The Forbes Road

EAST BOROUGH COUNCIL — BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA
519 Penn Avenue • Pittsburgh, Penna. 15221
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"Key to the West"

A selection of letters and documents describing General John Forbes' campaign to capture Fort Duquesne, now Pittsburgh. 1758

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As the English-speaking colonies along the Atlantic seaboard increased in population and consequent activity of industry and politics, men of foresight turned their attention to the West.

They wanted more land and more security in possession of the land. But the English speaking groups attempting to move westward after 1750 found their progress impeded along a line naturally formed by the Ohio Basin. The French in Canada had begun to build a system of forts along the Ohio and its tributaries, including the juncture of the Allegheny and the Monongahela. They had also organized the native Indian tribes to oppose the western movement of the English, not only by fighting but by raids into areas settled by the English. The hostility between England and France in Europe became a conflict for control of North America.

In 1753 Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia, representing the British monarchy and its colonies, sent George Washington into the Ohio country to ask the French commander there to honor what the English claimed as their rights.

As Governor Dinwiddie probably expected, the French commandant refused to acknowledge the British claims. The French not only refused to give up any forts in the area but also gave no indication of cooperating with the English in fur trading in the Ohio Valley. The result of this decision by the French was that Governor Dinwiddie instructed Washington to organize a force of colonial soldiers to drive the French from the Ohio territory near the site where Pittsburgh now stands and to build a fort at that place. His small army was discovered while many miles from the Ohio and forced to engage in battle. Washington won the first skirmish but was then forced by superior forces to go into a defensive position and build Fort Necessity, near what is now Uniontown. Here he was forced to surrender to the French Commander and sign a "confession". It was written in French, and when later completely translated, it was found to say that Washington had assassinated a French officer, Jumonville.

The following year, 1755, Washington agreed to help General Braddock attack Fort Duquesne, in what was supposedly a professional attempt. As Braddock's Army approached the Fort, victory appeared certain. Suddenly, it was attacked by French and Indians, as the Army was caught in the process of crossing the Monongahela River. In the battle that followed, Braddock was mortally wounded and most of his men killed. The remnants of the Army retreated with Washington to the Eastern seaboard.

The withdrawal of the beaten Army marked a tragic event for the new America. A reign of terror began for the frontier settler. For three years the savage Indians roamed at will, uncontrolled by their French allies, to massacre English settlers, burn their homes and carry into captivity women and children. The withdrawal of Washington with his crippled soldiers meant that there was no effective Army west of the Alleghenies, and Indians roved as far east as Winchester, Virginia, and even to the outskirts of Washington, D.C. itself.

In 1757, William Pitt became Prime Minister of England. He immediately commissioned John Forbes, a Brigadier General, and assigned him the task of capturing Fort Duquesne.

In the extracts of letters and documents which follow is reproduced first hand knowledge of the detailed planning, the hardships and the sufferings which went into the building of Forbes Road and the military campaign which it made possible. The spelling and grammar of the original documents have been included.

There may be readers who will have the question come to mind—"Was this not simply the story of the founding of another American city? (Pittsburgh). What does it mean to me, a citizen far removed from the junction of rivers which form the Ohio?" This introduction would be incomplete without considering this point of view.

This military operation became a means of training Washington and the nucleus of the Revolutionary Army. General Forbes said in his early association with Washington, that Washington knew little about an Army and did not know how to conduct a full scale military operation. Washington learned. The courage and perseverance he displayed in later years at Valley Forge had much of its basis in the experience and training that came as he lived and fought in the wilderness beyond the Alleghenies. It was ironical for the English that the leader and the core of the Army they trained should result in their final defeat at Yorktown.

