MAKING
Christopher Gist may not be a name recognized by most Western Pennsylvanians today, but in the mid-18th century, particularly in the colonies of Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina, he was widely known. George Washington, Edward Braddock, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Boone, and prominent Eastern Woodland Chiefs, such as Shingas, Guyusuta, and Tanaghrisson, the Seneca governor of Logstown, all knew Gist. He played an intriguing role in early American history, and his most dramatic adventures took place in Western Pennsylvania.
Little is known about Gist’s early life. He was born about 1706 near Baltimore, Maryland, the town his father, Richard Gist, helped lay out, and he most likely learned from him the art of surveying. But as one historian observes: “His easy grasp of the elements of geography and mineralogy show that his education consisted of considerably more than mere study of the basic fundamentals of surveying.”¹ In addition to his informal education, which probably included working on his father’s plantation, clerking in his mercantile business, and learning how to trap furs, Christopher and his siblings may have studied with a private tutor. His father could have afforded it, and it is clear that “his English and spelling are much above the average Virginian” when reading his journals.² Schools were rare on the frontier, so those who wanted their children to have a good education paid for it. Prospective marriage partners were almost as scarce as schools, and the three Howard sisters who lived on the farm adjoining the Gist homestead later became the wives of Christopher and his two brothers.

There were over 400 traders roaming the Pennsylvania and Ohio frontiers in the mid-18th century, but few were like Gist—on their way to becoming a millionaire by their early 20s. Gist joined in the lucrative fur trade in the late 1720s and soon saw an opportunity to significantly increase his income. The majority of the traders in the Ohio Valley might make enough profit on beaver and deer pelts to buy a new supply of trade goods for their return trip to the frontier,³ but it was the fur buyers in Carlisle, Philadelphia, and Baltimore who made enormous profits by buying beaver and deer pelts from the traders and then selling the furs to manufacturing firms in England. This is what Gist did.

By the early 1730s, Gist owned extensive farmlands, property in Baltimore, servants, livestock, and a farm house, but tragedy struck in 1732 when he was just 26. His fur warehouse caught fire, and he lost almost everything. In today’s currency, his 10,000 pounds sterling loss would amount to about $2 million. Over the next decade, Gist’s debts continued, and he was eventually forced to sell nearly all of his possessions to pay off moneylenders. In 1745, possibly to avoid creditors, he moved his family to a farm along the Yadkin River in North Carolina, “a location out on the extreme frontier.”⁴ At that time, North Carolina served as a safe haven for those who wanted to escape debtor’s prison. “It was here,” according to Bailey, “that he became noted far and wide for his abilities as a surveyor.”⁵ Gist also met Daniel Boone after relocating to North Carolina where he most likely traded furs with the Cherokees.

Before establishing himself as an important figure on the Western Pennsylvania landscape, Gist made a name for himself as a frontiersman. Although Daniel Boone is usually remembered as the pioneer who opened up Kentucky, Gist actually explored northern Kentucky 18 years before Boone’s adventures began. By 1750, Gist’s reputation had caught the attention of the directors of the Ohio Company, who had just been allocated 200,000 acres (approximately 350 square miles) of land by the King of England. This huge land area was awarded with the provision that the Ohio Company attract 100 families to establish farms on the land, along with forts and trading posts. Gist was hired to scout out the best land for the company and to keep a daily record of his progress. In return for his service, the Company paid him 150 pounds sterling ($30,000). This was no small sum of money in 1750, considering that an itinerant teacher made 8-10 pounds sterling per year, and a financially successful blacksmith seldom made more than 20-25.

