



First Session of Montgomery County Court, 1784, held in the Barley Sheaf Barn.

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HISTORICAL MURALS in the Montgomery County Court House

BY GEORGE M. HARDING

A Note about the Author-Artist

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY is privileged to present in this issue, through the courtesy of the Montgomery County Commissioners, reproductions of a new series of historical murals by Major George M. Harding, who recently was awarded for these paintings the Gold Medal in Mural Decoration by the Architectural League of New York.

Major Harding is an old hand at the author-artist game. "I was on the staff of *Harper's Magazine*," he writes, "drawing and writing, starting 1907. Assignments took me to Labrador, Cuba, Canada, Europe, Africa, the near East, Egypt, Arabia, India, Australia, the South Pacific Islands, the East Indies, Malaya, China, Japan." He is at the moment preparing a book on the Solomon Islands, which he visited during the last war as a major in the U. S. Marines (3rd Marine Amphib. Corps). He saw service in the South Pacific Area from Guadalcanal to Guam.

Major Harding's murals are familiar to most Americans. Millions saw examples of them in the United States Government Building at the New York World's Fair in 1939. Other examples may be seen today in the Post Office Administration Building, Washington, D. C.; the Chrysler Corporation Office, Detroit; the Municipal Court House, and the Court of Common Pleas, Philadelphia.

The murals in the Montgomery County Court House at Norristown were painted in tempera on specially designed panels



Architectural setting of mural in Court Room A: "First Montgomery County Court 1784: Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg, First President Judge."
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installed like large panes of glass. Should the building ever be demolished, the pictures may be removed without injury.

In preparation for these paintings, the artist made an intensive study of the rich historical background of Montgomery County. Once the contrasting overall approach—the subjects for each room—had been decided on, careful studies were made for the detail of each panel. “Old barns and furnaces were studied,” writes Major Harding. “Rittenhouse’s telescope and clock were drawn from the originals in the American Philosophical Society collection. Busts and portraits done in Rittenhouse’s lifetime were studied. Christopher Dock’s fractur illuminations and early Audubon drawings were examined.”

On the pages that follow, the artist sketches in words the stream of history which each painting is designed to recall.

COURT ROOM A

*Frederick Muhlenberg Holds His First Court
in the Barley Sheaf Barn
December 28, 1784*

Montgomery County has a history that goes back far beyond the date of the convening of the first court in the Barley Sheaf



*Detail: Types of early settlers in Montgomery County area, 1784.
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barn on December 28, 1784. For a generation the earliest grants of land in Lower Merion Township were filed in the court at Upland. The Revolution ended the corporation of the City of Philadelphia as it existed under the 1682 Charter of Penn. The deed books in the old Second Street Court House had a century's records of transfers of lands above the falls on the Schuylkill. A new book was opened in Montgomery County. Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg's signature records an entry dated December 4, 1784. The deed itself, on good white paper probably made by the Rittenhouse mill on the Wissahickon, is in the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society.

The newly-established county had about 15,000 population—Indians, Welsh, Swedes, English, Irish, Scotch, Germans, and Hollanders. Since Pennsylvania had abolished slavery in 1780, there were also African laborers. Germantown Road, Skippack Road; Fatland, Swedes Ford, and Matson Ford crossings of the Schuylkill; Whitemarsh, Plymouth Meeting, Schwenksville, on this side of the river; the Gulph and Valley Forge on the other side; and the deeds of the Colonial Army that had fought and marched and camped thereon—all these were by-words from Maine to Georgia. Philadelphia's hospitality to the British was not echoed at Barren Hill.

Printed handbills, with notice of the court's first session, announced the date at the Seven Stars Tavern, the Trappe store of Frederick Muhlenberg, McCall's Ferry, and the saw mill. Paper was scarce. Less than a hundred copies were needed. The town crier included the date in the day's news at Jenkintown.

The Barley Sheaf barn was on Germantown Road. The Inn was a step away, providing food and shelter for man and beast. A table, benches, and chairs had been carried over by the stable boys from the inn for the court's use in the barn.

At twelve o'clock noon the court crier proclaimed the opening of the first session of Montgomery County Court. Presiding at the deliberations was Judge Frederick Muhlenberg, then thirty-four years old.

