

FINDING FORT MORRIS

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ABSTRACT: *On July 31, 1755, following the defeat of General Braddock's army in western Pennsylvania, Governor Robert Morris commissioned the construction of two stockade forts, one in Carlisle and one in Shippensburg. Built by Colonel William Burd and named in honor of the governor, Shippensburg's Fort Morris was one of a line of frontier defenses erected to protect local settlers and garrison provincial troops. While the location of the fort at Carlisle is well documented, there has been much confusion over the location of Shippensburg's small fort. For over one hundred years local historians have argued about this topic without reaching consensus, so that there are now three locations recognized by various state agencies and local organizations as the site of the fort. This research will examine the available historic evidence, paying particular attention to the geographic aspects of the extant documentation, in an attempt to locate the actual site of Fort Morris.*

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1755 British Major-General Edward Braddock took his main force of 1450 men through Virginia and across the Monongahela River on his way to engage the French at Fort Duquesne. Robert Hunter Morris, the newly appointed governor of Pennsylvania, went to the small frontier settlement of Carlisle in an effort to support Braddock's military actions in the west. Morris commissioned a chain of supply depots be organized and placed Charles Swaine in charge of assembling the westernmost depot at the small town of Shippensburg. Edward Shippen, the town's proprietor, offered Morris the use of his "Strong Stone House, 30 feet Square, at the back Run..."¹ for Morris to use as the depot. Swaine arrived in Shippensburg June 9th, 1756 and began securing supplies, but was instructed by Morris to wait for instructions from General Braddock before preparing the depot.² While Swaine waited in Shippensburg, Morris had decided to move the supplies 20 miles west to McDowell's Mill in an effort to locate the depot closer to the troops.³

On July 9th Braddock's forces were defeated by the French and the provincial army was dealt a crushing blow. Less than a week later, Morris received news of Braddock's defeat and immediately commissioned the construction of two stockade forts, one in Carlisle and one in Shippensburg. These two

forts, as well as Fort Loudon and several private blockhouses, would provide a secondary line of defense for the widely scattered western outposts. Morris immediately left for Philadelphia, where on July 31st he wrote to Thomas Penn:

On the 16th I wrote you from Carlisle in Cumberland given an account of the defeat of our Forces under General Braddock in the imperfect manner I then had it from deserted Waggoners which however appearing to one to be in substance true. I issued writs to summon the Assembly on the 23rd and returned to Philadelphia having at the request of the people laid the Ground for a Wooden Fort in the Town of Carlisle and directed one of the same kind to be formed at Shippensburgh.⁴

Although this was the first official mention of a fort at Shippensburg, preparations for the fort probably began within a week of Braddock's defeat, as on July 16th, 1755 Joseph Shippen wrote his father Edward concerning the procurement of "12 Muskets for the Fort to be built at Shippensburg".⁵

Swaine, who was already in Shippensburg when news of Braddock's defeat reached the Cumberland valley, was placed in charge preparing the Shippensburg fort, but the actual construction fell to James Burd, son-in-law of Edward Shippen.

On November 2nd Burd wrote to Shippen:

... As our Fort goes on here with great vigour and expect to be finished in 15 days, in which we intend to throw all the Women and Children, it would be greatly Encouraging could we have Reason to expect assistance from Philad^a, by private Donation of Sweevells, a few great guns, small arms & ammunition... We have 100 men working at Fort Morris...

This is the first time that the stockade was called Fort Morris. The fort was still not completed by March of 1756, most likely due to Burd being commissioned as a captain in the provincial troops. Work on the fort was then taken up by others and completed sometime during the late spring of 1756 and garrisoned shortly thereafter.⁶

THE LOST FORT

There is a long standing local tradition that Shippensburg was the site of two forts: Fort Morris, which was completed in 1756, and a little known earlier fort which has come to be called Fort Franklin. The first mention of this earlier “settler’s fort” was by Hazard in 1829,⁷ reprinting a document tabulating the disposition of forces on the frontier and purportedly written in 1755. Adding credence to the assertion that there were two forts in Shippensburg was a map produced by J. G. Weiser showing Fort Morris on the western end of Shippensburg and an “old English fort” on the northeastern end.⁸ John McCurdy, writing in Wing’s *History of the Cumberland Valley*, fixed the date of the completion of Fort Franklin at 1740. McCurdy gave his writings credibility by noting that Governor George Thomas sent a garrison of 22 men, thereby advancing the idea that “Fort Franklin” was a provisional outpost.⁹

