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Improving Independence: The Struggle over Land Surveys in Northwestern Pennsylvania in 1794

Marcus Gallo
John Carroll University, mgallo@jcu.edu

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Improving Independence: 
The Struggle over Land Surveys in 
Northwestern Pennsylvania in 1794

ABSTRACT: In the midst of the Northwest Indian War, the former surveyor 
John Adlum’s operations as a land agent and his dealings with Cornplanter 
and other Allegany Senecas helped place a large portion of northwestern 
Pennsylvania in the hands of wealthy speculators. This article describes the 
complexity of the postrevolutionary clashes over land between governments, 
settlers, speculators, and Native Americans. It also demonstrates the critical 
role of surveyors in land speculation and settlement.

THE UNITED STATES GAINED independence at a heavy cost. After the 
war, Alexander Hamilton reckoned that the national government 
owed its creditors more than fifty million dollars, in addition to 
state governments owing twenty-five million dollars. While these num-
bers certainly distressed American officials, the end of the Revolutionary 
War promised a long-term solution. The 1783 Treaty of Paris granted the 
United States millions of acres of new territory west of the Appalachian 
Mountains and east of the Mississippi River. By selling these lands to
settlers and speculators, state and federal governments could solve their financial problems. As long as the lands ended up in the hands of upstanding yeomen with a sense of deference to their betters and loyalty to their republic, the sales would have the added benefit of consolidating the federal government’s rule over the trans-Appalachian west. However, despite the Americans’ nominal territorial gains, during the 1780s and early 1790s the West lay largely under the control of Native Americans. Before any land sales could occur, American governmental officials faced the thorny issue of “extinguishing” Indian titles to the land.¹ 

Across the whole of the country’s western edge, a complex assortment of government officials, Indians, speculators, and common settlers vied for control of frontier lands. Native Americans attempted to hold onto their lands for as long as possible in the face of pressure from both American elites and commoners. For the Iroquois in particular, the Treaty of Paris had come as a shock. Most of the Iroquois supported the British in the Revolutionary War. Although the Iroquois led effective campaigns and devastated the Patriot backcountry for years, the British abandoned their Native American allies, leaving them out of the peace negotiations. The Iroquois later learned that Americans had gained the nominal rights to control their territory and former trading posts. Two separate strategies emerged: while some Iroquois saw placating the Americans with land concessions as necessary for peace, others fought to preserve their territorial integrity as an independent buffer state between the Americans and the British in Canada. In 1783, the Mohawk leader Joseph Brant pressured the British to refuse to give up their posts at Niagara and Oswego. His group also aimed to maintain control of as much of western New York and northwestern Pennsylvania as possible, along with a corridor of land connecting them to the Indians of the Ohio Country. To this end, he helped to organize a loose confederacy of Ohio Country and Iroquois Indians committed to negotiating land sales as a group. His continued negotiations with the British prevented his presence at the critical Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784, where the Seneca leader Cornplanter and others negotiated separately from the proposed confederacy, ceding a huge swath of

their western lands, including their claims to most of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and a strip of land along the Niagara River.2

Benefiting from such mass extinguishments of Indian titles as the Fort Stanwix Treaty, speculators bought huge tracts of land with the intent to rent and sell small tracts at a profit. Some, including William Cooper of Cooperstown, New York, developed their lands effectively and enriched themselves. Others overshot: Robert Morris bought and sold millions of acres across the nation but went bankrupt in 1798 when he could not unload his remaining properties. Individuals and companies, both foreign and domestic, undertook similar grand speculations in Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, western New York, and Ohio, among other frontiers.3

While federal officials and grand speculators insisted that only the United States government had the right to extinguish, buy, and sell Native American lands, many white commoners disagreed. They intended to legally own their own land in the West but often denied that they first needed to buy those lands from the government or speculators. While some squatters bought titles “illegally” from local Indians, many believed that their sweat equity and occupancy of “uninhabited” lands entitled them to possess their tracts or at least have the preemption rights to buy them from the government before anyone else. These settlers defy easy categorization, ranging from impoverished squatters to men of means. Tenancy was commonplace in many regions before and after the revolution, which helped motivate squatters to trespass onto lightly defended Indian lands. The government could do little to displace these settlers once in the West. Squatters hoped to make “improvements” to the lands by building cabins and fences and planting crops, with the expectation that they could later buy the lands they occupied or sell their improvements to the next wave of settlers.4

Whether settlers initially squatted on their lands or not, few were content to merely acquire enough acres to farm for themselves and their immediate families. They engaged in petty speculations with regularity, hoping to gain enough land on the early frontier to secure greater profits for themselves and their descendants. In some cases, squatters occupied thousands of acres. The huge scale of these operations blurred the line between squatter and grand speculator.\(^5\)

Because squatters would not pay for their lands and disrupted land sales to wealthier men, the government preferred to deal with well-heeled speculators who had ready access to cash. Nevertheless, Reeve Huston has noted the “oddly symbiotic relationship” between squatters and the federal government: while the federal government detested them, squatters provoked conflict with local Native Americans. These conflicts led to the mobilization of the army and campaigns that further extinguished Indian land claims, opening the way for speculators to begin the profitable settlement of the West.\(^6\)

It is within this context that we should understand the upheaval that beset the Pennsylvania backcountry in 1794. In response to newly crafted state policies that opened millions of acres to settlement, speculators and squatters crowded into the northwestern corner of the state. Farther west, the federal government engaged a confederacy of Ohio Indians in the Northwest Indian War. While the Americans had an eye toward opening the Ohio Country for white settlement, Generals Harmar and St. Clair had led disastrous campaigns in 1790 and 1791, prompting President Washington to commission “Mad” Anthony Wayne to move into Ohio with greater force. Spurred into action by these aggressions, the Seneca Indians in northwestern Pennsylvania debated whether or not to go to war with the United States in an effort to hold on to the territory linking them to the West. Even Cornplanter, who had been a staunch ally of the
United States after the Revolutionary War, now spoke with British officials and appeared to have decided on war. Meanwhile, poor whites across Pennsylvania's backcountry (and beyond) began to rally themselves to action against government policies that benefited speculators while levying federal taxes on households. Before the end of the year, George Washington brought an army of twelve thousand men to western Pennsylvania to crush this uprising, known as the “Whiskey Rebellion.”

