

# The John Wise Story

BY JOHN H. ANDREWS

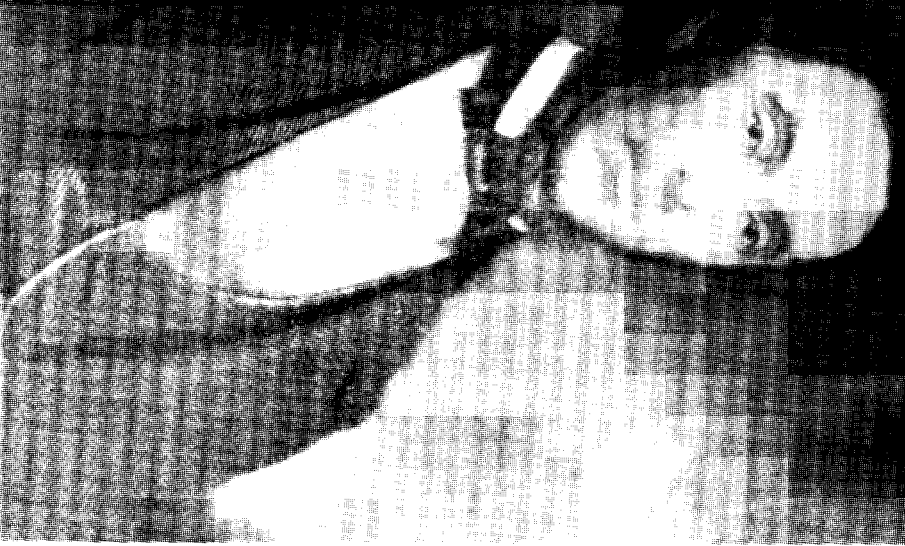
## Chapter I

The Fates seemed to be busy getting the stage set for the advent of John Wise's birth, for just about twenty-five years prior to this blessed event, (June 5, 1783), the first hot-air balloon ascended into the air under the guidance of the Montgolfier Brothers, Jacques Etienne and Joseph Michel. This was the beginning of an era of aerial exploits for which John Wise's birth seemed so correctly timed. (One) This first hot-air balloon was the initial practical attempt to compete with the birds in their flight and was the concrete proof needed to lay the ghosts of doubts and hopes that the ancient myths, tradition and legend had fostered. The Montgolfier Brothers helped to dispel these beliefs of incredible tales handed down, generation to generation, from the earliest recesses of man's imagination. (Two)

These intrepid brothers were sons of a wealthy paper manufacturer of Annonay, France, thirty-eight miles from Lyons, whose wealth, education and leisure had afforded them the happy alternative of unhampered experimentation. Ten years of painstaking trials of success and failure had preceded their 1783 ascension, made from Annonay, which was witnessed by a great throng. This balloon, made of paper lined with silk, was a 110-foot round bag of 23,430 cubic feet capacity. The first hydrogen-filled balloon constructed of taffeta impregnated with rubber followed in a Paris flight, August 27, 1783, by a Professor Charles. It fell at Gonesse where the villagers, with superstitious awe and dread at this "visitor from the skies," called their muzzle-loaders and pitchforks into play for their defense against the "writhing demon from the clouds."

On September 19, 1783, Joseph Montgolfier devised a water-proofed linen affair (the hot air for its buoyancy was made by lighting a fire of straw and shavings beneath it) to carry aloft the first animals. The world's first "passengers" were a sheep, a rooster and a duck. This balloon descended after eight minutes in the air and the animals bore no trace of hardship with the exception of the hen which was tramped upon by the sheep in the ensuing great excitement.

October 15, 1783, dated the first two human beings to make an ascent in a captive balloon (that is, attached by ropes tied to a support on the ground) taking them eighty feet into the air and remaining there for four and a half minutes. On November 21, 1783, nearly a half million people watched in wonder, in Paris, as two other men in a free balloon rose to 300 feet and wafted away about five miles in twenty minutes, landing safely.



JOHN WISE  
Aeronaut

1808 — 1879

Benjamin Franklin was the very first American to witness a balloon ascension when in Paris as American Delegate and Commissioner, and was present when both the animals and the human beings made their trial flights and was carried quite away by these series of spectacles. A cynic tapped him on the arm and commented: (Three) "Now what in the world good can a balloon ever be?" "Well, my friend," countered Franklin, "of what use is a brand new baby?"

These "exciting times" foisted Blanchard, a Frenchman, upon the British consciousness on October 16, 1784, with an ascension, and later, November 31, 1784. Blanchard, among the celestial myriads of the sincere and the sensational the high of intellect and low of mentality, did more to popularize aerial navigation over Europe than any man in the initial years of flight. His 33rd ascent was made from Berlin on September 27, 1788. In America, things were starting to awaken. Deckers made the first attempt at a flight in New York, September 23, 1789, but it was a complete failure, the balloon catching fire before the chance of a take-off. The first actual, successful ascent was made by Blanchard, January 9, 1793. For Jean Pierre Blanchard, then forty years of age, had arrived from France, December 9, 1792, in preparation for this important event.

This ascension, from the yard of Philadelphia's old Walnut Street Prison, was Blanchard's initial flight in America; his 45th ascension. This exhibition had been well advertised (Four) and on the chosen day two cannons were fired every quarter of an hour by Captain Fisher's company of artillery; and fifteen cannons on the arrival of President George Washington. Here was one of the most august of assemblies (Five) ever to be gathered together in a public cause.

General Washington delivered a short speech and gave to Blanchard a passport of introduction — the first air-borne letter in the new world. Should this be found today (and, indeed, all the possibilities have not been exhausted for its recovery), it would prove to be the most valuable piece of philately in existence. Even a century after this flight French collectors offered a fantastic price for it. The printed "passport" from President Washington, "as a most flattering mark of his goodwill," to Blanchard, read: (Six)

**GEORGE WASHINGTON,  
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA**

**To All To Whom These Presents Shall Come.**

The bearer hereof, Mr. Blanchard a citizen of France, proposing to ascend in a balloon from the City of Philadelphia, at 10 o'clock, a. m., this day, to pass in such direction and to descend in such place as circumstances may render most convenient — These are therefore to recommend to all citizens of the United States, and others, that in his passage, descent, return or journeying elsewhere, they oppose no hindrance or molestation to the said Mr. Blanchard: And, that on the contrary, they receive him and aid him with that humanity and good will, which may render honor to their country, and justice to an individual so distinguished by his efforts to establish and advance an art, in order to make it useful to mankind in general.

Given under my hand and seal at the city of Philadelphia, this ninth day of January, one thousand seven hundred and ninety three, and of the independence of America the seventeenth.

(SEAL)

(Signed)

GEORGE WASHINGTON.

Springing then gaily into the "boat" attached by ropes to the balloon, at five minutes past 10 o'clock, a. m., Blanchard threw out some ballast, and the balloon of yellow silk, highly varnished, began to ascend slowly and perpendicularly the while waving the colors of the United States and those of the French Republic and flourishing his be-feathered hat to the thousands of awed and astonished citizens.

### NOTES

(1) The chronological series of events follow closely the concise and detailed Francis Trevelyn Miller's **The World in the Air**, Volume I. This monumental work contains over 1200 rare prints, photographs and official documents, with over 150,000 words of text.

(2) As far back as 3500 B. C., in ancient Babylon, the story of Etana is told of his flight on the back of an eagle — truly an early if somewhat impossible feat. Around 2200 B. C., the Chinese Emperor Shun was said to have escaped from a high tower by the means of two large reed hats serving him as parachutes. Greek mythology records the use of waxen wings by Icarus who flew too near the sun, causing the wax to melt and catapulting him into the sea. Archytas, 400 B. C., of Greece, was credited with building a mechanical wooden pigeon capable of flight. The Chinese, centuries before Christ, claim to have had a system of signals which were sounded from the top of the hills to warn balloonists of impending weather conditions. The Emperor Fo Kien is said to have used a dirigible at his Coronation party in 1306 A. D. While we smile at these fantastic and primitive tales, we must find it important for the thought that it prompted on the subject of aviation as we know it today. (As chronicled in **Minute Epics of Flight** by Lumen Winter and Glenn Degne).

(3) Mary Alkus commenting in **Coronet**, January 1954.

(4) This reference, as well as the account of Blanchard's first American ascension, is culled from Carroll Fry's excellent and exhaustive **First Air Voyage in America**, published by the Penn Mutual Company of Philadelphia, 1943. Commented one of the ads of the day:

#### M. Blanchard's FORTY-FIFTH AERIAL FLIGHT

Is positively fixed for Wednesday, January 9th, in the Prison Court, at 10 in the morning precisely, weather permitting.

Those who have subscribed on blank subscription cards distributed thro' the city, are requested to send them to Oeller's Hotel, and those who wish to subscribe, may apply at the same place, until the 3rd of January inclusively. Price of subscription, \$5.

This was a facsimile of the original from the **Federal Gazette** and the **Philadelphia Daily Advertiser**.

(5) Some of the famous people of history, then and afterwards, included: Mons. John de Tervant, the French Minister Plenipotentiary, John Adams, Vice President; Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State; Monroe and Madison, Senator and Representative, respectively, from Virginia, two men to be later Presidents of the United States; Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, Edmond Randolph, Attorney General; Henry Knox, Secretary of War; Senators from fifteen states, Thomas Mifflin, Pennsylvania's Governor. Matthew Clarkson, its Mayor; a special delegation of Indian Chiefs who had arrived thirteen days before the event; Martha Washington, Betsy Ross and Dolly Madison, living in Philadelphia in 1793, must have seen the demonstration. Others who must have been on the scene were David Rittenhouse, the Astronomer; Peter DuPonceau, Charles Willson Peale, famous painter and owner of the Peale Museum. Included, too, were Stephen Girard, Benjamin Franklin Bache (editor, grandson of Benjamin Franklin), Dr. Benjamin Rush and Dr. Caspar Wistar, all named by Blanchard in his Journal as assisting local scientists. These and many, many more who were later to become historic figures.

(6) As photographically recorded by Francis Trevelyn Miller, page 211, Vol. No. I.

It would be admirable to clothe his birth with fancy phrase and glowing incident, but so little is known of John Wise's early childhood, one must tap the stream from its source — his autobiography. All of the euphemisms and embellishments one uncovers now and then are but the individual writer's literary whim, for the encyclopedias and biographies merely resorted to the repetition of his own account of what would seem to be a prosaic and normal childhood, with a garnish of whimsy here and a pathetic imaginative fragment there. But John Wise tells it so much better and simpler: (One)

"I was born," he said, "in the city of Lancaster on the 24th day of February, 1808. My father and mother were both born in the same place." These cold facts offer little of the interest and respect he was to be accorded at a later date. His paternal grandfather was a German from Wurtemberg; his maternal grandfather an Englishman from London.

John Wise, as a boy, received an English and German education in the Grammar school and afterwards graduated at the Lancaster High School. While a scholar there, he was granted permission for the free use of the libraries of the Rev. William Augustus Muhlenberg and of the church, and became a member of Dr. Muhlenberg's Bible Class.

Theology appealed to him, under the guidance of Muhlenberg, and it seemed to hold out a "paramount invitation for mental improvement." But the more he tried to "sound its mysteries" the more he became confused and gave the subject up in despair. He felt certain he had not received the Divine "call."

"My mind," he observed, "was directed to the appearance and motion of the heavenly bodies," and at night he would lie on a heap of straw looking up at the stars and moon. An occasional falling star gave him "rapturous joy." This was his first inclination to indulge in what he called "aerial projects." He took to flying kites, and would occasionally tie a kitten on the end and take this hapless animal for a sky ride; at night he would illuminate these kites with vari-colored paper lanterns. He tried to visualize a kite large and strong enough to carry himself aloft, but was forced to relinquish this impossible idea.

At the age of 14 (this was 1822), he read in a German paper an account of a balloon voyage in Italy which interested him in the mechanical procedure of the problem. Then followed experimentation with tissue-paper parachutes dropped from housetops and church steeples. Next, he tied four large-sized, inflated ox-bladders together and fastened a grown cat to these as his first "passenger," hoisted the contraption to a gable window of his house and released it. The contrivance landed with the cat unhurt. This was a rather crude beginning, but he was steered in the correct direction.