There are no extant documents from the period that mention any other fort in Shippensburg except Fort Morris. All subsequent historical research concerning Fort Franklin (in Shippensburg)¹⁰ can be traced back to material published by John McCurdy in 1879, whose writings on Fort Franklin and other local historical events were extremely detailed. McCurdy was purported to have a set of papers written by Francis Campbell,¹¹ a merchant who is thought to have arrived in Shippensburg in either the late 1730s or early 1740s.¹² Upon McCurdy’s death

the Campbell papers were reported to have been found in his desk and were later published in the April 3rd, 1880 edition of *The Shippensburg News*. Unfortunately these papers have not been located and their existence can not be verified. The sources quoted in Hazard’s 1829 work contain several inaccuracies¹³ and has been labeled by a historians as an obvious fraud.¹⁴ Therefore, the evidence of the existence of Fort Franklin comes solely from secondary published works whose primary sources cannot be located or authenticated.

Prior to the French and Indian War there were no significant military establishments in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Assembly and the western settlers did not view the Ohio valley as a region of potential conflict, but rather as one of rivalry—a view that did not change until the middle 1750s. In 1740 the state had no standing army, and there is no record of Governor Thomas garrisoning troops at any location. Governor Thomas, at the time Fort Franklin was supposed to be built, was enmeshed in a political deadlock with the Quaker assemblymen over the raising of a state militia,¹⁵ a proposal that was eventually defeated. Perhaps the best indication that there was no fort prior to Fort Morris is that there is no mention of such a fort anywhere in any of Edward Shippen’s correspondence. During the 1740s Shippen had still intended to use his Shippensburg land as a plantation, and he would have certainly taken an interest in the construction of a fort using timber from his lands at a time when the frontier was relatively peaceful.¹⁶

Unfortunately, local tradition dies hard since more recent secondary published works—for the most part written by local historians¹⁷—perpetuate the existence of Fort Franklin. This has led to continued attempts to reconcile the locations of the two forts, which has only added to the confusion. Currently there are three locations in Shippensburg that have been suggested as the site of Fort Morris, one of which is also identified as the site of Fort Franklin. Since there are no known contemporary maps which pinpoint the location of Fort Morris, the burden falls solely on the few extant records that have been authenticated. Fortunately there is enough evidence contained in these records to allow researchers to make an educated and defensible proposition as to the fort’s location.

LAYOUT AND CONSTRUCTION OF FORT MORRIS

Although individual designs varied widely, most frontier forts of the time were of the simple stockade type, consisting of a regular square of vertically placed logs and an elevated bastion at each corner to house small canons or swivel guns.¹⁸ The most distinctive feature of these early stockades was their bastions, which were angled in such a way as to allow for the maximum “line of defense”. This line marked an area around the perimeter of the fort where enemy troops could be subjected to fire from two directions. Morris laid out the proportions of the standard stockade fort in a memorandum to Colonel William Clapham, the commander of Fort Augusta.¹⁹ Unfortunately the diagram which apparently accompanied the memorandum has been lost, but based on the text of the document the procedure was reconstructed by Hunter²⁰ and was subsequently used to reproduce the layout and proportions of Fort Morris (Figures 1 and 2).

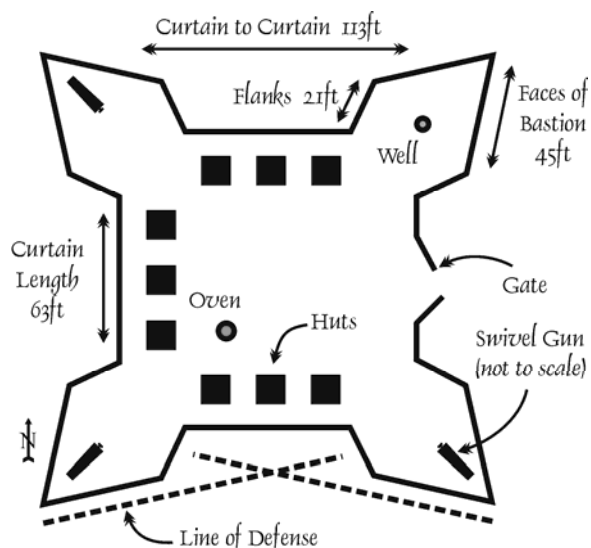


Figure 1. The layout of Fort Morris based on the measurements given in the Forbes memorandum and the layout procedure reconstructed by Hunter.

