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SHIPPENSBURG AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF OVERLAND TRANSPORTATION IN THE CUMBERLAND VALLEY, PENNSYLVANIA IN THE 1700s.

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ABSTRACT: *Overland transportation routes played an important role in the early development of Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley. The Virginia path (a major north – south overland route) and Raystown path (the southern extension of the east – west Allegheny path) were major regional trade routes and met in the valley at the small town of Shippensburg. Founded in the mid-1730s by Philadelphia merchant Edward Shippen, Shippensburg was envisioned as a trading center that would help to link the eastern plains with the Ohio Valley. Its location in the center of the Cumberland Valley should have allowed the settlement to prosper as raw materials flowed east and finished goods flowed west. However, within a few decades of its founding Shippensburg's role as regional trading center had all but ceased. By the late 1700s east – west trade had been diverted away from Shippensburg by Carlisle to the north and Chambersburg to the south.*

INTRODUCTION

The town of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania was an important transportation center on the western edge of the Pennsylvanian frontier during the middle 1700s, and from its founding was envisioned as a focal point of trade. Three major paths (roads) passing through Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley converged at Shippensburg and for nearly four decades (1740 to 1780) the town played a pivotal role in the movement of trade between the frontier west and the developing cities of the east. At the time Shippensburg's location was well suited for overland trade, which typically entered the valley from the north at Harris's Ferry (Harrisburg). The east – west traffic moved across the valley to the southwest through Shippensburg and exited near Fort Louden. As long as traffic followed this route, Shippensburg had an advantageous location. Yet toward the end of the eighteenth century overland transportation developments within the region caused a significant shift in trade away from Shippensburg. Improvements to paths to the north and south of Shippensburg gave more direct access to the valley and to western trade. Shippensburg—located mid-way between the old northern entrance and the southern exit—found itself marginalized as traffic was diverted. This shift signaled an important change in the role that Shippensburg played in the region. The rival towns of Carlisle to the north and Chambersburg to the south diverted much of the traffic away from Shippensburg, relegating the town to a secondary role in subsequent regional development.

BACKGROUND

The Cumberland Valley in Pennsylvania is part of the much larger Great Valley system which runs from Georgia to New York. As the valley enters Pennsylvania it bends rather sharply toward the east, making it an attractive route to the west. To the east the Cumberland Valley is bounded by South Mountain, a complex assemblage of broad mountains with an average elevation of approximately 1500 feet. To the west the valley is bounded by North (also Kittatinny, Blue) Mountain, the beginning of the ridge and valley province. The steep sided and long parallel ridges which form this range of

mountains rise to an elevation of over 2000 feet. Historic overland routes across South Mountain on the eastern side of the valley utilized low points or passes, and tended to be long due to the breadth of the range but not particularly steep. A very different situation existed on the western side of the valley where overland routes used gaps between the folded ranges. In contrast to South Mountain routes, North Mountain routes tended to be much shorter and the grades much steeper.

By the 1730s, western expansion for agricultural and trade had begun to spill out of the Lancaster Plain and into the Cumberland Valley. Philadelphia, located on the coastal plain, was rather isolated from the western Pennsylvania by the elongated mountains of the ridge and valley system that bisect the state. Difficult river navigation forced a heavy reliance on overland transportation, which played a key role in linking eastern merchants to the raw materials of the west. Yet overland transportation in the region was problematic as roads had to negotiate a seemingly endless series of mountains. The resulting routes were long, circuitous, poorly maintained, and expensive. Yet despite the difficulties in moving goods through or around the mountains, a vigorous trade industry developed. Eastern merchants who were eager to tap western resources found themselves hampered by the high friction of distance imposed by the rugged terrain and the costs associated with a poorly developed overland transportation network. Coupled with the rivalry between Pennsylvania and Maryland which necessitated an all-Pennsylvania route to the west, Philadelphia merchants began to look for a means of improving the fledgling system of trade routes.