Thirteen years of Muhlenberg's boyhood had been spent in the country about Trappe where his father was pastor of Augustus Church. In 1763, Frederick, with his brothers, Peter, sixteen, and Henry, nine, was sent to Halle, Germany, to be educated in the

school at which his father had taught before his call to minister to the backwoods Lutherans of Pennsylvania. Old German towns and schooling ripened the boys' background. The spark of their maternal grandfather, Conrad Weiser, ambassador to the Indians, and presiding judge of Berks County when it was established in 1752, was in their blood, later to burst into flame. Starting as Lutheran pastors, they were all in time to assume other roles.

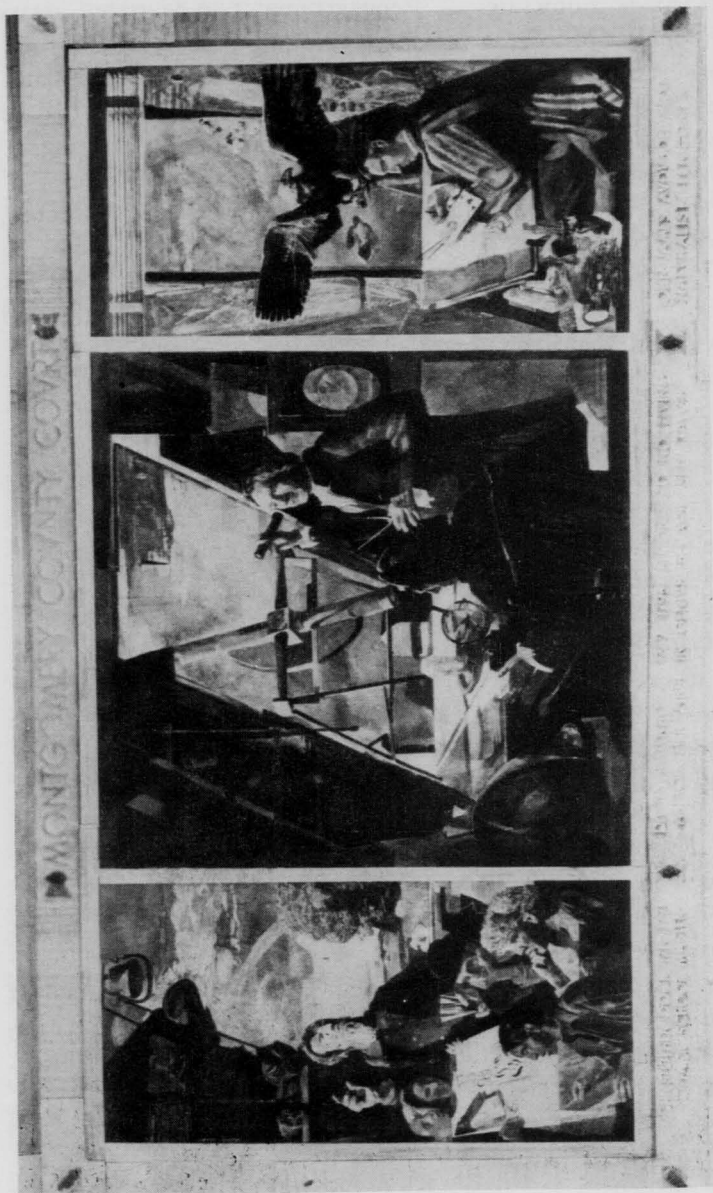
At the start of the Revolution, Peter had thrown off his robes, dramatically declaring, "There is a time to pray—and a time to fight." On this December day in 1784, Peter was back from his Ohio journey to report that the Indians of the Ohio were in no friendly mood, that it was impossible for him to occupy the twelve thousand acres granted him for seven years of service as a brigadier general in the Virginia line.

Out in Lancaster, Henry Muhlenberg, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, not only carried a Bible but also a microscope and a case filled with flower specimens. He was a great botanist. At the time of the court's first session, he was planning the establishment of Franklin College.

