

Lancaster in 1796

By WILLIAM FREDERIC WORNER

IN the fine collection of rare books in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., is one entitled, "Travels Through the United States of North America in 1795, 1796 and 1797." The work, in two volumes, was published in London in 1807. The author, Isaac Weld, Jun., was a keen observer, and little of importance seems to have escaped his attention. He has furnished an interesting pen picture of life in America during the early years of the infant Republic.

Weld was in Lancaster, Pa., in March, 1796. In Volume I of his valuable work, appears the following:

"This winter [1795-96] has proved one of the mildest that has ever been experienced in the country. . . . The season being so fine, and so favorable for traveling, I was unwilling to stay at Philadelphia; accordingly I set out for this place [Lancaster] on horseback, and arrived here last night, at the end of the second day's journey. From hence I intend to proceed towards the south, to meet the approaching spring.

"The road between Philadelphia and Lancaster has lately undergone a thorough repair, and tolls are levied upon it, to keep it in order, under the direction of a company. Whenever these tolls afford a profit of more than fifteen per cent. on the stock originally subscribed for making the road, the company is bound, by an act of assembly, to lessen them. This is the first attempt to have a turnpike road in Pennsylvania, and it is by no means relished by the people at large, particularly by the wagoners, who go in great numbers by this route to Philadelphia from the back parts of the state.

"It is scarcely possible to go one mile on this road without meeting numbers of wagons passing and repassing between the back parts of the state and Philadelphia. These wagons are commonly drawn by four or five horses, four of which are yoked in pairs. The wagons are heavy, the horses small, and the driver unmerciful; the consequence of which is, that in every team, nearly, there is a horse either lame or blind. The Pennsylvanians are notorious for the bad care which they take of their horses. Excepting the night be tempestuous, the wagoners never put their horses under shelter, and then it is only under a shed; each tavern is usually provided with a large one for that purpose. Market, or High, street, Philadelphia,—the street by which these people come into the town—is always crowded with wagons and horses that are left standing all night. This is to save money; the expense of putting them into a stable would be too great, in the opinion of these people. Food for the horses is always carried in the wagon, and the moment they stop they are unyoked, and fed whilst they are warm. By this treatment, half the poor animals are foundered. The horses are fed out of a large trough, carried for the purpose, and fixed on the pole of the wagon by means of iron pins.

"Lancaster is the largest inland town in North America, and contains about nine hundred houses, built chiefly of brick and stone; together with six churches, a court house and goal. Of the churches, there is one respectively for German Lutherans, German Calvinists, [Presbyterians; although he does not mention it nevertheless there was a church of that denomination in Lancaster at that time], Moravians, English Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics. The streets are laid out regularly, and cross each other at right angles.

"An act of assembly had been passed for making this town the seat of the state government instead of Philadelphia, and the assembly was to meet in the year 1797.

"Several kinds of articles are manufactured at Lancaster by German mechanics, individually, principally for the people of the town and neighborhood. Rifled barrel guns, however, are to be excepted, which, although not as handsome as those imported from England, are more esteemed by the hunters, and are sent to every part of the country.

"The rifled barrel guns, commonly used in America, are nearly of the length of a musket, and carry leaden balls from the size of thirty to sixty in the pound. Some hunters prefer those of a small bore, because they require but little ammunition; others prefer such as have a wide bore, because the wound they inflict is more certainly attended with death; the wound, however, made by a ball discharged from one of these guns, is always very dangerous. The inside of the barrel is fluted, and the grooves run in a spiral direction from one end of the barrel to the other, consequently when the ball comes out it has a whirling motion round its own axis at the same time that it moves forward, and when it enters into the body of an animal, it tears up the flesh in a dreadful manner.

"The best of powder is chosen for a rifled barrel gun, and after a proper portion of it is put down the barrel the ball is inclosed in a small bit of linen rag, well greased at the outside, and then forced down with a thick ramrod. The grease and bits of rag, which are called patches, are carried in a little box at the butt end of the gun. The best rifles are furnished with two triggers, one of which being first pulled sets the other, that is, alters the spring so that it will yield even to the slight touch of a feather. They are also furnished with double sights along the barrel, as fine as those of a surveying instrument. An experienced marksman, with one of these guns, will hit an object not larger than a crown piece, to a certainty, at a distance of one hundred yards. Two men belonging to the Virginia rifle regiment, a large division of which was quartered in this town [Lancaster] during the war, had such a dependence on each other's dexterity, that the one would hold a piece of board, not more than nine inches square, between his knees, whilst the other shot at it with a ball at the distance of one hundred paces. This they used to do alternately, for the amusement of the townspeople, as often as they were called upon. Numbers of people in Lancaster can vouch for the truth of this fact. Were I, however, to tell you all the stories I have heard of the performances of riflemen, you would think the people were most abominably addicted to lying. A rifle will not carry shot, nor will it carry a ball much farther than one hundred yards with certainty.

"In Lancaster and the neighborhood, German is the prevailing language, and numbers of people living there are ignorant of any other. The Germans are some of the best farmers in the United States, and they seldom are to be found but where the land is particularly good; wherever they settle they build churches, and are wonderfully attentive to the duties of religion.

"In coming to this place [York] from Lancaster, I crossed the Susquehanna River,—which runs nearly midway between the two towns—at the small village of Columbia, as better roads are kept there than at either of the ferries higher up or lower down the river. The Susquehanna is here somewhat more than a quarter of a mile wide [he is mistaken; it is a mile and a quarter]; and for a considerable distance, both above and below the ferry, it abounds with islands and large rocks, over which last the water runs with prodigious velocity; the roaring noise that it makes is heard a great way off.

"The quantity of wild fowl that is seen on every part of the Susquehanna is immense. Throughout America the wild fowl is excellent and plentiful; but there is one duck in particular found on this river, and also on the Potomac and James rivers, which surpasses all others: it is called the white, or canvas-back, duck, from the feathers between the wings being somewhat of the color of canvas. The duck is held in such estimation in America, that it is sent frequently as a present for hundreds of miles—indeed, it would be a dainty morsel for the greatest epicure in any country."