

# WESTMORELAND COUNTY

## A Short History

Now entering its third century, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, was the eleventh and last county established under the Penn proprietary government during the tumultuous final years of British rule prior to the outbreak of the American Revolution. Most likely named after Westmoreland county in the northwestern part of England, it was one of two Westmoreland counties in British North America, the other being in Virginia.

From the time of its creation Westmoreland County played a pivotal role in bringing civilization and English law to the trans-Allegheny colonial frontier. For 225 years, from the opening of the west after the French and Indian War to the present-day post-industrial high tech revolution, Westmoreland has remained a leader in the economic and political development of the region, state and nation.

### Early History of Westmoreland County

Nearly a century and a half passed from the time of the founding of the first permanent English colony at Jamestown, Virginia before Europeans entered the land west of the Allegheny Mountains and into what is now western Pennsylvania. That account is detailed in the diary of Christopher Gist, surveyor and agent for the Ohio Company of Virginia, who on November 12 through 14, 1750, stayed at a Delaware Indian town at Loyalhannon, near present day Ligonier. The first white settlement within the region of old Westmoreland was sponsored by the Ohio Company in what is present day Fayette County in 1752. Virginia continued to lay claim to the region through the onset of the American Revolution, setting into motion a running and often heated conflict between the governments of Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Major General Edward Braddock's ill-fated 1755 military expedition to dislodge the French and their Indian allies at Fort Duquesne established a major transportation artery, Braddock's Road, into Western Pennsylvania. This military road, from Virginia through Cumberland, Maryland, had a major impact on the future settlement of the region - providing easy access to Western Pennsylvania for immigrants from Maryland, Virginia and the western Carolinas. It was not until Brigadier General John Forbes built a military road from Carlisle to present-day Pittsburgh in 1758, that the door was opened for settlers from eastern Pennsylvania to start settlements in what is now Westmoreland County. The Forbes Road, or the "Great Road" as it was known to the thousands of settlers to follow, entered present-day Westmoreland

County at the top of the Laurel Ridge near where a fort was constructed. It was named Fort Ligonier by General Forbes in honor of Sir John Viscount Ligonier, Commander-in-Chief of all of the king's forces. By the fall of 1758, Fort Ligonier was the military springboard for the assault on Fort Duquesne that drove the French from western Pennsylvania.

The Forbes Road continued from Ligonier through present-day Youngstown, Hanna's Town and Murrysville and on to the forks of the Monongahela, Allegheny and Ohio Rivers where General Forbes would rename the captured French fort, "Pittsburgh" in honor of the British Prime Minister William Pitt. By eighteenth century frontier standards, the Forbes Road provided a "superhighway" into the western Pennsylvania wilderness.

The duel for North America between England and France known to the Americans as the French and Indian War, ended in victory for the British in 1763. The Battle of Bushy Run, near present-day Harrison City, was the site of a pivotal battle in that war. On August 5th and 6th, 1763, British troops under the command of Col. Henry Bouquet, met and defeated a large Indian force at Bushy Run, effectively ending a major threat to the safety of the settlers in the region.

The end of the French and Indian War resulted in the British government issuing the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Issued to placate the Native American tribes who were complaining about the encroachment of white settlers on their lands, the act forbade English settlement beyond the head waters draining into the Atlantic Ocean from the Crest of Laurel Hill. Neither the threats of arrest nor later enactment of a death penalty for violators of the law stopped squatters and some early traders from moving into the area. The Treaty of Fort Stanwix with the Six Nations, Delaware and Shawnee Indians in 1768 finally permitted settlement west of the Alleghenies. Fueled by glowing accounts of the land to the west, taken back east by the soldiers of Braddock and Bouquet's armies, settlers poured into western Pennsylvania in pursuit of land.

As the area of Westmoreland County began to be settled, the composition of the population began to take shape. In the main they were the landless, the disinherited and the defranchised. They were bold, aggressive, hardy, courageous and self-reliant. They were church and unchurched. They often had little respect for authority or title. Having experienced arbitrary and capricious government in England, they were zealous defenders of personal liberty and self-government. Ethnically, the majority of the population in early Westmoreland was composed of Scotch-Irish, German and English settlers. They were predominantly Presbyterian and Lutheran.