Frederick Muhlenberg, espousing the cause of freedom, refugee from New York under the British occupation, barred from Philadelphia where the British had burned his father-in-law's sugar refinery, rode the trails of his native country. He shared the rough life, understood the hearts of its settlers. Offered a church in Reading, he was unable to accept because wealthy Philadelphians, fleeing there when the Continental Congress moved to York, had sent the cost of living beyond the humble means of a pastor with a family to provide for.

A few years later Frederick Muhlenberg was called to public life. He was elected delegate to Congress, a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and president of the Pennsylvania Council of Censors. He served as County Registrar of Last Wills and Testaments, and as Justice of the Peace for the district of Skippack, Perkiomen, Providence, and Limerick Townships.

And so seven men of strength and integrity, though unlearned in the law as we understand the term today, were the first to administer justice in the unsettled period through which the new country was now passing. Some of the trouble-makers fled and followed the expanding frontier westward—more fertile ground



Christopher Dock

David Rittenhouse

John James Audubon
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for vice. The aftermath of war was found in the lawbreaking Doan Gang, the members of which called themselves the Royal Refugees. They broke through from Bucks County. The militia was called to hunt them down. The Royal Refugees even threatened Muhlenberg's life. "They'll have to catch me before they can hang me," was his tempered answer. The Muhlenberg store at Trappe was robbed of cash and the best of the trade goods two nights after he had assumed office as Justice of the Peace.

Frederick Muhlenberg had a calm head and a brave heart—qualifications for a judicial mind. He was destined in the next few years to move from President Judge of Montgomery County to enlarged responsibilities.

April 30, 1789, found him on the balcony of the Federal Building in New York. Pennsylvania had elected him to the Congress of the United States, and Congress, in turn, had elected him Speaker of the House of Representatives. In this office he attended the inauguration ceremonies when George Washington took the oath of office as first President of the United States.

COURT ROOM B

Christopher Dock

In a countryside untouched by any serious disturbance with the Indian inhabitants, it was possible at a very early date for the seeds of folk art, science, and natural history, once transplanted, to thrive and grow. Penn's proprietary settlement of Philadelphia in 1682 made this particularly true in the fertile lands of the Schuylkill and Perkiomen Valleys now included in our Montgomery County.

Many of the colonists from overseas—from Holland, England, France, Ireland, Scotland, and Germany—settled in Philadelphia, but many others went up and down the Delaware and along its tributary streams. Today we are concerned with the first settlers who proceeded up the Schuylkill Valley and who not only made it possible for their descendants to carry on to the present day, but also, in doing so, to hand on to us documentary proof of their stature which today has become a part of our national heritage.

In those early days ships arriving in the newly-founded colony anchored off Dock Creek and from them, carrying their chests,

the passengers marched along the river bank and up High Street to the Courthouse where they would take the Oath of Allegiance to King George the Second, or affirm their peaceful and God-fearing intentions in seeking refuge here.

The Germans in the group then traveled on foot or by cart along Second Street and some five miles out along the Germantown Road to where Pastorius had a grant of land and where he had, by 1686, built a small church and the first houses of Germantown. Here the wagon road ended. Only a few trails led on, later widened by pack horses and carts bound for the Skippack and Perkiomen.

It is not definitely known just when Christopher Dock arrived in Germantown. According to Martin G. Brumbaugh, ex-Governor of Pennsylvania and an authority on the life and work of Christopher Dock, the date is set somewhere between 1710 and 1714. At least it is known he taught then in Germantown, and soon after 1718 was also teaching on the Skippack three days a week. It is recorded that he purchased a tract of land in Salford Township from the Penns for 15 pounds, 10 shillings, and from then on divided his time between teaching and farming. The log schoolhouse on the Skippack where he taught was one story high; its floor was of split logs with a hearthstone. In the days of late Indian summer and the warmth of spring his pupils sat outside. Besides the "Three R's" Dock taught them folk art, and he was the first to teach music in a Pennsylvania school. His pupils copied his color designs of fraktur and baptismal certificates and learned to express themselves by writing letters to one another. Christopher Saur, the Germantown printer's son, was one of Dock's pupils and, before Dock died in 1771, the former pupil had published his schoolmaster's views on education, "The Schul Ordnung."

