

Early Days in Centre County

HISTORY MAKING TRIALS OF OUR ANCESTORS.

The Story of the County Told from its Earliest Day Down to the Present.—A Brief History Compiled from the Only Reliable Sources of Reference—A Century Passed in Review.

The history of the region comprised within the present limits of Centre County is necessarily interwoven with that of the several counties of which it originally formed a part, viz., Mifflin, Northumberland, Lycoming and Huntingdon, from which it was taken in 1800; and a historical sketch of the county, however brief, should begin with, or prior to, the time when the first permanent settlers located upon its soil. This takes us back more than an hundred years—to a period when wild animals and wild men seemed to vie with each other in their hostility to the white intruder, their common foe.

That the territory under consideration was once a favorite hunting ground of the Indians there is no doubt whatever. Though there are many evidences, traditional and otherwise, that they roamed in vast numbers over the mountains, and through the valleys, there are very few monuments remains now existing to indicate their former presence. Occasionally a mound of earth, supposed to have been thrown up by them, has been discovered; but such relics are exceedingly rare, and of doubtful origin, no one being fully prepared to say; when, by whom, and for what particular purpose they were built, the general supposition, however, is, that they marked the site of some important event, or the burial place of a dead chieftain.

It should be borne in mind that the Indians had no fondness for physical labor, as such. Though they would endure the hardships and privations of a wild and desolate region, they were never known to injure their constitutions by what might be termed actual labor. Hunting, fishing and fighting, constituted the routine of their daily duties, while the work fell to the lot of the uncomplaining squaw. Therefore it is not to be supposed, that, being constitutionally averse to manual labor, they would toil and sweat to rear lofty piles, even to commemorate their own skill and greatness, as architects, or to immortalize the name and fame of a departed hero. The principal "monuments" raised by the Indians to mark the resting place of the dead, were either mounds of earth or piles of stone thrown loosely together—just such structures as it is reasonable to suppose would have been made by decrepit old men or over-worked women. Hence the scarcity, or even the total absence, of such remains in certain localities, is no proof whatever that the Indians had not, at some time, lived and moved and held high carnival there.

Then again it should be remembered that in constructing their habitations the surface of the ground was scarcely disturbed. A certain spot may have been occupied by wigwams for generations; but a few years after their removal not a vestige would remain to mark the place. Furthermore, it was often the case, except in especial instances, that the remains of their dead were taken for interment a considerable distance from their favorite haunts.

The pioneers of Centre county, like those of other localities, encountered many hardships and endured many privations. Economy, in some cases the most rigid, had to be practiced; privileges, now so common in every day life in the country, were then unthought of; luxuries, such as now are enjoyed by the masses, were out of the question. In fact, the resources of the parents were often severely taxed to provide food and clothing for their children. It has been said, that the matrons of the Bald Eagle Valley, in early times, employed themselves during the winter in spinning flax and tow, and weaving it into cloth for summer use, while, in the summer, they spent their time in manufacturing woolen fabrics for winter wear.

Frontier life is about the same the world over. "First settlers," those who prepare the way—lay the foundation for a more advanced civilization—always have to endure toil, undergo trials and submit to perplexing inconveniences from which their more favored successors would scornfully shrink; but, as has often been remarked, they are more social and "neighborly," more obliging to each other, than are the people of densely populated regions. Their interests and destinies are blended together and intermingled. They pass through the same hardships, encounter the same dangers, and share together the same privileges and enjoyments. Indeed, they help to bear each other's burdens, and mutually participate in the various pleasures of their humble lives. They weep together and console each other in hours of affliction, and rejoice in unison under the benign influences of a smiling Providence. Thus it was with the early inhabitants of Centre and adjoining counties. Their lives were by no means monotonous, as may be supposed; and there is no doubt whatever that, notwithstanding their unfavorable surroundings, they, as a general thing, took "solid comfort." Their work was toilsome, and their food exceedingly plain, but wholesome, as their vigorous constitutions attested. Their amusements were essentially limited, and consisted of hunting and fishing (which, by the way, were important means of obtaining subsistence), and occasionally a social gathering, or dancing frolic, when a party sufficiently large to form a set could be gotten together. It happened sometimes on such occasions, that, owing to the inability of the "ladies" to be present, the dance was conducted entirely by the men, who chose their partners from their own sex, and entered into the spirit of the affair with great zest and manifestations of supreme enjoyment.

