

Christopher Gist: Plantation Owner and Unsung Hero

How many times have people driven by the historical marker on Route 119 near Cellurale's Garden Center and never noticed the subject of that marker? It says Gist's Plantation. But who was Gist and how did he come to have a plantation in our area? Over 250 years ago, Christopher Gist played a vital role in the history of our area. During his lifetime, he wore many hats. He was a guide, scout, surveyor, explorer and soldier. Some historians believe that Gist never received the credit due to him.

The Gist family has a long history in this country. His grandparents, Christopher and Edith Gist, braved the perils of the Atlantic Ocean when they migrated from England to the province of Maryland in 1679. Prior to this, they had a distinguished history in England. They had one son, Richard who was well-educated and financially secure. He married Zipporah Murray at the age of 21 and they had nine children, the oldest was Christopher born in either 1705 or 1706 depending upon which historian one chooses to believe. At this point it would be prudent to share the following quote from Francis Jennings' Empire of Fortune: "All histories are interpretations made by writers predisposed by personal experience and cultural imperatives and prone to human errors." Research for this article turned up some minor historical variations among the writers reviewed.

Little is known about Gist's early life. When his father, Richard Gist, died in 1741, he left no will and in 1724 had disowned his wife, Zipporah, by public notice. Since Christopher was the oldest, he inherited most of his father's sizable estate. Due to his business sense, he added to this estate and became a businessman and planter in Baltimore County, Maryland. It was during this time that he joined the newly created militia known as the rangers to help protect the citizens of Baltimore County. As the name implies, they "ranged" the countryside to protect outlying settlers from Indian attacks. It was here that Gist learned much about the Indians and the Maryland and Pennsylvania frontier. He in turn became a fur trader and gradually traveled into what is now western Pennsylvania and into the Ohio country. But hard times fell upon Gist and his brother, Nathaniel, when one of their storehouses filled with furs, was destroyed by fire. The British Fur Company sued for the cost of the lost furs. According to Allen Powell, author of Christopher Gist: Frontier Scout, "Gist paid on this claim for the rest of his life but never to the legal satisfaction of the agents of the fur company."

Gist was now broke but by 1750, at the age of 45, he had earned a reputation as a scout. Because of his knowledge of the region, he was a natural choice to become an agent of the newly formed Ohio Company, a group of wealthy Virginians who formed this company in order to explore a large portion of the territory beyond the mountains. Many saw the great expansion possibilities of opening up the west.

In September 1750, Gist was given his instructions which outlined what the Ohio Company wanted him to do as their scout. He was expected to show locations of mountains, passes through the mountains and describe the types of soil, note the Indian tribes and villages that inhabited the area, get accurate locations of land suitable for starting settlements and to map his trip west. He was expected to keep a journal of his time spent in the wilderness. He set out on his first journey in October 1750.

It helps to get a better perspective about the man and his stamina and determination if one remembers that Gist was not a young man. He set out on this first journey just prior to the beginning of the winter season, at the age of 45, to trek across the mountains from Wills Creek (Cumberland) to the Falls (Louisville) by way of the Forks (Pittsburgh)...no roads, no wagons, no restaurants, no bike trails, no rest areas and no cars...but on foot!

The Ohio Land Company wanted to settle the land in the wilderness, which at that time included our neck of the woods along with the present states of Ohio, Kentucky and points farther west. Gone for seven months, he had experienced the extremes of weather and of the trail. He had gone over the rocky crags of the Appalachian Mountains and looked upon the lush green valleys and meadows north of the Ohio River. He had gazed at the bluegrass area of Kentucky, where 18 years later, Daniel Boone would blaze a trail. (Gist and Boone were acquainted and had been neighbors while they both lived in the Yadkin River area in North Carolina.)

Gist had completed all of the duties assigned to him on his first journey and after a short visit with his family, he traveled to Williamsburg to present his journal along with his personal report. He recommended to the owners of the land company that a settlement should be started in the area of southern Ohio, close to present-day Cincinnati. The owners deemed this impractical because it was so far away from any other settlement and was regarded as an area too hard to defend. They wanted settlements closer to Virginia's more established towns and so it came to be that Gist would make another trip, this time to the area south of the Ohio River and between the Kanawha and Monongahela Rivers. It will be on this second journey that Gist will fall in love with a "beautiful tract of land beyond the mountains near the Youghiohony."

