THE MONONGAHELA RIVER (1)

The name “Monongahela” is significant, and indicates a peculiar trait of the Indian language. An Indian name always tells you the outstanding quality of the thing named, Monongahela means—muddy water, clayey—falling in banks. You will note “hela”, which is a corruption of “henna”, which is a general term for river. Thus, you have Monongahenna, Alleghenna, Loyalhenna, Susquehenna, etc.

Were you to follow the main stream of the Monongahela, its source would be found in some spring on the mountain side, close up to the drainage Kingdom of the stately Potomac. It drains an area of nearly 9,000 square miles. This is all underlaid with the Pittsburgh, Waynesburg and Freeport veins of coal, and this adds no small amount of importance to this noble river. The rocks that form the framework of this river basin are high in felspar and low in silicon, rendering this region easy of erosion. This explains, why the sand deposits are of poor quality. This also explains why there are few rounded river stones. The Monongahela lacks the hard sand, so characteristic of the Allegheny River. It also lacks the hard, flinty, round river stones with which the streets of Pittsburgh were, as some of you may remember, all paved in earlier days. These paving stones of Pittsburgh’s earlier streets are interesting

(1) Paper read before the Society, March 27, 1923.
and have a history. When the great ice-cap came creeping down from the north land, covering most of North America with a mass of ice, snow and debris thousands of feet thick, it pushed ahead unthinkable amounts of sand, gravel and boulders and these were deposited over almost the entire Allegheny River System. The sand of the Allegheny River is ground up Laurentian, Huronian, Keewatin, and other forms of flinty, igneous rocks that find placement in Northern and Central Canada. Should you find a pile of ordinary gravel used for cementing and pick out the various types of rocks there seen, and carry these specimens to Northern and Central Canada, you would be able to identify the various formations from which these came. This difference in the quality of the sand found in the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers has an economic significance.

The hard carborundum-like sand of the Allegheny, called the plate glass industries to its shores, since this industry must have a hard sand to grind down the glass, after it is rolled on the tables. When the great glacier had come and gone, what a wreck it had made of the drainage system of the Allegheny River. The old river bed was filled up with claysilt, sand and gravel, damming its water back into great lakes. When these great dams gave way, this material was carried out so fast as to dam up the Monongahela as high as the Pittsburgh hills and make a lake of the Monongahela river valley extending back far above Fairmont, West Virginia. The old river bed of the Monongahela, was completely refilled with eroded material.

Then began the long struggle to reestablish its former drainage system, but, in its long battle, the river wandered from its original site. In former days it flowed peacefully over Oak Level at McKeesport, crossing the old bed at Duquesne, recrossed near Turtle Creek, and kept the even tenor of its way through Swissvale and East Liberty valley, where it divided, one branch going north, and one south of the Herron Hill. When excavating for the new Schenley Hotel, deep beds of characteristic Monongahela River sand were found there. In excavating at the Homestead Steel works, beds of Monongahela River sand are found some twenty feet below the level of the present river bed, which
indicates the river has not yet attained its former depth of erosian.

Many of you know the county road leading from Murray Avenue to Browns Bridge on the Monongahela River. When this road was built, the builders did not cut into the side of the hill, but filled in dirt, over the delta of the Nine Mile Run, close up against the cliffs skirting Mr. James Ward's mansion on the river bank. When this road was used as a coal road it kept sinking. Mr. Ward tells me, he hauled car-loads of discarded railroad ties, and corduroyed the road to make it passable. When the road was improved three years ago, the road broke vertically, and sunk nearly eight feet. The telegraph and power line poles still stood erect. A flimsy cement retaining wall, that had previously broken and hung ready to topple over, did not fall. Where this road was built, Nine Mile Run, meets another run, flowing in an almost opposite direction, and this naturally would cause a whirl pool, and cut a deep hole, and this Nine Mile Run and the other run were both filled up by the glacial dam and into this bed of quicksand the road found easy access to rid itself of cumulating pressure. Thus do present effects connect themselves with distant causes.

No discussion of this river would be complete without noticing the Flood Plains, for on these Flood Plains came the industries, towns and cities which are the spinal column of our modern civilization. When the river began to swing from side to side, where the current hit the bank, its current on the outside of the curve was swifter and its carrying power greater, so it cut into the bank deep, and eventually made on this side, high, steep banks, and much of this material was deposited on the inside of the curve where the current was slower, and the carrying power less.