He had a momentary set-back in the use of a Montgolfier "fire balloon" which he released only to have it descend on the thatched roof of a house and set it afire. From a hole in the cow-stable, he furtively watched the fire ransack the roof, the fire buckets flying helter skelter and the street pumps belching out their water. Frightened to death for fear the building would be burned to the ground, he remembers that he "trembled from head to foot." But the blaze was extinguished and he was thoroughly admonished for this near catastrophe. He tried the experiment of another "fire balloon" a year later, when the incident had been forgotten, and its success determined the profession of his life.

A few years later, he was apprenticed to the cabinet-making trade and served four and a half years in this capacity whence he became a "proficient workman." He branched out into the trade of pianoforte making and worked at this until 1835, when he embraced professional ballooning as his chosen vocation.

He closes his account by stating that he determined this profession "more from the scientific attraction it had than from the mere love of adventure and money-making." His purpose to live had been the attainment of that much desired prophesied epoch of time when men "would call for their wings when about to make a journey as readily as they do now for their boots and spurs."

#### NOTE

(1) Follow me, if you will, through his "Autobiographical Sketch" — a scant three-page summation of his life as recorded August, 1873, which follows the brief preface to his **Through the Air**.

22



JOHN WISE

From a photograph in later life.

## JOHN WISE'S FIRST ASCENSION

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 2, 1835

Fifteen years before John Wise was born, the first American Balloon Ascension was staged at Philadelphia, by Mons. J. P. Blanchard, a Frenchman, January 9, 1793. George Washington and other notables of that day were interested spectators. After Blanchard died in 1809 — one year after John Wise was born — several other Frenchmen followed in the wake of this new aerial sailing. An American, Mr. Durant, of New York, was the first American to take up the business and soon other Americans were cashing in on the excitement and financial reaping. (1)

"When I first conceived the idea of making a balloon," wrote Mr. Wise, "I had never seen an ascension with one, nor had I any practical knowledge of its construction." Although he failed to date this conception of his idea, at least he started working on the project some years previous to 1835. His first step was to study the atmosphere, its nature and its buoyant power, causing him to rub his forehead and "to strain my imagination," but it led him into the study of pneumatics and hydrostatics. Checking his progress "with a number of scientific gentlemen," (2) and finding out that he was on the right track, he determined to make this his life's ambition. Once his background was established, he started to put his knowledge to practical use.

He procured enough shirting material for the balloon — a muslin called "long cloth" — and experimented with quick-drying varnishes to coat this muslin to make it air-tight. Cut, then, into segments, it was sewn together, coated a second and third time and left for a week's drying, when it was inflated for testing. The thing was 28 feet in diameter, and the network for its rigging (by which the car and other paraphernalia were to be attached) was knit by a woman who was accustomed to make and repair fish nets. The basket was 2½ feet in diameter and about 2½ feet deep. This would be about the size of our present-day large clothes hampers.

Following the custom of other aeronauts and their ascensions, Mr. Wise decided on the plan of a publicly advertised ascension, at the corner of 9th and Green Streets, Philadelphia; the date was set for April 30, 1835. Immediately the "foreboding of timid minds" predicted a balloon riot. "You are going right in amongst the butchers," said they, "and they are a very rough and determined class of people." But unafraid of these wailing Jeremiahs, Mr. Wise proceeded at his own risk with his plans. He even found the "butchers" a kindly sort who brushed aside all intimations of violence and, while setting up his apparatus, he soon found he was among friends who tendered him "warmest assistance and encouragement."

April 30 turned out to be blustery and stormy, so much so that his ascension was forced to be delayed until May 2, which was "favorable in every way for the experiment."

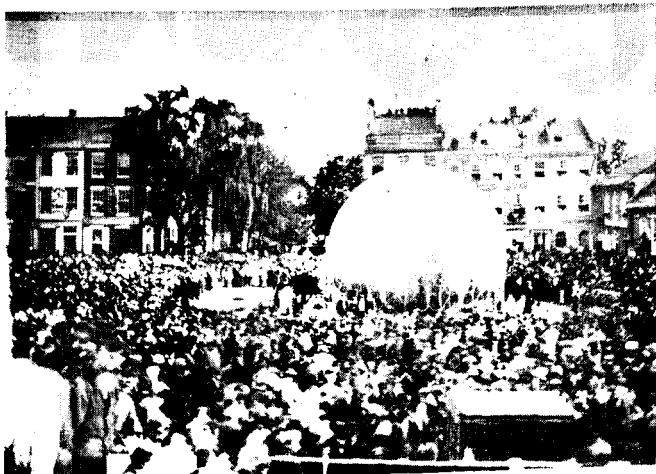
One can picture the excitement of Mr. Wise awaiting this first trial flight, surrounded by multitudes of strangers, some of whom were skeptical of the whole idea from its inception and who had come to the conclusion that "he will go up

if he can." Finally the car, balloon and network (the whole contraption weighed but 186 pounds), were brought onto the grounds, and the bag was slowly filled with gas by the use of his primitive machine. The filling consumed nearly four hours. At last, all was in readiness, and, with a flourish of great assurance, he stepped into the "car" of the balloon, taking with him about fifteen pounds of sand in several sacks, a thermometer and barometer for his "tests." But there was a great confusion and Mr. Wise couldn't seem to make the men, who held the ropes of the balloon, understand what he wanted them to do. Suddenly the great gas bag made an unexpected lurch forward and upward, grazing the chimneys of a nearby building, swooped down again, coming to rest in a vacant lot. Again the crowd surged forward to hinder and help and John Wise became distracted for the moment, fearing the affair would turn out to be a fizzle. "The scene here," Mr. Wise moaned, "presented a mixture of excitement and confusion . . . of such nature as to make it morally impossible to do anything with system or order." Divesting himself of his instruments, bags of sand, boots and coat (to cut the weight) he roared at the top of his voice: "For Heaven's sake, gentlemen, will you give me the chance to make the ascension?" (3) This seemed to solve the problem and according to his instructions a circle was formed, a space cleared and one man was selected to hold the rope. As soon as he released it, on a signal from Mr. Wise, the aerial ship sped swiftly upwards.

The first few minutes of the balloon's ascent caused a stillness in the immense mass of people, but they finally recovered and the "very air reverberated with their shouts" of his successful take-off.

Up, up, he soared to about several thousand feet, and a gentle breeze wafted the balloon over the intersection of Market Street and the Schuylkill River.

22



Wise Balloon Ascension in Lancaster  
Southwest Angle of Penn Square.

Note people on the housetops.



Here he lost sight of the crowds and the noise and stood in the little basket "without hat, coat, or boots," and strange emotions pervaded his mind. He wrote: "Grandeur had ever been a delightful theme to me, but this was more than grandeur, and the sublimity of the scene kept me in a mood far different from what I had ever experienced." However, this "soul inspiring spectacle" soon resolved itself into more earthly speculations and he discovered that he was losing gas and was descending. To attain height, he cut loose and threw overboard a huge floral wreath which, on falling through the air, was mistaken for flocks of birds by those who followed his flight through their telescopes.

Reaching a point five or six miles on the Jersey side of the Delaware, he began to make preparations for his descent, after having been in the air an hour and a quarter. He landed safely near Haddonfield, about nine miles from Philadelphia, and returned home that evening congratulated by his many friends.

This, his first flight, made him all the more determined to continue to fly, trying to simplify the art "so as to bring it within the reach of experimenters at a reasonable cost and a certainty of success that must ere long give it a practical value." (4)

## NOTES

(1) Among these was one, a Mr. Clayton (**Lancaster Journal**, May 8, 1835) a Cincinnati aeronaut, who came in for a share of the praise by one of his own local flights, April 18, 1835. The news account reported that "of really intrepid Aeronauts, Clayton surely bears the palm! Durant himself has been outdone! Clayton's voyage was about 350 to 400 miles in 9½ hours."

(2) From the **Encyclopedia of Philadelphia, Harrisburg, The National Historical Association**, 1931, Joseph Jackson: "He consulted with Dr. James K. Mitchell, who was highly regarded for his scientific achievements and who took the young man in hand and taught him chemistry, physics and natural philosophy as was necessary for an aeronaut. Professor T. P. Espy, founder of the United States Meteorological Service, proved a useful friend."

Wrote Hugh W. Nevin (**Lancaster County Historical Society**, Vol. 39, No. 2, **A History of Aviation in Lancaster County**): "My grandfather, Dr. Theodore Appel, a teacher of Mathematics at Franklin and Marshall College, conferred with Mr. Wise on many occasions during his career, checked his calculations, aided him in his mathematics, and proved an invaluable aid in the pioneer's work."

(3) Nevin, same volume as above, quoted him as saying (on page 25), "For God's sake, gentlemen, etc.," but this is an error. Mr. Wise was not one to engage in profanity no matter what adverse circumstances overtook him.

(4) Chapter II, of Wise's **Through the Air**, provided the basic context for this First Philadelphia Flight.

## THE FIRST "SUCCESSFUL" LANCASTER ASCENSION

John Wise must certainly have been cognizant of the success and popularity accorded the other balloonists of his day and must have envied, in a small way, their acclaim by press and populace in this new phase of aerial adventure. In 1834, when he was just twenty-six years old, and at an age when impulses lead one into devious and dangerous paths, according to the inclination, his manual pursuits in Philadelphia (where he lived at the time) must have afforded him the chance to do other than just read about and dream of these daring aerial experiments of other and older men. He possessed the spirit to do something about it.

Sensational as were all of the balloon ascensions at that time, the press was prepared to lavish glowing accounts of the success or failure of each, and entire columns were given to these experiments, sometimes with woodcut illustrations (since photographs were not then processed for the newspapers), (1) of the various ascents and aeronauts. Wise must certainly have read of the Lancaster ascension by James Mills, on November 1, 1834, for he was a methodical man, as the sheaf of news accounts of the many ascents by him and others which he saved for his autobiography, will testify. However, no record is available whether John was present or not at this gala affair, but more than likely he witnessed it as part of his latent professional duties. Two original posters (2) remain in the possession of the Landis Valley Museum of this ascension, which appears to be among the earliest Lancaster had the chance to witness.

Mr. Wise held in high regard all members of his craft and made special note of John Mills. (3) "About this period," he said, "a considerable number of experimentalists in Ballooning made their appearance in various parts of the United States, but, unfortunately, for the progress of the art, the most of them were not philosophically acquainted with the subject. The most successful of this numerous corps of aeronauts were Mr. James Mills, of Baltimore, Mr. Richard Clayton, of Cincinnati, and Mr. William Paullin, of Philadelphia."

John Wise's first balloon was of muslin and the initial scheduled flight in Philadelphia had been for April 30, 1835. Bad weather caused the change of date to May 2, 1835; his second experiment was from Philadelphia also. His third trial was at Lebanon, Pennsylvania, July 4, 1835, (4) and Reading had seen the following two during August of that same year. His sixth — and last of the muslin-made balloon — was planned for October 1, 1835 for Lancaster, Pennsylvania, but the attempt was a complete fiasco due to over-expansion, a too-brisk wind, inept helpers and assorted unrelated misfortunes. The uneven cutting of the ropes caused the great, inflated bag to dash the car against the eaves of a two-story building and John was spilled out on the very apex of the house. Stunned, but coming to his senses by the great shout of the people below, he looked in a southwesterly direction and beheld his great balloon "plunging furiously into a chasm of dense clouds." The ill-fated balloon rose to such a height that the dilatation of the gas filled the whole cavity of the balloon to such a degree that it burst completely. The remains landed near Bordentown, New Jersey, a distance from Lancaster of about seventy-five miles. "Thus ended," John said ruefully, "the experiments with a machine that had given me much more trouble than reputation as a skillful aeronaut,"

We are at a loss to explain his announced ascension for October 31, 1835, which ran in the Lancaster Journal, October 23, 1835 and October 30, 1835. It was a colorful advertisement announcing a BALLOON ASCENSION and carried a stock wood-cut of a garish balloon unlike anything ever flown. "J. WISE," it said, "respectfully announces to the inhabitants of Lancaster and its vicinity that he intends making his FOURTH GRAND ASCENSION (5) on Saturday, the 31st of October, 1835, from the enclosure on East King Street. J. WISE begs leave to mention that no expense will be spared to render the amphitheatre safe and comfortable, and should the weather prove UNFAVORABLE, and the ascension not take place, the money will be refunded. ORDER OF ASCENSION: At 10 o'clock the gates of the amphitheatre will be opened for the reception of visitors. (6) At 11 o'clock, the inflating of the balloon will commence. At half past 11, a small balloon will be sent off, and others at intervals of 15 minutes through the course of inflating. At half past 2 o'clock, Mr. Wise will take his seat in the car, and after floating around several minutes over the enclosure, he will ascend to the upper regions, and at an altitude of 2,000 feet he will drop a PARACHUTE WITH A LIVING ANIMAL which will reach the earth in safety. Tickets 50 cents; children half-price, to be had at any of the Hotels in the city. A Band of Music will attend and a sufficient police to preserve order. October 23, 1835."

