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# Fort Gaddis: Fact or Misnomer

Ronald L. Michael

## INTRODUCTION

George D. Alberts (1896) identified no less than eighteen "frontier forts" in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. The location of most of the forts, information about the people who built them, and data as to the value of the forts to western Pennsylvanians two hundred years ago—people who were living on the fringes of civilized life—have been lost with time. One partial exception to this situation is thought to be Fort Gaddis, the only extant frontier fort in Fayette County.

The date of construction of this settler's fort, located on the southern outskirts of Uniontown, is historically listed as 1764 (Nelson 1920:140) and 1770 (Hadden 1913:686). Regardless of whether either date is correct, it was apparently built by Thomas Gaddis after he arrived in Pennsylvania from the Winchester, Virginia area (Ellis 1882:674). Although that date is unknown, he had applied for a patent on that 323¼ acre tract called "Hundred Acre Spring" on April 3, 1769 (Rolls of the Patent Office, Book 13, Survey 1690, p. 98ff.), the first day the office would accept patent applications for lands in the area where Gaddis wished to settle. It was sometime between 1764, when he is believed to have been married in Winchester, Virginia (DAR Lineage Book 123:76; Mrs. Boyd Hustead 1974, per. comm.), and 1769 when he applied for a patent on his land that he is likely to have arrived in present Fayette County although Nelson (1920:550-52) claims he arrived in 1758 which was the year General John Forbes pacified the area Indians.

Equally as perplexing as the question of when Gaddis arrived and when the legendary Fort Gaddis was built is whether the extant 1½ story log structure (Michael and Carlisle 1976:39-46) was part of a frontier fort. As already noted, the structure has several times been referred to as a fort, but there is only one account of an instance when it was supposedly used as a rallying place for settlers (Custard 1882:558).

It is well documented that Gaddis was a mili-

tia officer during the American Revolution rising from a captain in 1776 to full colonel by 1777. As a colonel he was commandant of the Monongalia County, Virginia [which included much of present Fayette County, Pennsylvania, and most of five West Virginia counties (Core 1974:439)], militia and commanded five forts of which Fort Gaddis was not one. He retired from active duty in 1782 (Fulton 1932:141-32; United States 1832:n.p.; Von Pilchau 1894:150; Montgomery 1907a:385, 1907b:320). What is lacking is evidence other than oral tradition that the extant structure was part of a fort and if it were of what it consisted. Mulkearn and Pugh (1954:219-20) reported that Basil B. Brownfield, a former owner of the fort property (Fayette County, Property Roll, Union Township 1834-35; *Republican Standard* 1881) removed a stockade from around the building. Their description apparently came from an early 20th century newspaper (Sarah Honsaker 1974, per. comm.) which lists the dimensions of the stockade as follows:

Starting at the southwest corner of the house go N 46°20' 115 feet to the place of the beginning. Then N 27°E 500 feet. Next S 10°5' 661.5 feet (this gives an arc with a 1510 foot radius and encloses ¼ acre). Thence N 59°W 400 feet to the place of the beginning which gives an arc of 1330 feet and encloses ¼ acre (Anonymous n.d.).

This description was supplied by a borough engineer who accompanied an oldtime area resident to the site. The oldtimer had supposedly played, as a child, along the old stockade lines. The validity of this description is questionable inasmuch as the stockade perimeter would have been in excess of 1500 feet thus making it large even for a period military fort.

Not only is the description of the fort questionable, but the extant house is on a hillside about 400 feet from the hilltop. This location does not make it an easily defended position. Historically it cannot be fully demonstrated that the structure

known as Fort Gaddis was in fact part of a fort. It may have simply been the post-war home of a well known American Revolution militiaman, Thomas Gaddis.

## EXCAVATION

The excavation of legendary Fort Gaddis was carried out by the Center for Prehistoric and Historic Site Archaeology, California State College, California, Pennsylvania, during the summers of 1974 and 1975. Excavation was specifically undertaken to test one hypothesis—was the extant structure at the site (cf. Michael and Carlisle 1976:39-46), which was known locally as Fort Gaddis, part of a Revolutionary War settler's fort?

Proof of this hypothesis rested on whether evidence could be found that the standing building was part of a settler's fort. Therefore, it was necessary to ascertain what constituted a settler's fort for southwestern Pennsylvania during the American Revolution. According to William Hunter's fairly recent study of Pennsylvania frontier forts, private forts "almost invariably consisted of previously-existing buildings adapted to a new use (1960:549)." This was usually done by cutting loopholes in the existing structure and surrounding it by a stockade (Hunter 1960:549). A more succinct account of such forts was written by Joseph Doddridge who lived in the vicinity of present southwestern Pennsylvania during the Revolution. He said that a usual fort consisted of cabins, blockhouses, and stockades with cabins

commonly forming one side of a 10-12 foot high stockade. Blockhouses which projected 2 feet beyond stockade walls were built at angles of the fort, and the upper stories of these structures projected 18 inches, in all directions, beyond the lower blockhouse walls. If there were no blockhouses, bastions were located at the angles of the fort. A gate was located at a point nearest the settler's spring. Doddridge further noted that in some less exposed areas "a single blockhouse with a cabin or two, constituted the whole fort (Doddridge 1912:94)."

