

The Lackawanna Historical Society BULLETIN

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THE REV. GEORGE PECK, D.D.

In a manner of speaking, I was introduced to Rev. George Peck, by my grandfather, the first H. H. Null, who left among his effects, Dr. Peck's "Wyoming: Its History, Stirring Incidents and Romantic Adventures," published by Harper in 1858. This early history of our area was based on the author's interviews with survivors of the Revolution and early settlers and should be read by anyone who is interested in getting a picture of what life was like in those days.

In the flyleaf of the book is pencilled "H. H. Null his book, bought this 15 of Novem. 1858 of a Tennessean tough - father owns from 80 to 125 slaves"; however this is not the story of H. H. Null, Sr., but of Rev. George Peck. It is an easy story to follow as Rev. Peck apparently kept careful notes throughout his life and put his story into another book called "The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D.D.," written by himself." It is by no means a dull book.

I have no space for genealogy, that part of the Peck line having been well covered by the late S. Fletcher Weyburn, but will quote a paragraph from Dr. Peck's book in order to give his background: "The old Hebrew method of rehearsing genealogies has the merit of clearness and brevity, if no other. Borrowing the ancient style, I begin with the statement that I am the son of Luther Peck, who was the son of Jesse, who was the son of Eliphalet, who was the son of John, who was the son of Joseph, who was the son of Henry."

Henry was born in England and arrived in Boston on the ship "Hector" on June 27, 1637. He settled in New Haven. His descendant, Jesse, lived in Danbury and with three of his sons enlisted in the Continental Army, when the Revolution erupted. One son died of smallpox in the service, the other two were prisoners in a British hulk and returned home with health greatly impaired.

A younger son, Luther, who was father of George Peck, was apprenticed to a blacksmith and married Annis Collar, the daughter of a Revolutionary soldier who died of smallpox at Valley Forge. Shortly after marriage, Luther settled in New York State in Otsego County, then pretty much of a wilderness.

Luther set up as a blacksmith, raised a family and was converted to Methodism while the family was growing up. Each one of his boys in turn became a Methodist minister. They were, besides George; Luther H., Andrew, William and Jesse, who became a bishop. The girls were Rachel, Martha, Elizabeth, Mary, Anna and Susanna.

George Peck, who was born Aug. 8, 1797, at the age of fifteen, experienced religious emotions and in 1815 took charge of a small congregation, which met



Geo. Peck

at his father's log cabin. Shortly after that, he was licensed as an exhorter by the church, giving him authority to conduct meetings. He attended a local school for one year, but in 1816, he decided to become a minister, so on appointment to help out on a "circuit" without pay, he left home on horseback to commence a ministerial career, which ended with his death in Scranton on May 20 1876.

He relates that this was the famous "cold summer," that corn failed to ripen as far south as New Jersey and that on June 6, there was a heavy snow storm. Accompanying the regular circuit preacher, they must have come into Luzerne County, because he conducted his first meeting at Plymouth at a camp meeting.

At the annual district conference, held at Sauquoit, he was admitted on trial as a circuit riding minister. This was in 1816 and he set out on the Broome Circuit, which seems to have included a number of meeting places around Binghamton, such as Chenango Point and Great Bend. For a year's work, Rev. Peck received the sum of \$50.

In 1817, he was assigned to the Cortland Circuit, but became ill and had to spend the winter in Cazenovia. The following year, after recovery, he was admitted to the ministry and assigned to the Wyoming Conference. He set out on horseback and made it there in five days - with fifty cents in his pocket. At a camp meeting near Forty Fort, the family of Philip Myers, Esq., was converted to the Methodist Church; eventful because Rev. Peck later married Mary, a daughter of Mr. Myers.

This circuit included such places as Plains, Hanover, Stoddardville, Marcy and so on. The country was much of it unclaimed forest and involved riding a horse with his possessions in saddlebags over corduroy roads or rough trails with few bridges built to avoid fording the streams. In what is now Scranton, he preached at the home of Preserved Taylor, who owned

most of what is now Hyde Park. He journeyed into the country then known as Drinkers Beech and to Leaches Flats, now known as Chinchilla and, since there were survivors of the early settlers still alive, must have gathered much of the source material for his history written much later.