As you go up the river, the first Flood Plan is on the south side. The next appears across the river at Hazelwood; the next across the river at Homestead, thence across to Braddock, thence to Duquesne, to McKeesport, etc.; and on these Flood Plains, the early settlers found very fertile soil, and called them the meadow lands, but now they are the sites for cities and these Flood Plains have, according
to their size and availability, dictated the course of developments.

The earliest residents here were, so far as we may know, the Allegwei Indians. These were conquered and driven away by the Delawares and the Iroquois, and the latter subjugated the Delawares. These Indians are said to have come from the west. Their custom was to build mounds much after the fashion of the Indians of the west. There were many of these mounds at McKees Rocks, and a very large one on the Brierly Farm, back of Homestead. There was also a very large one excavated at Peter's Creek, above McKeesport, and the articles found therein now find sanctuary in the Carnegie Museum. All up the river valley, these Indian burying grounds were numerous. It is probable that those who died gloriously in battle find repose in these mounds.

In the period before the Revolutionary War, Guyasootha and Queen Allequippa were Indians of prominence here. Queen Allequippa was a gracious, stately queen who ruled over this district and had her royal tepee on a commanding cliff, this side of McKeesport. Guyasootha was a very remarkable man, brave, energetic, and like Pontiac, exceedingly resourceful and a great traveler.

The Indian trails up the Monongahela valley are very interesting indeed. The Indians did not wander at random through the trackless forests but followed well thought out and worked out trails. These trails were marvels of directness and efficiency. The dim eyes of the white man had it is true too hazy a discernment to follow these trails, but the keen-eyed Indian followed as easily as you follow the Boulevard of the Allies. One of these trails was a sort of Lincoln Highway, starting at the Gulf of Mexico and kept in its steadfast course on to northern Canada; and this trail had much to do in determining the location of early settlements in Western Pennsylvania. A branch of this trail came over the mountains from Cumberland, passing through Uniontown, Connellsville, Cat Fish Camp at Washington, Pa., a further branch of which came over this way and connected with the Kittaning-Juniata Valley trail, at the foot of the Horse Shoe Bend on the Pennsylvania lines, thus intersecting with the extensive east and west trail.
When the Ohio Company was formed, 1748, Col. Thomas Cresap was secured to open a trail from Cumberland to the head waters of the Monongahela. Cresap secured for this important work, the services of Nemacolin, who blazed a trail and cut away all fallen timber, and this trail marks a significant milestone in the transportation of the Monongahela Valley. So well did this wonderful Indian, Nemacolin, do the task assigned to him that Nemacolin’s Path, later became the pack-horse route, and over this came thousands of tons of freight costing about $150 a ton to transport, as against $1.30 a ton now; seven to ten cents a pound were the prevailing rates. Salt, iron, nails, etc. were carried thus, and hides, feathers, etc., went east.

These pack-horse drivers were very interesting characters. Each driver handled eight or ten horses. Each horse carried about 800 pounds burden; over his shoulders, each horse carried a wooden half hoop, in the center of which, hung a bell that was silent by day, but when the horses were turned loose at the end of the day, tinkled the night long to notify the driver where to look for his beasts in the morning. These pack-horses streamed over the mountains in endless cavalcades, but, in 1774, Conrad Hawk drove a wagon over the mountains, and this event also marks a significant milestone in early transportation in the Monongahela River Valley. Soon, the freight was all sent over in wagons, dispensing with the services of the pack-horse drivers, who went on a strike, destroyed the bridges and wagons, and sometimes even the freight, showing that labor troubles and strikes are no recent conception.

If I could reproduce in a graphic way the kaleidoscopic panorama of Nemacolin’s Trail, it would clearly illustrate the dizzy pace civilization has set. First, came the vague, and to white men, the indistinct Cataba Trail, then the better selected, the clearly defined and well blazed Nemacolin Path, then the pack-horse path, then the wagon road, then the greatest road-building project in the world, the building of the great Cumberland Turn Pike. Starting at Baltimore it passed through Cumberland to Wheeling, with a branch to Pittsburgh. This great road ended at Joplin, Missouri, and was a wonderful undertaking. Following the same general
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path Nemacolin had chosen came the great B. & O. Railroad, over whose shining steel goes the traffic of a continent.