Amid this crisis, wise speculators relied on backcountry agents to secure their fortunes in the West. In Pennsylvania, the Land Office oversaw land sales. The key member of the office was the surveyor general, who appointed deputy surveyors, sent them warrants to survey lands, and prepared the returns of surveys so that applicants for land could receive their patents. Deputy surveyors conducted the surveys on the ground. Because of their knowledge of the land, inhabitants, and laws of the backcountry, deputy surveyors could render unique services to their speculator patrons.

John Adlum ranked among the most effective former deputy surveyors who took on duties as a backcountry land agent. Born in York, Pennsylvania, in 1759, Adlum enlisted for the Patriot cause as a teenager in July 1776. After his wounding, capture, and release, he returned home to work in his father's tannery and learned surveying from his uncle. Beginning in 1787, he received a series of appointments from the state of Pennsylvania. These included his own surveying district, along with assignments to determine the boundary between Pennsylvania and New York, survey various strategic sites, including Presque Isle, and study the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rivers for potential canal sites. In 1791, he surveyed three tracts granted by Pennsylvania to the Seneca leader Cornplanter, and the following year he coproduced a map of Pennsylvania's roads and waterways. As Adlum continued to receive state work in the backcountry, he also scouted land for speculators, including William Bingham and Samuel Wallis. By 1793, Adlum was so busy as a land agent that he could no longer work for the state as a district surveyor. During the summer of 1794, the Holland Land

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Company and a consortium of several other well-connected speculators contracted Adlum to work on commission as their agent. He entered northwestern Pennsylvania intent on claiming up to a million acres around present-day Meadville, in the midst of land the Senecas wanted to protect. This article will focus on the role of the surveyor John Adlum in the summer of 1794, explaining the context for his activities in the scramble for land and examining the aftermath of his actions. Despite the terrible state of diplomatic relations between the Senecas and the United States, Adlum and the Senecas cooperated to deny lands to squatters and secure them in the hands of elite speculators.9

*Land in Northwestern Pennsylvania*

Debt motivated both the federal government and state governments to look to the West. Following the American Revolution, the Pennsylvania government developed a two-pronged approach to paying down its war debt of approximately five million dollars. First, the state raised property taxes. Second, it targeted debts owed to veterans. Officials set aside two tracts of land: the Depreciation Lands immediately north of Pittsburgh and the Donation Lands in the northwestern corner of the state. Prospective buyers could purchase Depreciation Lands with “depreciation” certificates issued by the government in lieu of payment for their military service. Veterans enlisting after 1780 received bounties (or “donations”) of Donation Lands.10

During the early 1780s, when the state set aside these lands, they remained unavailable for settlement (fig. 1). Prior to the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784, known in Pennsylvania as the “Last Purchase,” the northwestern reaches of the state were Indian territory. The land was remote

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from white population centers and fraught with danger for trespassers, forty of whom died in Indian attacks in early 1783. Although Pennsylvanian negotiators at Fort Stanwix strong-armed a small set of Iroquois leaders into the sale of the remainder of the state, most Iroquois resented the terms of the deal, and the area remained unsafe for white visitors after the treaty’s signing. In January 1786, when James Dickinson attempted to survey territory for the Donation Lands south of the Erie Triangle near Fort LeBoeuf, a number of Iroquois leaders stopped him. The leader of the local Allegany Senecas, Cornplanter, and two other Seneca chiefs insisted that they had not been adequately paid by Pennsylvania for their territory. Therefore they could not guarantee Dickinson’s safety north of Venango (modern-day Franklin). This region became the site of Adlum’s operations in 1794.11

Beginning in 1790, the Northwest Indian War flared in the Ohio Country, further exacerbating frontier tensions in Pennsylvania. While the United States government intended to extinguish Indian titles in Ohio, two decisive defeats at the hands of Native Americans in 1790 and 1791 placed further American expansion in jeopardy. Given the reality of hostile Indians and the long distances between goods and markets, Pennsylvania’s auctions to sell Depreciation Lands failed to attract buyers, and many holders of rights to Donation Lands sold their claims to speculators. In response, the state dropped land prices from £30 per hundred acres in 1785 to £20 per hundred acres in 1789. By 1792, still only half of the Depreciation Lands had found purchasers.12

Throughout the 1780s, the state struggled to leverage western land sales to pay off its debts (fig. 2). However, by the early 1790s, the federal government’s decision to absorb state debts solved Pennsylvania’s financial problems. As part of Alexander Hamilton’s plan, the state received $6 million in federal securities and drew 6 percent interest on these stocks, enough to eliminate all of the state’s debts (fig. 3). In 1789, Pennsylvania stopped taxing its citizens.13


Once the state’s finances were secure, its legislators turned their attention toward economic development. As part of this vision, government officials and prominent Philadelphia businessmen formed the Society for Promoting Improvements in Roads and Inland Navigation, electing Robert Morris as president. Members imagined a road and canal network that would weave throughout the state, linking Philadelphia with a thriving agricultural hinterland and creating a commercial power in the process. To this end, in March 1792 the state purchased the Erie Triangle from the United States, making it possible that an all-Pennsylvania route could connect Philadelphia to the nation’s West.¹⁴

That April, the legislature passed a law to regulate land sales to the public. Recognizing that speculators and settlers had already picked over the best lands in much of the state, the law drastically lowered the price of most of the state’s land to two pounds, ten shillings per hundred acres. In the Last Purchase, the legislature set prices for the remote lands east of the Allegheny River and Conewango Creek at five pounds per hundred acres.

Fig. 2: Pennsylvania’s land purchases. Image accessed at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pennsylvania_land_purchases.png.