Gist left for his second journey in November 1751 accompanied by his son. Once again, he had specific instructions as to what he was to accomplish on this journey. He was to "look out and observe the nearest and most convenient road you can find from Will's Creek (Cumberland) to the Monongahela." The importance of a road into this region could not be overstated when considering the future development of this region westward. Gist had relied upon old Indian paths and trails used by traders since the woods were nearly impossible to trek through due to the dense foliage. On this journey, Gist proceeded along what was known as Nemaquin's trail. Nemaquin was a Delaware Indian scout who was very familiar with the path from Cumberland to the Monongahela. Gist proceeded along a route through what is now the Frostburg and Confluence-Turkeyfoot area until he came upon some land which "took his eye." Powell in his book writes, "Even the barrenness of winter could not hide the awesome beauty of this rise of gently rolling hills with a beautiful mountain as a backdrop." Gist marked this place for his family to settle someday. "Gist's Plantation" was to become a landmark for travelers for many years.

Gist and his son returned from this second journey in March 1752. After reporting his findings to the land company, Gist made plans to return to the beautiful tract of land. But his plans had to be put on hold so he could attend the Logstown meeting between the colonies and the Indians. Briefly summarized, this conference was to affirm the Lancaster Treaty of 1744 in which the Virginians claimed that the Indians had agreed to the right of the Virginia Colony to the lands upon the Ohio River. The conference lasted for two weeks. After some heated debate and much ceremony, those involved agreed to permit Virginia to proceed. Gist's name appears on this treaty.

With the conference over, Gist was determined to move his family to the new land. He assured the Ohio Company that he had 50 families willing to move near his settlement. The Company finally gave their approval for the settlement and in April 1752, he received his instructions to "open up a road over which the settlers could move their families and supplies." Along with the assistance of Nemaquin, the trail was widened enough for pack horses and thus Gist was able, in the fall of 1752 according to his journal, to finally move to his new land along with, not 50 families, but maybe 11 and that is disputed by historians. It should be noted that the historical marker along Rt. 119 says he settled at the plantation in 1753. The Ohio Company had made an attractive offer to those willing to settle here. The settlers were promised 100 acres for each of the first four family members and 50 more acres for each additional person. After living on the land for three years, each family was expected to pay four pounds sterling for each 100 acres. However tempting this offer was, many were fearful to move here to the "wilderness" because of Indian attacks and the fighting between the two powers vying for this region.

Gist finally settled here but it would not be long before tensions between the French and the British would once again dictate the need for his services. It would not be long before a young major would knock at his door and ask for his help on yet another journey. That young major's name was George Washington.

The summer of 1753 was a time of frantic activity and frustration for Gist. He continued to work on clearing the road from Wills Creek to "the forks" while the Ohio Company was pressing him to construct a fort in the area. The site of the fort, as recommended by George Washington, was to be at the forks in Pittsburgh. On a positive note, Gist had finally been granted his surveyor's commission from William and Mary College in July 1753.

Tensions between the British and French continued to escalate and George Washington sought out Gist's expertise as a guide and asked Gist to accompany him to Fort LeBoeuf. Washington was to deliver a letter to the French Commander at the fort, the present day site of Waterford PA near Erie, advising the French that they should leave the area. Well, to no one's great surprise, the French were not leaving. A confrontation was brewing!

Gist willingly came to Washington's aid and the two, according to Powell, made a good team. Gist was now approaching 50 years old and had an abundance of knowledge about the region and common sense born of experience. Washington was 21 years old and extremely ambitious. The path taken on this third journey by Gist and the group was the same one used on his second journey west. This made it possible for them to stop at his plantation on their way north. One biographer in the [Dictionary of American Biography](#) makes reference to this third journey as "the celebrated journey in which Gist twice saved Washington's life," once when Washington fell off a raft while crossing the ice-jammed river and again when an Indian attempted to kill him. This may be a slight exaggeration but nevertheless, the nation should be indebted to Gist for saving the life of the future leader and President of the New Republic.

Even before Gist and Washington made it back to Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia in January 1754, they met a convoy loaded with materials and tools needed to build a fort at the forks. The Governor had taken the lead in meeting the French threat and hoped to get a jump on them by building a fort at that location before the French could do so. The British began building in February and Gist was there to help with the efforts; however, by April the French made their appearance with over 500 troops and demanded the immediate surrender of the small group of Virginians, who had no choice but to leave. The French destroyed the work started by the Virginians and immediately set upon building their own fort that would be called Fort Duquesne, after Marquis Duquesne, then governor-general of New France.

