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An Otsego Frontier Experience: The Gratzburg Tract, 1770-1795

By G. WILLIAM BEARDSLEE

It has been over 100 years since Frederick Jackson Turner proposed his "Frontier Thesis" at Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. In a condensed form, Turner's thesis suggested that the uniqueness and exceptionalism of American culture were the product of the availability of "free" land to successive generations of Americans. As a result of the availability of frontier land, the frontier dually served as the American society's "safety valve" and as the incubator for several unique "American" frontier values. Certain cultural characteristics, including self-reliance, individualism, democracy, sectionalism, and nationalism were prized on the frontier and were permanently inculcated within American culture, social systems, and institutions. Emphasizing the power of the frontier's existence on successive generations of Americans, Turner and his disciples identified the frontier, and the "frontier experience" as the predominant factor in the evolution of American history and culture.¹

Turner's Thesis was embraced by a generation of historians, journalists, social scientists, and politicians as the explanation, indeed the justification, for America's world view of itself, as unique and special. After years and decades of initial acclaim, Turner's thesis passed through subsequent eras in which it was alternately vilified as too simplistic, or reacclaimed as proof of American superiority. Within the past thirty years (1960-1990) it has been de-

1. Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 3, 37-40. See generally, Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc, 1996), 1-38. See also, Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner's Trail: 100 Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 237-47.

ridged by many who once again prefer not to see the unifying power/influence of the frontier, but rather perceive it as the creator/incubator of a host of differences and deficiencies implicit in race, ethnicity, and gender afflicting American society.²

Because of its theoretical and philosophical grandeur in explaining the American experience, Turner's "frontier thesis" was applied to the "big" events in American history: the development of democracy, nationalism, sectionalism, individualism, and free markets. Despite Turner's emphasis on regionalism, it is less frequently encountered or appreciated in regional studies or local history. Its recognition within personal or family histories is even more rare. Applied to the single person or event, it is often unrecognized and unappreciated. Yet its subtle presence is undeniable; one must simply look for it.

An example of this lesson can be seen in the history of a small tract of land in modern day central New York and Otsego County. It is identified even today within the land records as the "Gratzburg Tract" or as the "Jew's Tract." Located along the picturesque and pleasant Unadilla river valley, known by the colonials as the Tianaderah, the history of the "Gratzburg Tract" is a casebook example of the power and influence of the frontier.

Many of the original 1790s purchase deeds for Unadilla River homesteads of Otsego County begin with a Michael Gratz of Philadelphia.³ Preserved, protected, and hidden away in old family chests of papers, these old deeds evidence an intriguing historical connection between Philadelphia and the Otsego frontier country. Witnesses to the Gratz deeds, and the public officials acknowledging them, often included such well known names in post-Revolutionary

2. Nash, *Creating the West*, 259-77; Turner's "Frontier Thesis" has been much misconstrued by recent American historians as simplistic. Turner contended that the history of the United States should deal with at least the following great historical processes: (1) the evolution of a composite non-English nationality; (2) the movement away from the European state system and the rise of an American system; (3) the movement westward; (4) the democratic movement; (5) industrial transformations; (6) the slavery struggle; (7) the struggle of particularism, and sectionalism with nationalism; and the (8) growth of the Constitution by evolution of political institutions.

3. Michael Gratz to William Nichols Deed, Nov. 6, 1792, unrecorded deed, Beardslee-Pittsfield Homestead Document Collection, Greeley, Colorado. (Hereafter, Beardslee Collection.)

War New York and Otsego County history as William Cooper, Jacob Morris, and Jedediah Peck. Many present day residents of the Town of Pittsfield in Otsego County know that within their chain of land title there indeed exists a Michael Gratz of Philadelphia. In fact, an examination of the 1790s grantor deeds for several miles of land along the Unadilla River (or the Tianaderah as it was known until about 1790) in Otsego County, invariably finds deeds signed by a Michael Gratz, as grantor, and describing the lands conveyed as either "Gratzburg," "The Gratzburg Tract," "The Jew's Tract," or the "Gratz Tract." Other deeds sometimes elusively refer to the same lands as "The Jew's L." All of the these descriptions relate to a narrow and oddly shaped sliver of land located along the eastern side of the Unadilla River running north-south and parallel to New York State Route 8 from approximately South Edmeston to south of Silver Lake in western Otsego County. After several miles along the Unadilla it abruptly turns east and ends a similar distance later. Compared to other nearby patents/tracts, the "Gratzburg Tract" is modest in scale and contains but 9050 acres. It's most distinctive characteristic is its shape which is that of a giant letter "L." It is named after Michael Gratz and his brother Barnard both of whom were important Revolutionary War era merchants and western land speculators of Philadelphia.⁴

4. Gratzburgh deeds and mortgages dated in 1792 are located in the Otsego County Courthouse in Cooperstown, NY. Deeds are located in *Otsego County Deeds, Liber A*; Gratzburg mortgages are located in *Otsego County Mortgages, Liber A*. The 1795 Gratz-Lawrance Assignments of mortgages and deeds are located in the New York State Library Archives in Albany, NY. Except for the Feb./March of 1795 Gratz-Lawrence assignments of mortgages and deeds, all Otsego County Gratzburg deeds and mortgages are dated between Aug. 24, 1792-Nov. 6, 1792. It appears that Michael Gratz was personally present in Otsego County on Sept. 12-19, 1792 as he acknowledged several documents on that date; it is also highly probable that Gratz was present in Otsego County on Nov. 6, 1792. For the placement of the tract, see F. W. Beers and F. S. Fulmer et al., eds., *Atlas of Otsego Co., New York from Actual Surveys by and under the direction of F. W. Beers* (New York: F. W. Beers, A. D. Ellis, and G. G. Soule, 1868), 23. See also A. T. Volwiler, "George Croghan and the Development of Central New York, 1763-1800," *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association*, 4 (January 1923), 27-34; A. T. Volwiler, *George Croghan and the Westward Movement, 1741-1782* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1926), 279-89. For the Gratz brothers, see William Vincent Byars, ed., *B. and M. Gratz: Merchants in Philadelphia, 1754-1798: Papers of Interest to their Posterity and the Posterity of their Associates* (Jefferson City, Mo.: Hugh Stephens Printing Co., 1916), 28. This assemblage of Gratz brothers documents is collected from several important Gratz document collections including Gratz-Croghan Papers, Etting Collection, McAllister Manuscripts, etc.

