

# THE FORT PITT BLOCK HOUSE

Prepared by Kelly Linn - January 2008

The Block House is just one small defensive redoubt and the only surviving structure of Fort Pitt - a key British fortification during the French and Indian War in North America (*or the Seven Years War as it is known in Europe*). Constructed as the second largest British fort on the colonial frontier, Fort Pitt measured about 18 acres. Crown Point in New York was the largest covering 3.5 square miles. Both of these installations date to the same military era.

Fort Pitt was constructed at the Forks of the Ohio (now the Point at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) between 1759 and 1761. It was a classic star-shaped fort with 5 bastions projecting from the corners. The Music Bastion and the Grenadiers Bastion were on the east, or land side, of the Point, the Flag and Monongahela Bastions fronted the Monongahela River and the Ohio Bastion overlooked the Allegheny River floodplain. Only the eastern walls were faced with brick to repel cannon fire; the remaining walls of the fort were earthen ramparts covered with sod. The walls of the fort averaged a height of 15 feet above the Monongahela terrace upon which it was constructed. In January 1762 - only a few months after the fort was completed - flood waters from the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers crested at nearly 40 feet inflicting heavy damage to the fort. Repairs were made, but in March 1763, another flood cresting at 41 feet, destroyed the Ohio Bastion entirely and heavily damaged the Monongahela Bastion a second time.

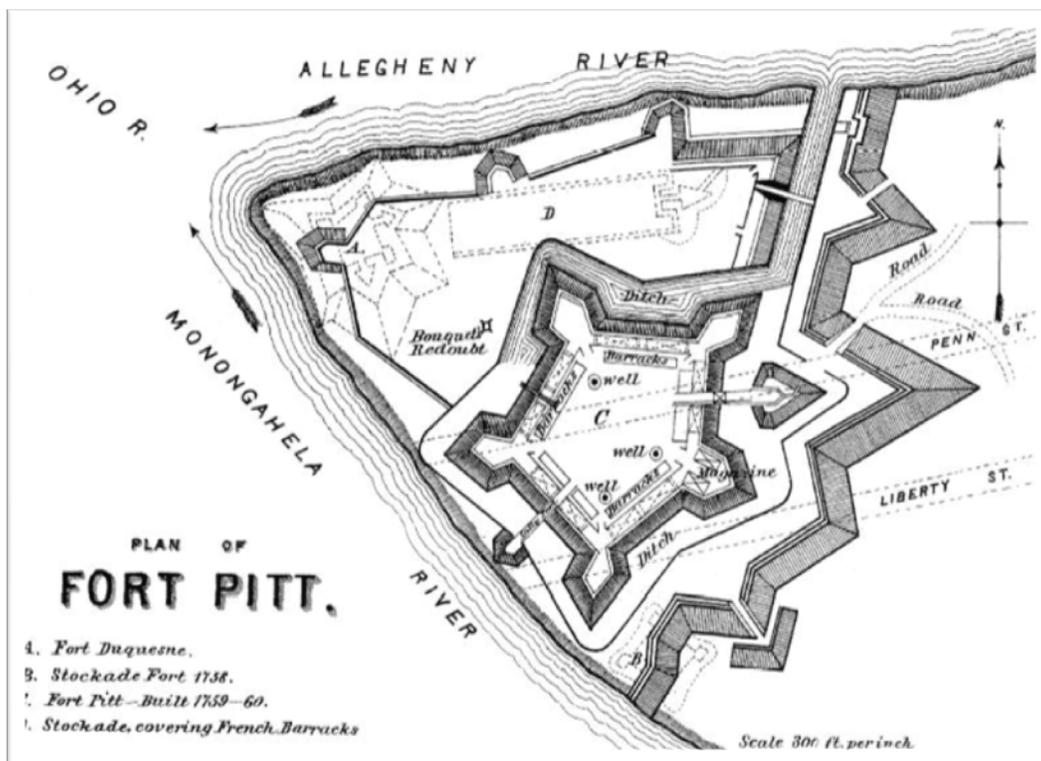


Figure 1. Map of Fort Pitt showing its position on the Point at Pittsburgh. The modern streets of Penn and Liberty are shown in overlay to provide its relative position to current Downtown Pittsburgh.

Because the treaty to end the French and Indian War had been signed in the month prior to the 1763 flood, the sense of urgency to repair the fort was absent as was the necessary man-power to do the job. With the security of the fort compromised by slumped walls and missing bastions, the fort came under attack by Native Americans in the summer of 1763 during Pontiac's War; the fort was held at siege for 72 days. Led by Col. Henry Bouquet, the 42nd and 77th Highland Guard Regiments and the 60th Regiment of the Royal Americans defeated the Native forces (Delaware, Shawnee, Mingo and Huron Tribes) at the Battle of Bushy Run in August 1763 successfully quelling the Indian uprising in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Bouquet and his troops then marched the 30 miles to Fort Pitt to resupply the installation.