In addition to the fort, if the site were the location of a settler's fort where there had been martial activity, there should be evidence of such activity, e.g., gunflints, gun parts, and lead balls.

Based on the information as to what a fort consisted of, the extant structure was examined for the presence of loopholes. There were none (Michael and Carlisle 1976), but it is possible that logs cut for loopholes were replaced (Figure 1). If this were the case, the replacement was carried out without altering the integrity of the structure which was not the situation when the bottom-most logs on the front and rear sides were replaced (Figure 2).

Next, in an attempt to locate traces of a stockade, excavation was done along and parallel to each side of the existing building and in the area around the legendary fort building (Figure 3). There was no evidence that the extant structure formed part of one side of a stockade nor was there any

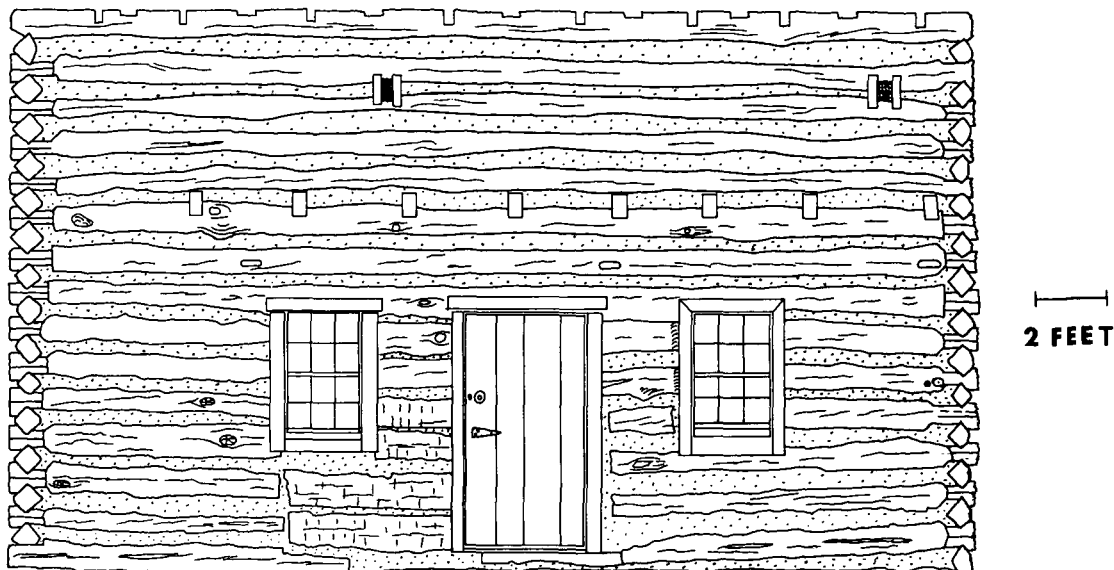


Figure 1a. Front of building shows air vents near top of wall, ends of floor joints on second floor, and a 20th century door renewal.