According to his own records, his last flight in the muslin balloon was the ill-fated October 1, 1835, affair and his balloon was destroyed. Whether his memory was at fault, or if he borrowed a balloon for this occasion and the event was cancelled due to bad weather, we do not presume to know. But there was no news notice after this last of two advertisements relative to the flight or cancellation of it.

"During the winter of 1835 and 1836", he continued, "I constructed a new balloon — 24 feet in diameter and of a pear shape." The silk he used was a kind termed "India sarsenet," white, and came in 60-yard pieces. He coated it with a varnish composed of linseed oil and gum-elastic, and after it had been coated twice and became very dry, the segments of the balloon were cut in readiness for sewing them together. Care was taken that these segments were in no danger of spontaneous combustion resulting from collecting gases — this liability having proven fatal to many an aeronaut's balloon. It was finished in the spring of 1836 and he named it the "METEOR" and when pronounced thoroughly airtight, he was back in business again.

"The citizens of Lancaster," John stated, "were desirous of having an aerial experiment on a most liberal scale," and contributed enough money so there would be no charge at the ascension — literally, one on the city. The spectacle was set for the people of the city and county to witness, May 7, 1836. Mr. Wise wanted this flight to be particularly impressive, so he concocted the usual form of Balloon ad which was run in the Lancaster Journal, April 8, 15, 22, 29, and May 6, 1836. "BALLOON ASCENSION", it started, "Mr. J. Wise respectfully informs the inhabitants of the City of Lancaster, and its vicinity," it continued, "that he will make his first Ascension this season with his new and elegant SILK BALLOON, on Saturday, the 7th day of May next. The ascension will be made from an open common, West of the City, so that every spectator can have a view of the process of inflation and ascension. A COLLECTION WILL BE MADE ON THE GROUND.

ORDER OF ASCENSION: At 12 o'clock the Balloon will be brought on the ground, and the process of inflating commence. At 3 o'clock a handsome pioneer will be sent off to explore the different currents of air and at half past 3 o'clock, Mr. Wise will ascend to the regions above." April 8, 1836-42-td.

It must have been most satisfactory because, "as impartially quoted by the newspapers of the day," this truly splendid ascension entitled it to "honorable mention" and "particular commendation."

It was a Saturday afternoon affair and was staged "from the common near the head of West Orange and Chestnut Streets." The day was extremely disagreeable and a succession of showers seemed to indicate the flight would not be made. However, Mr. Wise determined to go through with the scheduled demonstration and when the people learned of his decision ("the news spread like wildfire," he said), the crowd began to assemble.

Occasional small balloons were released to excite the gathered throngs and to assure them that the great event would ultimately materialize. The balloon was finally properly inflated, and soon after 5 o'clock, Mr. Wise took possession of the frail basket ready for him, quickly adjusting his ballast and appliances. The cords were cut and amid waving of hands and shouts of the excited group, the glittering ball rose slowly and majestically and winged its way "to the regions above."

It was a perfect ascension and Mr. Wise stood very composedly in his little wicker car acknowledging the salutations. The balloon rose steadily for a few minutes, started its course in a direction south-by-east, and in something less than a quarter of an hour the height to which the balloon had risen "allowed the good people of Lancaster to see me no more." Some fear was expressed for his safety since he was headed for the Chesapeake Bay but news, later, confirmed the reports that at 8:30 that same day, he let off the gas and descended near Port Deposit, Maryland. So great was the acclaim and the excitement of the citizens of that town by way of welcome, that the lights and candles and lanterns brought by them came in contact with the escaping gas and immediately exploded the balloon "causing the entire destruction of the whole splendid machine." Destroyed and ruined were all the instruments, clothes, etc., and John Wise was so severely burned that he was taken to Philadelphia and confined to his room.

As he told it later, when he was sufficiently out of danger, he drew from notes he collected while soaring in the clouds and rated it "one of the best ascensions ever seen," and added other data interesting to the general observer. He had continued to keep notes of his progress all of the way and immediately after the cords had been cut in Lancaster, after two minutes had ascended through the cloud stratum and found the vapor to be quite warm and comfortable. Above the clouds it was "lit up in a brilliant white light and gave the appearance of a vast ocean of snow rolling along in the most majestic grandeur, and the cold, frosty state of the atmosphere from which it was beheld rendered this 'snow scene' most impressive."

He could hear from this height the familiar tune of martial music by a band of the city battalion of volunteers invited to play for the occasion. From a sudden opening of the clouds, he saw the Conestoga.

Discharging gas to ascertain his whereabouts, he swooped sufficiently low to hear a cowbell and a woodchopper's axe. He called, "How far am I from Lancaster?" and the echo was returned and this novelty so pleased him that he resorted to a one-way conversation to which his echo always replied. Tiring of this by-play, he trained his spy-glasses on a certain area and saw a man to whom he waved his flag to gain attention. He asked how far he was from Lancaster and the man replied, "Sixteen miles." "Upon which," Wise chronicled, "I bade him goodbye, threw out some ballast and went up through the clouds again."

Having cruised nearly two hours, he brought his balloon "over Conowingo Falls, in the Susquehanna;" he could discern that darkness was fast approaching and he arranged for his descent. Soon impenetrable darkness surrounded him on all sides, making the descent "awful yet grand and imposing." Even in grave danger John was always in command of scientific and artistic appreciation. He threw out his grapple iron and it caught on a fence, mooring the balloon momentarily. He then quickly filled the basket with stones to assure it a permanence of stability. Soon, a colored man came running to help him and informed John that he had landed "between Belle-Air and Port Deposit" on the plantation of a Mr. Stump, in Harford County, Maryland.

Mr. Stump and family were routed from their beds and extended Mr. Wise their hospitality and the help of their servants to collapse the balloon. This was where misfortune stepped in in the guise of the candles which ignited the escaping gas from the balloon and Wise's recollection of the final gesture was that "of a consuming fire, with a rushing noise, at a considerable height, it was totally consumed like a dying meteor." For once, John Wise had no pun handy for the occasion: His meteor had just burned out!

Even Matthias Zahm (7) put his pencil to his diary, and, with a crude drawing of a balloon, as though of particular significance, wrote: "Saturday, 7th to day John Wise made a grand ascension with his new silk balloon, he cut the cord 20 minutes after 5 o'clock and went off with a N. W. air, he was visible only about 7 or 8 minutes, when he entered the clouds in a S. E. direction from Lancaster." His postscript (8) "Wednesday 11th the account of John Wise's balloon being burn'd up after descending in Harford County is now confirmed," proves that he kept his eye and ear tuned in for the latest developments of his age.

John Wise concluded his escape story by the account of the fire which had badly burned him and some of the helpers, and of his shipment to Philadelphia for recovery. "By dint of blood letting," said he, "wholesome diet, and the constant application of cooling cataplasms, I was out in ten days with a new skin on my face and hands, determined to make a new balloon, feeling satisfied in my own mind that all my sufferings were overpaid by the experience I had gained in the adventure." (9).

On his arrival, later, in Lancaster, he was greeted with a most honorable and hospitable reception as well as a substantial voluntary monetary collection contributed by the citizens to procure a new balloon.

Thus was this Lancaster's memorable "successful" May 7, 1836, Balloon Ascension, another of the milestones in John Wise's famous career.

## NOTES

1. Photographs were used for newspaper illustration starting in the 1880's.
2. These are photostatic copies of originals in the Landis Valley Museum and were held to be of such importance as to be requested by the New York Institute of Aeronautical Sciences as part of their exhaustive exhibits on aviation — particularly the early phase of aeronautics under the section of Balloons.
3. After Mills' Second Ascension (**Lancaster Union**, June 5, 1835), Mills went into a column of rhapsody concerning his success and great elation, and, with a coy nod to the opposite sex, he closed his account with this pretty gem of gallantry: "Just before ascending, some ladies presented Rings, Bracelets, Locketts, etc., to be carried up to the clouds. They were restored after their voyage to their fair owners, who, no doubt, think them of HIGH VALUE on account of the danger they encountered."

From the files of the **Lancaster Journal**, November 7, 1834, is a lengthy and complete report of his SIXTH ASCENSION, November 1, 1834, by Mr. Mills himself, who was also given to as much glowing rhetoric and floral verbiage as Mr. Wise, but there is not the faintest mention of a "young lady of Lancaster" going aloft with him.

4. The account of this (**Lancaster Journal**, July 17, 1835) was brief: "Mr. Wise," it said, "a citizen of Lancaster, made a handsome ascension from Lebanon, of the 4th inst., and returned to mother earth, near the Sinking Spring Tavern, on the Reading and Lebanon Turnpike, within five miles of the former, in perfect safety."

5. On page 267 of his book he says: "In the following August I made two ascensions from Reading, Pennsylvania, neither of which was of importance enough to need detailed description." These were his fourth and fifth trials.

6. "Visitors," according to the ad.

7. Volume 47, No. 4, **Lancaster County Historical Society**: "Matthias Zahm's Diary" by Robert H. Goodell, page 66.

8. The same.

9. This running commentary is found in Chapters III, IV and V of Wise's **Through the Air**.

When Mr. Wise had completely recovered from his accident during the last experiment, and had determined to make this business of flying his vocation, on his return to Philadelphia he resolved that an observing and interrogating mind was necessary for these experiments. (1) All of this laid the required groundwork for his autobiography which he later published and the accounts of which experiments were embodied in his three literary works. (2)

He set about constructing a new balloon, called EXPERIMENT, made financially possible with what meagre means he possessed at the time, plus what he earned from employment at a concern engaged in the manufacture of philosophical instruments. At this time, too, he took up the study of the science of electricity which was to benefit him greatly in his aeronautic experimentation.

Mr. George Dill, of Lebanon County, had returned Mr. Wise's balloon EXPERIMENT which Wise had allowed to drift away because it had proven less successful than he had hoped when it was made. He repaired and readied it for a Philadelphia ascension, September 18, 1837, when amidst a vast throng, "our pilgrim of the air" had the cords cut and rose majestically.

Mr. Wise's own balloon, on its ascent, had been punctured by a small stone thrown by a boy, and the hole had grown larger as the balloon rose. The gas escaped rapidly, his descent was quick, and he just missed landing in the Delaware River, but was saved by some on-the-scene men at that point who fished him to safety.

In 1837, late October, Mr. Wise made another Philadelphia ascent with the Indians, Black Hawk and Keokuk the prophet, as greatly interested on-lookers. This time his descent nearly landed him in the middle of a raging forest fire and only by dint of casting out his speaking tube and some air bottles, to attain height and speed, was he able to cross over the conflagration in safety. Followed more trials from Easton, Allentown, Danville, Reading, Kutztown, Bellefonte, Lewistown, Wilkes Barre, Chambersburg, and other cities nearby. Once, his balloon rose to such a height as to cause its explosion, and during the dreadful descent, the lower half of the balloon doubled up into the upper half, creating the perfect parachute, landing Mr. Wise safely but badly shaken up. This near-catastrophe proved an inspiration and idea to Mr. Wise who, later, inserted a rip panel, which, when pulled at the propitious moment, would purposely explode the balloon and parachute him to safety. This was October 1, 1838.