In the summer of 1764, word was received at the fort that the Native populations were again planning an attack. With the fort still not fully repaired, 5 redoubts were constructed outside the perimeter of Fort Pitt in order to extend the line of fire and to reinforce the defensibility of the missing and damaged bastions. Each two-story, five-sided redoubt rose approximately 25 feet from the ground surface to the peaks of the wooden pyramidal roofs and exhibited a footprint measuring roughly 660 square feet. Four were constructed of brick; one was built of wood. The redoubts were fitted with a series of narrow gun loops cut into timbers on both the first and second floors through which muskets were extended to safely fire upon the enemy.

A redoubt, by definition, is a "defensive outbuilding" or a *Guard House* and is, therefore, a first line of defense. A Block House, by definition, is a defensive structure where settlers and soldiers could assemble to make a last stand, or a secondary defense. Since the earliest recordation of its existence by historians, *Bouquet's Redoubt*, although built as a guard house, has been erroneously referred to as the *Fort Pitt Block House* - a misnomer that is forever etched in the historical record.

The attacks for which the redoubts were constructed never materialized and Fort Pitt saw no further assaults. The need for the exterior defenses became so unnecessary that in 1772, the Fort Pitt Block House was converted to the trading post and meeting house of Indian Agent, Alexander McKee. At the outbreak of the American Revolution, McKee sided with the British and was eventually forced to flee Pittsburgh in 1778 when soldiers at Fort Pitt were ordered to arrest him on charges of conspiring with the enemy. Although the function of the Fort Pitt Block House during the American Revolution is unclear, it likely returned to service in some capacity for the military.

Following the American Revolution, the town of Pittsburgh continued to grow in the shadow of Fort Pitt and the need for the redoubts and the fort itself became less and less necessary. By 1785, when Fort Pitt was officially sold to Alexander Ross and Stephen Bayard, only two of the redoubts were still standing. The fate of the others is not known but it is speculated that they were cannibalized for the building material much like Fort Pitt was dismantled for the salvage of bricks, stones and timbers which were immediately recycled into new dwellings for the expanding city.

The Fort Pitt Block House remained intact but was annexed by a larger dwelling house in 1785 and occupied as a residence for 2 years by Isaac Craig. Craig was Deputy Quartermaster General and military storekeeper of Pittsburgh in 1791, led federal troops during the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, and helped prepare munitions during the War of 1812. For the 18 years following Isaac Craig's initial occupation, the Block House changed ownership a number of times but was eventually purchased along with the majority of the Point in 1805 by James O'Hara, 6th Quartermaster General for the U.S. Army (1792-1796).

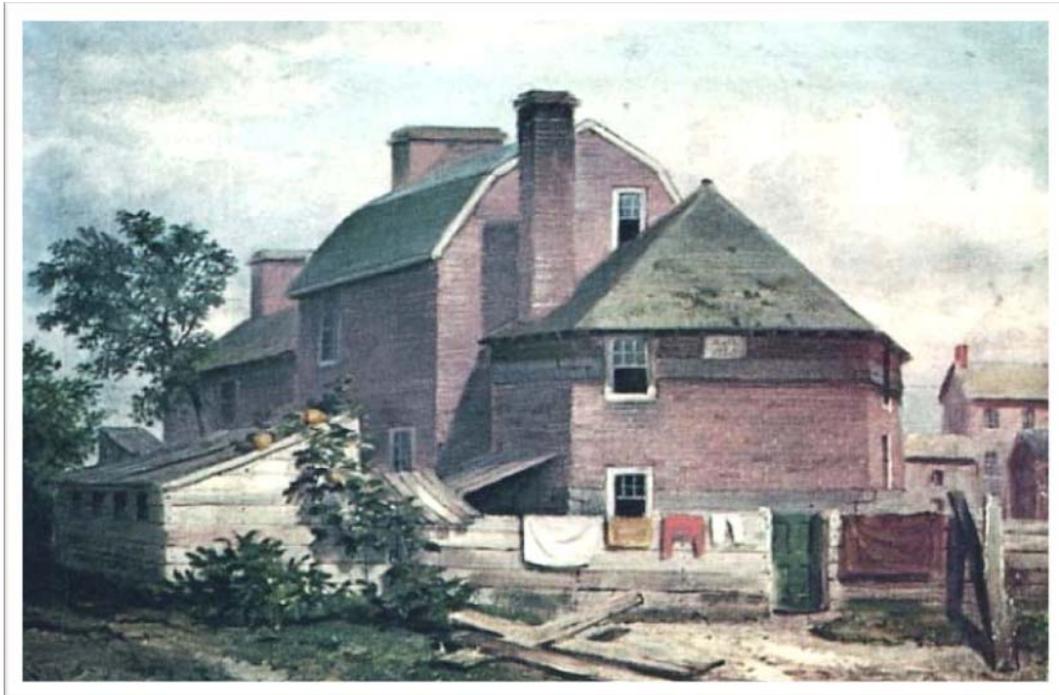


Figure 2 An 1832 image of the Fort Pitt Block House showing it as a residence. The larger structure annexed on the north side the home was constructed by Isaac Craig in 1785.

