Builders of Ohio
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A Biographical History

Edited by

WARREN VAN TINE AND
MICHAEL PIERCE

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Introduction

WARREN VAN TINE AND MICHAEL PIERCE

Near the end of his fourth and final term as governor of Ohio, James A. Rhodes was the guest of honor at the unveiling of a statue of him—one that the governor had convinced the General Assembly to erect—on the statehouse lawn. There, his likeness joined statues of William McKinley, James Garfield, and others the state had deemed fit to memorialize, although few passersby can recite their deeds or accomplishments. By installing an idealized piece of bronze to symbolize his historical legacy, Rhodes assured that he would be remembered even if his historical role was not understood. The purpose of this book is to take the state's history beyond the homage of statues. That is, it seeks to humanize rather than memorialize Ohioans who have played important roles in the state's past.

Unlike the statehouse statues, this work is not an uncritical celebration of the state’s past. There are certainly events recounted here that most Ohioans will deem worthy of praise, such as John Parker’s escape from slavery, Tom Johnson’s rise from poverty, and the efforts of Philander Chase and William Oxley Thompson to create a system of higher education that met the needs of the state. But there are also things in the state’s past and in this book that most Ohioans will find uncomfortable, such as the mistreatment of Native Americans, the persecution of African Americans, and the inequities that accompanied industrialization. This volume contains both the positive and negative; the editors believe that an honest portrayal of Ohio’s past is the best way to celebrate it.

The twenty-four essays in this volume use biography to explore Ohio’s history. They are not intended to provide a narrative history offering encyclopedic coverage or describing events in chronological order. Nonetheless, they do provide a historical overview of the state’s development from George Croghan’s search for fame and fortune on
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the eighteenth-century frontier through Dave Thomas’s creation of a fast food empire in the late twentieth century. Each chapter also addresses important events and transformations in the state’s history such as European settlement, Native American resistance, the creation of territorial and state governments, the development of the state’s educational and economic institutions, the disruptions created by the Civil War, the struggle of African Americans and women to participate in Ohio’s public life, efforts to ameliorate the pernicious effects of industrialization, the negotiation of the state’s role in a nation increasingly dominated by the federal government, and the ramifications of deindustrialization and rise of a service economy.

The editors chose the biographical approach for three reasons. First, the volume seeks to bring the work of academic historians to a wider audience. With its strong narrative structure and attention to the personal, biography can do just that. Second, the biographical approach underscores the contingent nature of history and the agency of individuals. In other words, history is not simply the interplay of impersonal social and economic forces; it is how individual actors responded to these forces to create the worlds in which they lived. Third, as historian David Brion Davis has observed, “By showing how cultural tensions and contradictions may be internalized, struggled with, and resolved within actual individuals, biography offers the most promising synthesis of culture and history.”

These biographies are not necessarily of the most famous Ohioans. In fact, few of the twenty-five individuals are household names. Ohioans such as Pete Rose and Neil Armstrong will certainly always be better known than the likes of Benjamin Arnett or Frances Dana Gage or John Campbell. This is not to suggest that Rose and Armstrong are unworthy of scholarly attention. Certainly, Rose’s career could be used to illuminate the role of celebrity in late-twentieth-century America and Armstrong’s the race for technological superiority during the Cold War, but they tell us little about the state’s development or what distinguished Ohio from other states or the nation as a whole. Likewise, the editors have not included essays examining Ohioans whose primary area of influence was on the national stage. Hence, there are no essays surveying the lives of William McKinley, Ulysses S. Grant, and numerous other Ohioans who have played important roles in national affairs. These individuals also tell us less about Ohio than they do about the United States as a whole.

The essays emphasize political and economic developments because that is what makes the state distinctive. Ohio is foremost a
political entity. The state was created by an act of Congress, its boundaries established as much by political intrigue as geography, and it is only through their common citizenship that Ohioans are bound together as Ohioans. The state’s people are not united by some loosely defined common culture or social system that terminates at the state’s borders. This in no way suggests that the state’s cultural or literary figures should not be studied but that the likes of William Dean Howells, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Sherwood Anderson tell us more about regional, ethnic, or American cultures than they do about what is distinct about Ohio. If Anderson had entitled his famous novel *Winesburg, Indiana* or *Winesburg, Michigan* would that have changed the work or how people perceived it in any substantive way?