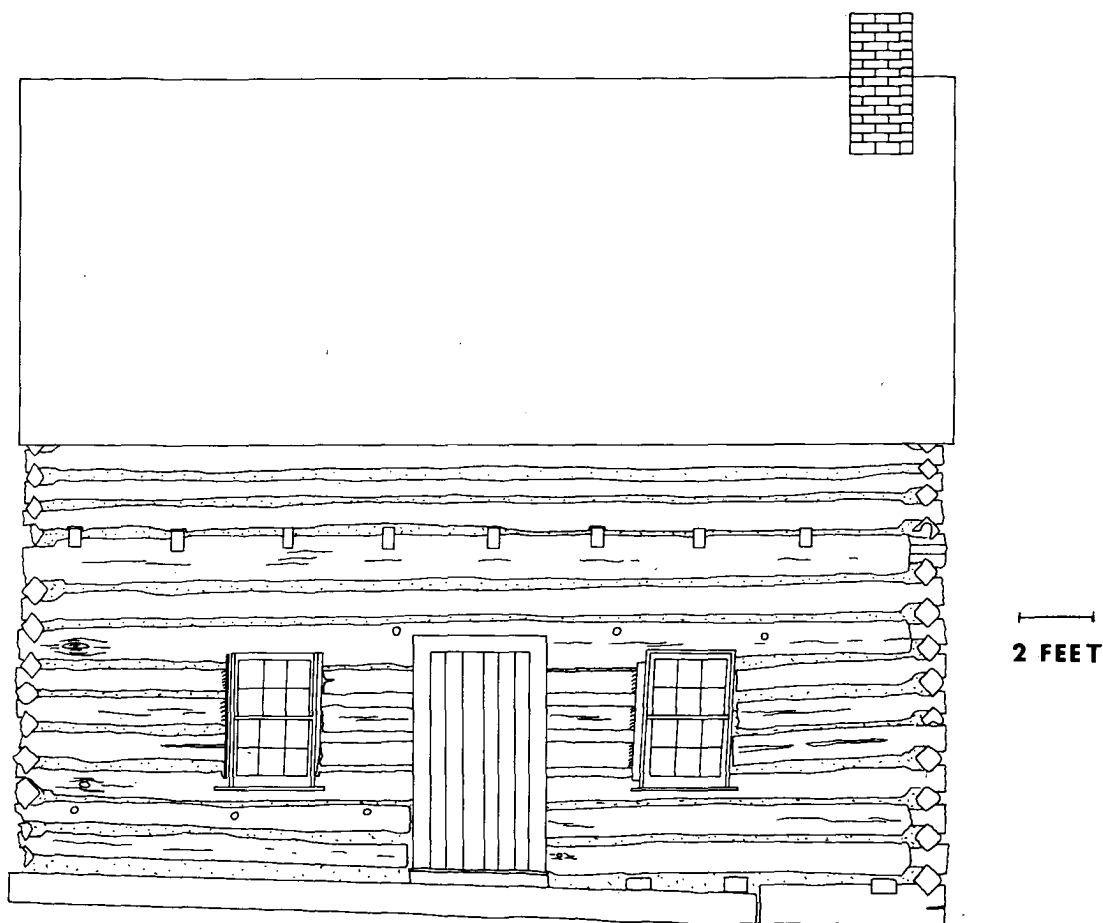


Figure 1b. Rear of building shows renewal of roof and chimney, floor joints on second floor, drilled holes (3-4" deep) of unknown use, and a renewed bottom log.

evidence of a linear row of closely spaced post-holes elsewhere in the excavated area. In fact, except for a partially existing fence line, there was only one area where a linear pattern of post-holes was found, Postholes 1,33,35,44,&39 (Figure 4).

Likewise no evidence of blockhouses or bastions was found. The only structural features in addition to fence posts and postholes excavated were a cellar, a drainage ditch, a fireplace foundation, a chinking pit, and a springhead.

#### Cellar (Figure 4, F6)

A 10 foot 6 inch by 12 foot cellar was located at the northeast end of the extant log structure. It had three walls of horizontally laid black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) boards (R. B. Miller 1975, per. comm.) which were attached to black locust posts (B. F. Kukachka 1975, per. comm.). The fourth wall, which included an exterior entryway,

was built of coursed sandstone (Figure 5). This wall acted as a foundation for a wall of the addition (Michael and Carlisle 1976: Fig. 4) the only cellar wall so used. The cellar wall which paralleled the end wall of the extant building was set in from the extant wall about 2 feet 6 inches so that the addition foundation, with the exception of the sandstone wall, rested on either shale-like sandstone or sterile subsoil. The cellar had a floor of random width boards or planks.

It appears that the cellar was filled during the early 20th century with 18th, 19th, and 20th century rubble. Although it was stratified (Figure 6), the artifacts in each layer were mixed, e.g., late 19th century, locally made gray salt-glazed stoneware (Michael and Jack 1973; Jack and Michael 1973) was found associated with a 1774 British Half Penny, and 18th century snaffle bits (Noël Hume 1969:241, Fig. 75, no. 3) were recovered from strata above mason

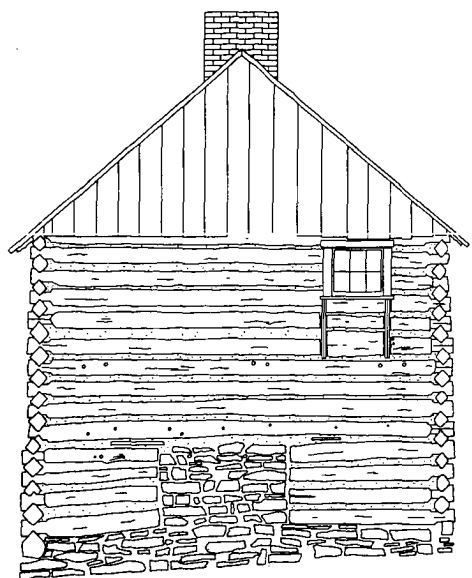


Figure 2. End view of house shows closed doorway to a pre-1798 addition, log opening for an earlier fireplace, ends of replaced bottom logs on the front and rear of the house, and several drilled holes of varying depth.

jar sherds which must postdate ca. 1858 (Lorrain 1968:44). The most recent dateable artifact was a piece of semi-porcelain from the John Maddock and Sons, Burslem pottery; the particular mark was used from 1906 onward (Godden 1964:406).