Gist started his exploration of the Pennsylvania frontier (much of which was also claimed by Virginia) and the Ohio frontier in late October 1750 accompanied by a 17-year-old servant, most likely a slave. At this time there were no roads into Western Pennsylvania, so Gist and his servant traveled through the wilderness on horseback, starting from the Ohio Company’s trading post at Wills Creek (present-day Cumberland, Maryland). From there, they followed an old Indian trail (present-day Raystown Road) to Shannopin’s Town (near present-day 40th and Butler streets). Gist noted in his diary that he dared not let the village warriors see that he was carrying a surveying compass because the Delaware knew that an Englishman with a compass was not a good thing.⁶

Winter soon descended upon the pair, and after buying corn for their horses, they crossed the Allegheny and arrived at Logstown (near present-day Ambridge, Beaver County). With over 40 log cabins, a council meeting

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¹ Bruce Cridlebaugh.
² Figures of Christopher Gist and Chief Guyasuta once guarded the entrance to the Manchester Bridge. These sculptures are now housed in a Canonsburg warehouse.
The Pennsylvania forest contained trees **200 feet tall** with a canopy so thick that 80 percent of the sunlight was blocked from reaching the forest floor.
On Monday, November 4, 1751, Christopher and his 18-year-old son Nathaniel began this five-month expedition. Traveling through the Western Pennsylvania wilderness on horseback during the coldest days of the year was no easy task, slogging through sleet, snow, freezing rain, and bitterly cold mountain streams. Their journey was constantly impeded by the vagaries of Pennsylvania weather, often forcing them to stop. Journal entries describing inclement weather were common: "Rained hard and We could not Travel … From Saturday 21 to Tuesday Jan 7 we stayed at this Place, We had good deal of Snow and bad Weather."13

Another problem Gist and his son had to deal with upon venturing into Pennsylvania's backwoods was its incredibly dense forest, which offered almost no browse for horses. On this trip, Gist probably had a small pack train consisting of at least six horses: two for riding, one for carrying supplies and trade goods, and three for carrying corn and fodder for the horses since the forest floor was barren of grass. Huge white pine forests reaching heights of 200 feet or more would have stretched for miles, the pines' trunks averaging 12 feet in circumference. Gist also would have navigated through enormous stands of maples, oaks, and...
black walnuts, their trunks averaging 18 feet in circumference as well as immense cottonwood trees growing along the banks of the rivers often reaching 45 feet in circumference. The streams flowing through this massive forest would have resembled narrow ribbons of ink during the summer because the forest canopy, which stretched across both sides of the stream, blocked out almost all sunlight. Gist was always on the lookout for meadows or former Indian villages where his horses could find lush grasses and thus have a chance to renew their strength.

There are several explanations as to why Gist waited until late fall to begin his expeditions when severe winter weather conditions could be so treacherous. Perhaps during the summer and fall, Gist and his sons would have been too busy planting and harvesting crops, but by late October, the day-to-day farm chores could have been handled by Gist’s younger teenage sons. A winter exploration would have been free of horseflies, mosquitoes, fleas, deer flies, copperheads, and rattlesnakes. During the winter, Gist could get a better feel for the geographical features of the land. Once all the leaves were on the ground, high ridges would have permitted views of vast stretches of potential farmland as well as the best location for Ohio Company trading posts and forts.

By late November, Gist arrived at the foot of the Laurel Ridge where he and his son spent six days inspecting the land around present-day Connellsville, Uniontown, Republic, and Greensville. On a Saturday in early December, Gist arrived at Nemacolin’s village located on Dunlap’s Creek near Brownsville, and during his two-day stay, Nemacolin complained to Gist about how his father, a respected Delaware chief, had been cheated out of land that was given to him by the Penn family. Gist relayed the complaint in his journal:

“The Proprieter of Pennsylvania granted my Father a Tract of Land beginning eight Miles below the Forks of Brandy Wine Creek … The White people now live on these Lands, and will neither let Me have Them, nor pay Me any Thing for Them … I desire that you let the Governor and Great Men in Virginia know this. It may be they will tell the great King of it.”