Besides offering insight into specific periods and events, the essays as a whole paint a picture of Ohio as a state that has struggled to come to terms with opportunity. The earliest white settlers came to Ohio in pursuit of economic success. Since that time, the state has continued to attract newcomers seeking economic opportunity, from those already with comfortable means, such as Thomas Worthington, to those on the edge of poverty, such as African American women Jane Edna Hunter sought to assist. In fact, only ten of the twenty-five individuals examined in this volume were born within the state. The rest migrated either from within the United States or from Europe. Five came from the southern United States, six from the East Coast north of the Mason-Dixon line, one from the western United States, and three from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

While roughly one-third of the individuals covered in this volume could honestly claim humble origins, the majority climbed from economic comfort and social acceptance to affluence and prominence. Yet the search for opportunity in Ohio did not guarantee sustained success. The last great land proprietor, John Cleves Symmes, died in poverty as did Indian trader George Croghan; Florence Allen never gained the seat she coveted on the U.S. Supreme Court; and Benjamin Arnett fell from grace in the eyes of both the Republican Party and the African American community. The industrial and moral values that brought John Campbell early success were unable to sustain Ironton’s future. Similarly, John Bricker’s aggressive advocacy of Old Guard Republicanism brought him a successful political career that ended ignominiously.

No matter what their origins or their individual successes and failures, the people covered in this volume insisted that it was the government’s responsibility to protect their prospects. Symmes campaigned to
have Congress recognize his land claims; George H. Pendleton promoted both the Pendleton Plan and civil service reform; George DeNucci used law and political pressure to advance workers’ interests; and James A. Rhodes dedicated state government to providing Ohioans with “Jobs and Progress.” In each case, Ohioans turned to the political system to protect and advance their opportunities.

Still, throughout the state’s history, Ohioans have debated the limits of this opportunity: Who should be given the opportunity to participate in civic life? Who should be allowed to attend public schools? How much should the government use its power to ensure economic and political opportunity? To some degree or another, every subject of this volume wrestled with at least one of these questions. For the framers of Ohio’s first constitution, the answers were obvious. In keeping with their times, they extended the franchise only to white, male taxpayers and created a government so weak that it could not possibly impinge upon individual liberty. The first generation of the state’s leaders also evicted Native Americans, erected barriers to keep African Americans—both slave and free—out, and denied women the right to vote and, in some cases, to hold property. The strength and endurance of this vision is reflected in the selection of individuals to be profiled in this volume; seventeen of twenty-five are white males. Today, few Ohioans favor restricting full citizenship on account of gender, race, or financial status, and, although they might debate particular policies, most feel that the state government has a positive responsibility to promote the general welfare.

The volume’s essays collectively document the transformations that changed Ohio into a more egalitarian and activist state. These changes resulted from long and contested processes, as the struggles for African American rights demonstrates. The struggles began in the years before the Civil War as abolitionists such as Frances Dana Gage and John Parker pressed for the end of slavery, arguing not only that slavery was inhumane but that it also robbed African Americans of their natural rights. Other Ohioans, including Clement Vallandigham and George Pendleton, opposed both the abolition of slavery and the granting of citizenship rights to African Americans, arguing that such actions would threaten the rights and opportunities of white males. During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, African Americans such as Benjamin Arnett worked within the Republican Party to secure the rights of citizenship (including voting), support for African American higher education, and integrated schools. Many of these gains, however, were temporary. After the turn of the century, men like William
Oxley Thompson led efforts to resegregate public schools and limit African American access to higher education. He expressed the opinion of many white Ohioans when he stated, “our fathers in the North thought that the ballot was essential to the freedom of the colored race . . . [but] most of their sons regard that as a mistaken theory.” As the twentieth century progressed, black migration to Ohio increased, and African Americans, such as Jane Edna Hunter and Carl Stokes, demanded equal access to jobs, educational opportunities, housing, and political institutions.

