

# EARLY COLUMBIA AND VICINITY.

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The following paper was read by H. Frank Eshleman, Esq., at the recent anniversary of the founding of the town of Columbia:

Civilized activity opened up on the Susquehanna very early. Three hundred and six years ago Captain John Smith forced his way a short distance up this romantic and boldly picturesque River, and (when his two-ton bark struck upon the rocks), forced his way on by land four days farther. About 1638 the Swedes (who by that time had settled down Delaware River and on the west shore of its Bay—at old Christina, now near Wilmington and Chester) began trading with our Indians on the Susquehanna and up Conestoga; and, according to Campanius, the old roadway or trail from those lower Delaware settlements to and up Susquehanna was visible many years afterwards. About the same year the whole Susquehanna Valley was sold by the Indians to Wm. Clayborne—from source to mouth and forty miles on each side; and he petitioned the British Government to grant him a patent for it also, he guaranteeing to the Crown of England an annual payment of 100 pounds. England was very much angered over this presumption and considerable excitement with Virginia and Maryland ensued. Then from 1640 to 1675, the Susquehanna-Iroquois wars raged along this river, in which thirty-five years many power-

ful expeditions of the Five Nations descended in brutal savagery upon our giant Susquehannocks here (on this river) and as many return stealthy marches and campaigns were made by our Indians upon their enemies along the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes. The end came in 1675 when the Five Nations, put under the effective leadership of the Senecas, swooped down on the Susquehannocks in September, 1675, and demolished them. Then came Penn to Pennsylvania in 1682. In 1684 he visited the Susquehanna, and in 1685 wrote a glowing description of the fertility of this section. In 1690 Penn had a plan made out and a prospectus issued for the building of a second city like Philadelphia, on the Susquehanna, to be the capital town of a county which he planned, extending from the mouth of the Conestoga fifteen or twenty miles up the river and back eastward into the country; and throughout England he advertised the project and attempted to sell lots there. In 1701 he had executed a carefully detailed plan for the government of this town and county, and an agreement with the persons who bought lots, as to their privileges, etc. It is recorded in Philadelphia, where it remains to this day. Therefore, the plan of Columbia, or at least, of a city on the Susquehanna, is at least thirty years older than Lancaster city. But the project of the Susquehanna collapsed about 1705.

Then came the French traders, trailing throughout this section from about 1705 onward. Then the settlers of Hempfield and Manor, about 1713, began closing in from the east, filling up the regions of the Conestoga until by 1726 the Germans and Swiss had filled to overflowing all the rich val-

leys to the east, and the tide began to pour over Susquehanna about that time. Then, that same year, came John Wright and the Barbers and Blunston and others—from old Chester—and the English settlement on Susquehanna took definite form.

A great wealth of history clusters about early Columbia. But I assume that the general lines and outlines of that history are well known to you all. At any rate, a locality so long honored by the life and presence of a consummate and tireless historian as was your town, could not help having been informed of the lively past of all this region. You know, of course, that John Wright was the leader in all that was brought about here in earliest times—industrial, civil and political. His activities were, however, more generally devoted to the whole county of Lancaster and to the whole province of Pennsylvania, rather than to local affairs. The times required it. Affairs of the province and inter-provincial with Maryland and of national importance demanded constant attention; and John Wright was by far the most capable man there to administer them. It remained for Samuel Wright, grandson of John Wright, to lay out this town, about fifty years after his grandfather arrived here.

Every community owes a debt of gratitude to the great figures who have lived in it and have done valiant service for it. When a community fully know and realize such service they freely feel that gratitude. All America are grateful to Washington and Lincoln.

Citizens of Columbia, I beg your leave here and now to bring to your minds the services of the real pioneer of this town and the "Father of Lancaster county"—John Wright.

