ROMANTIC STORY OF BARON BASSE, FOUNDER OF ZELIENOPLE
By Dettmar Passavant

The razing of the old log house, on Main street, Zelienople, of Philippe Louis Passavant, the son-in-law of Dettmar Basse, or as he was variously named, Baron Basse, Dr. Basse Mueller, or even Dr. Mueller, calls for more than passing notice. It was the first house within the now known town bounds, but the first house in the purlieu of Zelienople was the two-story “Bassenheim” or “Basse’s Home,” a castellated structure built of brick, stone and frame on an eminence between the trolley line cut and the New Castle Road at the end of the bridge crossing the creek at Allen Stop.

As the building of these two houses bears intimately on the life of Baron Basse, as we shall call him, it may interest the readers to learn some romantic phases and episodes in the life of this restless and eccentric individual.

Born in Iserlohn, Germany, in 1760, Dettmar William Frederic Basse was the only son of wealthy parents. Not much is known of his boyhood years other than that he was carefully educated, and arriving at manhood chose the diplomatic service as his vocation. From all accounts he was very handsome, of engaging personality with polished and graceful manners, and spoke fluently three or four languages.

On a visit to Frankfurt on the Main he met, courted and married the wealthy and accomplished Wilhelmina Kellner. Two sons and two daughters were the issue of this union. When one of his daughters, Zelie (afterwards Mrs. Philippe Passavant) was six years of age the Baron received a diplomatic appointment to Paris where he remained ten years. During this period he negotiated the release of some German prisoners for which he received a vellum inscribed scroll of the “Freedom and Thanks of the City of Frankfurt” to be seen at the home of Miss Passavant on Main street.

Through the long Napoleonic Wars the nobility of France had suffered fearfully, ground down by oppressive
taxes, their estates confiscated, added to which were the horrors of the French Revolution, so that many were compelled to flee the country and part with their estates at a sacrifice. The Baron being of a visionary and speculative temperament bought a large estate of 600 acres near Paris called "Nielgine" that had once belonged to the Princes of Conde, and began to engage in mercantile pursuits, starting a ribbon factory which proved a failure.

Obliged to sell his estate and attracted by the lure of the young Republic of America that promised life, liberty and pursuit of happiness untrammeled by religious persecutions, and intestinal wars of the old world, he finally decided to emigrate to America. The United States was the natural haven for these expatriated exiles, there having come to its shores in 1796 no less than three Princes of royal blood one of whom, Louis Phillipe was afterwards King of France. They visited Pittsburgh and made quite a stay there. Then too the tide of emigration from France had been wonderfully stimulated by the propaganda by the Ohio Scioto Company, a land speculation engineered by Rufus Putnam and others that flooded France with rosy pamphlets of cheap lands and an easy life in the backwoods of Ohio.

Many French and German travelers had also returned from the States and published glowing accounts of America's free institutions, cheap lands, easy means of livelihood, lauding the open, free, careless life, especially of the boundless Western Country. Arriving in Philadelphia in 1801 Basse was induced to buy from the Philadelphia Land Company, one of the Robert Morris Companies that controlled millions of acres in what was known as the Donation Lands, a certain block north and west of the Ohio and Allegheny rivers, opened up by the Act of 1792 to settlement by soldiers of the Revolutionary War to whom warrants had been given in lieu of money of which the impoverished government had none.

As many of these old soldiers, broken in health and spirits, did not care to settle on these lands only ten years prior vacated by the Indians, they sold these warrants for a few cents on the dollar to these famous—or shall we say infamous—land speculators.
Coming over the long mountainous journey from Philadelphia with pack horse and team Basse arrived in Pittsburgh in 1801. To this polished and cultured man the rawness and crudeness of this frontier town must have been amazing. It was a town of 200 houses, 150 of which were of logs. As the central outfitting point for the rapidly settling Western country its inhabitants were for the most part wild Irish, traders, boatmen, here and there a drunken Indian. The streets were unpaved and unlighted. "Hogs, dogs, drays and noisy children filled its streets" says Samuel Jones, first Recorder of Allegheny County. Arthur Lee, an English traveler says it was the worst place he ever got into and "damned without benefit of the clergy."