Overland transportation in the 1700s was a slow and difficult process. The pack train was the most common method of transporting goods, especially through the mountains. Wagons were rarely used since they required routes which were cleared of debris, an expensive option given the limited availability of manpower. Pack trains imposed their own requirements on the network of trade routes, but these were more easily accommodated. The game and foot trails from which

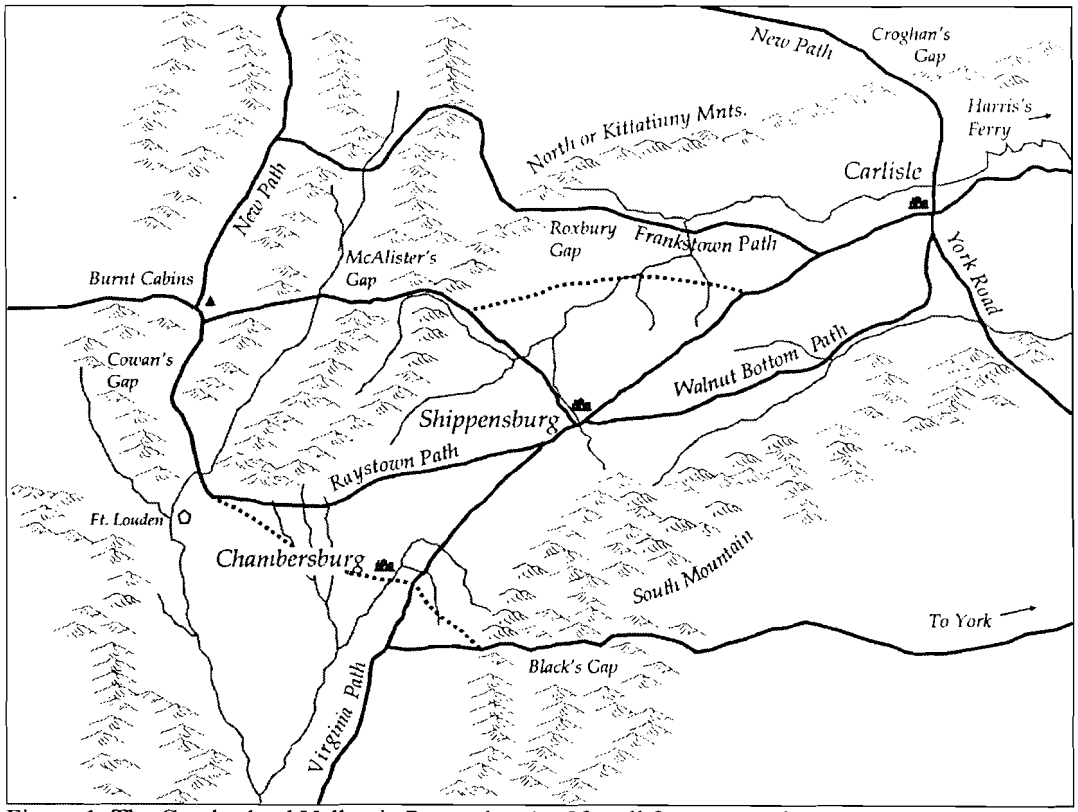

Figure 1. The Cumberland Valley in Pennsylvania. Not all features on the map were contemporary.

paths evolved had to be widened and kept clear of downed timber, but paths could easily skirt obstacles, unlike wagon roads. To the west of the Cumberland Valley pack trains were used almost exclusively, but within the valley and to the east trails were eventually widened and cleared for wagon travel.

In 1736 all the lands comprising the Cumberland Valley were deeded to John, Thomas, and William Penn by the chiefs of the Six Nations in Philadelphia (Steward, 1930). Edward Shippen, a wealthy merchant in Philadelphia and friend of the Penn family, obtained a patent for 908 acres in the valley that same year, and an adjoining 404 acres the following year (Burkhart, 1970). At the time of Shippen's patent Europeans had already begun to settle in the valley[1], although this was contrary to the Penn family's policy of purchasing the land from the natives prior to settlement. Several of the earliest paths[2] converged at what was to eventually become Shippensburg (Figure 1). The Virginia Path, which connected the Susquehanna and Potomac rivers, ran through the center of the Cumberland Valley. The Raystown Path, the southern branch of the Allegheny Path, ran west from Shippensburg crossing the North (Kittatinny) Mountains at Cowan's Gap. A northern extension of the Raystown Path crossed North Mountain at McAlister's Gap, meeting the southern route at Burnt Cabins. There was also the Walnut Bottom Path, which ran parallel to the Virginia Path from Carlisle to Shippensburg (Wallace, 1965; Swaim, 1994).