Nature has been accused of partiality in the distribution of her favors. She is charged with scattering them with a lavish hand in some places, and parsimoniously withholding them in others.—Whether these charges are true or false, it is an indisputable fact that Centre county has received a full share of her richest bounties, and man has not been unmindful of this right to employ his skill and energy in appropriating her favors to his own use. The forest trees he has manufactured into lumber. The streams themselves he has converted into public highways. The minerals with which the region abounds, he has made to serve important purposes. The very rocks and stones he has utilized in making roads, and in building various structures. He has bridged the streams and used their waters as moving power for machinery. He has built railroads, and opened public thoroughfares, leading in every direction. He has cleared and cultivated the soil, making it produce abundantly. He has reared fine buildings for religious and educational purposes. He has built towns and villages on every hand. In fact, where the Red Man once roamed in fearless freedom, and whooped in barbaric revelry, there has been planted a progressive and enduring civilization.

THE FIRST SETTLERS.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain when the first actual settlement was made in what is now Centre county. It is known, however, that it was previous to the Revolutionary war, for "in 1776," according to Linn, "Penn's Valley was pretty numerously settled;" and Sherman Day says, in alluding to the Fort Stanwix Treaty in 1763, "about that time, or as some say, a year or two previous, Andrew Boggs, father of the late distinguished Judge Boggs, erected his cabin on the left bank of Bald Eagle Creek, opposite to an old Indian village on the flats near where Milesburg is now situated. Daniel and Jonas Davis, Low Dutchmen, settled a few years after Mr. Boggs, a little further down the creek. There was a block-house at Davis' place, at which a garrison was stationed for a while in 1777. Not long after Mr. Boggs, Mr. William Lamb settled on Spring Creek, about a mile below Bellefonte, just above the gap in the mountains. Richard Malone was also an early settler in the valley. A Mr. Culbertson, who was killed by the Indians, appears also to have settled somewhere in the valley during the Revolution. Soon after the treaty of 1763, James Potter, afterward a Brigadier General under Washington, came up the West Branch and Bald Eagle Creek, to seek for choice lands. He crossed the Nittany mountain at Logan's Gap, and for the first time set his eyes upon lovely Penn's Valley, afterward his happy home.—After reconnoiter-

ing the valley he descended Penn's Creek in a canoe; but soon returned again, took up a large body of land, made a settlement there, and erected a stockade fort." Other pre-revolutionary settlers of the valley were John Livingston, Maurice Davis and John Hall.

In common with many others, General Potter was driven from his home by the Indians at the opening of the Revolution. He entered the service of his country, and was with Washington at Valley Forge, Brandywine, Germantown and in New Jersey. It is evident, from letters, orders and other papers now in possession of his descendants, that he had the entire confidence of his superior officer. One letter in particular, giving instructions and explicit directions in regard to the details of a certain important expedition to be conducted by General Potter, is in the hands of the family of Dr. Potter, of Bellefonte, who was a great-grandson of the General.

At the close of the war, General Potter returned to his possessions in Penn's Valley, and subsequently became deputy-surveyor for the Sixth district. He died in Franklin county, Pa., in the fall of 1789, from the effects of an injury received while assisting at some work upon his property. He had gone to Franklin county for the purpose of getting medical assistance, and soon died, at the residence of his daughter.

General Philip Benner was one of the early and prominent citizens of the county. In 1792 he located in Spring township, where he died in 1833. He was a native of Chester county. When quite young he took up arms against the British, under General Wayne, who was a relative. After the war, he became a successful manufacturer of iron, at Coventry forge in Chester county. About the year 1790, he purchased the property in Centre county known as "Rock Furnace," and soon after erected a forge, one of the first in the county, to which he subsequently added another forge, a furnace and a rolling mill. The rising importance of the West impressed him with the idea of opening communication with Pittsburg, as a market for his iron and nails. He succeeded, and for many years enjoyed, without competition, the trade in what he called "Junia iron," for the western country. He held the rank of Major-General of militia, and was twice a Presidential elector.

