

Hempfield: The Beginning of Columbia

On the occasion of the observance of the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the laying out and disposal of lots in the town of Columbia, by Samuel Wright, it seems to me fitting that I, his senior grandson, shall put on record an authentic statement of the origin and title of the property in question; and shall give some account of the settlement at this point and of the original settlers.

In the year of our Lord, 1492, as our earliest teaching impressed upon our memories, the Great Discoverer crossed the ocean; and nearly two hundred years later—March 4, 1681, to be exact—Charles II. of England granted to William Penn, our honored founder, proprietorship of the territory now comprising our State. But notwithstanding we derive from Columbus our name, and from Charles our title of ownership, it would be unduly fastidious to hark back so far for our datum point. To begin at the very beginning of our separate territorial existence, however, it will be necessary to come forward but twenty years from the last-named date—to 1701—the year in which the pretender succeeded his father, James II., in his claim to the English throne, and in which the Act of Settlement was passed by the English Parliament by which, on the death of childless Anne, the crown should pass to the House of Hanover. I thus identify our time of origin with important historical events in our Old Home.

In the year 1701, then—17th, 18th of 11th month—by lease and release, “William Penn, Esq., proprietor and governor in chief of said province” (Pennsylvania) “did grant release and confirm unto one George Beale, of Surrey, in Great Britain, Yeoman, the quantity of three thousand acres of land, clear of Indian encumbrances, in the said province of Pennsylvania, to hold, etc., etc., * * * under the yearly quitrent of one penny sterling for each hundred acres of said land, payable to the Chief Lord of the fee thereof after the expiration of seven years from the locating and the seating of the same.”

The royal grant to Penn—comprehensive, but indefinite—was of a broad virgin territory, unsettled, uncultivated and unknown. Charles named the province Pennsylvania, after his great Admiral, William Penn’s father, and in 1682 the proprietor came over in person and took possession of his vast estate. While Penn’s broad-minded statesmanship is shown in the unprecedented liberality of his laws for the government of this new land, it is not to be supposed that he did not take into consideration its pecuniary resources. No private means would suffice for undivided proprietorship, therefore he offered a market.

At this day our Founder would be called a promoter; and on a large scale he did promote a Province. He granted, as shown above, territory to what were then known as “adventurers.” The name was figurative, representing a class of speculators, successors in modified measure of the old-time capitalists—merchants and nobles—who staked the freebooters of Elizabeth’s “heroic” days (the genuine adventurers), the scourers of the sea for grain in treasure ships and in

general piracy. This later adventuring, however, was legitimate, and was about equivalent to our speculative investment in mines and other sources of hoped-for revenue.

Our George Beale then was an adventurer, and with many another, doubtless, sent good money into the wilderness in hope of large return from the investment in the promises of the wonderful new country. This enterprise might be called a "blind pool," for the lands conveyed were unseated—that is, of no definite locality; lands thereafter to be surveyed to the purchasers at their demand. And, moreover, back of Penn's title was the aboriginal Indian title, to be extinguished by negotiation and treaty. In the case of this particular tract—the Beale purchase—the treaty that cleared away the Indian claim was of 1700, supplementing a previous treaty and assuring to Penn title to lands on both sides of the Susquehanna River.

George Beale's adventure brought him no return until October, 1718, when he sold his entire claim to Jeremiah Langhorne, to whom, 25th of fifth month, 1717, Richard Hill, Isaac Norris and James Logan, Commissioners, had issued a warrant to "Locate and Lay Out" to him five hundred acres of the above tract. Langhorne was one of the Penns' surveyors, and must have had practical knowledge of the choice of lands of the Province. He chose these 500 acres wisely, and on 19-20 August, 1726, conveyed the same, by lease and release, to Robert Barber, of Chester, who, on August 31, 1726, deeded 100 acres of the land to Susanna Wright, and on 20 September, 1726, 150 acres to John Wright, retaining 250 acres of his purchase in his own name. On August 23, 1726, James Logan conveyed to

Samuel Blunston, of Darby, 300 acres of land; and to complete record of titles of lands, parts of which eventually came to be included in the limits of the Borough of Columbia, I will cite subsequent purchases by Blunston—on January 10, 1733, from James Logan additional 300 acres, and on June 2, 1741, by patent, from John and Richard Penn, 225 acres. These three tracts were contiguous, and joined Susanna Wright's land on the south. All quantities cited carried the customary allowance for roads of six acres per hundred.

I have thus far confined my memoranda to the land from which the area of present Columbia was carved. The original settlers are now to be considered. These were three—John Wright, Samuel Blunston, Robert Barber. Having in my possession the papers of my family, my record of John Wright will be the most complete. He emigrated "From Manchester in the Kingdom of Great Britain * * * I removed from thence to the province of Pennsylvania the 15th of ye 2 mo., 1714," to quote the family Bible. The date being old style, the month would have been May. It is on record in "Certificates of Removal, Philadelphia Monthly Meeting," that the certificate of "John Wright, wife Patience, and four children. Dated 1 mo., 16, 1713, from Hartshaw Mo. Mtg., Lancashire, England, received, 5 mo., 30 1714." This is again old style, and the month corresponds with August. It must have been filed soon after arrival on this side, the exact date of which event is not on record. He first settled with his family in Chester, where he had effected the purchase of a plantation before his coming; and where his youngest child,

James, was born the year of his arrival—1714—the first “native-born” of the family.