From 1718 to 1726 he was in public life in old Chester, Chester county, of which county we were then a part. He was a justice of the peace and an assemblyman there. He saw greater opportunity and greater need of strong men on the frontier—that is on the Susquehanna—about 1726, as the line between civilization and savagery at that time was the Susquehanna River. All beyond that river was “the wild and woolly West.” In Wright’s career on the Susquehanna, where he lived nearly twenty-five years, the two capacities in which he was the most conspicuous were that of a judge of our county, which included justice of the peace and that of a member of the Assembly. Our county was created in 1729, and he sat as president judge of the courts from that time on until 1741. He presided both over the criminal and civil courts. The sentences that he pronounced upon guilty criminals were generally severe. A counterfeiter he sentenced to be set in the pillory, have both his ears cut off, whipped thirty lashes on his bare back, pay a fine of 100 pounds and pay to all parties who lost money through the counterfeiting, double what they lost. He sentenced both men and women to lashes. Sarah Taylor, for larceny, was sentenced to be whipped. A certain Doctor Smith, found guilty of being an impostor, he sentenced to ten lashes, and, further, that the man be handed from one constable to another down to the Maryland line, be whipped in each township and then be thrown over the line of Maryland. The most important case, however, that he had anything to do with was the riot case in which 300 Marylanders came over and attempted to seize the homes and cattle and

property of our people, west of the Susquehanna river, which was a part of Lancaster county, at that time, on the ground that the Susquehanna River was the boundary of Pennsylvania, and that all west of it belonged to Maryland. This was the most noted case of the county, before the Revolutionary War. In 1741 he resigned the judgeship because he knew that he would not be reappointed by the Governor. Wright always contended that the government could not draft the servants, whose services the citizens had bought and paid for, into the army to fight in King George's War. The Governor considered him as an obstructionist; and a person unfaithful to the government. This is why Wright resigned. The last court he held he gave a splendid charge to the grand jury, on the right of private citizens; and touched upon the subject of the dispute between him and the Governor, which charge has always been considered a very able address.

In the Assembly, from the time he began to represent our county, he rapidly rose into prominence, and he was a valuable help in all of the money measures which rose, such as the issuing of paper money and the methods of laying taxes and collecting revenues; and he always advocated strongly laws that would help Lancaster county—laws to reduce the taxes on distilled liquors and wines, etc., made from our own Lancaster county grains and fruits. He showed an intense love for the common people always and even went pretty far in making Mrs. Penn and Penn's sons feel that they were urging too much in the way of revenues out of the people. He became the leader of the agitation to do away with the oath in

Pennsylvania and take the affirmation instead. He soon was found on committees to draft laws for the procedure of the courts. Early he had strong hand in making the laws to establish our different courts. He had a law passed, allowing our county to borrow money to build its jail and courthouse. About 1734 we find him very zealously interesting himself, in the Assembly, to make it easy for the Germans here in the county to be naturalized, and to hold land and be able to hold office. When King George's War broke out, he took great pains to oppose our sending troops to Massachusetts and other places to help those provinces in their fighting against Spain and France. From 1741, while a member of the Assembly, he attended very infrequently because of old age, yet he continually exercised himself to have laws passed for the Germans here, in the interest of their agriculture, their health and in their naturalization. He was chairman of the paper money committee, of the Assembly for one or two terms and in his latter years was one of the trustees of the general loan office and as such had the duty of signing the paper money that was issued, same as bank presidents sign bank notes and put them into circulation. John Wright was also the chief agent of the officers of the government of Philadelphia to keep them reminded of the condition on the Susquehanna River. There are a large number of letters, preserved in the archives, between him and the authorities of Philadelphia. On all subjects he was a valuable man. On the subject of Indian treaties and Indian slaughters Wright was a man usually relied upon by the government. On the other hand, the Indians of that region brought their complaints most

generally to him. On the disagreeable subject of the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland, Wright was always interested. Maryland claimed the Susquehanna River as the boundary. On the subject of arresting the raiders that used to come over from Maryland and raid the Germans and Quakers here, Wright issued the warrants to arrest and try them. On the general subject of keeping the peace, John Wright was the most active man, preventing law-breakers and horse-thieves from becoming numerous.

Wright was the leading figure in creating this county, and he drew up the petition for the separating of the land west of the Octorara Creek into a new county which was called Lancaster county. He circulated that petition among the people and got signers on it. But two petitions were handed in to the Assembly against creating this county, largely by the Germans. They were sent by the Assembly to John Wright and he went to these people and argued the case with them and got many of them over on the side of the new county. When the county was finally formed he had a great deal to do with the starting it off on its new separate duties; and he was made, as I said before, the president judge of the county.