Came additional novelties by way of double-balloon ascents and of conversation between the dual-ballooning aeronauts while aloft. One of these tandem flights Mr. Wise performed with Mr. Paullin — an accomplished aeronaut in his own right. August 1, 1840, found Mr. Wise making an ascent from the prison yard in Lancaster. (3) He landed near Dillerville and this ascent was reported to be the "most gratifying exhibition of the kind." The first reports of his charging for rides came from an ascension at Danville, Pennsylvania, where he tied the balloon to a tree with a long expanse of rope and at first offered a free ride to anyone interested enough to go up. He had no takers. Finally a brave young fellow with a trumpet accepted the challenge and while in the air gave some mighty blasts on his instrument, advertising the spectacle and setting at ease the more nervous. A crowd soon gathered and the charge of a quarter was levied. The price jumped to half a dollar and when the excitement grew to fever pitch, Mr. Wise charged a dollar. Even with this fantastic price, the demands of

the crowd were so great that he was compelled "to close the fun." He had realized about \$80.00. (4)

Mr. Wise interrupted his ascensions in 1841 (5) to dabble in local politics and the high flyer he took in this caused a nose dive which he carefully expunged from the intricate records of his life. Whether or not the editorial attack was justified, it is significant to note that Mr. Wise, ever ready with his pen for any occasion, never scratched a line in rebuttal or denial. The editorial, "Mr. Wise's Last Flight," conveyed the story of a feverish political condition at that time and punned its way through ridicule and double entendre, allowing Mr. Wise no chances of a comeback. "The last wonder of the town," the article read, "is a letter issued by Mr. Wise in favor of Banks and Stevens, calling upon the poor to oppose demagogues. Addressed to the People of Pennsylvania, it looks like the bulletin of some Commanding General on the eve of battle. We regret to be enabled to say that this last ascension of Mr. Wise will prove a failure. As for the man's democracy and his dislike of Demagogues, it may be seen best in the fact that he last year followed in the wake of the Log Cabin and Hard Cider Frolics. Making balloon ascensions and speeches alternately, we advise Mr. Wise to turn his attention to inflating **balloons** — the Public is not prepared for his new process of political gas expansion. It is known that in 1836 he may have voted for Van Buren, and in 1840, when he opposed him, Van Buren had within 3 votes of 500 majority! If Mr. Wise's Somerset from Van Buren to Harrison made us 60 odd votes, how many will his flip flap from Porter to the Banks average for us?" But it took more than an editorial lacing like this to discount Mr. Wise who was back again in the business of flying.

During the first part of August, 1842, at York, Pennsylvania, after the death of John Mills, Mr. Wise made an ascension in his new black silk balloon, the UNITED STATES, which experiment was reported to be the "most beautiful ascension ever witnessed in Pennsylvania, or probably in the Union." He sailed over Lancaster and landed on the farm of William Heister near New Holland, Pennsylvania. A huge sum of money was raised by the York citizens who demanded another aerial experiment which happened August 20, 1842, and which the **York Gazette** described as "exceeding the ne plus ultra in grandeur," and stated that it was a spectacle never before having been so "unutterably grand and sublime." The editorials of the day seemed to demand the quintessence of description.

In September, 1842, from Gettysburg, Mr. Wise jokingly promised to take the young Colonel M'Clellan with him, for \$50, and only when the Colonel got into the basket did John realize he was in earnest. But M'Clellan was not joking and, without warning, cut the ropes and was quickly carried aloft, alone. With luck and good weather and some scant knowledge of operating the balloon in his favor, he landed in York, the **Gazette** of that town going all out in reporting this "historical description."

In 1843, Mr. Wise conceived a project for crossing the Atlantic Ocean and presented his plan to "some gentlemen of Philadelphia." But his zeal frightened them to the point of their disassociation with the proposal and John Wise decided to try Congress. He hoped for this body to appropriate "a trifling sum." \$15,000 would have started the project, if not pay for the whole experiment. He



waited for a reply. But in the meantime, he continued with his flying and was available to every suggestion and offer to thrill any city contributing financially to an ascent. One of these came from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, spring of 1843, and on this flight he promised to drop in on "friends in Lancaster" via the "atmospherical current that always blows from west to east" in the higher regions of the atmosphere. This ascension was successful and soon he passed over Marietta in direct line towards Lancaster. When he got within earshot, they called aloud to him: "Wise, you have redeemed your pledge." (6)

And, indeed, he had. His ascent was described in detail "by my old and esteemed friend, John W. Forney, Esq., then of the **Intelligencer-Journal**, now of the **Philadelphia Press**." He descended in his "chariot of the clouds," southwest of the city, and was escorted by some young men who had attached themselves to the ropes of the balloon. Wise sailed through the streets at a slight elevation, "the great gas bag nearly touching the sides of the houses." Hat in hand, and amid great cheering, Mr. Wise passed through West King Street and halted in Centre Square, fronting North Queen Street. Here Mr. Wise was in his element, and aside from being "cool, collected and intrepid" he was also the showman and, as Forney wrote, "after a rest of about 15 minutes it soon became evident that Mr. Wise was about to attempt an ascension from Centre Square." The gas in the balloon had become so expended that it was incapable of carrying a heavy load, so Wise divested himself of nearly all his clothing but his pantaloons, even his shoes, and took the car off the balloon to cut the weight. His seat was only a narrow board attached to the cords of the balloon and when the "let her go" sign was given, he shot into the air like an arrow. The witnessing hundreds were amazed at the "singular boldness of the daring feat." He came down about two squares away and made his second triumphal entry through North Queen and East King Streets to his residence. A handsome collection was taken on the spot and paid over to Mr. Wise.

He had not given up the prospect of his proposed Atlantic crossing which he had set for the summer of 1844 and made a great proclamation which he sent to J. W. Forney for publication: "To All Publishers of Newspapers On the Globe," was the title, and the burden of his electric message was to advise the people of the world of his intentions. This was press-released throughout the Nation and all of civilized Europe. One of the many replies it elicited stated that Mr. Wise "may be destined to soar above the fame of such common men as Robert Fulton and Oliver Evans."

Mr. Wise, still waiting for a reply from Congress, wrote to that body, December 20, 1843, for this Trans-Atlantic appropriation, and their "favorable" decision he hoped for was embodied in the final line of Chapter XXI: "This petition was received, read and referred to the Committee on Naval Affairs where it slept." (7)

His balloons VESPERUS and COMET carried him through to 1846, when on August 8 of that year he ascended from West Chester, Pennsylvania, and came down to within speaking distance of persons below. He took notes of the trip: "Talking to people below as I passed along. Dogs barked. Distributing newspapers to the people who ran and picked them up. Crossed the Schuylkill above Norristown; Phoenixville a little up the river. Passed the Trappe, and over the



*Howard Taylor*

## SAILING UP THE SCHUYLKILL VALLEY

Near Trappe

From a Calendar of the Lebanon Steel Foundry and used by their permission.  
Engraved by the artist, Florence Taylor

Reading and Philadelphia Pike. Invitations from all around to come down. To cap the climax, one sang out, 'Come down and I will give you a bottle of brandy,' but it was impossible to land." His descent was less successful than his trip because the balloon entered an electric storm and crashed among the trees.

At this time (October 22, 1846), the Government was at war with Mexico and the plan to reduce the formidable Castle Juan de Ullon at Vera Cruz had fostered several projects and considerations. Mr. Wise stepped into the breach and rose to the occasion, sending a suggestion to the War Department to the effect that he would render the capture of the Castle as easy as launching a frigate. His startling plan was to send a balloon, about 100 feet in diameter, into the air, with a carrying-capacity of 20,000 pounds, and capable of inflation within a day's time. Equipped with a thousand percussion bomb-shells and torpedoes, and anchored to a ship in the harbor by a five-mile-long cable, the crew in their mile-high position over the fortress could easily bombard the Castle into submission without any fear of returned enemy fire and without the loss of a single man. His suggestion was publicly read, but was considered, in the main, another of his hare-brained jokes. The deflation of his idea prompted another famous chapter last-line: "The War Department," it read, "was not sufficiently advanced in its ideas, and like many other good suggestions, it came to nothing." This was after he had written to the War Department, December 10, 1846, to feel out the advisability of his plan. They didn't bother to reply. Having sold his old ROUGH AND READY, he made a new balloon and named it the same and made a Lancaster ascension, January 7, 1846, not memorable in any way with the exception of some scientific observations over the Conestoga River. "In concluding the account," he said, "ballooning is about half a century ahead of the age; but if the spirit of mechanical progress, necessarily requisite to a high percentage of scientific principles, keeps pace with the onward march of intellect, our children will travel to any part of the globe without the inconvenience of smoke, sparks and seasickness, and at the rate of 100 miles an hour." This observation was made about one hundred and ten years ago and is an understatement as anyone who follows the current trend in supersonic sciences will know. Speed in excess of four times that rate is already known even for commercial travel, and projectile experimentation and jet propulsion trials soar into the four-figure mileage speed.

Many balloon voyages and experimental flights were conducted by Mr. Wise from 1847 through 1860: Syracuse, Auburn, Buffalo, Rochester, Oswego — all New York cities. Ohio towns and cities were represented by Zanesville, Columbus, Springfield, Cincinnati, and many others. On some of these he was accompanied by his wife and son, Master Charles. But through all this barnstorming era, he still retained the secret hope of crossing the Atlantic Ocean and in 1851, still undaunted by their other refusals, he petitioned Congress for aid, to the tune of \$20,000. It was presented in the Senate by Mr. Douglas, and in the House by Mr. Madison. After presenting his reasons for the certainty of the venture, he said, "in conclusion, your petitioner will refer with pride and pleasure to the fact that Fulton, discoverer of the navigation of the ocean by steam, was also born in his native county and he hopes and feels that he shall be the first to apply the navigation of the air to the usefulness of man and demonstrate the practicability of aerial voyages around the globe."

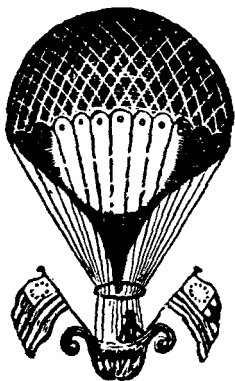
Meanwhile, his cruises over the United States continued and his pride in the success of his daring reached its height, when, on September 3, 1853, he allowed his son, Charles, then seventeen years of age, to make his solo flight. This was from Shannondale Springs, Virginia. Charles had been a frequent passenger with his father and had come to know the routine. His first ascent was most successful, remaining in the air nearly two hours, when he alighted ten miles from Hagerstown. He was helped out of the balloon car by about twenty persons who had appeared on the scene and in return Charles gave them souvenirs of his trip which consisted of "quantities of tissue paper," his flag staff, and a treat to a drink of wine from a bottle which he had carried with him.

In 1854, he sold his old balloon ULYSSES for a hundred dollars to Miss Lucretia Bradley, who readied herself for a solo flight in January of 1855, from Easton, Pennsylvania. In the air but half an hour, the balloon burst from overpressure and Lucretia landed with some force in a clover field about four miles from her point of starting.

The years 1855 through 1858 found Mr. Wise busy in the vicinity of Boston, and through the New England states with son Charles assisting with the junior balloons. These were named OLD AMERICA, YOUNG AMERICA, JUPITER and GANYMEDE. John's newest balloon at the time was called ATLANTIC and was built especially for an endurance run from St. Louis to New York, but more specifically to prove the possibility of his life-long dream of the trans-Atlantic voyage with a view to inaugurate a trans-Atlantic balloon line for the rapid transportation of mails and passengers from the United States to principal European cities. A Trans-Atlantic Balloon Company was organized with a five-man partnership, each owning equal shares in the project. The crew consisted of Mr. Wise, who was Director in Chief; John Lamountain, Aeronaut; Mr. O. A. Gager, Scientific Observer. A reporter, one Mr. Hyde of the **St. Louis Republican**, was welcomed belatedly to the group. The St. Louis Gas Company arranged for the balloon inflation; the American Express sent along overland mail, papers and letters. The larder was stored with food, water, ice, well-cooked game, a bucket of lemonade and a basket of wine. The gay, enthusiastic party was cut loose on the evening of July 1, 1859, at 6 P. M.