Fig. 3: Inset from the 1791 map of Pennsylvania made by John Adlum and John Wallis, including all of the area priced at seven pounds, 10 shillings per hundred acres according to the 1792 land law. John Adlum and John Wallis, “A map exhibiting a general view of the roads and inland navigation of Pennsylvania, and part of the adjacent states: Respectfully inscribed to Thomas Mifflin, governor, and the General Assembly of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania” (Philadelphia, 1791). Image accessed at http://maps.bpl.org/id/14507. Map reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library.
acres. The assembly priced the more desirable lands north and west of the Ohio and Allegheny Rivers and Conewango Creek at seven pounds, ten shillings per hundred acres. At these prices, legislators and speculators alike could foresee a dense population of settlers covering Pennsylvania’s newly opened frontier.15

At first blush, the 1792 land law appeared to favor common settlers over speculators. The law established a four hundred-acre limit for purchasers and banned anyone but the state’s deputy surveyors from surveying in the region. Aimed at preventing land agents from surveying vast tracts of land for single purchasers, these measures would theoretically preclude large-scale speculation. Also, while the state normally expected the purchase of a warrant and a survey before settlement, the law recognized the longstanding tradition of squatting in the province by allowing squatters to clear and cultivate their property prior to purchasing a warrant for their lands. In addition, the law demanded actual settlement: within two years, any purchaser needed to clear, fence, and cultivate at least two acres out of every hundred acres purchased. The buyer also had to live on the property afterward for five years or else forfeit the purchase. Like the surveying requirements, this provision would make it difficult for speculators to hoard lands while waiting for property prices to rise.16

However, well-crafted loopholes within the law allowed speculators to exploit its seemingly populist intent. The law eliminated property taxes on the land for ten years, allowing speculators breathing room to sell their purchases without drowning in taxes on hundreds of thousands of acres. Most importantly, the legislature allowed purchasers to either settle the land “or cause the same to be cultivated,” opening the way for purchasers to rent their lands or hire companies of men to make improvements over a vast territory. Finally, in recognition of the turbulent political situation, the law stated:

If any such actual settler, or any grantee in any such original or succeeding warrant, shall, by force of arms of the enemies of the United States, be prevented from making such actual settlement, or be driven therefrom, and


shall persist in his endeavors to make such actual settlement as aforesaid, then, in either case, he and his heirs shall be entitled to have and to hold the said lands, in the same manner as if the actual settlement had been made and continued.17

Given the events of the Northwest Indian War, this prevention provision became critical, allowing speculators to suspend their attempts at actual settlement.

Speculators

Speculators moved quickly to capitalize on the low land prices stemming from the 1792 law. In perhaps the most egregious abuse of Pennsylvania’s land system, the state’s comptroller, John Nicholson, created the Pennsylvania Population Company to acquire most of the 202,000-acre Erie Triangle. Along with a consortium of four Dutch banking houses known as the Holland Land Company, the Population Company would become a dominant player in northwestern Pennsylvania’s land market. Initially, Nicholson and the other members of the Population Company studiously gathered political and financial contacts while incorporating. Nicholson arranged to purchase the Erie Triangle indirectly through the common practice of falsely registering different names on 640 land warrants for 400 acres apiece, thereby avoiding the legal limit of 400 acres per purchaser. The named people yielded their lands to Nicholson and the Population Company for a modest payment.18

The names on the warrants included Joseph Nourse and Edmund Randolph, the register general and attorney general of the United States; John Donaldson, the register general of Pennsylvania, who oversaw Nicholson’s activities as comptroller; John Nixon, the president of the Bank of North America; and the Republican merchant Charles Pettit. The New York senator Aaron Burr sat on the company’s board from 1794 to 1796. The agent for the Penn family at Fort Pitt, Tench Francis, acted as the

company cashier. Out of 2,500 hundred shares in the company, Pennsylvania governor Thomas Mifflin received 400. The Revolutionary War general Walter Stewart owned 247 shares. The Holland Land Company controlled another 1,000 shares. The wealthy speculators Robert Morris and James Wilson took seats as company managers.\(^\text{19}\)

In another wise move, the company enlisted the services of surveyors and Land Office staffers. Surveyor General Daniel Brodhead was a friend and partner of Nicholson. Various deputy surveyors either worked for the company as land agents or owned company shares, including Daniel Leet, John Hoge, Ennion Williams, and General William Irvine, who directed the Donation Land surveys. Nicholson used other connections in the Land Office to influence the clerk Edward Robinson to backdate warrants filed in 1793 to May 1, 1792, in order to prevent potential rivals from interfering with the company’s purchases. In return, Robinson received 490 acres. By collecting favors and distributing shares among the politically and financially connected, the company’s managers sought to ensure enough support to prevent their venture from failing due to political pressure or undercapitalization. As a result of its connections, the company came to control not only the Erie Triangle but also another three hundred thousand acres of land north of Fort Pitt, the majority of which lay in the Donation Lands.\(^\text{20}\)

While the 1792 law paid dividends for speculators, the state of Pennsylvania failed to benefit as much as legislators had expected. Enormous buying activity took place: between 1792 and 1794, the state issued warrants for almost ten million acres of land. However, a small handful of speculators controlled most of the warrants, and they failed to pay in full for their lands. By the spring of 1794, buyers had actually paid for less than 750,000 acres. In April, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a law to compel payment and address the backlog of applications for land. Beginning on June 15, 1794, no more land could be bought in the New Purchase or Erie Triangle, and old applications for those lands would be void unless paid in full by that time.\(^\text{21}\)


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 355–56; Hale, “Population Company,” 125–27. Hale notes that Hoge voted “not guilty” as a state senator in the state’s 1794 impeachment proceedings against Nicholson, who was ultimately acquitted for mishandling state funds.

