

# *The Army Has A Heart*

*A War Incident in Lancaster County*

By H. M. J. KLEIN

I HAVE lying on the desk before me all available documents relating to a very interesting and important series of events which occurred in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, shortly after the United States entered the Second World War. These incidents, coming within a month or two after Pearl Harbor will read like fiction in another generation. But they are not fiction; they are just another evidence of the fact that Truth is oftentimes stranger than fiction. Even after an interval of almost five years, the full significance of what actually took place is realized by few Lancaster County residents.

Today the whole world is appalled at the devastation that war has created everywhere. Men are looking forward to reconstructing towns and villages, and to reconverting farms and industries to a normal and livable condition. They realize, however, with dismay that long cherished historic structures and shrines sacred with age and historic associations can be neither reconstructed nor reconverted. They are gone forever as vital parts of our civilization.

For this reason it is cause for gratitude to be able to record the simple yet exciting story of the men who saved a large portion of the fertile and historic land of Lancaster County from the havoc associated with hurried war preparations. They saved at the same time some of Pennsylvania's patriotic and sacred shrines for future generations.

Now it should be told. It is fitting that these facts be recorded while the participants are still living. This is as yet contemporary history. Some day it will form a worthy chapter in the glorious annals of Lancaster County.

On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked. On December 8, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan. On December 11, 1941, the United States declared war on Germany and Italy. Then things began to move fast in the United States. The War Department under Secretary Stimson lost no time in a hurried preparation for a long conflict.

Strategic points in the eastern portion of the United States were selected as sites for the construction of vast munition plants. T. N. T. production centers, Army camps, warehouses and hundreds of other structures deemed necessary for the waging of a modern war.

Hardly a month had passed when the War Department seriously considered appropriating over 11,000 acres of the most valuable and fertile area of Lancaster County, located in the historic Donegal region, for the purpose of erecting a T. N. T. plant. It was thought to be likely that the area would be extended southeast toward Lancaster City. How the War Department came to change its mind is the burden of this story.

A little over two weeks after the Pearl Harbor disaster, several representatives of the U. S. Army were driving about the East Donegal section of Lancaster County, looking over the farms, taking photographs of the buildings, taking measurements along the Donegal Creek, inquiring about the value of the land in the community.

One of the residents of the community, Harold Enslow, learned that several Army Officers were checking on information concerning the land in the vicinity of the old historic Donegal Church and the region west to the Conoy Creek. They inquired how much water flow from the Donegal Springs in twenty-four hours and investigated the possibility of building a railroad extension into the community from the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. They procured maps of the territory and began drawing plans under the heading: "United States Army T. N. T. Project."

When the farmers of the 186 farms involved in the project learned that they would undoubtedly be called upon to evacuate land which had been tilled in many instances by the same family line for 200 years, they were in consternation. They were loyal,

patriotic citizens but they felt that less valuable and less fertile land might certainly be secured elsewhere in the Commonwealth, to serve the same purpose for the War Department.

In their perplexity they turned to one of their own number, Harry N. Nissly, cashier of the Union National Bank in Mount Joy, for counsel. He is a man who is thoroughly informed on the family traditions and agricultural history of the region. Mr. Nissly belongs to one of the oldest and most honored families in Lancaster County, its progenitors having come from Switzerland in 1716. They settled in that section of Pennsylvania now known as the Donegal region, before Lancaster County was established. The deeds to their farms go back to the Penns; one bearing the signature of James Logan, Secretary of the province, 1724; one of Andrew Galbraith, 1736. When Mr. Nissly learned of the T. N. T. Project, he saw the seriousness of the situation and proceeded to take measures to prevent this valuable farm land from becoming a war casualty.

On January 13, 1942, at the annual meeting of the Mount Joy Chamber of Commerce, the matter was thoroughly discussed. Mr. Fred Bucher, Lancaster County Farm Agent, reported that the land under consideration by the Government for a powder plant comprised the district from Maytown east to the Harrisburg Pike just west of Florin, excluding Rheems, Elizabethtown and Masonic Homes, extending to Conewago Creek to Route 241 as far as Maytown. The number of farms involved were 186. The acreage covered 11,520 acres of land, valued at \$200 per acre. The following report shows the total value of the land and farm products to be purchased by the Government.