The Penn government soon found it necessary to create a new county, both to establish the province's ownership of the land and to establish law and order in an area, where many unruly individuals cared little about civil law or the laws concerning land ownership. Bedford County, established in 1771, had assumed superficial jurisdiction over settlements in western Pennsylvania in addition to administering to the populations along the eastern slopes of the Alleghenies.

### **Westmoreland County Created**

Arthur St. Clair, then living at Ligonier, representing the Penn family interests in western Pennsylvania, petitioned the authorities in Philadelphia to establish a new county. In addition to Virginia's aggressive presence in the region, he pointed out that the Forbes Road was a rough military road that wound over 100 miles and three mountain ranges from Bedford to Pittsburgh making it difficult for Bedford to serve the needs of a rapidly growing population.

By the Act of Assembly dated February 26, 1773, Westmoreland County was carved out of Bedford County which had previously been created from part of Cumberland County. At its inception, Westmoreland was comprised of what are now Westmoreland, Washington, Allegheny, Fayette and Greene counties and part of Beaver, Armstrong, and Indiana counties.

The same statute that created Westmoreland County also designated Hanna's Town along the Forbes Road, as the temporary county seat. Robert Hanna and town residents Joseph Erwin and Samuel Sloan were appointed along with George Wilson and John Cavett as trustees to choose a permanent county seat. Hanna and his neighbors outvoted Wilson and Cavett who favored Pittsburgh. It was in Robert Hanna's tavern, on April 6, 1773, that the first English court west of the Alleghenies was organized with Robert Hanna as presiding judge. Arthur St. Clair served as justice, prothonotary, register and recorder and clerk of the new county.

General St. Clair later served in the Revolution. He was elected as a delegate to the Congress under the Articles of Confederation and within a year was elected one of its presidents - the highest office in the American government until the U.S. Constitution created the office of President of the United States in 1787. He also served as the first governor of the Northwest territory. Today, his grave is preserved in St. Clair Park in Greensburg.

From this date until the outbreak of the Revolution, the conflicting land claims between Pennsylvania and Virginia remained the dominant political issue as each claimant arrested one another's officials - nearly erupting into war over the issue. The conflict was finally settled in 1776 as the common cause of revolution made further

rivalry undesirable. Negotiations continued until 1784 when the definite boundary lines, roughly akin to today's boundaries, were established by way of friendly agreement between two states.

Two significant events relative to Westmoreland's role in the American Revolution occurred during the brief life of Hanna's Town. On May 16, 1775, settlers along with Arthur St. Clair gathered at Hanna's Town and affixed their names to the *Hanna's Town Resolves* agreeing to bind themselves together and to take up arms if necessary to resist further "tyrannical" acts of Parliament. More than a year later, the *Declaration of Independence* would be signed in Philadelphia.

The second event was when some officers and men of the British Indian Department and their Seneca Indian allies attacked and burned Hanna's Town on July 13, 1782 in retaliation for American atrocities committed against them. Although rebuilt to some degree, the town never recovered. Archaeological surveys begun in 1969 have resulted in a partial reconstruction of the town and its stockade. The site is a designated National Historic Registered Site as well as a Westmoreland County Park and is administered by the Westmoreland County Historical Society.

The need to re-establish the county, seat resulted in a committee of trustees, appointed by the General Assembly, selecting Greensburg (then called New-town) as the new county seat. Greensburg was located on the new state road which ran from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Parts of this road would later become the Lincoln Highway. The first court at the new county seat was held on January 7, 1787 in a log building on the site of the present court house. Rapid growth and the press of county business resulted in the construction of new courthouses on the same site in 1798, 1856 and the present French Renaissance structure completed in 1907.

After the Colonial War for Independence, Westmoreland, the "mother county", gave "birth" in their entirety, to five counties that were carved from her original boundaries - Allegheny, Armstrong, Fayette, Indiana and Washington. After 1800, eleven other counties in the western section of Pennsylvania - Beaver, Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Forest, Greene, Lawrence, Mercer, Venango, and Warren - were created in part from these counties making Old Westmoreland a "grandmother" county as well.