Of even more significance of the road for America was its effect on the pattern of its population. Woodrow Wilson said that nothing in the development of America did so much to develop its dynamic character as the flow of unlike pioneers across the mountains over Forbes Road. As the French began to occupy the area, they brought with them the conception of an old France in a new America. They were attempting to establish the same form of government and were insisting on the same religion. Had France continued to dominate a large section of the country, a divided America would have most certainly been the result. Even on the English coast, the tendency was to colonize in segments unlike each other. The Cavaliers of Virginia and the Puritans of New England were cases of groups unlike in many respects. The opening of Forbes Road gave a secure and practical entrance into the West. Over the road began to pass pioneers from all the other groups. Here met, and at the end of the journey began life together, the Quaker, the Puritan, the Cavalier, the Catholic, the Protestant, and the Frenchman himself. They met and established their homes without questioning each others' religious or political beliefs. All they asked was that each get respect for his code of living no matter how independent it appeared.
PITT (IN LONDON) TO ABERCROMBY (IN NEW YORK)
DECEMBER 30, 1757

(Major General Abercromby, Commander-In-Chief of British Forces in North America) (The instructions at this time for Forbes were in general terms. Two campaigns, further north, were timed to coincide with the attack on Fort Duquesne.)

"I am further to signify His Majesty's pleasure that you do appoint Colonel Forbes (who will, by this conveyance receive a Commission of Brigadier General in America) to command such Forces, that Brigadier Forbes do proceed, without loss of time to Pennsylvania, or such other of the Southern Provinces, as shall be thought undertaken by said Troops, who, in conjunction with the Forces, directed by my letter (of which the inclosed is a copy) to the Southern Governors, to be raised in those Provinces, are to be employed under the command of said Brigadier Forbes, on any such offensive operations, as may be judged by him most expedient for annoying the enemy, and most efficacious towards removing and repelling the dangers that threaten the Frontiers of any of the Southern Colonies on the Continent of America."

FORBES (IN NEW YORK) TO DENNY (DEPUTY GOVERNOR OF PENNSYLVANIA) — MARCH 20, 1758

"I have favor (letter) of yours of the 17th and make no manner of doubt of your doing of everything in your power in forwarding His Majesty's Service. And, therefore must beg that the officers and soldiers raised in Pennsylvania for the service are able body'd good men, capable of enduring fatigue, and that their arms be the best that can be found in the Province; as carpenters and axe men are absolutely necessary upon many occasions. I must recommend the sending as many of those as can be conveniently got into the Troops."

FORBES (AT PHILADELPHIA) TO PITI — JUNE 17, 1758

(Forbes had written to the Governors of all near-by states. Men, wagons, and supplies were coming in from most of the states and were being assembled at Winchester, Cumberland, Carlisle, etc.) (Remembering that one contributing reason to Braddock's defeat was the absence of any fortification to fall back on short of Fort Cumberland, Forbes resolved to proceed cautiously and to erect strong points at convenient distances.)

"As my offensive operations are clogged with many difficulties, owing to the great distance & badness of the roads, through an almost impenetrable wood, uninhabited for more than 200 miles, our back inhabitants being all drove into

Carlisle. I am therefore lay'd under the necessity of having a stockaded camp, with a blockhouse & cover for our provisions, at every forty miles distance. By which means, although I advance but gradually, yet I shall go more surely by lessening the number, and in moderate long train of provisions waggons &c., for I can set out with a fortnight's provision, brought up from the first, to the second, I directly advance to make my third, and so proceed forward, by which I shall have a constant supply security for my provisions, by moving them forward from depots, to deposit as I advance, and lastly, if not thought convenient to settle upon the Ohio, or in that country, I shall have a sure retreat, leaving a road always practicable to penetrate into those back country, as our settlements advance towards them, from this side of the Allegheny Mountains."

FORBES (AT CARLISLE CAMP) TO PITI — JULY 10, 1758

(Advanced contingents of the Army reached Raystown (Bedford, Pa.) in early July. Scouts were sent out to locate the course of a road over the mountains. At the same time a road was constructed to connect with Fort Cumberland.)

"I halt tomorrow and shall then proceed 100 miles further to Raestown who are building some Storehouses and stockading a piece of ground for our ammunition and provisions. For in Raestown there is not one single house; the place having its name from one Rae, who designed to have made a plantation there several years ago, nor indeed is there either inhabitants or houses from this to the Ohio (except at Forts Loudoun and Lyttleton which are only two or three houses each, enclosed with a stockade of 100 feet square) the whole being an immense forest of 240 miles of extent, intersected by several ranges of mountains, impenetrable almost to anything humane save the Indians, (if they be allowed the appellation) who have foot paths, or tracts through those deserts, by the help of which, we make our roads."

