

Zeroing in on Christopher Gist's cabin site

By Lannie Dietle

Christopher Gist looms large in regional and national history for the important role he played in the years leading up to the French and Indian War. His contributions as a pioneer, explorer, and guide are widely known from his journals, and need not be retold here.

In the 1843 book "**Historical collections of the State of Pennsylvania...**", Sherman Day wrote *"Soon after the treaty at Logstown in 1752, Mr. Gist made a settlement and built a cabin on the tract of land since called Mount Braddock, and induced eleven families to settle around him on lands presumed to be within the company's grant."*

The 1847 book "**Early History of Western Pennsylvania...**" credits Gist's plantation as *"The first actual settlement made ... within the present limits of Fayette county..."* Accordingly, the settlement is a prominent landmark on the 1755 Fry and Jefferson map. The western part of that map is based in part on Gist's *"Surveys and Draughts"*.

Documentary evidence proves that Gist's house existed in 1753. During that year, Gist was the guide for George Washington's famous journey to *"deliver a Letter to the Commandant of the French Forces on the Ohio"* and surveil the French Forts. Gist's November 14, 1753 journal entry from that trip states *"And at night got to my house in the new settlement, about twenty-one miles; snow about ancle (sic) deep."* Washington's journal states *"According to the best observations I could make, Mr. Gist's new settlement (which we passed by) bears about west northwest seventy miles from Wills Creek..."* Washington's map of the trip shows several cabins along the route they took, including "M^r Gists new Settle^{ment}" and Mr. Frazer's cabin at Turtle Creek.

In a story that is well known, after Washington's deadly May 28, 1754 encounter with Jumonville, Washington began fortifications at Gist's Plantation, but then retreated and built Fort Necessity, where he capitulated to a superior French force. When the French arrived at Gist's Plantation, they destroyed it. On July 2, 1754 de Villers described Gist's plantation as: *"...consisting of three houses surrounded by some pieces standing on end and by some enclosures the interior of which was found to be commanded by the neighboring heights."*

Gist applied for recompense for his loss, as recorded in the House of Burgesses on October 30, 1754. His application includes the following statement about his settlement: *"That the petitioner, having settled there with his family, upon the late incursions of the French His Majesty's forces, under the command of Colonel Washington, encamped at the petitioner's plantation, and his Horses and Carriage being employed in his Majesty's services, he was thereby prevented from removing the greatest part of his effects, to the value of nearly two hundred pounds, which the French either took away or destroyed, besides setting fire to all his houses, and*

fencing which had been removed and used as a palisade for the security of His Majesty's forces..."

Some of the buildings belonged to the Ohio Company. In a complaint to the crown after the cessation of hostilities, the Ohio Company mentioned: *"...the destruction of the fort they had begun at Pittsburg, and another fort or blockhouse which they had actually completed at the mouth of Red Stone creek on the river Monongahela, together with some store houses they had built on the communication to Red Stone creek, at a place called in the maps GISTS on the west side of the mountain..."*

The general location of Gist's plantation is known to be in the vicinity of Mount Braddock, Pennsylvania. A marker along Route 119 at Latitude 39.954968°, Longitude -79.651651° commemorates the settlement. Many sources indicate that Gist's cabin was located at the site of Isaac Meason's mansion, which is located at Latitude 39.953913°, Longitude -79.648248°.

I became interested in this subject as a result of Arthur P. Freed's article in the February 1966 issue of the "**Laurel Messenger**". He disputes the Meason house theory, because of the lack of a spring. Braddock road historian Robert Bantz concurs, writing the following to me on March 17, 2013: *"Many folks, including many from Fort Necessity, believe his cabin was on the present Isaac Meason mansion property that was built on Gist's land... I searched the entire area. I could never find a source of water on that site. It just always made sense to me that he would settle along the stream..."*

The attached figures should help to settle the issue. Figure 1 is a copy of a 1785 survey that shows the location of Gist's cabin relative to Gist's Run. Figure 2 orients the survey relative to a 1900 topographical map. During the course of this research, Mr. Bantz sent me a copy of Lacock's circa 1912 study of the Mount Braddock area. In Figure 3, Lacock's map is rotated to align with the topographical map, and a numbered comparison of streams is provided. Figure 4 is a comparison between Lacock's study and a 1939 USDA aerial photo. This comparison identifies the location of Braddock's road on the photo. Once the location of Braddock's road is known, the general location of the site of Gist's cabin is apparent on the photo, and is identified with a red circle. Figure 5 is a comparison between the photo and the topographical map which reveals the presence of distortion in the map. Figures 6 and 7 are other surveys which are represented on Lacock's study. Figure 8 shows the general location of Gist's cabin relative to Isaac Meason's mansion.

This preliminary research should be followed up by rigorous analysis, including deed searches. This would be a fitting project for a graduate student.

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