Despite the mixed nature of the strata, the artifacts could be typed as household or transportation and/or farming items. The household set included creamware, pearlware, whiteware (earthenware and ironstone), yellow ware, red-

ware, local salt-glaze stoneware, and overglazed porcelain ceramics, mold-blown and automatic bottle machine made container glass, window glass, oil lamp chimney glass, small porcelain doll arms, slate pencils, a hard rubber comb, pewter and silverplate spoons, a barrette, leather shoes (tongues, heels, soles, whole shoes), over-all bib snaps, a nutting stone, an iron kettle handle, an harmonica plate, 2-tine forks, bone knife handles, a jews harp, zinc canning jar lids, a furniture caster, a silver thimble with the initials "R. B." engraved, and cut pig and cow bones and teeth. The transportation and/or farming artifacts included horseshoes, chain links, sickle-bar mower cutter sections, single tree end hooks and center clips, felloe plates, a wagon leaf spring, wagon box straps, harness hooks, conveyor chain links, a whetstone, a scythe blade, carriage and machine bolts, snaffle bits, harness buckles, and horse teeth. It appears that fill from each of these activities was used to close the cellar. Since the fort had been used as a farm house from its original settlement through the 19th century (Property Rolls 1811-1840, 1851-1882; Joseph Brownfield 1975, per. comm.), fill from these types of activities can probably be accepted without further speculation as to their origin.

#### *Drain (Figure 4, F4)*

Evidently water from several nearby springs, several of which are still active, seeped through the shale-like sandstone outcrop into which the cellar had been cut because a drain consisting of overlapping sandstone flagstones abutted the exterior, sandstone cellar wall between the cellar

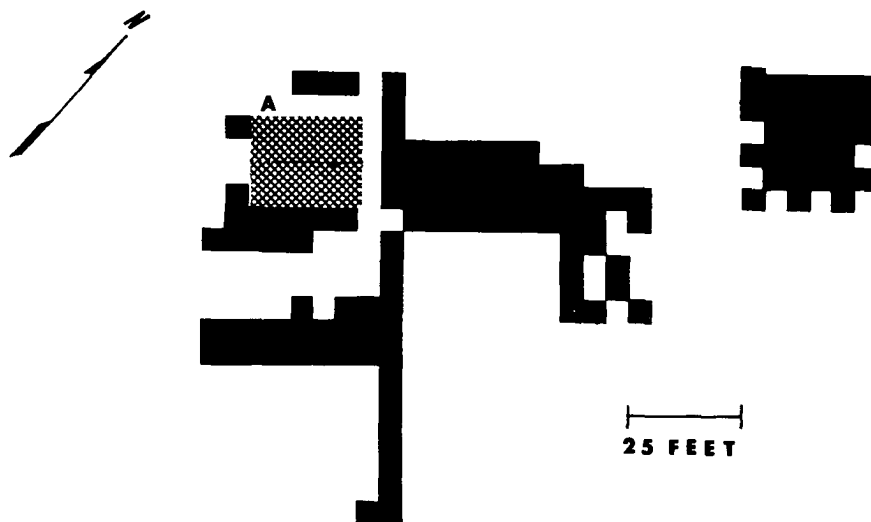


Figure 3. Excavated area.