Andrew Gregg was another prominent citizen in the early days of Centre county. He was born at Carlisle, Pa., on June 10th, 1755. He received a classical education, and was engaged for some years as tutor in the University of Pennsylvania. In 1873 he commenced the business of store keeper in Middletown, Dauphin county. Four years later he married a daughter of Gen. Potter, and in the following year moved to Penn's Valley, where he settled down in the woods and commenced the business of farming, about two miles from Potter's old fort. He remained on his farm until 1814, when he removed to Bellefonte for the purpose of educating his children, several of whom were still young. In 1790 he was elected a member of Congress, and re-elected several times, serving in all sixteen successive years, and during the session of 1806-7 was elected a member of the United States Senate. In 1820 he was called to the position of Secretary of the Commonwealth by Gov. Hiester. "As a public man, as well as in private life, he was remarkable for a sound and discriminating mind, agreeable and dignified manners, and unbending and unyielding honesty."

Col. John Patton, who built the first furnace in the territory of Centre county, was a Major in Col. Samuel Miles' regiment, appointed March 13th, 1776. He participated in the battle of Long Island, was appointed Major of

The Potter family seems to have been one of the most prominent in this section of the State. Two, at least, of the General's sons occupied positions before the public in various other capacities. One of them became General, and another, James, Jr., succeeded his father as deputy-surveyor. The following letter, written to him by Chief Justice McKean, requesting the appointment, may be somewhat interesting to the reader:

PENNS VALLEY, 10 December, 1789.
THE HONORABLE THOMAS MCKEAN, ESQ.
Sir—Doubtless before you receive this you will have heard of the death of my father. The district, in the new purchase for which he was surveyor, will of course become vacant. I presume that, from my knowledge of that country and experience in the surveying business, if I was appointed to succeed him in the district, I could do business as much to the satisfaction of the public as any other man. My age and close confinement at home have prevented my being able to make any friends in Philadelphia, and my situation renders it impossible for me to go there at present. I must, therefore, presume so far on your goodness as to solicit your interest in obtaining me this appointment. I flatter myself I shall merit your approbation and give general satisfaction in the discharge of the office. Your attention, sir, in this affair, will lay lasting obligations on your friend and obed. s't. JAMES POTTER.

The following from Surveyor-General Brodhead to Thomas Mifflin, President of the Supreme Executive Council of the State, shows that Mr. Potter's request was not in vain:

SURVEYOR-GENERAL'S OFFICE, January 20, 1790.
Sir—I have appointed Mr. James Potter deputy-surveyor of District No. Six in the new purchase, become vacant by the death of his father, and submit his appointment for the approbation of the Supreme Executive Council.
I have the honor to be, sir, your most obed't serv't.
DANIEL BRODHEAD, S. G.