In the interest of readability and brevity, the authors have omitted footnotes and formal bibliographies. Those seeking additional information should consult the suggestions for further readings at the end of each essay.
George Croghan and the Emergence of British Influence on the Ohio Frontier

ALFRED A. CAVE

The man whose skills as an Indian trader and negotiator were instrumental in opening the Ohio country to British influence and later to white occupation was an immigrant of origins so obscure and lowly that we do not know the date of his birth. Despite his later prominence, no painter preserved his likeness, and no writer described his appearance. His life, colorful and turbulent, deserved but did not command the talents of a contemporary chronicler. Born in poverty in Ireland sometime during the second decade of the eighteenth century, George Croghan was driven from his native land by the potato famine of 1741. Settling in Pennsylvania, he quickly emerged as one of the most resourceful, successful, and prosperous of the colony’s frontier Indian traders and land speculators.

Few of his colleagues or competitors could match Croghan’s rare capacity to understand the hopes, fears, and expectations of Indian clients and use that understanding to his advantage. Hard drinking, flamboyant, generous, cunning (sometimes ruthless), and poorly educated, George Croghan was the quintessential frontier entrepreneur. His relationships with Native Americans, with colonial officials, and with his business partners were seldom simple and often less than straightforward. A complex man of driving ambition and great ability, he made—and squandered—several fortunes. But his most substantial achievements were in the public arena, where he excelled as a frontier diplomat and peacemaker. While misgivings about his character were rampant, there is not doubt about his impact on Ohio history. The story of Anglo-American Ohio begins with George Croghan.
Prior to 1763, France claimed the Old Northwest as part of Canada. Croghan, one of several hundred British traders who challenged that claim, established in the fall of 1744 a trading post at a Seneca village at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, the future site of the city of Cleveland. French efforts to incite the Ottawa and the Miami to attack Croghan and his associates were unavailing. French pretensions notwithstanding, English trade goods were greatly in demand among the Indians of the region, as they cost less than French offerings and were of higher quality. Moreover, a British naval blockade soon left French traders short of supplies. Croghan, conversant in several Native American languages, made the most of those advantages. In 1747, he instigated an Indian uprising against the French, sending the scalp of a French trader with his report to the governor of Pennsylvania. With help from the Iroquois on the shores of Lake Erie, Croghan extended his trading activities to the west and south. Given his exceptional rapport with his Indian clients, the Iroquois in 1746 admitted him to the governing council of their league at Onondaga.

Croghan joined the veteran Indian agent Conrad Weiser in advocating an aggressive British diplomatic initiative to open trade and win allies in the Ohio country. Both realized that Pennsylvania’s long established policy of conducting Indian diplomacy through the League of the Iroquois could no longer provide security. The westward migration of Delaware and Shawnee Indians displaced by British colonial expansion had undermined the influence of the Iroquois, their nominal overlords. Concurrently, French traders in the region actively threatened British interests. After much prodding, Pennsylvania authorities authorized direct negotiations with the western Indians. In the spring of 1748, the colony dispatched Croghan and a pack train loaded with gifts to Logstown, an Indian trading village near modern-day Pittsburgh, where he met with Iroquois and Shawnee leaders and with representatives of the Miami, a western Ohio tribe hostile to the French.

Croghan’s mission paved the way for an alliance between the Miami and the British. In 1749, he established a substantial trading post on the Great Miami River at the Miami village called Pickawillany. Although France was now technically at peace with Great Britain, a French official at Detroit placed a price on Croghan’s scalp. Alarmed by British incursions, Quebec authorities dispatched a military expedition of several hundred men under the command of Captain Pierre Joseph de Céloron de Blainville to the Ohio Valley to
reassert French military and commercial power. Throughout the West, after warning Indian village leaders not to deal with the British intruders, Céloron planted lead plates that proclaimed French sovereignty. Everywhere, Céloron reported, he encountered resistance to his demand that Indians refuse to buy from British traders, around one hundred of whom worked directly for Croghan and his partners. Their pack trains laden with goods reached far to the south and west of Pickawillany. Soon, their presence was reported in the Illinois country and in Kentucky.