SHIPPENSBURG AS DOMINANT TRADE CENTER

Edward Shippen's purchase of land at the junction of the Virginia and Raystown paths shows the importance of these two routes to early traders and settlers. Bypassing much better farmland both to the north and south, Shippen chose land comprising a few low hills and two small streams where the valley begins its eastward bend. Shippen was the mayor of Philadelphia, a successful merchant, and the largest single landholder in the Cumberland Valley during his lifetime (Reynolds, 1968). He was familiar with the western trade routes and the importance of the Cumberland Valley, and also of the routes used by

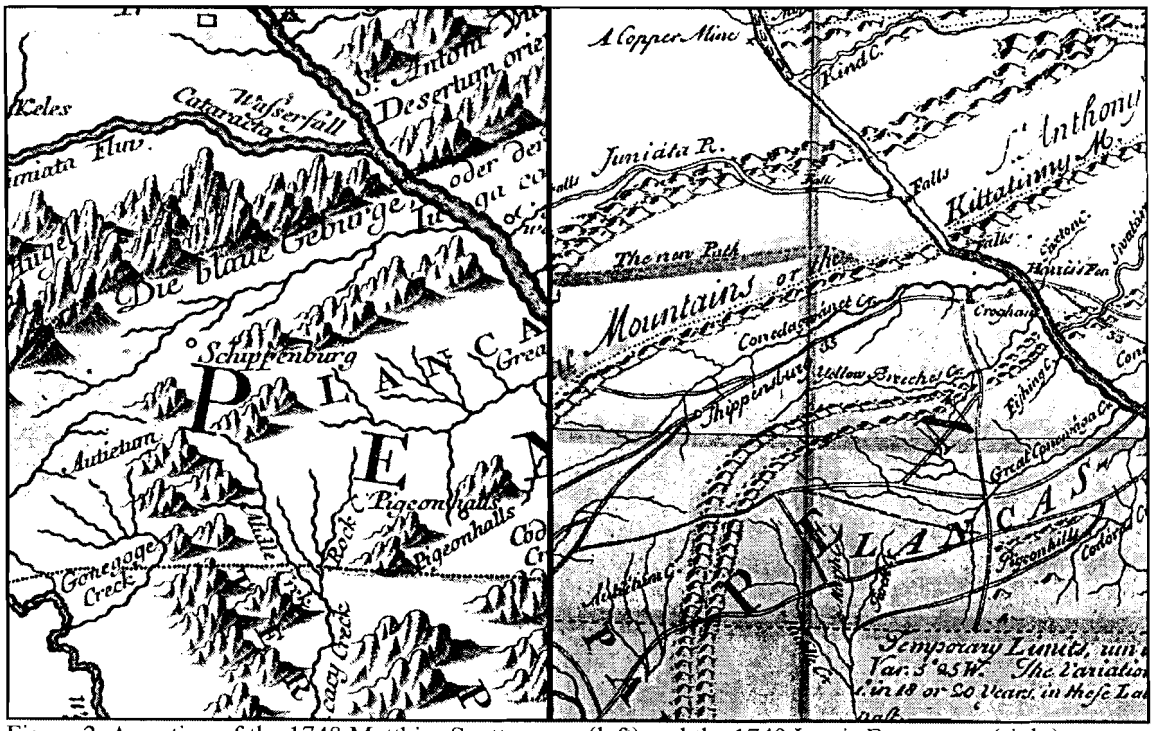

Figure 2. A section of the 1748 Matthias Seutter map (left) and the 1749 Lewis Evans map (right).

George Croghan, an early trader in the region[3]. Hoping to capitalize on both the westward expansion of trade and the influx of settlers to the valley, Shippen began to sell town lots shortly after his purchase. Shippen persuaded Francis Campbel, a college educated immigrant from northern Ireland, to come to Shippensburg in 1737. Campbel was the town's first merchant and owner of one of the town's earliest inns (Schaumann, 1994). Campbel recorded in his journal the existence of two additional inns and noted that the settlement was growing rapidly (Burkhart, 1970). All of these inns pre-date 1741 and suggest that Shippensburg had become an important transportation center very early in its history.