<i>Dimensions of the Fort.</i>	<i>Feet, Inch</i>
<i>Diameter from Curtain to Curtain</i>	<i>abt. 113. 0</i>
<i>Curtain</i>	<i>abt. 63. 0</i>
<i>Face of Bastion</i>	<i>abt. 45. 0</i>
<i>Flank</i>	<i>abt. 21. 0</i>
<i>Line of defence</i>	<i>abt. 117. 0</i>
<i>Height of the Stockade</i>	<i>abt. 10. 0</i>

Figure 2. The portion of the Forbes memorandum noting the important dimensions of Fort Morris.

The proportions of Fort Morris are detailed in a memorandum written on August 13th, 1758 by Brigadier-General John Forbes after visiting the fort.²¹ Forbes listed the dimensions of the fort as follows: Forbes indicated that the fort was oriented to the cardinal directions, with the bastions on the salient angles. The memorandum also states that there were “...nine Huts and Houses within the Fort sufficient for Barracks, Magazine and Storehouse for about 150, or 200 men, A good Draw-Well, and an Oven.” Colonel William Eyre, who visited the fort in 1762 noted that it was “...a small Fort made of Stockades... A Well within Side [is] seventy Feet deep, and very good Water; it stands high...”²² The placement of the huts, oven, and well in Figure 1 were based on the location of these features in similar stockade forts where the location of these features are known.²³

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The King Street Site (Bull’s Eye)

There are three locations currently proposed as the site of Fort Morris (Figure 3). The King Street location at the western end of Shippensburg is located on a prominent hill known locally as the Bull’s Eye. The site was purchased by the Shippensburg Civic Club in 1920 and a marker signifying it as the site of Fort Morris was placed there the following year. The site has a commanding view of West King Street, which in the 1750s would

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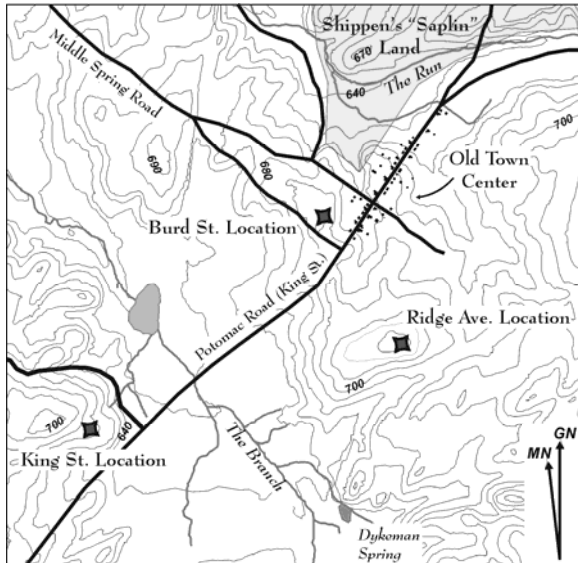


Figure 3. Shippensburg, Pennsylvania in the 1750s. The three proposed fort location are also depicted. The location of the roads and houses are based on work by Barner.²³

have been the newly realigned Potomac Road. Yet the location is poorly situated for a fort meant to protect settlers. It is nearly one mile from the original town center, and in the 1750s would have been separated from the town by a large swampy field along Middle Spring Creek (known locally as The Branch). The specific site thought to be the fort is also situated below the crest of the hill, which would have made defending the position difficult. The King Street location is called into question based on the statements of Charles Swaine, who while in Shippensburg wrote to Governor Morris on July 20th, 1756 that:

