

Somerset County — 175 Years Ago

(Excerpts from a talk prepared for the Constitution Day Dinner of the local S.A.R. - D.A.R., September 17, 1970.)

BY MARGUERITE L. COCKLEY

Twilight was falling on an evening in early September as a horse and rider made their way to the crest of the Allegheny mountain. The road was little more than a trail through the woods. Loose stones made the horse's footing difficult. Cool crisp air spoke of frost soon to come as they reached the higher altitudes.

The man pulled his cloak more closely about him as he reached the mountain top and scanned the terrain ahead. His destination was the town of Berlin. The year was 1795.

At Berlin Town he was to meet four other men, and before the first of October, they were to make a decision of importance to the new county of Somerset. They were to select the seat of justice for the new county from several possible choices.

The new county "Henceforth to be called Somerset" was created by an Act of the State legislature passed on April 17, 1795. It included the land between the crests of the Allegheny and Laurel Hill mountains and stretched northward from the Mason and Dixon Line to what was known as the Purchase Line in what is now Cambria County.

When this part of Pennsylvania was opened for legal settlement, in 1769, it was part of Cumberland County. In 1771, a portion of that county became Bedford County and the western part of Bedford County was designated as Brothersvalley Township. This township included most of what is now Somerset County. In November of 1771, Abraham Cable, "a man of property and reputation" was appointed by the Governor as the first magistrate to serve the people living in this area.

There were hardships involved in being forty or fifty miles from the county seat at Bedford. Finally, after several petitions from men living here, the assembly acted. A new county was formed.

The legislative act stipulated that court should be held in Brunerstown until a permanent place would be selected. Governor Mifflin was directed to appoint five men, not residents of the

new county, to meet in Berlin, and "proceed to view and determine the most eligible and proper situation for erecting the public buildings". They were to make their report on or before October 1, 1795 and it was to be final.

The archives of Somerset County contain a copy of the report. It reads thus:

Summerset Town, formerly called Brunerstown

September 12th, 1795

Sir,

We the undersigned Commissioners appointed by his Excellency, Thomas Mifflin, Esq., Governor of the State of Pennsylvania; agreeable to an Act of the General Assembly, passed April 17th, 1795.—have viewed the County of Summerset, and taking the Center, and other important circumstances under view, do unanimously fix on the Town of Summerset, formerly called Brunerstown, as a proper place for the Seat of Justice for said County.

We are, Sir, Yours truly,

Wm. Findley
John Badollet
James Chambers
Thomas Campbell

A. J. Dallas
Secretary

It would be interesting to know more about the men who selected the county seat and why they spelled the name Summerset. Who were the people they met and the places they viewed as they fulfilled their assignment?

What was this area like 175 years ago?

History is not dry dates and facts. It is the story of people, real people, and their daily lives. They experienced joy and sorrow. They had desires and hopes even as you and me. Our ancestors were brave men and women. Many had crossed the ocean, on perilous voyages. They had left familiar places and loved ones which they would never see again. Some had come from the more heavily populated eastern seaboard. All came seeking land, opportunity, freedom or adventure.

In 1795, some of these people had already been in the county for thirty one or more years. The land had been open for legal settlement since 1769.

We do know that some had settled here before the legal date. There is record of persons living in the Turkey-

foot area, the Stoney Creek Glades and along the Forbes Road prior to 1769.

The physical appearance of the county had changed little from the time Harmon Husband had written his observations, about 1771. He wrote "This land is what properly may be called rolling, divided into hills, bottoms and glades, generally densely timbered and with little under brush, the bottoms open and sodded with a short fine grass . . . As to the glades, nothing could exceed in beauty and luxuriance these plains, when vegetation was a full growth. In many places grass was as high as a man . . .

The streams usually rise in the hills. The native fruits begin to ripen in July, service berries, choke cherries, wild cherries, plums . . . blackberries, raspberries and whortleberries. The hunting season began in October and beaver trapping in December. Deer and bear were hunted for their skins".