By the late 1740s Shippensburg had become such an important landmark that it had begun to appear on maps of the mid-Atlantic region. While Matthias Seutter's 1748 map of the mid-Atlantic region was primarily a physiographic depiction of the region, towns and settlements were clearly important and Shippensburg was the most westerly settlement shown (Figure 2). Lewis Evans' 1749 map clearly depicts the paths which were being used at the time. Again, Shippensburg was the only settlement shown in the valley. Evans' map includes the Virginia and Raystown paths, as well as the Raystown short cut through McAlister's Gap and the path across Black's Gap from York.

Prior to the 1760s, settlers and traders coming from the eastern plains of Pennsylvania typically entered the valley from the north, crossing the Susquehanna River at Harris's Ferry. Although there was a path that crossed South Mountain at Black's (Wetherspoon's) Gap, before the 1760s this was probably a little used route as it is rarely mentioned in any of the contemporary journals or letters of local residents. It is also reasonable to assume that if the route were well traveled, then a settlement would have developed where this and the Virginia path met, approximately a mile south of present day Chambersburg. Since most travelers were entering the valley from the north, Shippensburg was the logical location for a transportation center. The town is located where the valley begins its eastward bend, while to the west are two gaps through North Mountain (Cowan's and

Figure 3. A section of the c1765 manuscript map.

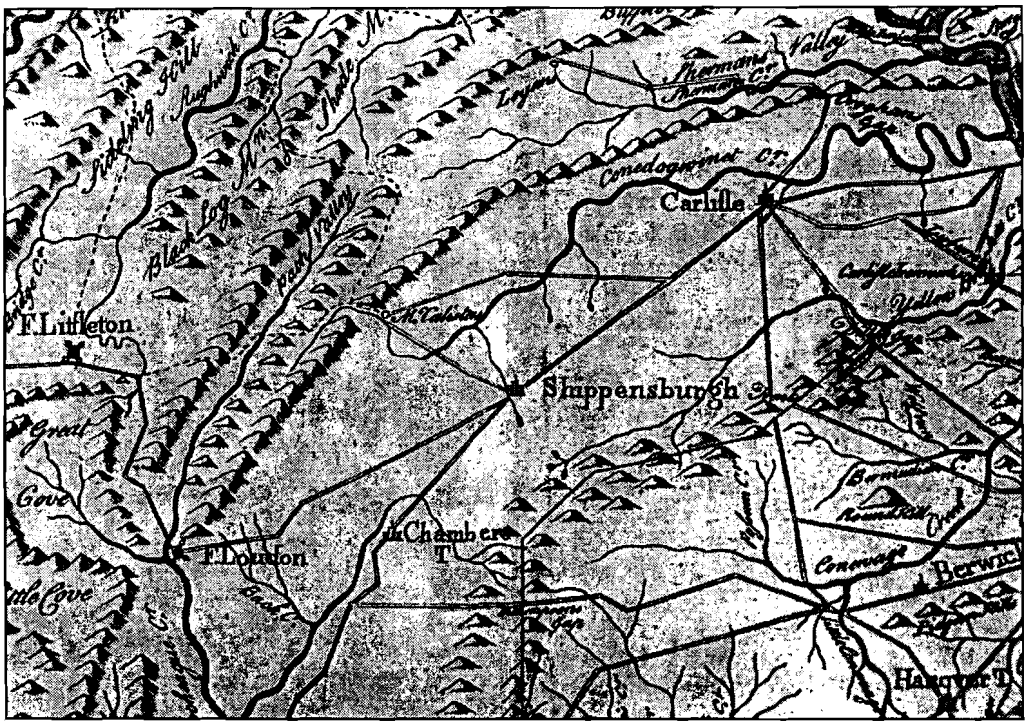

Figure 4. A section of the 1770 William Scull map of Pennsylvania.

McAlister's gaps). Trade entering the valley from the west did so via narrow horse paths, but at Shippensburg the routes widened enough to allow the use of light wagons (Crist, 1964). As long as traffic angled to the southwest through the valley and the route across Black's Gap remained lightly used, Shippensburg's position as trading center was secure.