David Rittenhouse

David Rittenhouse's family established the first paper mill in America on the Wissahickon, carrying on an industry in which their ancestors, the Ruttinghuysens, had excelled in Holland. The family moved from Germantown, where David was born in 1732, to Norriton, and there, at eighteen, he started his own shop. His

reputation as a clockmaker became known throughout the township. His nights—or his “idle hours,” as he called the time for sleep—were devoted to study. In 1755 his brother-in-law, the Rev. Mr. Barton, of Lancaster, brought his valuable books from England, and he borrowed others in Philadelphia. As a young man he read Benjamin Franklin’s publication, “Poor Richard’s Improved Almanack,” poring over its advices on courts, fairs, and roads, together with its judgments of weather, limitations, eclipses, movements of the planets, length of days and nights, chronological observations, and other interesting remarks.

The Almanack, printed in 1758, is of particular interest to us today. Under Entertaining Remarks the following is printed:

“The glorious planet Venus—evening star until the 28th of March, then morning star to the end of the year.”

Rittenhouse was 26 the year this was published. Who knows but that just such a statement as this planted the seed in this brilliant young astronomer’s mind that, ten years later, led to the construction of his orrery? His skill created an instrument capable of ascertaining the position of the planets and their satellites at any given period of the world—past, present or future—thus forming a perpetual astronomical almanac. When the news of it spread, this extraordinary instrument commanded the wonder and admiration of learned men everywhere. The first recognition came from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Franklin was founder and first president of the organization and, on his death, Rittenhouse was elected president. Rittenhouse, on his passing, was succeeded by Thomas Jefferson.

The minutes of the Society for June 19, 1768, the date on which Rittenhouse’s orrery was first announced, read as follows:

“The Orrery Committee’s report was made, applauding Mr. Rittenhouse’s apparatus. The Committee on Astronomy, having checked the Observation of Venus calculations, moved to consider a proposal and estimate the cost for making observations of the predicted transit of Venus.”

Almost a year later, in April, 1769, a log cabin was built at Norriton from which Rittenhouse might make these observations. It was of simple construction, with a sliding door in the southern slope of the pitched roof. Through the roof opening the expanse of sky that could be seen reached from the low, unobstructed hori-

zon to directly overhead. Here, night after night, Rittenhouse spent his time, making astronomical observations preparatory to his predicted date of the transit of Venus over the face of the Sun—June 3, 1769. Sometimes he was alone, other times in company with his friends: Dr. Smith, Provost of the College at Philadelphia; his brother-in-law, the Rev. Mr. Barton; and John Lukens, Surveyor General of Pennsylvania.

All his hours of study, gazing into the limitless space of the heavens, recording for the latitude and longitude of Norriton the seasonal movements of the stars and planets in relation to the rotation of the Earth, were, of course, done by Rittenhouse in the deep silence of nights during the 1760's. But the culmination of the work came just after midday on the 3rd of June. Just as precisely as the sun had risen at 5:30 that morning, the planet Venus began to move between the Sun and the Earth. Providentially the day was beautifully clear and, when the transit began at 2:11 p.m., Rittenhouse was able to see it plainly. A group of neighbors gathered by the roadside and stood in awed silence while Rittenhouse in his observatory witnessed a phenomenon that was never again visible to any person then alive.

John James Audubon

Just as the simple folk art designs of decorative Gothic letters, birds, tulips, and stars, taught by Dock, were the visual expression of far deeper religious feelings; just as Rittenhouse's early curiosity about the movements of planets led to his important achievements—so too the work of John James Audubon began simply—in this case as observation of wild life along the Perkiomen, where he lived in the early 1800's—and developed into his great ornithological masterpiece in *Birds of America*. At Mill Grove in Montgomery County, he learned to love the nests and eggs and, with a peculiar genius for observation, he came to know our native birds in their nesting seasons and their migratory flights. Audubon found at Mill Grove both his wife and his lifework. Later he was a great traveler on America's expanding frontiers—Florida, Louisiana, the Mississippi River Valley, and even the Labrador Coast. He made two trips to England and Scotland when plates for *Birds of America* were being printed. Today first

editions of this great book, along with *The Quadrapeds*, individual plates of the elephant folio, his water colors and his oils, like the famous wild turkey, are prized possessions of museums, libraries, academies of natural science, and many private collections.