I suppose the people will now come fast into these parts & I shall use all possible expedition in forwarding the Fort. *I have pitched on a piece of Ground of Mr. Shippeys [Shippen] & the timber about here is all his,* therefore should be glad he was wrote to about it, if your Honour thought proper that there may be no claps on his part.²⁴ [italics added]

In the usage of the day, *to pitch* would mean to layout the fort in its proper dimensions on the ground. Swaine also states that the fort was on land owned by Shippen and that “the timber all about here is his.” Shippen did not purchase the 109 acre tract of

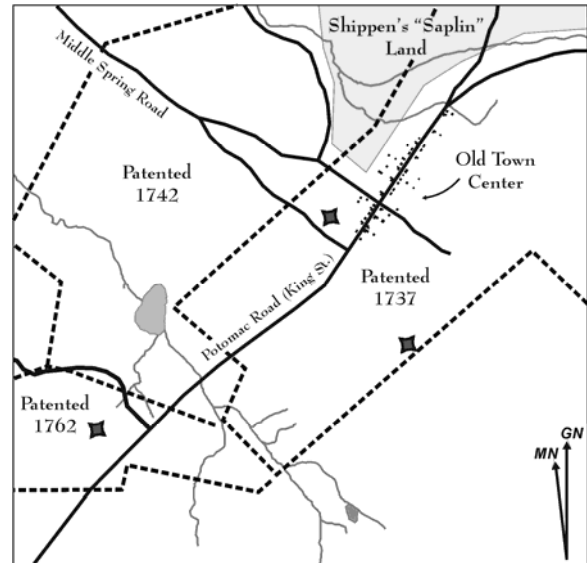


Figure 4. Edward Shippen's three patents in the Shippensburg vicinity and the years of purchase.

land at the western end of town that encompasses the King Street site until 1762,²⁵ and since Swaine stated that the land he had pitched the fort on land that was owned by Shippen, it is unlikely that the fort was located at the Bull's Eye (Figure 4).

The Ridge Avenue Site

The Ridge Avenue location was proposed by Hayes Eschenmann²⁶ in 1987 as an alternative to the King Street and Burd Street sites. This site is located at the crest of a hill a little over 3/10^{ths} of a mile south of the old town center. While much of what Eschenmann notes in his book *The Elusive Fort Morris* is correct, he based his suggested location on several incorrect interpretations of the evidence and one serious oversight. Eschenmann realized the problems associated with the King Street site, but was also convinced that Shippensburg had an earlier fort. He surmised that Fort Franklin must have occupied the Burd Street site²⁷—based largely on the writings of McCurdy—therefore Fort Morris must have been located elsewhere.

Eschenmann's arguments for the Ridge Avenue location are extremely weak, relying heavily

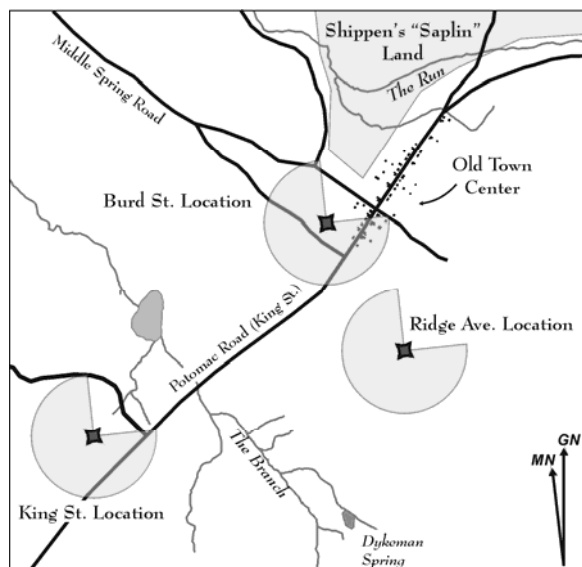


Figure 5. Range of fire (800ft) of the fort's three swivel guns.

