

The Montour's Namesake

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Most folks know that the Montour Trail takes its name from the Montour Railroad, whose right-of-way property it acquired and uses for much of the trail's route.

Many railroads take their name from geographical features, cities or areas which they intend to connect and provide services. In our area, Pennsylvania, Baltimore & Ohio, Pittsburgh & Lake Erie and Norfolk & Western are some examples.

The Montour Railroad Company was organized under the laws of the state of Pennsylvania on September 10, 1877. All stock was owned by officers of the Imperial Coal Company. As the railroad was to follow the course of Montour Run creek from Coraopolis to its headwaters near Imperial, Montour was chosen as the company name. Several other local railroad companies were later organized and then merged into the Montour Railroad Company, including the North Fayette Railroad Company and the North Star and Mifflin Railroad Company.

But what gave its name to Montour Run and several other land features in the area? They were named after Andrew Montour, an American Indian interpreter and negotiator in Pennsylvania and Virginia during colonial times. (In colonial times, Virginia included the current land of West Virginia.)

Andrew Montour was born about 1720 in the Lenape Indian village of Otstawonkin in Lycoming County. His mother was Madame Montour, of Algonquin Indian and French Canadian heritage and his father was an Oneida chief named Carondawanna. In the lineage of some Indian tribes, the family name was passed along from the matriarch side.

The following is from National Park Service: Fort Necessity Archives.

Andrew Montour's American Indian name was Sattelihu (SAT-tel-ee-hyoo). His father was an Oneida. There are many stories about his mother, Madame Montour. She lived her life and raised her children in American Indian towns. However, she was very familiar with European lifestyles. She spoke several languages and served as an interpreter between Europeans and American Indians.

Madame Montour's eldest son inherited his mother's gift for language. He spoke French, English, Lenape, Shawnee and the Iroquoian languages. It was very unusual to find a person who spoke so many languages and did it so well. He made his living helping the colonists and the American Indians communicate. It was called a "go-between". He set up meetings, delivered messages and translated whenever it was needed. He was a man comfortable both with American Indians and Europeans.

In 1742, when Count Zinzendorf met Andrew Montour, he wrote that Montour looked “decidedly European and had his face not been encircled with a broad band of paint”, we would have thought he was European. Montour wore European clothes. However, in his ears he wore earrings “of brass and other wires” braided together.



An artistic rendition of Andrew Montour

Throughout the French and Indian War, Montour sided with the British. He often worked for the Pennsylvania government. He was with George Washington before the battle at Fort Mifflin. He was also one of the few American Indians to travel with General Braddock. He had so much influence with the American Indians in the Ohio River Valley that the French offered a bounty of money to have him killed.

In 1752, Montour received land from the Pennsylvania government for all the work he had done for them.

One parcel of land was an island in the Ohio River near Pittsburgh, which was named Montour Island. Other lands named for him included the town of Montoursville, in Lycoming County near the village where he was born, Montour County near Williamsport and the Montour School District in Allegheny County. There are several streams named Montour Run or Montour Creek, including the one flowing from Imperial to the Ohio River at Coraopolis, one in Perry County near Harrisburg, and one in Columbia County, which was named after his mother.

Montour had problems with alcoholism and debt during much of his life. When sober, he was highly reliable and officials were willing to pay a high price to secure his skilled services. Plagued by alcoholism and debt, Montour sold the Ohio River island land during his lifetime. Possession of this land was later granted in a supreme court suit which transferred it to General John Neville and the island was renamed Neville Island.

Montour's son John, born in 1744, also became a well-known translator, negotiator & go-between with Native Americans & Pennsylvania officials. John served with American troops at Pittsburgh during the American Revolution.

Andrew Montour died Jan 20, 1772. He was killed at his home by a Seneca Indian who had been entertained at Montour's house for several days. He was buried near Fort Pitt.

Although not directly named for him, the Montour Railroad and Trail can trace their name's lineage back to this man, Andrew Montour.

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