The "Gratzburg Tract" is several hundred miles north from Philadelphia. But in the eighteenth century, river routes were often just as important as physical proximity and sometimes more so. Historical Otsego County was drained by two of the major rivers in the northeast: the Susquehanna and the Delaware. Both provided an alternative and convenient transportation route for colonial trappers, traders, land speculators, and settlers. Despite Otsego County's proximity to Albany, New York, less than fifty miles to the northeast, the Susquehanna and the Delaware naturally siphoned attention from the south: Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. In addition to "The Gratzburg Tract," many other Otsego County patents also exhibit strong Philadelphia connections.⁵

It is with the conclusion of the French and Indian War (1754-1763) that the modern history of the Gratzburg Tract begins. With the vast expanse of lands taken from the French and added to the English colonies in 1763, interest in western lands and land speculation exploded. In 1768, in an attempt to deal with the increasingly difficult relations between Indians and colonists, a great treaty meeting was held at Fort Stanwix (Rome, New York) with many of the principal Indian tribes in attendance. A line of settlement stretching from Fort Stanwix to the Illinois country was established, beyond which colonists were not expected to occupy land. In Otsego County the line was drawn from near Fort Stanwix to the source of the Unadilla, then called the Tianaderah, and then southerly down the length of the river to its confluence with the Susquehanna. East of this "Line of Property" all Indian claims or procedures protecting Indian property rights were extinguished. Although several land patents such as the Cherry Valley, Hartwick, and Schuyler Patents existed in the Otsego country prior to 1768, it is only after the Great Treaty at Fort Stanwix that the region experienced larger scale frontier land development.⁶

Over the next three years several small and large patents were granted to numerous individuals. Included within this select group

5. Volwiler, *Croghan and the Westward Movement*, 244-45; Roy L. Butterfield, "The Land Patents of Otsego County," *The Freeman's Journal*, Summer, 1953; Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York," 24.

was Col. John Butler. John Butler's father emigrated from Connecticut to the Mohawk Valley and had become an extensive land owner. As a result of the family's friendship with Sir William Johnson, England's Colonial Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and also as a consequence of his extraordinary military operations and valor during the French and Indian War, Col. John Butler accumulated several patents in and near the Mohawk Valley. Three of his patents were located in the southern sections of Schoharie County. All three of these patents were eventually lost in Whig government forfeiture actions as the result of Col. Butler's fierce loyalism and legendary brutal command of "Butler's Rangers" during the Revolutionary War.⁷

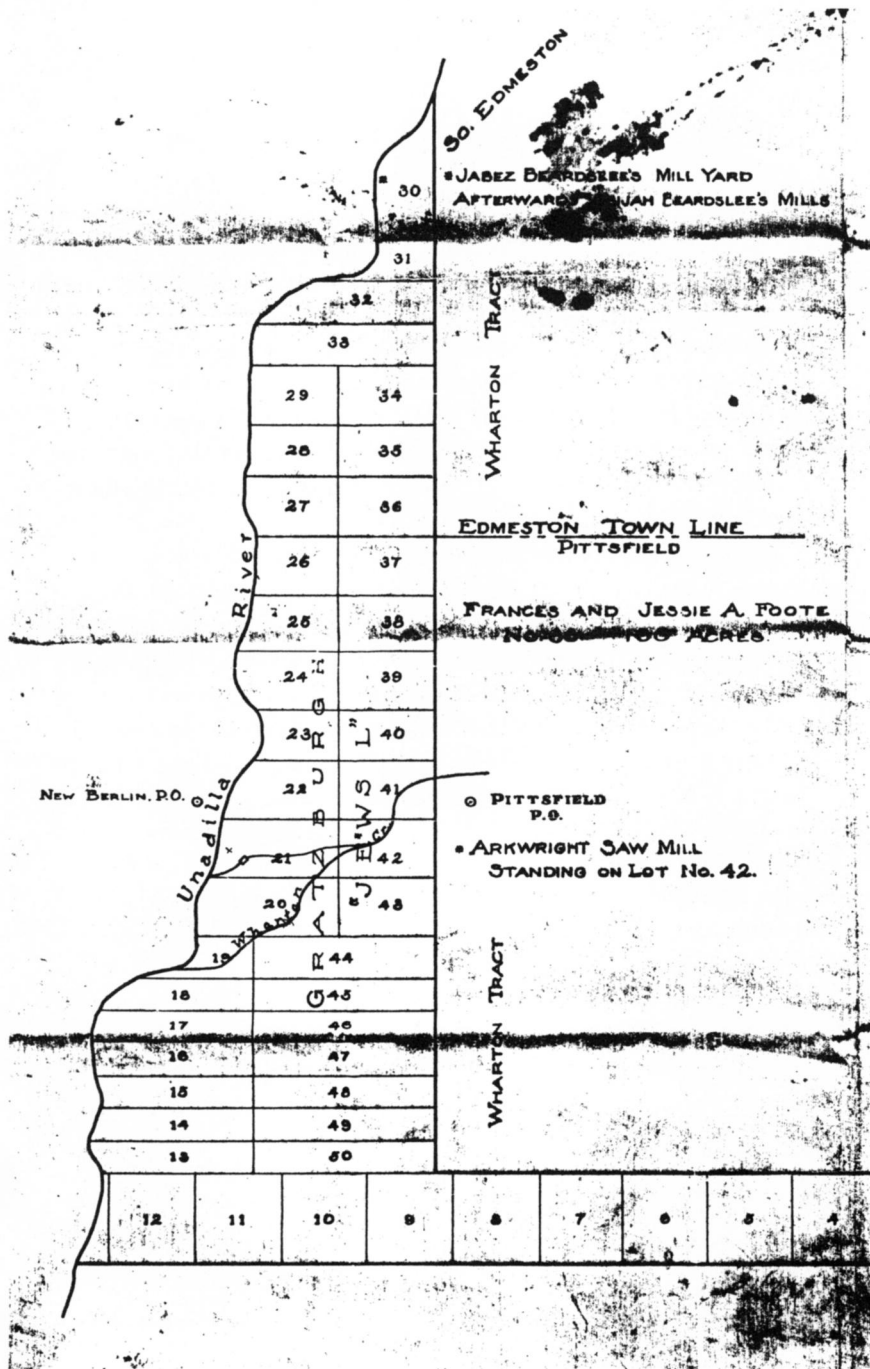
There are few names in American Revolutionary War history that elicit more reaction, at least in central New York, than that of Col. John Butler, his son, Capt. Walter Butler, and other relatives. The "Border War" waged by Tory and Whig in the Mohawk Valley or the north branch of the Susquehanna River is generally conceded to have been characterized by a special legacy of brutality, barbarism, and savagery. Butler was demonized during the Revolutionary War as a symbol of barbarism, brutality, and Tory partisanship. D. W. Griffith, the early American cinematographer, portrayed Butler as the archetypal folk villain in his early film spectacle, *America*. Two hundred years later, the Wyoming Massacre remains, to some observers, "the surpassing horror of the American Revolution."⁸