A rather interesting event then occurred that blocked for a while the transportation facilities of the Monongahela. Philadelphia at this time was the metropolis of the new world. The Erie Canal was completed and this put New York in the lead. The great Cumberland Turn Pike and now the B. & O. Railroad were threatening to put Baltimore in the saddle over Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia interests blocked the passage of the B. & O. Railroad to Pittsburgh, forcing this railroad to Wheeling.

One of the best known events connected with this great river is the ill-starred Battle of the Monongahela, or General Braddock's Defeat. It seems to me that a faithful description of this unfortunate battle should give General Braddock a much more glorious position than the one he now occupies. The conduct of his campaign was masterful in every detail up to the time of the battle. In earlier British military annals, General Braddock had honestly won great renown, and was certainly much superior to Amherst or Lord Howe. This campaign was to be carried on under new, untried, and unknown conditions, and some one had to be the pioneer. He was not surprised and ambushed, as is generally thought. General Braddock's battle line, as shown on Patrick McKellar's map, shows a complete mastery of the situation in guarding against surprise and ambush, with out-posts on both flanks carefully posted, and an advanced picket line. Some French soldiers were surprised by the English out-posts, and like the hunter and bear, both ran. The morale of both the French and the English soldiers was lamentably bad. It was probably the psychology of the forest that defeated Braddock's army. The never ending, unconquerable forest with its gloom, and dread forebodings had broken the nerve of the English army, and the first sign of danger threw them into a frenzied panic.

The French soldiers were no better. It was the Indians who won renown for France, for the French Army, at once sought safety in flight. The Ax-men, under the direction of Patrick McKellar had cut a road 66 feet wide, from Turtle Creek to the end of the battle line, and down this line of
least resistance, most of the army fled in panic, where they were an easy mark for the lurking Indians. In what sharp contrast to this cowardice does Braddock's bravery show. His was not to direct the battle from the rear, but to gallop to a place of hardest fighting, and there, while vainly, but glorious endeavoring to stem the tide, to receive his death wound; and with blood streaming from him, he still did his best. You say he was so self-willed, etc.,—but is not this the dominant trait in all great military leaders? Let us accord General Braddock the place that is due the brave, dauntless, courageous man. He was carried to Braddock's Spring, where he was given a drink and his wound was washed and hastily dressed. The location of this spring is fittingly marked by a tablet, and is now covered by the general offices of the Edgar Thompson Steel Works, at 13th Street, in Braddock, Pa.

The exact location of the Battle of the Monongahela, is a matter of some controversy. The location of Frazier's Cottage is known. Where Braddock crossed the Monongahela is known; but how far up the hill and how far west the battle took place are matters in dispute.

Pat McKellar was Braddock's engineer. His duty was to lead the Ax-brigade and prepare the road. McKellar was asked after the battle by General Shirley to prepare a sketch of the battle line, which he made, and submitted to the surviving officers by whom it was approved. He made two sketches, one of the battle field, and another showing the deployment of the troops at 2 P. M.

Mr. Sidney Dillon, who was chief Draftsman for the Edgar Thompson Steel Works, had his interest in the line of battle aroused by the research work along this line done by Prof. Lacock of Harvard University, and Prof. Temple of Washington and Jefferson College. Mr. Dillon was in possession of all the typographic maps and outlines, which show defiles and elevations as existing prior to modern improvements. By imposing Mr. McKellar's maps on the maps of Braddock and North Braddock, Mr. Dillon has succeeded in harmonizing the maps. Mr. Dillon makes the farthest point west near 6th Street, Braddock — at a point much farther west than old citizens had thought,—but it agrees
with General Washington that it was 600 perches west of Turtle Creek.