COMPETING TRADE CENTERS: CARLISLE AND CHAMBERBURG

By the 1760s a second transportation center was developing within the valley—Carlisle. Founded in 1751, LeTort's Spring (later renamed Carlisle) was selected as the seat of the recently formed Cumberland county (Bates, 1886) and was rapidly becoming the most prominent settlement in the valley. Of the five paths shown in Figure 3 converging on Carlisle, the most significant is the path running north and crossing North (Kittatinny) Mountain. The New Path, which made its first appearance on maps during the late 1740s, was actually a branch the Frankstown Path[4] that allowed travelers to avoid the steep grades of the Raystown Path by continuing up the Susquehanna River and around North Mountain (Wallace, 1965). The decrease in grade was more than offset by the increased length. The New Path remained obscure until a route was found through Croghan's (Stevenson's, Sterret's) Gap north of Carlisle. With the opening of the Croghan's Gap route the New Path began to divert a significant amount of the western trade away from Shippensburg (Crist, 1964).

By 1770, Carlisle was diverting trade on the New Path and the northern extension of the Raystown Path. An extension connecting the Raystown Path through McAlister's Gap to the Virginia Path just north of Shippensburg had been opened during the late 1760s (Figure 4). This shortcut to Harris's Ferry (and Carlisle) left Shippensburg all but cut off from the western trade routes, save for the southern Raystown Path route. Although the southern route continued to carry a fair amount of trade, the northern route via the New Path had become the preferred trade corridor to the Ohio

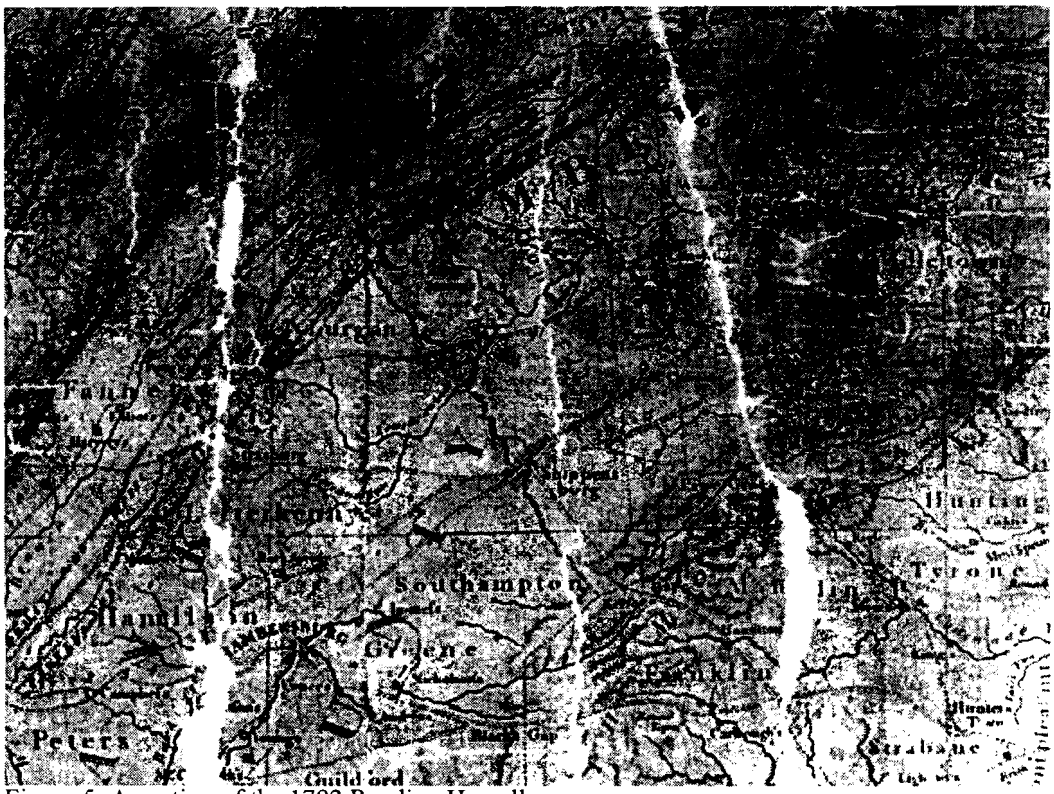

Figure 5. A section of the 1792 Reading Howell map.

