REMINISCENCES OF EARLY WILKINSBURG*

By Mr. James Horner

The ground upon which Wilkinsburg is located was settled upon prior to 1788 by William Thompson. On April 23, 1788, he received a patent for the same from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. On May 1, 1789, he conveyed the same to Col. Dunning McNair; Mr. McNair mortgaged this property to the Pennsylvania Population Company and it was by them conveyed on October 19, 1824, to William Griffith and on April 1, 1826 to Mark W. Collett and on August 28, 1833, Collett sold the same to James Kelly.

The original name of Wilkinsburg was “McNairstown” which was afterwards changed to Wilkinsburg, being called for Mr. John Wilkins, a brother of the Hon. William Wilkins.

The first settlers in Wilkinsburg were Dunning McNair, David Lytle, James Horner, Samuel McCrae, David Park, Patrick Green, John Cannon, James Mulvill, James McKee, Alexander Hill, James Sample, and William Minteer.

A word about Col. Dunning McNair, the founder of the town. He had been for a number of years a Colonel in the Regular Army and stationed mostly in Washington City. He was a gentleman of the old school, honorable, hospitable and generous to a fault. On account of having indorsed heavily for supposed friends, he lost his wealth and died poor. His home, since occupied by Mr. Kelly, at that time was considered a palatial residence and was the resort of the most aristocratic people in, or visiting Pittsburgh. It was called “Dumpling Hall” on account of its being built of stone boulders. Dunning McNair, who for a number of years was Sergeant-At-Arms in the United States Senate, was his son.

*The author of these reminiscences, James Horner, son of Squire John Horner, the father a pioneer resident of Wilkinsburg was born in 1833 and died in 1906. For a number of years he was Burgess of Wilkinsburg. The occasion of the reminiscences was a banquet given by Burgess Horner in 1896 to about sixty residents of Wilkinsburg and Pittsburgh. Reference to these reminiscences appears in the Pittsburgh Evening News March 16, 1896. For this document, buried in a local paper, we are indebted to Miss Ilka M. Stotler.—The The Editor.
I have a clipping from the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. It is dated at Chicago and was written by Mrs. Jane Gray Swiss-helm. It refers largely to Mr. Kelly's troubles, so I will read only a portion of it.

"In the days of my earliest recollections, the aristocracy of Wilkinsburg was headed by Col. McNair and his brother-in-law James Horner, Justice of the Peace. Col. McNair was a large land owner, a member of the Legislature and a leader of public opinion. He was laughed at for prophesying that if not in his day, in the days of his children, there would be a graded and Macadamized road all the way from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. When that road came along, it passed by his dwelling, "The Old Crow's Nest", on the hillside, a little north of the mill. The Colonel laid out the village and called it McNairstown and built himself a family mansion to the south of it and sold the "Old Crow's Nest" to my uncle, John Cannon. The new McNair mansion is that stone house south of the R. R. station, and when I first remembered it, there were six stone huts in a row, fronting the kitchen door, between the house and the station. Here with his slaves he lived like a prince and exercised unstinted hospitality. Squire Horn-er was also a large property and slave holder. He was a very prominent and popular gentleman and had a great influence throughout this section of the state."

The population of Wilkinsburg up to 1840 did not exceed 200 people. The first house was built by Col. McNair and was situated on what is now Penn Avenue, by the run near the bridge by Water Street (later Swissvale Avenue). It was afterwards called the "Crow's Nest."

The number of houses in existence up to 1840 was 38. They were situated as follows:—I will begin on Penn Avenue, at the residence of William Peebles. This was a celebrated hostelry and was called "The Bullock Pen Farm." Nearly opposite was a house subsequently occupied by his son, George Peebles. Next comes the large brick built by Mr. Grey and afterwards the Horbach Mansion, now the Columbia Hospital. Then comes the old Bennett house; then a building on what was the Snowden property at an earlier date occupied by Smith Leacock. The next house
was situated where William Boyd lived. On the other side where J. L. Hoffman lives was a house owned by George Johnston. On the side where Dr. Stotler lives was the home of Mrs. Cannon, the mother of Jane Grey Swisshelm. Corner of Wood and Penn was the residence of James Horner. Opposite was the brick residence of Dr. James Carothers. Above this was the building where Mr. Lovett has his store. Opposite is the hotel built by Daniel McMullen; beyond this was the old log house. Opposite were three houses occupied by James Reddy, Samuel Meyler and Daniel Double. Above these was the old "Green Tavern." Opposite to that was the house occupied by Charles Wilson. Next to this was the property of Edward Thompson. Next a house where Dr. Semple now lives, occupied by Eli Quinter; opposite, the house of Louis Stattenfield. Above this, at the corner, was the home of David Lytle. Opposite to this on the lot where Mr. Hugh Turner lived, was a house in which my uncle, J. D. Horner lived. On the corner was a shop belonging to David Lytle and George Johnston, carpenters and wagon-makers.