Wolves and panthers were numerous. As early as 1777 an association to encourage the destruction of wolves was formed and bounty was paid for wolves as late as 1828. In that year, Wm. Oldham moved into a wilderness area atop the Allegheny mountain, bought 800 acres of land and paid for it with bounty for killing wolves. Thirty five bears were reported killed in 1835. Buffalo and elk seem to have disappeared by 1795, but the names continue in Elk Lick Township and Buffalo Lick Creek, now known only as Buffalo Creek.

The original Brothersvalley township had been divided into six townships. They were Turkeyfoot in 1773; Quema-honing in 1775; Milford in 1780; Elk Lick in 1785; and Stonycreek in 1792. There were approximately 850 farms with 10 to twenty or more acres of land cleared. About 980 houses and cabins were listed in the first tax assessment. There were 1,238 taxables and a total population of five or six thousand. Perhaps less. There were 17 grist mills, 21 stills, 24 sawmills and 2 oil mills for making flaxseed oil. Flax was an important commodity.

One fourth to one half acre was grown by nearly every household for the manufacture of linen and tow cloth. It is said that the flax patch resembled a flower garden during blooming season. It bloomed only part of the day. That

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which was planted in the forenoon would bloom only in the forenoon and that planted in the afternoon would bloom only in the afternoon.

The preparation of the flax for spinning and weaving was the task of the women and girls of the household during the long winter evenings. The pioneer women had not only to make the clothes worn by the family, but also spin the thread and weave the cloth from which they were made. The drowsy sound of the softly whirring spinning wheel and the rhythmic thud of the loom were familiar sounds.

In 1795, travel was slow and tedious. There were no paved roads, no railroads, no interstate highways. There was the Forbes Road, later called the Great Road crossing the northern portion of the county. The Braddock Road crossed the southwestern corner of the county. These had been cut out of the wilderness to serve as military roads. Wagons passed over them with great difficulty. The Turkeyfoot Road followed an old Indian trail in Elk Lick township and the old Cumberland road led into Berlin. The Glades road from Bedford to Brunerstown and several other trails and bridle paths were the highways in 1795. The era of turnpike building which brought great prosperity was to come after the turn of the century.

There were no bridges. The county built the first bridge in 1797 over Laurel Hill Creek. In 1798 a bridge was built near Somerset over Coxes Creek.

Food preparation was not an easy task. The pioneer woman cooked with a fireplace which furnished both heat, and light. There is a story of a stove being brought across the mountain on horseback for one of the Ankeny wives, but most women were not so fortunate. Cooking kettles were precious and valuable.

Wild meat was plentiful. Lots of potatoes and cabbage were grown. Salt and coffee were rare and precious items. The early settler sometimes had to go as far as Winchester, Virginia, for salt. A few bushels of salt brought over the mountain on horse back supplied a family for several years. Salt cost as much as \$8.00 a bushel and was used sparingly. It was not until about 1800 that salt was produced commercially in western Pennsylvania.

Rye, which was raised in abundance was parched and used for coffee. If a fortunate family could get a

pound of coffee it was used only on very special occasions, a few grains at a time mixed with the rye. Maple sugar and syrup along with honey from a bee tree supplied the sweets. Bees had been brought to Pennsylvania by early German settlers. Some swarms had gone wild and the settler found the bee tree a precious source of sweets. The Indians called the bees "white men's flies".

Buckwheat was grown in abundance and buckwheat cakes were a food staple. The Rev. Robert Boyd, a Methodist preacher, who traveled the Pittsburgh Circuit near the turn of the century tells of the hardships and sufferings of an itinerant preacher. Strange beds and questionable foods disturbed him. He writes of going home with a woman who had prepared for the preacher before going to meeting. He says "The buckwheat cakes had been baked and set in what was called the stock-hole, in the back of the cabin chimney. When they returned from meeting, the cats were seen helping themselves to the cakes . . . But as they only nibbled round the edges . . . the old lady sprung around and got the cakes on the slab table, with some milk in hard looking tins, and some butter on an old pewter plate. I managed to wait until someone took the top cake on which the cats had sat . . . and I was careful in eating another. to use only the middle part, leaving the edge with the cat's teeth marks. on my plate." end quote

In the early days, it was thought by some, that the climate was too cold and the seasons too short for growing corn. It grew well in Bedford and Westmoreland counties and later it was found that it grew and matured in Somerset County too.

