



5

MORE

# 1749 deed shows Native Americans sold Pittsburgh for tobacco, blankets, knives and gunpowder

FOR THE PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

DEC 2, 2022

6:00 AM

As summer faded in 1749, fur trader George Croghan journeyed to Beaver County to negotiate a major land purchase, offering tobacco, blankets, kettles, knives, gunpowder and other household items to the chiefs of six Native American tribes – Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora.

After negotiations ended in the Ohio River hamlet of Logstown — now Ambridge — the Irish-born businessman got the far better deal – 100,000 acres of land that included Pittsburgh and much of southwestern Pennsylvania.

For more than 250 years, the property deed that spells out the location and terms of this transaction remained inside a bound book at the Augusta County Courthouse in Staunton, Virginia.

Last year, the nine-page document was removed and photographed on a high-resolution scanner. Then a graduate student spent five days studying the words and carefully transcribing them before the deed was made available to the public earlier this year.

□



**Text of the 1749 deed for Pittsburgh and surrounding land**

Now accessible online at [James Madison University Libraries](https://www.lib.umd.edu/collections/1749-deed), the deed represents the school's five-year effort to digitize historic records in four Virginia counties tucked into the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Since the project began in 2017, more than 30,000 records have been digitized, said Kevin Hegg, who heads digital projects at James Madison University Libraries in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

"The Pittsburgh grant is the oldest of those," Hegg said. "We have documents from 1749 all the way through criminal case records through the 1960s."

The first page of the 1749 deed lists the names of the Native American chiefs and the goods they received in return for 100,000 acres in what was then Augusta County, Virginia. The land now includes Pittsburgh and surrounding property in Pennsylvania. (James Madison University Libraries)

R. Steven Landes, clerk of Augusta County Circuit Court, explained why the deed is in a northwestern Virginia courthouse instead of Pennsylvania.

“As of 1749, this land was in the state of Virginia. That’s why we have got the original record.”

Up until 1770, Landes added, “Augusta County was literally the largest county in the colony of Virginia. Besides that part of Pennsylvania, the county comprised all or part of Indiana, Illinois, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Ohio, Kentucky and Michigan.”

For 100,000 acres centered on “Pittsburg,” the Native American chiefs were given 600 pounds of tobacco, 400 blankets, 460 pairs of stockings and garters, 240 “strouds” (woolen cloth) and other kinds of fabric, 200 shirts, 50 pounds of brass kettles, 600 knives, 500 pounds of gunpowder, 1,000 lead bars, 1,000 gun flints, 1,000 needles, 240 tobacco tongs, 50 pieces of ribbon, 4 pounds of thread and 120 Jew’s harps (a musical instrument).

They also received smaller amounts of the same items for 60,000 acres on a river by an “Indian Village called the Seurckly old Town,” which possibly refers to Sewickley.

Kayleigh Bishop, a 24-year-old graduate student studying for her master’s in English at James Madison University, spent five days analyzing the deed on her computer, zooming in on specific letters and words.

“The writing on this document looks like calligraphy,” Bishop said, theorizing that communication among colonizers, settlers and indigenous chiefs was probably difficult.

She relishes the challenge of interpreting and transcribing documents.

“I am pretty good with reading scripted handwriting,” she said. “In my public school system, I was one of the last classes to come through that was taught cursive handwriting. We learned it in third grade.”

Bishop is interested in archival work and enjoys seeing how historical writing changed over time. Hegg, the librarian who supervises her digitization work, has given her a wide variety of documents to study.

On page 6 of the deed, each chief’s signature is accompanied by a symbol, followed by an English translation. Their names are translated as steel, stone, a cross, a mountain, a pipe and a high hill.

Besides Croghan, other signers of the deed included a representative of King George II of England and John Madison, who was Augusta County’s clerk of court. He also was an uncle of James Madison, the fourth U.S. president and best known for drafting the U.S. Constitution.

Landes, who became clerk of Augusta County Circuit Court in November 2019, said his predecessor, John Davis, stressed the value of digitizing documents that reveal the history of other states.

“When I became clerk, we tried to digitize more of these historic records with this partnership with James Madison University,” Landes said. “Kayleigh Bishop did the yeoman’s work on really doing the transcription and telling us what that document actually says.”

Augusta County is “kind of like Western Pennsylvania – mountainous,” Landes said. “We are in a valley between the Blue Ridge and Appalachian mountains.”

“A lot of the grad students working on these projects are earning their master’s degree in public history and will be working in museums,” he added.

The symbols made by the chiefs on the document fascinate Landes, who thinks they may represent individual tribes. He is looking for someone with a background in Native American history to provide insight.

The indigenous tribes “weren’t getting a lot in return for what they were signing over,” he said.

Hegg also has questions about how this land transaction unfolded.

“I don’t know who is translating. I don’t know if the Native Americans understand what they are signing. As a student of American history, I am not surprised that the white man gave so little for all of this land,” he said.

Some questions may never be answered.

“This document has survived 275 years. None of us are sure if we have the entire document,” Hegg said.

Matthew Wingfield, who scanned the deed and created the metadata for it, recently moved to Pittsburgh, where he works for the Children’s Museum.

Hegg said it is sometimes difficult to locate documents in the drawers and boxes of the dusty courthouse archive. There is much history hidden in old courthouse records, he said, and some is disturbing.

“Courthouses in the South are full of important legal records that document the lives of enslaved people and the Black experience in the American South, which was not pleasant.”

Hegg said the criminal justice system sometimes “was another instrument of terror and oppression.”

*First Published December 2, 2022, 6:00am*