All that, however, lay before him when his fourth patent, generally identified as "Butler's Patent," was granted to Col. John Butler and his associates in 1769-70. Bounded on the north by the Edmeston Patent, on the east by the Otsego Patent, and on the south

6. Nicholas B. Wainwright, *George Croghan: Wilderness Diplomat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 257, 261-70. Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 40-52, 46; Volwiler, *Croghan and the Westward Movement*, 221-55, 257, 261-70; Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York," 22; Butterfield, "Land Patents," 3-11.

7. Butterfield, "Land Patents," 11.

8. Callahan, *Royal Raiders: The Tories of the American Revolution* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), 165-69; Robert McCluer Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1973), 427-29; William C. Kashatus III, "The Wyoming Massacre: The Surpassing Horror of the American Revolution, July 3, 1778," *Valley Forge Journal* 4 (1988):107-22.



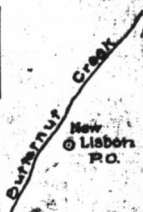
NOTES BY JESSE BEARDSLEE.

Lot No. 36 Jewe Tract purchased cleared and fenced by Gideon De Forest about 1794, who, resided on the lot until about 1825, when he bought river lot No. 27. Upon his death hill lot No. 36 passed to his son.

Lot No. 37 was settled upon at same time by Capt. Abel De Forest father of Genl. De Forest of Norwich, N.Y.

Jesse Beardslee purchased 100 Acres of Lot No. 38 in 1843, the balance of the lot 60 Acres was then owned by Jabez Beardslee.

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*The Gratz patent, divided into lots.
From the Beardslee Collection.*

by the Morris Patent, it was originally in excess of 47,000 acres. If overlaid on a map of modern Otsego County, Butler's Patent would encompass all of Pittsfield, and portions of Edmeston, New Lisbon, and Morris townships. Soon after Butler's receipt of the lands, he and his colleagues sold it to Col. George Croghan. Some historians believe that Butler's petition and brief ownership as "Butler's Patent" had actually been another of the many legendary facades/devices/scams used by George Croghan to accumulate western lands.⁹

Born in Ireland and emigrating to Pennsylvania in 1741, George Croghan by 1770 owned over 250,000 acres and most of modern Otsego County. His involvement there relates to his role as western explorer, Indian trader, and as Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs under Sir William Johnson. Although Croghan's greatest spheres of influence were with the Indians of Pennsylvania and the Ohio country, he was familiar with the Otsego region as a result of his personal and professional relationship with Johnson. Operating from his Philadelphia base, Croghan exhibited an early and extended interest in western lands. During the 1740s his land activities were located in the Cumberland Valley. By the 1750s his interests moved to lands near Harris's Ferry and the important road leading to Virginia. During the remainder of the 1750s, as a result of the French and Indian War, most land development subsided but after the war in 1764, Croghan boldly petitioned the British Board of Trade for confirmation of a land grant (200,000 acres) given to him by the Six Nations. The Board of Trade denied the confirmation, and in 1765 Croghan petitioned for a 20,000-acre grant in New York. He did not receive the entire acreage but because of his record during the French and Indian War, he was awarded a grant of 10,000 acres. Three years later, after a celebrated peace mission to Pontiac and the Illinois country, Croghan received a second 10,000-acre grant in New York. He combined these two grants, and after approval by the New York colonial government, located

9. Wainwright, *Wilderness Diplomat*, 259-71; Volwiler, *Croghan and the Westward Movement*, 249-53; Butterfield, "Land Patents," 11. F. W. Beers, *Atlas of Otsego Co. New York*, 23. The Otsego County Clerk and Recorder's Office, Cooperstown, NY, has numerous tract, patent, and other maps illustrating the relative locations of Butler's Patent and the Gratzburgh Tract.

them near Cherry Valley, New York. Croghan called this new township "Belvedere."¹⁰

Over the next few years, George Croghan along with friends, colleagues, associates, and family in Philadelphia and nearby Burlington, New Jersey, heartily participated in the rapid development of the frontier lands of the Mohawk Valley, Susquehanna/Delaware headlands, and central New York. This historically prominent group of speculators from Philadelphia and nearby Burlington, New Jersey, included New Jersey Governor William Franklin, Thomas, Samuel, and Joseph Wharton, Alexander Mckee, William Trent, Richard Smith, Charles Reade, and Croghan's son in law, Lt. Augustine Prevost.