Valley. Shippensburg was still able to maintain its position as the southern transportation center within the valley due to the continued use of the Raystown Path by way of Cowan's Gap, and was sustained to lesser extent by trade along the Virginia Path.

As old routes were improved and new routes were opened through the Cumberland Valley, the old trade patterns shifted. Carlisle continued to grow in population and importance as the New Path route was widened and improved. A map produced by Reading Howell in 1792 shows nine roads radiating out from Carlisle (Figure 5). However, the most significant change occurred in Chambersburg as the route across South Mountain via Black's Gap grew in popularity. In a letter to James Burd dated 1767, Jeremiah Dixon suggests that the path had been widened sufficiently to allow wagon travel[5]. The 1792 map also shows a branch of the Black's Gap route ran to Chambersburg, and that a new path had been built from the town to Fort Louden where it joined the Raystown Path. Chambersburg, which just two decades before was little more than a wagon stop, had taken on the familiar appearance of a trading center with six paths radiating out in all directions. The number of paths entering Shippensburg had not changed since the mid-1760s and its once advantageous location in the center of the valley had become a liability. With overland transportation improvements both to the north and south diverting traffic to Carlisle and Chambersburg, Shippensburg entered a period of stagnation. Shippensburg's early role as the major transportation center within the valley had passed in less than four decades. By 1796, the cartographer Cyrus Harris had left Shippensburg off his *Map of Pennsylvania Drawn from the Best Authority* (Figure 6).

SUMMARY

Shippensburg's role as an focal point for overland transportation to western Pennsylvania was a short lived, but important, event in the development

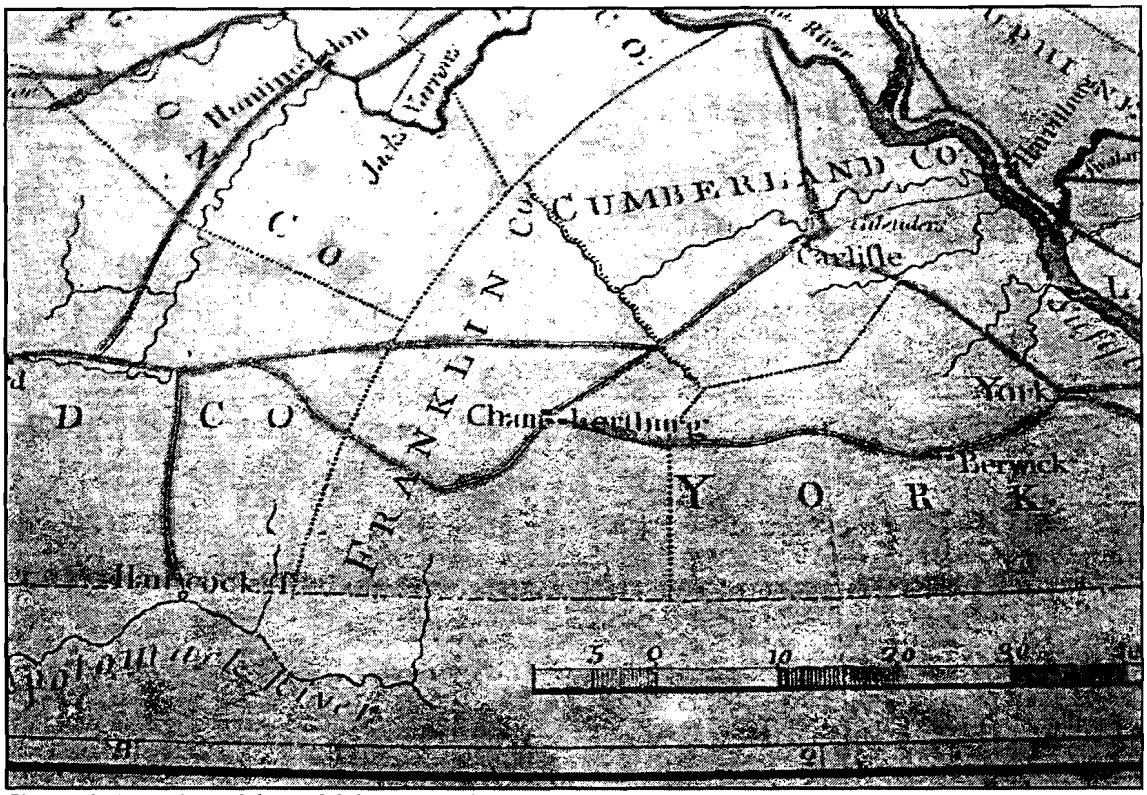

Figure 6. A section of the 1796 Cyrus Harris map.