The take-off was perfect. Passing over the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, St. Louis was soon lost to their view and the happy and excited group settled down "into a state of composure." Sailing over broad expanses of pasture, towns and villages, the novelty soon wore off and during the heat of the next day, Mr. Wise decided to take a nap in the upper basket where his position was shared by the neck of the gas bag. The discharge of the fumes of the gas, together with Mr. Wise's exertion of the previous day's arrangements, lulled him into a state of stupor, and when the men in the boat below called to learn of his silence, Mr. Wise was unable to reply, having been overcome. In fact, he was breathing so heavily and convulsively that Mr. Gager climbed above to discover John's plight and arrived just in time to save him from asphyxiation. The gas hose had covered his face, and his mouth and nostrils had received the full discharge of the escaping vapor. On his recovery, Mr. Wise stated that he had been in a deep dream state, featuring "diving bell experiences and interplanetary balloon voyages." Thereafter, he kept watch while the others in the boat below took their turns at sleeping and resting. Following the course of the Wabash, over Fort

Grand, Sublime and Interesting Spectacle!



**The Mammoth Balloon 'Hercules'**  
AGAIN IN SERVICE!

**G**RAND and Topical Ascensions, on **FRIDAY** and **SATURDAY**, the 23rd and 24th of August, inst., from the city of Lancaster.

Topical ascensions will be made on Friday, the 23rd, with a rope and windlass, to commence at 9 o'clock, A. M., and continue during the day. The Balloon will be secured during the night, and operations will continue during Saturday, the 24th, until 4 o'clock, P. M., when the Aeronaut, Mr. Wise, will leave *terra firma* for a long voyage with a party of passengers.

If, however, the weather on Friday, should be too boisterous to retain the "Hercules" till Saturday, then the grand ascension, with a party of passengers, will be made on Friday, at 4 o'clock, P. M., and an effort will be made by the Aeronaut to bring the Balloon back to the city without discharging the gas, for next day's operations. For topical ascensions, persons will be charged according to height, from 500 to 1000 feet, and ten minutes time will be allowed for each ascension, exclusive of the time of letting out and taking in the rope.

For the long voyage, the fare will be \$150. For seats, either topical or the voyage, apply to John Wise.  
[aug 20-30]

An Advertisement that Appeared in the Lancaster Intelligencer August 20, 1850.

Wayne, they finally passed Lake Erie and Toledo, calculating they would reach Buffalo by noon. The trip of 250 miles over the lake proved to be the most monotonous on their journey. Over Niagara Falls, they took a look at the spectacle and Mr. Gager conceded that it "was no great shakes after all." But heavy clouds started to agitate and compress the atmosphere and they knew they were riding the advance of an approaching storm. Increasing in intensity, the balloonists found it impossible to descend to Rochester when some or all of them might get off to take the mail to New York. To make matters worse, the ballast had spun out and the balloon was quickly falling. To gain immediate height, they were forced to throw overboard the machinery which allowed the balloon to rise rapidly and to soar above the wind-whipped trees and rocky gale-swept terrain. Fast thinking on the part of Mr. Wise called for additional items to be thrown overboard to attain further height for the balloon, which now was perilously close to the angry and raging waters of the lake. Over went the champagne, the sack carrying the mail (8), the valise with all his clothing, and his silver cigar case. As the last bottle of wine was about to be tossed out, and the descent of the balloon had been checked somewhat, Mr. Wise proposed that they drink the last bottle themselves, but the three men were too frightened to participate with Mr. Wise. Accordingly, John drank a cup and then dropped the remainder over the side of the fast sailing vessel. Only the hatchet and grapple hook of the original items in the car remained. The three men by this time had cut away the boat below and had climbed into the upper basket with Mr. Wise.

The balloon would rise and fall, occasionally striking the water, and a steamer on the lake was passed with the men waving their hats, the women their handkerchiefs in a cheery salute to what seemed to them smooth flying, but Mr. Wise conjectured that little did they dream that "we were sailing with death warrants in our hands."

Suddenly, the car of the balloon crashed violently on the margin of the shore but the grappling hook which Mr. Wise then threw out was immediately broken by the force of impact and the balloon dashed along the tree-tops "like a maddened elephant through the jungle." In its headlong charge, the great gas bag finally lodged in the side of a large tree; the car, with the four frightened men in a dazed heap at the bottom, hung by three ropes and dangled in mid-air.

Stretching their limbs to find out if any bones were broken, they managed to lower themselves to the ground. Nobody was hurt, but their garments were a little the worse for wear. A group soon collected and ministered to their immediate comforts. They had landed in Henderson, New York, 2:35 P. M., July 2, 1859. Telegraphic messages had been relayed notifying the public of the balloon journey, and it was thought advisable to hold a public meeting by candlelight to substantiate the facts for posterity. This was held in the public hall where a proclamation of the journey was evidenced by the documents Wise carried. A president and secretary were provided and three of the four aeronauts sat on the stage not unlike visiting nobility. Mr. Lamountain had remained behind to untangle the balloon from the tree.

Mr. Wise was forced to wear a pair of checkered pants, six inches too short, but the "longest the town afforded." In this unique and grotesque appearance, he briefly and truthfully narrated their experiences. "Thus ended,"

said Mr. Wise, "the greatest balloon voyage that was ever made." The party had gone 1200 miles in 19 hours and 50 minutes, a record unsurpassed and unbroken until 1910. That night, all of the men took the train for Albany on their way home. (9)

This flight had its influence on the fiction of the day, for it had been witnessed by a pilot on one of the river steamers left far behind in the wake of Wise's speeding balloon. Thirty years later the pilot had become famous as an author whose **TOM SAWYER ABROAD** was exaggerated into a fantastic story of an airship flight from St. Louis to the Sahara Desert. Mark Twain was that pilot

Also impressed was a Parisian playwright who had waited vainly for Wise's balloon to appear in France. In his novel, **MYSTERIOUS ISLAND**, Wise's flight was patterned into a description of the escape of Civil War prisoners to a remote Pacific Island. He who had waited was Jules Verne.

The year 1861 found Mr. Wise still piling up accredited flights, but these were cut short by the entry of the Union into the Civil War.

## NOTES

1. This phase of his career is the comprehensive survey of Chapters VI through XLVIII, pages 285-553, of his book **Through the Air**.

2. In 1850, **A System of Aeronautics** (published in Philadelphia) was his first literary effort which was incorporated later in his huge volume **Through the Air**. In 1870, he wrote a thin pamphlet called **Lightning and the Lightning Rod, Its Use and Abuse**, with "Thirty Years in the Clouds" as an Observer of Thunder and Thunder Storms. Published in Lancaster by the Express Printing Office, a copy of this rarity rests in the Franklin and Marshall College Library. In 1873, Today Printing and Publishing Company, in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, etc. issued his 650-page **Through the Air**, an account of his 40 years' experience as an aeronaut.

3. Matthias Zahn records in his diary: "August 1, This afternoon a few minutes before 4 o'clock, John Wise made an ascension with his large Balloon from the jailyard, he was up about 4 or 5 minutes when he came down in James Cameron's field near Dillerville." (**Lancaster County Historical Society's "Matthias Zahn's Diary"** by Robert H. Goodell, Vol. 47, No. 4, 1943). John Wise dates this flight August 5, 1840 (probably a typographical error) and his duration of 20 minutes.

4. Mr. Wise charged \$100 to \$150 per person for extended "trips."

5. From the files of the **Intelligencer**, October 12, 1841. In 1850 Wise was a school director and select councilman.

6. Matthias Zahn was again ready with his recording pen to note that another ascension (which John Wise does not include in his account) took place from Lancaster when "a John Weiss (!) made an ascension from the yard of Sowers and Sheaff, in Queen Street, and landed near John Forney's Tavern on the Reading Road." September, of that same year, he stated that Mr. Wise made an ascension from York and landed near Millerstown, "from whence he was brought to Lancaster and taken home, not having gass enough to make another assention here." See Note No. 3 for reference.

7. Undoubtedly inspired by Mr. Wise's attempt to procure finances for the Atlantic crossing was Edgar Allen Poe. He had just reached New York from Philadelphia with a sick wife and with less than \$5 in his pockets and it was more from necessity than desire that his story of the Atlantic crossing was written. Published April 13, 1844, was the announcement that a full story would be out in a special edition, next morning. The full story purported to be the amazing adventure of a three-day Atlantic crossing from North Wales to Charleston, S. C. The party of men was supposed to have left April 6, 1844, and landed April 9, 1844, in Monck Mason's Flying Machine, and the account of this fictional journey was given a full page in the **New York Sun** as a fact. This paper was later forced

to admit that "the intelligence was erroneous." The story had all the earmarks of scientific authenticity and the dirigible balloon supposedly used in this fabricated flight was actually a model proposed (but never used) by Charles Green's fellow aeronaut, Monck Mason, in 1843. A bit of local color is injected here for at this time Poe ran a column called DOINGS OF GOTHAM for the old **Columbia Spy**, (**Sunday News**, October 2, 1949) and in Poe's second column, he discussed this balloon hoax as though it had been the work of someone else.

8. Even though **Hobbies**, August 1934, carried the story and said that the mail pouch was retrieved intact from the lake and later forwarded to New York City, Milbank said, "this particular flight cannot be claimed as the first instance of mail transport. Another flight, about a month later, can be given the honor. On that occasion, August 16, 1859, the Postmaster of Lafayette, Indiana, delivered to the aeronaut John Wise an official mailbag containing 123 letters and 23 pamphlets for delivery in New York City. Although weather conditions prevented a flight of more than a few miles when the balloon JUPITER was forced down in Crawfordsville, Indiana, the mail duly sealed was taken to New York for delivery by the Postal authorities. Whether the letters, addressed "via Balloon Jupiter" were postmarked at Lafayette, Crawfordsville or New York will apparently be determined when one of them is discovered."

9. One account of this trip, THE GREATEST BALLOON VOYAGE EVER MADE (by Esther M. Douty, **American Heritage**, June 1955) follows Mr. Wise's own account faithfully. A second, JOURNEY INTO NOWHERE (from **Fotorama**, 1955), by Walter Gibson, states that John Wise organized this five-man company in direct competition with the Pony Express which was being planned then to carry mail from Missouri to the Pacific Coast. On the strength of his proposed Balloon Express (for which the American Express Company promised him a mail contract), the Trans-Atlantic Balloon Company was organized. That this flight from St. Louis to New York was to have been the first leg of the Trans-Atlantic crossing is doubted, unless cited figuratively. More exactly, according to Milbank, "the balloon had been christened ATLANTIC in anticipation of the later trans-oceanic flight." In January 1894, **Aeronautics** ran THE LONGEST VOYAGE — a story of this venture. **Hobbies**, for August 1934, repeated the account.



## CHAPTER VI

Few historians and chroniclers of events have gone to the trouble to mention, more than in passing, John Wise's participation in the Civil war. This could have arisen from the fact that the part he played showed up to no advantage; indeed, with the elements and conditions at great odds with him from the start, the sorry lot which was his was deemed best omitted, or glossed over quietly and lightly. He even seemed to start off on the wrong foot by volunteering his services, (1) not as a balloonist at all but as the captain of a picked company of men from his hometown, Lancaster. In view of his wide reputation and long experience as an aeronaut, and his intense interest in aerostatics from the aspect of a scientific profession (2), it is surprising he did not offer to serve as a military balloonist.

Whatever his reasons, his initial attempt was that of an officer of the line, but he later shared the distinction with his former associate, John LaMountain, of being sought out by the military authorities and offered an appointment as balloonist with the Federal Army. This was quite an honor in consideration of the failure of Lowe (a contemporary aeronaut) to receive recognition. Lowe was supported by President Lincoln and Prof. Joseph Henry, of the Smithsonian Institution, but by action of the Chief of Topographical Engineers Mr. Wise was offered the appointment.

Mr. Wise, aged 53, had been busy in Lancaster drilling a company of men for the duration of the conflict. Early in May 1861, he wrote to Secretary Simon Cameron tendering the services of this unit. But he had not fully acquainted himself of the administrative system that had been adopted in the marshalling of this army. The raising of militia and volunteer troops had been placed in the hands of the State Governors, who, in turn, supervised the organization and equipping of the officers and men, and when they were duly organized they tendered these regiments and batteries to the Secretary of War for service. (3)

Therefore his offer was referred by Cameron to Governor Andrew G. Curtin. It was while waiting for the processing of this proposal that Wise was called for service as a balloonist by the Bureau of Topographical Engineers. On June 10, 1861, (4) Major Hartman Bache, acting Chief of the Corps of the Topographical Bureau, dictated a telegram to John Wise asking for the estimated cost of a balloon of 500 pounds lifting power and the amount to pay the aeronaut would demand for his services. (5) This telegram was mistakenly sent to Philadelphia where Bache understood John Wise had lived. (6) Receiving no reply, he wired to G. Castor Smith, of the Lighthouse Office in Philadelphia (7), who sent word that Wise was believed to be in Lancaster but that he had located another aeronaut, William Paullin, of Philadelphia. (8)

Bache repeated his offer to Wise in Lancaster (9) who replied that a balloon fitting the description would cost \$300.00 and that his services would be "gratis" in the cause of the Union (10). But at this point, complications arose: Captain Whipple, also of the Topographical Bureau, had been detailed to investigate the possibility of balloons for war service and had been first consulted by his Chief, Bache, before Wise's offer was accepted and orders given to the aeronaut to construct the apparatus and report for duty (11).