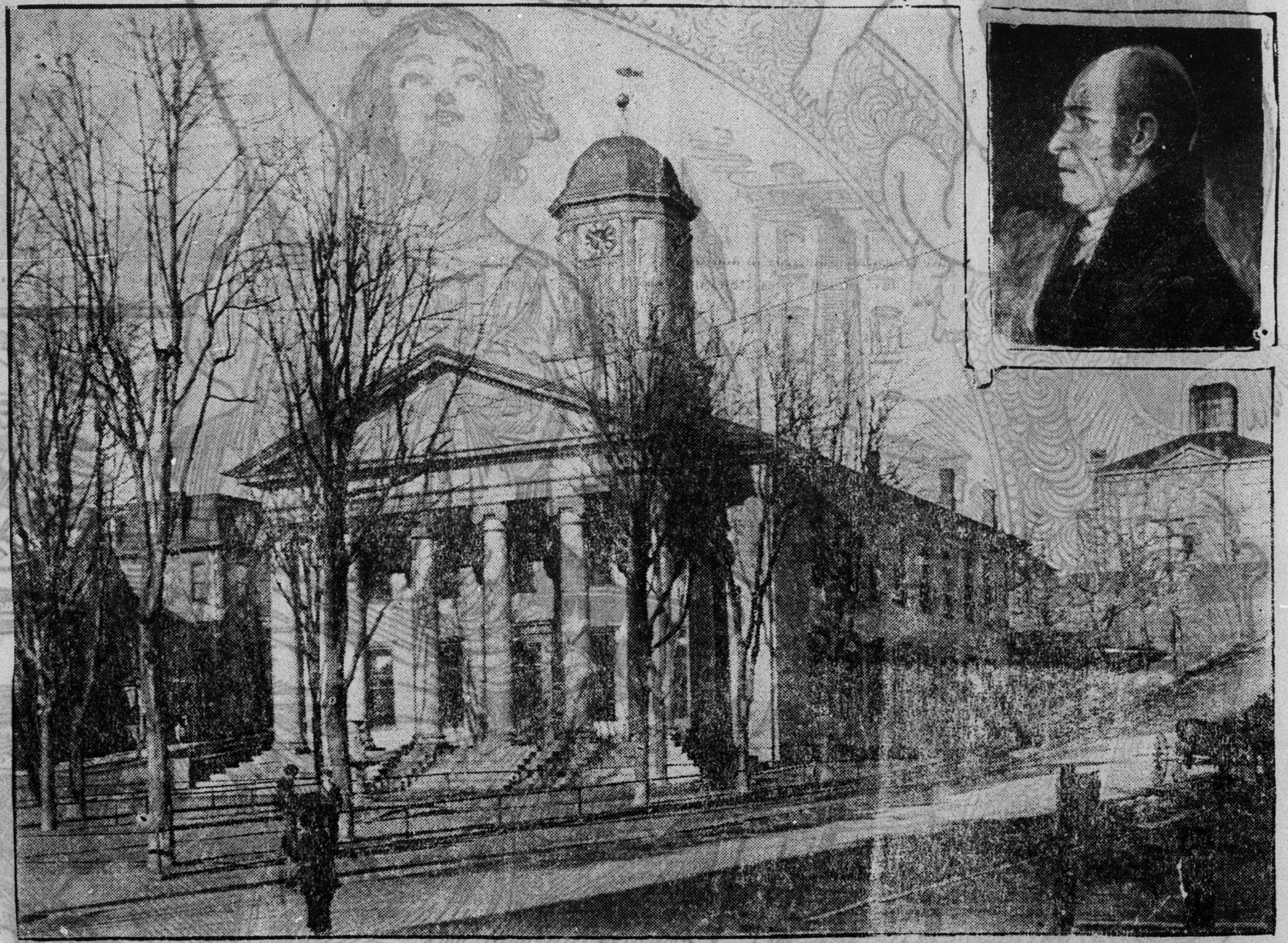
In addition to the pioneers already mentioned, Col. John Holt, a Revolutionary soldier, settled in Bald Eagle valley in 1783, near where Curtin's iron works now stand. He was grandfather of J. H. and Wm. Holt, well known citizens of Centre county, and among the very first settlers of the north-western portion of the county. Holt's brother-in-law, John Harrison, settled about the same time near the site of Milesburg. McGee and Tipton, also his brothers-in-law, located near where the village of Howard is now situated. So did Capt. John Askey, another soldier of the Revolution.

The first settlers of the county were, as a general thing, persons of education and ability, some of them ranking as scholars; which accounts, to a great extent, for the intelligence now displayed among its people.

THE INDIANS.

Many instances have been related of cruel treatment received by the early settlers of Bald Eagle and Penn's Valleys at the hands of the Indians. Often they were surprised at night, their houses plundered, and their cattle and other live stock driven off. Their lives were frequently endangered, and in many instances taken. Captivity, with its most barbarous treatment, often fell to their lot.

