

# Rafting On The Old Susquehanna

*By Hortense D. Missimer*

Nearly every community in our great country is blessed with one or more special natural advantages such as rich mineral deposits, great virgin forests, large water power potentialities (Holtwood, Conowingo and Safe Harbor). Our particular Lancaster County in addition to its rich soil can boast of the beautiful Susquehanna River. The river runs the entire length of Lancaster County on the west and borders York County. In Colonial Days and up to a century ago fish from the Susquehanna constituted a large part of the local food supply - now men fish for the sport - but some have good luck and catch prize fish. In the early days all important roads in the river area, either led to the ferries crossing the river or to established fisheries located on the many river islands or along the shores of both counties - these have long since disappeared.

Many of the rivers of our country are navigable, and thus valuable as a means of transportation. Not so the Susquehanna, which was much too swift and rocky to navigate any distance. On several occasions consideration has been given to overcoming these obstacles but generally the plans were not feasible. About a century ago a commission was appointed, of which Simon Cameron was a member, to investigate the possibility of making this rugged stream commercially navigable. The estimated cost was well over a million dollars, a stupendous sum in that day. The commission's report was unfavorable and further thoughts along these lines were definitely abandoned with the construction of the huge dams and hydro electric plants.

But it is not of these things that I wish to write, but rather of an industry that flourished on the Susquehanna in the last century and about which the present generation knows little. While the river was not navigable in the usual sense of the word it was the scene of considerable activity for two or three months every Spring when the river was usually higher than normal from melting snows and Spring rains. Thousands of rafts of cut timber were floated down the river to tidewater and market. The records also show that in addition no less than

three thousand arks and flat boats came down the river in the short space of ninety days, loaded with grain, other produce and many kinds of merchandise from the upper counties of Pennsylvania and New York.

It is of this timber rafting that I want to write especially. For those who have never seen a raft a little information will not be amiss. During the year lumbermen cut the virgin timber in the mountains of the head waters of the river, vast quantities then available are now depleted, the logs were floated down the streams to booms and held until high water. The logs were generally cut in 16 foot lengths, never shorter, and sometimes much longer, especially if they were destined for use as spars in ship building. These great logs were pinned together with wooden pins to form flat rafts 16 feet wide and several logs long. When the waters were sufficiently high these rafts were started down the river manned by a crew of ten men. Each raft was equipped with two large oars for steering, one at each end and each oar manned by four men. A steersman and a pilot rounded out the crew. The current carried the raft along. It could not run during the night because there were no lights. The river, therefore, was divided off in sections that could be traversed by the floating raft in one day. The raft was moored to the shore at night, and the next morning a new crew that was in readiness would take over and pilot it to the next stopping place. These regularly designated overnight stopping places were really booming during the rafting season.

The regular stopping places, or change overs, on the lower Susquehanna with which we are most interested locally were Marietta, Washington Boro and Peach Bottom. Early in the morning of one day a crew would take over a raft at either Marietta or Washington Boro, run it to Peach Bottom on that day, and on the next morning another crew would take it on its final trip to tidewater.

The next to the final day's shift, from Marietta to Peach Bottom, was hard strenuous work, and required strong husky men; the pay was good, eight dollars a day for common oarsmen, - top wages in those days, but they certainly earned it. They would start from Marietta early in the morning, shortly after daylight and work hard at the oar all down the river. Sometimes there would be short respites when they got into smooth water, but other times it was very hard when they got into a tight place that required all their strength. Occasionally both the steersman and pilot had to give a hand at the oar to keep off the rocks, and even then sometimes they failed. If by luck they reached Peach Bottom, which they generally did early in the afternoon, their hard day's work was done, but they had to walk back to Marietta that day to be there for their next day's work, generally reaching there about dark. They had their supper, went to bed and were up early the next morning for that day's trip. There was no railroad along the river at that time and there was no way of getting back up the river except by walking. After the Tidewater Canal was built along the York County shore, a canal boat ran from Peach Bottom to Wrightsville to transport these men who could then take their nights rest while riding on the boat, for it took most of the night to make the trip. That made it a lot easier, but cut a considerable slice from their pay.

