HISTORY

OF

FAYETTE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA.

CHAPTER I.

HISTORIC GROUND OF FAYETTE—LOCATION, BOUNDARIES, AND TOPOGRAPHY.

THERE are within the State of Pennsylvania very few counties whose boundaries include ground more historic than that which is comprehended in the domain of the county of Fayette. A century and a quarter ago, when the two great European rivals, England and France, contended for dominion over the vast region watered by the head-streams of the Ohio, the latter nation claimed the summit of Laurel Hill as her eastern boundary; and in the strife which followed—the contest by the issue of which that claim was extinguished forever—it was in the ravines and on the hillsides and meadows lying between the Youghiogheny and Monongahela Rivers that the forces marching respectively under the Bourbon lilies and the cross of St. George first met in actual shock of arms; it was the soil now of Fayette County which drank the first blood spilled in that memorable conflict. Years afterwards, when a scarcely less fierce controversy sprang up between the States of Pennsylvania and Virginia, the Old Dominion insisted on extending her limits eastward to that same Laurel Hill summit, while Pennsylvania, willing at one time to recognize the Monongahela as the division line, peremptorily refused to yield an inch east of that stream; and so Fayette County, with contiguous country lying to the west and north of it, became the theatre of a conflict of jurisdiction which almost reached the extremity of open war.

It was here, within what is now Fayette County, that GEORGE WASHINGTON fought his first battle, and here he made his first—and last—surrender to an enemy. Across these hills and valleys and streams the army of the brave Braddock marched in pride and confidence to assault the French stronghold at the head of the Ohio; and when the survivors of that proud host returned by the same route, flying in disorder and panic from the bloody field of the Monongahela, it was here that their dauntless leader died of his wounds, and here, in the soil of Fayette County, they buried him.

On the shore of the Monongahela River, in this county, was held the first, as also the last, public meeting convened by the insurgent leaders in the famous insurrection of 1791–94; and when at last the government sent an army to enforce the laws, the military column marched through Fayette, and the commanding general established his headquarters at the county-seat, where he received assurances of submission from the disaffected leaders. Detailed mention will be made of all these historical facts, with numberless others relating to this county, including the construction of the great National road; the building, in Fayette, of the first steamboat that ever descended the Monongahela, the Ohio, and the Mississippi Rivers; the erection here of the first iron-furnace west of the Allegheny Mountains; the first recorded instance of the use of the bituminous coal of Western Pennsylvania as fuel;[1] its first application to the manufacture of coke, and the subsequent development of that industry to an extent which seems destined, in the near future, to place this county among the most prosperous and wealthy of the State.

In regard to its location and boundaries, Fayette may properly be described as one of the southern tier of counties in Pennsylvania, and the second one from the western line of the State. It is joined on the west by the counties of Greene and Washington; on the north by Westmoreland, of which it once formed a part; and on the east by Somerset. Its southern boundary is formed by the north line of the States of West Virginia and Maryland. This is identical with the famed "Mason and Dixon's line," and thus for many years the southern border of Fayette County formed a part of the free-State frontier against the dominion of African slavery.

The two principal streams of the county are the Monongahela and the Youghiogheny Rivers. The

[1] By Col. Burd, near Redstone Creek, in 1759.

former (and the larger) stream takes its rise in West Virginia, crosses the State line into Pennsylvania at the extreme southwest corner of Fayette County, and flowing thence in a meandering but generally northward course, marks the entire western boundary of Fayette against the counties of Greene and Washington, for a distance of nearly forty-seven and a half miles. After leaving the northwestern limit of Fayette, the river continues in nearly the same general course between Westmoreland and Washington and through Allegheny County to its confluence with the Allegheny River at Pittsburgh.

The Youghiogheny—a mountain stream of clearer and purer water than that of the Monongahela—runs from Maryland into Pennsylvania, crossing the line into this State at the extreme southeast corner of Fayette County. Flowing in a generally northward course from this point, it marks for a distance of fifteen and one-half miles the boundary between Fayette and Somerset Counties. From there, turning somewhat abruptly towards the west, it leaves Somerset, and, with the highlands of Fayette on either side, passes through this county for a distance of more than forty-four miles to the north line. Its general direction through Fayette is nearly northwest; its current rapid, rushing and tumbling over a rocky bed in many places, and broken at one point (Ohio Pile) by falls of considerable height. From the north boundary of this county it enters Westmoreland, and flows on in nearly the same course to its junction with the Monongahela at McKeesport.