\(^{21}\) Wilkinson, Land Policy and Speculation in Pennsylvania, 126–35. These numbers are from the Pennsylvania Assembly—the governor’s office believed that only four million acres had not been fully purchased.
The land laws of the early 1790s came on the heels of a series of events that left the Iroquois distressed and divided. First, the American Revolution split the community: while many Oneidas and Tuscaroras chose to support the Patriots, most of the Iroquois aligned themselves with the British. The war’s aftermath split the community again: some Iroquois decided to remain on their traditional homelands while negotiating limited land sales with the Americans, while others cast their lot with the British in Canada. Most of the latter eventually relocated to a reservation along the Grand River in a migration spearheaded by the Mohawks, traditionally the easternmost nation of the Iroquois.22

After the war, several Iroquois leaders emerged, backing different survival strategies for continued independence. The Mohawk war leader Joseph Brant concentrated on convincing the Six Nations to withdraw to Grand River while keeping communications open with the Indians of the Ohio Country. By maintaining control over western New York and northwestern Pennsylvania, along with lands in Ohio, Iroquoia would exist as a buffer state between the United States and the British Empire. Pursuing this strategy would move the main council fire of the Six Nations to Canada and risked hostility with the Americans down the road. Brant found his primary opposition in Cornplanter and Red Jacket. An Allegany Seneca and a war hero of similar stature to Brant, Cornplanter’s people lived along the border between northwestern Pennsylvania and western New York, a region with easier navigation to Pittsburgh than to Niagara. White settlers would soon surround the region, and the Allegany would need to trade with them in order to survive. Emphasizing the need for peace after the devastation of the Sullivan and Broadhead campaigns in Iroquoia, Cornplanter primarily sought to placate the Americans while he maneuvered for the security of the Allegany Senecas’ lands. Unlike Cornplanter, Red Jacket had a reputation for cowardice during the war, but his cunning and talent for negotiation allowed him to emerge as a

peacetime leader by the 1790s. He developed a compromise strategy, seeking to maintain Iroquois neutrality between the British and the Americans for as long as possible. As with Brant and Cornplanter, Red Jacket’s position as a Seneca from the Buffalo Creek community also influenced his attitude; his local community was situated along the border between New York and Canada, well-positioned as the central location for a buffer state. At Fort Stanwix in 1784, Brant agreed to conduct preliminary negotiations over territorial boundaries with the state of New York. However, the Iroquois had yet to sign a formal peace treaty with the United States after the Revolutionary War, and they refused to make permanent decisions about New York’s land claims prior to negotiating peace. Brant left soon thereafter to consult with Quebec’s governor, Frederick Haldimand, for a grant of land at Grand River. Because Brant was not present for later negotiations at Fort Stanwix with Pennsylvania and the United States, Cornplanter emerged as a principal negotiator in the treaty that established peace. The final terms also erased Iroquois claims to the Ohio Country and almost all of northwestern Pennsylvania, whittling away the corridor to the western Indians. With his absence, Brant avoided signing the peace treaty or the humiliating land cessions. He and a council of the Iroquois at Buffalo Creek later disavowed the results of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix.

While Brant courted better relations with the British, Cornplanter and his people suffered at the hands of their nominal allies, the Americans. At Fort Stanwix in 1784, he had negotiated the best deal he could, receiving a personal promise for one thousand dollars and two rifles in addition to the right to monitor the survey line between Pennsylvania and New York. United States officials kept these provisions in documents separate from the treaty and avoided fulfilling their promises. More importantly, while Cornplanter thought that he had guaranteed permanent hunting rights for his people in the ceded land, he discovered in 1785 that these rights only applied to the land until whites improved it. With his people disgusted over the terms of the treaty, which had netted the Iroquois only five thousand dollars in goods, Cornplanter began to fear for his life. He unsuccess-

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fully sought relief from Congress in the spring of 1786, pledging support to the United States and asking for a new Indian superintendent who would guarantee that no white settlers trespassed on their lands. By 1787, robberies and murders at the hands of whites in the Pittsburgh region forced the Allegany Senecas to abandon trading there and to assent to the construction of Fort Franklin on French Creek.25

Later, Brant attempted but failed to prevent the 1789 Treaty of Fort Harmar, in which Complanter and others reaffirmed the sale of the Ohio Country, including the Erie Triangle. Dispossessed Iroquois again renounced the results of these treaties, but the federal government ignored their complaints. At Fort Harmar, Complanter again negotiated with Pennsylvania for hunting and fishing rights in the Erie Triangle, along with a small reservation of land, only to find after later surveys that the “reserved” lands were instead part of New York, to which Pennsylvania had no rights. En route to collect payment for this treaty at Pittsburgh, where the Senecas received moth-eaten blankets instead of their promised goods, whites robbed his people three times. Among the items stolen was a title for 640 acres in Ohio, partial payment for Complanter’s cooperation. After whites murdered more Allegany Senecas on Pine Creek in central Pennsylvania, Complanter conducted a visit to Philadelphia in 1790 to receive justice for his people, but the Pennsylvania government delayed him there for six months. He eventually received personal rights to a tract of about fifteen hundred acres in northwestern Pennsylvania, along with payment of a few hundred dollars. On the way home, Virginia militiamen again robbed his party near Pittsburgh.26

Meanwhile, in the West, Indians in the Ohio Valley continued to wage war with American armies. As neutral parties, Complanter and other Seneca chiefs had tried to intercede with the Ohio Indians on behalf of the United States in 1791. With words carefully chosen to emphasize their own needs, they wrote to George Washington that they would attempt to “persuade the Wyandots, and other Western Nations to open their Eyes, and look towards the Bed which you have made for us, and to ask of you a bed for themselves, and for their Children, that will not slide from under them.” As late as 1793, Complanter still played a role as conciliator, help-

ing to lead an Iroquois delegation to the Ohio Valley in order to con-
vince western Indians to forge a lasting peace with the Americans. His
hosts imprisoned his party, and he and others were poisoned. Several died.
Eventually, the Allegany Senecas returned to their homes in Pennsylvania,
where increasing white settlement activity rendered their hunting rights
worthless. In addition, their people soon succumbed to a virulent strain of
dysentery brought from the West. In the words of the historian Anthony
F. C. Wallace, this period saw the Iroquois nations’ “declining confidence
in their ability to survive as a people.”27