But Nemacolin’s plea most likely fell on deaf ears. Gist’s final comment on the Delaware leader’s understandable grievance is revealing: “This I was obliged to insert in my Journal to please the Indian.”

After leaving Nemacolin’s village, Gist and his son camped in a rock shelter near present-day Isabella along the Monongahela River and continued to record land features up and down the eastern shore of the river. He recorded this camping place in his journal:

“At this place is a large cavity in a rock about 30 feet long and 20 feet wide and about 7 feet high and even floor—The entrance into it is so large and open that...
and told him that he could come and live upon the Monongahela.

In the fall of 1752, Gist built a log structure at the foot of Laurel Ridge where he, his wife Sarah, and several of his children lived. Some accounts assert that 11 families erected cabins in the area of the Gist plantation, but their names were not recorded. Gist himself probably did not live at his new settlement for extended periods of time,24 but it served as the beginning of what would become Mt. Braddock, right outside Uniontown, Pennsylvania. A year later, Gist was once again employed by the Ohio Company to lead an expedition into the backwoods, and it was this trip that secured his place in American history.

On November 14, 1753, Gist met 21-year-old George Washington, the man he was hired to guide through the wilderness.25 Gist agreed to lead Washington on a mission to deliver a letter to the French demanding that they stop building forts in the Ohio Valley and return immediately to French Canada. In addition to Gist, Barney Curran and John McQuire were hired as hunters, William Jenkins and Henry Stuart as traders, and Jacob Van Braam, Washington’s former fencing instructor, as a French interpreter. At the conclusion of their first day of travel, however, Gist was faced with a personal dilemma: whether or not to leave the expedition to take care of his son Nathaniel who “lay sick at the mouth of the Conegocheaque River.” Gist’s skills as an experienced guide were something Washington was reluctant to lose, even temporarily, so Gist continued with the mission, noting in his journal, “Washington and all the company unwilling I should return, I wrote and sent medicines to my son, and so continued my journey…. ”26 Nathaniel recovered, later married the daughter of a Cherokee chief, and became the father of George Gist, better known as Sequoyah, inventor of the Cherokee alphabet.27

After plodding through snow for three days, they stayed at Gist’s plantation overnight.
Gist agreed to lead Washington on a mission to deliver a letter to the French, which demanded that they stop building forts in the Ohio Valley.

Four days later, the expedition arrived at the trading post of John Frazier (or Fraser) located across the Mon at the mouth of Turtle Creek (near present-day Braddock, across the river from Kennywood Park). A well-established fur trader, blacksmith, and gunsmith, Frazier had a life filled with adventure. His Venango post was confiscated by the French; his post at Turtle Creek was later burned to the ground, and his wife was captured by the Indians. Frazier lent Washington’s party a canoe to carry their baggage to the point where the three rivers met.

In the mid-18th century, the area we know as the City of Pittsburgh was a densely forested wilderness described as a place “not easily capable of culture.”28 The most populated area would have been the 20-family Lenape village, Shannopin’s Town, a major trading center where about 80 Delawares lived. Whites found in Western Pennsylvania at this time would have been mostly traders living in “miserable” log cabins.29 What we now know as the Point, “the land that was soon to engross the attention of the world,”30 was barren of human habitation. The land was “Low swampy ground much infested with venomous Serpents and Mosquetose” according to Lewis Evans, Philadelphia’s best known cartographer,31 but Washington looked at the Point and saw what Half-King had seen earlier—the strategic value of the area between the forks:

I spent some time in viewing the rivers and the land in the fork, which I think extremely well situated for a fort; as it has the absolute command of both rivers … and a considerable bottom of flat, well-timbered land all around it very convenient for building.”32

As the expedition started down the Ohio, they stopped to visit Shingas, a prominent Delaware chief whose village was located at McKee’s Rocks—the spot originally proposed by the Ohio Company as a good location for a fort. Shingas would later strike terror among the English settlers across the frontier, but in 1753, he was an English ally. They reached
Logstown on the last Saturday in November, and Washington explained his mission to Monakatootha, an Oneida/Mingo chief who then sent out runners to find Half-King, who was familiar with Gist from the 1752 meeting about building a trading post at the forks of the Ohio River.