on secondary sources and inference. His interpretation of the single most important piece of extant documentation, the Forbes memorandum, is also flawed. The memorandum states that "There are three Swivel Guns on the salient [sic] Angles of the SE, SW, and NW Bastions, but none on the NE" and it is this single statement that forms the basis of his argument. His reasoning was that no gun was in the northeast bastion because if Fort Morris was located at the Ridge Avenue site, the northeast bastion would have been facing the town (Figure 5)²⁸. Eschenmann places too much significance on the lack of a gun in the NE bastion. The lack of a gun in this bastion could have been due to a variety of circumstances, such as the difficulty of obtaining guns on the frontier or that the well was located in this bastion (as seen in other period forts). More importantly, the Ridge Avenue location is almost due south of the old town center, so a gun in the NE bastion would not be aimed directly at the town. Eschenmann also did not take into account the range of swivel guns of the period, which were loaded with smaller charges to prevent the recoil from breaking the mount. With an effective range of approximately 800 feet,²⁹ these guns would not have posed a problem for the town, some 1900 feet distant.

This location is also poorly situated as a means to protect settlers, as it places the town between the fort and the perceived dangers to the west. At approximately 1900 feet from the old town center, the location would not have been easily accessible by settlers fleeing from a surprise attack. However, the most serious flaw is that Eschenmann completely ignored the one statement in the Forbes memorandum that is most useful in fixing the location of the fort.

The Burd Street Site

The Burd Street location is on a small hill just over 0.1 miles west of the old town center. Based on the available authenticated documents, this location holds the most promise for being the site of Fort Morris. Of the three proposed fort locations it is the closest to the old town center and is situated between the town and the perceived dangers to the west. In August of 1755, as the fort was being constructed, Shippen wrote to James Burd "I hope the people will all get together immediately to build the ffort (sic) and You will get pine Logs and black Oaks from Saplin Land..."³⁰ Shippen's "Saplin Land" was a portion of his original 1737 patent³¹ located along The Run (now Burd Run). This site is the closest location to Shippen's "Saplin Land" that is both situated on a hill and on land owned at the time by Shippen (Figure 6).

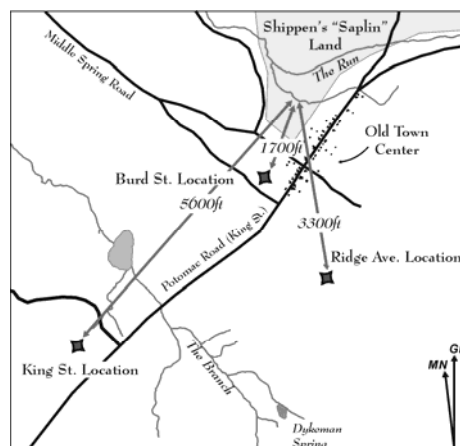


Figure 6. Distances from the three proposed fort site to Shippen's "Saplin" land.

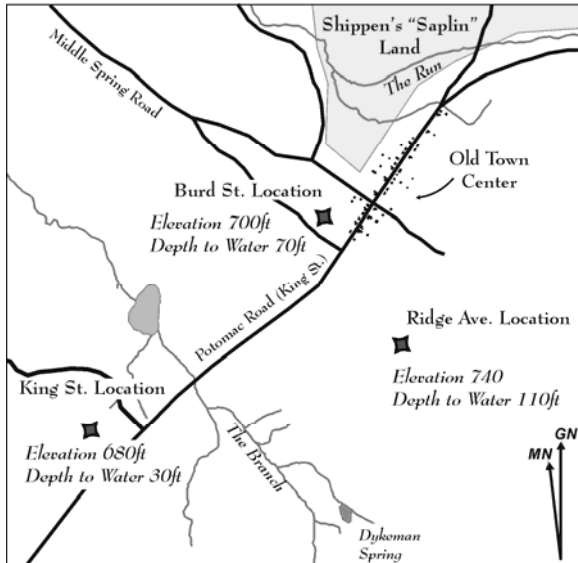


Figure 7: Depth to water at the three proposed fort sites.