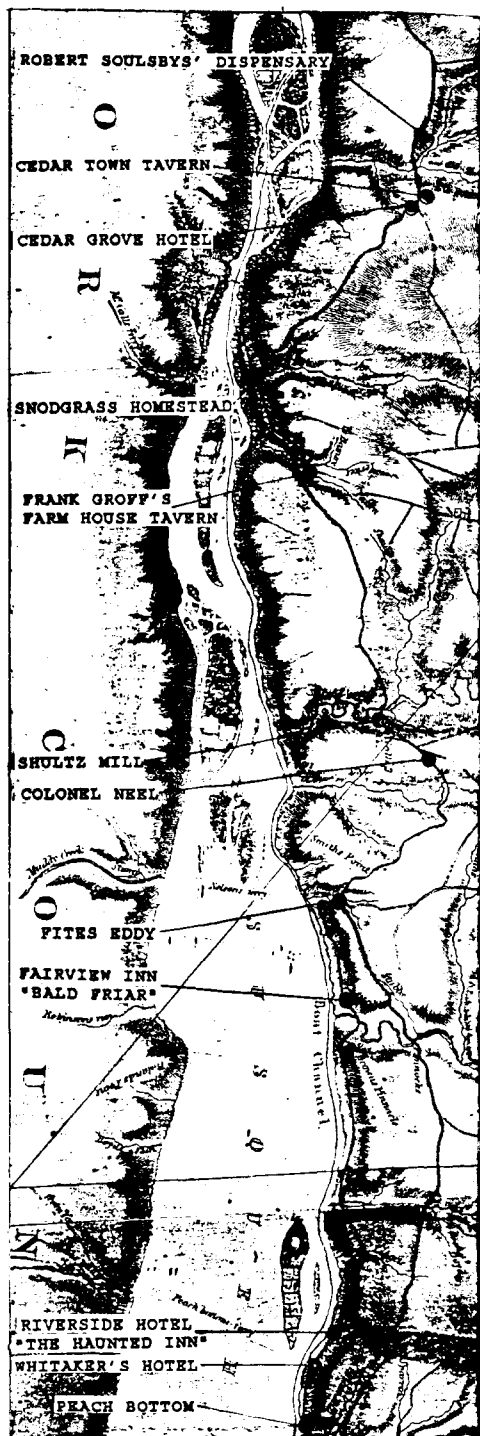
The trek from Peach Bottom to Marietta - the course which the raftsmen followed was called the Raftsman's Path, and was as direct as possible, only keeping to the public highway when that road led directly in the right direction. Many of these men were drinking men who occasionally felt the need for

something stronger than water to keep up their spirits. To supply this need many hotels sprang up along the Raftsmen's Path. Reaching Peach Bottom and disembarking, the raftsmen were very thirsty after their hard day's work and there was a rush to meet the accommodating landlord. If business was too brisk to accommodate all, only a short way up the shore was Whitaker's Hotel which also did a brisk business. Only about a half mile farther up the river was another stopping place known for years as "The Haunted Inn." It was rumored that years ago a murder had been committed in one of the upper rooms, and it was said that peculiar weird sounds could be heard at night that could not be accounted for. The late William Riddle of Lancaster relates in his book "Cherished Memories" published in 1910, of having spent a night in this riverside hotel along with a group of raftsmen, and he did not get much sleep or rest either. The cause of the strange noise was discovered some years later when the building was torn down. It was found that a small scrap of board had been left lying between the ceiling and the attic floor, perfectly balanced over another piece of timber, and rats or flying squirrels in passing over this piece of board would cause the end to spring up and tap on the floor above. So the ghost was discovered. Some men would pass by this haunted place, but they did not have far to go to get their drink for almost in sight was Mr. Sweigart's "Fairview Inn." later known as "Bald Friar," or a little longer walk to Fites Eddy where Clark Bostic passed out the beverage. All these places have since disappeared with the building of



Raftsmen's Path (North half)

W. Mathew Renkin Cartographer



Raftsmen's Path (South half)

W. Matthew Renkin, Cartographer

Conowingo Dam and the consequent building of the railroad along the river.