War between the United States and the Ohio Country Indians esca-
lated, leading to a decisive defeat for Harmar’s American forces in 1790
followed by St. Clair’s disastrous American campaigns in 1791. Hoping to
capitalize on the tensions in the West, Brant pushed successfully for the
British to construct a fort south of Detroit, near present-day Toledo. By
1794, they built Fort Miami, the location of which—well within the ter-
ritorial claim of the United States—signaled British intentions to support
Ohio Country Indians and undermine American authority in the West.
Despite this step, Brant did not join the war, and his continued neutrality
harmed his status among the Ohio Indians. The British governor of Upper
Canada, John Simcoe, attempted to take advantage of this situation. He
reached out to Cornplanter, promising him a pension and giving him gifts
while encouraging him to join the Ohio Indians’ cause. By the summer,
feeling isolated and betrayed, the Allegany Senecas seriously considered
going to war with the United States. If this occurred, it would seriously
threaten speculators’ plans.28

John Adlum’s Surveys

By the summer of 1794, the legislature canceled land sales throughout
most of the state, but land in the thinly settled Last Purchase remained
available. Those who arrived first on the scene would get the best lands,

27 Wiley Sword, President Washington’s Indian War: The Struggle for the Old Northwest, 1790–1795
(Norman, OK, 1985), 96–119, 176–89; “To George Washington from the Seneca Chiefs, 7 February
and Pennsylvania Politics, 1794,” 96–121; Anthony F. C. Wallace, The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca

28 Fort Miami: Robert M. Owens, Red Dreams, White Nightmares: Pan-Indian Alliances in the
but many whites feared to enter the region. In mid-May 1794, Andrew Ellicott attempted to survey in the Erie Triangle for the state but had to withdraw to Fort LeBoeuf. In response, Governor Mifflin authorized a force of one thousand militiamen to protect Ellicott’s operations. President Washington vetoed this action, knowing that any further antagonizing of the Senecas could lead to war, which would threaten Wayne’s campaign in the Ohio Country.29

By the middle of June, surveying across much of the north of the state halted in response to western Indians crossing the Allegheny River into central Pennsylvania. Reports about Seneca intentions presented a confused picture. Local merchant Daniel Ransom believed that Cornplanter had “been bought by the British” and was stockpiling weapons on his land in anticipation of a joint invasion of French Creek. In contrast, for John Lytle, who had accompanied government surveys south of the Erie Triangle, “the Cornplanter acted artfully, in order to obtain presents, but honestly, for he communicated every thing to the commanding officer at Fort Franklin, even a private letter from Joseph Brant.”30

It was in the midst of these failed surveys that the former Pennsylvania deputy surveyor John Adlum arrived in western Pennsylvania with the intention of doing business on a large scale for Pennsylvania state senator William Bingham, Supreme Court justice James Wilson, and the Holland Land Company. In 1793, Wilson and the Holland Land Company’s agent Theophilus Cazenove concocted a scheme to arrange for the warranting of one million acres in northwestern Pennsylvania through the purchase of depreciation certificates, mirroring the Population Company’s grab for the Erie Triangle. In return for capital, Wilson would transfer half of these acres to the Holland Land Company, which could not purchase depreciation certificates because of its foreign status. This was a clever plan, but powerful and connected financial operators like James Wilson could not execute land speculations on their own. Based in the East, these men could only oversee one end of the transaction with the new government. They


had to trust others in the West to conduct their purchases on the ground, scouting out and seizing the best lands before other great or petty speculators could fall upon them.31

Surveyors often acted as the agents for land speculations. In some cases, men who worked for the state as deputy surveyors speculated on the side and still retained their government commissions. Forced to resign his deputy surveyorship to concentrate on what early Americans referred to as “land jobbing,” by 1793 Adlum had surveyed more than six hundred thousand acres for William Bingham in the Last Purchase in north-central Pennsylvania, in addition to working with the speculator Samuel Wallis. His deal with Bingham guaranteed Adlum a yearly expense account, one third of the profits from all land sales, and a percentage of the unsold land remaining after five years. In the summer of 1794, negotiations ensued between Adlum, Wallis, Bingham, and Governor Mifflin about how best to exploit the rich bottomlands of the French Creek region that Adlum had scouted out years before. Bingham came to an agreement with Wilson and Cazenove to jointly employ Adlum. His previous time as a deputy surveyor would make it easy for the surveyor general’s office to rubber-stamp any surveys he conducted, despite laws forbidding surveys not conducted by deputy surveyors.32

From the beginning of his surveying expedition to French Creek in 1794, Adlum struggled to buy himself enough time to complete his work. On May 30, Indians attacked some nearby settlers, killing a handful of whites. This caused a panic in the area, as the whites feared that the Northwest Indian War would come to the Pittsburgh region. Lacking longstanding connections with local Senecas and uncertain of their own abilities to defend themselves until Wayne’s army could bail them out, the area’s squatters fled. They could not match Adlum’s resources or dogged-


ness, and their unwillingness to stay in the Allegheny Valley during the summer gave him a great opportunity. He had heard similar rumors the previous summer and believed that rival speculators initiated them to drive him out of the area. Nevertheless, he struggled to retain the fifty men he had hired for the expedition. The men mutinied three times, and some sued him when he refused to release them from their contracts.  

The area that Adlum’s backers wanted to claim lay in the midst of the highly valued Seneca lands that maintained a corridor between the Iroquois and the Ohio Country. After years of experience in the trans-Appalachian backcountry, Adlum could relate to the Seneca Indians, which set him apart from his competitors and made him particularly useful to his speculator patrons. Over the previous decade, Adlum had served the state on four expeditions to northwestern Pennsylvania, scouting for potential roadways and canals and sometimes employing local Indians. Several of these surveying expeditions delineated the state’s boundaries, which affected Seneca land claims. He also surveyed Complanter’s personal tracts. On these missions, Adlum developed his knowledge of the region’s lands along with a mutual respect for Seneca leaders, especially Complanter. Most surveyors never experienced the special access to friendly Indians that Adlum gained by serving on Pennsylvania’s commissions for internal improvements. Other surveyors who worked alongside him made little effort to cultivate long-term relationships with the Senecas. Only Adlum put his good standing to use later on as a land agent.  