The stirring sights and scenes of this frontier town, Pittsburgh, its shifting, cosmopolitan population, pack-trains with emigrants and freight from the East arriving daily, keel-boatmen and piroques with settlers and household goods from Brownsville coming and going to the limitless West, must have appealed to the romantic fancy of the Baron. He tarried in Pittsburgh some weeks and made the acquaintance of some of the leading citizens, the O'Haras, Nevilles, Dennys, Craigs, the Tarascon Bros., James Berthold & Co., compatriots of his in the shipping business and it requires no stretch of the imagination to think of him as having met some of the queer and eccentric characters of the town—Chevalier Dubac with his trained raccoon, the redoubtable Molly Murphy that kept the famous tavern on Ferry street—and strangest of all the Frenchman Ruoe that dealt in smuggled silks and wines from the piratical stores of Lafitte of Louisiana.

Butler county, where Basse's lands were, was just being formed in the years 1801-3. A few Scotch-Irish and German settlers had built a few log cabins in Butler, but apparently no settlements had been made between Butler and New Castle. It was all a primitive wilderness, miles and miles of virgin forest, criss-crossed by Indian trails leading south to Fort Pitt or Pittsburgh, west to Kuskuskia, the Moravian Delaware Indian town, and north to Fort Erie. The forests abounded in deer, bear, wild turkey, immense flocks of wild pigeons, an occasional elk, while mink,
muskrat and, here and there, beaver were still plentiful in the creeks.

When the Baron reached his Butler county lands, the resources of these unpeopled solitudes must have appealed to his fanciful and visionary temperament. He writes enthusiastically to his daughter Zelie whom he had sent to Frankfurt to relatives that he is delighted with his purchase, purposed to have a castle built and a Baronial estate laid out that would put to shame those of many German Princelings, that he can embark in a canoe on his own land and float 2,000 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, that he had discovered iron ore on his lands and purposes to make iron and if successful retrieve their fortunes, and that she must come over and join him.

He chose for the site of his “Castle” or “Bassenheim,” the eminence just beyond the bridge before mentioned. Beautiful for situation it commanded a magnificent sweep of the country in every direction. The building was very slow in being erected owing to the lack of labor and the need of all building materials being transported from Pittsburgh on what could hardly be called roads—mere packtrails through the forest.

About the year 1803 the Baron sold 5,000 acres of his land to the Rappites who at once began the erection of Harmony, having refused to sell the lower half which they had first desired. A few years passed. Finding his nearest neighbors the Harmonites not very friendly, nor sociable, too absorbed in clearing forests, planting vineyards, erecting manufactures, under the autocratic, and one might almost say the theocratic leadership of the two Rapps, Basse's restless spirit craved new excitements, and longing for the society of his son and daughter Zelie, and wishing to bring them to this country, he in 1806 resolved to go to Germany. On arriving in Frankfurt he found she had become betrothed to Phillipe Louis Passavant. Mr. Passavant was of French Huguenot extraction, his forbears having been compelled to leave France upon the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. They emigrated to Switzerland and were engaged in the silk industry. In later years a branch had moved to Frankfurt and were engaged in mercantile
pursuits. Here Mr. Passavant had met and became engaged to the charming and accomplished Zelie Basse.

The Baron had no objection to the match, but sanctioned it only on one condition, that they should leave for America with him, setting forth the charms and advantages of the New World in glowing terms. The young couple reluctantly amid the tears of well-wishing friends and relatives, agreed to go, sailing from Antwerp in September, 1807, the young bride never to see any of them again.

Tarrying a while in Philadelphia, the party set out in large Conestoga wagons for their long journey over the mountains. Their baggage consisted of 70 cases of household goods, some fine Louis Seize furniture, rare china, valuable paintings, etc., and two imported Merino sheep, probably the first ever brought to the Western country. A ram was afterwards sold to the Harmonites for $1,000.

Arriving at Bassenheim in the depth of winter, in its still rude, unfinished state, the young bride, so tenderly nurtured, was almost heartbroken at the primitive conditions around her. The winter was a very severe one—bitter cold—the snow sometimes filtering into their sleeping apartments, no help to be had, forced in a few months to bake her own bread, make her own clothes and endure all the discomforts and handicaps of the lowliest pioneer settlers.