of the Cumberland Valley. The difficulty in negotiating the steep grades of both South and North mountains forced traffic to enter the valley to the north and exit to the south. This pattern set the stage for the early development of Shippensburg as traffic angled across the great bend of the valley. As long as this pattern of movement existed, Shippensburg's location allowed the town to prosper. At this small town horse paths became wagon roads. Shippensburg's location was a link between the frontier west and the settled east.

However, as the early trading routes with the west were improved and new routes developed, Shippensburg's location in the center of the valley became less important and newer towns began to eclipse the valley's oldest settlement. The shorter New Path across North Mountain which diverted trade to Carlisle avoided the steep grades west of Shippensburg. To the south, the route across South Mountain via Black's Gap shortened the Raystown Path route and diverted traffic to Chambersburg. Shippensburg, which was once the most important settlement in the Cumberland Valley, became a minor stopping point on the Virginia Path. This pattern—set during the last half of the 1700s—persists. The New Path route at Carlisle is now the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the Raystown Path route via Black's Gap is State Highway 30, and Shippensburg is one of several settlements on the old Virginia Path route... currently Interstate Highway 81.

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MAP CITATIONS

Figure 2a: Seutter, Matthias. 1748. Pensylvania Nova Jersey et Nova York Cum Regionibus ad Fluvium Delaware in America Sitis... *The Pennsylvania State Archives.* Manuscript Group 11: Map Number 143.

Figure 2b: Evans, Lewis. 1749. A Map of Pensilvania, New Jersey, New York, and the Three Delaware Counties. *The Pennsylvania State Archives.* Manuscript Group 11: Map Number 629.

Figure 3: Unknown. c1765. Manuscript Map of Pennsylvania as Far as the Allegheny Ridge. *The Pennsylvania State Archives.* Manuscript Group 11: Map Number 349.

Figure 4: Scull, William. 1770. Map of the Province of Pennsylvania. *The Pennsylvania State Archives.* Manuscript Group 11: Map Number 87.

Figure 5: Howell, Reading. 1792. A Map of the State of Pennsylvania. *The Pennsylvania State Archives*. Manuscript Group 11: Map Number 1.

Figure 6: Harris, Cyrus. 1796. Pennsylvania Drawn from the Best Authorities. *The Pennsylvania State Archives*. Manuscript Group 11: Map Number 868.

ENDNOTES

[1] In 1721 approximately 150 squatter were removed from the Cumberland Valley by the proprietary government to avoid conflict with the native Americans. However when squatters from Maryland moved up the valley from the south the Penn family began to issue temporary licenses to Pennsylvania squatters to establish the their claim on the territory. Deeds were issued after the 1736 agreement with the native Americans (Flower, 1961; Burkhart, 1970).

[2] Swaim (1989) classified *paths* as being a cleared route less than ten feet wide which was used primarily for foot or horse travel, and reserves the term *passageway* for routes cleared sufficiently for wagon travel. Path is used here simply to denote a route of travel, either by foot, horse, or wagon.

[3] Shippen was one of George Croghan's many creditors, and for a time Croghan owned several lots in Shippensburg (See Volwiler, 1926).

[4] The Allegheny Path ran from Philadelphia to Reading to Lebanon to Harrisburg and past Carlisle where it split into two main branches. The Frankstown Path was the northern branch while the Raystown Path was the southern (Wallace, 1952).

[5] Jeremiah Dixon was one of the surveyors hired by the Penn family to fix the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland. That surveyed boundary is now known as the Mason-Dixon line. The letter is part of the James Burd papers at Pennsylvania State Archive.