

MONTOUR'S OHIO RIVER ISLAND AND JOHN NEVILLE

There is an island, five miles long and only three-eighths of a mile wide, situated just below the start of the Ohio River at Pittsburgh. This island was given by King George III of England to a veteran of the French, British and Indian War named Douglas, who named his land Long Island. (King George also gave a land grant of some 400 acres to Major William Lea, also a French, British and Indian War veteran, which is the site of today's Old St. Luke's Church.) Subsequent residents of Long Island were Charles Simms, John Harvie and Andrew Montour, who then gave his surname to the island.

THE NEED FOR INTERPRETERS

In the colonial years, there were three languages spoken around the three rivers — English, French, and the Iroquois tribes. The vital task of communicating and understanding one another fell to either multi-language English sophisticates, or to half breed interpreters. A major task in communication was to prevent misunderstanding and avoid anger and violence. Indispensable interpreters also served as guides for colonists and Indians to meet with their opposites. Indeed, colonial interpreters also sought to be peace keepers.

One highly respected interpreter was Andrew Montour. Andrew was born around 1700, of both native and European ancestry. His native American name was Sattelihu. He had a French mother, Elizabeth Catherine Montour, and his father, Robert Hunter, was a war chief of the Oneidas. Andrew's mother spoke several languages and she was a translator for settlers and local tribes. The Indians greatly respected her skills. It was from Elizabeth that Andrew received his surname, and the gift of languages which enabled him to earn a very comfortable living. It was said that he looked European except for the band of paint on his forehead. He wanted to live in both the white and Indian worlds. He served with Washington at Fort Necessity and with Gen. Braddock in the French, British and Indian War and the founding of Fort Pitt, and countless other engagements between the colonial English and Indians. He was tragically murdered by a Seneca Indian in 1772.

Andrew's son was John, born in 1744. When he was ten years old, he was enrolled in the preparatory school at the College of William and Mary. He learned to read and write in English as well as his native Delaware tongue, and the Wyandot and Mingo languages..

About 1770, young John chose to live on Long Island in the Ohio River, which he renamed Montour's Island. As the tension about American Independence was increasing, John's work as an interpreter significantly increased. In 1773 Chief Pontiac led a rebellion which touched many British forts, including the one called Fort Dun-

more, (Fort Pitt). Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia, led a counterattack on the Shawnee Indians, and John was called on to serve at the Treaty negotiations in 1774 at Pittsburgh.

When the Revolutionary War began American patriots were concerned that the Indians remain neutral between the Americans and the British. John was the primary interpreter. He strategically took the risk of alternating his activity between the English and Indian leaders.

JOHN NEVILLE'S PRESENCE

When the British troops left Fort Pitt in 1772, both Virginia and Pennsylvania laid claim to the Ohio Valley region. The local role of John Neville might have begun as a participant with Braddock's attack on Fort Duquesne. In 1776 he took charge of Fort Pitt and a vital part of his duties included hosting treaty negotiations with the Indians, aided by the work of translators. It is ironic that Presley Neville spoke French fluently.

In 1776 Montour's Island was surveyed by William Crawford for Captain John Neville, and other parties. Neville, was an ambitious land speculator, and he became the new owner of Montour's Island. Neville's local ownership then included the Woodville and Bower Hill plantations straddling Chartiers Creek, and a two story frame house at Ferry and Water streets in Pittsburgh. After the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, he and his wife Winifred lived in their Pittsburgh house until she died in 1797. He moved to the home on Neville Island and he lived there until he died in 1803. The home was later occupied by Isaac and Amelia (Neville) Craig. Owning both a city and country home was not only stylish, but it gave the opportunity to leave the congestion in Pittsburgh and Small Pox disease that often plagued city life.

Isaac and Amelia Craig eventually occupied Neville Island until he died in 1826. Amelia stayed there until she died in 1849. Thereafter, the Neville Island site was deeded to successive generations of the Neville family.

References:

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