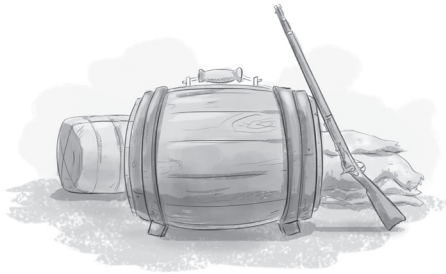


*Adventures on the American Frontier*

# PIONEER TRADERS

Revised Edition



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# George Croghan, Fur Trader

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The gentle thud of pack horse hooves on the path and the creak of leather hour after hour were making George Croghan sleepy. He was leading a string of twenty horses along a faint trail through the wilderness, and he was too far from the man at the other end of the pack train to talk with him.

George came to a fork in the trail and stopped to decide which way he should lead the train. The path to the right was well worn. He could see that many moccasined feet had traveled there. “Hey, Tom! Come up here,” he called back.

His cousin, Thomas Smallman, squeezed between the horses with the big bundles on their sides and the trees of

the forest they were traveling through. When he reached the lead horse, he saw that George had followed the trail to the right a short way. He was turning back to the pack train, a pleased look on his face.

“We’ve found it, Tom,” said George. “We’re almost there. Peter Tostee’s post isn’t far from here. There’s a big native village just ahead.” He sniffed the air. “Smell the cooking fires? And I can hear some children shouting in play.”

Tom was glad. He didn’t enjoy following a rough trail through the wilderness like George seemed to. Both of them had come from Ireland the year before, in 1741. This was their first journey into the American wilderness.

“For my part, I’ll be mighty glad to sit down on a chair again instead of on a fallen tree,” said Tom. “I hope Mr. Tostee has such a sign of civilization in his trading house.” He swatted at one of the small bees that buzzed around his head. The warm June sunshine had brought out swarms of insects, and they were always bothering the men and horses.

Tom turned to go back to the end of the pack train, but he had to cut his way free of a tangle of briars into which he had stepped. “Don’t know whether I want to be a fur trader or not,” he muttered as he squeezed past the sweaty horses.

George was sure that fur trading would be a good business to get into. It had been the first important business in North America since white men had begun building settlements there. Men took packs of goods and cloth, shipped from the cities of Europe, and traveled with them to Native American

villages. The Native Americans brought in furs and animal skins from their hunting trips and traded them for the white traders' goods.

Men and horses moved on. The trail swung to the banks of the Ohio River, and at last George could see the Native American village toward which they had been traveling for several weeks. They were carrying a load of trading goods from the frontier settlements east of the Appalachian Mountains.

Ships had brought the goods from Europe to the harbor at Philadelphia. Edward Shippen, a merchant, had them taken by wagon to his storehouse on the Pennsylvania frontier at what would become the town of Shippensburg in a few years' time. From there, the only "road" to the west was a narrow trail that went over the mountain ridges to the place where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers came together to form the Ohio River. Just a short way down the Ohio River was the Native American village where Peter Tostee had built a trading house.

"Hello!" called out Peter. The villagers had seen the pack train coming and had taken word to the trader. He came now to meet George. So ended George's first journey into the wilderness. In the next thirty years, he would know the trails, the trade, and the Native Americans so well that his work would help make the Ohio Country part of that unborn nation, the United States of America.

George helped Peter unload the packs from the horses' backs and store the goods in the log trading house. Each

pack weighed about seventy-five pounds, and from each horse's back came two packs. The first ones held rolls of bright red cloth. Next were rolls of the same coarse cloth but dyed bright blue.

“We cut this cloth into pieces, each about one and a half yards long,” Peter explained. “The natives can make a cloak or robe from a piece that long. They’ll trade an equal length of fur for it. They can get furs anywhere, but in this part of North America, they can’t get this cloth any other way but to trade for it.”

George and Peter went out to bring in more packs. Some of the Native Americans were helping with the work. One picked up a small pack and grunted in surprise at how heavy it was.

“Lead,” said Peter, “for bullets.”



When all of the goods were unpacked, there were many different things in the trading house. Besides the bright-colored cloth, there were a few pieces of clothing and a few blankets. There were some guns, the lead for bullets, and some gunpowder for firing them. There were steel knives and hatchets and some blades for hoes. But mostly the stock was made up of small objects the Native Americans liked. There were pocket mirrors, bells, whistles, scissors, colored pictures printed on paper, beads and bracelets of colored glass, and children's brightly-painted toys.

“We can begin trading tomorrow,” said Peter. “Watch, and you’ll learn how to make good trades.”

By the time the horses were loaded with bundles of furs for George and Tom to take back east, George had learned much from Peter and had decided to become a trader in his own right.