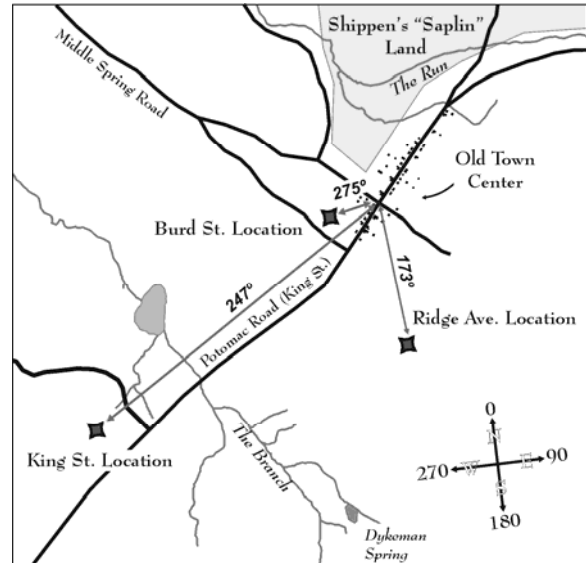


Figure 8. Direction of the three proposed fort sites from the old center of Shippensburg

The fort's well is often mentioned in the extant documents. Both Morris and Swaine mentioned the fort's well, and Colonel Eyre noted that the well was 70 feet deep. In 1937 the Daughters of 1812 placed a marker at the Burd Street location at the site of a deep well which had been capped with concrete by the landowner. The marker states that the well was part of Fort Franklin. The site is at an elevation of 700 feet, approximately 60 feet higher than Burd Run (which is about 1600 feet to the northeast), and a well sunk here would reach groundwater at about the 70 foot level. In contrast, a well sunk at the Ridge Street location (740 feet) would hit water around 110 feet, while a well sunk at the King Street location (680 feet) would hit water at around 30 feet due to the large spring exiting at the base of Bull's Eye hill (Figure 7). Perhaps the best evidence for the location of Fort Morris is found in the first line of the memorandum, where Forbes writes "The Fort is a regular Square with four Bastions, and one Gate in that Curtain which fronts *due East towards the Town* [*Italic added*]." This would place the fort west of the old town center (currently the corner of King Street and Queen Street). Only the Burd Street site is at an azimuth of approximately 270° (west) of the old town elevated above the surrounding landscape and close enough to

the old town center that it could be easily reached in an emergency (Figure 8).

CONCLUSIONS

Although three locations have been proposed at various times as the site of Fort Morris, only one location matches all of the available documentation concerning the fort. The Burd Street location, which is currently marked as being both the site of both Fort Morris and Fort Franklin, is in all likelihood the correct location of Fort Morris. Unfortunately, the site is presently a residential neighborhood and no archaeological excavations have been conducted to verify the existence of a colonial fort. However, the location is known to have had a well of approximately the correct depth (as noted by Colonel Eyre), was on land that was owned by Shippen during the correct time (as noted by Swaine), was close to Shippen's "Saplin Land" (as per Shippen's letter to Burd), and is the only elevated location due west of the old town center (as noted by Forbes) which could be easily reached in an emergency. There is no credible evidence that Shippensburg had a fort prior to the provincial fort of 1756, and thus the name Fort Franklin was most

likely erroneously applied to Fort Morris at a later time.