**STATISTICS OF AREA COMPRISING  
EAST DONEGAL, WEST DONEGAL & CONOY TOWNSHIPS  
OF LANCASTER COUNTY, PA., WHICH THE GOV-  
ERNMENT IS CONTEMPLATING TO PURCHASE**

Approximate number of farms involved—186	
Total acreage—11,520	
11,520 acres @ \$200 per acre.....	\$2,304,000.00
Acreage in farm gardens and truck patches—93	
93 acres @ \$200.00 per acre yield.....	18,600.00
Acreage of corn—2594	

2594 acres yield 145,264 bushels @ 75c per bushel.....	108,948.00
Acreage of field grains (feed-barley, oats, etc.)—1388	
1388 acres yield 55,520 bushels @ 65c per bushel.....	36,088.00
Acreage of wheat—1210	
1210 acres yield 29,050 bushels at \$1.00 per bushel.....\$	29,050.00
Acreage of hay—2790	
2790 acres yield 3,438 tons @ \$15.00 per ton.....	51,570.00
Acreage of pasture—1016	
1016 acres of pasture @ \$10.00 per acre.....	10,160.00
Acreage of tomatoes—558	
558 acres @ \$135.00 per acre.....	75,330.00
Acreage of sweet corn—279	
279 acres @ \$64.00 per acre.....	17,856.00
Acreage of peas—93	
93 acres of peas @ \$70.00 per acre.....	6,510.00
Acreage of tobacco—1020	
1020 acres yield 1,224,000 lbs. of No. 1 tobacco @ 16c per lb. ....	195,840.00
1020 acres yield 306,000 lbs. of No. 2 tobacco @ 5c per lb. ....	15,300.00
Number of hogs marketed—3,146	
3,146 hogs @ 225 lbs. per hog—707,850 lbs.	
707,850 lbs. @ 7½c per lb.....	53,088.75
No. calves sold—1500	
1500 calves @ 140 lbs. per calf—210,000 lbs.	
210,000 lbs. @ 12½c per lb.....	26,250.00
Number of steers sold—1476	
1476 steers yield a net profit of \$30.00 per steer.....	44,280.00
Number of milking cows sold—1488	
1488 cows at \$160.00 per cow.....	238,080.00
Pounds of milk produced—1,027,000	
1,027,000 lbs. of milk @ 2.8c per lb.....	28,756.00
Dozens of eggs produced—599,650	
599,650 dozens of eggs @ 30c per dozen.....	179,895.00
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>\$3,439,601.75</b>

### Supplementary

Total carried forward.....	\$3,439,601.75
Farm equipment—\$2,200.00 per farm—186 farms.....	409,200.00
48,160 bushels—potatoes—\$1.00 per bushel.....	48,160.00
83,000 chickens @ \$1.50 per chicken.....	124,500.00
Increase the egg item to 900,000 dozens.	

### Production Sales

12,450 tons Agricultural Lime Stone Poultry Grits.....	68,011.43
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Plant & Equipment and Land..... 100,500.00

Total .....\$4,189,973.18

Today Mr. Bucher's estimate would probably be  
from seven to eight million dollars.

At the meeting of the Mount Joy Chamber of Commerce the following Resolution was passed unanimously:

"Be it resolved that the Board of Directors of the Mount Joy Chamber of Commerce act as a committee to investigate and oppose as much as possible the Government taking the ground in the Donegal Valley for such purposes as they now intend to use it."

The next night, January 14, 1942, a mass meeting was held in the Mount Joy High School Auditorium. The auditorium was packed with interested persons. In addition to the local people, the Lancaster City Chamber of Commerce was represented by its Secretary, Lester W. Newcomer, and several other members; the Elizabethtown Chamber of Commerce was represented by Paul Grubb, President, and several other members. There were also present representatives from Dauphin, Lebanon and York counties.