COURT ROOM C

*Swede's Ford,
December 12, 1777*

Before Audubon came into this area, the peace of the Schuylkill Valley was overcast by the news of Bunker Hill in 1775. However, the gathering storm clouds did not actually break here until the Battle of the Brandywine on September 11, 1777—nearly two years later. On September 14 the low thunder of cannon at Goshen was heard as far away as



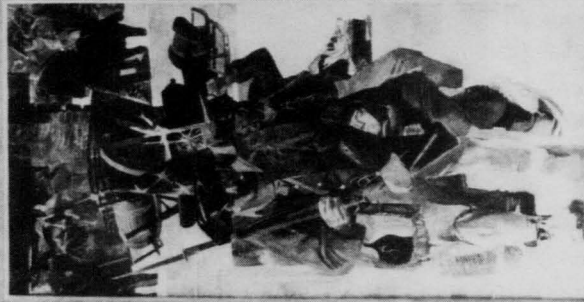
Detail: Audubon Drawing

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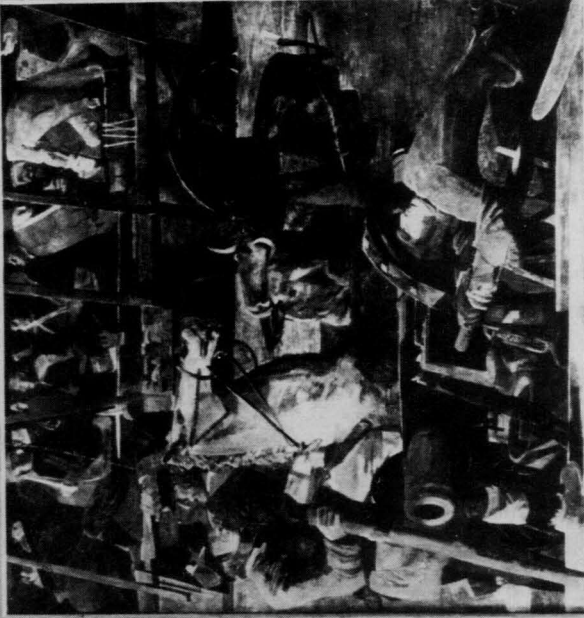
Trappe. The war was close at hand, and the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* of Philadelphia printed the news of the British success and of Washington's withdrawal and added: "Those who expect to reap the blessing of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it."

In the months that followed, the inhabitants of the area we now

MONTGOMERY COUNTY COURT



VALLEY FORGE DECEMBER 19
1777 JUNE 13 1778



BY SPIRITED CONTINUANCE WE SHALL OBTAIN THE END
OF OUR WARFARE INDEPENDENCE LIBERTY PEACE



IRON FURNACES AND FORGES
WHERE MONTGOMERY

From the windows of this court, the Valley Forge Park can be seen five miles away in the portion of Montgomery County that lies across the Schuylkill River.

Center panel, from Washington's order of the day on reaching Valley Forge: "By spirited continuance we shall obtain the end of our warfare; independence, liberty, peace."

Left panel: Valley Forge December 16, 1777-June 18, 1778.

Right panel: Iron Furnaces and Forges—Upper Montgomery.

