

# Washington's trail likely hit McCandless

*Pine, Richland also lie along future president's probable 1753 course*

BY VIRGINIA NEFF CAMPBELL

In 1753, George Washington, at age 21, was sent on a historic mission by the Governor of Virginia to take a message to Fort Le Boeuf in Erie.

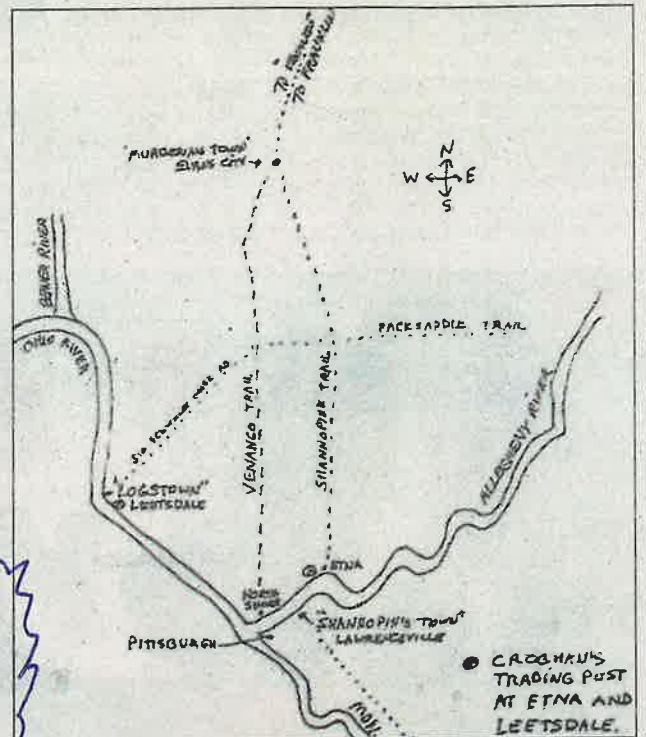
He hired Christopher Gist, a surveyor and an experienced wilderness traveler, as his primary guide, as well as six others. Washington and Gist kept travel journals. From these notes, we know three Native American chiefs and a young hunter named Guyasuta also accompanied them to ensure safe passage.

The 12 men left from George Croghan's Logstown Trading Post, at the intersection of Big Sewickley Creek and the Ohio River, on Nov. 30, 1753. They probably took the trail up today's Big Sewickley Creek Road to Warrendale Bayne Road and Franklin Road, through McCandless and Pine, to get to "Murdering Town" (Evans City area).

Traditional maps of their return trip show them following the same road back, but I believe Washington and Gist, who traveled on foot some of the trip home because their horses could not make it through the deep snow, did not return the same way. New evidence and careful attention to detail shifts their path through a section of Butler and Richland.

Washington wrote that at Murdering Town, "we intended to quit the path [Franklin Road] and steer across the country for Shanapin's Town." Shanapin's settlement was approximately in Lawrenceville, and the river's swift current made Etna the best point for crossing it.

After a Native American shot at them a couple of miles from Evans City, Washington wrote they "walked all the remaining part of the night without making any stop," from 9 p.m. on Dec. 27 until the morning of Dec. 28. Gist wrote, "we set out a half mile ... set our compass ... and in



DRAWN BY VIRGINIA NEFF CAMPBELL

Two possible paths on George Washington's return trip from Fort Le Boeuf in Erie in 1753.

the morning we were at the head of Piney Creek."

That is about 11 miles in about 11 hours. Normal long-distance hiking speed is 2 mph in good conditions, 1 mph in deep snow.

People have assumed the beginning of Pine Creek in Wexford was the "head" Gist referred to. But in geological terms, the beginning of Pine Creek is the "source," while the "head" is short for "headwaters," the small streams that feed into larger ones. The headwaters of Pine Creek are North Fork, Montour, Willow and Crouse runs.

The only one named in 1750's maps was Montour Run, likely the main headwater. The highest end of Montour Run's watershed is at Bakerstown Road (then known as Packsaddle Trail). This places them somewhere around North Montour and Valencia Roads, or Grubbs and State Roads.

Montour Run and Pine Creek run roughly parallel to Shannopin's Trail, which cut straighter than the many meanders in the streams. The

trail ran between Evans City and Etna. It followed the ridge heading south-southeast out of Evans City, then eventually to Hardt, Banks School, Josephine, West Hardies, Wildwood-Sample and Sample roads, then Mt. Royal Boulevard to Etna. Most historians have assumed that they followed the creek, right by its banks, but that would have taken them longer than their timeline allows.

While this scenario may not change the official George Washington Trail maps, it receives further support from having Etna as its destination. The Allegheny River in that part was swift. Making a raft as they did, they only could have paddled or poled against the current to reach the other side. If they were heading to Lawrenceville, they had to start well upriver, lest the current sweep them past it.

For more information, see the Richland History Group Facebook page.

Virginia Neff Campbell is a researcher in the Richland History Group.