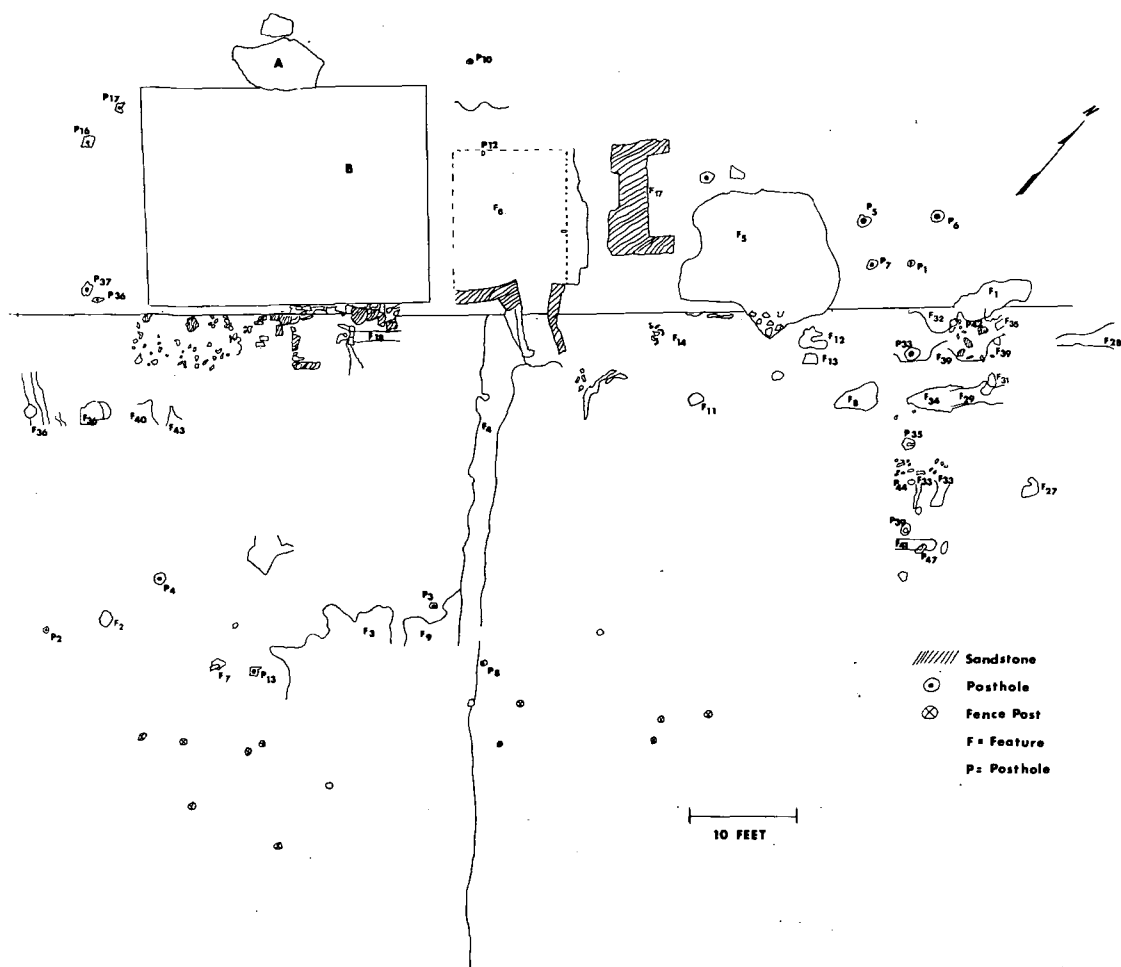


Figure 4. Site map showing features: A, stone walk; B, extant house.

entrance and the extant house (Figure 7). The drain, which forked within 5 feet of the wall, extended for approximately 67 feet at a perpendicular to the wall and an undetermined distance the other direction. The ground sloped away from the building in the direction the drain was constructed, and at the indicated distance the one leg of the drain was at ground level.

Artifacts in the drain fill consisted of pearlware, whiteware, redware, stoneware, and overglazed enameled porcelain ceramics, container glass, cut nails, roofing slate, cut cow bones, and a pig's canine tooth. Of the several artifact classes, the ceramics provided the best means of dating when the drain ditch had been filled. The white-ware included handpainted, spatter decorated and rose transfer printed wares but none of the more common second half 19th century plain and decal decorated wares (Freeman 1954:4).

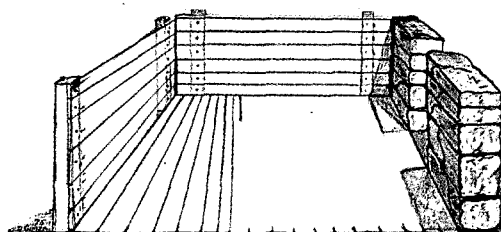


Figure 5. Cellar

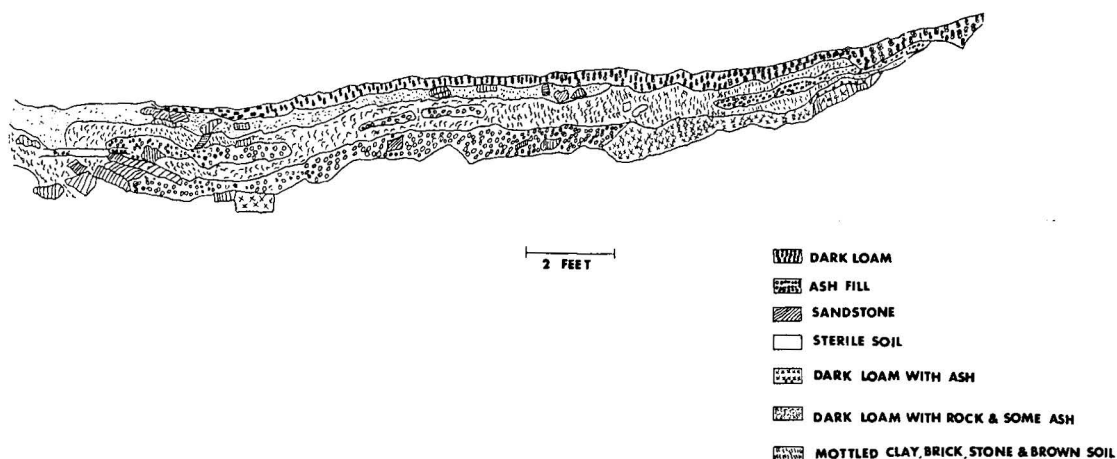


Figure 6. Cellar stratification.