Evidently Whipple considered a balloon of the specifications described in Bache's original communication to Wise inadequate for military purposes, for he had seen, previously, Lowe's demonstration to President Lincoln, in Washington, of the aerial telegraph from the balloon ENTERPRISE and had also seen an experimental ascension of James Allen. He seemed to be impressed by the dimensions, performances and workmanship (12).

At any event, Whipple and Bache went into some deliberation, after receiving Wise's reply, but it was not until June 26, 1861, that Bache reopened negotiations with Mr. Wise. This time he telegraphed for an estimate of the cost of a balloon "of the best India raw silk, 20,000 cubic feet capacity, everything complete" and how long it would take to construct (13).

Wise replied that the cost would be \$850.00 and would require two weeks to build (14). He followed this telegram with a letter detailing the figures which estimate was calculated on the basis of cost only. He had no desire to exact any profit on a war balloon but wished "to introduce a means of Topographical and Hydrographical Engineering into Government use." (15) He offered proof of his scientific knowledge by asking permission to send Bache a copy of his "System of Aeronautics." (16) And, in conclusion, he referred Bache to Prof. Henry of the Smithsonian Institution for testimony of his professional standing. His recommendation was considered the best the authorities could wish. (17)

With Bache convinced, five days later it was publicly announced in the press that Wise had been appointed as a Military Balloonist. (18) Lowe was disgruntled at the choice and echoed a complaint that the appointment was "another of Cameron's official malfeasances." (19) But all wrangling to the contrary, Wise completed the balloon on July 16, 1861. (20) And the following day Whipple telegraphed asking how soon the equipment and operator could be in Washington. (21) McDowell was advancing on Centreville and a major action in the next few days seemed imminent (22)

So Wise, with son Charles as assistant, left Lancaster with his balloon the same day as the telegram was received (23) and arrived in Washington the next morning, reporting to Major Bache, and remained waiting orders from Whipple who was then with McDowell advancing into Virginia. (24) His orders came the next day from Whipple at Centreville for Wise to inflate his balloon and report to McDowell's Headquarters. (25)

When John Wise had not reported by July 12, 1861, Lowe had been ordered by Whipple to join McDowell's column, (26) and was in the midst of preparation when John and Charles Wise reached Washington. (27) The plan of balloon reconnaissance in the Manassas Campaign had come to the attention of Major Albert J. Myer, Chief Signal Officer of the Regular Army, and on July 15 he requested Whipple to arrange for him to take charge of Lowe's balloon operations in the field. He wrote Whipple (28) the same day: "Get Captain Woodruff, your Chief, to apply to the Secretary that I may be ordered to arrange the signal communications from the balloon to the earth. Whether this is done either by electricity or aerial signals it is my duty to arrange it. We can keep up communication easily and to points some miles distant from that of the ascension." (29)

After much traditional red tape, Myer was finally handed the necessary orders permitting him to take charge of Lowe's balloon party, (30) which he lived to regret later.

Bureau Dep. Engrs  
July 20., 1861

Mr. John Wise,  
Washington D.C.

Sir,

Capt. Whipple sends a telegram to Maj. Hartman Bache Corps Dep. Engrs to send you and the balloon filled to Centreville, Vir. as quickly as possible.

Enclosed is an order for the Sec. Gen. Co. for gas.

Wagon and four horse team and a balloon party of twenty men will be sent to the Columbian Armory as speedily as possible, report to Maj. Mayer, U.S.A. Signal officer.

Very Respectfully  
Yours Obedt. Servt.

J. C. Woodruff,  
Capt Dep. Engrs  
Asst in Bureau

By the time Wise had reached Washington, Lowe was already filling his balloon from the gas valves but Wise forced him to step aside to allow him (this Pennsylvania rival) to connect his own specifically ordered balloon to the same gas main. (31) Wise's equipment was complete even to the precaution against capture. As part of his ballast, he carried a number of bombs and percussion grenades which could be rained down on the enemy were the balloon to drop within reaching distance to prevent its capture. The release of them would enable the balloon to rise to a position of security. (32)

So John Wise inflated his balloon at the Columbian Armory (33) and was joined by a detail of twenty picked men from Col. Wm. F. Small's 26th Pennsylvania Infantry. The plan called for him to march on Friday night, July 19, reach Centreville before morning and his ascension was scheduled by daylight, Saturday the 20th, to take observations two miles from the Confederate lines. An officer was to go along up who was to signal observed movements and important details to McDowell's Headquarters (34). But the complication in completing all the details did not allow him to get under way until 2 o'clock on the 21st (35) making him about 30 hours late. The plans of operation were miscarried from the very start, as it was on the 21st that McDowell's army was routed at Manassas.

At 2 o'clock, Sunday morning, Major Myer joined and took command of the balloon party. The inflated balloon towed by mooring ropes made slow progress from the Columbian Armory, through Georgetown, following the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. More than once the detail of men were forced to swim or wade the canal in order to maneuver the balloon through trees, thick clumps and tall bushes along the tow path. Mr. Wise and son Charles supervised the handling of the cables and by noon, the party had not gone even half way. (36)

Even from this distance the sound of battle could be heard. The thunder of the artillery and the continued roll of sustained musketry filtered across the miles from Bull Run's raging battlefield. But with the excited pitch to which the men had been keyed, the advance progressed perceptibly though not sufficiently for Major Myer, who was not satisfied with the pace. He ordered the balloon (37) to be tied to the wagon to hasten the march, a plan of which Wise disapproved. The horses were whipped to a smart trot and the wagon sped at a rapid advance forward towards Fairfax Court House. When but a short distance from there, the party ran into a densely wooded patch and the balloon was caught in the branches of the trees as in a vise. Impatiently, Myer ordered the horses driven forward in a dash to extricate the big inflated envelope by force; large rents were torn in the balloon, the gas escaped, and the whole thing rendered useless, making aerial observations in the Battle of Bull Run impossible. (38)

Damaged beyond all field repair, no gas available for inflation, Myer ordered the men under Wise's command to return to Washington, make repairs, and return to the front as quickly as possible. for Myer supposed the battle would last several days. He proceeded alone to the front and reported as Signal Officer to McDowell's Headquarters (39). Despite this error in judgment on his part, his remaining service was one of distinction and gallantry and he was cited in McDowell's dispatches (40).

Wise and his exhausted party reached the Columbian Armory about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, but despite his own fatigue he set about repairing the extensive damage to the balloon. By the 23rd of July, it was ready again for service (41) but he never returned to Manassas for the shattered remnants of McDowell's routed army streamed in disorder and panic into the capital.

He remained there while the McDowell army was rallied and reorganized, and Whipple took up his duties anew at Arlington Heights. He asked Wise to inflate the balloon and bring it there at once under the charge of Lt. Abbot, and ordered Major Myer along to ascend with Wise and signal to headquarters the enemy's movements.

The party arrived at Arlington on the 24th of July, the Wednesday following the battle, and ascensions were made in the afternoon when Wise asserted he saw several pieces of artillery bearing on the capital about five miles from the city (42). Completing this mission, he returned to Georgetown with instructions to move forward early the next morning for observations at Ball's Cross Roads (43).

So, at sunrise, July 26, Wise and his men set out but they seemed to be encumbered with their knapsacks and rifles in such a manner that the mooring ropes of the balloon were ineffectually managed. He ordered the men to remove their knapsacks and heavy muskets and place them on the floor of the balloon car to aid in a quicker progress along the line. But he didn't reckon with the stiff breeze which had sprung up and which caused the great gas bag to strain against the ropes which were soon tangled in the overhead telegraph wires and which eventually cut through these manila ropes, freeing the balloon. It arose with a great surge and with it its precious cargo of guns and knapsacks and sailed off in the direction of the Confederate lines (44).

With great presence of mind, Wise ordered the few men who still carried their muskets to fire into the gas-filled envelope to bring it down, saving it, he hoped, from capture. But, alas, the bullet holes were too small to make any change in the direction of the fast sailing balloon. Luckily, a number of men near Arlington sensed the tragedy and fired a volley of shots, bringing it down to earth near General Lee's home. After feasting on the rations of food stored in the knapsacks, the troops packed up the collapsed balloon and sent it back again to the Columbian Armory (45).

Whipple was waiting for the balloon party when news reached him of the disaster, and if the first failure had made him angry, this second collapse made him livid with rage. The oaths and unbridled profanity he poured out on Wise, with Charles, a "young man of tender years" present at this scorching interview, was rather dreadful to the senses of Mr. Wise, who once had intended to study for the ministry. He was particularly sorry that Charles had to be a witness to Whipple's anger. But Whipple might have had some cause to give vent to his spleen at this series of frustrations though John Wise was not at fault; the elements of bad luck were more than he could cope with. Resenting this eloquent flow of profanity he returned the dubious compliment with the remark that "the balloon part of the disastrous affair at Bull Run was just about as good as the fighting part." (46) The strained relations between the two men did not

sever Wise's connections with the army nor did they dampen his efforts to prove the balloon an auxiliary form of military equipment. Aside from Wise's failures, the Balloon Corps became an important branch of our military service (47).

These balloons were sent up from all parts of the camp and when there was but little wind and the atmosphere clear, they proved exceedingly efficient in disclosing the position and movement of the rebels. It was annoying to the Confederates to see these silken globes floating and suspended in the air with the attached car underneath knowing that the Union men with their powerful glasses could scrutinize all their movements. A strong 2,000 ft. cord length held the balloon at any height and the balloon could be brought down very easily by pulley and tackle from below. Generally, two or three went up together. An area of four miles in diameter was commanded. Many of Wise's suggestions were carried out by Lowe later in the war when he, Wise, retired from the actual field of battle.

It was in Lowe's capacity as balloonist that he demonstrated the use of the wireless to the ground below. Lincoln had handed a scrawled note which read: "Lt. Gen. Scott, please see Professor Lowe once more about his balloon." And it was after the interview with the President that, with an eye on the history books, he linked Lincoln's study by wire and from a height of 1,000 feet, sent this first telegraph message: "The city with its girdle of encampments presents a superb view." On August 2, 1861, he was appointed Chief Aeronaut, Balloon Corps, Union Army, and would resort to the use of the telegraph to inform the White House of the blow-by-blow account of an actual battle. Lowe was also credited with fighting with and capturing the ship that was the pride of the three-balloon Confederate Air Force! One day he met Mathew Brady circulating about the camp and arranged for an aerial-photograph venture. Brady's pictures from the balloon were the first ever seen taken from this bird's-eye view.

Even so, these two failures of Wise's had prejudiced Whipple against all balloons. And when Lowe had been ordered to take his balloon to Arlington for ascensions and had been compelled to deflate it because of a sudden storm, Whipple, who had waited for this, the third occasion, for the arrival of a balloon only to be disappointed, declared he would have nothing more to do with balloons (48), and washed his hands of the whole sorry matter. Even on certain of Wise's suggestions he defined his attitude clearly in a letter to Bache. Said he, "the failure of Mr. Wise's War Balloon has caused great disappointment. American Aeronauts have thus far proved less successful than the French were at the close of the last century. I cannot recommend new experiments." (49)

In this dismissal, Whipple was unfair because the French had been trained and especially selected for their technical knowledge and Wise must have felt keenly the obvious lack of appreciation of his efforts. He had been blamed for the Bull Run affair which was the fault of Major Myer; and Whipple inferred that Wise was the cause of the mishap on the way to Ball's Cross Roads. Wise had received no pay, not even rations for himself and son Charles; he had furnished the balloon for the army's use without profit and without wages for the labor of construction. He even bore the expense of the two damaged balloons (50). So it was with a sigh of relief when he received an order for a balloon from a Western engineering firm (51), that he notified Woodruff he was leaving

Washington for Lancaster and offered to send a trained aeronaut to resume operations. He even promised to return to the capital within twenty-four hours should his services be required (52). There is no indication in the records that the letter was ever acknowledged. (53)

He left Washington on August 13 a disappointed man (54), but while his aeronautic services were ended, back in Lancaster he set about raising a unit and by October had a cavalry troop under arms known as the Lochiel Grays (55) which was mustered into the United States Service as Company "F", 9th Cavalry, Pennsylvania Volunteers (56).