After a thorough discussion of the situation, the group by motion chose Mr. H. N. Nissly of Mount Joy to be chairman of a committee to be appointed by him and to be authorized to take whatever action was deemed necessary to remedy the situation. The chairman of this committee then took charge of the meeting. He urged each person present to act as a Minute Man, to awaken all the people of the community to the urgency of the matter, to call and to telephone, to watch and to pray for the preservation of the beautiful, fertile, historic Donegal region. Mr. Nissly himself at once entered into communication with local and State officials and other men of influence.

On Friday, January 16, 1942, the Board of Directors of the Lancaster City Chamber of Commerce pledged their cooperation with the citizens of the Donegal area in the following resolutions:

"WHEREAS, information supplied the Board although lacking in details, indicates nevertheless that the United States War Department is considering the use of 10,000 or more acres of land in the Donegal Valley of Lancaster County, comprising an area which would include a large part of the townships of Conoy, East Donegal and

West Donegal, for the construction of a plant or plants to be used for the manufacture of explosives, and

"WHEREAS, the project, as we understand it, would involve major economic and social changes such as:

"1. The abandonment of some of the most fertile farm lands in Lancaster County and perhaps in the Nation,—lands which are now producing crops, dairy and poultry products with an annual value, according to an analysis of U. S. Census figures, exceeding one and one-half million dollars; this land which, because of its productivity and because it is now dotted with fine farm homes and farm buildings in an excellent state of repair, represents some of the most valuable and highest priced farm land in the Country, land with a current total value in excess of two and one-half million dollars according to a survey made yesterday by local authorities; the area also includes historical land marks such as the Donegal Church, built in 1740 (congregation organized in 1721) the local shrine of Presbyterianism, with its famous 'Witness Tree' beneath which members of the church pledged allegiance to the Colonies in the War for Independence;

"2. The removal from the area of a resident population of sturdy, industrious and dependable farm people many of whom are descendants of the earliest settlers of Lancaster County and whose families have lived on the same farms for generations; these families would have great difficulty in securing farms elsewhere as practically all of Lancaster County's farm lands are being tilled and few farms are for rent or sale, and thus the labor, skill and knowledge of these families would be lost at a time when it is most needed to produce food products;

"3. The loss of a market for farm needs and supplies which would result in dislocation and hardships for the country stores and business and professional enterprises in the small towns now serving the farm population in this Donegal Valley area, therefore

"BE IT RESOLVED, that the War Department be requested to make a most thorough and careful survey of this and other sections in order that any action may be avoided which would leave the Donegal Valley as an unsightly reminder of unwise and too hasty action after victory has been achieved and peace is again restored, when food production will be of continuing importance, and

"BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that in the event a careful survey by the War Department of the many thousands of acres of unproductive land in the eastern section of the United States clearly indicates that this Donegal Valley area is the only site suitable to the

purpose, we recognize that local objections to its use must be withdrawn in the greater interest of achieving victory in the war in which our country is now engaged, and

"BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Board of Directors of the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce oppose the War Department project unless and until evidence is presented to show that the Donegal Valley is the ONLY suitable site for the purpose."

Three distinct lines of action were followed in order to get quick and sure results.

(1) First, contacts were made with men who knew the locality and its productiveness, and who at the same time were known to have influence in the national government. Among these men were Congressman J. Roland Kinzer; Senator James Davis; Secretary of Commerce, Mark S. James; the State Secretary of Agriculture, J. H. Light; Mr. P. N. Hershey of the Hershey Chocolate Corporation; the late Vance C. McCormick of Harrisburg, Pa., and other men of prominence.

(2) Secondly, the members of the nine churches and schools in the district gathered in a community prayer meeting at Bossler's Mennonite meeting house on Friday morning, January 16, 1942. This meeting is described in the *Christian Monitor* as follows:

"It was opened by singing 'God of Our Strength.' The brethren were resigned to the will of the Lord, and if it was His will they implored Him for grace to bear this trial, and then guidance to move elsewhere, where the Lord could be served as well or better. They recognized the past blessings of their government and were not desirous that the burden should be lifted from them and placed on others. Perhaps this was to be a disguised blessing. At least they were resigned to the will of the Lord at this pivotal experience in their history. Then they sang 'Faith of Our Fathers' and went home."