The stoneware was of local origin and manufactured between 1855 and 1900 (Michael and Jack 1973). Therefore, the drain was evidently built post 1855 but pre-1900.

#### *Fireplace Foundation (Figure 4, F17)*

The house addition above the cellar and abutting the extant original log house was also built of logs (Figure 8). Like the extant structure, it measured 20 feet 6 inches front to back, and based on the position of the I-shaped fireplace which must have marked its lateral extent, it was 16 feet 3 inches from end to end. That would have made the two-unit structure 42 feet 7 inches X 20 feet 6 inches which is not identical but close to the 20 feet X 50 feet dimensions listed for the Thomas Gaddis house in 1798 (United States 1798). The fireplace in the addition had a firebox measuring 3 feet 5 inches wide (Figure 9).

Although a late 19th century photograph showed a second addition to the house (Figure 8), one that was attached to the end of the first addition, the only archaeological evidence for a second addition was the I-shaped fireplace foundation at the interface between the main addition and the second addition (Figure 9). Based on the size of the firebox opening in the area where the second addition should have stood, according to the photograph, the second addition may have been a kitchen; the firebox opening was 7 feet 6 inches wide. The dimensions of the second addition could not be determined. There were no indications of a foundation or corner supports.

#### *Chinking Pit (Figure 4, F5)*

Under part of the presumed area where a kitchen may have existed, there was a pit where

the clay may have been obtained for chinking the logs on one or more of the house units (Figure 10). The chinking pit measured approximately 14 feet 4 inches X 11 feet 9 inches, had sloping sides, and about 253 cubic feet of clay had been removed from it. The pit had been filled with random-sized rocks, some of which showed signs of having been cut, and miscellaneous rubble. Artifacts represented in the filled area included those from



Figure 7. Drain construction.