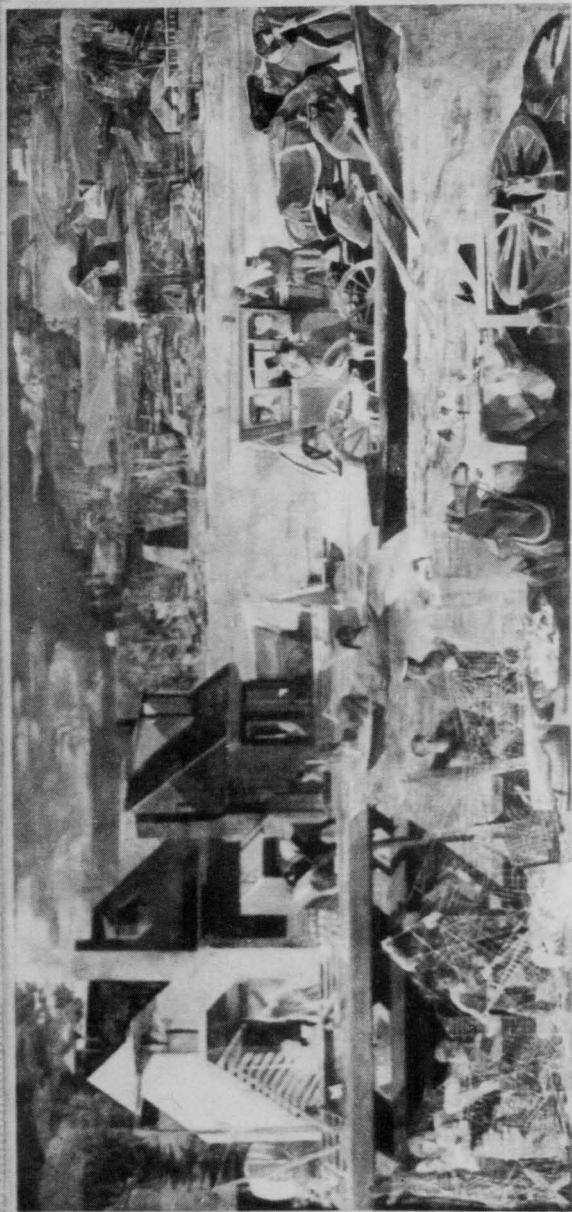
know as Montgomery County saw much of the suffering and hardships of Washington's army. Hay in the barns, shocked corn in the fields, and even the standing buckwheat all were used as bedding for the men and food for the horses of the army. Main roads were few, and of those existing there was not one leading from Camp Pottsgrove, Camp Perkiomen, Camp Towamencin, Camp Worcester, or Camp Whitemarsh, but was scarred with woodlots cut down and burned, along with the fence rails, for firewood. There was not a bridge in existence—the Perkiomen Bridge was not built until 1798—and the main water courses, the Schuylkill, Perkiomen, and Skippack, intercepting the existing roads, all had to be forded.

In December, 1777, the decision was made to leave Whitemarsh and build winter quarters at Valley Forge. The crossing of the Schuylkill was made on Friday, the 12th of December, at Swedes Ford for the march to Gulph Mills. It was in the depth of a severe winter. Two thousand men were incapacitated. Fording the icy river and then camping in the open was not to be thought of. Contemplate the difficulties. Examine the means placed in Washington's hands, and the use he made of them. The crossing of the Delaware the year before had been made by collecting flat-bottom ferries and Durham ore batteaux, stripping the river of all available craft and thereby denying the enemy access to the same means. But no such means existed on the Schuylkill. The flat-bottom boats—few in number on the stretch of river from below Swedes Ford to above Parkers Ford—were essential for transporting the artillery and powder. How was it to be done?

Thirty-six wagons were backed end to end across the river and a ramp of rails laid from the last wagon at each end to the river bank. The foot soldiers started crossing in the low sunlight of the winter afternoon. The double line consumed hour after hour through the long night, lighted by blazing fires on the river banks. It was after sunrise before the last troops, carrying the incapacitated, reached the warmth of the fires in the Gulph where the shivering men were crowded. The tent wagons, first in the long line of transport wagons, forded the river just beyond this wagon bridge. Finally, when all the men were across, a group of fifty wagoners, wading in the cold waters, harnessed teams of oxen the horses to the wagons comprising the bridge and they were

MONTGOMERY COUNTY COURT

THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER FERRY, 1806



THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER FERRY, 1806

In this court the mural panel is placed on a very simple mahogany wainscoted wall.

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hauled out. The army was safely across, but the bleak prospect of the Valley Forge encampment still to be built faced them.

The position at Valley Forge protected the iron furnaces of the Upper Perkiomen, the rich farmlands, and the Continental Congress that was then at York, from the British.

