Evening of Braddock's Defeat by W.C. Wall.
HC Museum collection.
A FERTILE LAND FOR DEVELOPMENT

16,000 BP–1850

Long before dinosaurs roamed the earth, about 300 million years ago, the key geographic features of this region formed. Vast tropical swamps covered Western Pennsylvania. As the climate changed over millions of years, that plant life died, decayed, and was buried. Under pressure and over time, those materials transformed into the single most valuable mineral deposit in the world: the Pennsylvania coal seam. Above ground, meltwater from glaciers north of the city filled the Allegheny River basin carrying sand, gravel, and rock to the area around the Point. By the time the first people arrived 16,000 years ago, the distinctive features we know today already existed.

These gifts of nature made this land valuable for the peoples who traveled to and through it. The forks of the rivers became the key to the interior of the nation—first for military control and later as a jumping off point to the West. The landscape challenged settlers to create new ways to travel over, on, and around it. The rich coal deposits provided fuel for this region’s idea foundry—the spark for early industry and the engine that drove innovation.
Fur trader Michael Bezallion writes first description of region

These peoples’ names and faces are lost to the ages, but archaeologists find their belongings at sites like Meadowcroft Rockshelter.

**Tool Maker**

Twelve thousand years ago the last ice age came to an end. The massive glaciers that once crushed the landscape with ice over a mile thick, retreated north beyond the newly formed great lakes. Among the forests of what we now call Western Pennsylvania lived a people well adapted to living off the region’s abundant natural resources. These peoples’ names and faces are lost to the ages, but archaeologists find their belongings at sites like Meadowcroft Rockshelter (Washington County), which dates to 16,000 before present (BP)—the oldest site of human occupation in North America.

The tool maker figure at right from the History Center’s Innovators exhibition is at work on a stone projectile point. He is skilled at working flint, chert, quartz, and other materials. In addition to producing tools of stone, bone, and wood, the first people in the Americas produced finely woven textiles for clothing, bags, and nets used for hunting and fishing. By 3,000 years ago, their descendants throughout the Americas had also domesticated plants such as maize (corn), beans, squash, and tobacco, which figured prominently in trade with newcomers from Europe 400 years ago.

Above: An early tool maker replica in the History Center’s Innovators exhibition. Figure by Time Machine AG, photograph Heather Mull.

Queen Aliquippa

“We dined in a Seneca town where an old Seneca Woman Reigns with great Authority,” wrote Conrad Weiser. Shrouded in mystery, Seneca leader Aliquippa’s life reveals itself only in brief accounts by French and British envoys. Aliquippa may have been born as early as the 1680s; one story has her family bidding farewell to William Penn when he departed Pennsylvania in 1701. Other reports date her birth to 1701 or 1706. In fact, by the 1740s, Aliquippa lived in Western Pennsylvania and led a group of about 30 Seneca families.

Fiercely loyal to the British throughout her life, she met twice with Conrad Weiser in 1748 while negotiating a treaty between the western Indians and Pennsylvania. He reported a Logstown visit where Aliquippa requested gunpowder and shot to “enable her to send out the Indian boys to kill turkey & other fowls for her, whilst the men are gone to war against the French.” Céloron, a French expedition commander, attempted to pay the Queen homage in 1749 as she encamped near McKees Rocks. She rebuffed him. “The Iroquois inhabit this place and it is an old woman of this nation who governs it,” Céloron wrote. “She regards herself as sovereign. She is entirely devoted to the English.”
Queen Aliquippa and George Washington

“Went up three miles to the mouth of the Youghiogheny River to visit Queen Aliquippa, who had expressed great concern that we passed her in going to the Fort,” wrote a young George Washington. Aliquippa had at least two encounters with Washington. When he traveled to Western Pennsylvania in 1754 at Governor Robert Dinwiddie’s request, Washington visited Logtown to attend a council with Iroquois leaders, but he neglected to visit Aliquippa on his way. Hearing of the Queen’s displeasure, Washington made a trip to pay her homage. His short journal entry of that visit reveals the best known account of Aliquippa:

I made her a Present of a Match-Coat: & a Bottle of rum, which the latter was thought much the better present of the two.

Aliquippa must have trusted Washington; she, her son, and their followers joined him at the Great Meadow to witness the battle at Fort Necessity. After the defeat, they fled to George Croghan’s Augswich homestead in present-day Huntingdon County. There the tired, sick Seneca leader lived out her last months, dying on December 23, 1754. “Alequeapy, ye old quine is dead,” Croghan recorded in his journal. Her name lives on in the town of Aliquippa, Beaver County, and in the ridge and gap near Augswich.
Why Pittsburgh?

On November 27, 1758, Brigadier General John Forbes penned a letter to William Pitt, Prime Minister of England. Forbes reported the positive turn of events for British forces battling the French in North America. Days earlier, Forbes marched an army of nearly 5,000 men 50 miles to the Forks of the Ohio, site of French Fort Duquesne. Alerted to the approaching British army, the few hundred French and Canadian soldiers defending the fort destroyed it and withdrew. Forbes claimed the ruins, renaming them for Pitt: “I have used the freedom of giving your name to Fort Duquesne, as I hope it was in some measure the being actuated by your spirits that now makes us Masters of the place…. These dreary deserts will soon be the richest and most fertile of any possessed by the British in North America.”