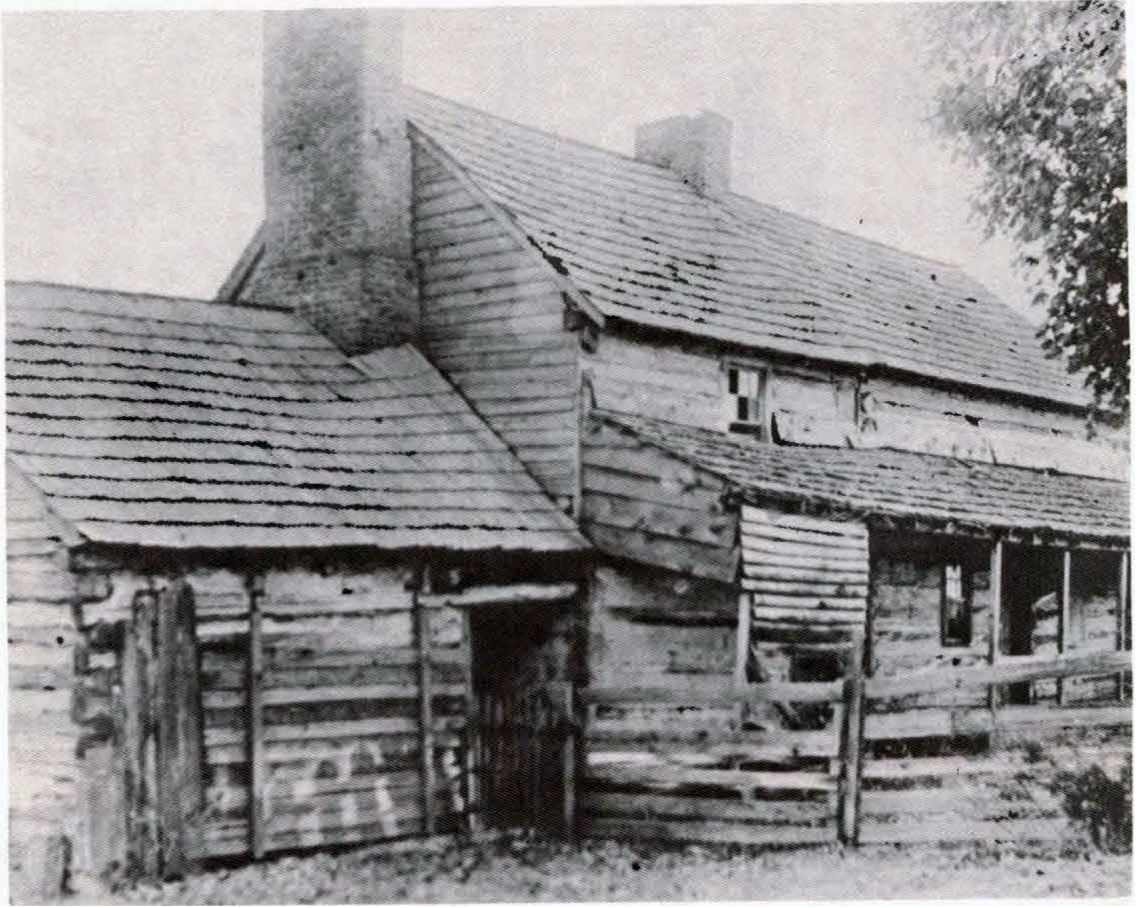


Figure 8. "Fort Gaddis" ca 1880's or 1890's.

household, transportation, and farming activities. The most recently manufactured artifacts were locally made salt-glazed stoneware, ca. 1855-1900, and a W. R. A. (Winchester Repeating Arms) 32 caliber cartridge which must post date 1866, the date of the inception of the company (Fontana 1962:81). Therefore, the chinking pit was not filled before, and the second addition was not built before, 1866.

#### *Springhead (Figure 4, F18)*

To the northeast of the rear door of the original portion of the house there had been a springhead which evidently tapped one of the several springs so that there was a constant supply of water at the house. The feature consisted of 3 courses of soft red bricks laid in a square approximately 16 inches on each side. In the open center of the brickwork, there was a vertical pipe which attached to a horizontal pipe, below the bricks,

which assumably led to a spring (Figure 11). The end of the pipe was not located, but it was traced for about 25 feet; the present pipe is black iron. Connecting into the squared brick area, at one corner of its base, was a double linear row of bricks laid on edge length-wise with the rows, presently, tight together. This apparently served as a run-off area for the excess water. Artifacts associated with this feature included delft (1), pearlware, redware, and salt-glazed stoneware ceramics, window and container glass, a brass rivet, a metal button with wire eye, a shoe buckle, and a 22 caliber cartridge. Since the pipe trench leading to the brickwork contained local salt-glazed stoneware, this feature dates from the second half of the 19th century.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It was quite clear from the excavation that no stockade or a blockhouse had ever existed at the





Figure 9. I-shaped fireplace.



Figure 10. Chinking Pit.