REFERENCES AND ENDNOTES

- ¹ Edward Shippen to Robert Morris (June 13, 1755). *Pennsylvania Archives*. Series 1, Volume 2. pg. 359. Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.
- ² Robert Morris to Edward Braddock (June 3rd, 1755). *Minutes of the Provincial Council*. Volume 6, pg. 407. Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
- ³ Robert Morris to Edward Braddock (July 3, 1755). *Pennsylvania Archives*. Pg. 372.
- ⁴ Robert Morris to Thomas Penn (July 31, 1755). *Minutes of the Provincial Council*. pg. 517.
- ⁵ Joseph Shippen to Edward Shippen (July 16th 1755). *Shippen Family Papers (1701-1856)*. Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Manuscript Group 595.
- ⁶ Hunter, William A. 1960. *Forts on the Pennsylvania Frontier: 1753-1758*. Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. 453-4.
- ⁷ See pgs. 389-91 in Hazard, Samuel. 1829. *Register of Pennsylvania, devoted to the preservation of facts and documents, and every kind of useful information respecting the state of Pennsylvania*. Volume IV. Philadelphia: W. F. Geddes Printers.
- ⁸ Weiser, Jay G. in Indian Forts Commission. 1916. *Report of the Commission to Locate the Site of Frontier Forts in Pennsylvania, Volume Two, Second Edition*. Thomas Lynch Montgomery, editor. Harrisburg: W. S. Ray, state printer.
- ⁹ McCurdy, John in Wing, Conway P. 1879. *History of Cumberland County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: James D. Scott Printers.
- ¹⁰ The fictitious Fort Franklin in Shippensburg should not be confused with the actual Fort Franklin constructed and garrisoned in 1756 near Snyders in present day Schuylkill County.
- ¹¹ There is considerable confusion concerning the Shippensburg merchant Francis Campbell (Campble). See Egle, William H. 1896 *Pennsylvania genealogies; chiefly Scotch-Irish and German*. Harrisburg: Harrisburg Publishing Company.
- ¹² Burkhart, William. 1970. *The Shippensburg Story: 1730 - 1970*. Shippensburg Historical Society, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.
- ¹³ The *disposition of force* document, purported to be written in 1755, also lists the garrisoning of men in Forts Loudon, Augusta, and Juniata. Forts Loudon and Augusta were not built until 1756, and Fort Juniata was not built until 1758.
- ¹⁴ See footnote 280, pg. 437 in Hunter, William A. 1960.
- ¹⁵ A MESSAGE from the House of Representatives to the Governor, in answer to His of the 23d Instant. *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 7th, 1740.
- ¹⁶ Shippen showed interest in the destruction and use of his timber in the construction of Fort Morris and on several other occasions. See Edward Shippen to William Piper (March 23rd, 1763), Edward Shippen to James Burd (July 31st, 1755), Edward Shippen to Joseph Shippen (October 30th, 1756), *Shippen Family Papers (1701-1856)*.
- ¹⁷ Principally Eschenmann, Hayes R. 1987. *The Elusive Fort Morris*. Shippensburg: Beidel Printing House; Finafrock, John L. 1942. *Notes on Franklin County History*. Chambersburg: Kittingtinny Historical Society; Stewart, Harriet Wiley. 1918. *History of the Cumberland Valley, Pennsylvania*. Shippensburg: Chronicle Printing Co.

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¹⁸ See pg. 192 in Hunter, William A. 1960.

¹⁹ Robert Morris to William Clapham (c.June, 1756). *Simon Gratz Collection (1343-1928)*. Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Manuscript Group 250A.

²⁰ See pgs. 541-3 in Hunter, William A. 1960.

²¹ John Forbes, General. Memorandum of the Fort at Shippensburg (August 13th, 1758). *Headquarters Papers of Brigadier-General John Forbes Relating to the Expedition against Fort Duquesne in 1758*. Charolettsville, Virginia: University of Virginia, Tracy W. McGregor Library. Collection 10034.

²² Francis R. Reece (ed). 1944. Colonel Eyre's Journal of His trip from New York to Pittsburgh, 1762. *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*. Volume 27, pg. 41.

²³ Specifically forts Halifax, Allen, Augusta, Ligonier, Bedford, and Carlisle. Contemporary plans for these forts can be found in Indian Forts Commission. 1896. *Report of the Commission to Locate the Site of Frontier Forts in Pennsylvania, Volume One, First Edition*. Harrisburg: Clarence M. Busch, state printer.

²⁴ Charles Swaine to Robert Morris. *Minutes of the Provincial Council*. pg. 493.

²⁵ Shippen Land Survey (109 acres, 137 perches). Penn Family to Edward Shippen. Patent AA-10-400. October 16th, 1762. Carlisle: Cumberland County Historical Society.

²⁶ Eschenmann, Hayes R. 1987.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pgs. 82, 95.

²⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 100.

²⁹ See Simmons, Joe J. 1992. Replicating Fifteenth- and Sixteenth – Century Ordnance. *Historical Archaeology*. 26(4):14-20.

³⁰ Shippen to James and Sarah Burd (August 7th 1755). *Shippen Family Papers (1701-1856)*.

³¹ Shippen Land Survey (908 acres). Penn Family to Edward Shippen. Patent A-8-338. February 17th, 1737. Carlisle: Cumberland County Historical Society.