It is interesting to note that he mentioned Preserved Taylor as "cultivating a little farm in a rather lonely neighborhood on the west bank of the Lackawanna, now the center of Hyde Park."

Next year, he was assigned to the Bridgewater circuit, which took in such places as Hopbottom, Snake Creek, Vestal, Choconut, Mehoopany, The Forks (now Forkston) and had many interesting experiences, which there is no space for me to recount. During his services on the Bridgewater Circuit, he married Mary Myers on June 10, 1819 and she went with him on some of his trips around the circuit; rough travelling, no doubt. In July, 1820, he took her with him on a trip to a church conference in Canada at which time they found an opportunity to visit Niagara Falls and Auburn Prison.

That year he was appointed to the Canaan Circuit, which included no churches, meeting in the court house at Bethany and taking him to such little places as Salem, now Hamlin, where he boarded with a fellow church member named Hamlin, who probably gave his name to the town. It was hard work and much of his pay was in such products as maple sugar. His clothes wore out and he was given an old suit by one of the faithful. He describes the "Beech Woods" as a place where everybody was clearing land and the people were mostly very poor.

In 1821, he was taken out of Pennsylvania and sent to a "station," which meant a settled church. He found the work a little more exacting because he had to write a new sermon each week instead of writing one to serve him on his trip around a circuit.

In 1822, he was moved to another station in Vienna and during the same year to Utica and in 1824 seems to have established himself with the church authorities as a coming man, because he was appointed to attend a General Conference in Baltimore, involving a trip across the Poconos to Philadelphia and thence to Port Deposit by horse and buggy and a steamboat ride down to Baltimore. At this conference, friction between Northern and Southern delegates began to develop and to deepen at succeeding conferences until the Southern delegates withdrew and established the Methodist Church South.

In 1824 he was appointed presiding elder of the Susquehanna District, which included eleven charges, and held this position for two years, after which he asked for less arduous work and was appointed to a station, a church in Wilkes Barre, in 1826. In 1827 he made a trip to the General Conference in Pittsburgh. In 1828 he was sent to a church in Ithaca and had to move there by wagon, a disastrous trip, because one of the wagons broke down on the way and the family, which now included four children had to spend 10 days in Montrose, during which time he "baptized a grandchild of Putnam Catlin, father of the famous painter of Indians." In 1829 he was reappointed to Ithaca and in 1830 to Utica.

In Utica, he became ill and, recovering in the spring, took a trip for his health, which took him over the Green Mountains, to Troy and Saratoga, where he drank the waters for 10 days and returned. Part of this trip was via the Erie Canal.

In 1831, he was named to the church in Cazenovia where he was reappointed in 1832. On his stay there, he found it possible to improve his education, studying Greek and natural science. He had little elementary schooling. He later studied Hebrew. It may be observed that he became as well educated as anybody could possibly be, taking every opportunity to read and study, thereby fitting himself for work, not only as a preacher, but as an author and editor.

He was moved to Auburn in 1833 and in 1835 appointed principal of Cazenovia Seminary, having proved fitness, not only in character, but in his sermons and writings. Under him, the seminary prospered.

In 1836 he went to the General Conference in Cincinnati - by wagon to Nanticoke, by raft to Northumberland, by stage to Duncan's Island, by packetboat over the Pennsylvania Canal to Pittsburgh and by steamboat to Cincinnati.

While principal at Cazenovia, Mrs. Peck became sick in the summer of 1838, so Rev. Peck sold his household goods, left three of the children in Cazenovia and on Oct. 13, set out with his wife and youngest child for a trip south recommended by Mrs. Peck's physician. It was quite a trip. They first went to Wilkes Barre, took a canalboat to Northumberland and reached Huntington.