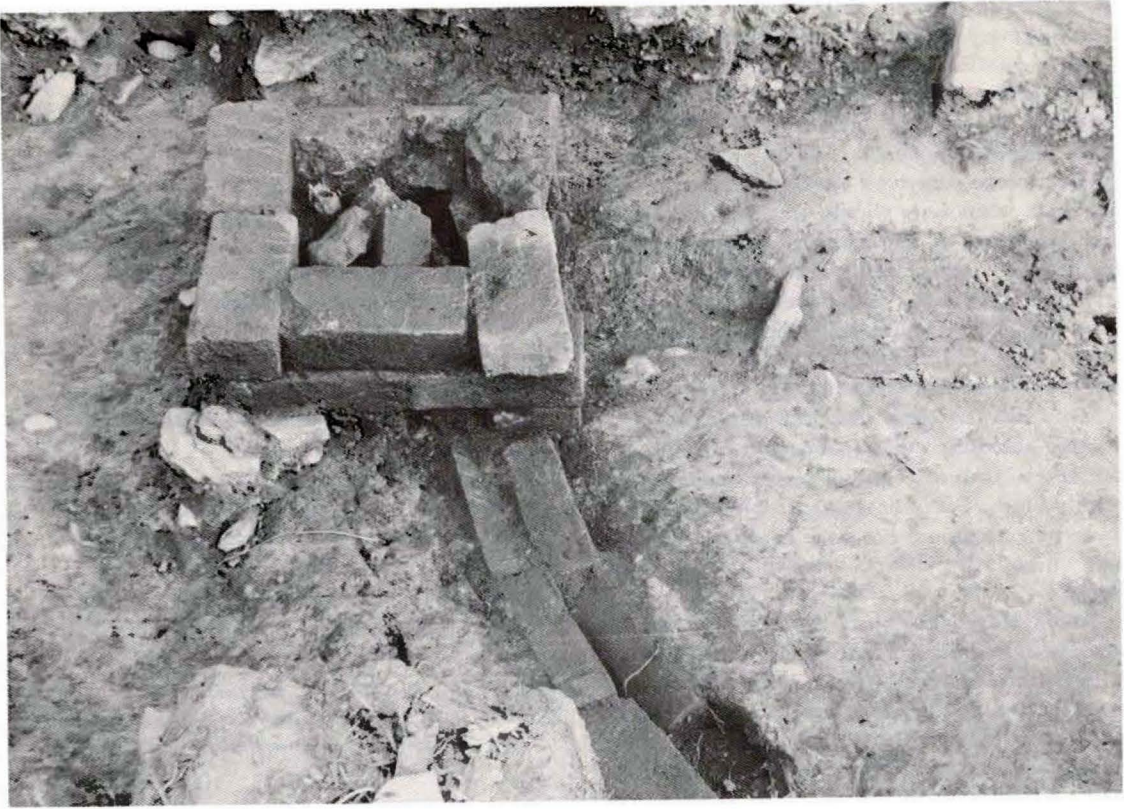


Figure 11. Springhead.

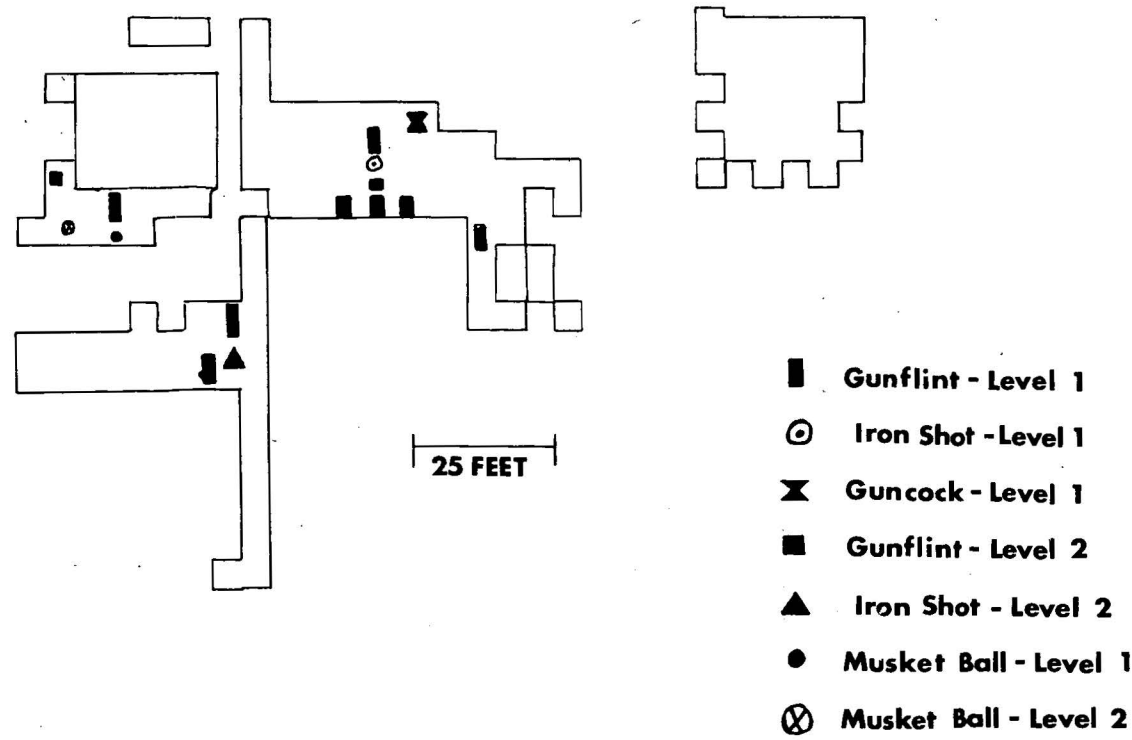


Figure 12. Locations of hunting or military artifacts.

site. Likewise, military related artifacts from the Revolutionary War were few. A total of 10 gunflints or gunflint fragments, 3 ironshot (1.214" diameter, 93.8g; 1.229" diameter, 99.4g; and .877" diameter, 34g), 2 lead musket balls (.438" diameter, 8g; .540" diameter, 13.6g), and 1 partial guncock were recovered during the excavation. All these items were widely scattered (Figure 12) and only three of the artifacts came from features: 1 ironshot and 1 gunflint came from the filled cellar and 1 musket ball came from a shallow pit. Certainly these few artifacts do not indicate (nor preclude) martial activity at the site but instead are probably the remains of nearly 150 years (late 18th-19th centuries) of hunting activities and casual accumulation of site debris. Only the several pieces of shot cannot readily be explained as perhaps non-military, and those objects should not have been at a frontier fort where Indian attacks were the only military threat.

Archaeologically there is no evidence that the site was ever part of a settler's fort. None of the criteria for a fort were found at the site or were many period military artifacts recovered. This negative data does raise a question which needs further research: Were many of the so-called settler's forts actually forts or were they merely homes where area residents had agreed to congregate for protection when there was rumor of danger, particularly from Indian raiding parties?

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