

Stargazers, Ax-men and Milkmaids The Men who Surveyed Mason and Dixon's Line

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ABSTRACT

In 1763, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon were called upon by the colonial proprietors of Pennsylvania and Maryland to demark the long disputed boundary that eventually came to bear their name. During the ensuing four years, Mason and Dixon cleared a line (visto) eight or nine yards wide through the virgin forests of the western frontier, crossed the Allegheny Mountains, and set 500 pound monuments every mile along the way.

While it is true that Mason and Dixon accomplished the task of establishing and marking the complex boundary between the Penn's and Calvert's, it can hardly be said that they did it alone. This tremendous undertaking required the skills and labor of a large work party. During the late summer of 1767, as many as 115 men were employed as ax-men, instrument bearers, cooks, tent keepers, shepherds and even a milkmaid.

The journal of the survey that was kept by Charles Mason contains a wealth of information pertaining to the measurements and astronomical observations taken during the course of the survey. Little is mentioned in his journal about the men who were employed for the work or of the tremendous undertaking necessary to clear the lines for the surveyors to perform their observations.

Moses McLean, a colonial surveyor, was hired as the Steward of the survey and was charged with the management of the work force necessary to accomplish this tremendous undertaking. McLean, who along with his brothers Archibald, Samuel and Alexander had been involved only a few years before with the difficult task of surveying the 12-mile radius northern boundary of the present day state of Delaware. McLean kept detailed ledgers of the names of those employed, their time and wages as well as daily receipts and expenses. From these ledgers, we are able to gain insight into the magnitude and complexity of surveying Mason and Dixon's Line.

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