"I am in hopes of finding a better way over the Alleghany Mountains than that from Fort Cumberland which Gen L'E. Braddock took, if so I shall shorten both by March, and my labour of cutting the road about 40 miles, which is a great consideration. For were I to pursue Mr. Braddock's route, I should save but little labour, as that road is now a brushwood, by the sprouts from the old stumps, which must be cut down and made proper for Carriages, as well as any other passage that we must attempt."
FORBES (AT CARLISLE) TO BOUQUET (AT RAYSTOWN) – JULY 14, 1758

"I have sent up Major Armstrong with one Dunning Ane Old Indian trader who has been many a time upon the road from Raestown to Fort Duquesne, and he says there is no difficulty in the road across the Laurell Hill and that he leaves the Yohageny all the way upon his left hand about 8 miles, and that it is only 40 miles from the Laurell Hill to Fort Duquesne along the top of Chestnut Ridge."

FORBES (AT CARLISLE) TO ABERCROMBY – JULY 25, 1758

"I have already informed you that I had sent Col. Bouquet to form at Post at Raestown, things are there in pretty great forwardness—scouting parties have been sent out with the best guides we could find, and according to the reports which some of them have made the road over the Alleghany Mountains and the Laurel Ridge will be found practicable for carriages, which will be of infinite consequence, will facilitate our matters by shortening the march about seventy miles besides the advantage of having no rivers to pass, as we shall keep the Yeogheny upon our left.

BOUQUET (AT RAYSTOWN CAMP) TO FORBES – AUGUST 8, 1758 (Colonel Henry Bouquet—second in command of expedition and in direct charge of one third of troops.)

(Based on the advice of scouts, a road was blazed over the Allegheny and Laurel Mountains to Loyalhanna (Ligonier, Pa.). Most of the Army was engaged in road building during the entire month of August.)

"There are 700 men, in four Divisions, employed in cutting the road from here to Armstrong's Post, including the detachment which protects the workers. As there is much to do and time is short, I shall reinforce them in two days with the rest of the First Battalion in Pennsylvania, in order to make a new entrenchment at the Major's Post and some bark covering for a temporary storehouse there. The rest of the Virginia detachment will set out to work with Colonel Stephens, who is cutting on the mountain, and Byrd's second company of workmen will join Major Lewis to open the gap. This makes in all more than 1200 men in these 37 miles."

STEPHEN (CAMP AT EDMUNDS SWAMP) TO BOUQUET (AT RAYSTOWN) – AUGUST 8, 1758 (Lt. Col. Adam Stephen—officer in Washington's regiment.)

"This morning has set the men to work about bridging the Swamp, and goes myself with a party to reconnoitre the shades of death, a dismal place! and wants only a cerberus to represent Virgil's gloomy description of Aeneas's entering the Infernal Regions."

FORBES (AT CARLISLE) TO ABERCROMBY – AUGUST 11, 1758 (Forbes had planned to move from Carlisle much earlier but he encountered delays in getting men and supplies together. Also, he was too ill to travel most of the time.)

"The new road from Raestown to Loyal Hanning on the other side of the Laurell Hill has been thoroughly reconnoitered and altho many bad steps, with very steep ascents and descents at times, yet Sir John has assured me that it is fully as good as the first 40 miles of General Braddock's route."

"I have had these 8 or 10 days about 1200 men employed upon it so a few days more will complete it, and when deposite for the stores at Loyal Hanning is in any sort of readiness for our reception, I shall move forward from Raestown to Loyal Hanning, from whence at any time I can proceed to the Ohio, as all that Country is mostly large nut and Oak Wood without any brush below."

BOUQUET (AT SHIPPENSBOURG) TO BOUQUET (AT RAYSTOWN) – AUGUST 18, 1758

"In carrying forward the new road. I think there might easily be a small road carried on at the same time, at about 100 yards to the right and left of it, and parallel with it, by which our flanking parties might advance easier along with the line. I don't mean here to cut down any large trees, only to clear away the Brushwood and Saplings, so as the men either on foot or on horseback may pass the easier along."