James O'Hara and Isaac Craig partnered in 1797 to open the first glass works in Pittsburgh at a site just opposite the Point on the southern bank of the Monongahela River. The glass factory was the first such enterprise west of the Allegheny Mountains. O'Hara also operated the Point Brewery which was located in one of Fort Pitt's abandoned soldier's barracks converted to a malt house. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Block House may have utilized as a storage facility for bottles made at the glass works prior to them being filled with O'Hara's Porter Ale.

James O'Hara died in 1819 and his land holdings passed to his daughter, Mary Croghan who died several years later in 1827. The land holdings including the Block House were then solely inherited by O'Hara's granddaughter, Mary Elizabeth Croghan Schenley (1826-1903). It is probably in the early 1820s that the Block House resumed its role as a dwelling house and served that function until 1894 when Schenley gifted it to the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution for preservation.

Schenley has often been called *Pittsburgh's Fairy Godmother* owing to her philanthropy in donating land or funds to support endeavors such as the Western Pennsylvania Institute for the Blind, the Newsboys' Home, Schenley Park (300 acres) and the land used for the construction of the Carnegie Library and Museum (19 acres). Land known as *Schenley Farms* in the 1890s is presently the Pittsburgh suburb of Oakland – the home of the University of Pittsburgh. The Schenley Hotel, built in 1898, now serves the campus as the *William Pitt Student Union*.



Figure 3. The east elevation of the Fort Pitt Block House as seen in the early 1890s.

After 16 months of restoration, which involved primarily the in-filling of window and door openings cut into the Block House during the 109 years that it was used as a residence, the Block House was opened to the public as a *Museum of the Colonial Era*. The Block House is the oldest, continuously operating museum in the city of Pittsburgh. Much of its architectural fabric is intact in that the foundation, bricks and timber elements are largely original to its 1764 construction. Brick acquired from the demolition of the adjoining Isaac Craig residence - which had been built with recycled Fort Pitt components - provided sympathetic building material for the DAR repairs. Consequently, every brick in the Fort Pitt Block House can be authenticated to the 1760s.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Block House came under the only attack it would ever see. The Pennsylvania Railroad, proposed to demolish the structure as its existence complicated the expansion of their rail lines through the Point District. The railroad challenged the legal ownership of the property by the DAR but the court battle that followed was lost by the railroad and the building was spared. Persistently, the railroad's largest backer, Henry Clay Frick, petitioned to have the property condemned via eminent domain. Again, the DAR emerged triumphant after vigorous litigation. The resulting legislation was one of the first preservation laws in Pennsylvania which prevents the taking of historic properties through eminent domain. The final language of the law, which passed in May 1907, was authored by the Regent of the Pittsburgh Chapter, NSDAR, Edith Darlington Ammon.

The railroad continued with their plans to develop the Point District and in doing so, demolished all of the dwellings and commercial buildings that populated the area except the Fort Pitt Block House. In order to accommodate the level grade of the rail lines over the undulating Point, the ground surface surrounding the Block House property lines was raised some 15-20 feet thereby isolating the Block House in an industrial abyss. Equally high retaining walls of timber and concrete cribbing were utilized to protect the Block House property from any encroachment and damage. Public access to the Block House was maintained from Penn Avenue via a narrow and descending 90-foot long walkway.

Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Fort Pitt Block House was the only visible representation of the colonial era in Pittsburgh and the last remnant of British rule in Southwestern Pennsylvania. It continued to operate as a museum despite being surrounded by a labyrinth of elevated commercial warehouses and train tracks.



Figure 4. The restored Block House as it appeared in 1902. The variant brick pattern above the door and on the right side of the building mark some areas of repair.

In the late 1950s, the city of Pittsburgh acquired the Point property from the Pennsylvania Railroad, removed the freight stations, warehouses and train tracks, and constructed the 36-acre Point State Park as a memorial to the French and Indian War and the founding of Pittsburgh in 1758. A major feature of the state-owned park is the reconstruction of the Monongahela Bastion in which is housed the Fort Pitt Museum- a facility operated by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Although the Fort Pitt Block House and the state-operated Fort Pitt Museum work in tandem with the public to interpret the history of early Pittsburgh, the Block House remains the private property of the Fort Pitt Society - the incorporated arm of the Pittsburgh Chapter, NSDAR and it also remains the *Jewel of the Point*. It has served as a museum and been defended by the DAR for over a century during which time the organization has fulfilled its mandate to preserve, protect and promote the history of the site by providing public admission for tours and interpretation free of charge.

The Fort Pitt Society, who holds a collection of historical and genealogical records as well as artifacts representing the history of the site, maintains an office in the Fort Pitt Museum located only 90 feet from the Block House.

The Fort Pitt Block House is open year-round, Wednesday - Sunday, 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM.

Its history is interpreted through period artifacts, digital presentations, exhibits and on-site educators. For more information or to schedule a specialized group tour, the curator of the Block House may be reached by telephone at 412-471-1764 or by email at [fpbh1764@verizon.net](mailto:fpbh1764@verizon.net).