One Horatio Gates wrote that he lived in Somerset from 1797 to 1799. His article was printed some years ago in the Somerset American. He writes "There is something singular about this climate, maize has not an opportunity of ripening once, perhaps in ten years The principal produce is wheat, rye, potatoes and oats, which last is much superior to any other oats I have seen. Fruit is very scarce and never good There are frosts nine or ten months of the year and then temperature of 97 degrees in the shade. One would suppose, that climate so changeable would be unhealthy. But the facts are otherwise. Although rheumatism etc. prevail pretty much, I

never saw a case of fever. The salubrious air is a specific against agues and remittant fevers." This was a picture of the climate and health conditions in the county at that time.

The virgin soil was cleared with an axe and a mattock. It was plowed with a wooden mold-board plow. Sometimes the harrow was an all wooden spike tooth harrow and sometimes a thorn-bush with logs to weigh it down.

A blacksmith at his forge and a resident minister were all that was needed to convince new comers that a place was an established community. Brunerstown and Berlin, the largest towns in 1795, had both. They were rival contenders for the honor of being chosen as the seat of justice and the site of the public buildings for the new county of Somerset.

What were the towns of Berlin and Brunerstown like at that time?

Berlin had been laid out on a tract of land warranted in 1784 to certain Jacob Keffer, in trust for the Lutheran and Calvinistic (Reformed) congregations of Brothersvalley township. The lots were equally divided between them and when sold carried certain restrictions about buildings and one about ground rent to be paid to the respective congregations, forever. This interesting document is found in Bedford County records and is signed by seventeen men, the "Owners of Berlin." All but two signed their own names, which was remarkable in a time when only about fifty percent of the adults could read or write.

In 1795, Berlin was the oldest and largest town. It has at least two tanneries, Martin Dively's and Jacob Gulls. There were two potteries. The first one had been built by a man with the intriguing name of Christian Evil. The second potter was Charles Zorn. Frederick Garey was established as a weaver. There were even two resident doctors. Dr. John Kimmel also had a store and a tavern with the sign of a black horse. Dr. Christian Boerstler had moved from Funkstown, Maryland, and located in Berlin in August, 1794.

Dr. Boerstler's journal reveals some interesting notes of his life in Berlin from August 1794 to April 1796. He came just in time to become involved in incidents relevant to what is known as the Whiskey Rebellion. Many residents of western Pennsylvania protested the tax on whiskey imposed by the Federal government.

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Dr. Boerstler writes, "I sold my property for about 200 pounds and moved about ninety miles away to Berlin where many of my friends and countrymen lived . . . When I arrived with my family on the 31st of August 1794, everything was in an uproar on account of the new excise tax. I tried to keep out of politics, and keep quiet and neutral, but it was impossible. I had to join some party and my wisdom told me to join the party of the government . . . I was the first man who spoke to the ignorant people and explained to them in what great danger they were and warned them . . . An army was marching on our country to suppress the revolt, but on their arrival everything was quiet." An entry dated October 21, 1794 states, "In the evening to Bedford and appeared before Judge Mr. Peters . . . and was sworn as a witness, in order to report what we knew against Robert Philson and Harmon Husband in respect to insubordination against the excise and the state. I was compelled by \$500 bond, under my signature, to appear in Federal Court if called." He told the judge that the people are "Quiet and peace-loving and the only thing against them is ignorance."

Entry of Oct. 24th, 1794 — "The first troop of the army arrived here . . . they distinguished themselves excellently in their politeness and humanity and deserve to be publicly praised on that account." Entry Oct. 25th — Gov. Thomas Mifflin, his nephew, John M. General Morris, General Ross, Lawyer Hamilton and Mr. Read took their quarters in my house, (although there were much larger and nicer houses). They comported themselves very well; all paid. The Governor gave me his hand as he went off and said that he hoped I would visit him if I got to Philadelphia."