At Fites Eddy the raftsmen's path left the river shore and the men had to climb the hill and cut across country, not coming back to the river until they reached the present village of Pequea, thus cutting off the many bends of the river. Further, it was practically impossible to follow the river shore the whole way, as there were points where the hills descend in sheer, steep rock, to the very water's edge, leaving no foothold. Notable of these might be mentioned, Face Rock just below Holtwood, The Pinacle just above McCalls Ferry, House Rock below York Furnace, and Turkey Hill above Safe Harbor. It seemed property owners did not object to these men passing over their land, and sometimes even built stiles or steps to aid them.

On leaving Fites Eddy the raftsmen's path led up through the woods to the top of the hill, close by the residence of Colonel Neel, then down the north slope to the public road just above the old Snavelly place, later Shultz Mill. This house is rafting days was also a hotel, but has been torn down recently. The raftsmen now kept to the public highway and soon reached another place of refreshment. From here the rivermen kept to the road till they reached the old Street Road at the present Holtwood ball diamond, and here was another opportunity for refreshing. Only about one hundred feet from their path Frank Groff had established a bar in the farm house, lately town down by Pennsylvania Water and Power Company. On taking to the path again they left the public road and went down through the woods, and passed the old

Snodgrass homestead, since entirely disappeared.

Just below this old house the path came into the road again, down a steep bank into which several large stone steps had been placed. This was at the foot of the hill where the road made a sharp curve around a great spreading oak tree. Across the creek and up the road the walkers passed. Only about a mile and a half farther up the road was the next hotel at Cedar Grove, kept by a Mr. McCue. Or some might leave the regular beaten path, if they did not mind a little extra walk across the field about a mile to the right, to a place known locally as Cedar Town. There were only three or four houses there, one of them occupied by an old lady by the name of Mary Buffington who presided over a bar, and was said to welcome men guests over the night. Her husband, known as "old" Bob Buffington was away from home most of the time. He was a pilot on the river.

There were no more regular hotels along the raftsmen's path until Pequea was reached, but there was a wholesale liquor dispensary, (or whatever it may have been called) conducted by Robert Soulsby, just above what is now Erb's saw mill. Here the men could get a bottle of liquid to consume as they tramped onward. I have heard it said that this continual work and tramping was very hard on the feet, and they would get very sore and occasionally the men would pour liquor into their shoes to help heal them.

Just south of the old Mt. Nebo Presbyterian "Brick" Church the path left the public road again and led straight over the hills toward the mouth of Pequea Creek, crossing the York Furnace Road not far from the Old Bridge Valley School house, and over the hill back of the old McCleary farm house, coming down to the river right at the mouth of Pequea Creek.

A short way up the river was another hotel at Shenk's Ferry, but if some of them could not wait until they reached Shenk's Ferry to slake their thirst, just off the path a little way up the hill above Pequea was the old Duck Tavern. Just above Shenk's Ferry the path took to the hills again and came out into the road near the present Green Hill Church, and thence via the road to Safe Harbor. Here some time must have been spent as there were two hotels to visit, one on either side of the creek which was crossed over on a small foot bridge. Just back of the hotel on the farther side, steps were cut in the hill side which was very steep; these the men mounted to the top, and crossed what is now the Safe Harbor Observation Site. Then they crossed country to the public road at the present Turkey Hill Dairy Farm, and on by road to Washington Boro, if that was where they were to stop, or if Marietta was their destination, they continued through Columbia to Marietta depending on what pilot they might be working for. It might seem odd that there were two stations so close in Washington Boro, and some in Marietta and that they had their rafts stop at their home towns for their own convenience.

*Hortense Drucker Missimer was an active member of the Lancaster County Historical Society for many years prior to her death in 1971. Mrs. Messimer was a graduate of Linden Hall in Lititz. She was an avid hiker, and a member of numerous musical, historical, camping, and natural history groups. It is said that she probably hiked "every square foot" of Lancaster County. Her interests included the Native American population of Lancaster County. She was the widow of Karl H. Wagar and John C. Missimer.*