Despite his early success in detaching Ohio Indians from the French commercial orbit, Croghan’s enterprise went bankrupt by 1753. A renewed French offensive, beginning with the massacre of Miami Indians at Pickawillany and leading to the building of Fort Duquesne at the forks of the Ohio River, intimidated his Indian associates and drove his traders from the interior. As Croghan recalled some years later, “We had trusted great quantities of Goods to the traders, the Chief of them were ruined by Robberies committed on them by the French and their Indians.” He added that “those which were not quite ruined when the French army came down” were bankrupted “by Indians being prevented from hunting, from which means we lost all.” Fifty-two of Croghan’s agents had been either killed or imprisoned by the French by 1754. The flow of furs from the interior into Croghan’s warehouses dried up.

Despite bankruptcy and allegations that he had fabricated an Indian request for the establishment of a British fort at the head of the Ohio Valley, Croghan nonetheless remained in demand as an Indian negotiator. In 1752, he assisted the Ohio Company, a land venture chartered by the Virginia Colony, in its efforts to secure Iroquois support for the establishment of a company trading post and settlement at the forks of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. Although Virginia’s claims in the area were bitterly opposed by Pennsylvania authorities, Croghan in 1749 had obtained from the Iroquois a 200,000-acre land grant near the lands the Ohio Company planned to occupy. He hoped to profit from the company’s promotion of British settlement in the area.

When French military occupation threatened to terminate all British activity in the West, Croghan worked hard under adverse circumstances to neutralize French influence among the Indians of the region. The results were mixed, but Croghan saw possibilities in war as well as in peace. He contracted to supply flour to the ill-fated Virginia military expedition dispatched in 1754 under the command of
Colonel George Washington to dislodge the French from the forks of the Ohio. He also promised the colonel that he would recruit a substantial number of Indian allies. Croghan’s inability to fulfill those commitments further damaged his reputation. Washington declared him the least trustworthy of the Indian traders.

Pennsylvania authorities shared Washington’s distrust of George Croghan. But with the coming of the French and Indian War, they could ill afford to dispense with his services. He was too well regarded by the Indians of the Ohio Valley. In recognition of the colony’s need of Croghan’s assistance, the Pennsylvania Assembly passed a bill granting him a ten-year replevye from the claims of his creditors. After Washington’s defeat, Croghan was engaged to survey two wilderness roads for General Edward Braddock’s army. When Delaware and Shawnee leaders, offended by the high-handed manner of Braddock and his officers, failed to supply warriors for the campaign against the French, Croghan recruited nearly one hundred Mingo who had gathered at his estate at Aughwick on the Pennsylvania frontier. All but eight of those warriors deserted soon after their arrival in Braddock’s camp. Croghan’s friend and Oneida chief Scarouady later explained that Braddock was “a bad man” who would not listen to Indians but treated them “like dogs.” Croghan and the eight remaining Indian scouts were with Braddock at his defeat and death near the forks of the Ohio on July 9, 1755.

In October, the Delaware and Shawnee, emboldened by the French victory, attacked Pennsylvania frontier settlements. Receiving the rank of captain in December 1755 from the colony’s War Commission, Croghan raised a small, private militia to protect his exposed and vulnerable plantation at Aughwick. Ordered to build and garrison a chain of frontier forts, Captain Croghan returned to western Pennsylvania at the head of a force of 180 men. Establishing his headquarters at the newly constructed Fort Shirley, he soon recruited several hundred more. However, disputes with the commissioners over his expenditures combined with criticism of his informal and friendly relationships with his men, impelled the headstrong Irish trader to resign his captaincy in March 1756. His shaky reputation in the east, diminished by his refusal to continue military service, was further damaged by rumors that he was secretly a Roman Catholic disloyal to England. The rumors were false and may well have been the work of one of Croghan’s many disaffected creditors.

Disheartened by his poor relationship with colonial authorities and with Philadelphia merchants, Croghan in the late spring of 1756
moved to New York, where he attached himself to Sir William Johnson, England’s newly appointed superintendent of Indian affairs for the northern colonies. Johnson valued Croghan’s exceptional command of several Native American languages and his uncommon understanding of Indian customs and values. After Croghan assisted Johnson in a round of negotiations with the Iroquois, Delaware, and Shawnee, he won a salaried appointment as Johnson’s deputy superintendent.