Despite British policies designed to avoid friction with western Indians by suppressing large scale land speculation, Croghan and his associates utilized imaginative, unique, and sometimes questionable methods in the process of accumulating several hundred thousand acres of Otsego lands.¹¹ Twentieth century sensibilities are sometimes offended by the methods used by Croghan and other land speculators of the era, but it should be remembered that land speculation was a natural target for the free capital accumulated by successful colonial entrepreneurs including Col. George Washington, who stated, in response to the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which created a boundary extending from Canada to Florida to protect western Indians and their lands,

I can never look upon that proclamation in any other light (but this I say between ourselves), than as a temporary expedient to quiet the minds of the Indians. . . Any person, therefore, who neglects the present opportunity of hunting out good lands, and in some measure marking and distinguishing them for his own, (in order to keep others from settling them), will never regain it.¹²

By 1770 Croghan and/or his associates had accumulated 250,000 acres in the Otsego country, including the Butler Patent of 47,000

10. Volwiler, *Croghan and the Westward Movement*, 238-39; Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York," 22-25.

11. Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York," 23-24.

12. Quoted in Volwiler, *Croghan and the Westward Movement*, 233.

acres lying along the Unadilla River. During this concentrated and extensive period of land acquisition, Croghan relocated from Philadelphia to the Otsego country. He selected as the location for his future home a picturesque site at the southern end of Otsego Lake from which he would administer his vast holdings. These included, in addition to his Otsego lands, claims to over one million acres in Indiana and Ohio. To finance these ventures, Croghan went to his friends, colleagues, and associates and borrowed heavily. Indeed his greatest character trait may have been his genius or ability to borrow, bond, and chronically extend his creditors. A partial list of his creditors is historically noteworthy: Gov. William Franklin, Samuel, Thomas, and Joseph Wharton, John Morton, Dr. John Morgan, Goldsboro Banyar, Richard Peters, and a group of investors known as the Burlington Company. In fact, it is the Franklin/Burlington Company debt that would one day be utilized by another land speculating Pennsylvanian, William Cooper, to obtain much of the land, including Croghan's Forest, around Cooperstown, New York.¹³

Perhaps Croghan's most important creditors, trusted bankers, and closest friends, were two Philadelphia "merchant adventurers," Barnard and Michael Gratz. The Gratz brothers lent him money at a reasonable rate of interest whenever he needed it. Indeed, long after Croghan ceased to be a major force in western land speculation, the Gratz brothers continued to assist their old friend. Croghan eventually accumulated enormous obligations that were particularly troublesome because they took the form of short term debt. Hoping that his other western lands would eventually provide the means to pay all his debts and mortgages, he gradually authorized the sale of major portions of his Otsego lands including the Skinner Patent, portions of the Otsego tract, and the Butler Patent.¹⁴

The Butler patent was subdivided and deeded to different persons. A large portion, known as the Wharton Tract (15,000 acres) was deeded to Philadelphian Joseph Wharton in part payment of a previous loan and mortgage. An odd L-shaped 9050-acre tract was

13. Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York," 27, 28-35.

14. Croghan to Michael Gratz, Nov. 22, 1779; Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 190; Wainwright, *Wilderness Diplomat*, 269-72. See also, Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York," 32-34.

deeded in 1770 to Croghan's friend and banker, Michael Gratz of Philadelphia. Gratz paid Croghan £1800 (approximately four shillings per acre) for the entire tract. Two years later in 1772, Croghan gave Gratz his full power of attorney in order that more Otsego lands might be sold—an effort that failed despite Gratz's advertising and travel to the Otsego country. At that time Croghan wrote to Gratz and indicated that, "I am determined to Sell the Lands I have in New York Government and rely on you to Do itt." Finally in 1774, after his claims in the west had collapsed, Croghan authorized Gratz to conclude the sale of his remaining lands in the Otsego country: "I main to Sell the ottsego Tract and gett Don with that part of the country." Gratz successfully sold the remaining acreages including the McKee, Belevedere, and the Schoharie tracts, and with the proceeds paid several important creditors.¹⁵

With the sale of Croghan's Otsego lands and the payment of certain creditors, the L-shaped section of the Butler Patent was now securely owned by Michael Gratz. The story of the Gratz brothers, Barnard and Michael, states Jacob Marcus, "is not simply the personal history of two early American immigrant merchants...the lives of these two men illuminate at least four different worlds; the restricted one of the European Jew, the expanding one of the eighteenth century merchant, the adventurous one of the immigrant to frontier society, and the patient, enduring one of the nascent Jewish community."¹⁶

Born in Langensdorf, Upper Silesia, in 1738 and 1740 respectively, Barnard and Michael Gratz both served, early in their lives, in the London counting house of their cousin, Solomon Henry. After learning the rudiments of trade, geography, and money, they both emigrated to Pennsylvania—Barnard in 1754, Michael in 1759. Upon their arrival in Philadelphia both were employed by David Franks, a leading fur trader. Within a few years, the brothers formed the partnership known as B. & M. Gratz which remained in existence for over thirty years.¹⁷

15. Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 345; Barnard Gratz Poster dated May 26, 1773, Albany, NY, and Michael Gratz to Barnard Gratz, April 8, 1774, Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 131-32, 139; Volwiler, "Croghan and Central New York, 32, 33.