On Sunday afternoon, Half-King arrived at Logstown and met privately with Washington and his interpreter, John Davidson. Half-King’s role at Logstown was to safeguard the interests of the Iroquois Nation who had lived for hundreds of years on the land the French and English now claimed. He told Washington that the trip to the French fort would take six days and also described the disdain that the French commander had for the Seneca in the Ohio Valley. After traveling for five days through snow and freezing rain, Washington and his fellow travelers arrived at Venango. Rain, snow, high creeks, and worn-out horses made the Fort LeBoeuf trip miserable. Gist described how the icy creeks and freezing rain wore down the horses until they were utterly incapable of travel. After some diplomatic delays, Washington delivered Dinwiddie’s letter to St. Pierre, the French commander. St. Pierre needed several days to have the letter translated and a diplomatic response prepared, but this delay gave Washington a good chance to gather some useful intelligence. He quietly estimated the number of French soldiers and cannons guarding the fort and counted 50 birch bark and 170 dugout canoes.

After five days, the expedition began its trek back to Virginia. The horses, far too exhausted by this time to carry any baggage, were taken south toward Logstown by Barney Curran. After four days, ice and snow impeded their travel. Washington describes their daily frustrations: “we were stopped by ice, and worked until night…. The ice was so hard we couldn’t break through…. The creek began to be very low, and we were forced to get out … several times; the weather freezing to our clothes.” In view of the constant delays, Washington decided more progress would be made walking. Noting that their horses were extremely “weak and feeble” and that “the roads were becoming much worse,” he and Gist began their three-week journey home through heavy snow and freezing temperatures with just their rifles and a few provisions in their backpacks. Neither man seemed to mind not being home for Christmas. Washington never mentioned it, and Gist noted only that they slept in an abandoned Indian cabin and that “the Major was much fatigued.”

The next day Washington and Gist met an Indian whom Gist had seen before at Venango. He noted, “This fellow called me by my Indian name, and pretended to be glad to see me.” But the Indian roused Gist’s suspicions when he asked questions about their trip—where they left their horses and when their horses would arrive. Gist, however, didn’t reveal his uneasy feeling. Washington wanted to find the nearest way to the forks of the Allegheny, and this native traveler agreed to lead them, so they set off, presumably toward the Allegheny. But after about 10 miles, Gist noted that the Indian was not traveling southeast but northeast. Then, when Washington wanted to stop and encamp,
the Indian asked to carry Washington’s gun. When Washington refused, the trouble began. Gist detailed the incident in his journal:

the Indian grew churlish, and pressed us to keep on telling us that there were Ottowa Indians in these woods and they would scalp us if we lay out; but to go to his cabin, and we should be safe, I thought very ill of the fellow, but did not care to let the Major know I mistrusted him. But he soon mistrusted him as much as I.... Before we came to the water, we came to a clear meadow; it was very light, and snow on the ground. The Indian made a stop, turned about; the Major saw him point his gun toward us and fire. Said the Major, “Are you shot?” “No,” said I. Upon which the Indian ran forward to a big standing white oak, and to loading his gun; but we were soon with him. I would have killed him; but the Major would not suffer me to kill him.36

Washington’s journal entry concurs:

One of the Indians fired at Mr. Gist or me, not fifteen steps off, but fortunately missed. We took this fellow into custody, and kept him until about nine o’clock at night, then let him go, and walked the remaining part of the night without making any stop.37

Gist is usually credited as a hero for saving Washington’s life during this incident, but as their journal entries illustrate, there is no evidence to support such a conclusion. Perhaps the most important reason Washington wasn’t killed that day was that the Indian was a poor shot, and we will never know exactly what happened or how big a role Gist played in subduing the shooter. Washington’s response to the shooting incident, however, is worth noting. He wisely prevented Gist from killing the Indian, most likely realizing that such an action might well have endangered the success of his diplomatic mission.