She bitterly complains in her letters to her friends in Germany, of the vicissitudes they have to endure and writes rather chidingly of her father having brought them to this wilderness under false pretenses. An Intime Journal, or Diary that she kept for many years recorded her secret thoughts and daily happenings. This she caused to be destroyed just before her death in 1870. What a graphic picture it would have given of backwoods pioneer life.

In 1809 the Baron built for the young couple the two-story log house now being razed on Main street, the lower part fitted out for a store in which dry goods, groceries, drugs, hardware, china, etc., were sold, mostly in exchange for furs, wheat, hides, beeswax, etc., for there was precious little coin of the realm going. Most of the coins current were Spanish Pistoles, "Jonnies" and English shillings and
Bassenheim 1820, Home of Baron Basse, from an India Ink Sketch by Virginia Passavant.
pence, and the beautiful Liberty-Head silver U. S. dollars with inscribed edges, coined since 1794 were scarce as hen's teeth and likely to be buried or treasured up. Even the big copper pennies were scarce. If you don't believe it, try to get hold of a penny of 1799. The coin dealers will give you a nice sum for a good example, and if you should happen on a genuine 1804 silver dollar you'll be on Easy Street.

Would you be interested to know what a backwoods country store order was in those early days? Well, here's one 'verbatim' and 'literatim.'

"Zelienople, Sept. 17, 1817.
Furnace Storekeeper, Please give the bearer, Jno Barr, one quarter of tea and 3 Pounds of Coffe, and one yard of Cheep Callico, and one yard of Musslin, one half dozz. of herron [herring] one pound of Shugar and as I am going to have a frolic, ½ gallon of Wiskee. Elijah Boyce."

A "frolic" in pioneer days was a house or barn raising and our Scotch-Irish friend Elijah, though perhaps a little 'long' on the Shorter Catechism and 'short' on spelling knew the orthodox drink at "raisings," or it may be the 'herrons' were a bit dry eating and some liquid was needed to wash them down.

Let not our Volstead readers be shocked that all pioneer country stores sold whiskey. It was the universal beverage, it was good whiskey, it was cheap, only 2 cents a glass, and drunken by everybody, at marriages, feasts, christenings, in the harvest fields. Everybody had it on the sideboard and all house visitors were first invited to take a snack.

The Scotch-Irish settlers in and around Butler, the Mac's, were all hearty whiskey drinkers. It was bred in the bone. Coming for the most part from Washington and Green Counties, they had always contended—and their clergy sided with them—that they had a perfect right to turn their corn and rye into whiskey until Alexander Hamilton, the brilliant Secretary of the Treasury who placed the finances of this young Republic on a sound financial basis, imposed an excise tax on its manufacture, thus precipitating the famous Whiskey Insurrection of 1794 when all the farmers of Washington County rose up en masse, defied the Government, maltreated the Revenue Agents,
and were only cowed into submission by an armed force of 15,000 men under Gen. George Washington. No reproach attached to any one that either made or sold liquor in those days. Some of the leading and most respected citizens of Pittsburgh made and sold it.

Leaving the young Passavant couple domiciled in their new home on Main street, she trying to become adjusted and reconciled to the privations and discomforts of pioneer life, he trying under adverse circumstances to build up his little country store business through the patronage of a few straggling settlers who had drifted into the locality, let us further follow the fortunes of the Baron.

But before going into the Baron's Zelienople business activities, let us take a backward glance at the country's political and economic conditions in the decade 1800-1810.

The aristocratic Federalist party of Washington, Hamilton and Adams was in the wane and the Democratic-Republican party under President Jefferson was in the ascendant. Thrilling and momentous events were happening. Jefferson had bought Louisiana in 1803 from Napoleon to enable him to carry on war with England, thus opening up the valley of the Mississippi to trade and commerce hitherto forbidden by the former owners, the French and Spaniards.

The far-seeing Jefferson in 1804 had sent out the Lewis & Clark Expedition over 15,000 miles of unexplored wilderness and deserts to the Pacific Ocean, thus securing our title to the North West. The Burr-Blennerhasset Conspiracy had been suppressed, in which Aaron Burr disgruntled at not getting the presidency, attempted by traitorous designs to induce the people of the Western country to secede from the Union and form a new Empire with himself at its head.