David McClure's diary lay in a New England attic until a few years ago, and his account is, as yet, little known to the general public; and as it is brief, I give it to you. On Sunday, August 1772, Dr. McClure visited Braddock's field. He says, "This memorable spot is about 11 miles from Pittsburgh on a bank of the Monongahela. It is a gradual ascent from the bank to the top of the hill, extending about ¼ of a mile. Up and down the ascent, the army, consisting of about 1400 chosen troops, were parading in rank and file three deep, with intervals for field pieces. They were a fatal mark for the Indians. Nine hundred of the army fell, and it is not known that a single Indian was hurt. The trees in front of the army were wounded with grape shot, about five feet from the ground. It was a melancholy spectacle to see bones of men strewn over the ground, left to this day, without solemn rites of sepulcher. The fact is a disgrace to the British Commanders at Fort Pitt. The bones had been gnawed by the wolves, the vestiges of their teeth appearing upon them. Many hundreds of skulls lay upon the ground. I examined several and found the mark of the scalping knife upon all them. I put a skull and a jaw bone in my portmanteau, which I afterwards presented to Mr. Stewart's Museum in Hartford. A man, Meyers, who lives near the field of battle, had humanely collected a great number of the bones and laid them in small heaps, in order to cultivate his corn. I departed from the place with serious and solemn reflections on the vanity of life, and the deep depravity of our fallen nature, the dreadful source of fighting and war, and all the miseries that man delights to inflict on man."

Although the battle of Braddock's Field was lost, I would not say the campaign was a failure. Braddock made a good road over the mountains from Cumberland almost to Pittsburgh. Over this road in a short time came sweeping a resistless tide of emigrants from Virginia and Maryland, a tide the French could not stem. Within ten years after this battle, streams of people were flowing into Fayette County, and an advance guard came to McKeesport and other places in this vicinity. Zadock Wright, a waggoner with
Braddock, returned to Miflin Township. One of the Wilsons, also, with Braddock, did the same. My great grandfather, also with General Braddock, returned later to Miflin Township.

A letter, written from Winchester, Virginia, April 30, 1765, says, "the frontier inhabitants of this colony and Maryland are fast moving over the Allegheny Mountains in order to settle and live there." George Crogan, Indian agent in 1766, stated that many were settling at Red Stone, in violation of treaty rights. This easy Nemacolin Path, made settlements in Fayette, Greene, and Washington County, easy to attain. The Monongahela River, via the Ohio, made settlements in Ohio, Tennessee, and Kentucky feasible and desirable at an early date.

The Pennsylvania Journal, of February 13, 1788, advertised that boats of every description and dimension may be had at Elizabeth Town. It also added, provisions of every kind may there be had, especially flour. Stephen Bayard, was the proprietor. Thus, as early as 1780, this whole district was settled and organized. Indeed, most of the early deeds of this region bear date of 1787, and were issued under Governor George Miflin. By 1790, Kentucky alone had 74,000 population, and most of these early settlers floated down the Monongahela River. It has been estimated that 1500 who passed down the Monongahela River were murdered by the Indians. From the above, I would think that no settler could be counted very early here, who did not come prior to 1780. Many surveys were made about this time, and surveys would not be needed unless the land was wanted by settlers. Again, earlier than the surveys, were the "tomahawk claims."

On March 31, 1836, the Monongahela Navigation Company was organized with a capital of $300,000. It was planned to make the river navigable by use of locks and dams, as far as the Virginia line, and as much farther as Virginia would permit it to go. I believe the fall to be overcome in the first 55 miles, was but 33 1/4 feet, and from Brownsville to Virginia line, 41 feet. By 1838, about 3/4 of a billion bushels of coal annually, were moving down this stately river. In 1880, nearly a billion bushels of coal were carried
down the river, and the tolls for the ten years previous totaled $2,250,000, and the Monongahela Navigation Company became a rich concern.

When Mr. Charles Avery died, he willed a block of this stock to the Pittsburgh Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church for superanuated ministers. The stock later became valuable and the fund is now one of the largest and best of which I know. The residents along the Monongahela River were the inveterate foes to the Navigation Company. Sylvanus Lathrop, chief engineer for the Navigation Company, said in 1847, "Instead of being as it ought to have been, fostered by our citizens, and hailed by the inhabitants of the Monongahela Valley, as a blessing to themselves, it met with nothing but the most chilling regards from the one, and with either the most violent prejudice or the most determined hostility from the other."

When the Smithfield Street Bridge was built in Pittsburgh it was most seriously considered advisable to build the bridge so low boats could not pass under. The Railroads throttled river transportation and the pleasant vision of boats on the river was fading from sight. But Uncle Sam bought out the rights of the Navigation Company.