Our cause for taking so much time in speaking of this fine old character and leading figure, in the infant days of this county, and the region which is now Columbia, is that not sufficient is known of this great character, and the work of a fundamental nature that he performed for us. His faith, it would seem, forbade any conspicuous tombstone being placed upon his grave. Indeed, I am not informed whether he has any tombstone at all. He was the undoubted originator or

father of his county—and by head and shoulders rose above every other figure in helping civilization at this point on the Susquehanna and in laying the first stone of the foundation of Columbia. For these reasons there ought to be a marker of fit and commensurate size, proportion and dignity set up to his memory, somewhere in this town. The 200th anniversary of his going into public life will arrive in about three or four years. Other anniversaries of events connected with his life will be happening every day from now on—next year will be the 100th anniversary of the granting Columbia's first charter, as a borough.

We plainly see, therefore, that there will be occasions for suitable exercises to be held, by historical bodies, commemorating his life and career and for placing some permanent and suitable memorial above his ashes.

Columbia had a strenuous life in her early days. As we have said, about 1730 it was the principal frontier point in eastern Pennsylvania. Some of the roughest and hardest American life occurred there. Wright established his ferry at this point on the river, and as soon as civilization opened west of the river this became the most famous ferry in America west of Philadelphia and New York. Nearly all the struggles with Maryland centered here. Two bandits, named Lowe, terrorized everybody a year or more, until a body of constables from Lancaster county shot and crippled them in their cabins just opposite Columbia. About 1732, nearly 200 Marylanders appeared opposite the present Columbia and began to battle against the Germans and drive them off by shooting. About 300 men from Lancaster county, under the sheriff, drove them away.



Columbia, therefore, at an early date, was the key to the west. In the frontier days, all matters of importance were centered at this point on the river. It was the point at which all news of the west was first authentically handed over to the public authorities. It was the chief watch tower on the river where alarms were given out to the country of Indian movements, etc. It was the place where expeditions west made their first relay and the base of supplies for all projects into the new and undiscovered sunset land. It was the Waterloo of Maryland's invaders. It was the edge of the woods where the horse thieves of the southwest found efficient officers of the law to arrest them. It was the chief point on the frontier line where the Germans, who held the Hempfield and Manor plains, found the Scotch-Irish politicians, who held the offices and the protecting rifles. It was the place where the wealth of skins and furs were unloaded and bought when brought out of the virgin forests, where the Indians had been cheated by their first being treated to fire water. It was the outlying point where the reign of law met the reign of terror.

In the later days it was the point at which the trade on the river converged, from up and down stream, whence merchandise was sent eastward. But in spite of all human efforts to make the channel profitable, it never succeeded. The merchandise and cattle taken across the river at Wright's Ferry were tremendous in amount. Scores of carriages and wagons were there awaiting their "turn." Some of them had to wait two days sometimes.

Among the prominent events in the life of the town, which was laid out

by Samuel Wright in 1788, several may now be mentioned. We note first that this year is the 125th anniversary of the laying out of this town, the event celebrated this week. In 1789 Congress is deciding a permanent place for the government of the United States discussed and debated the advisability of fixing the seat of government on the Susquehanna, and it was moved that the place be on the east bank of the river in Pennsylvania. Wright's Ferry was proposed as the place and debated. An eloquent speech was made in Congress in favor of Wright's ferry on the east bank of the river. Finally the motion passed to locate the capital "on the banks of the Susquehanna." Then a committee of three were appointed to find a suitable place on the east bank of the Susquehanna and \$100,000 were appropriated to carry it out, but the Senate defeated the bill. It came up again in 1790, but did not go through. We were left, therefore, with the consolation that for one day (thirteen years before) the neighboring town of Lancaster was capital of the United States.

Your town of Columbia was also honored, in its early days, by three visits from George Washington. These occurred on July 3, 1791, when he went through the town, and the next day was the guest at a banquet in our courthouse, held in his honor.

The second visit was on October 26, 1794; this visit he spoke of in his letter to Alexander Hamilton; in the letter he said, "I have proceeded to Wright's Ferry." This visit was on his return from Carlisle, where he had gone to help quell the whiskey rebellion in western Pennsylvania. Reference is made to this in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography.