Samuel Blunston was American-born—September 2, 1689—at Darby, Chester county, in the province of Pennsylvania. He was the son of John Blunston, of Derbyshire, England, who emigrated thence in 1682, and was a close friend of the proprietor, a member of his Council and of the Provincial Assembly. Samuel, at the time of the Susquehanna purchase, resided at Darby, where he had married Sarah Bilton, a widow well-left. His means, besides, were ample. Both he and John Wright were then and for many years afterwards members of the Assembly. He died at Hempfield December 13, 1745.

Robert Barber preceded John Wright as an immigrant to the province. He is recorded as having come “about 1699,” supposedly from Yorkshire, and at the time of his purchase of the cited 500 acres from Langhorne he was a citizen of Chester. It is a tradition that he, in his capacity of Assessor of Chester county, became acquainted with and selected the land purchased for himself and the Wrights. It is supposed that he preceded his two friends to the Susquehanna; but his final removal with his family, from Chester, could not have been earlier than 1728.

The only record of the actual change of residence, or, rather, preparation therefor, is a “Journal of our removal from Chester and Darby to Conestoga in order to begin a settlement at Shawanah town on Susquehanna upon the 12th day of September, 1726. In company John Wright, Samuel Blunston, H. Scarlet, L. Ryley, John Devel, Prince, an Indian; Negro Peter, Negro Sal.” This is

manuscript in the hand of Susanna Wright, arranged as a title-page of a bound book, evidently intended to be followed by a record of this memorable event in the lives of these families—the removal from civilization to a comparative wilderness. Unfortunately the design was not pursued beyond this title page, the book being filled with various, mostly undated, memoranda of expenditures on the journey and elsewhere, details of building material, time checks of workmen, etc. Unusual items of contents, always in Susanna's hand, (some of the manuscript is Samuel Blunston's) are a transcript of a French grammar, and a brief glossary of Indian words.

This journey was evidently a formal taking possession of the newly-purchased land, for in October Wright and Blunston are recorded as present at the opening of the Provincial Assembly at Philadelphia. Scarlet, Ryley and Devel were supposedly mechanics left to prepare shelter for the removal of the families in the coming year. The Indian was probably a guide, and the negroes, cook and servant, slaves of Samuel Blunston. (It may here be recorded that Samuel Blunston, in his will of 1745, freed, after one year, his "negro Sal," with an annuity of five pounds; and that in Susanna Wright's "Account of Persons Laid in the Burying Grounds at Hempfield, of 1750, occurs among names of "servants of Samuel Blunston" that of "Prince, an Indian man." So these two fairly may be commemorated as among the "First Settlers.")

Susanna Wright, one of the purchasers, and besides an important member of this little community, certainly shall be named among the first

comers. Her name will frequently recur in my paper. Her part in the colony was notable, but beyond necessary mention particulars of her life are of sufficient interest and importance to deserve a more fitting memorial.

Shawanah Town, as it is named above, was an abiding place on the banks of the Susquehanna of the Shawanese Indians, who, if in numbers, must have removed as a body before the coming of the Whites. A number remained, however, in the immediate neighborhood, and it was a story told to me of the old time, how our forebears and their associates of the settlement were always friends and allies of the natives. The children of the two races were playmates, and there was peace between the elders. It is a satisfaction to remember that no Indian was oppressed or allowed to want in this Quaker settlement.

There is no record of the breaking up and early cultivation of this wild country. There must have been more or less of frontier hardship going to the conversion of virgin forest into tillable and producing land. We only know that the immigrants thrived, and in the end left to their successors the goodly milk-and-honey land that has come down to us. The ambition of these mature people was a quiet country life. They modeled their houses and their customs upon those of the Old Country, and it would seem that their lines had fallen in pleasant places. It is one of "Life's Little Ironies" that these Friends, seeking here peace and a tranquil life, should fall into the turmoil of domestic warfare. The boundary dispute between Penn's descendants and Lord Baltimore, their Maryland neighbor, was still unsettled, and it happened that

a collision between Cresap, a turbulent claimant under Baltimore's warrant seeking to crowd the dividing line into Penn's territory, and James Patterson, an Indian trader, holding land under Penn's grant, occurred near what is now Washington Borough, and opened a fairly serious border war. John Wright and Samuel Blunston, as magistrates, issued warrants under which some of the invaders were arrested, and this resulted in an offer of reward by the Governor of Maryland for the heads of these two agents of the Penns.