### **Westmoreland's Role In the Shaping of State and Nation**

Near the end of the nineteenth century, visionary entrepreneurs and political leadership brought together men, machines and an abundance of bituminous coal that would allow Westmoreland County to play a vital role in

the nation's industrial growth as agriculture gave way to post Civil War expansion.

Henry Clay Frick was a driving force behind the industrial development of Westmoreland County and the western Pennsylvania region during the late nineteenth century. Born in 1849 in West Overton, near Scottsdale, Frick rivaled Andrew Carnegie in the development of coal and coke production and the creation of the modern steel industry in the years immediately following the Civil War. He founded the H.C. Frick Coke Company which later became a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation. Because of his talent for organization and management, Frick soon became associated with Andrew Carnegie and was made chairman of the Carnegie Brothers and Company. It was during this time that the tragedy of the Homestead Steel Strike in 1892 took place at the Carnegie Steel Plant at Homestead, PA. Frick died in 1919. His will bequeathed generous financial gifts to Westmoreland Hospital at Greensburg, the Henry Clay Frick Memorial Hospital at Mt. Pleasant, the Cottage State Hospital of Connellsville and the Uniontown Hospital. To Pittsburgh, he gave a park and funded an educational commission named for him. His birthplace at West Overton is now a museum.

Thomas Mellon, after serving as a judge for the United States District Court for western Pennsylvania, left the bench in 1869 and founded a vast financial empire in Pittsburgh that came to include banks, aluminum factories at New Kensington (later to become ALCOA), and the Rolling Rock recreation area near Ligonier.

General Richard Coulter, the commander of the Eleventh Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Civil War and George F. Huff, both of Greensburg, laid the foundation for the Keystone Coal Company that operated in the central Westmoreland County area well into the middle of the Twentieth century. Robert S. Jamison, a contemporary of Coulter and Huff founded the Jamison Coal Company and operated mainly in the Hannatown area. These giants formed the companies that mined the coal that fueled homes, businesses and industry for nearly a century.

The Westmoreland county area has been represented in the U.S. Congress by many able individuals. The names of Congressmen William Findley and John Covode stand out. Findley, whose home was along the Loyalhanna Creek near Latrobe, served as Westmoreland County's first Congressman. A staunch anti-Federalist, he was elected to Congress in 1791 and served for twenty-two years. Findley opposed the tax on whiskey levied during Washington's administration. He also opposed the short-lived Whiskey Rebellion that followed. "Honest" John Covode, a Whig and later a Republican, was elected to the Congress in 1854 from the Westmoreland-

IndianaArmstrong district. He served the area for six terms.

Reputed to be fair and forthright, Covode was an Abraham Lincoln confidant, and a power in Lincoln's inner circle of advisors during the Civil War. In private life, he was instrumental in the construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Westmoreland has been the birthplace of two governors of the Commonwealth. William Freame Johnson, born in Greensburg in 1808, was elected the first Whig governor of Pennsylvania in 1848, while a resident of Armstrong County. John White Geary, born near Mt. Pleasant, served as governor from 1873 to 1876. Prior to that time he served as the assistant superintendent of the Portage Railroad, officer in the army during the war with Mexico, postmaster of San Francisco, governor of Kansas territory, general in the Civil War, and military governor of Savannah, Georgia in 1864. As governor of Pennsylvania, he was responsible for the new state constitution of 1873. John Latta, born in Unity Township and a long-time resident of the Sewickley Creek valley, was the first lieutenant-governor under the new Constitution.

Two United States senators were natives of Westmoreland County. Edgar Cowan, born in Sewickley Township, served as Senator from 1861 to 1865. He fell out of favor with the Republican Party by opposing the Republican plan for Southern reconstruction in the aftermath of the Civil War. His appointment as minister to Austria by President Andrew Johnson was not confirmed by the Senate. Also born in Sewickley Township, Joseph Finch Guffey was elected to the United States Senate in 1934, serving one term.

Westmoreland County can boast one U.S. ambassador in Cyrus E. Woods of Greensburg, who served as Minister of Portugal, Ambassador to Spain, and Ambassador to Japan during the early part of the twentieth century.