Although Croghan and Indian auxiliaries he recruited fought some engagements in New York in the summer and fall of 1756, Croghan’s most important contributions to the British victory in the French and Indian War were made not on the battlefield but at council fires. The British lacked the military capacity to defeat France’s Native American allies and secure the West, but a diplomatic offensive might well secure, at minimum, Indian neutrality. France’s difficulties in resupplying its Indian supporters hurt its cause. However, suspicion of British intentions kept Indian belligerency alive. The Indians remained mindful of General Braddock’s earlier declaration that “no savage should inherit land.” It fell to frontier diplomats to provide the assurances needed to allay Native American anxieties.

Late in 1756, Pennsylvania initiated peace talks with the Delaware. The British military commander in North America, Lord Loudon, was appalled by the prospect of colonial governments dealing independently with Indian belligerents, and Sir William Johnson dispatched George Croghan to Philadelphia to take charge of the negotiations on behalf of the Crown. After listening to Indians and weighing their grievances, Croghan recommended that the colony invite both Teedyuscung, “king” of the eastern Delaware, and leaders of the tribes that had resettled in the Ohio Valley to a treaty conference as soon as possible. Overcoming their prejudice against Croghan, indeed swayed by his charm and eloquence, the Pennsylvania authorities agreed to cooperate.

Even so, continual bickering between the Quakers and the Proprietors (descendants of William Penn who had inherited his proprietary rights) greatly complicated Croghan’s task, already made difficult by Indian distrust of the English. Teedyuscung, with the encouragement of the Quaker faction, demanded restitution for losses suffered in the notorious “Walking Treaty” of 1737, wherein the Proprietors had invoked an old deed of questionable authenticity to divest the Delaware of much of their land in eastern Pennsylvania. Western Delaware and Shawnee, previously driven west by land hungry whites,
feared British occupation of their new homelands in the Ohio Valley. Croghan presided over treaty proceedings at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in May. With the help of the Quakers and of a large gift provided by the colonial assembly, he made much progress in winning over the western Indians. But Teedyuscung remained disaffected. After a brief diplomatic mission to the Cherokee, Croghan conducted new negotiations with the eastern Delaware at Easton in July. The Quakers, agreeing that the 1737 treaty was fraudulent, urged the Delaware not to compromise. But the Proprietors’ representatives opposed consideration of Teedyuscung’s land grievances. Croghan, steering a course between the two English factions, antagonized both but did succeed in obtaining a peace treaty with the eastern Delaware. The Pennsylvania frontier was now relatively secure, but Croghan warned Johnson that the Proprietors’ eagerness to acquire more western land could well lead to new hostilities. Proprietor Thomas Penn responded by advising Johnson that Croghan was “a bad man,” not to be trusted.

Knowing that his deputy had kept the Crown’s interests foremost in his dealings, Johnson disregarded Penn’s complaint. He dispatched the Irish trader to Fort Herkimer, a strategically critical and exposed frontier post on the Mohawk River. There Croghan, accompanied by his Indian spouse, traded with the Iroquois and gathered intelligence on French activities. After providing support to an unsuccessful offensive against Fort Ticonderoga in 1758, Croghan returned to Pennsylvania to conduct a new round of treaty negotiations at Easton. In addition to winning over the Seneca, an Iroquois nation whose ranks included many French sympathizers, he endeavored to resolve a power struggle between Teedyuscung, by now a drunken megalomaniac who claimed to be king of all Indians, and the representatives of the League of the Iroquois, who demanded restoration of their previous preeminence in Pennsylvania Indian matters. Croghan won over the Iroquois by securing revocation of a controversial 1754 land purchase and by marginalizing the troublesome Teedyuscung who fared poorly in the proceedings. Maligned by the Quakers for failing to support the Delaware chief’s demand for immediate settlement of the Walking Treaty claim, Croghan retaliated by circulating, with Johnson’s help, an outrageous rumor that Quakers had been encouraging the Indians to massacre non-Quaker white settlers. While his conduct in that instance, and on other occasions, left much to be desired from an ethical point of view, his skill as an Indian negotiator had once again helped pacify the frontier for Great Britain.
The Easton Treaty of 1758, partially neutralized France’s Indian allies and paved the way for General John Forbes’s successful occupation of the forks of the Ohio in the fall of that year. Although Pennsylvania leaders still expressed doubts about Croghan’s character and integrity, particularly in financial matters, they generally conceded that no one else could have dealt as successfully with the Iroquois. To guard against a renewal of Delaware belligerency, Croghan accompanied Forbes’s army, assisting Colonel Henry Bouquet in offering Delaware leaders appropriate assurances regarding the British resolve to respect their rights. His dealings with the Delaware were, however, somewhat controversial, and to some extent created unnecessary tensions. The Delaware chiefs denied Croghan’s claim that they had asked for the establishment of a permanent English fort at the head of the Ohio Valley. In addition to playing his role as an agent of the British Indian service, Croghan apparently reasoned that British occupation would enhance the value of his land holdings. A friend of the Indian, Croghan was also a land speculator, and throughout most of his career he juggled his private interests and public responsibilities.