The steamers are now coming back. Prohibitive railroad freight rates are turning the tide, and the noble river is coming into its own again. The U. S. Steel Corporation is building a half million dollar dock at Rankin Junction. Recently, at Clairton, there has been erected, on the bank of the Monongahela, one of the largest cranes ever constructed, which is used for loading and unloading river freight. The great dock being built at Rankin Bridge will be equipped with modern loading devices which promise a great increase in river transportation.

There is at present, at least on the Pennsylvania lines, an embargo on freight, indicating that railroads, bereft of river aid, are inadequate to meet the growing demands of transportation.

Everything points to a speedy return of river transportation as a safe and efficient means of transfer. Let us hope that the dream of General Washington may yet come true, that a great canal will creep over the mountains and
connect up the Chesapeake Bay with the Gulf of Mexico by way of the Potomac, Monongahela, Ohio and Mississippi.

Let us also hope that city, town, and industrial concerns, great and small, will find other and more decent methods of sewage disposal than that of turning it into our beautiful river.

Let us hope for better things, and help restore it to its former beauty, when its limped waters from thousands of bubbling springs caused the artistic Indian to exclaim, "Hoheyn!" or, "The beautiful river!"

The Monongahela River was a heavy handicap to early French settlements west of the Allegheny Mountains. When Maryland and Virginia, two colonies on the Potomac highway, were settled by English, this fact made the manifest destiny of the territory west of the Allegheny Mountains English. The great Potomac carried an easy pathway well up to the base of the mountains, and the Monongahela had dissected its course far to the south and across the mountain divide. The great Indian engineer, Nemacolin, had mapped out a marvelous pathway that made settlement in the southwestern part of Pennsylvania very feasible. A rich soil, and an abundant rain fall, good drainage, and a salubrious climate made early settlement very desirable. How early this magnetic Monongahela pulled settlers over the mountain path, we do not know, for history is usually not carefully recorded between the time of discovery and the time when society becomes somewhat organized.

When land and roads are surveyed, and the machinery of civilized life is set up, some records must be kept. In the primary stage of settlement we have the hunter, the trapper, and the fur trader. The earliest deeds recorded are in 1787, and it is probable that considerable settlements were made 20 years prior to this time. Prior to the surveys, were the "tomahawk claims" which were later surveyed and made available for record.

As early as 1740, the Frazier family was found at Turtle Creek and likely some others of the type of Daniel Boone, who settled soon after then, and later moved on to freer and wilder regions beyond. Probably about the year 1760, traders and trappers were found at the mouths of most
creeks in southwestern Pennsylvania, as these afforded easy access for the trapper to reach the haunts of the finer fur-bearing animals. Prior to 1773, when Westmoreland County was erected, Bedford County embraced all southwestern Pennsylvania. Since Fayette, Greene, and Washington Counties were nearest to the parent colonies of Virginia and Maryland, these localities had the earliest settlements.

It will afford you some notion of the extent of these settlements to examine those that were recorded in Bedford County in 1772. The names of enough families are known to furnish a sound basis for saying there must have been 5000 to 6000 people in the southwestern part of the state who were assessed and on the tax roll; in 1772 there were likely many who were not assessed, as tax dodging is no modern device. There were enrolled in 1772 in Pitt Township, I believe 79 families. Among these were George Croghan, John Ormsby, Devereux Smith, Conrad Winebiddle, Peter Roleter, Alexander Ross, Thomas and William Lyon. Thomas was later killed in sight of Homestead, and his family carried into captivity by the Indians. John Barr, who is connected with my own ancestry, lived here, as did Aeneas McKay and Jos. Spear. We know there was a family named Meir living at Turtle Creek not on this roll. I am quite sure Sebastian Frederick was, at this time, living at Homestead.

Contrast this easy path from Virginia and Maryland up the Potomac River over Nemacolin’s Path and down the beautiful Monongahela with the fact that the French must come up the long St. Lawrence River across Lakes Erie and Ontario, down French Creek to the Allegheny. Besides, between the French parent colonies and the Gateway to the south and west, interposed the Iroquois Indians, the friends of English and the foes of the French, and a big buffer state between the French and the English.

Let us be thankful and do homage to the noble Monongahela, that it made English colonization easy and gave us a kind mistress, England, the most liberal and the most enlightened colonizing power in the world at that time.

James M. Norris.