To succeed in these ventures, Adlum needed to gain safe passage from the Senecas. If he could not do so immediately, his opportunity would be lost, and rivals would seize his claims. Four decades later, he wrote in his memoir:

I had no doubt on my mind but that General Wayne would defeat the Western indians, and that peace would immediately follow, and that soon after the whole Country would be overrun by those peddling Speculators, and be employed in what they called improvements, and the next season the whole territory would swarm with such characters and [they] would drive off all who had paid honestly for their lands.  

34 Kent and Deardorff, “John Adlum on the Allegheny, Part I,” 268–75; Samuel Maclay, Journal of Samuel Maclay, While Surveying the West Branch of the Susquehanna, the Sinnemahoning and the Allegheny Rivers, in 1790 (1904; repr., Lewisburg, PA, 2007), 34.
Adlum felt contempt for these “peddling Speculators” who sought to “seize the land by what they called improvements, and to prevent those who had bought and paid the State for it, from surveying the lands.” As for the improvements, he wrote that they “were made by girdling a few trees, and driving four forked sticks in the ground, and laying two poles across in front and rear of the forks and cover[ing] them with bark—by this they expected to hold four hundred acres of land, and two persons would make upwards of a dozen of them in a day.” Squatters would certainly have described their activities with different words, emphasizing their willingness to work clearing lands with their own hands. They believed that the work of transforming woodlands into farms entitled them to the land. Squatters argued that their sweat equity and personal knowledge of the ground created a more legitimate claim to frontier lands than the bits of paper that coastal elites passed around, much of which amounted to little more than a shell game for massively indebted, but well-connected, speculators. Squatters certainly could not compete with grand speculators like those employing Adlum and usually could not pay in cash even for small plots. Settling land without a warrant and building improvements upon it offered an opportunity for men without capital to make something of themselves, and Adlum intended to prevent them from doing so.

Entering what amounted to a war zone, Adlum came equipped with a letter of recommendation to the commander of Fort Franklin provided by the speculator Thomas Willing. As the Senecas debated whether to stay neutral, join the Ohio Indians, or withdraw to Canada, Adlum also sought an audience with them to request permission to survey. He established his credentials at the outset of this meeting with the Senecas, bringing invitations for negotiations from United States Secretary of War Henry Knox and Pennsylvania’s Governor Mifflin. By pairing his request to survey with his official documents as a peace envoy, Adlum presented his business interests as government sponsored. Beyond this, Adlum worked for the Holland Land Company, which had conducted a purchase with Robert Morris for much of western New York, where most of the Seneca nation lived. To make good on the purchase, Morris would have to pay the Senecas for their land rights. Adlum’s status as an employee of the Holland Land Company therefore placed the Senecas in a delicate position with

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
regard to future, potentially remunerative land deals. Mistreating the company’s land agent in 1794 could complicate matters later.38

Adlum knew enough about Iroquois culture to conduct himself with decorum. His initial encounter with them could have gone very badly; in a crowded meeting, the belligerent prowar faction interrupted him as soon as the translators had delivered the first paragraph of his address. As he later recalled, “The young Indians on the beam above, saluted me with an univer[sal] roar, vulgarly called farting.” Unable to continue without interruption, Adlum kept his head and gave the young men a gift of gunpowder. After that, elders shamed the young men into leaving, allowing Adlum’s negotiations to continue.39

The Senecas admired bravery, which Adlum demonstrated by refusing to flinch at ceremonies in which warriors fired guns toward him at close range or used tomahawks to chop the air above his head. As he participated in the Allegany Senecas’ war debates, he tailored his message to specific constituencies, based on his prior experiences. When addressing the Seneca women, he emphasized the threat of destruction to their towns and agriculture, for which female Iroquois had responsibility. When he described American victories over outnumbered Indian forces in order to dissuade them from war, he tactfully avoided mentioning battles such as Oriskany and Newtown, in which Senecas had suffered heavy losses, in order to avoid insulting their prowess.40

Like many white people in the backcountry, Adlum also knew that the Iroquois held dreams in high regard, believing that they should obey visions conveyed in them. In one example, the local Senecas told Adlum that they had dreamt that he had given them his provisions, including whiskey and hogs. Initially, Adlum tried to deny these requests, saying that he too had dreamt, and that the famous chief Guyasuta did not want him to distribute these items to just anyone. This plan backfired when the Senecas saw Adlum’s dream as a bad omen. Ultimately, Adlum changed course, pretending to dream that he would throw a feast for all of the Allegany Senecas, with the idea that he could gather intelligence by count-

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ing all of the warriors at the council. Recounting these stories of dream manipulation in his later memoir, he boasted about how a clever white man could use Indians’ own culture to outwit them.41

Adlum benefited not only from past relationships with his Seneca friends but also from their mutual enemies: squatters. Acting on their own initiative, the backcountry’s common settlers had terrorized Cornplanter and his people, using violence and intimidation to make it virtually impossible for them to trade with Pittsburgh or travel safely through the region. By means of hasty improvements, these petty speculators hoped to convince the authorities of their claims to small plots of land under the 1792 land law and protect those claims against men like Adlum.42

While “peddling speculators” clearly made for poor and unpredictable neighbors, the Iroquois had recognized that grand speculators could make good neighbors beginning in the colonial era, when the Mohawks struck land deals with Sir William Johnson. In the postrevolutionary era, the Mohawks focused on securing a British imperial guarantee of their lands along the Grand River, but this option held little attraction for the Allegany Senecas, who did not desire to abandon their homes. They wanted to work with President Washington and local officials, but they realized that American political authorities might be powerless or unwilling to prevent squatters from staking claim to the region. Powerful and legally adept speculators like the Population Company and the Holland Land Company could perhaps become good neighbors who would slow down the flood of squatters onto Seneca lands.43


