

STEPHEN GIRARD'S CONNECTIONS WITH LANCASTER COUNTY

By W. Frank Gorrecht

Living in Lancaster county, mostly in Washington Borough, Manor and Conestoga townships, in Columbia, Lancaster and scattered far and wide elsewhere are a large number of people in the aggregate, who cherish the hope that they will be participants in a partition and division of part of the estate of Stephen Girard. They base these expectations on the claim that they are the heirs of Sebastian Urban, who, they aver, was a partner of Stephen Girard, and that upon Urban's death his estate became merged into that of Girard. Before going into the details of these claims and the authority upon which they are made, it will perhaps be interesting to note Girard's associations in two big enterprises in Lancaster county.

One was in 1809, and the other in 1823. I will treat them in reverse of their chronological order, for the reason that Girard's part in the project of the latter date was in effect a declaration of faith in the transportation theories advocated and promulgated by Robert Fulton. In this particular, as we all know today, both Girard and Fulton were wrong.

It is a rather remarkable historical coincidence that the two men foremost in the successful development of steam navigation should be closely associated with Lancaster county—Fulton as one of its immortal sons, and John Stevens, the father of the greatest and most valuable enterprise the county has ever known and probably ever will know. The race between Fulton and Stevens for the first successful steamboat experiment was very close, so close in fact that Stevens had the honor of having the first boat to navigate the sea when his "Phoenix" was brought from the Connecticut river to the Delaware.

Up to this time Fulton and Stevens were working along the same general lines of water transportation. But shortly thereafter they became advocates of exactly opposite theories for inland transportation. Fulton believed the true solution was in canals, Stevens maintained the railway would, in the end, be the great common carrier. The first authentic record of Stevens' conversion to the railway is an essay he published in 1812. In the years to follow he went from State to State begging legislative appropriations to make experiments. In 1823, when he was seventy-four years of age, the Legislature of Pennsylvania, granted him a charter to build "The Pennsylvania Railroad," from Philadelphia to Columbia. Among the incorporators were Amos Ellmaker, of Lancaster, John Barbour and William Wright, of Columbia, and Stephen Girard. Evidently the incorporators were willing to give their names only, and none of their money, for Stevens was unable to raise the \$5,000 needed for the construction of a mile of experimental track, and as nothing was done the charter was repealed two years later. The historians of the Pennsylvania railroad, with one accord, credit Stevens with being the father of that corporation, which has been the greatest factor in the commercial and industrial development of Lancaster county. Girard, it will thus be seen had no faith in the railroads advocated by Stevens, while his faith and confidence in Fulton's plan of canals is best presented by the provision in his will bequeathing the sum of \$300,000 for the improvement of canal navigation in Pennsylvania.

Inasmuch as we are having quite an agitation at the present time over a new bridge across the Susquehanna river at Columbia, the fact may be mentioned in all propriety that Stephen Girard was the principal agency in the construction of the first bridge across the river at that place. And here

again is a double historical significance in the fact that the Act of March 28, 1809, granting the patent or charter for the bridge, was passed by the General Assembly then sitting in the Borough of Lancaster. And still another matter worthy of special note is that of the three commissioners from Lancaster city named in the Act, John Hubley, Casper Shaffner, the third one, Abraham Witmer, was the same man who built our historic Witmer's bridge. I have been unable to find any data to indicate how much financial aid Girard gave to the project. Evidently, during the first two years he held somewhat aloof. This is indicated in the appeal to the General Assembly at the session here in Lancaster for a State appropriation in 1811, when an Act was passed to give \$90,000 to the Columbia bridge and \$20,000 to the freshly launched project of a bridge at McCall's Ferry. During the period of the building of the bridge at Columbia Girard carried a large deposit in the Farmers' Bank in this city. The total amount of these deposits was \$844,114.79, but so far as I could learn from an examination of the account, there is nothing to show whether or not any of the sums checked out were in payment for or on account of the bridge. As under the provisions of the charter the building of the bridge was virtually exclusively under the control of Girard and five of his Philadelphia associates, it appears to be a fair conclusion that he was the leader.

The story of Stephen Girard and Sebastian Urban was given to me for the first time about forty years ago. Residing in Washington Borough at that time was Nathaniel Urban, then over ninety years of age, but mentally and physically of wonderful vitality. He was an inveterate joker and proclaimed that, if he was an old man, he intended to die young.