Their commercial “adventures” were initially the importation of goods needed or desired in a colonial economy. Within a short time however, they expanded their goods and interests to include not only London and England, but also trade involving Quebec, New Orleans, and the Caribbean. More importantly, they were soon involved in the western Indian trade and the opportunities inherent in the western lands of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and beyond.

In 1769 Michael Gratz married Miriam Simon the daughter of Joseph Simon, a leading western Indian trade merchant of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It was through this Simon connection that Barnard and later, Michael Gratz established their first contacts with the “King of the Indian Traders,” Col. George Croghan.¹⁸ As a recent biographer of the Gratz brothers has written,

With the passage of time these ties grew in scope and complexity to such an extent that they profoundly affected the business fortunes of the two brothers. With the possible exception of their ties with the Franks and Simon interests, no other connection established by the brothers proved as fateful as the life-long association they maintained with . . . George Croghan. Through this relationship they earned a place among the promoters of pioneering western land schemes, making their story part of the saga of the historic American westward movement.¹⁹

Over the next thirteen years (1769-1782), Croghan could count on few persons other than Michael and Barnard Gratz for financial support. Croghan’s debtors were numerous and often ill tempered as a result his chronic inability to settle his debts. Many friends and/or creditors suffered severe financial difficulties as a result of their involvement in his ever more grandiose land schemes. One creditor, Philadelphian Dr. John Morgan wrote to Croghan,

Where sir, is the generosity of leaving one who became a security for you to fall a victim to his reliance on your honor... Why have I not heard from you before now, or what is the reason you have never answered my letters? ²⁰

16. Jacob Marcus in foreword to Sidney Fish, *Barnard and Michael Gratz: Their Lives and Times* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1994), i.

17. Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 8-27.

18. *Ibid.*, 13-14. See also Fish, *Barnard and Michael Gratz*, 43.

Benjamin Franklin's son, New Jersey Governor, William Franklin said of his dealings with Croghan, "You cannot imagine what an infinite deal of difficulty & trouble I have had in the management of that cursed business of the Otaga tract. . ." On at least one occasion Michael Gratz told his brother Barnard that he wished he had never heard of Croghan. Yet his creditors, including the Gratz brothers, also recognized the personal heroism, generosity, and charisma possessed by Croghan. Despite their personal situations at least one creditor wished that Croghan could settle matters in a manner that would "enable him to live according to the elegance of his desires and the nobleness of his disposition."²¹

During these difficult times, Barnard and Michael Gratz became Croghan's principal agents, creditors, and suppliers for his and their own Indian fur trade and land adventures. Acting as his agents, they conducted negotiations, sold his lands, and otherwise personally interceded with his creditors. Their willingness to continue to assist Croghan enabled him to continue his adventuring and inevitably engaged the Gratz brothers in western land speculation. It is true that they were often beneficiaries of these activities, but the brothers' loyalty to Croghan suggests that the Gratz-Croghan relationship went beyond the unsentimental ties of business.²²

Croghan's last years (1775-1782) were less than glorious. Chronically ill with the gout, he was nearly destitute, but the Gratz brothers continued to provide personal assistance. During the Revolutionary War and after, when many questioned Croghan's loyalties, the Gratz brothers, despite their own status as staunch Philadelphia Whig patriots, remained personally loyal to Croghan. Croghan appointed the Gratz brothers as principal executors of his 1782 last will and testament. In his will he gave significant personal gifts of land to Barnard and his daughter Rachel Gratz, though Barnard surely knew that Croghan's lands, so extensive in theory, were irretrievably bound by creditors. The inventory of the colonel's personal estate, filed with the Pennsylvania probate court, reveals that

19. Ibid.

20. Wainwright, *Wilderness Diplomat*, 275.

21. Ibid., 270, 275.

22. Ibid., 283.

other than the clothes in which he was buried and one pair of breeches, two pair of stockings, and five shirts, Croghan's personal property consisted of: one old pinchbeck watch, one pair of buckles, one old coach, six silver spoons, and miscellaneous furniture—total value fifty pounds.²³

Interesting as it is, and significant as it was, the brothers' relationship with Col. George Croghan and their involvement in western land development were only two facets of their historical significance. Throughout their years of "merchant adventuring" within the Philadelphia business community, Michael and Barnard Gratz were also active in Whig politics, their faith, and the Jewish community. They were among the early signers of Non-Importation resolutions adopted in 1765 as a part of the Whig reactions to the Stamp Act. During the Revolutionary War both affirmed oaths of allegiance to either Pennsylvania or Virginia. Both of the Gratz brothers were founders of the Jewish community in Philadelphia. Barnard Gratz was the first recorded "parnas" of the Mickveh Israel Congregation and laid the cornerstone of the first synagogue in Philadelphia in 1782. Upon his death in 1801, Barnard was survived by his daughter Rachel.²⁴

Michael Gratz died in 1811. He was succeeded in business by his sons Simon and Hyman Gratz. Among his other children was the well known philanthropist and social activist, Rebecca Gratz, who is generally credited with the founding of the Female Association for the Relief of Women, Philadelphia Orphan Society, Jewish Foster Home, and the Hebrew Sunday School Society. Perhaps her most lasting fame is within the accepted tradition that she served as the model for Rebecca, daughter of Isaac of York, in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.²⁵

Curiously, despite the many difficulties related to their earlier association with George Croghan's Tunaderry, or their own Tenedorah, Michael Gratz's association with the Tianaderah did

23. Wainright, *Wilderness Diplomat*, 300; Last Will and Testament of Col. George Croghan, June 12, 1782.

24. Report on the Value of Col. George Croghan's Personal Property, Sept. 6, 1782, Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 209, 210.