As a result, while they debated, the Allegany Senecas granted Adlum sixty days of freedom to survey the area below a line running between the present-day site of Meadville on French Creek and the mouth of the Conewango Creek. North of this line, a wedge of land could keep Iroquoia in communication with the Ohio Country. Despite their restrictions, Adlum could still survey several hundred thousand acres. After the sixty days, near the end of September 1794, Cornplanter demanded that Adlum cease working. To signal that his people would soon go to war with the Americans, he granted Adlum a gift of moccasins, saying that he could use them in battle against the Senecas when the time came for them to strike. With this gift in mind, Adlum left his final meeting with Cornplanter convinced that the Senecas would join the war effort and attack the Pennsylvania frontier in late September or early October.
However, news of the American victory at Fallen Timbers in late August arrived soon thereafter. The Senecas reconsidered and maintained peace with their neighbors.44

Through luck, skill, and connections, Adlum had managed to act when his competitors panicked. Nevertheless, the success of his mission depended entirely on Seneca toleration of his presence near the Erie Triangle. That they did tolerate his surveys in the midst of their deliberations on war should be surprising. It could suggest indecision or genuine friendliness toward Adlum, but it can also be seen as an attempt to hedge against the future. The Senecas refused to allow Adlum to operate in the northern reaches of French Creek in order to keep a corridor open to the West. Banning Adlum from surveying the southern portion of this area would not have long prevented squatters and speculators from making their way back to the region. On the other hand, befriending him cemented relationships with potentially valuable neighbors, regardless of whether the Allegany Senecas embraced peace or war.

The Aftermath of the Crisis

In the aftermath of the crisis of 1794, the federal government secured peace by conducting the Treaty of Canandaigua with the Six Nations in November 1794 and the Treaty of Greenville with the Ohio Indians in August 1795. These treaties permanently severed the territorial connection between the Iroquois and the Ohio Indians. Frontiersmen’s fears of Indians abated, replaced instead by the fear of an aggressive central government. Washington’s decision to mobilize a large army to put down the Whiskey Rebellion in the fall of 1794 signaled the power of the American administration to all of the frontier’s inhabitants. By 1795, as the turmoil in the region subsided, settlers began trickling into northwestern Pennsylvania once again.45

While land companies had snapped up much of the best land in the region, the law had stated that the claimed ground had to be settled and


improved within two years, unless interrupted by Indian attack. Hundreds of settlers began to squat on claimed lands, believing that the land companies would forfeit the rights to the undeveloped lands they purchased in 1792 and 1793. However, the state board of property began issuing “prevention certificates” to the land companies, allowing them to maintain control over their acreage because the Northwest Indian War had prevented them from settling it. Pennsylvania’s courts ruled that the companies had until December 22, 1797, to settle their lands. In a further blow to squatters, the court also ruled that settlers could not legally possess undeveloped lands without a new warrant from the state. Any such squatting would amount to a prevention of settlement, similar to an Indian attack.46

In 1799, Republicans came to power in Pennsylvania, casting doubt on the legality of the prevention certificates. This political reversal led to more squatters taking their chances on entering the region. The New England surveyor who acted as the Population Company’s agent in the late 1790s and early 1800s, Judah Colt, described the abilities of squatters to disrupt grand speculations. In the summer of 1797, he wrote, “It was more than once mobs of men from 20 to 30 would assemble for the purpose of destroying houses and for other mischief.” By tearing down the improvements that the company’s workers erected, these settlers hoped to establish their own improvement claims on the land that the company had surveyed and purchased. Colt spent much of his time indicting rioters for destroying improvements and ejecting squatters from company lands. He also employed one hundred men to frighten off potential squatters, and the Population Company encouraged legitimate settlers to build improvements along the edges of their property so that they would appear to occupy neighboring tracts.47

By 1804, twenty-four separate ejection suits against squatters passed before the federal circuit court in Philadelphia. Eventually, the Supreme Court of the United States confirmed the land companies’ rights against squatters. John Marshall’s decision in Huidekoper’s Lessee v. Douglass (1805)

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stated that land grantees who “persisted in . . . endeavors to make . . . settlement and residence” were “excused from making . . . actual settlement” if Indian hostilities drove them off the land. Despite this ruling, which should have quashed squatters’ rights to the lands, the ongoing legal battles and physical disputes drained the speculators’ resources. For example, the Holland Land Company felt compelled to offer tracts of one hundred acres for free if the settlers would stay on the land and improve it, enabling the company to claim a four hundred–acre tract. One family of three resourceful brothers, the McNairs, trespassed upon and claimed 240 tracts of the Population Company’s lands, amounting to nearly 100,000 acres. Due to the McNairs’ penchant for destroying company improvements and their ability to physically intimidate surveying crews, the company opted to employ the family as overseers during the late 1790s rather than continue to battle them. These kinds of struggles with local settlers made it difficult to monetize the companies’ claims.48

Despite their early advantages, the land companies ultimately failed to make a profit. By 1797, the leader of the Population Company, John Nicholson, had overstretched himself financially, forcing him to sell most of his shares in the company. In 1798, Nicholson relinquished the presidency of the company, and a series of sheriff’s sales liquidated more than four hundred thousand acres of his property in order to cover his debts. Similarly, the Holland Land Company invested significantly in its northwestern Pennsylvania lands but could not sell many of them. In 1810, its leaders decided to unload their remaining lands for a loss of approximately 75 percent on the money they had invested.49

Private speculators also experienced mixed results. Overstretched by the debt accrued from various land speculations, Adlum’s patron James Wilson landed in jail twice in 1797 for failure to pay his creditors. He fled to North Carolina and died the following year. However, through luck


and good management, Adlum’s other patron, William Bingham, profited from selling many of his Pennsylvania lands. His heirs held on to a large reserve in the New Purchase near Bradford, and the estate profited immensely following the discovery of oil on the property in 1878.50