One day I heard a discussion between Urban, the late Jacob Shuman and several other residents of the town, over the advisability of raising another fund to defray the expenses incident to legal proceedings to recover the estate of Sebastian Urban from the Girard estate. The proposition appeared so preposterous that I concluded Urban was trying to have a joke at my expense. Upon quiet inquiry I learned it was no hoax, at least so far as actual claimants was concerned. Urban, who was a nephew of Sebastian Urban, and lived contemporaneous with Sebastian, though as a younger man, gave me the version of the claim and the allegations upon which the proposed legal proceedings were based. The families most largely represented as heirs of Sebastian are the Urbans, Shumans, Dombachs, Roberts, Douglas, Seiples, in and near Washington Borough, and the Shanks in Conestoga township as they were two generations back. I have had the story from representatives of most of the families named, and their accounts differ only in minor details from Nathaniel Urban's narrative. This summarized was that Girard and Sebastian Urban were partners; that Urban's role was to play the pirate on the high seas; that he died and was buried at sea, and that no accounting of the partnership was ever made.

The story of piracy is not true. It is no doubt based on the fact that in the war of 1812, in recognition of his financial help to the government Girard was given letters of marque to fit out privateers to prey upon British merchantmen, often referred to as legalized piracy. Urban was in command of the privateers. The charge of piracy, however, is not a new one. In his life time Girard was frequently scored in the public press for an alleged act of piracy. During one of the revolutions in Haiti two of Girard's ships were in port in command of Urban. The wealthy residents transferred their portable riches on board the ships intending to leave the country for a safer abode, and on this event the tradition was based. The story according to Nathaniel is that Sebastian was forced to sail away as soon as the riches were on board and the refugees were left to their fate. The value of these riches is variously stated at from \$50,000 to \$200,000. Despite all efforts of the heirs of the victims to recover this wealth Girard held on to it on the plea that there

was no way of determining to whom the effects rightfully belonged. Four or perhaps five years ago, sitting in the office of Senator John G. Homsher at Strasburg, I was telling him the story as Nathaniel Urban told me, when he picked up a paper from his desk, remarking as he handed it to me, there at least is some corroboration in the Haitian story. The paper was a current copy of The National Republican, printed at Washington, and the item to which he referred was a lengthy eulogy on Girard with one paragraph of adverting to the Haitian matter.

Girard was the principal financial backer of the government in the war of 1812, and privateering then was recognized as a legitimate venture. Just what tales of the sea Sebastian Urban told we have no means of knowing. No doubt they were exciting, perhaps highly colored. The idea conveyed by them to Nathaniel Urban was that a desirable prize did not necessarily carry the British flag.

There is a conflict of when and where Girard and Urban first met. Nathaniel Urban's version is that Sebastian ran away to sea when a boy and got a berth on a ship of which Girard was captain. Another account is that Girard picked the boy up along the river front in Philadelphia. Be that as it may, there is no question but that the two were closely associated in business for many years.

Sebastian Urban never married, and at his death was survived by six brothers. The first effort of his heirs to claim part of Girard's estate was about 1870. The movement was headed by Nathaniel Urban. A fund was raised and a Philadelphia lawyer employed. The renewed demands for more funds dampened the ardor of the claimants. Later, somewhere around 1885, another combination was formed. The leaders were the late Jacob Shuman, Amos Dombach and Nathaniel Urban of Washington Borough and Manor township. The late J. W. F. Swift, of the Lancaster Bar, was employed as their attorney. Meetings were held once a week at the home of Amos Dombach, when the reports of Mr. Swift were read. Obadiah Dombach, of Manor township; Amos Dombach, of Columbia, and Mrs. Susan Seiple, of Lancaster, children of Amos Dombach, then approaching manhood and womanhood, all living now, have each given me graphic accounts of these meetings. It was the opinion of Mr. Swift that the prospects were most encouraging, and the eagerness and expectations of one of the heirs in attendance at these meetings reached such a pitch that he was induced to walk from his home in Washington Borough and back again each Monday to ascertain if the money had been paid over to the lawyer. The deaths of Amos Dombach, Nathaniel Urban and Mr. Swift disrupted the movement of alleged recovery. So far as I have been able to learn there is not a bit of documentary evidence in existence to substantiate the claim, nevertheless there are a host of heirs still hopeful and expectant.

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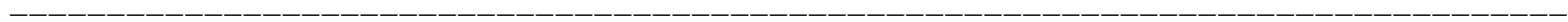
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