Besides these two rivers, Fayette County has a great number of smaller streams, but among these there are few that are of sufficient size and importance to deserve separate mention. Cheat River, which has its sources in West Virginia, enters Pennsylvania, and flowing a short distance across the extreme southwest corner of this county, joins its waters with those of the Monongahela. Nearly five miles farther down the river is the mouth of Georges Creek, which stream is entirely within this county. Dunlap's Creek and Redstone Creek are both also wholly within the county, from mouth to head-springs. The former enters the Monongahela between the boroughs of Brownsville and Bridgeport, and the latter about one and a quarter miles farther north. Jacob's Creek, flowing in a westward direction, forms the northern boundary of Fayette County for a little more than twenty miles (by its meandering course) eastward from the point where it enters the Youghiogheny River. The other principal tributaries of that river within the territory of Fayette are Mounts' Creek, which rises in the mountainous region in the northeast part of the county, and enters the Youghiogheny just below the borough of Connellsville; Indian Creek, which also takes its rise in the northeastern highlands, and flows into the river from that direction, about eight miles above Mounts' Creek; and Great Meadow Run, which flows from its sources in the Laurel Hill range, first southeasterly, and then towards the northeast, entering the river through its left bank near Ohio Pile Falls. Big Sandy Creek and Little Sandy Creek rise in the southern part of Fayette, and thence take a southerly course into West Virginia, where their waters join those of the Cheat River, and through it find their way into the Monongahela.

In that part of the county which lies northeast of the Youghiogheny are two mountain ranges, extending from Westmoreland County in a direction nearly south-southwest and parallel with each other to the river. The more western of the two is called Chestnut Ridge, and the other Laurel Hill, the crest of which latter forms a part of the county boundary between Fayette and Somerset, the remainder of that line, about fifteen miles, being marked by the Youghiogheny River, as before noticed. The valley between these ranges, broken somewhat by detached hills, is drained by Indian Creek and its small tributaries. Its soil is better adapted for grazing purposes than for the production of grain. West of the Chestnut Ridge is a valley drained by Mount's Creek and its branches. Beyond this the land rises into hills, of which a long and high range lies between the Youghiogheny and Jacob's Creek, sloping away towards both streams, along the margins of which are narrow bottom-lands.

On the southwest side of the Youghiogheny the name of Laurel Hill is applied to the mountain range, which is in fact the prolongation of that known on the other side as Chestnut Ridge. This Laurel Hill range extends from the Youghiogheny southwestwardly nearly by the geographical centre of the county, and about two miles east of Uniontown, the county-seat; its summits being more than two thousand five hundred feet above sea-level, and one thousand feet above neighboring valleys. Across the southeast corner of the county, extending southward from the Youghiogheny to and across the State line, is a ridge of rugged hills, which may properly be termed the prolongation of the Laurel Hill range on the other side of the river. These hills are, however, in general much lower and more flattened, there being among them but one summit (Sugar-Loaf) which in height approximates to those on the northeast side of the river.

West of the Laurel Hill range, and extending in a direction nearly parallel to it across this part of the county, is a beautiful valley several miles in width, drained on the south by York's Run and Georges Creek, and on the northwest and north by Redstone Creek and several small tributaries of the Youghiogheny River. This valley is the "Connellsville Coal Basin," extending west to the "barren measures," about four miles west of the county-seat. West of this valley are elevated uplands, undulating, and in many places hilly, particularly as they approach the Monongahela, where they terminate somewhat abruptly in what are termed the "river-hills,"

which descend to the rich bottom-lands, rarely exceeding one-fourth of a mile in width, which lie along the margin of the river.

In all this part of the county west of the Laurel Hill, including the broad valley, the rolling upland, the hilly lands (often tillable to the summits), and the river bottoms, the soil is excellent for the production of grain and fruits, and the country in general well adapted to the various requirements of agriculture.