Two years later, all of George's plans had come true. He was in business for himself, with a good partner to stay at their home station and keep the accounts straight, as well as a number of traders out working for him, as he had worked for Peter. It had taken a great deal of effort. George had studied the ways of the Native Americans, their languages, and their cultures so that he could do well when he went among them.

George stopped by to see Peter as he started out on a trip farther west than he had ever gone before. He was going into the Ohio Country, up along the shores of Lake Erie.

Peter shook his head at that news. “George, you’re going right into trouble,” he said. “You’ll be leaving the land where most of the Iroquois tribes live and heading into Algonquian territory.”

George looked at the older trader questioningly. “Why should that stop me? The Iroquois are more warlike than the Algonquians, and I’ve already made friends with many of the Iroquois braves.”

“It’s the French traders and soldiers I’m thinking of,” Peter explained, “more than the Algonquians themselves. There’s talk of war between France and England, and almost all of the Algonquian tribes are on the side of the French. It goes back to the days of Samuel Champlain, when he went with an Algonquian war party and helped them defeat the Iroquois. What’s more, the French say that all of the Ohio Country belongs to them because their explorers went there first. They’re building more and more forts to hold it, too.”

George frowned. “But the English are also claiming all of the land to the Mississippi River,” he said. “If that claim is to count for anything, we can’t back off just because the French tell us to. It’s our rightful trading territory, and I’m going there.”

Peter shook his hand. “Good luck, my friend. I wouldn’t risk it myself, for all the furs in America.”

So George left. Four men went with him as he led his pack train north and west from the place where Pittsburgh now stands. There was no marked trail, but sometimes they found paths followed by buffalo and deer. Occasionally



they saw signs that Native Americans also used those paths. Following the valleys of streams was helpful, too.

The men found a river that seemed to be flowing southwest but suddenly made a great bend northward. “We’ll follow this river,” George told them. “It has to take us to Lake Erie.”

The river was the Cuyahoga, which empties into Lake Erie where the city of Cleveland now stands. The pack train followed it, fifty years before the first settlers would come that far, and saw at the river’s mouth a Native American village.

As they looked down at the village from a gentle rise of land up the river, George said, “That’s an Iroquois village. I think we’ve found a tribe of Seneca Iroquois. Wait here for my signal.”

George had packed a small bundle of gifts to take to the chief to make sure he would be welcomed. Soon he was in the chief’s lodge and had spread the gifts before him. He had met Senecas before and could speak their language well enough to make himself understood. But the chief had something on his mind.

“You are my good brother, George Croghan,” the chief said. “You speak my tongue. You bring fine gifts. But French soldiers come to me. They say, ‘No trade with English traders.’ You are an English trader. What do I do now?”

“We are brothers,” replied George. “We come together in peace. We do not live under the great French father but under the English father and his flag. We follow his laws, and

his laws say we may trade here. I will give you more for your furs than the French traders give you.”



The chief explained that the French had traded for all of his furs just a short time before but that George was welcome to stay in his village, for they would soon have furs to trade with him. So George signaled his men to enter the village. Soon they were cutting trees to build a trading house. Winter was coming, and the traders decided to stay in the Seneca village, with short trips out to see if they could get furs to add to what the Senecas brought in.

One such trip took George as far as Sandusky Bay, about seventy-five miles farther west along the Lake Erie shore. He talked with the Algonquians there, even though they were friendly with the French, and offered them better trades than the French had made. The French were having trouble shipping in enough trading goods because of the

fighting between France and England. The British navy was attacking many French ships, and it was hard for the French to get enough goods to offer for trade.

Word of George's higher trade values traveled with the Native Americans. When the French officers at the fort in Detroit heard that there were some Englishmen taking away their fur trade, they sent orders out to the local tribes right away: "Go to that Seneca village, and bring back those traders' scalps!"

But the Native Americans around Detroit, the Ottawas, were not anxious to get into a battle with the Iroquois Senecas. Through the winter, they did not attack the village at the Cuyahoga River. April came, and George and his men were ready to load the pack train for the trip back east.

On the day they were planning to leave, a Seneca brave came running into the village from the west. "Hurry, friend Croghan!" he said, panting. "Frenchmen and Ottawas come with horses to take furs. They also come to take you. Hurry!"

George and his four men worked as they had never worked before to get the pack saddles into place. The bundles of furs had all been packed, and the men quickly put two bundles onto each horse and tied them into place. The halter of each horse except the lead one was hooked to a strap from the harness of the horse ahead. Then the men saddled their riding horses. At last George's best year's trade was ready to go east.

"Off with you, men. I must say goodbye to the chief. I'll catch up," said George.

The steady plod of the horses' hooves began as they followed the trail into the woods.

A Seneca on watch sent a signal that the French were coming. George said his goodbyes quickly, leaving one last gift for the chief. The chief promised to save more furs for George's men if they were coming back.