25. *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.vv. "Gratz, Barnard"; "Gratz, Michael"; "Gratz, Rebecca."

not conclude with the last sale in the “Gratzburg Tract.” Croghan sold an adjoining tract, also a part of Col. John Butler’s 1770 patent, to Philadelphian Joseph Wharton in 1770. This 15,000-acre tract would be known as the “Wharton Tract” and portions of it were acquired by Michael Gratz at about the same time (1793) as the sales in the “Jew’s L.” An extended Gratz family ownership interest (Gratz, Etting, Moses, and Hays) would persist in the Wharton Tract until at least 1831.²⁶

The obvious object of a land purchase, assuming that the buyer will not settle upon the land, is to derive a profit from the transaction. And the quicker the better. Purchase and profit in the speculative ventures of the eighteenth century were often decades apart. Soon after the acquisition of the Gratzburg Tract, Michael Gratz wrote to his brother Barnard, who was in London,

I hope you have done something in the matter of the 9050 acres of land to your satisfaction, as the lands are very good, and so near a city, they are valuable. I expect they will fetch L 2000 sterling. However, you must know best, as you are on the spot.²⁷

By October 3, 1770, it appears that the 9050 acres were to be offered for sale in London. Barnard stated, in a letter to William Emerton,

Enclosed you have a copy of a deed of 9050 acres of good land. It lays within 70 miles of Albany, a large trading town in the New York government. It will be very salable in a little time. The same is submitted at 2 shillings, 6 pence (?) sterling per share, or L 12 los. per hundred. Mr. Trent told me it was worth L 20 per hundred, but if you can get the submitted price for it, you may agree

26. The “Wharton Tract” lies to the east of the Gratzburg Tract in Otsego County. Comprising about 15,000 acres, it was also a part of the original Butler Patent of 1769. Transferred by Butler to Croghan in 1770, the tract was eventually deeded by Croghan to Joseph Wharton Jr. of Philadelphia. In 1774 Wharton and his wife, Sarah Wharton, deeded their interests to Jonathan Beere, John Shaw, and John Alsop. Portions of the tract were deeded in 1793 by John Alsop to William Cooper and Richard R. Smith. In 1793, Jonathan Beere’s son, John Beere, sold his Wharton Creek Tract interests “on the waters of the Tennadara” to Michael Gratz. After Gratz’s death in 1811 various deeds, mortgages, and powers of attorney reflect the ongoing Gratz family interests until their final sales in 1831. All records can be found in the Otsego County Courthouse in Cooperstown, NY.

27. Michael Gratz to Barnard Gratz, July 6, 1770, Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 111-12.

for it. The land is not yet patented; therefore, it does not mention the boundaries properly. The purchaser will be at the expense of having it patented, which will be about 30 (shillings?) per thousand acres. . . Should you meet up with a purchaser and sell, you will be allowed a good commission.²⁸

The hoped for quick London sale and resolution of one of Croghan's many debts did not occur. During the next two years, 1772-74, extended negotiations and arrangements amongst Croghan's creditors ultimately concluded in Barnard Gratz's June 1774 efforts to sell much of Croghan's Otsego lands. This time the sale went well and on July 22, 1774, Miriam Gratz, Michael's wife, wrote to him and shared the good news from Barnard Gratz and the Otsego country:

I have the pleasure to acquaint you that the sale of Croghan's lands . . . was finished yesterday. The amount of the sales is £4845. . . so that it will pay Mr. Peter's judgment, Mr. Banyer's mortgage and I reckon, about L 1000 for the billholders, which I think is well done. And now I am in hopes that our 9050 acres on Tenedorah is safely ours, as none of the mortgages or Judgments can take it now. Nevertheless, as I go down, I shall make strict search in the office, though I am pretty sure we are safe in that, as the deed is prior to any judgment I know of and I intend, if I can sell it to anybody at a good price, I will. Mr. Hicks tells me it is worth six shillings per acre. If anybody were to purchase it and let it lie for a few years, it will fetch twelve shillings per acre in small lots. . . .²⁹

Within months of Miriam Gratz's letter, the events in Lexington, Concord, and Boston would cause more than a "few years" to pass before the Gratzburg Tract could be further developed. In the years following 1775, the Mohawk and Susquehanna Valleys were the sites of major military operations as well as brutal partisan activities. One outcome of the war was that the native inhabitants of the Susquehanna Valley were forced to leave. They would be replaced by a new population with very different attitudes and values regarding life, land, forests, and wildlife. In the aftermath of war—

28. Barnard Gratz to William Emerton, Oct. 3, 1770, Byars, *B. and M. Gratz* 112-13.

29. Miriam Gratz to Michael Gratz, July 22, 1774, Byars, *B. and M. Gratz*, 146-47.

the Iroquois barrier removed; New England suffering from a perceived sense of overpopulation—the existence of land that was fertile, available, and “empty,” and located just a few days journey to the west, was irresistible to Yankee farmers. Their exodus accelerated in the years following the end of the war and became a flood in the 1790s. In that decade they reached the Gratzburg Tract.³⁰

Purchased in 1770 for nearly four shillings an acre and divided into small lots as envisioned by Miriam Gratz, a third of the tract did not sell for the twelve shillings per acre that she expected but for twenty shillings (one pound) an acre—an impressive five-fold return by the time the tract was disposed of in 1795. Most of the purchasers of the Gratzburg lands acquired relatively small plots, ranging from 57 to 345 acres, with an average of 192 acres, at a price of twenty shillings per acre. Three men, however, bought larger acreages at lower prices: Lewis De Villers bought 1645 acres in 1792; James White bought 1550 acres that same year; and John Lawrence bought 3085 acres in 1795. These larger sales disposed of nearly 70 percent of the entire Gratzburg tract acreage and the lots were concentrated unlike the scattered locations of smaller purchases. It is reasonable to presume that portions of the larger purchases were intended for future resale. Michael Gratz had the same choice as all land speculators. He could sell to other speculators at wholesale prices for a quick and certain profit or he could sell directly to settlers at retail prices. As a retailer, he obtained higher profits per acre but the process extended over time and involved numerous transactions. The sale of a thousand acres required a legal procedure that was no more involved than the sale of a hundred acres.³¹