The intrepid Zebulon Pike in 1806 had made a great Exploring Expedition to the Middle West crossing the Plains to what is now the site of Denver, thence south to the head waters of the Rio Grande, all then Mexican territory to become a part of the United States by the Hidalgo Peace Treaty of 1848 and the Gadsen Purchase of 1853. The Cleremont in 1807, built by Robert Fulton, had been the first steam vessel to plow any waters.
For many years our young Republic's foreign relations had been vexatious and disquieting. England and France were still at war and the Father of his country had always tried to avoid entangling alliances with foreign powers and maintained a strict neutrality under the most trying and irritating conditions. England however still persisted in impressing our seamen, searching our ships, refused under treaty conditions to give up the Northwest trading posts, still incited the Indians to make war against us, refused to allow us to trade with the West Indies, while on the other hand the French, our former Ally and helper in the Revolutionary War, exasperated at our refusal to declare war against England threatened to send ships to ravage our coasts unless we came across with a goodly sum to help fight England.

Well, here was a coil indeed! What was Congress to do? It surely was betwixt the Devil and the deep sea. Jefferson, the Pacifist, knowing the country was too weak to offer resistance, induced Congress to pass the very undemocratic and arbitrary measure known as the Embargo Act of 1807 and the Non-Intercourse Act forbidding all trade with the belligerents, hoping by this measure to bring both the English and French to terms, by starvation. But the result to United States trade was most disastrous, utter stagnation and paralysis of all commerce or export trade. Wheat, corn, cotton, tobacco and other articles of produce were piled in the barns of northern farmers and southern planters, and along the wharves of every seaport, while the ominous clouds of the Second War of 1812 were lowering over the unprepared and impoverished Republic.

Certainly not a very auspicious time to start any business enterprise, yet in 1808 we find the Baron establishing a brick yard in Zelienople with a Mr. Jno McManame as his partner. Basse is to furnish the ground, the fuel, wages to pay employes, while Mr. McManame is to supply the experience and oversee the business, the profits arising from the sale of the brick are to be divided on a 50-50 basis. This partnership agreement is signed rather singularly, Dettmar Basse Muller.
Still the Baron had not given up his cherished project of making iron from the ore deposits on his land. To acquaint himself with some technical knowledge of its smelting, and of foundry work, he doubtless visited the young iron works in Pittsburgh. Probably he took a run up to the old charcoal furnaces of old Dunbar & Center in Fayette County and in Juniata County, secured the services of a competent manager in the person of John H. Hopkins.

He was a very highly-educated young Irishman of agreeable and polished manners and soon became engaged to and married the accomplished Melusina, daughter of Casper Mueller, a neighbor of Basse. Mr. Hopkins continued as manager of the Bassenheim Furnace for several years, afterwards studied for the Episcopal ministry, wrote a number of books and finally became Bishop of Vermont.

Since the Embargo Act had stopped all importation of iron from England and the few infant iron industries of the East could not supply the increasing demand for all kinds of iron in all its varied shapes and forms, stoves, nails, pots, kettles, etc., the profit on these manufactured articles was simply enormous.

With water-power convenient, miles of timber for charcoal, a low grade kidney ore on what became later the Wilson, now the Ball farm, two miles or more from Zelienople, the Baron about 1810 constructed one of the first charcoal blast furnaces in Western Pennsylvania. The bosh of the furnace held about 5 tons of ore and the blast was worked by a bellows operated by water power. A small foundry probably was attached to fashion the pigs into stoves, pots, kettles and other course manufactured articles.

Rules governing Bassenheim Furnace were as follows:

1. Any person wishing employment must engage during the blast.
2. Any person quitting during the blast shall suffer a diminution of wages pro-rata with loss suffered by the proprietor.
3. Any person not attending to business, or making trouble will be discharged.
4. No person shall keep more than 2 cows. Hogs and fowls must be kept in pens.
5. No person shall lay off work more than two days.
6. No person shall keep a boarding house as long as the proprietor has one.

Signed  Dettmar Basse.
Nov. 5, 1815."