His fellow citizens of Lancaster appreciated his services and sincerity far more than did the engineer officers in Washington, and presented Mr. Wise with a handsome sword, a relic of the War of 1812, when his company was about to leave for active service (57).

After several months of cavalry service, his health became impaired from hardship and exposure and he was compelled to retire. He returned to Lancaster to prepare a new edition of his **System of Aeronautics** (58) which he called **Through the Air**. This was published in 1873.

Lowe carried on after Wise in the matter of ballooning but in spite of many of his contributions to Union victories, the War Department was dissatisfied; his expense accounts were attacked and his performances criticized. When he half-heartedly offered to resign, Secretary of War Stanton snapped up the resignation. Lowe packed up and left the army.

With Lowe and Wise both out of the service and with no one having any technical skill to take their places, the Balloon Corps passed out of existence (59).

## NOTES

1. With the kind permission of the publishers, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, nearly the entire chapter on John Wise, from **Aeronautics in the Union and Confederate Armies**, by F. Stansbury Haydon, has been quoted. Only those particulars not immediately concerned with Wise's active service, and certain footnotes not immediately bearing on the history of the local aeronaut, have been deleted. The account as given by Mr. Haydon is the most complete account of any man's day-by-day life and activity barring **The Day Lincoln Was Shot**. We are grateful to the publishers for the use of this pertinent and valuable data.

2. Mr. Wise, more than any other of his contemporary aeronauts, with the exception of Lowe, approached his work and profession from the scientific point of view. He continually carried on meteorological and atmospheric experiments, made tests to demonstrate the value of various types of parachutes, and invented other improvements. He made experiments with falling bodies and with the effect of altitude on sound waves, tested theories of air currents, recorded data on atmospheric conditions at various levels and on electric phenomena.

3. General Orders, No. 15, AGO, May 4, 1861, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.

4. It is appropriate that Major Bache (1797 - 1872) should have been prominently connected with the first experiments with military balloons in this country. He was the grandson of Benjamin Franklin, the first known American to have suggested the possibility of balloons in warfare. See also Chapter I, Note 3.

5. The telegram was missent and Wise never received it.

6. Bache to Wise, June 10, 1861. MS Letterbooks, Bureau of Topographical Engineers.

7. Bache was at this time, in addition to his other duties, Engineer of the 4th Lighthouse District.

8. A well-known aeronaut of the period who later served with the Balloon Corps of the Army of the Potomac under Lowe.

9. Telegram to John Wise: "Send cost of balloon of five hundred power and operators services. Hartman Bache." Original telegram in possession of the writer. Dated Washington, June 12, 1861.

10. Wise to Bache, June 12, 1861. MS W505, LRTE. (A key to these initials will follow the notes to avoid confusion and to save space.)

11. Bache to Whipple, June 13, 1861, MS LBTE, XII, 445.

12. T. S. C. Lowe to Sec. Stanton, June 4, 1863, 3 O.R., III, 256.

13. Bache to Wise, June 26, 1861. Telegram read: "Estimate expense for Balloon of best India raw silk, Capacity 20,000 cubic feet, cordage of linen, everything complete and how soon can it be made. Original telegram in possession of writer.

14. Wise to Bache, June 26, 1861, MS W546, LRTE.

15. Wise to Bache, June 26, 1861, MS W839, LRTE.

16. The full title: **A System of Aeronautics, Comprising the Earliest Investigations and Modern Practice and Art.** (Philadelphia, 1850)

17. Wise to Bache, June 26, 1861. MS W839, LRTE.

18. Among many others: Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 1, 1861.

19. Cincinnati **Commercial**, July 4, 1861.

20. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 17, 1861.

21. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 18, 1861.

22. General Orders No. 17 July 16, 1861. (McDowell's movement and preliminary combat order.)

23. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 17 and 18, 1861.

24. Bache to Whipple, July 18, 1861, MS LBTE, XXII, 504.

25. Whipple to Bache, July 19, 1861, MS W850, LRTE.

26. Lowe to Stanton, June 4, 1863, 3 O.R., III, 256.

27. Lowe to Bache, July 29, 1861, from the Lowe Papers.

28. Israel C. Woodruff at this time was assistant chief of the Bureau of Topographical Engineers.

29. Myer to Whipple, July 15, 1861, MS LBTE, XXII, 501.

30. Special Orders, No. 117, HQA, July 17, 1861. 1 O.R. II, i, 421.

31. Lowe to Bache, July 29, 1861, MS, Lowe Papers.

32. Wise in the Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 17, 1861. Another valued inclusion of these Wise Papers in the writer's collection is the "Pass For Balloon Party," issued July 20, 1861 by A. Beckwith. It reads: "The bearer Maj. Myer U.S.A. with his party is entitled to pass over the Ferry and through the lines to join Gen. McDowell in the advance."

33. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 24, 1861.

34. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 22, 1861.

35. John Wise, **Through the Air**, p. 554.

War Correspondence of the Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 24, 1861.

36. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 24, 1861.

37. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 24, 1861.

John Wise, **Through the Air**, 554-555.

38. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 24, 1861.

39. John Wise, **Through the Air**, p. 555.

40. McDowell's Report, Battle of Bull Run, Aug. 4, 1861. 1 O.R., II, 322-323.

41. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 24, 1861.

42. John Wise, **Through the Air**, p. 555.

43. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 26, 1861.

44. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 29, 1861, July 27, 1861.

45. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, July 29, 1861.

46. Wise to Woodruff, June 5, 1863, MS W542, LRTE. See also Chapter III, Note 3.

47. **History of the Civil War**, Vol. II. Page 35. By John S. C. Abbott.

48. Whipple to Woodruff, August 11, 1861, MS W912, LRTE.



49. Whipple to Bache, August 6, 1861, MS W920, LRTE.
50. Wise to Bache, June 26, 1861, MS W839, LRTE.
51. Wise to Woodruff, August 13, 1861, MS W970, LRTE.
52. Wise to Woodruff, August 13, 1861, MS W970, LRTE. Evidently resenting what he felt was shabby treatment, Wise later presented a claim for his personal expenses adding a charge for his son's services. Obtaining no satisfaction, the matter was placed in the hands of a Lancaster attorney for collection. There is no record that the claim was ever paid.
53. The letter is filed in the Bureau's correspondence without disposition entry and the outgoing letterbooks contain no copy of an answer.
54. Wise to Woodruff, August 13, 1861, MS W970, LRTE.
55. Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, October 26, 1861.
56. Wise to the Editor of the Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**, October 14, 1861. Ellis and Evans' History of Lancaster County, p. 126.
57. Dr. Charles Herbst to Wise; Wise to Herbst, November 8, 1861. Both letters the same day in the Lancaster **Daily Evening Express**.
58. Wise to Woodruff, November 28, 1861. MS W948, LRTE.
59. **Coronet**, March 1948: Air Ace of the Civil War, by Peter J. Harkins.

From another copy of a letter by Wise in the writer's collection, as late as Feb. 3, 1868, John Wise was still trying to collect for his services. He closed the long letter with the statement: "I had put my claim into the hands of J. B. Livingston, Esqr., to collect for me four or five years ago but the Topographical Dept. of War sent me a voluminous document of transcripts to know why they should not pay and not one of them indicated anything more than I have here stated. Had I charged according to my professional services as they were paid for in my civil operations, I would have it not less than \$3,000.00. But you will please and do the best for me you can. I am now poor and even a little return of the money I spent for the Government would come good to me now." This must have been pigeon-holed in the Government file-and-forget department for all correspondence seems to have ended.

#### **Glossary of Abbreviations Cited in the Footnotes:**

- AGO — Adjutant General's Office.
- HQA — Headquarters of the Army.
- LBTE — Letterbooks, Bureau of Topographical Engineers.
- LRTE — Letters Received, Bureau of Topographical Engineers.

## CHAPTER VII

After the Civil War heartbreak Mr. Wise curtailed some of his activity and set about to start the preparation of his Autobiography (1). But he still had the urge to fly and his notes record a July 20, 1871, ascension made from Chambersburg, Pa., in his balloon "Gambetta" (2). The weather was uncertain, but his ascent to 9,000 feet was unique in that he and a companion rose from the ground amid a 90 degree temperature, penetrated a thunderstorm to rise above it into a snow-filled cloud. Above this it was clear as a crystal, "just one of those peculiar conjunctions of meterological phenomena one encounters on rare occasions," said John.

In October, 1871, John Wise made an ascent from Gettysburg, Pa., (which was a repetition of a feat done twenty-nine years before from the same spot), and found the little old cemetery in the midst of "one of the most beautiful burial grounds in the land." He made his descent in York, Pa.

Mr. Wise, now at the age of 71, had drifted into rather financial straits (3) and as the people of St. Louis wanted to witness an all-out ascension, he didn't need too much coaxing to arrange for the trip. He would make the flight in his new balloon "Pathfinder" (4) from Lindell Park, St. Louis, on Sunday evening, September 28, 1879, and "intended to remain in the air as long as the sustaining power of the balloon held out." The ascension was to be made solely in the interests of science, particularly meteorology. Professor Wise expected to enter what he called a permanent eastern wind current at an elevation of about 1,500 to 2,000 feet, which he desired to keep in if possible and make observations; and to effect this more surely, his ballast consisted only of a  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch rope, 1800 feet long which trailed from the balloon. When the gas was exhausted, the balloon was to descend and the end of the rope dragging on the ground was to relieve the balloon of part of its weight and hold it steady in the current.

The balloon was new and had been sent to him by his son, Charles (5), and had made only a few ascensions previously. The last had been from Sterling, Illinois, "the 19th ult.," when his grandson, John, reached an altitude of over three miles (6). George Burr, a paying teller of the St. Louis National Bank, paid \$50 for his seat in the car, and James Downey, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, manager of the aerial excursion, was to be the other occupant of the car with Wise and Burr. But during the inflation the network was torn which caused some delay in starting as well as the loss of gas, impairing the carrying power of the balloon. (7) As a consequence, Mr. Downey was eliminated as a passenger. A St. Louis **Globe Democrat** reporter importuned Mr. Wise to go along, but he was denied this, John saying it was impossible. Mr. Downey was apologetic also, and told the reporter: "It's no use; I'd give my own place to you, but there isn't room for more than the Professor and George Burr who has already paid for his seat." A brisk breeze was blowing (8) when Mr. Wise and Mr. Burr placed themselves in readiness for the ascent and when the order of "Let her go" was given and the balloon released in its upward flight, it nearly collided with the branches of a large tree, causing John and Mr. Burr to sink into the bottom of the basket for protection (9).

After this obstruction was cleared, the balloon sailed northward and floated out of sight. A telegraph operator at Miller's Station, on the Michigan Southern

Railroad, stated that he saw a balloon pass over that place about 11 o'clock Sunday night. At 11:14 P. M., Monday the 29th, the balloon was seen passing over a point 20 miles west of LaPorte, Indiana, a few miles south of Lake Michigan. Some papers were dropped 75 miles from their starting point. These were the last evidences known of the balloon or John Wise.