Let us cross over Center Street: South side; first comes the house of Sam'l. McCrae. It is still standing. Next the mill (1896). Next, the home and shop of George Cleeland. These were all the houses on the south side of Penn Avenue. Now I begin at Center, north side of Penn. There was a small house on the McFee lot, occupied by Mr. Cleeland. Next was the old house built by Col. McNair. Now cross Water Street (Swissvale Avenue). The first house was owned by William Creelman, father of our worthy Squire. I forget who lived in the second frame. The next, a brick, was occupied by Jacob Buzzard; the next by William Minter; the next, around the curve of Penn Avenue, by Mrs. Beatty, mother of our towns-man, Richard Beatty. Now we go to "Crab Hollow." Here lived Jimmy Airs and William Cox. On the Swissvale Road or Water Street, stood a farm where lived a Mr. Arthur Cleeland. This and Mr. Kelly's house were the only houses south of Penn Avenue, within the present borough limits. On Wood Street, north of Penn, where the Singer House now stands, lived Robert McFarland. On Wallace, where R.
Robinson now lives, was the residence of John Speer, father of Josiah Speer. Next to this was the frame house of Joseph Keeling; next, the old school house at the corner of Center. Beyond Center was a house owned by George Grove. These were all the houses in the town until 1840.

The nomenclature of our streets was neither extensive nor euphonious. Penn Avenue was "The Pike"; Wood Street was "The Lane"; Wallace Street was "Horner's Lane"; Hay was "Kelly's Lane." The first merchants were Samuel McCrea, Edward Thompson, Abram Stoner, and Charles Carothers; the first miller, Hugh Thompson; the first carpenter, David Lytle; the first wagon-maker, George Johnston; the first blacksmith, Smith Leacock; the first chair-maker, Samuel Meyler; the first butcher, John Simmers; the first carpet-weaver, William Minteer; the first bag-weaver, William Creelman.

The first tavern-keeper was Thomas Steele; the first physicians, David Kuhn and John Semple; the first Justice of the Peace, James Horner. The first churches built were Methodist, Covenanter and United Brethren; the first school house, corner Wallace and Center; the first teachers, Napoleon Bonapart Hatch and Harvey Nelson, both of whom became lawyers.

The oldest and most prominent families in the immediate vicinity of Wilkinsburg were the Hon. W. Wilkins, William Peebles, William Dixon, Col. William Hawkins, James Swisshelm, James and John McKelvey, George Johnston, Rev. James Graham, John and Peter Perchment, Capt. James Johnston, James and Robert Graham, and Col. Miller. The Rev. James Graham was the first pastor of Beulah Church. He was an able theologian and died at the age of 80, beloved by all who knew him.

One of most interesting events in our early history was the shooting of Sergeant Trotter by General Wayne's order. In the spring of 1794, Gen. Anthony Wayne, or "Mad Anthony Wayne," as he was generally called, marched his army against the Miami Indians in Ohio. He went into camp on my grandfather's farm near Wilkinsburg. Sergeant Trotter was his orderly and a great favorite of the general. He was privileged to leave camp without leave
from the general. He had gone to his home in the Sampson settlement in what is now a part of Penn Township, for a day's absence. The general was in one of his terrible drunken orgies and upon waking up in a maudlin state asked that Sergeant Trotter be sent to him. He was told that the Sergeant was away from camp. The general replied; "Absent without leave. Send out a guard, arrest him and shoot him on the spot and do not dare disobey my orders." Poor Trotter was arrested near where Beulah Church now stands, on his way back to camp. Wayne was so stupefied with drink that he could not be aroused to hear the guard's report, and they, fearing to disobey the order, took the Sergeant out and shot him. When the general came to his senses he asked for Trotter. The guard told him that Trotter had been shot the day before, by his orders. He replied: "Trotter shot by my orders? God in Heaven forgive me," and fell down in a swoon. His feelings were so shocked by what he had done that for a time his life was despaired of. General Wayne was a hard tyrant, a great martinet, a terrible drunkard and the best Indian fighter of his day. "Old Rose," the slave belonging to my grandfather, never tired of relating the shooting of Trotter, to which she was an eye-witness. My grandmother became so excited when she heard the volley fired that she fainted away.

One of the most prominent and noted characters in Wilkinsburg was "Old Rose Rattler." She was my grandfather's favorite slave. He bought her, her sister Sarah and brother George from people in North Hampton County. She was a splendid looking negress, very intelligent, honest and upright and respected by everyone. We almost made an equal of her. She died in our family in 1847, aged 80 years. My father buried her beside his mother and a pretty marble stone covers her grave in the Beulah cemetery, with the inscription: "Rest in Peace, good and faithful Rose." Col. Hawkins, father of Judge Hawkins, wrote a lengthy and interesting history of the Rattler family. It was published in the Saturday Visitor, edited by Mrs. Jane Swisshelm. I refer to old Rose, because no history of Wilkinsburg would be complete without her.