In the spring of 1759, Croghan, after a sojourn to Philadelphia, returned to the Ohio country, where he sought through diplomacy to counter renewed French influence among the Delaware and the Shawnee. Holding several peace conferences that summer, Croghan, through verbal persuasion and astute gift giving, won over several hundred warriors formerly committed to France. In the last year of the French and Indian War, the Irishman provided invaluable service both as a leader of Indian forces now allied to England and as a negotiator with those who remained hostile. His mission to Detroit, as part of a force led by Robert Rogers, secured a peaceful transfer of power at that crucial outpost.

Paradoxically, the defeat of France led to renewed frontier warfare. Over the objections of Croghan, Johnson, and other experienced Indian agents, the British commander in North America, Lord Jeffrey Amherst, believing that Indians were lazy parasites who no longer needed to be won over through “bribes,” terminated the long-standing practice of gift giving. Ignoring those who warned that such practices in Native American cultures secured peace, by confirming alliances based on fictive kinship, Amherst compounded the offense by restricting trade, raising prices, and seizing some Iroquois lands as prizes for his officers. Amherst’s restrictions on the supply of ammunition to Indian hunters led to both deep resentment and real hardship. Croghan dipped into his own diminished resources to help out
his Indian friends. Soon his distaste for Amherst’s methods impelled him to make plans to leave the Indian service altogether.

After conducting treaty negotiations at Lancaster (a task made difficult by the continued involvement of his Quaker enemies), in the spring of 1762 Croghan began exploring ways of rebuilding his fortune through private involvement in trade and land speculation. Croghan used his position to secure access to choice properties now made available by the Pennsylvania land office. He soon held title to vast sections of western Pennsylvania. But the outbreak of the series of frontier uprisings, later erroneously named “the Conspiracy of Pontiac,” would force Croghan to delay plans to end his official service. In October 1762, he had warned Amherst that an Indian uprising was likely if the new, restrictive policies on gifts and trade were not modified. Amherst dismissed his concern, writing of the Indians “it is not in their power to hurt us.” Croghan then appealed to Sir William Johnson, saying of the war he now felt was inevitable “how itt [sic] may end the Lord knows.” But Johnson also lacked influence with Amherst.

In May 1763, warriors led by the Ottawa chief Pontiac besieged Detroit. In the same year, and in 1764, local war parties struck British forts and settlements from the Great Lakes to the Ohio Valley. Although Pontiac, contrary to later myth, was not the leader of a vast “conspiracy,” the belligerents shared common grievances and anxieties. Amherst’s policies exacerbated perennial fears of British expansionism. Rumors were rampant that the British would kill all Indians and take their land in punishment for their earlier support of France. Many of the insurgents hoped for the return of the French, who were esteemed for their respect for Indian territorial rights. Some, including Pontiac, were also influenced by the teachings of nativist prophets such as the Delaware holy man Neolin, who proclaimed that the Great Spirit was angered by Indian toleration of European invaders on lands meant for Indians. These prophets declared that Indians who resisted European territorial aggression and ceased their emulation of European ways would enjoy supernatural aid. Although the insurgents were unable to take the British forts at Detroit and Pittsburgh, they destroyed smaller British posts throughout the frontier and put numerous small white settlements to the torch. Pontiac and other leaders of the northwest nativist uprisings of 1763–64 were not able to attain their objectives, but they were not defeated either. Despite Amherst’s insistence that there be no compromise and that all insurgents be put to death, the
fighting was finally terminated after Amherst’s departure, not by decisive British victories on the battlefield and summary executions but by a negotiated peace.