His last visit was September 20 and 21, 1796, and there is not much known of it; it seems that he passed through Lancaster on that visit; but on his visit, in 1794, it is not certain that he was in Lancaster.

I am indebted to George Steinman for confirmatory evidence of these visits of George Washington.

The town progressed apace from 1790 onward. Additions to the original tract were laid out in lots and the limits extended. And by 1814 considerable land was added to it.

In 1807 Samuel Wright conveyed a tract of his land to trustees for a school, and a school building was at once erected in which a school of a semi-public nature was begun. It was built and flourished in 1830.

Private schools were opened as early as 1807 and some of them early became famous. The so-called public school of 1807 was started here by a large meeting of the citizens at which twelve resolutions concerning education were adopted. You have, therefore, a proud record of at least a century and six years of public education to look back upon. Your public instruction began fully twenty-five years before the common school system was adopted. From that time onward your schools have made a record to be proud of.

In public libraries you can look back eighty-four years over a record of credit. Away back in the year 1829 you founded your first library. I am pretty sure there was only one other public library in our county at that date—the old Juliana, of Lancaster, at least seventy-five years older, named in honor of Juliana Penn. You have had both a reading people and an industrious people.

You have had a fine financial

record, especially pre-eminent in early days. Your Philadelphia Branch Bank was opened in 1809. For about fifteen years, Philadelphia maintained the Columbia branch of its bank, until local banks were organized here on their own bottoms. The trade from Philadelphia westward made a branch bank here highly important and prevented the danger of carrying money through the wilderness.

Your next bank was a bridge. A charter for the Bridge Company was granted in 1811. The State took \$90,000 of the stock, of which \$400,000 was sold. About \$230,000 of the money was used to build the bridge, and the balance, \$170,000, was used for banking purposes. In 1824 a new charter for banking purposes was granted, under the name of "The Columbia Bridge Company." Later it was called the Columbia Bank and Bridge Company—then the Columbia Bank and lastly the Columbia National Bank. In 1863 the First National Bank was organized. There were other early banks, but they did not succeed well.

Your war record is an honor to your town. Your sons brave and true rallied to do their part in all the wars our country has faced.

In fraternal societies you have through many years shown a charity and generosity of spirit hard to equal anywhere, keeping well abreast with the age and keeping in faithful touch of the needs of the unfortunate brethren.

In religious life and activity you are banner bearers. The Friends' Society took hold here as early as 1726. The Methodists, who have been worshippers here about 125 years, first acquired their own church in 1803. The Presbyterians had occasional services here prior to the year 1803, and from 1806 onward had regular services; and about the same time

their own church. The Lutherans organized their first congregation about 1806—but, of course, they existed here numerous long before that date. The Reformed grew into a solid congregation about 1805, and have flourished and prospered ever since. The Catholics became a known religious sect here about 1826. The Brethren in Christ were organized about 1846.

These were the original churches in Columbia. And it will be observed that the most of them are 100 years old and over. Thus it may be said that your town has wreathed upon its head a hundred years of religious honor and glory. There have been many branches organized as offspring of these original congregations; and they, too, have prospered and grown strong and mighty.

This, then, is the record of your Columbia—your town that has prospered so well and pushed civilization along so strenuously here on the sunset border of this great county. This epitome of its career is luminous and lustrous—laden with loving memories, that dot and shine down the avenues of the ages, like the numerous stars above your peaceful town. I have passed its career before you, so that you may know and feel it in epitome. Be inspired by it—be proud of it. Stand by your town and applaud it. It has done you good. The citizens here have helped you. Help them. Help your town. It will reach its 100th birthday as a borough next year—in a few months. Welcome in that year—that day—with bells and bonfire—with joy in your hearts and with glad acclaim in your voices. Then will the town take on new life—new vigor and new lustre; and you will realize a good and healthy motto—"Each one for all and all for every one."

Author: Eshleman, Henry Frank, 1869-1953.

Title: Early Columbia and vicinity / by H. Frank Eshleman, Esq.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Wright, John, 1667-1749.  
Banks and banking--Pennsylvania--Columbia.  
Church buildings--Pennsylvania--Columbia.  
Columbia (Pa.)--History.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1914

Description: 29-41 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 18,  
no. 2

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.18

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

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