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# The LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Bulletin

November - December 1967



CATLIN HOUSE  
Home of the Historical Society  
232 Monroe Ave., Scranton, Pa.

### A SHATTERED DREAM

When General Samuel Meredith, the first treasurer of the United States, retired from public life after having served under Presidents Washington, Adams, and Jefferson, he purchased vast tracts of land in Northeastern Pennsylvania and eventually made his home at Pleasant Mount. It was his son, Attorney Thomas Meredith, who was said to have been responsible for opening the first anthracite mine in North America. This event took place in 1824 in what is now Carbon-dale Township, and for many years afterwards the village there was known as Meredith. Some time later it was called Childs.

The general's grandson, and namesake, Samuel R. Meredith, acquired some land eight miles northeast of Scranton, and remembering his grandfather's connection with the immortal George Washington, called the place Mount Vernon. In the early 1850's James Seymour, a mining engineer, opened a mine shaft at Mount Vernon, and now the tiny settlement was called Seymour until 1854 when it changed names again. This time it was called Jessup, in honor of Judge William Jessup who had high hopes of turning the place into a mining metropolis and a railroad center.

Judge Jessup was born in Southampton, Long Island on June 21, 1797. He graduated from Yale College at the age of eighteen, moved to Montrose, Pennsylvania, in 1815, and was admitted to the bar in 1820. In 1833, Governor Ritner appointed him to the position of president judge of the 11th Judicial District, originally Luzerne, Pike, and Monroe counties, later Luzerne, Susquehanna, and Wyoming counties.

On September 19, 1854, Judge Jessup in his capacity as president of the newly-formed Lackawanna Railroad (not to be confused with the already-existing Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad) signed an agreement with the contracting firm of Michael Meylert, Henry Doolittle, and Christopher L. Ward, to build a railroad from a point near Greenville (now the Nay Aug section of Dunmore) to Meredith, a total of sixteen miles. The contract specified that the railroad was to be completed from Greenville to Jessup by September 1, 1855. The second phase of construction was to take the railroad from Jessup to Meredith. The first phase was completed, but not the second.

Judge Jessup's company agreed to pay the prime contractors \$28,000 for each mile of track- age completed. Meylert, Doolittle, and Ward also agreed "...to open in a proper manner for mining coal by sinking shafts, three coal mines on or near the line of said road---two to be completed by the time the first division of the road is finished." Each mine shaft was to cost \$22,000. The contract also included station houses, water tanks, turn tables, an engine house, a machine shop, a locomotive, and railroad and mine cars.

By September, 1855, the Lackawanna Railroad was in operation and hauling its coal from Jessup to Nay Aug where the coal cars were switched onto the DL&W Railroad for transit to the New York and New Jersey markets. The company owned 700 acres of coal lands at Jessup, and 1300 acres at Meredith. It also had an option on an additional parcel of 380 acres "in the valley near Jessup." Forty miners' houses and a hotel were situated in an area known as the Town Plot, which consisted of 250 lots. Two of the

company's mine shafts were in operation, and the company also owned two wharves at Elizabeth Port, New Jersey.

Financial difficulties arose, however, and by October 1857, there was much correspondence with a Philadelphia attorney, John M. Read, who seemed to know something about the then relatively-new problem of how to liquidate the assets of an unsuccessful railroad. It can be assumed that Judge Jessup and the other investors lost heavily in the ensuing months that saw the termination of the company and the collapse of the Judge's dream. The railroad rolling stock was sold as well as the lumber from the company's structures which were dismantled. Only the hotel and several homes near it remained to await the restoration of mining operations a few years later under other auspices.

There are many questions that remain unanswered about Judge Jessup's project because of the unavailability of many documents pertaining to it. In October, 1953, the Historical Society was the recipient of some papers relating to the Lackawanna Railroad which had been in the possession of Mr. J. M. Jessup, grandson of Judge Jessup. In August, 1967, the Society had the good fortune to purchase an additional group of pertinent papers from a professional collector, who would not disclose the source of the acquisition. It is evident, however, that this latter group of papers had belonged to Mr. C. L. Ward, one of the prime contractors. They are particularly valuable since they include the original contract for the short-line (and short-lived) railroad.