Today very few traces remain of the Bassenheim Furnace settlement. The stripped hillsides and denuded forests show from where the ore and charcoal were obtained. The small furnace, store and the log shacks of the employees, miners and moulders, have long since disappeared. Still discernable though is the outline of the creek mill-race. The half dismantled furnace stack with its glazed inner surface is almost hidden in a tangled mass of wild grape, blackberry bushes, sumach and sycamore, while the large slag beds lying around have for years been utilized to repair the nearby roads.

As for the products of the furnace in the way of old Franklin stoves, fire backs, grate bars, etc., they are doubtless scattered here and there in the old pioneer homes of the early settlers. Several are in the old Ben-Venue home of the Muellers, but the finest example of the furnace's craftsmanship is in the Passavant Homestead on Main street, with its lettered "Bassenheim" front and floriated side panels.

Our Second War, 1812-1815, with England, long inevitable, was now raging. Almost uniformly successful on sea under the gallant Commodores Paul Jones, Barney, Perry, we made a pitiful showing on land, witness the battle of Bladensburg, and the craven surrender of Hull at Detroit. Our government, as usual unprepared, without arms and munitions of war now made every possible exertion to increase its supply. So we find in 1814 the Baron made a contract with the United States officials at Fort LaFayette (Ninth and Penn Streets, Pittsburgh) to supply thirteen tons of Case shot at $140.00 a ton, and sixteen tons of Grape shot at $140.00 a ton, the whole amounting to $4,060.00. The contract is signed by Major A. R. Woolley and W. Wade, June 14, 1814. Whether the Baron fulfilled the terms of this contract, deponent saith not, in all probability it was carried out by his furnace successor, Michael Beltzhoover.
But, Alas! The Baron's vision of riches and retrieved fortune all came to naught. Like the ribbon factory in Paris, the furnace proved a losing venture. Various causes contributed to its failure. First of all was the business depression after the War of 1812, the increased taxation, the difficulty of making collections, the competition of the growing iron industries of Pittsburgh with its easy water shipping facilities, the probable exhaustion of the ore beds, and lastly, rumor has it, the dishonesty of a partner, but above all, the failure may have been due to the lack of business ability and sagacity in the Baron himself.

At all events, things went to pot. He became financially embarrassed and was compelled to sell the furnace and his Castle home, both being bought by a Pittsburgher, a Mr. Michael Beltzhoover, who operated the furnace a few years and then abandoned it, living with his wife in "Bassenheim" some years, then selling out to a Mr. Saunders, an Eastern gentleman who converted the Castle into a Presbyterian Labor School, continuing so until struck by lightning in 1842 when it burned to the ground.

Thoroughly discouraged by his New-World experiences the Baron, "though slightly disfigured," to use a pugilistic expression, was still "in the ring." Down and out financially, he still had a handsome income—a life interest from his wealthy, deceased wife's estate. So, somewhat advanced in years, he upon mature deliberation, finally thought best to go back to Germany and end his days in peace and quietness. Many of the handsome furnishings of the Castle, furniture, etc., went with the Castle when sold, but a number of the finest paintings and prints were purchased by Frederick Rapp for the Harmony Society and now adorn the walls of the Great House at Economy (Vide: Agnes Hays Gormley's, Economy, a Unique Community), while others were sold to Lambdin's Museum in Pittsburgh (Vide: Anne Royall, Pennsylvania Travels, under "Pittsburgh").

Empowering his son-in-law, Phillipe Passavant, to dispose of his yet remaining land holdings as best he could and satisfy his creditors, he gathered up a few of his belongings salvaged from the debacie and set forth in 1818 with his eldest daughter, Sophia, and a young son, Sully, by a second marriage, upon a keel-boat to float to New
Orleans and from thence to sail for Germany. They had an uneventful voyage down the La Belle Riviere, the beautiful Ohio, noticed a few peaceful Indians, quite subdued now after their crushing defeat by Anthony Wayne in 1794, and desiring to call upon their old friends, the Rapps, who in 1815 had sold out their Harmony, Pa., land holdings to the Mennonite, Abraham Ziegler, had bought thousands of acres of prairie wilderness in Indiana and had begun a second New Harmony in twenty years; the Basse outfit poled up the Wabash River and were most kindly and hospitably entertained.