The stage is now set for the Jumonville incident, the battle at Fort Necessity and the aftermath which included the destruction of the Gist plantation. After Washington's surrender at Fort Necessity, Gist returned to Will's Creek and then moved to Winchester. His plantation in ruin and little money to spare, he worked to help supply Virginia troops as they prepared for the next conflict. Little did Gist know that he would once again be called upon to serve his country.

The British government determined that a major assault against the French would be made in 1755. General Edward Braddock was appointed commander of all the British armies in North America and set sail for Virginia. Two regiments of British regulars under the command of Colonel Sir Peter Halket (the forty-fourth regiment of foot) and Colonel Thomas Dunbar (the forty-eighth regiment of foot) set sail from Cork, Ireland. After a stormy passage at sea, the sea-weary army landed in the Chesapeake area.

In late May of 1755, Gist was appointed lead guide by General Braddock and his sons, Nathaniel and Thomas also served as guides. Washington became a member of the General's staff as an unpaid volunteer who would serve as an aide to Braddock. He had resigned his commission in the Virginia forces after the Fort Necessity battle

because a reorganization plan by Governor Dinwiddie would have meant a reduction of rank, which was unacceptable to Washington. The road that Gist had traveled so many times would be the route taken by Braddock's army. What happened at the Battle of the Monongahela resulting in Braddock's defeat is a story for another time. It is a well-documented story and readers are encouraged to do additional reading on the subject.

Gist emerged from the battle with even higher regard. A letter from the Department of Internal Affairs in Harrisburg certified his commendation for sobriety, prudence and fidelity in carrying out his job during the Braddock campaign. Both Gist and Washington returned to Virginia. In October 1755, Gist received his title of Captain and In July 1757, was appointed Deputy Agent of Indian Affairs at which time, he moved back to Winchester.

A major part of Gist's work in 1758 was to help recruit Indians for service and maintain good will with the various tribes. Gist's last reported visit to his plantation was in the spring of 1759. Later that summer, he contracted smallpox while on a trip to one of the Indian nations, and died at the age of 54 on July 25, 1759. Some writers have stated that he died somewhere in Georgia or South Carolina, but according to Powell, more recent evidence in the form of a letter to Captain Tullekin states that "Captain Gist died on the road from Williamsburg with the smallpox."

And so ends the story of a man that history seems to have overlooked. Three short journals and a hand full of letters seem so meager for a life that truly was eventful. By the time he died, Gist had acquired the skills of a surveyor, explorer, trader, negotiator, diplomat and soldier-scout. Most of which he did not achieve until between the ages of 48 and 54!

Had he been more of a self-promoter, he may have received more recognition for his dedication and loyalty to the colonial cause during this tumultuous time in history. His two sons, Nathaniel and Richard, who served faithfully during the French and Indian War, would come to change their loyalties and fight with the colonies against England in the war for independence.

Financial bad luck seemed to not only follow Christopher Gist, but also his children. According to Darlington in Christopher Gist's Journals, "there is a final ironic and rather sad twist to the affairs of the Gist's in Penn's southwest as found in Fayette County land transfers after the death in 1787 of Gist's son, Thomas. In order to pay a debt of nine pounds owed, the Westmoreland sheriff seized the 400 acres where he had lived and sold it at public auction November 20, 1788 to the highest bidder." And who, may you ask was that high bidder? It was none other than Isaac Meason, who began his acquisition of Gist land for a bid of thirty pounds! Meason went on to build his iron empire beginning in Dunbar in 1791 with his Union Furnace. Darlington goes on, "In the spring of 1789 the Fayette County sheriff recovered against Anne Gist for 120 pounds by selling another Gist tract of 620 acres to Meason for thirty-one pounds." However, five years later, the Gist heirs sued Meason and were able to recover a total of 1,200 pounds for 1,000 acres of land!

Of course, Meason went on to build the beautiful Meason House which stands along Rt. 119 to remind us of this historically rich area. While Christopher Gist may not have achieved the prominence of others who came to this area, he nevertheless played a significant role in local history. It is important to remember that it is all the bits and pieces of history, when taken together, that tell the complete story of our region's heritage.