The three "Adventurers" with whom we have thus far been concerned—for surely the settling of sober, peaceful Friends among Indians, however friendly, was adventure—were men of more than ordinary character and weight. Samuel Blunston was a land surveyor and agent of the Penns. John Wright was a preacher in his society and the trusted negotiator between the proprietors and their Indian allies. Robert Barber was an energetic and enterprising citizen, in public life, before the removal to the Susquehanna. All were upon confidential terms with the Penns and with their chief agent in Philadelphia, James Logan. Upon the erection of the new county, named Lancaster after John Wright's English home county, in 1729, the three became prominent officials: John Wright was appointed Presiding Justice of the newly established Courts, Samuel Blunston Associate Justice and Prothonotary, Robert Barber Sheriff.

The writer is descended from two of these first settlers—great-great-grandson—and it appears to him justifiable to record his satisfaction in the fact that John Wright anticipated Franklin, Adams, Jefferson and all

that declaratory crowd, in his pronouncement for Freedom. In 1741 a new Bench of Magistrates for the several counties of the province was appointed by the Governor; and, in consequence of opposition by them to arbitrary acts of Government, a number of the old Judges were dropped. Among these was John Wright, who had denounced the impressment of bound servants as soldiers, in the Provincial Assembly. In his final charge to the Grand Jury he bade farewell to the Court, and among his words were these: "For this cause, my friends and countrymen, for the cause of English liberty, for the standing in the civil defense of right and property, we are dismissed; and I rejoice and am heartily glad that I have been one of those who are thought worthy of displeasure." This has not the eclat of the Tea Party, but it sounds the Advance.

Samuel Blunston died September 30, 1745; Robert Barber, September 3, 1749; John Wright, 1st October, 1749. Thus three pioneers left the New Land they came to build up nearly at the same time—the senior surviving his younger brethren.

Having come with the fathers of the settlement to the end of their days, it will be well to complete the record of title to the Columbia land. On the 10th of November, 1745, John Wright conveyed to his son, James, his estate of 150 acres. Samuel Blunston, dying without issue, bequeathed to Susanna Wright a life interest in his realty, and a caveat against the probate of the will having been filed by Thomas Pearson, husband of Hannah Blunston, Samuel's niece, a compromise was effected, the parties all being Friends and averse to litigation, by

which James Wright purchased from the Pearsons the undivided one-fourth part of the Blunston real estate, roughly estimated at 800 acres. Susanna Wright retained her 100 acres until her death in 1784, when it descended by testament to her nephew, Samuel, son of James Wright; excepting the "Ferry Property," of some acres, which she bequeathed to her nephews, Samuel, John, James and William. The Barber tract remained intact until a later date.

The "Ferry Property" was a part of Susanna Wright's land set apart for the erection and maintenance of the ferry, a grant for which John Wright obtained in 1730. This was a very valuable holding, which fixed the most important crossing of the mile-wide Susquehanna, and came to be known as Wright's ferry. Over this ferry passed the vast freightage and travel between the settled East and the expanding West. This made, in the open season, a busy place of the quiet settlement; yet the initial impulse of seclusion remained, and it required another generation before the value of the locality as a town site in prospect broke through the family reserve.

Thus, although Samuel Wright, on the death of James Wright in 1756, received as his share of his father's real estate the 200 Blunston acres bought from the Pearsons, it was only upon his Aunt Susan's decease and his inheritance under her will, that his hands were free. And to him came the impulse to found a town. So arrived the "day we celebrate." In 1788 a portion of the Pearson purchase and a part of Susanna Wright's land adjoining were laid out in 160 lots and were offered to "adventurers"—ad-

venturers again—upon easy terms. There must have been something of a boom, for in a few years a busy town arose—and there you are.

The town as then laid out comprised what came to be known as Old Columbia. Subsequently, in 1795, the Ferry property was laid out and disposed of by the owners as Columbia Continued. Later John Wright laid out John Wright's addition, and his son, James Wright, Jr., laid out Columbia Extended, from lands inherited from his father and purchased from the estate of Samuel Wright. There were besides smaller additions by Barber and Epply, Rohrer and Herr, and others, mainly from the original John Wright purchase, part of which fell to the share of his grandson, at the time of the partition of James Wright's estate. These constituted Columbia borough at the date of incorporation, 1814. With the exception of a strip bordering the Canal basin, after the opening of the Pennsylvania Canal, the Bethel (Blunston) property was held intact until 1867, when the writer resurveyed and extended the borough lines and laid out for the Heises and Mifflins, heirs of the Bethels, opening and extending streets, a large part of the estate included in the borough. About the same time he laid out in like manner for Green and Gossler a portion of the Robert Barber land, purchased by them from Barber's descendants—the first of this tract opened for improvement.

After the custom of the period of naming towns for great (and near-great) men, Samuel Wright called his new town Columbia. We value this historic and euphonic name (which, however, we share with how many towns

and cities throughout the States?); but it has come to the writer to think that his respected grandsire had more wisely done to retain the traditional Hempfield, or to go back to the aboriginal Shawanah.

Were it not that there has been an over-indulgence in Wright, in these memoranda, I should add a few words upon the notable Susanna. Certainly an uncommon woman, about whom there has been written much fol-de-rol; with valuable appreciation by those of her time who knew her. She was the head of the settlement from the death of John Wright, her father, up to the time of her decease—its lawyer, its doctor, its general adviser.

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