Norman Wilkinson has argued that allowing speculators to profiteer on Pennsylvania’s lands delayed development by scaring off potential settlers, thereby reducing the potential population and long-term revenues for the state, but this argument is difficult to assess. It is true that the defeat of the Whiskey Rebellion and the Huidekoper’s Lessee ruling made it clear that elites would dominate Pennsylvania’s western backcountry. However, while northwestern Pennsylvania experienced significant court struggles that were likely to frighten away settlers looking to purchase land, grand speculators came to control much of the American frontier, making Pennsylvania’s frontier situation commonplace. In addition, while there were certainly good bottomlands in northwestern Pennsylvania, the region as a whole did not present an attractive profile to farmers. In terms of its weather and soil profile, northwestern Pennsylvania did not compare favorably with neighboring northeastern Ohio or many other regions along the Ohio River. Nevertheless, one could speculate that a more settler-friendly legal regime could have made Pennsylvania’s plans for developing a network of canals between Erie and Philadelphia more realistic.51

Cornplanter’s actions during the crisis of 1794 helped squeeze squatters out of northwestern Pennsylvania, ensuring the speculators’ claims. In return for his friendship to the state, he received a grant of land from Pennsylvania that he maintained until his death, along with a dispensation on taxes while he or his heirs lived there. In 1794 and 1797, Cornplanter, Red Jacket, and others participated in the Treaties of Canandaigua and Big Tree, which sold much of the remaining Iroquois lands in upstate New York, leaving a few reservations amounting to 340 square miles. Squatters never overran their remaining lands, but the Senecas lost their prior exten-


51 Wilkinson, Land Policy and Speculation in Pennsylvania, vi. For an example of speculators in other locations, see Paul W. Gates, Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier (Ithaca, NY, 1973). On weather, see the USDA’s plant hardiness map: http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/#. Whereas inceptisols predominate in the soil of northwestern Pennsylvania, alfisols that are superior for agriculture predominate in much of the Midwest, including northeastern Ohio. On soil, see United
sive hunting and fishing rights and could no longer live as they had. In 1798, the Quaker missionary Halliday Jackson recorded Cornplanter’s dissatisfaction with their current situation:

our Forefathers once lived in ease and plenty, but the White People have not dealt honestly with us, they have taken away our Lands, and drove us into the Wilderness, and now we have but little Land left, we are determined to try to learn your ways. . . . we cant [sic] all go to work at Once, because of the scarcity of axes and Hoes and the implements necessary to assist us in tilling the Ground, and we are poor, we are not able to buy more.

Like other Iroquois leaders of the postrevolutionary period, Cornplanter benefited personally from the treaties he conducted, especially through gaining personal land grants. He now adapted to the local settlers’ market, selling whites alcohol and building a sawmill on his property. By 1806, when Jackson returned, Cornplanter had lost his influence over the Allegany Seneca, prompted by accusations of corruptly mishandling both the treaties and his timber business. Most of his former supporters moved away to a new village in Coldspring, New York, to follow the prophetic teachings of his half-brother, Handsome Lake. The “Good Message” included adopting whites’ agricultural practices. In Pennsylvania, Cornplanter’s descendants remained on his lands until the construction of the Kinzua Dam during the 1960s flooded most of them. For a while, at least, Cornplanter had secured a bed that could not slide from underneath his people.52

Most of the players involved in the scramble for land in 1794 failed to reap much profit from their actions. However, in contrast to the speculators, who took on financial risk, the surveyor John Adlum had taken on a physical one, and he received a handsome reward for his role as middleman and frontier diplomat. His payment during his lifetime is unknown, but by

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1851 Adlum’s heirs had received more than $400,000 in cash and securities and nearly ninety-five thousand additional acres from the Bingham estate. After 1794, Adlum gave up surveying and entered positions of political and military leadership, becoming an associate judge and a brigadier general of the militia in Lycoming County. He also held various commissions in the regular army, including a stint as a captain during the War of 1812. Following his military career, he pursued his scientific and agricultural interests as a vintner near Georgetown on the Potomac, becoming one of the nation’s foremost wine experts.53

Alan Taylor has argued that independence, meaning freedom from “domination by a landlord or employer or slave-master,” was the key to understanding republican citizenship. If a man depended on others economically, his attitudes and ideas could not truly be his own, which prevented him from being a citizen in the truest sense of the word. In the crisis of 1794, the struggle over land was a struggle for economic independence: settlers desired enough land to secure financial freedom for themselves and their families, speculators desired the freedom that could come with wielding great wealth in the new republic, and the Senecas desired enough land to stake out their continued survival. In the years after 1794, most of the players in this campaign experienced mixed fortunes in their attempts to profit from the state’s land sales.54

Of all of the major players in northwestern Pennsylvania in the summer of 1794, be they Indians, settlers, speculators, or politicians, Adlum had done the most to secure his independence. The crisis created an opportunity for him; he continued to work while squatters fled the region en masse and other surveyors sat in forts, waiting for hostilities to subside. By leveraging his special talents as a surveyor, boldly staking out the best lands for his patrons while shrewdly understanding and manipulating the backcountry’s inhabitants, Adlum did his part to ensure that “great men” would dominate the best lands in the region. Adlum’s unlikely triumph sheds light on the unintended consequences of Pennsylvania’s land policies, which theoretically protected settlers but ultimately secured the lion’s share of land for grasping grand speculators. His experience shows the power that surveyors could wield on the early American frontier by fun-


neling the best lands into the hands of the wealthy or leaving them to hustling frontiersmen. Surveyors’ competence could make or break speculative investments.

In addition, because so much of Adlum’s success depended on his good relations with the local Senecas, his story also demonstrates the Iroquois’ ongoing influence in northwestern Pennsylvania and their ability to shape the region’s development in the years after they formally lost their lands. If Cornplanter and the Allegany Senecas had not feared squatters more than speculators, it is unlikely that they would have allowed Adlum to conduct his surveys. Pennsylvania’s legal regime certainly favored wealthy elites, but it took both Adlum and Cornplanter for speculators to forestall squatters along French Creek in the summer of 1794.55