Other entries: March 1795 — Jacob Cumer's house in Berlin purchased for 130 pounds. April 9, 1796 — Sold my house to John Russel for 163 pounds. April 17, 1796 — My Phillippin was married to Jacob Huber by Mr. Giese. April 19, 1796—Moved to Cumberland from Berlin.

In an addition to this journal he writes that he was taken to Philadelphia in the spring of 1795, with many others to be a witness against the leaders of the mob accused of high treason. He left home with \$70 and

expected to receive another sixty dollars for his services. With this he planned to buy medicine to bring back to Berlin. But he did not get the sixty dollars and after paying traveling expenses he had only two dollars left. Two of the prisoners were liberated (Philson and Husband), two were hanged and he was disgusted with the way the trial was handled.

We can well imagine why his welcome in Berlin was short lived. People do not relish being called ignorant, even by a good doctor.

As early as 1777 a school-church house had been erected to provide a place of worship and instruction. In 1795 the Rev. Heinrich Geise came to Berlin as a resident pastor. Previous to that time the Reformed congregation had been served for several years by Cyranus Spangenburg. During a quarrel he had stabbed Elder Jacob Glessner and inflicted mortal wounds. He was tried, convicted and was awaiting execution in the Bedford jail. That gruesome event occurred on October 10, 1795. Berlin was under the shadow of this awful event, when the five man commission viewed the town as a possible choice for the county seat.

We do not know how all this may have affected their decision. We do know that they moved on to survey Brunerstown and when their choice was announced on September 12th, that was the chosen site.

Brunerstown had been surveyed by Harmon Husband and town lots laid out about 1787 for a certain Ulrick Bruner. "It is said that Bruner, who purchased the land on which the town is located and whose name it bore for some time, came here leading two pack horses on whose back were all his worldly possessions." (Quote from Centennial issue Somerset Standard, 1895.)

The town was first given the name Milford Town, but seems to have been commonly called Brunerstown, before that day in September when it became Somerset. The report of the commissioners spells it Summerset Town.

On the same day, September 12th, Adam Schneider and Peter Ankeny conveyed certain lots to the county to be used for public buildings, schools and churches. The town was again plotted and lots laid out.

The first public building to be erected was a temporary jail. It was built of logs at a cost of \$270.25. The erecting

of a courthouse must wait for several years but "law and order" could not wait!

Brunerstown was the home of the Rev. Wm. Frederick Lange, Lutheran Minister. John Nichols was a blacksmith and Dr. Wm. Gore Elder a physician. Captain John Webster and Jacob Schneider had taverns and there were a few stores and other businesses.

The town square or diamond is described by Squire Abraham Beam, who was born in 1797. He told of spending a night in Somerset at a very early age. "There was some kind of jollification going on. The square was full of big tree stumps. It was lighted up with torches made from pine knots. On one of the stumps a fiddler was seated. Around him were dancing a score or more of men, each bearing a torch. In another corner was a barrel of whiskey, which was issued out at 3 cents a drink. In still another corner were several barrels of cider which flowed without money and without price." (From Centennial Issue.)

Captain John Webster had served in the Revolution and was a member of the "Society of the Cincinnati". He had been appointed as a collector of the whiskey tax. He served until his commission was taken from him.

This was a most unpopular tax and it's collecting could be dangerous business. In 1793, "Tom the Tinker" leader of those in Westmoreland who opposed the tax, came and captured Capt. Webster, took his commission from him, and after marching him out of town some distance, made him mount a stump, promise to act as excise officer no longer, and released him. It is said that he dressed in the old Colonial style, with his hair in a long cue, hanging down his back and tied with a ribbon. He was described by a traveler, who stopped at his tavern in 1811, as haughty and astute.

Harmon Husband, the town's first permanent settler, did not live to see Brunerstown become the county seat. He had presented a petition to the legislature in 1790 requesting that western Bedford County become a separate county. When the petition was finally granted in 1795, Husband was near death following his unjust imprisonment in Philadelphia. He died of a fever in a tavern on the outskirts of the city and was buried on June 19, 1795. The location of his grave is unknown. His will is the first registered in

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Somerset County.

