LIFE IN BUCKS COUNTY IN 1722/23

EDITED BY HAROLD B. HANCOCK*

SOMETIMES letters written by immigrants are very revealing concerning their new homeland. Such a letter was written in 1722/23 by Ambrose Barcroft, a resident of Solebury in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to his father in England.

Barcroft was born at Noyna in Yorkshire in 1681. At the age of twenty-one, he had married Mary Washman or Walshman of Whalley, but she had died in 1705, leaving two sons, William and Ambrose. By 1711 the Yorkshireman had moved to Deptford in Kent.

"Having a designe to goe Beyond the Sea," he granted a power of attorney to his father and sister on September 21, 1720. Probably he settled first in Maryland, as a Pennsylvania deed of 1723 referred to the sale of land near Solebury to "Ambrose Barcroft of Talbot County in the Province of Maryland, gentleman." In 1722 he was appointed a Justice of Peace for Bucks County. After his arrival in America he married a second wife whose first name was Elizabeth, and by her he had a son named John. While he was crossing a branch of the Delaware River thirty miles north of his home on horseback on December 24, 1724, with his son Ambrose as a companion, his horse stumbled, and he was thrown off and drowned. Presumably he had been in America less than five years at the time of his death.

Barcroft's letter to his father back in England in 1722/23 described the problems faced by a farmer on the American frontier in the eighteenth century. From morning to night, Barcroft wrote, he was busy clearing land, planting crops, and constructing a home or supervising the labor of others to perform these arduous

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2Lancashire Record Office Report for 1957, 19; Runk, Barcroft Family Records, 158-159.

397
tasks for him. Except for a few items, his cattle, crops, and timber soon made him self-sufficient. A trifle wistfully, perhaps, he noted that some were garnering riches more easily than himself from a mine of yellow ore in the vicinity and from a copper mine in West Jersey. He reported that labor was expensive and that servants were hard to control. With more capital than most immigrants, he was concerned with sending tobacco from Maryland overseas to complete a trading venture for some English friends, also about a draft for £70 that he had drawn upon an English firm.

From this letter readers will find out how one settler met and successfully solved the problems of frontier life in Pennsylvania in the early part of the eighteenth century—until unexpected tragedy struck.

Soleburry Mar. the 1st
1722/23

Hond. Father*

* * *

My buying the whole Tract of 450 acres oblig'd me to pay a greater Sum then I were to do by the first Contract, besides the Charge of mentaining a family where every thing is to be bought, the building a house, and buying all sorts of Househould and husbandry goods, which are here very dear. For Instance Pewther is 2s. p. lb. and Kettles 3s. If you let work by the great, you will always find victuals because there is no convenient Boarding near. A labouring man has 1s.8d. per day in the Winter and 2s. in the Summer; a Carpenter, Joyner or Mason has 2s.6d. and 3s.6d. per day and meals. As we have no market nearer then Philadelphia, we are oblig'd to lay in our year's provision at the fall of the year. I have laid in a good quantity of beef and Pork at 2d. per lb. (which is usually double that price in the Spring and Summer) which together with my stock of live Hogs, of which I have above a score of one sort and other has cost me about £17. I hope hereafter to have no occasion to buy any Pork nor no other provisions, till the next fall, except a little venison of the Indians, of which I can have a Quarter for ¼ of a lb. of Gun Powther, but that is not to be depended upon.

I sow'd two acres of wheat last fall, & I hope to sow 10 or 12 acres of Corn in the Spring, that I may reason-

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a Barcroft Collections, DDB/61/20, Lancashire Record Office, Preston, England. This letter was photographed for the writer. A portion of it was printed in the Lancashire Record Office Report for 1957, 19-23. A lengthy
ably expect to subsist with little buying in a short time. Cattle and horses, I think, are much the same price as with you. I have eleven of both sorts. I could summer what I pleas’d, and they will be very fat at the fall, but if they are not bred in the neighbourhood they are apt to stray the first Summer. I have had a great deal of trouble riding after ’um, which I hope is now over, but I have lost none.

We have a tract of land about 2 miles off, where few trees grow; we can mow there what hey we please. I got some hey there last Summer, and that, with one acre and a half of Oats and as much Indian Corn, is the fother I have had for my Cattle, I hope I shall not be scarce, for I think one beast with you eats as much as three here.

I had 4 servants. The woman I sold, she were not worth keeping. One run away, I have heard of him in Maryland, but I am afraid he’ll get to England, that I shall not catch him; two I have still. I have been in an humour to sell one of them the next Summer (for there is no danger of his running in the winter). He is a good hand and can be a good Servant, that if I were sure he would stay with me, I would not part with him on any account, but being a convict for 7 years I am afraid he’ll run.

I am now about the building of a Barn of 4 Bay. It would cost me near £30 to let out, but the man I just mention’d is something of a Carpenter, and I think with the assistance of a good workman a few days at the Setting up the frame, he’ll do the work. The Clapboard and Shingle I have bespoke and is already pay’d with goods that I have sold.

’Tis very well that Lambert is come with Ambrose; his trade will do well here and you may see that I want hands. You may agree with any servant you send to have such wages by the year as they have with you, for I think it will do no more here than buy ’um Cloths, but they must always be Indentur’d at Leverpool; any able hands will do, but trades are the best.

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The House I have built is near 9 yards long and 6 wide within. The walls of oke trees of about 12 inches
Diamiter, laid one upon another and one let into another at the four Corners, and the Seams fill'd with morter. 'Tis cover'd with Shingle which with a little repair will last 20 years and is a handsome Dry Roof. Tho' such a house be not the handsomest 'tis very warm, and that is enough for the present. Tho' we recon the Timber nothing, the Expence is considerable in day wages as above and in Nails at 10d. per lb. and other necessarys, and it is impossible for new hands to do such work.

