

McElhattan's notable past

By DAVID KAGAN dbkagan@comcast.net

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DAVID KAGAN/Sun-Gazette Correspondent
Old, vacated Evangelical United Brethren
Church on Linnwood Drive in McElhattan.

(First of two parts)

McELHATTAN - Named after Irish pioneer "squatter" William McElhattan, who arrived around 1760, the eastern Clinton County community of McElhattan in Wayne Township has an interesting past. It includes American Indian settlements and stories, a fort, the Pennsylvania and Erie Railroad, a major church camp meeting site, and a famous mansion and owner.

Lying along the south side of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River at the base of Bald Eagle Mountain, McElhattan was the site of American Indian settlements up to and well before the arrival of white settlers. According to the plaque on a 1913-erected stone marker about 100 yards east along the southbank riverside road from the bridge connecting McElhattan to the Woolrich area, "This marks the site of an Indian town, the ancient capital of the Lenni Lenape," called "Canasorgu." Translated as either "original people" or "common people," the Lenni Lenape were called the Delaware by the English settlers.

Furthermore, Wayne Township resident and local historian Harlan Berger has researched the life of an 18th-century Iroquois Confederacy (or Six Nations) Cayuga chief named John Logan (c. 1725-80), son of Chief Shikellamy. A trail through the mountain gap at McElhattan has been designated "Logan's Path" in honor of this American Indian who reportedly was a peacemaker between the Indians and the whites, and who loved and extensively hiked in the area. Also, it is believed that the community of Loganton (in Sugar Valley south of Bald Eagle Mountain) is named after James Logan, John's brother.

In 1774-75 Horn's Fort (a stockade only) was built "on a high bluff a little west of Kurtz's Run, at which place there is a short curve in the river, giving a view of both banks, east and west, for over a mile" (from a George W. Twitmyer, Esquire's writing in D. S. Maynard's 1875 book, "Historical View of Clinton County, Pennsylvania"). This location is thought to be on the south side of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River near the present-day railroad bridge crossing. A sign, "To Fort Horn," placed at the corner of Pine Mountain and Shoemaker Roads, points north down Spook Hollow Road to the site.

Of the fort, Twitmyer wrote, "It was the most advanced on the frontier, save Reed's Fort, near where Lock Haven is now. The remains of Horn's fort could still be seen till 1856-58, when by the building of the P. & E. R. R. (Philadelphia and Erie Railroad) the last vestiges of it were destroyed."

"Firsts" in the history of the area include the mill built "by a widow lady named Smith, in 1778, at the mouth of McElhattan Run"; the school opened in 1807-08 "in an old, abandoned dwelling house near Kurtz's Run," taught by Walter S. Chatham, "for many years considered the best teacher in this section" of Pennsylvania; and the Union Church "built in 1853 at a cost of \$800" and "open to all denominations."

Three other churches were erected in the 1870s: the Wayne Methodist Episcopal Church in 1873, the Pine Methodist Episcopal Church in 1874, and the Ebenezer Church of the Evangelical Association in 1875 ("the largest and most commodious church in the township"). In 1875 a Young Men's Christian Association was also organized in connection with the churches.

Religious "camp meetings" also were notable in Wayne Township. The first, organized by the Evangelical Association, was held in 1835 on the farm of pioneer settler John Stabley (1787-1858). Beginning in 1871, this same association started the yearly Pine Station Camp Meeting along Love's Run, "in the midst of a beautiful grove, surrounded by the most picturesque scenery, and well supplied with water from two never failing springs." But the most celebrated was the West Branch Camp Meeting (also called the Wayne Camp Meeting), organized by the Methodists of the area, with sessions held each year in late summer or fall from 1869-89.

It was said that over 150 "cabs" met the trains sometimes. Permanent wooden structures were erected, including over 400 board tents with shingle roofs, a tabernacle seating 2,500 people, and an auditorium seating nearly 5,000. This impressive camp was located in the present-day "Youngdale" section of McElhattan, on the margins of McElhattan Run, "one of the finest mountain streams on this continent" (J. N. Welliver, Esq., quoted in Maynard's book).

A stone monument at the curve on Stabley road off Youngdale Road west of McElhattan Drive commemorates the camp with the simple wording, "West Branch Camp Meeting, 1869-89." According to Rodney Stabley, 71, who lives on Stabley Road and is the fourth-great-grandson of McElhattan pioneer settler John Stabley, the great flood of 1889 ended the camp's days.

Stabley has lived his entire life in McElhattan, as did his direct paternal ancestors back to pioneer John. Of his own childhood in the 1940s, Stabley fondly recalled, "I attended eight grades at the old schoolhouse out on Pine Mountain Road about a mile past the Restless Oaks Restaurant (at the intersection with Shoemaker Road). Mary Gardner was my teacher. There was a big stone well out back and an old wood stove inside."

Stabley continued, "At that time the big thing was baseball. I have pictures of all the old teams then - before Little League - the Junior and Clinton Leagues. McElhattan, Monument, Orviston, Beech Creek, Castanea, Charlton, Avis, Lock Haven - all the communities had ball teams."

Retired now after 42 years at the Lock Haven paper mill (having worked there under the four successive owners - New York and Penn, Curtis Publishing, Hammermill and, finally, International Paper), Stabley has enjoyed life in the Youngdale section of McElhattan. Involved in the community, he served on the township planning board back in the early 1970s and was a supervisor for 12 years. A son, Malcolm lives next door with his family, and two cousins have homes on Stabley Road also.

Perhaps the most famous man in McElhattan's history was Col. Henry Wharton Shoemaker (1880-1958). His large, Victorian-Colonial mansion on his estate, Restless Oaks, is now the Wellington Bed and Breakfast.

Col. Shoemaker was an author (writing a 12-volume Pennsylvania folklore series), banker, newspaper columnist and publisher, foreign diplomat (to both Bulgaria and Germany), and an archivist. In addition, he played key roles in state wilderness preservation efforts, the organization of our state park system, and the creation of historical roadside markers throughout the commonwealth.

Next - McElhattan today.

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