"I'll be back," George told him. "You can count on that." He could hear a loud call in French as he hurried after his pack train.

It had been close. George knew that his Seneca friends would not give away the secret that the English traders were only a few hundred feet away from the village. They would pretend they'd had a poor hunt, that there were no furs but the few the Frenchman could see and the ones they needed to keep themselves warm.

When George saw his old friend Peter on the way back east, he learned that the French had led some Shawnee braves to the old trader's post. Peter had not been as lucky as George. All of his furs had been stolen.

"Some of yours, too, my friend," he said. "Your men had a canoeload all ready to take up the Ohio River when the attack came."

The same thing had happened at some of the other posts. In all, George found that he had lost forty-eight horseloads of deerskins, four hundred pounds of beaver pelts, and six hundred pounds of raccoon furs. But at least he had his furs from the Seneca village. Peter had nothing left at all.

The trouble with French traders grew worse each year. By 1749, France had decided that the English traders had to be put out of business in the Ohio Country once and for all. They built new forts near Lake Erie, and from those they sent out a great company of soldiers, with bright uniforms and silk flags to show the Native Americans how important the French were. They put up flags over the trading posts. They posted signs on trees saying that the land belonged to the French. They buried lead plates in the ground with the same information.

But by that time, George and his men had gone all over the Ohio Country. The chief of a Miami village in western Ohio was so good a friend of the English traders that he was called “Old Britain.” George followed where the French soldiers had been. Down came the French flags over the trading posts, and up went the British. Trade went on a little longer.

Then, in 1754, the French and Indian War broke out, and trade stopped. The English called on George to meet with Native American tribes to try to hold their friendship for the English colonies and to keep them from helping the French in their fighting. Some say that without George’s good work at making friends as he built up his trade, France would have won the Ohio Country and all the land that later became the states of Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

Fur trading, which began in colonial days by men like George Croghan, went on pushing back frontiers all across North America.

# Trader Kinzie and the Battle of Fort Dearborn

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Settlers kept pushing westward into the wilderness of America, building trading posts along the way. A trading post along a river or at a crossroads was often the heart of a new settlement, and its business kept a town alive and growing. But the Native Americans, whose lands the white man was slowly taking over, were not happy about the settlements that were springing up farther and farther to the west. They knew they had to do something about it or lose their lands entirely.

In 1804, John Kinzie was taking his family west to the small settlement of Chicago when he heard about a Native American chief named Tecumseh. Chief Tecumseh was traveling around, trying to gather all of the Native Americans into one great fighting force to battle for the hunting grounds and homelands from which the white people were pushing them, mile after mile.

“We don’t need to worry,” John told his wife Eleanor. “Where we’re going, a new fort has just been built. Soldiers will be stationed there all the time, and we can go into the fort for protection if we need to.” He showed her the map he had of the place where the river called the Chicago had two arms—one coming from the north and the other from the south. They joined each other not far from Lake Michigan and flowed to the east together toward the lake. The fort was on the south bank of the river just before it reached the lake.

John had brought with him a good stock of trading goods, as well as his kit of silversmith’s tools. Eleanor had packed clothing for herself, her daughter, and her infant son. There was room in the wagon for little else.

“Look!” John told her as they at last came in sight of the little settlement. “Someday this will be a great city.”

Eleanor, holding the baby, looked at her new home. There were only four houses besides the fort, and beyond them a village of Native American huts.

John went on. “We’ll have the finest of those four houses—the one with the smokehouse and barn and summer kitchen already built behind it. The natives already know it

as a trading post because it was built by the first settler here after the French missionaries left.”

Eleanor’s eyes rested on the house that was to be her home. Two tall poplar trees guarded its front door. A path led down a little slope to the river, and right across the river was the fort. The house was as good as she could have hoped to find in a wilderness settlement, but she wondered how John could see this place as the beginning of a city. The river was brown and sluggish and unpleasant-smelling—the “River of the Wild Onions,” some said its name meant. Some said *Chicago* meant skunk, and that could be right, too.

John was saying, “See how the house has a good, quiet harbor where the natives can bring their canoeloads of furs? And if we want to get to the fort quickly, there’s a rope ferry almost at our doorstep.” He pointed to a small flatboat pulled up at the riverbank. As was common with ferries across small rivers, a rope went from a tree on either bank and was connected to the flatboat by pulleys. By pulling on the rope and using a pole to help, a person could move the boat across the river easily.

John looked toward the Native American village. “There are Potawatomis living in that village and all around here. They live by getting the things they want from traders. A smart trader can do well for himself here.”

Within a few days, the Kinzies felt as though they had lived in Chicago all their lives. The house John had chosen was not only the oldest but the best built of the four, and the location was perfect. Native Americans often used the