On Saturday, December 29, 1753, Washington and Gist constructed a raft to ferry themselves across the Allegheny (near the present-day 40th Street Bridge in Lawrenceville). Having just “one poor hatchet” in bitterly cold temperatures, the task took all day. Just before sunset, they started across, but before long, Washington narrowly escaped another near-tragic event. Both men recorded this hair-raising drama rather matter-of-factly in their journals. Gist’s account is austere: “The Major having fallen in from off the raft, and my fingers frost-bitten, and the sun down, and very cold, we contented ourselves to encamp upon the island. In the morning, it was frozen hard enough for us to pass over on the ice.”38

Washington’s description, although subdued, includes the drama of detail: before we were halfway over, we were jammed in the ice, in such a manner, that we expected every moment our raft to sink, and ourselves to perish. I put out my setting pole to try to stop the raft, that the ice might pass by, when the rapidity of the stream threw it with so much violence against the pole that it jerked me into ten feet of water; but I fortunately saved myself by catching

French Creek 1753, Half King and Christopher Gist, by John Buxton depicts Washington and Gist during the winter of 1753, delivering a message from Governor Dinwiddie to French Fort LeBoeuf. At Venango, French Captain Joncaire attempted to stall them by giving presents and liquor to the Indians allied to Washington, one of whom was the Half-King. Anxious to keep moving, Washington sent Gist to the Indian camp to solicit the Half-King to leave for Fort LeBoeuf, “which he did with great persuasion.”

Courtesy of the artist.
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George Washington

Gist is also hailed as the man who saved George Washington’s life during the raft incident, but neither of their firsthand accounts have Gist pulling Washington out of the water. Washington and Gist had to travel 10 more long miles on foot the next day before reaching the warmth of John Frazier’s cabin.

On New Year’s Day 1754, Washington and Gist either borrowed or purchased two horses from Frazier and continued toward Gist’s settlement. On Friday, January 4, they started across the Allegheny Mountains. Arriving at Wills Creek on the 7th, Washington seemed relieved the trip was at an end. Within months, 500 French soldiers arrived at the forks of the Allegheny to construct Fort Duquesne. Four years later, the English took possession of that fort’s remains and renamed it Fort Pitt. Traders and their families settled in the bark huts and log cabins originally built for the soldiers. As the white population on the land between the forks grew, the Woodland Indians were forced off their land.

During the French and Indian War, Gist served as a guide to George Washington and...
General Edward Braddock, and after Braddock’s defeat, “Captain Gist” headed a group of scouts in Virginia and Maryland. In the fall of 1758, while leading a band of Cherokees north in hopes of enlisting their support in the fight against the French, Gist contracted small pox and died near Winchester, Virginia. He was about 52 years old.41

Gist was one of the 18th-century’s most skilled frontier guides and diplomatic emissaries. As Baldwin has noted, “His minute reports and observations … under the most trying circumstances, are surprisingly accurate…. We read much of the achievements of such men as George Washington, Edward Braddock, William Trent, and their associates, yet it is largely on information furnished by Christopher Gist that they relied on in times of difficulty.”42

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Since 2005, the History Center has housed the Center for the French & Indian War in the Library & Archives on its 6th floor. The Center promotes scholarship and original historical research on the 1754-1763 global conflict that began in Western Pennsylvania and profoundly shaped the world we inhabit today.

Offering public access to more than 1,000 books, documents, maps, and other materials essential to an understanding of the war, the Center also serves as a liaison to other institutions and provides scholars and the general public with needed assistance in locating specific research materials. Educational programs, lectures, and conferences are offered, and the Center serves as a forum for scholarly debate and discussion.

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