BOUQUET (AT RAYSTOWN CAMP) TO FORBES – AUGUST 18, 1758

"You are going to be shaken up on that abominable road from Littleton, and I am afraid that weak as you must be, the fatigue of this trip might cause your relapse. So, if you are still in Shippensburg, I think that you should not leave until you are stronger."

"It is a difficult and long task to build the road. I reconnoitered yesterday as far as the Shawnee Cabins, and will go tomorrow to the Summit of the Allegheny to judge the difficulties which the artillery will have at this gap."

"The rains have delayed them a little, but tomorrow or Sunday the wagons can go to Edmund's Swamp. The parties have cut in four different places, eight miles apart from each other, which advances the work rapidly."

FORBES (AT FORT LOUDON) TO PIT – SEPTEMBER 6, 1758

(Loyalhanna [Ligonier] was occupied by the first troops early in
September and construction started on a strong fort. From here, Major Grant attempted to capture Fort Duquesne before the main body of the Army arrived. His attack was discovered early by the French and Grant was defeated. Grant Street in Pittsburgh commemorates the defeat.

"In my last letter I had the honour to acquaint you, of my proceedings in the new road across the Allegheny Mountains, and over Laurell Hill (leaving the Rivers Ohioany and Monongahela to my left hand) strait to the Ohio, by which I have saved a great deal of way, and prevented the misfortunes that the overflowing of those rivers might occasion."

"My advanced post consisting of 1500 men, are now in possession of a strong post 9 miles on the other side of Laurell Hill, and about 40 from Fort Duquesne, nor had the enemy ever suspected my attempting such a road till very lately, they having been all along securing the strong passes, and fords of the rivers, upon General Braddock's route."

"My health, that has been extremely precarious these two years, has of late been very near brought to a close, by a long and severe attack of bloody flux, which has reduced me to a state of weakness that I am obliged to travel in a hurdle carried betwixt two horses..."
FORBES (AT PHILADELPHIA) TO PITT — JANUARY 21, 1759

"...Aho' my Physicians and all our hospital people unanimously agree that I must go directly for England for to save my life, I must therefore beg it as the greatest favour that you will be so good as to move His Majesty to be graciously pleased to give me his leave of returning home as soon as I possibly can in order to re-establish my health, which at present renders me incapable of any service in doing any duty whatever."

JAMES GRANT (AT PHILADELPHIA) TO BOUQUET — FEBRUARY 20, 1759

(Apparently too ill to write, General Forbes had a junior officer write the following letter. In it is described the medal which you as a scout may qualify to wear. The medal was never made for Washington and the men who opened and secured the road to the west.)

Philadelphia 10th Feb. 1759.

Sir,

General Forbes hereby sends of the many Journeys and hardships you and your officers with him in General under his command have underwent during the course of the last extraordinary campaign that has happened to this day in our Country, and wishing at the same time to give some public testimon of his approbation to the good conduct under his command I have ordered me to acquaint you and the commanding officers of corps that he has resolved to make to you the following present which he hereby authorizes the officers of his army to receive as a reward for their faithfull services — and as soon as an opportunity offers he intends to inform his Majesty of it.

In the mean time your officers and Colonel Montgomery may be presumed in town.

The Medal has an one side the representation of a road cut throw an immensue range of Wythe Mountains: the State of the lake Distamnunna — in the other side are represented the Confluence of the Ohio and Monongahela rivers, a Fort in carrier in the forse of the picture at the approach of General Forbes, and in a circle, shewed with the army marching in company with the men of the Ohio little Briluined closed circle medall. This to be more round the neck with a color.

By the General Command.

W.B. General Forbes. By the General Command.

The order of your officer.

Colonel Bouquet
OBITUARY OF GENERAL JOHN FORBES
(Pennsylvania Gazette, March 15, 1759)

On Sunday last died, of a tedious illness, John Forbes, Esq., in the forty-ninth year of his age, son to Forbes of Petincrief, Esq; in the shire of Fife in Scotland, Brigadier General, Colonel of the Seventeenth Regiment of Foot, and Commander of His Majesty's troop in the South Provinces of North America; a gentleman generally known and esteemed.

Yesterday he was interred in the chancel of Christ Church in this city.

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