up in the conflict.

“He was ‘company clerk,’ literate and artistic. Several of the beautifully decorated powder horns he made survive and the one we’ve shown him working on is in the exhibition. I’ve shown him calmly working during a pause in the march. His dress reflects the semi-uniformed state of many provincial troops. John was captured at the fall of Fort William Henry; African Americans could expect to be treated as slaves if captured by the French. He died at sea, enroute to France.”

Perhaps the most intriguing piece will be a young captive girl of European descent admiring the new clothes she has received from her American Indian captors. Embleton says he and History Center staff strived to push beyond the clichés of who participated in this war: “This is a young captive at a moment of complete happiness with her adopted people. I wanted the viewer to ask, ‘Will she stay, or return to her own people?’ Many captives were treated very harshly indeed but many others were adopted – really



Embleton also paints in oils; here he depicts three soldiers from the Virginia Regiment, 1755.

adopted – and treated as one of the family.” The artist didn’t need to look far for a model; he had one at hand in his 9½-year-old daughter Camille.

In all his works, Embleton strives to capture people and their embellishments as they really were: “I dig deep and I enjoy the detective work. I’ve worn the clothes, fired black powder, eaten the food. I look for soldiers’ letters and diaries, and I try to see beyond what was supposed to have been to accurately portray people and how they lived.” ☀

Opposite: Reenactors on the Allegheny River, Pittsburgh.
Photograph © Richard Kelly Photography.

