

SAMUEL BOWMAN AND THE VILLAGE

HE FOUNDED.

On the largest tombstone in the Mennonite graveyard in the rear of the new Mennonite Church, near the village of Bowmansville, is the following inscription :

"in memory of
SAMUEL BOWMAN
Was born December 1, 1789.
Dien, January 19, 1867:
Aged 67 years, 1 month and 18 days.

Here rest the ashes of the founder of the village of Bowmansville, the capital of Brecknock."

Mr. Bowman was born at Bowman's Mill, in Allegheny Valley, Berks county, on the first day of December, 1789. His father was a Swiss Mennonite, whose ancestors had emigrated to America on account of the religious persecution that followed the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV. His mother was Nancy Huber. Of his early *years* little is known, except what we learn from John B. Good, who knew him more intimately than any one else. He tells us that his mother in early childhood noticed that he was different from the rest of the children and was much concerned about him, not knowing whether his peculiarities indicated mental vigor or imbecility.

As soon as he was sent to school, however, it became evident that he had a natural fondness for learning, and he soon made such progress that he far outstripped all his schoolmates. English schools had no existence in those days in the vicinity where Bowman was born and raised. The only language heard in his father's family or for many miles around was Pennsylvania German. He, however,

studiously applied himself to the study of English and with the aid of the best dictionaries to be had he made wonderful progress. After he attained all the knowledge he could from the crude country school of his neighborhood, he attended the Churchtown Academy, where he had the opportunity of learning to converse in English. Here he studied surveying, which he afterward so extensively and successfully practiced for many years, and in which he attained much skill and accuracy. His clear head and logical mind were eminently fitted for practical geometry. His love of justice and equity, and his high character for honesty and uprightness of purpose all combined to make him afterwards the most successful surveyor in the northeastern end of the county. In his library were found some of the best classical authors in the English language. From 1815 to 1820 he was during the winter months engaged in teaching school. Surveying, scrivening and ordinary labor took up the rest of his time. As a teacher he acquired a wonderful reputation among his neighbors for the great amount of knowledge he possessed, and was especially famous for his success in keeping good order and governing his school. Some of his pupils are still living, and acquainted as they are with modern school discipline, say, "It was not so in Sam Bowman's school." His life was one of constant and unremitting toil of mind and body. He had a laudable ambition to be esteemed a correct and competent business man, and all who knew him and had any business transactions with him can bear testimony to the ability and honesty with which his affairs were conducted. He was a man of great power and worth, the ideal leader and adviser around whom his neighbors flocked for advice ; the centre of a community which he founded; the father any

settlement may be proud of. Like the mighty oak in a great forest, he was the giant among those who gathered around him. I am digressing from my subject, but no sketch of any place is completed unless something is known of the founder. It is true, most admirable biographical sketches of this marvelous man appear in several of our county histories, but his noble, rugged character is deserving of a wider acquaintance, and for that reason I have at some length referred to him. In 1820 Mr. Bowman built a house on the southeast corner where the road leading from Reamstown to the Plow Tavern crossed the State road. The house was arranged for keeping a country store. Here he commenced the mercantile business immediately after the building was finished, and was succeeded by his son-in-law, Jonas Musselman, and he in turn by his son, J. B. Musselman, who does a flourishing business at the old stand to-day. This was the first house of the now thriving village and from whence the name of the place was derived. Martin Bowman erected the second house, Daniel Bowman the third, and Jahn B. Good and Peter B. Good followed with substantial stone buildings. The latter built upon the northwest corner of the cross roads and opened a hotel, the only public house the place ever had. Now the village contains over a hundred houses, many of beautiful, modern design, four churches—two Mennonite, a Lutheran and Reformed, an Evangelical Methodist—and a handsome, substantial two-story school house. In 1840, just twenty years after the first house was erected, a post-office was established at Bowman's store and named Bowmansville. Mr. Bowman was appointed Postmaster, the only office, outside of Justice of the Peace, he would accept, the latter only for the convenience of

acknowledging his official papers. The establishing of a post-office and naming it after the founder, with the attachment of ville to it, was a fortunate occurrence, for by it the place received its baptism by the authority of the Department at Washington, or else more than likely the village would be known to-day by the inelegant title of Buckstown.

About a mile southeast of the then hamlet lived an old bachlor, Samuel Good. He was an eccentric old hermit, whose chief delight was in a flock of sheep, but he had a singular hatred for any sheep which was so unfortunate as to have black wcol. In other words, he had more contempt for a black sheep than for his satanic majesty. This the villagers knew, and one morning as Good viewed his flock he was amazed to find a black buck among them. He accused certain ones from the town of having perpetrated the joke, and from that morning on he called it Buckstown, or ,in Pennsylvania German, Buckstettle. The name stuck to it like wax and is now and then heard yet when one wants to refer to the place in a contemptuous way.