With still no definite word of the balloon or the aeronauts, the presses of the nation started to grind out column after column on the conjecture and supposition, and the Lancaster **Intelligencer**, taking more than a casual interest in the fate of John Wise and companion was filled with hopes for, fear of, and concern about their safety. One editorial expressed "increasing fears of John Wise's tragic death," (10) and another was devoted entirely to an account of his supposed fate. "It seems no more than probable," it read, (11) "that the unfortunate aeronauts went down in darkness and were lost in the waters (of Lake Michigan)." One ray of hope was faintly couched in a Personal: (12) "John Wise may yet be found. A balloon passed over Albion, Illinois, yesterday." But in the increasing lapse of time with still nothing heard from the expedition, hope was abandoned. A sort of glorified obit (13) carried the account of Wise's last voyage with the premonition of his own fate: "To all reckless aeronauts, etc." And, now, the "life story" and memorials of Wise appeared in profusion. The **Intelligencer** devoted two and one half columns to his life history — being merely a concise review of his own book **Through the Air**, (14) and its condolences in an editorial titled "Wise The Aeronaut," same issue, seemed to accept the fact of his loss as did other newspapers throughout the country.

Nearly a month later, (15) October 24, 1879, the dead body of a man was found washed ashore from the lake near Miller's Station, Indiana, which was definitely placed as that of George Burr, Wise's companion. A collar button found among the articles on his body was marked "G. B." in monogram, and the sleeve buttons, linen and underwear all bore the single initial "B." St. Louis papers of September 27, the date announcing the ascension, were found in the pockets. Search was to be instituted for Wise's body, but it was never found. He had gone to the bottom with his loved balloon.

All hope abandoned, (16) a final report contrasted Wise's fate as a direct parallel with that of Donaldson. He, too, went to his death when his airship was swamped in the waters of Lake Michigan, in 1875, and from which his companion's (Grimwood's) body was later rescued. Donaldson, like Wise, was never found. (17)

John Wise's passing was mourned editorially by the nation. (18) Said the **Intelligencer**: "Perhaps if this eccentric, but persistent, scientist had been convinced that his time had come, he would have asked no more heroic death than martyrdom in the cause to which he gave his life. And many a sympathetic tear will be dropped for his tragic death on a trackless voyage."

Over a period of forty years he had made "446 clear aerial voyages, and many hundred ascents with the captive balloon." (19) John Wise's preeminence as a scientist and specialist in aerostation has never been equalled. Many of his calculations and mechanical computations are still reference material. One source recognizing his worth has stated that "neither of his books has been rendered obsolete by any of the discoveries in this science made since they were written."

But the balloon had served its purpose as an important cog in the great wheel of aviation, jet propulsion and spaceway navigation. No better name on the first successful space-satellite could be found than that of JOHN WISE to grace its nameplate.

### NOTES

1. We follow his progress through Chapter IV for this narrative.
2. This balloon was named for Francis Leon Gambetta, Chief of the Chamber of Deputies, Paris, France, who won world acclaim in 1870-71 during the Siege of Paris.
3. Lancaster **Intelligencer**, October 3, 1879. The expense of the inflation was borne by the Kansas Southern Railroad.
4. Same, October 2, 1879.
5. Same, October 3, 1879.
6. Same, October 2, 1879.
7. Same, October 3, 1879.
8. Same, October 2, 1879.
9. Same, October 3, 1879.
10. Same, Monday, October 6, 1879.
11. Same, Wednesday, October 8, 1879.
12. Same, Friday, October 10, 1879.
13. Same, October 14, 1879.
14. Same, October 4, 1879 (also **St. Louis Globe Democrat** September 29, October 7, October 15, October 19, October 25, October 26, 1879).
15. Same, October 25, 1879.
16. Same, October 30, 1879. The **Intelligencer** files were combed for additional data, but the search after November 19, 1879, was discontinued.
17. Same, October 3, 1879.
18. Same, October 3, 1879.
19. This computation was his own from his autobiography completed in 1873. But accounts differ — even his own: in the preface he stated (page 23): "During all this period of nearly 40 years I have made 443 balloon ascensions, some of them for pleasure, but most for observation and study." In October 1871 he stated that his Gettysburg flight was his 446th (page 567). The **Intelligencer** (October 2, 1879) summarized his exploits to number "462 successful voyages." **The World in the Air** lists "440 Balloon ascensions altogether." The **Philadelphia Evening Bulletin** (July 18, 1946) states that "John Wise made 440 balloon ascensions in 44 years." **Minute Epics of Flight** credits him with 400.

### SOME PERTINENT DATA ON JOHN WISE

From **Cherished Memories of Old Lancaster**, by William Riddle.

Page 114, "I became imbued with the desire to becoming a blacksmith in the shop of the late Daniel Werntz in the rear of the Balloonist John Wise's home opposite the Grubb Estate."

Page 115, "In view of the fact that I had travelled 'some' I resolved to turn balloonist while assisting Charlie (Wise) in unrolling and varnishing the long rolls of silk in his father's back yard. Whether I was conscious at the time that at some future day I might go soaring over the English Channel or down over the Hudson in a monoplane, memory fails me. Nor can I remember at this late date whether it was the gas that gave out or a storm that prevented my taking a seat in the wicker basket in going in search of the later much-discussed Halley's comet's tail. What I do remember is, the balloon was inflated on the plot of ground where, among others, stands the residence of the Hon. W. U. Hensel."

(This was dated as his "fourteenth year of age." Born Feb. 16, 1837, this would date the account 1851.)

From **Story of Lancaster Old and New**, by William Riddle.

Page 258, "I was an intimate friend of Charlie Wise and recall the time his father took him to a city in North Carolina where, after making an ascension himself, Charlie entered the balloon. Reaching terra firma in safety, he was presented with a fawn deer by the girls, which he brought home to Lancaster with him. Over this we boys had much pleasure." (Sept. 3, 1853, Shannondale Springs, Va.)

From **Our Fledgling Period** — John Wise, in **Antiques**, October 1925  
by Carl W. Drepperd.

He speaks of an untraceable gas leak near Center Square which caused the gas dispensers and loafers around the square no end of inconveniences. Every foot of piping had been checked with the maps, tested with meters and found tight. However, a few lengths of "unchartered" wrought iron pipe were discovered in a forgotten line laid purposely to supply gas for balloon ascensions of John Wise in the 1840's. From correspondence of Mr. Drepperd, "This was an actual happening and they had to dig up, I think at what was the southwest corner, and so found the taps used by Mr. Wise."

"I presume you know that John Wise used the 'Common' (before he ascended from Center Square) which I believe was a stretch of land across West Orange Street, reaching from King to Chestnut Streets. This was where the people took their cows to graze."

Mr. Wise was Librarian of the Franklin Institute from September 1871, to July 1872. (Johnson)

Mr. Wise was in charge of the Aeronautics Section of the Centennial Exposition. He was 68 years of age at the time. (Johnson)

Lancaster Chapter 16, American Air Mail Society, is organized and named for Balloonist John Wise. Prof. Rollin Charles was the first president. Charter Night was observed December 4, 1940, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Singley, 1022 West Ross Street. (Air Post Journal, December 1940)

From his book, Wise mentions a few of his relatives: Page 460, "My son Charles made his first ascension alone when he was 17 years of age." This would date Charles' birth in 1836. The Shannondale Springs, Va. ascent was September 3, 1853.

Page 464, September 18, 1869: "Some of the ladies of my family have occasionally taken balloon flights with me . . . ."

Page 565, July 29, 1871: "I passed the balloon into the hands of my son Charles, who, with his son John, ascended from the place of my descent."

Page 467, September 19, 1869: "The ascension written by Louisa Wise, wife of my son." "I stepped into the wicker car and began to wave my kerchief in response to the happy salutations of my friends below. My husband gave me the talismanic flag to wave while he threw overboard ballast composed of bundles of business circulars. Mr. Wise said: 'Before we go down let us eat a bite of our provisions furnished by John Sides'. To please him I ate a few grapes off a bunch placed in the car by John Adams. He also got out a basket of roast fowl to regale himself with. We landed on the farm of Mr. Hoffman Hershey, about nine miles north-west of the city. Mr. John Herr invited us to his house where we took supper."

Page 420, September 5, 1851: "I ascended from Columbus, Ohio, with the balloon ULYSSES, the car containing Mrs. Wise, Master Charles and myself."

# *The Grandson*

## JOHN WISE DEAD

### He was an Aeronaut and a Widely Known Artist

*Made a trip alone in an airship when nine years of age. His father and grandfather were both aeronauts.*

Word was received by Charles Bitner, of this city, on Monday, of the death of John Wise (in Philadelphia), aeronaut and artist. It occurred at his home, 3236 Germantown Avenue. It was known by his relatives in this city that he had been sick for the past seven weeks and the news of his death was not unexpected. He died of gout of the stomach.

The deceased was a member of one of the most famous families of aeronauts the world has ever known. Three generations were making balloon ascensions at the same time and young John was the youngest person that ever made an ascension alone. He was a grandson of Prof. John Wise, one of the most daring balloonists that ever lived, and was known in this city as "the boy aeronaut." The widow of Prof. Wise lived on North Lime Street, a few years ago, when she moved to Philadelphia where she died.

The father of the subject of this sketch was Charles Wise, who died at Jenkintown, on March 12, 1895. He was also a famous aeronaut and made fully as many ascensions as his father. He was also an artist of note. Young John was born in this city on May 28, 1861. He attended the public schools here and afterwards was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts. The boy took to ballooning like a duck to water. The first time he went up in a balloon was when he was one year old, in 1862. His father and mother (Charles and Louisa) made an ascension from Centre Square and his mother carried little John in her arms. After that, while still a mere tot, he made many ascensions with his father and grandfather. When he was but nine years old, he made his first ascension alone. It was from Indiantown, Pa., and was very successful. The boy at once became famous all over the country and he afterwards made hundreds of ascensions. He knew no such a thing as fear and possessed a thorough knowledge of ballooning. During the three years from 1876 to 1879, the three Wises made weekly balloon ascensions from the Centennial Grounds in Philadelphia. J. M. Johnson, who was a great friend of the family, and made several ascensions alone, also went up from the Centennial grounds during that time. During the Summer of 1882, John Wise, his father Charles and Charles Bitner, of this city, were at Congress Hall, Cape May. While there they made many ascensions from the Hotel Grounds. John was later married to Miss Keiser, of Rising Sun. She thought ballooning dangerous and she prevailed upon her husband to give it up, which he did, retiring from the business when quite young.

He then turned his entire attention to painting and he became quite an artist. He has done some excellent work in that line, and Charles Bitner is the owner of a number of paintings by him which he prizes very greatly. Mr. Bitner

has dozens of pictures of the Wise family which were taken in different parts of the country when they were ballooning, and they are very interesting. Mr. Bitner was a close friend of the famous balloonists and spent much of his time with them.

The deceased leaves a wife but no children, and they have lived in Philadelphia since their marriage. The mother of Mr. Wise (Louisa) lives at Jenkintown as does his sister Helen, who is the widow of Dr. Nelson who died a few years ago. Lancaster Intelligencer, April 17, 1900.



# *John Wise Monument*

## UNVEILING PROGRAM

**Musser Park**

**October 9, 1955**

President George L. Heiges, Presiding

Unveiling of Monument .....	Mrs. Frances Mack McCulley Hanes
The National Anthem .....	Frederick S. Klein, Leader
Invocation .....	Reverend Wallace E. Fisher
For the City of Lancaster .....	Bernard M. Zimmerman City Solicitor
Music .....	The Red Rose Ensemble
For the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania .....	Dr. Paul A. W. Wallace Editor "Penna. History"
For the Lancaster County Historical Society .....	M. Luther Heisey Editor Publications Dr. William A. Wolf Local reminiscences of John Wise
Music .....	The Red Rose Ensemble
For the United States Air Force .....	Colonel Daniel Riva
America .....	Audience

MONUMENT TO  
JOHN WISE

FAMOUS PIONEER AERONAUT  
OF AMERICA WHO WAS BORN  
IN LANCASTER IN 1808 AND  
LIVED MOST OF HIS LIFE  
NEAR THIS SPOT.

BEGINNING IN 1835 HE  
COMPLETED FROM MANY TOWNS,  
462 BALLOON ASCENSIONS  
DURING HIS LIFETIME.  
JOHN WISE DIES IN LAKE  
MICHIGAN WHERE HIS  
BALLOON FELL AFTER AN  
ASCENT FROM ST. LOUIS  
SEPTEMBER 29, 1879.

THE LANCASTER COUNTY  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1935

The monument which carries the bronze tablet is a gate post made prior to 1825, for the Grubb Mansion at Mt. Hope, Lancaster County. It was transferred from one of the residences of the late Daisy E. B. Grubb to her Lancaster home, at Musser Park.