Arriving at their seaport destination, New Orleans, after a long, tedious voyage on the turbid Mississippi they set sail for Germany. The Baron died in Mannheim in 1836 and so ends the strange, eventful career of this adventurous pioneer—founder of Zelienople—who named it, "City of Zelie," after his daughter and the Greek word "polis."

Meanwhile let us follow the fortunes of the young married couple living in their humble log home and store on Main Street. With Christian fortitude and resignation they bore the Baron's departure for Germany and Zelie, her sister leaving, earnestly looked forward to the time when they themselves would rejoin the loved ones there. Though locally isolated and lonely in the still primitive wilderness, they had made many warm and cherished friendships among the best families in Pittsburgh, the Neville Craigs, the Barlows, Prebles, with whom they corresponded and exchanged visits.

They numbered among their Sewickley friends the Shields, Leets, while at Baden afterwards were their blood relatives, the Ehrmans. Though almost reconciled to their fate and apparently recognizing the hand of Providence in that their lot was to be cast among strangers in a strange land, still the "Heimweh" or homesickness oftimes became almost unbearable.

The social amenities of Zelienople about the year 1812 or earlier were enlivened by the arrival of Casper Mueller, wife and daughter. They were people of culture and refinement, and Madam Passavant enjoyed their association
for many years. Casper Mueller was a man of varied attainments, had traveled extensively, had an amazingly large library for a backwoodsman, covering all branches of knowledge, poetry, travels, art and science, himself versed in mystical and occult literature and rather, in later years, taken up with the socialistic theories of Karl Marx and Fourier. He was greatly interested in meteorology and he kept local weather records for over forty years. He had built a large stone mansion on the opposite hill to Bassenheim and called it "Ben-Venue," and as he and the Baron were quite intimate they were accustomed to communicate with each other by some sort of a flashing heliographic signal code.

In the year 1823 Phillippe Passavant went to Germany to visit his aged parents. His wife, now the mother of five children, could not accompany him. While there he learned that the only letter from his parents he had never received was one offering him a position in his father's mercantile establishment, so that they came finally to the conclusion that it was Fate or God's will that they should never return and that it was best that their children grow up and remain here.

Phillipe Passavant had received his education in England, conversed fluently in three languages, was rather stockily built, had blue eyes, a very winning and amiable personality, and was noted for strict honesty and integrity of character.

Madame Zelie Passavant, always thrifty and energetic, took the greatest pride in the development and education of her children, was extremely fond of outdoor life among her plants and flowers, and though in her later years afflicted with blindness, her untiring industry knit hundreds of pairs of stockings for the Orphans.

And so the years pass and this courageous couple through sunshine and shadow endured hardness and self-sacrifice, paying off the Basse obligations, helping the needy and distressed, winning the love and esteem of all with whom they came in contact.

Of the children, one of the girls, Virginia, died in the flower of womanhood, aged 26 years, highly accomplished in music and art. Her sketches in India ink and pencil
almost equal the finest engravers art. Emma Marie, the eldest, married the Rev. Samuel P. Jennings, D.D., one of the pioneer Presbyterian clergymen, who for forty years was pastor of the Sharon congregation opposite Sewickley. Dettmar, the eldest son, died of brain fever in Pittsburgh in 1839. Charles Sidney I continued his father's mercantile establishment in a new brick store erected opposite the old original cabin, which in after years was transferred to a still larger store next to the homestead, eventually assisted by his son Charles Sidney II until the store was burned down in 1902, a remarkable successorship of grandfather, father and son of almost a hundred years.

William Alfred, the youngest son, became a Lutheran minister, the founder of many charitable institutions throughout the country. Philippe Louis Passavant departed this life in 1858; Zelie his loving wife, surviving him eighteen years, entered into rest in the year 1871.

And so we leave this pioneer couple, the parents of revered and honored children, peacefully sleeping beneath the soughing pines in the hillside graveyard they gave the town, and the 114-year-old log cabin now razed with its records of joys, sorrows, hardships, its still firm and durable timber fit symbols of the staunch and sturdy virtues of its God-fearing erstwhile inmates, now passes from sight; but the memory of the beauty, devotion, self-sacrifice of their lives is forever enshrined in the recollection of their descendants and treasured by many of the yet-living older townsfolk who knew and loved them.

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