The western packet was crowded and there was no place to sleep, the boat being filled with "half-drunken and profane men." At Huntington, due to a breach in the canal, they had to take a stage over the Allegheny Mountains to Hollidaysburg, where they again embarked on the canal and reached Pittsburgh. Here they found that the Ohio River was low and had to wait three weeks for it to rise and after starting south in the steamer "Canton" on Nov. 24, went aground 50 miles below Pittsburgh and had to transfer to another steamboat, which took them as far as Steubenville. They took another steamboat to Wheeling and were stuck there until spring.

On March 25, 1839, they reached Louisville and on April 5, Nashville. Rev. Peck visited Andrew Jackson and stayed overnight at the Hermitage. Thence their journey took them to St. Louis and Lebanon, Ill. Mrs. Peck and the child were left with acquaintances in Lebanon and the minister left on a trip up the Mississippi. After passing the Mormon settlement at Nauvoo, he reached Stevenson, Ill. and took a carriage to visit the scene of an Indian battle and call on Gen. Samuel Thomas, of Kingston, who held some office in the then territory.

On the way back up the Ohio, the engine broke and their boat sank, fortunately in shallow water; however, they made it safely back, in time to receive another appointment as presiding elder of the Susquehanna Conference, taking him back to what was then all Luzerne County for a year. In 1840, he was again a delegate to the General Conference, where he witnessed a three mile long parade of the supporters of

William Henry Harrison, then a candidate for president. He also heard Henry Clay and Daniel Webster speak and was elected editor of the Quarterly Review, although he really wanted to return to Kingston and have a hand at establishing Kingston Academy. The family moved to New York City.

In 1844, he was a delegate to the General Conference in New York, which was followed by the breaking off of the Methodist Church South and in 1846, he was a delegate to the Evangelical Conference in London. This entailed another steamboat trip and another wreck, this time off the shores of Nova Scotia, but nobody was lost and most of the delegates went on to England. A few turned back. The European trip took in many sights, including Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Sir Walter Scott's home at Abbotsford, Newcastle-on-Tyne, York, London, Paris, Belgium, Cologne, Wiesbaden, of which he didn't much approve, Rotterdam, return to London and back to New York on Oct. 3.

Then another trip to Pittsburgh to a General Conference in 1848, followed by a term as editor of the Quarterly Review, including duty as a commissioner to settle financial accounts with the southern branch of the church, finally, returning to the Wyoming Valley as pastor of the Franklin Street Church in Wilkes Barre in 1852.

He made another trip to Pittsburgh in connection with the money settlement and in 1854 was made presiding elder of the Wyoming District. He spent 1855 as presiding elder of the Binghamton District and, on asking for lighter duties (he was 58 years old then) was assigned to the Scranton Mission.

He found "forty reliable members and forty nominal members" and proceeded to commence building a bigger congregation and bigger church, in which he was successful. In 1857 he was reappointed to Scranton and finished his book "Wyoming: its History, etc." and saw it published the next year.

Also, in 1858, Rev. Peck built and moved into a house in Scranton, his 50th moving since leaving his original home. He was reappointed to Scranton in 1859. In 1860 he published a book on early Methodism. In 1860, he was again a delegate to the general conference, this time in Buffalo. In 1861, while attending a district conference in Owego, news of the firing on Fort Sumter was brought and the Civil War had begun. In 1862, he was appointed presiding elder of Lackawanna District.

In 1863, Dr. Peck relates that an epidemic, called the black fever, broke out in his district and about 400 people in Carbondale died; also that one third of the inhabitants of Clarks Green (600 - 700 inhabitants) suffered the same fate.

In 1864, the General Conference in Philadelphia appointed him a member of a delegation which presented a memorial to President Abraham Lincoln in Washington.

In 1866, he was made pastor of Providence Methodist Church, where he stayed until 1869, when he was again made presiding elder of his district. He was active until his death.

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There is not space in this Bulletin to properly present all of the interesting facts relative to the "Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D.D." He was a traveller and a most remarkable man, plainly one who kept careful notes throughout his life. His contribution to local history is large and valuable.

H. H. Null, III