The initial sales in the period August through November 1792

30. The Sullivan expedition, which devastated the Iroquois heartland, also brought the fertility of the region to the attention of New England soldiers. Joseph R. Fischer, “The Forgotten Campaign of the American Revolution: the Sullivan -Clinton Campaign Expedition Against the Iroquois in 1779,” *Valley Forge Journal* 4 (1989), 288, 303. During the Sullivan campaign. Col. John Butler and the Iroquoian leader, Joseph Brant, brother of Col. George Croghan’s Indian mistress, commanded portions of the British forces opposing the American army.

31. The author acknowledges the assistance and cooperation of Otsego County Clerk’s Office, Cooperstown, NY, for their assistance in his search of the documents relating to the Gratz Tract.

were in small quantities to individual purchasers. Three listed Vermont or Connecticut as their place of residence and five listed Saratoga County; most listed "Otsego County," but it is probable that they were among the swarm of New Englanders who were moving into Otsego County at that time or had arrived a bit earlier. The two major purchasers who can be identified were John Lawrence and Lewis De Villers.

Lawrence (sometimes spelled Laurance or Lawrance) bought the last 3085 acres in the tract in 1795. He also bought the remaining promissory notes, bonds, and mortgages of the earlier 1792 purchasers. The assignments of mortgages, indentures of sale, and related powers of attorney confirm and clarify all of the earlier purchases. The Gratz-Lawrence sales and assignments, unlike the earlier purchases filed in Cooperstown, were recorded in Albany and the New York City clerks office.³²

Louis Charles Aime Le Febvre de Villers was born in France in 1757. In 1783, as a French Infantry Lieutenant, he was transferred to a North American bound regiment under General Rochambeau. His transport ship was unseaworthy and after leaving France was forced to put into a Spanish port for repairs. His arrival in the colonies occurred after the British defeat at Yorktown. By 1793 De Villers was in Cooperstown. De Villers settled in Butternuts near Louisville (present day Morris, New York) where he purchased a large tract of land. In 1795 he married Sarah Kinne daughter of Roger and Huldah Skinner. De Villers remained in Otsego County until 1808 when he moved to Ogdensburg, New York, where he died in 1840.³³

32. Assignment of Bond etc., Gratz-Lawrence, Book 27, page 295, recorded May 7, 1795; Assignment of Mortgages, Bond etc., Gratz Lawrence, Book 27, page 302, recorded May 8, 1795; Deed: tract of 3084.5 acres, Gratz-Lawrence, Book 27, page 299, recorded May 7, 1795; Deed: tract of 3.84.5 acres, Gratz-Lawrence, Book 27, page 305, recorded May 9, 1795, New York State Library Archives, Albany, NY. Lawrance or Laurance, an Englishman who served in the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War, became a lawyer, politician, a staunch Federalist, and an investor in lands in New York City and several parts of central New York. See *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Laurance, John." See also Robert Ernst, *Rufus King, American Federalist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 144, 152-53; and various letters by or relating to Laurance in Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-1987), 18:504, 507; 21:93-95; 22:390-91, 395-96.

33. For De Villers see De Villers file, New York State Historical Association library and obituary notice in *St. Lawrence Republican*, April 29, 1840.

Several smaller-scale purchasers can also be identified: John Canfield, purchaser of 57 acres in lot 20, may be the itinerant preacher who built the first log house in the Town of Pittsfield, situated on the bank of the Wharton Creek flats near its juncture with the Unadilla. This cabin appears to have lasted until the late nineteenth century and appears on local maps as a farm building.

Daniel Adams, who also bought 182 acres in lot 20, is identified as a blacksmith in early Pittsfield records and was certified and listed as competent to serve as a juror 1798. Adams appears to be one of the few original Gratzburg purchasers who remained on the Tract for the remainder of his life. In 1799 he petitioned the Commissioner of Highways to lay out a road running north along the Unadilla River.

David Coburn, bought 236 acres in lot 22. He was an early Pittsfield tavern keeper and may have owned a tavern on the eastern bank of the Unadilla as it intersects present-day New York State Route 80. The tavern or "road house" remains a part of the still existent Beardslee-Benson farmhouse. In 1801-02 Coburn was granted a town license to sell spirituous liquor.

Benjamin Atwell, who listed his residence as "Saratoga," bought 330 acres in lots 41 and 42. He built the first mills in Pittsfield which stood on the south bank of the Wharton Creek a few rods below the Arkwright factory dam and in the place where once stood the local saw mill. The mills were built about 1793-94 and consisted of a saw mill, grist mill, and oil mill.³⁴

An examination of the Gratzburg Tract deed and mortgage records reveals a common method of purchase for all sales: Gratz conveyed the land to the purchaser by a deed in fee simple; the debt was secured by a promissory note and a mortgage upon the land; final payment was due in five years at the legal rate of interest. These transactions are comparable to those used by William Cooper in his more extensive holdings in the eastern part of Otsego County. Cooper's land marketing advice, "A moderate price, long credit, a deed in fee, and a friendly landlord are infallible inducements to numerous settlements" is reflective of the economic reali-

34. D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Otsego County, New York with Illustrations: 1740-1878* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co. 1878), 287, 288, 289.