George Croghan would play a major role in these negotiations. Shortly after the outbreak of hostilities, Croghan had resigned from the Indian service. Declining a military command, he sailed for England to seek restitution for his financial losses and pursue various business opportunities. During his stay in London, he presented to the Board of Trade a plan for the future management of Indian affairs drawn up, with his help, by Sir William Johnson. The plan essentially called for the repudiation of Amherst’s policies. Croghan urged the Board of Trade to give the superintendents of Indian affairs greater power. His remarks were well received and led to measures to reduce colonial and military interference with the work of the Department of Indian Affairs. He was so frustrated, however, in his hopes for personal financial restitution and so disgusted by the arrogance and sloth of imperial officials that he left London. In a comment prophetic of troubles to come, Croghan wrote, “the cheefe study of the pople in power here att present is to lay heavy taxes on the coloneys.” As to their understanding of real conditions in America, he declared the members of the Board of Trade “imensly ignerant.”

Returning to New York in the late summer of 1764, Croghan called on Johnson to report on his accomplishments in London. He discovered that his resignation from the Indian service had never been processed. Armed with the new authority granted to the Department of Indian Affairs, Croghan resumed his old role. His reappearance angered Colonel Henry Bouquet who complained to General Gage, “one can not but regret that powers of so great importance to this country should in this instance have been trusted to a man so illiterate, imprudent, and ill bred.”

Others had a better appreciation of Croghan’s talents. When the time came to negotiate peace, Croghan presided over a congress of Indian nations of the Ohio Valley at Fort Pitt in May 1765. He then undertook an arduous and risky expedition westward to seek peace with the tribes of the Wabash region and to secure acceptance of British authority from the Illinois Indians. On June 8, a party of Kickapoos attacked his expedition near the Wabash, wounding most of the whites and killing three of his Shawnee associates. Croghan later wrote: “I got the stroke of a hatchett on the head, but my scull being pretty thick, the hatchet would not enter, so you may see a thick scull is of some service on some occasions.” Despite that setback, Croghan
persevered and finally secured an apology from the Kickapoo and a peace agreement. In July, he met with the Illinois and brought them into the British orbit. Pontiac had settled among the Illinois after the collapse of the siege of Detroit. Realizing that the time had come to make peace, Pontiac now assisted Croghan in his dealings with the Illinois and then accompanied the Irishman to Detroit where he helped in negotiations with representatives of a number of tribes there. The Indian rebellion was over. The commander at Detroit, Colonel John Campbell, not only praised Croghan’s “great care & attention” in Indian diplomacy but informed General Thomas Gage that the Indians of the region “prefer him to any other person.”

Croghan’s participation in the peace negotiations, invaluable to the Crown, was not disinterested. With several business partners, Croghan had entered into an ambitious scheme to circumvent wartime restrictions on trade with the western Indians by disguising private trade goods, including scalping knives, as part of the Crown’s peacemaking gifts. A road accident in Pennsylvania had exposed the knives and triggered a public outcry against Croghan, who unsuccessfully tried to deny his involvement. In a letter to Sir William Johnson, General Gage wrote that he was disturbed to learn that Croghan had entered into “leagues with traders to carry goods in a clandestine manner. . . . Mr. Croghan thought to take advantage of his employment to be first in the market.” Croghan had broken the law that forbade Indian agents engaging in the Indian trade. For that, the general reprimanded him.

Croghan’s private interests were not, however, limited to trade. He was also promoting a visionary scheme to establish a British colony in Illinois. He hoped to use his negotiations with the Illinois Indians to lay the groundwork for later land grants, a plan that Croghan had promoted while in England. After his return, he settled in Philadelphia, bought an opulent estate called Monckton Hall, and touted his Illinois venture to any person of influence and means who would listen. To Benjamin Franklin, he wrote, “The Illinois country far exceeds any other part of America that I have seen.” Franklin became one of Croghan’s most ardent supporters.