Some one, not of the group and without their knowledge, is said to have sent a telegram to the War Department Office at Washington which read:

"Bossler's Mennonite Congregation is gathered at Church praying right now for the preservation of their loved homes and farms."

(3) Third, by direct negotiations with the War Department

on the part of a delegation of Lancaster County farmers and businessmen. In the delegation besides Mr. H. N. Nissly, Chairman, were

Martin S. Musser	}	Mount Joy area
Rev. C. B. Segelken		
Harold Enslow		
Abner H. Risser	}	Elizabethtown area
Harry Schneitman		
Paul M. Grubb		
J. K. Carman		
Samuel E. Dibble		

H. W. Crouse, Harrisburg,

Manager of the nine Cameron farms

A. C. Darmstaetter	}	Lancaster City
H. F. Schell		Chamber of Commerce
Mark Anspach		

The delegation was bolstered by two state cabinet officers, State Secretary of Commerce Mark S. James and State Secretary of Agriculture, John H. Light. Congressman J. Roland Kinzer and Senator James J. Davis were also in attendance at an interview with Lieut. Col. J. P. Harris, which had been arranged by Mr. Kinzer.

The delegation left the Lancaster area early on Friday morning, January 16, 1942, and met in the House office of Congressman Kinzer. There they were joined by Mr. Light and Mr. James and proceeded to the Social Security Building for their interview with Lieut. Col. Harris who was in charge of the selection of sites for the War Department. They found Colonel Harris in a room surrounded by hundreds of other Army men, secretaries, typists and other functionaries. He was introduced to Nissly by Representative Kinzer, and Nissly introduced the other men in turn, after which Senator Davis said:

"Colonel Harris these people from Lancaster County have come to protest against the location of a munitions plant in their county. They feel you are doing a great deal of damage. If you want to start a revolution (he smiled) you can start with this."

To which Colonel Harris replied:

"It would take an hour or two to explain the whole situation. We've got a hell of a war on our hands. We have stayed away from



your section up to now for strategic reasons. But we have got to the point where we have to utilize the raw materials of industries from eastern cities and that is what is leading us up into your area. Several sites are being considered. Yours is one of them.

"I can't conceive of the plant going into your district at this minute. But I can't say what will be done in six months or a year. The government wants the site or one similar to it because it is near all the things needed. It is near railroads, the river, a labor supply; and sulphuric acid, needed in large quantities can be easily obtained from plants in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore."

Senator Davis interjected to say that he knew of sites in other counties which had all the advantages of this site, a large supply of labor in addition, splendid railroad facilities, and besides the people would be anxious for such a plant.

To which Colonel Harris replied, "You realize, too, that we need at least seven thousand acres, and that if a lot of mountains and gullies are in it, we may need as much as 20,000 acres. And we need 10,000 to 15,000 people for construction and about 3,000 for maintenance. Afterwards we must be close to plants to get the sulphuric acid, and must be able to ship it in and out. If you can suggest a site, we would like to know it—."

Then it was that Secretary James, who carried under his arm a large package of Commerce Department maps and plans of the Resources Planning Boards, brought out his plans and said:

"We have in our office all the information you might want. In Williams Valley, which is in Schuylkill and Dauphin counties, you have 70,000,000 gallons of water, 70,000 acres of land if you need them and 60,000 unemployed persons. How about the old valley back of Lykens? Are you looking at the valley back of Sunbury?"

"We would be glad to look at them," Colonel Harris replied.

Then a really remarkable scene took place. Mr. H. N. Nissly, seventy years of age, with tremulous voice, made a plea for the farmers of northwestern Lancaster County.

"These people in our section think you are going to take their land. They think they will have to move out. The people can't sleep, and these farmers are descendants of those who helped to make America."