ORPHANS COURT

Schuylkill River Ferry

Even today the Schuylkill River follows the same course as that shown on surveys entered in the earliest County Deed Book. The growth of the county can be traced clearly, era by era, along its banks. First there was the untouched land of the pre-white man days, with Indian encampments scattered along its length. Then, as the settlers came, the woods began to be cleared, log cabins to be built, and stump fences to mark the newly-planted fields. Then, gradually, grist mills were built and saw mills to cut the oak and hemlock logs. Board floors, clapboards, and shingles made in these mills were used in building the homesteads, some of which still crown the Schuylkill Valley hills. And, besides providing power for the waterwheels of the mills, the river provided a water highway to Philadelphia down which the settlers could float timber and the products of their farms.

Soon after the ice broke up in the spring, the river was ready for log rafts and heavily-laden flat-bottom boats to float downstream. It was a dangerous trip. The crews had to plunge at the oars as they swung round one rock and sheered off another in a counter-current. The rafts, about twelve feet wide and sixteen feet long, made simply of logs lashed together, were drifted to saw mills on the lower river and sold, and the produce from the boats was exchanged for necessary store goods.

Poling upstream on the return trip was laborious work, even when the flood waters had subsided. Sometimes the crews of the flat-bottom boats hauled on long cables, towing from the river-bank. At other times a horse was carried for the purpose, and it would splash along in shoal water close to the bank. On certain stretches of river bends, when the wind was favorable, even flat sails were hoisted to help on the slow trip.

But the growth of settlements along the river which this traffic encouraged, also drove the deer, the bear, and much of the game out of the valley. When this happened, the fish of the river became an even more important part of the food supply.

Each year great schools of shad worked their way up the river to spawn. Many of the settlers knew them well; they were the same fish that had appeared in the homeland rivers of Europe—the Thames, the Rhine, the Seine. When the shad started running in the Schuylkill, it was a time of short supply. Food bins were nearly empty from the winter and it was a long time until the new harvest. On the days and nights when they were running, regular farm work was dropped and every one turned to fishing. Often four hundred prime shad were caught in one haul of the seine nets, and sometimes as many as twenty-three hundred were taken in one night. Many of these were salted down in casks for later use.

The run of the shad was dependent on the temperature of the water in the river. The same weather that brought the apple blossoms and bees to the orchard brought the shad to the shoals of the river to spawn. And so it was an old saying that “the shad will come when the apple tree blooms.” There was another sign, too. When the fish were running, the bald eagles and fishhawks would perch in dead trees along the river, the hawk to catch the shad and the eagle to take it from him. Audubon observed this habit during his residence at Mill Grove.

In winter, of course, the river was frozen over and the ice thick enough to support a horse and sled. Crossing was no problem then. But the same spring rise that carried the rafts and flat-bottom boats downstream and that preceded the coming of the shad, also made travel more rigorous than ever. When the water was high and was sweeping over the fords in a torrent, ferries were the only means of crossing. Foot passengers and the travelers in the cross-country stagecoaches all had to give a helping hand on the ferry and man the big oars to get the craft across.

The first dam built on the lower river marked a tremendous change in life along the river. The shad fishing came to an abrupt end. And with each additional dam the river became nothing more than a series of pools. Mule teams began to plod along the tow path, hauling the laden canal boats close to shore. The river be-



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COURT HOUSE, 1854

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came too deep to be forded. Then even the ferries began to disappear. Bridges were built to take their place. And so the era of the free river ended. The lumber rafts, the ferries, the Reading boats, all became only memories of the past.

COURT ROOM D

Montgomery County Court House, 1854

The Court House built in 1854 was designed by Napoleon Le Brun, who later designed important buildings in Philadelphia and New York. He was the descendant of a French officer who accompanied Lafayette and served during the American Revolution. The historical research for this panel covered the Court House itself, the public square, and contemporary life—the buildings and characters of Main Street. The shop window shows work of craftsmen and small industry of the Norristown area of that period.

The Court House was built of marble quarried a few miles away on the other side of the Schuylkill. In 1876 the top of the spire was removed. In 1904 an addition was built to the original court house on each wing. The portico portion remains in its original condition.