It is interesting to note that the Government of Mexico had invested \$125,000 in the Lacka-

wanna Railroad, and one of the intriguing entries from the company expense sheet is an item of \$4,000 which was given to Mr. Ward in connection with the loan. Whether or not Mr. Ward travelled to Mexico to arrange for the loan is not known, but the facts on hand do seem to substantiate an area legend that in the 1850's General Antonio Santa Anna of Mexico had contemplated establishment of a Mexican colony at Jessup. General Santa Anna was the harsh victor over the American settlers in the Battle of the Alamo. In the later war between Mexico and the United States, he was defeated by General Winfield Scott. Santa Anna was president of Mexico on several occasions, and last occupied this position from 1853 to 1855, years that coincided with the starting of the Lackawanna Railroad. It is also significant that this colorful, though dictatorial, Mexican lost his presidency because of his extravagant use of government funds.

Like other towns in Lackawanna County, Jessup was the scene of many coal mining operations during the heyday of the anthracite industry. Now it is largely a residential community with a population of about 5,500 people, and is considerably smaller than the metropolis that Judge Jessup had envisioned.

The hotel that the Lackawanna Railroad built in 1854 is still standing and is located at 801 Church Street. In 1887 the building was converted into a church and was used for that purpose by St. James' Roman Catholic parish until 1940, when a new church was erected in the 500 block of the same street. The old building is presently occupied by a dress manufacturing concern. Private residences at 804 and 805 Church Street probably date back to the 1850's, but they have since been considerably remodeled and no longer resemble the small miners' houses they once were.

The area bounded by Front, Hill, Blakely Streets, and Grassy Island Avenue mark the perimeter of what Judge Jessup had called the Town Plot. Meylert and Ward Streets recall two of the prime contractors, and Clarkson Avenue was named for a sub-contractor who opened the Lackawanna mine shafts. Powell Avenue is named after Thomas Powell, one of the investors. It was evidently felt that the surname of the third prime-

contractor, Doolittle, was not appropriate for a street name in a town which was hopefully destined to become a bustling one.

When the D L & W Railroad opened its Winton Branch in 1874, the roadbed of the Old Lackawanna Railroad was used. This branch was discontinued in the middle 1940's. A few buildings and some street names, as well as the name of the town, are all that now remain to remind Jessup residents of a golden plan that rusted too soon.

#### **NOVEMBER MEETING.....**

Our speaker on Wednesday, November 29, will be Professor Matthew R. O'Rourke, from the Department of English at the University of Scranton. Professor O'Rourke, a native of New Brunswick, New Jersey, earned his baccalaureate and master's degree at Rutgers University. He taught at Ohio State and Notre Dame universities prior to joining the University of Scranton faculty in 1955. His fields of concentration include the English Romantic Period and the Modern American Novel. It is from the latter field that he will draw on when he discusses "The Roaring Twenties Through the Eyes of F. Scott Fitzgerald." Mr. O'Rourke has travelled extensively in Spain and it is possible that at a later date we may prevail upon him to give a travalogue on that interesting country.

#### **DECEMBER MEETING.....**

Last December a snowstorm cut into attendance at a program on music of one hundred years ago. We are hopeful that the weather will be kinder on Monday, December 18, when we will present a group of soloists in "Musical Comedy Through the Years." Soloists on that evening will include: Rita Betti, Mary Brown, Rita Calvey, Joan Dell'Amico, Dolores Domenick, Ann Flannery, Jane McGurl, Joseph Barrett, and Bernard McGurl. They will be accompanied by Marilyn Coar.

#### **HOUSE NOTES.....**

The formal drawing room and dining room on the first floor of Catlin House were redecorated in October. Although the Building Committee had hoped to have the exterior of the building painted this fall, it begins to look now as though this will not be accomplished until next spring.

### **LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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