Delaney's Cave, situated in Fayette County, is a wonderful natural curiosity, which appears, from the descriptions of many who have visited it, to be scarcely inferior to the celebrated Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. Its location is about nine miles in a southeasterly direction from Uniontown. A great number of descriptions of the cave have been given by persons who have visited it from time to time, but most of these accounts bear the appearance of too great embellishment. The description which is given below was written by Mr. John A. Paxton, who visited the cave in 1816, and published his account of it immediately afterwards in the *American Telegraph* of Brownsville. Mr. Paxton was a Philadelphia gentleman, who being in this section of country in the year named, engaged in the collection of material for a gazetteer of the United States, was detained by an accident to his horse, and obliged to remain two or three days at Uniontown. While there he heard of the great cave, and determined to see and explore it. A party was accordingly made up, consisting of Mr. Paxton, William Gregg, John Owens, James M. Johnston, John Gallagher, and Ephraim Douglass. These having provided themselves with refreshments, candles, tinder-box, brimstone matches, lanterns, compass, chalk, and a line for measuring, set out on Wednesday, Sept. 11, 1816, and proceeded southeastwardly to Laurel Hill, and ascended the mountain towards the cave. They left their horses at the farmhouse of Mr. Delaney (from whom the cave was afterwards named), and requested him, in case they should fail to return from their exploration the following morning, to have the people of the vicinity aroused to search for them, as they had heard the story of two young men—Crain and Merrifield—who had been lost in the cave for nearly two days, and were found at the end of that time locked in each other's arms and despairingly waiting for death. It was about the middle of the afternoon when the party, fully equipped, set out on foot for the entrance of the cave, and the story of their exploration was narrated by Paxton, as follows:

"Laurel Hill Cave, which I have taken the liberty to name, it being in want of one, is situated in Pennsylvania,—Fayette County, Georges township,—on the top of Laurel Hill Mountain, nine miles southeasterly of Uniontown, three miles easterly of Delaney's farmhouse. At four o'clock P.M. we commenced our operations. We first descended into a small pit, on the side of which we found the mouth, about three feet by four, which we entered, and immediately found ourselves in a passage about twenty feet wide, and descending about fifty degrees for forty feet in a northwest course, when we found a less declivity and smoother floor; here we left our great-coats and things we had no immediate use for, and proceeded in the same course a short distance, when we found that the passage forked into two avenues more contracted, both leading, by a considerable descent, into the first room; this is about twenty-four feet in diameter, with a roof of rock about twenty feet high. A large descending passage leads from this room the same course, with a very high roof, and is about twelve feet wide for some distance, when it becomes more contracted and leads into the second room, which is fifty feet by one hundred, with a large body of rocks on the floor that have fallen from the roof, which is not very high. At the end of the passage is a running spring of excellent water. In this room the person who had the tinder-box unfortunately let it fall among the rocks, which opened it, and by this accident we lost nearly all our tinder. A very narrow, uneven, and descending passage leads from the second room, in a northeast direction, to the narrows,—a passage two and a half feet high and about fifty feet broad, leading horizontally between rocks, with a small descent for about one hundred and fifty feet to a perpendicular descent over rocks; through this small passage we had in many places to drag ourselves along on our bellies, and the buttons on my coat were torn off by the rocks above. This passage evidently was formed by the foundation of the nether rock being washed by the veins of water, which caused it to separate from the upper rock and formed the route to the perpendicular descent, which we found to be twenty-two feet. I descended by a rope; but my companions found their way down by clinging to the rocks. We now found ourselves in a very uneven rocky passage, which ascended about twenty degrees for two hundred and thirty-four feet; but as we could not find an outlet from this, after the most particular search, we returned and ascended the perpendicular precipice, and to the right of it discovered a passage which had a great descent, was very rocky, uneven, and so contracted for about eighty feet that it was with the greatest difficulty we made our way through it; this led to a second perpendicular descent of thirty feet over rocks, which we with great difficulty got down. We now found ourselves in a large avenue, or Little Mill-Stream Hall (as I called it), with a very high roof and about twenty-five feet wide; it had a sandy floor, with a stream of water running through it sufficiently rapid and large to turn a grist-mill. On the sides of this stream were some large rocks which had fallen from the roof. This avenue is about six hundred feet in length, with a considerable descent to where the water loses itself through a small aperture in the rocks.