Those who invested in Croghan’s western schemes lost money. The efforts to persuade London to establish a colonial government in the Illinois country failed. The ample land grants in the West that Croghan dreamed of did not materialize. Croghan’s attempts to convince the British of the need to establish a substantial military presence on the Mississippi in order to dislodge French traders and take
control of the Indian trade were unsuccessful. The Board of Trade did not share Croghan’s interest in western expansion but instead called for retrenchment. Merchants who entrusted trade goods to Croghan under the promise that they would be purchased by the Crown for presents to the Illinois tribes received only partial payment.

Croghan, summoned in 1766 to pacify Ohio Valley Indians angered by the gratuitous killing of their kinsmen by white intruders, once again demonstrated his brilliance as a diplomat. He would repeat that performance several more times, in the next few years, as white incursions on Indian land threatened to destroy the fragile peace. Croghan well understood the nature of Indian grievances and deplored the spirit of “mobb rule” that prevailed in white settlements in the West. He urged punishment of whites who invaded Indian territory. He deplored the atrocities that were a commonplace aspect of Indian-white interaction on the frontier. He lobbied for a new, enforceable boundary line between the colonies and the Indian nations allied to Great Britain, envisioning that some regions would be permanently closed to white settlement. Croghan was frequently at odds with the Black Boys, a vigilante-style group of Pennsylvania frontier ruffians who threatened to kill him if he continued to negotiate with “savages.” He often traveled to treaty conferences with an armed escort. But while Croghan championed Indian rights in many ways, he also sought to persuade London that the line of demarcation should be extended westward, with appropriate compensation to the Indians displaced in the process. His motives were mixed. In part, he hoped to remove his Indian friends from harm’s way. But he also expected to profit personally from the sale of western land. Croghan thus anticipated the next century’s advocates of Indian removal. His own economic interests were now best served by removal. In the latter part of his business career, Croghan’s hopes for the renewal of his fortune were vested in land speculation not in the fur trade of his youth.

Croghan’s investments in land companies were extensive and, because of his official position, generally secret. His exploitation of opportunities afforded by the Treaty of Fort Stanwix of 1768 offers a telling example of his mode of operation. That agreement with the Iroquois opened vast tracts of western land to white settlement. Croghan purchased some 127,000 acres from the Iroquois before the treaty was negotiated, then lobbied for confirmation of his title. Protection of Croghan’s interests was written into the treaty itself. The British government, however, balked at ratification of that clause. Lord Hillsborough, president of the Board of Trade, declared “private
agreements with the Indians” illegal, a violation of the Proclamation of 1763. Croghan desperately sought to secure reversal of that judgment but failed. Pursued by creditors, ill with the gout and other infirmities, he abandoned an estate he had established in Iroquois country in western New York and took refuge at Croghan Hall near Fort Pitt in the summer of 1770.

Resuming his work as a negotiator, he was instrumental in preventing an Indian uprising in the Ohio Valley early in the decade but failed to prevent Lord Dunmore’s war, a bloodletting triggered by the slaughter, by frontier ruffians, of the family of the Mingo Chief Logan in 1774. Engaged now primarily in private pursuits, Croghan’s most promising speculation involved the proposed establishment of an inland colony to be called Vandalia. His efforts to satisfy creditors through sale of various other lands and properties were only partially successful. He remained at Fort Pitt to avoid imprisonment for debt in Pennsylvania or New York. A royal charter for Vandalia would have made Croghan a fabulously wealthy man, for his land holdings there, some acquired in secret negotiations with Indians, were vast. But that charter, although once promised by prominent officers of the Crown, never materialized.

The outbreak of the American Revolution destroyed his hopes for Vandalia. Although he supported the patriot cause, Croghan’s enemies circulated unfounded rumors of his disloyalty. Arrested on a trumped-up charge of collusion with the British, he was forced to leave Croghan Hall and take refuge at his estate near Philadelphia, which was subsequently burned by the British army. Although finally exonerated by a Pennsylvania court, Croghan found no place in the new order. His health broken, his fortune gone, George Croghan died in poverty in 1782. He did not live to see his dreams for the West fulfilled. The future would bring the realization of his vision of white settlers building new states beyond the Allegheny Mountains. It would not, however, fulfill his hope that his Indian friends there would be treated with kindness and generosity.

Further Reading