Published just two months after General Forbes claimed Fort Duquesne and named the site, this map may be the earliest to show Pittsburgh. Note the location of the fort and the many surrounding Indian towns, including Aliquippa’s location (#14). An accompanying article describes how “the British flag flies over the debris … in triumph.”
Creating a Culture

Families crossed the mountains into Western Pennsylvania on foot or horseback carrying just a few possessions. The journey took days, following old Indian trails and rutted military roads. Usually these pioneers arrived with only some hand tools and simple utensils, a few head of livestock, and a horse. They also brought with them language, music, foodways, and rich cultural traditions. By the late 1790s they had transformed the wilderness into a distinctive backcountry that valued independence, innovation, and hard work.

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Conestoga Wagon on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Thomas Birch, 1816.
Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.
Whiskey

*It steals gently upon the senses, like music upon the soul, and animates the intellect without ever collapsing an idea.*

— Samuel Johnson reflecting on the spirit “Pure Rock Water”

Before the rebellion came the whiskey, a tradition of distilling grains into spirits that settlers brought from the old country. In Scotland, malted barley served as its base; in this region, distillers created a new recipe—rye for whiskey or rye and corn to make bourbon. With little hard money on the frontier, whiskey—a daily drink—served as payment for work, barter for goods, and cash in trade. Not every farm had a still; just as millers of grain were specialists, so too were distillers. But enough 30-gallon copper stills existed in the region to produce whiskey for the population’s need plus extra for trade.
Gateway to the West

Meriwether Lewis may have been the most important traveler to head west from Pittsburgh. Lewis launched a “keeled boat” or barge from Fort Fayette in August 1803, carrying the hopes and dreams of a young nation. It was the start of the epic Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific—the greatest in American history. Between 1803 and 1806, the Corps of Discovery claimed and charted a vast new territory, made contact with Indians, discovered scientific wonders, and experienced adventures that captured the world’s imagination. Lewis and Clark opened a doorway of opportunity to the West; many of those who stepped through began their journey here in Pittsburgh.

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Portrait of Meriwether Lewis, C.B.J.
Saint-Memin, 1807.
Courtesy of New York Historical Society.

The artist painted Lewis as he appeared at journey’s end. Lewis wears a fur tippet of otter and 100 white weasel skins, a gift from Shoshone chief Cameahwait, Sacagawea’s brother.
Steamboats revolutionized river travel, just as steam engines transformed industry. In 1811, Robert Fulton, Robert Livingston, and Nicholas Roosevelt built and launched the *New Orleans* from Pittsburgh—the first steamboat on western waters. On its maiden journey to her namesake city, the boat demonstrated the steam engine’s unprecedented power to propel river crafts both down- and upriver. Journeys by flat or keeled boats that lasted several months now took weeks or even just days by steam. Freight and passengers could be moved much more cheaply. Within a decade the steamboat reigned on western waters, and Pittsburgh established itself as both gateway and shipper to the West.

Steam Power

*There is now on foot a new mode of navigating our western waters… This is with boats propelled by the power of steam.*

— Zadok Cramer, 1814

Robert Fulton built the nation’s first steamboat, the *Clermont*, launched in New York in 1807. Fulton adopted Nicholas Roosevelt’s sidewheel propulsion method for this boat and the *New Orleans* and relied on Roosevelt to chart the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to determine the feasibility of navigation by steamboat. Fulton and Livingston built the *New Orleans* here, initiating the age of steam.
John A. Roebling: Bridging Connections

Fire offered an opportunity to John A. Roebling. On April 10, 1845, a massive blaze destroyed much of Pittsburgh along the Monongahela River. The covered wooden Monongahela Bridge—the city's first and oldest span—burned in less than 10 minutes. Roebling, a Prussian immigrant, had come to Western Pennsylvania in 1831 with a degree in civil engineering. Roebling proposed a wire rope cable suspension bridge. He had perfected his rope while working for the Pennsylvania Canal and had used it for a canal aqueduct he built across the Allegheny River. His wire rope was untested on heavy, load-bearing bridges, but his design successfully proved its strength. The bridge established Roebling's reputation and launched his career. He became most famous for the design and building of the Brooklyn Bridge.

As early as 1815, travelers to the region remarked on Pittsburgh's smoky veil—generated by coal-fired factories and home heating furnaces. With an abundance of raw materials and access to growing western markets, Pittsburgh became the West's great provider, shipping a huge array of iron tools, nails, and pipe as well as glass and timber for building. The borrowing of ideas from industry to industry fueled the development of new machinery and industrial processes. By 1840, Pittsburgh had no peer in the glass industry, and just a decade later it also had earned the moniker “Iron City.”
Stephen Foster, 1826–1864

His powerful, yet simple songs still resonate today. Stephen Foster, the “Father of American Music,” grew up in Pittsburgh, the son of a Scots-Irish businessman. He likely received some formal training from Henry Kleber, a German immigrant who impacted Pittsburgh culture as a performer, composer, music merchant, and teacher. Foster worked at his craft, publishing his first song at age 18. As the first professional songwriter in this nation, he blended the country’s multi-ethnic sounds into a new form of American music.

The minstrel stage both popularized and circulated Foster’s music. Songs such as “Oh Susanna,” performed first in 1848, became national hits as well as “My Old Kentucky Home” (1853) and “Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair” (1854). Foster also arranged instrumental parlor music and later, school songs and hymns. Though he died penniless at the age of 38, he lives on through the uniquely American music he created.