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Retracing the trail to Forks of the Ohio

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By David Bear, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Near the northeast corner of Penn and Linden avenues in Point Breeze there's a monument to a tree.

Generally ignored by the cars speeding by, the mottled metal plaque fastened to the rocky stump notes that it was placed in 1914 by the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America to commemorate an old oak tree that once stood beside the Forbes Trail.

In the summer and fall of 1758, an army of 6,000 British and Colonial forces under the command of Brig. Gen. John Forbes hacked a crude cart path for 200 miles through the wild mountains of southern Pennsylvania from Carlisle to the Forks of the Ohio River, a point now known as the Golden Triangle.

Construction of the trail, conceived in response to the defeat of Gen. Edward Braddock in 1755, was ordered by Prime Minister William Pitt, who recognized the strategic importance of wresting control of the Forks from the French. Because Forbes was ailing, Col. Henry Bouquet carried out his construction directions.

Aware of Braddock's mistakes, Forbes proceeded with deliberation. Carving out a route up and through the rugged terrain that minimized pinch points where long columns might come under attack, Forbes established fortified positions at regular intervals to provide his forces with sanctuary and resupply.

Moving steadily west, his army erected stockades at Bedford and Ligonier before proceeding into the Ohio Valley. News of the advancing force preceded it, and the small French contingent at Fort Duquesne fled before Forbes' army arrived.

People in these parts have been speaking English ever since.

As a military accomplishment, Forbes Trail was analogous to Hannibal moving his armies across the Pyrenees and Alps to attack Rome in the Punic Wars. The route let the British funnel troops and commerce westward. The effort literally put Pittsburgh on the map, as it was Forbes who named the fort his troops established at the Forks of the Ohio after his benefactor, William Pitt.

The rest, as they say, is history.

For decades after, the Forbes Trail was the primary artery connecting Western and Eastern Pennsylvania and became one of the most enduring legacies of the French and Indian War. Over time as hostilities abated, the route was shortened and widened and re-purposed into other highways. The Pennsylvania Turnpike and Route 30 both follow segments of the trail. Plenty of Forbes place names are along the way (including Forbes Avenue), and nearly 20 historical markers have been erected, but 250 years of civilization have eradicated virtually all trace of the original trail bed.

Until recently the best description of the route was in the book "Bouquet's March to the Ohio: The Forbes Road," written in the 1930s by Edward Gilbert Williams, but mostly the Forbes Trail has been regarded as little as that monument on Penn Avenue.

That is about to change.

One of the activities associated with the 250th anniversaries of the War for Empire and, in 2008, Pittsburgh itself, the Forbes Trail is being re-created, at least in a virtual sense.

The project was spearheaded by Laura Fisher, director of the French and Indian War 250; John Giblen, director of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle; and Ron Hermany, of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources in Harrisburg.

Using known data points and the Williams' 1930s book as primary resources, the trail was closely plotted for the first time using modern technology. The 10-month effort has pioneered new graphic imaging techniques.

The first result of this effort is a 6-minute, animated fly-over that offers a bird's-eye view of the entire 300-mile route from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.

Already being used to plan a series of events designed to commemorate the historic effort, the digital map is being incorporated into a Forbes Trail Driving Guide that is being prepared for spring publication.

Part coffee-table photo book, part driving guide and history key to historic points along the route, the book will be the first phase of a revolutionary approach to self-directed interactive tourism. A range of innovative interactive media options is being developed to provide a comprehensive, in-car, enjoyable educational experience.

So by retracing 18th-century trails, 21st-century territory is being pioneered.

What could be more appropriate?

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