ties as experienced in Otsego country frontier real estate development.³⁵

The Gratzburg Tract sales records do not suggest any form of initial or down payment as a part of the sales transaction. In the sale to John Lawrence, Gratz assigned the notes of earlier purchasers to Lawrence which suggests perhaps that some purchasers defaulted and that Gratz did not demand a down payment even when selling a large tract. Repayment within five years from the date of purchase seems hasty to present-day observers. Modern real estate transactions are similar to the Gratzburg transactions in their use of a promissory note/mortgage/deed of trust process, but modern mortgages/deeds of trust are typically paid back over a fifteen-to-thirty year period. The short term allowed for repayment required the hasty and thorough use of the land's resources in a manner that was usually wasteful. The rapid transformation of the forest to farmland, as Alan Taylor has shown, was an enormous process with great ecological consequence.³⁶

The expectation of a profitable resale was well founded. Within seven years of his original 1792 purchase of 182 acres at one pound an acre, Daniel Adams sold the identical 182 acres to Mathew Bennett for £446. This may have included added improvements but still represents a significant inflation in land values. David Coburn's 1792 purchase of 263 acres for £206/10/ (about \$770) was later sold in two parcels in 1799: Jabez Beardslee of Stratford, Connecticut purchased 150 acres for \$1800; Zalmon Fairchild also of Connecticut, and Beardslee's brother-in-law, purchased 79.5 acres for \$800. William Nichols purchased 345 acres in lot 23 for £345 (about \$1287) in 1792, and later in 1800 sold to Nathan Summers of Weston, Connecticut, 175 acres for \$1000—a profit of over 50 percent. Five years later, Nathan Summers sold the same 175 acres to his own son-in-law, Zalmon Fairchild, for \$1550.³⁷

35. William Cooper, *A Guide in the Wilderness: Or, The History of the First Settlements in the Western Counties of New York, with Useful Information to Future Settlers* (Cooperstown, NY, 1986), 9-12.

36. Alan Taylor, "The Great Change Begins: Settling the Forest of Central New York," *New York History* 76 (July 1995), 265-90.

37. In modern real estate transactions, all deeds and mortgages are uniformly recorded at the county clerk's office. The legal requirements were the same two hundred years ago but the distance of settlements from the county seat and the difficulties of travel made the act of

Michael Gratz's plans included the creation of a small population center. Later references in nineteenth-century deeds indicate that he intended the village of "Gratzborough" to be located within the tract in lots 16-18 where Wharton Creek enters the Unadilla River. The "Town Plot" contains approximately 300 acres and is referred to in deeds that partitioned the property. However, no village was ever established by either Michael Gratz or any subsequent owners.³⁸ Gratz undoubtedly was aware that a commercial center would facilitate the exchange of agricultural products for manufactured goods. This would attract settlers and would speed mortgage payments. He may have concluded ultimately, however, that the capital outlay was too much.

As these exchanges suggest, the original Gratzburg purchasers did not necessarily remain long, much less permanently. Analysis of the 1800 U.S. Census for the Town of Pittsfield, in which the Gratzburg Tract is presently located, indicates that only 60 percent of the 1792 purchasers were still residents of the tract eight years later. In the 1810 Census for Pittsfield and Edmeston, only 25 percent, including likely widows, still appear as residents.³⁹ It would appear, as Alan Taylor has found for other Otsego County settlements, that "Most settlers departed within two decades, selling possession of their farms to newcomers that they might repeat the process of settlement farther north or west in some still newer county."⁴⁰ On the other hand, some families prospered and remained on the Gratzburg tract for decades and longer. Several present Gratzburg property owners and current residents trace their land ownership and family histories back to the 1790s, but they are few.

In the late eighteenth century the Otsego country lands along the Tianaderah were the American frontier. As the Gratzburgh tract

recording the deed more difficult than today. Surely experienced investors like the Gratzes and John Laurance were aware of the need for a sound title, but individual settlers could be careless, as, in fact, some speculators could be. Whatever the cause, many original and subsequent documents are missing from the Otsego County Gratzburg deed and mortgage records.

38. "Gratzburgh, New York," Land Sales Map #46-New York State Office of the Comptroller, New York State Library Archives, Albany, NY.

39. Ralph V. Wood, Jr., ed., *Otsego County, New York State: 1800 Federal Population Census Schedule Transcript and Index* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 29-32; 1810 Otsego County, Towns of Pittsfield and Edmeston, New York State, Federal Population Census Schedule, Denver Public Library, Microfilm.

40. Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, 318.

progressed through the ownerships of Col. John Butler, Col. George Croghan, Michael Gratz of Philadelphia, and eventually into the hands of the actual settlers—most of them probably from New England—the tract played its part in that historical process alternately considered reality, myth, region, utopian ideal, and most of all, a repetitive cultural process termed the “frontier experience.” Miniscule and modest the Gratzburg Tract may be, but it was part of that “inexorable westward movement of settlers” who are at the core of the Turner Thesis.

The Gratzburg Tract and its settlers mirrored many of the processes and characteristics associated with the historiographical understanding of the American frontier. Its initial existence as a “forbidden” potential source for settlement and fortune, served to chafe, as did all of the available western lands, the relationship between the pre-Revolutionary colonists and the British. Its ownership by Butler, Croghan, and Gratz reveals that those who participated in frontier experience, however individually diverse they may have been, experienced a unifying force. Or perhaps this force relates to the kinship of those who share a common history. In any case, within a few years, a collage of German Jews, British Loyalists, Irish frontier heroes, and New Englanders abandoned their remaining European pretensions, and engaged in a revolutionary free market whirlwind of conflicting American ideas, land settlements, and institutions. The result was a rapid transformation of forest to farmland. Having purchased their land on a loan of “five years, at the legal rate,” the settlers felt compelled to “go forth, multiply, and subdue the earth.” Their plunder of the land’s resources was an early harbinger of later and even greater exploitation farther west. Almost unmentioned and clearly marginalized in this entire process—a neglect that also may be included in “frontier experience”—are the original owners of the land, the Six Nations of the Iroquois.