An eye witness of the scene says that as Mr. Nissly's voice broke,

Colonel Harris dropped the give-and-take attitude he had assumed toward the political spokesmen. He listened sympathetically as Mr. Nissly continued:

"Colonel Harris, we are here to represent the section known as the Donegals, of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, settled by Scotch-Irish, English and Swiss when the Indians lived there. They came to worship God, built houses of worship and homes with firesides that became altars of prayer. For generations they have raised families with the highest type of Christian character. What I say comes from the very souls, hearts and minds of these good people."

Colonel Harris replied: "You can assure your people that there is no intention of taking that site now. There's no occasion for this worry among your people. It's gotten out of control."

But Nissly still continued, "You know Donegal Church is in this section. That is one of the most historic places in the country. There is the Witness Tree, known throughout the land, as a sacred spot in Revolutionary history, one of the ten most famous trees in the country. This spot at Donegal Springs is a shrine in the Presbyterian Church in America. It must not be destroyed as Hitler destroyed Cathedrals in Europe. Do you not understand?"

To which Colonel Harris graciously replied: "Yes, I know. I'm from Wilmington, Delaware, myself. I'm Welsh."

Then Nissly added: "In the west portion of the Donegal territory are the widely known Masonic Homes for the aged and the orphaned. Do you want them sitting during an afternoon or evening on the front porch or upper windows looking over the beautiful Donegal Valley when suddenly there would be an explosion that would shock their very minds and souls. Is this necessary? This section is as patriotic as any section of America. It furnished food for Washington's Army at Valley Forge. It's where William Henry's rifles were first made. Its granaries are always open to help the nation.

If I were an artist I would paint a Revolutionary Patriot with a William Henry rifle and beside him I would place one of our Christian Patriots with a sheaf of wheat coming from the granaries of Lancaster County."

"It's a fine country," Colonel Harris said, "but as Sherman expressed it war isn't pleasant and there are some things we can't avoid."

Then Nissly handed Colonel Harris the telegram from the Bossler congregation stating that they were in Church praying right now for the preservation of their loved homes and farms. The record says: "A silence followed. Taking Mr. Nissly's hand,

Colonel Harris, who had been deeply affected by the meeting, with tears in his eyes, said:

“Go home and tell the folks their prayers are answered. There is no intention of taking that site now.”

Thus the plans to establish a huge T. N. T. plant on lands rich in farming and historical importance in northwestern Lancaster County were abandoned by the War Department. This fact was disclosed within ten days after the historic interview, by Colonel W. B. Smith, Secretary of the office of the Army General Staff. He said:

“The Lancaster site was turned down by the Office of Production Management Site Board and no further action is contemplated so far as the Lancaster site is concerned.”

This statement brought to an end the apprehension felt by hundreds of farmers, business men and other residents in the Donegal area.

Another site was obtained by the War Department at much less cost to the government and the farms of northwest Lancaster County continued to serve the national defense by producing food and livestock for Army, Navy and the starving people of the earth.

Many letters of appreciation came to Mr. Nissly for the aggressive, gracious and diplomatic way in which he had handled a difficult and delicate task. Vance McCormick wrote:

“Lancaster County is to be congratulated because it would have been a most unfortunate thing if such a beautiful part of our Commonwealth had been destroyed by a T. N. T. plant.”

E. N. Hershey wrote:

“It would have been a shame indeed to sacrifice so much of the finest farming land in the United States.”

Another wrote to Mr. Nissly,

“I congratulate you on the happy outcome which means so much to so many people.”

The finest tribute came from the late Vance McCormick who wrote to Mr. Nissly as follows:

“I was Mayor of a large city, held a national position and became prominent. I am an old man now, and I wish that I could have had the honor to save the Donegals which I would have considered the crowning achievement of my life—but I must give the honor to you.”

Perhaps in the more distant future as the men and women of the Donegals go through life's tumult with tranquil faith, in patient work and prayer, as they make the valleys blossom as the rose, they will give a grateful thought to the men of this generation who saved their farms, comprising some of the richest agricultural land in the United States, from destruction.