For many years after the county was settled, the inhabitants lived in almost continual fear of their savage foes. At times the danger was so imminent that the people had to appeal to the great authorities for protection. The following extracts from letters written in 1778 will give the reader an idea of the condition of affairs, and of the consternation that must have prevailed at the time. In a letter dated Lancaster, May 16th, 1778, and directed to the board



The Centre County Court House and Jail. The profile in the upper corner is that of James Harris, who, with Col. James Dunlop, was the founder of Bellefonte.

the Ninth Pennsylvania Regiment, October 26th, 1778, and after the organization of the Pennsylvania Line in 1777, commanded one of the additional regiments. He and his old friend Col. Miles became associated in the iron business in Centre county, and together owned vast tracts of lands. He died in 1802.

Col Samuel Miles, the founder of Milesburg, took a very active part in the Revolutionary war, was in active service a long time, and performed most important duties. While yet an Ensign in Col. Clapham's regiment, he participated in the building of Fort Augusta, (now Sunbury,) in 1758. In his journal he gives the following brief account of his experience at that time and for a year or two after: "We marched up the west side of the Susquehanna until we came opposite where the town of Sunbury now stands, where we crossed in bateaux, and I had the honor of being the first man who put his foot on shore at landing. In building the fort, Captain Levi Trum and myself had charge of the workmen; and after it was finished, our battalion remained there in garrison till 1758. In the summer of 1757, I was nearly taken prisoner by the Indians. At about one-half mile distant from the fort stood a large tree that bore excellent plums, on an open piece of ground, near what is now called the Bloody Spring. Lieut. Samuel Ailee and myself took a walk to this tree to gather plums. While we were there a party of Indians lay a short distance from us, concealed in the thicket, and had nearly got between us and the fort, when a soldier belonging to the bullock guard, not far from us, came to the spring to drink. The Indians were thereby in danger of being discovered; and in consequence, fired at and killed the soldier, by which means we got off, and returned to the fort in much less time than we were in coming out."

After returning to civil life, Col. Miles engaged extensively in business pursuits, and became owner of valuable property. During the latter part of his life he was largely interested in the manufacture of iron, and built works for that purpose on Spring Creek, between Milesburg and Bellefonte. They are now owned by McCoy & Shugart. He not only laid out Milesburg, but he did more to advance its growth and prosperity, than any other individual. He died about the year 1805.

of war at Yorktown, by the Vice President of the Supreme Executive Council, it is stated that "it appears that several persons have been killed by the Indians, very lately, on the Bald Eagle Creek and in Penn's Valley, and the people on the frontier are in great distress for want of ammunition." Col. Potter, in writing to Maj. Gen. Armstrong, from "Upper Fort, Penn's Valley, May 17th, 1778," says: "Our savage enemies continue to murder, scalp and capture. We have two forts in this valley and are determined to stand as long as we are supported, but if we have not men sent to assist us we are too few to make a stand. The circumstances of this country are truly lamentable. I want for words to describe it to you. The people are very poor, and bread at such a high price; God knows what the consequences will be." Again on the 25th of July he writes: "Yesterday, two men of Captain Finley's company, Col. Brodhead's regiment, went out from this place in the plains a little below my fields, and met a party of Indians, five in number, whom they engaged. One of the soldiers, Thomas Van Doran, was shot dead; the other, Jacob Shedaere, ran about four hundred yards, and was pursued by one of the Indians. They attacked each other with their knives, and one excellent soldier killed his antagonist. His fate was hard, for another Indian came up and shot him. It is said that many years after the occurrence, "a rusted hunting knife was found near the scene of the encounter."

On the 8th of May, 1778, the Indians killed one man on the Bald Eagle settlement—Simon Vaughn, a private of Captain Bell's company. He was killed at the house of John Davis, who lived a short distance below Andrew Boggs, opposite Milesburg. Robert Moore, the express rider, took the news, stopped at the house of Jacob Standiford to feed his horse, where he found Standiford dead, who, with his wife and daughter, were killed and scalped, and his son, a lad of ten or eleven years of age, missing. Standiford was killed on what was lately Ephraim Keller's farm, three miles west of Potter's Fort. Henry Dale, father of Christian Dale, who helped bury them, said that Standiford and four of his family were killed. They were buried in a corner of one of the fields on the place, where their graves may still be seen.—Linn.

(Concluded on Page 4.)