One of the "eyesores" to many of the village people was the Mennonite meeting house that stood on the square for many years. From 1870 to 1880 the village enjoyed quite a building boom and the real estate became too valuable for hitching posts and was sold, the old stone building or meeting house removed and a new one erccted by members of the Mennonite Church near Von Neida's mill, about a mile south of the village. In one end of the old church lived for many years an old woman, whose name I have forgotten. She was the sexton of the mceting hcuse and a terror to the boys who played upon the village green. In this quaint old house of

worship preached for many years, every fourth Sunday, Jacob Moseman, a learned Prussian Lutheran, who forsook that church and joined the Mennonites, and was undoubtedly the ablest minister that church ever had in the eastern end of the county. The hitching posts and the old shed upon the village green were never sufficient to accommodate all the teams when Moseman's turn came to preach. In 1854 a new Mennonite meeting house was erected several hundred yards south of the village on the edge of a grove of magnificent pines. But three partly decayed trees remain, standing as sentinels of the many giants that stood there half a century ago. The new church has had but few members since its organization forty-five years ago. It was originally supplied by ministers from Montgomery and Bucks counties, but in 1860 Rev. Solomon Ott was ordained and **has** proclaimed the gospel for thirty-six years in the little church beside the pine grove. On the **same** road north of the town stood the little stone school house, now the site of the handsome school building of the town. Here Brecknock's fight for the free school system was repeated. What occurred in every other of the little temples of learning, the story of which when told is as interesting as Eggleston's "Hoosier Schoolmaster." From 1820, when Bowman built the first house up to 1860, a period of forty years, the village made but very little improvement. Bowman's store and dwelling, the hotel, the residence erected by John B. Good on the northeast corner of the cross roads and now occupied by 'Squire Stover, a brick dwelling a little north of Good's house and then occupied by Joseph Musselman, another brick house west of the hotel erected by Jonas Musselman and occupied by his son, Israel, the dwelling, shoemaker shop and tin shop that stood

on the edge of the hitching post ground of the Mennonite Church, and occupied by Benjamin Lausch, the village shoemaker, and his son, Reuben, the tinsmith of the hamlet, the farm buildings of Daniel Bowman, another most substantial and large dwelling house then occupied by Jacob Hoover and now by Michael Witmer, and a brick dwelling now owned by G. L. Bowman, of Reading, and occupied by John M. Weaver, were all the houses the village contained when the civil war broke out in 1861. Reuben Lausch, who hammered tin in the second story of his father's house and later in a commodious shop erected near his residence, was a man of far more than ordinary ability. He not only illuminated the homes of the neighborhood with the first coal oil lamps, but his genial, well-informed mind was a source of delight to the young men who gathered in his shop to listen to his interesting talks. In 1861 the war excitement created a stir in the village that was not surpassed by any other in the county. An immense pole was erected and a large flag flung to the breeze. This suggested the idea to some one that the village ought to have a large bell. A tall pole with a frame was put up on the corner of the tin shop, a bell hung in the frame, and for many years the shoemaker or the tinsmith rang the bell morning, noon and night, and also at the death of any one in the entire neighborhood. At the tolling of the bell for some one's funeral it broke ; the second was bought but broke when put in place ; the third was purchased and put upon a new frame erected in the rear of the old Bowman store stand, where the custom of ringing the meal time hour three times a day to all the inhabitants for miles around is still observed. This quaint observance is

part of the daily life of the village, to which everyone has become so used that to do without it would be like omitting *an event* of the day. No township in the county witnessed such exciting times as Brecknock did during the war. The district was strongly slavery, and contained many outspoken disloyal men who would defiantly at any public gathering yell for the Confederacy. Many of them were densely illiterate and had no more conception of the principle at stake than they had of the French revolution. The inhabitants of the capital of Brecknock, to their lasting honor and credit, were all loyal and stood by the flag that floated from the village *flag staff*. The Silver Hill rebels, as they were called by the villagers, were a terror to all law-abiding people. Philip Huber, the Berks county chief and organizer of the Knights of the Golden Circle, or Enemies in the Rear, came to Bowmansville and held a public meeting at the hotel then kept by Samuel Eshleman. The Saturday afternoon was a memorable event for the loyal people of the town. Huber, surrounded by several hundred of disloyal, cowardly enemies in the rear, many of whom came across the line from Berke county, was in his glory, and made the most treasonable speech that was ever publicly delivered in Lancaster county. The excitement was intense. This was the same Huber who afterwards was arrested at a public sale and put upon a rail and ridden to Reamstown, followed by all the people at the sale. And later when he marched to Reading at the head of the Heidelberg brigade was run out by the fire engines which he thought were cannons. The first political meeting ever held in the village was a Lincoln meeting in 1860. The speech making took place from the porch of John B. Good's house opposite the hotel. The New Holland band was

present and caused an unusual crowd to assemble. Brecknock has reversed herself politically, and to no cause can the result be attributed so much as to the disgusting, treasonable expressions of those who were in open sympathy with the Confederacy, and yet too cowardly to go and assist them. The fight for free schools and war times in Brecknock would make a subject for an interesting volume. As Bowmansville has improved, so has the township, and to-day no more thrifty, honest, conscientious and enterprising people are to be found anywhere in the county than in Brecknock.

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