"On returning from the bottom of the avenue we discovered a passage leading horizontally and at right angles from the side of this avenue, the entrance of which is elevated about eight feet above the floor. We found this a very pleasant passage in comparison to the rest; the roof, sides, and floor were quite smooth, and we could walk upright. It is one hundred and twenty feet long, and leads into the last and largest avenue, or Great Mill-Stream Hall. This we found to be very spacious, being about from twenty to thirty feet wide, from thirty to eighty feet from the floor to the roof, and twelve hundred feet in length, with a stream sufficient to turn a grist-mill running its whole length. From the source of this stream, where there is a considerable collection of white spar, formed in flat cakes and cones, caused evidently by the constant dripping of water, the avenue has a descent of about thirty degrees to where the stream disembogues itself through a small aperture in the rocks. Before we arrived at this aperture the avenue became so contracted that Mr. Gregg and myself had to creep on our hands and knees through the water for about fifty feet. Here in the sand we found the name of 'Crain' written, which we considered a mortifying discovery, as we thought we were the first persons who had penetrated so far in this direction. We wrote our names likewise in the sand and then joined the rest of the party.

"In our search through this great avenue we had to climb over or creep under a thousand craggy rocks that lay scattered on the floor, and which had fallen from the sides and ceiling. I have every reason to believe that no person except us ever visited the source of the stream and head of the avenue, as we found no sign of human invention within many hundred feet of the spot, and which was very common in every other part of the cave, as the sides of every place that had been previously visited were covered with names and marks made with coal, and if any person had penetrated this far they certainly would have left some token of their perseverance. We now found ourselves at the end of our exploring expedition, and as we had plenty of candles left and had taken the precaution to mark with chalk an arrow on the rocks at every turn, we were confident of being able to retrace our steps to the entrance.

"Returning, we measured with a line the extreme distance we had been in, and found it to be three thousand six hundred feet, but we must have travelled altogether upwards of two miles. Our return was found to be much more tiresome, as it was an ascending route nearly the whole distance. We arrived in safety at the mouth at ten o'clock at night, after having traveled incessantly for six hours. We were about sixteen hundred feet perpendicularly below the entrance. We heard the water running beneath the rocks in every part of the cave. The temperature we found agreeable, but owing to our great exertions we were kept in a profuse perspiration during the whole time we were in. In different parts we saw a few bats, but a gentleman from Uniontown informed me that the roofs of the two first rooms were covered with millions of bats hanging in large bunches in a torpid state and clinging to each other.

"This cave is composed of soft sandstone rocks, and has every appearance of having been formed by the veins of water washing them and their foundations away, which caused by their weight to separate from the standing rocks above. There is not the smallest doubt in my mind but this cave is considerably enlarged by the friction of the water each year, for all the rocks on the floors of the different apartments would exactly fit the parts of the ceiling immediately above them. The rocks that now form this cave will certainly fall by degrees as their foundations are washed away, therefore it is impossible to form an idea of the very great spaciousness that it may arrive to. The knowledge that the rocks above are subject to fall is calculated to create the most inexpressible horror in the minds of persons who visit this subterranean wonder. The arches of all the avenues are formed by rocks meeting in the middle of the roofs, with a crack extending in each the whole length."

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[1] The Moravian writer, Zeisberger, says, in reference to this subject, "In war they [the builders of these earthen works] used some ramparts about their towns, and round hillocks, in the top of which they made a hollow place to shelter their women and children in; they placed themselves around and upon it to fight; in such battles were commonly many killed, whom they buried all in a heap, covering the corpses with the bark of trees, stones, earth, etc. On the place where Schoënbrunn, the Christian Indian town, was built [in Ohio], one can plainly see such a wall or rampart of considerable extent, and not a great way off, in the plain, is such a burial-place, or made hillock, on which large oaks now stand."