Harmon Husband was a unique man in a pioneer society. He was English and a Quaker. He came into the wilderness using the assumed name of Toscape Death. He had left North Carolina because a price was on his head for his part in resisting unjust taxation there. He expressed unusual ideas on many subjects. The Journal of Robert Ayers, Methodist preacher, tells of his meeting with Mr. Husband. In an entry dated Sept. 25, 1786, he writes, "Rode about 8 miles from Michael Kings, and through a beautiful grove of white pines and preached to a small number of chiefly Germans. I spoke as plainly as I could, but the Dutch I doubt, did not understand.

Harmon Husband's wife was present and invited me home with her, where I tarried by importunity, that night, and was entertained by singular and wonderful opinions, or notions concerning the New Jerusalem. He maintains that the Allegheny Mountain is the wall of the New Jerusalem . . . and that the Garden of Eden lies to the westward . . . and that Adam was not the first man . . . That the vast age of the Patriarchs of scripture are not the age of single persons, but the age of that government. And many other such things too tedious to insert."

Peter Ankeny, a leading figure in the early life of Somerset had also been a Captain in the Revolution. Both he and Adam Schneider were public spirited citizens, looking forward to their future community interests.

We might ask if the merits of the small settlement at Stoys Town were considered for the seat of justice for the new county. This settlement was located on the Great Road and was near the center of what was then included in Somerset County. The state legislature had given funds for the improvement of the Great Road, which led from Bedford to Pittsburgh. The village of Stoystown promised to become a flourishing community. What were the "other important circumstances" upon which the choice of the county seat was determined? At this point the report is silent.

With the choice of Somerset, the high hopes of Berlin were laid low. Disappointment caused some comments that have come down through the years.

One story maintains that the commissioners were "wined and dined" so well in Somerset that the claims of Berlin fell on deaf ears. Another story states that the commission agreed that Berlin had better taverns and whiskey, but that there was not enough water for all the horses that would have to be cared for at the county seat. Berlin had but one watering trough. Somerset had two.

Brunerstown, renamed Somerset, was chosen. The decision was final. From this point in time, it seems to have been a good choice.

In October 1795, John Fletcher of Berlin, John Reed of Quemahoning and John Leech of Milford townships were elected county commissioners. They held their first meeting on October 26th. On October 28th Josiah Espy was named county treasurer at a salary of \$40 for the first year. Mr. Espy was also prothonotary, registrar, recorder and clerk of courts.

Judge Alexander Addison presided over the first court which convened on December 21, 1795. He was assisted by associate judges, James Wells, Abraham Cable and Ebenezer Griffith.

Court was held in a room rented from Jacob Schneider for the sum of \$30 a year. This room served until the completion of the first court house in 1801.

The first case to come before the grand jury was one indicting one of its own members for intoxication. He was seated behind the stove and oblivious to what was going on and unable to take part in the business of the day. A trial resulted in his conviction. A fine of \$5.00 was imposed on this erring brother.

One of the first duties of the new county commissioners was to arrange for the collection of taxes. The first tax levied was at the rate of five mills on the dollar. \$2,000 of the amount collected was appropriated for public buildings.

We cannot recreate the past. Neither can we escape it. It is part of our heritage. Our pioneer ancestors, who lived here in 1795 were challenged by the possibilities of the frontier.

They had at least two invaluable characteristics. They had determination and they had hope. They were determined to conquer the wilderness and they expected that life would be better. Even though the winter would be long and hard—Spring would come — and they

knew it would be worth the winter.

In a prayer offered by the Rev. Hiram King on the occasion of the memorable Centennial Celebration of 1895, are found these petitions, "Grant us Grace, we pray, to prove worthy of our ancestors. May we be in constant allegiance to Christ, the King, and therefore fellow citizens good and true. May we conserve the legacy of our forefathers and faithfully advance the progress of the century."

To these goals each generation must be dedicated and consecrated anew.

(Published sources from which quotations and other information has been taken include the "History of Bedford, Scmerset and Fulton Counties" published in 1884, "History of Bedford and Scmerset Counties", pub., 1960; "Somerset Connny Outline" by John C. Cassidy; "Somerset—150 years a County" by Paul D. Trimpey.)