The goods that I brought from England I laid out in Maryland for Tobacco, which cost me 7s. per 100 lbs. sterling. It will waste in the carriage. When I came hither I laid a great deal of it out there in Servants and what goods I wanted. I order'd my attorney there to consign about 90 hundred (at 100 lbs. to the hundred, for that is the weight in Maryland) to Mr. Seel of Liverpool for the use of those people that sent goods with me, but the Crop falling Short, there could be no more then 35 hundred be got in, which I hope Mr. Seel had rec'd. I hope to be in Maryland in a short time to order about getting in the rest. If the whole quantity had gone, it would have been the full to those people that sent goods; but to what I made of the Goods which I brought from England I cannot answer, for that is decided by the markets in England, which I believe were low about a year agoe.

The part of the Country where I am settled I think resembles Craven, and for what I can perceive is every wit as healthy. The new hands that I brought with me has never ail'd any thing, that for any thing I see one may settle here without any Seasoning. The tract that I have is mostly ascending, but no where so steep but you may Plough with Ease, and in some places 20 or 30 acres of a flat. I think there is at least 300 acres of land that will bear wheat and is as good as any in the County, except some small tracts by the river. We have a small run by the house where there is 3 or 4 acres of swamp land, which I am making into meadow; there are 4 or five more runs in the Ground and a great many Springs that were not dry all the last Summer, tho' it were the dryest that [it] has been for many years, that there scarce can be a tract of this Bigness better water'd. All the Adjacent country is Hilly, some Hills as big as Noyna, and about the river (which is about 2 miles off) a great many Rocks and Precipice; higher up about 30 miles there are great mountains which I have not yet seen.

A great many people have been digging last Summer
for mines, but few have got any thing but promising signs. Few have gone deeper than 8 or 10 yards, and I believe they generally want both ability and skill. Here is a mine about 3 miles off, where the light of some veins of yellow ore or stone. They have run mettle from it which they say is Gold and that it stands the proof of the touch stone and aqua fortis. The owner denies that it is of any value, but has been careful to carry away every scrap of the ore. What it is, time will show. Here is great plenty of Iron Stone and certainly great signs of other mettle.5

Mr. Schylor's mine in West Jersey is said to be the richest Copper Mine that ever was known, considering all its circumstances. It was found at about 10 foot deep, but it Dibbs [?] that they are now betwixt 30 & 40 foot. They are troubled with no water. The body of ore is about 11 yards broad, and betwixt 20 & 24 inches thick. 4 lbs. of ore runs 3 lbs. of Copper, and it is within three quarters of a mile of a navigable Creek. It had certainly been opened before, for they found some frames of wood in it, and they say that the last year there were found a Dutch Manuscript at Albany that describ'd this mine and another at some miles distance, which I have yet heard nothing of. The Dutch say (there are a great numbers of 'um a few miles off in West Jersey) that there were some of the ore sent to Holland and that the ship miscarried, and before another return could be made they had lost the Countery.6

I hope you have a particular Account of what you sent Bro. Will before this. I writ to him the 5th of last June which he rec'd. I writ in that, that a Letter which I had rec'd. from my Str. mention'd some Linnen that you had sent him. In a Letter I rec'd. from him some weeks agoe he says he rec'd. the Linnen you sent, but mentions no particulars. He writ to you sometime agoe by a Vessel that foundered off Bermuda and would write again by the first opportunity. He is Clerk of the Court at new London in Colliton County. He says he hopes the place will do well. I am acquainted with some Clerks of Courts.

5 This mine of yellow ore may have been the Solebury copper mine, which was rediscovered in 1854. When it was pumped out ten years later, drills and tools estimated to have been used two hundred years earlier were discovered. See John S. Bailey, "The Solebury Copper Mine," A Collection of Papers Read before the Bucks County Historical Society, I, 6-13.

6 This copper mine was discovered by a Negro slave on the plantation of John Schuyler prior to 1719. Today its ruins may be seen near North Arlington, New Jersey. See New Jersey: A Guide to Its Present and Past (New York, 1939), 542.
in Maryland that have good places, but I question whether his place be so good because the Court was but settled the last year.  

Here is one Pickles here (I think John) who says he is son to Michel of the Coit and serv’d an apprenticeship to a Tanner; he is now a Currier in Philadelphia. If it be he that Hen. Brigg wants, let him draw three Bills upon him (in the nature of myne to me, and send one in a letter to me, if I receive the money (which I presume is not much) I shall return it to him. Let him Direct the Bill to him in Black Horse Ally, Philadelphia. Let him also send a letter of advice to him so directed.

There has no ship arriv’d at Philadelphia from Liverpool since I came hither, but I now expect to hear of Ambrose (if not directly, by way of Maryland) every day.

In a Letter from Maryland I writ that I thereby quit my Feofeeship of Knowles’s house to you or any other sufficient person that would please to accept it, and that when it pleas’d God, I should arrive in England, I would Sign any deed or Instrument to that purpose which I hereby again repeat, and I do not Know how to do it otherwise.

We have had a very mild winter and no snow that lyen one day, that the River has not been frose this winter. I thank God I am very well. I hope you are all so. My service to all friends, my Duty to my mother, my Blessing to Will and my love to my Brothers and Sister. I am your most Dutifull and Most Obedient Son.

Amb. Barcroft.

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William Barcroft was the fourth son of Thomas Barcroft and a brother of Ambrose Barcroft. The father mentioned in a will which was drawn up in 1728 that William Barcroft was then residing in Nansemond County, Virginia, with Mr. Christopher Jackson. See Runk, *Barcroft Family Records*, 138, 143.