## **Religious and Ethnic Heritage**

The first Federal census of 1790 recorded a population of 16,018. In the century that followed, the original German, Irish, Scotch-Irish population would, by the end of the nineteenth century, be complimented by immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, and African Americans from the southern part of the United States, creating a rich ethnic tapestry.

The earliest religious denominations which served Westmoreland county residents included Presbyterians, Lutherans and the Reformed Church. Roman Catholics and Jews were also present in small numbers until the mid-nineteenth century. Although the distinction of being the first organized church west of the Alleghenies is difficult to place, the Long Run Presbyterian Church

(1772) near Irwin and the Unity Presbyterian Church (1774) near Latrobe are the earliest churches in Westmoreland County.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the churches and synagogues of the "new" immigrants would put down roots in Westmoreland County. In 1846,

Reverend Arch

Abbot Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. founded the first monastic community in the United States at Saint Vincent near Latrobe. Saint Vincent archabbey provided priests for a growing Roman Catholic population in Westmoreland County. A seminary and later a college - Saint Vincent College - would soon follow. By the end of the century, the Roman Catholic presence in the county expanded when nuns from the order of the Sisters of Charity at Emmitsburg, Maryland founded a religious community in Greensburg in 1882 that is Seton Hill College today.

In the post-Civil War period, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a church founded by free African Americans in Philadelphia and New York in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was established in Monessen in the late nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, other A.M.E. and Baptist churches would begin to appear in Greensburg, Mt. Pleasant and the Irwin-Jeannette area to serve African Americans who had come north to work in the mines and mills.

In the late 1870's, the official discrimination and persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe and Germany resulted in the emigration of Jewish people from that area of the world to the United States. One of the earliest Jewish congregations in Westmoreland County was the Tree of Life Congregation founded in Mt. Pleasant, PA in 1880.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, economic opportunity in the county's mills and mines, brought Italian and Slavic immigrants in large numbers. They founded Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine rite Catholic Churches as well as Roman Catholic churches with a distinct ethnic character throughout the county.

Today, Westmoreland County is home to people representing all of the major religions of the world.

## **Westmoreland In The Twentieth Century**

Throughout the twentieth century, Westmoreland reflected the nation's industrial growth and subsequent change. Agriculture served as the county's economic base for most of the nineteenth century. After the Civil War, the county relied upon the primary metals industry and mining for its economic base well into the twentieth

century. These industries dominated the communities in which they were located.

Through the end of the 1950's, Westmoreland ranked fifth among Pennsylvania's counties in the mining of bituminous coal, giving rise at the same time to the many mining "patch" towns throughout the county.

The center of the aluminum industry in the United States was located at New Kensington. Monessen led the county in steel and tin plate production producing immense quantities of woven wire and tubes. The glass industry was centered in Jeannette where six different plants produced glass for almost every domestic, industrial and military use. Glass was also manufactured in Mt. Pleasant, Greensburg and Arnold. Large population centers developed around these cities.

The demise of the steel industry in the United States through the 1970's and 80's was mirrored in Westmoreland County as over 40% of the manufacturing jobs in the county were lost after 1980. Coal also experienced more than 50% reduction in jobs during the same period. Today, Westmoreland County is experiencing economic growth and a changing economy. New industrial parks and the continued development of small businesses have led the way to a diversification of the county's economy. Traditional employers such as Alcoa, Allegheny Ludlum Steel, Elliott Company, Kennametal and Robertshaw Controls still form a great part of the county's economic base. The addition of Sony and many small firms such as specialty machine shops, fabrication and electronic businesses continue to grow.

Changes in the county's economy have also resulted in changes in where people make their homes. Small towns and cities are no longer employment centers and have lost population. Suburban growth is ongoing in the county as areas such as Hempfield Township, Penn Township, Unity Township and Murrysville have gained steadily in population. These communities have become "bedroom" commuter areas. Today, the county provides a combination of suburban, urban and rural living.

Today, Westmoreland County is composed of 6 third class cities, 35 boroughs and 23 townships. From its first federal census in 1790 Westmoreland has grown from a population of 16,018 to a population of 370,321 as of the 1990 census. After 1803, Westmoreland County would have the same boundary lines and 1,033 square miles as it has today. Today, it is the seventh largest in area of Pennsylvania's 67 counties with the sixth largest population.

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