Elbridge Gerry, Jr., Visits Pittsburgh, 1813

By E. M. Davis

A publication of especial interest to Pittburghers is the Diary of Elbridge Gerry, Jr., given to the world through the generosity of a descendant of his sister. Especial praise is due her as few indeed are generous enough to count against their own instinctive reticence on family matters the immense benefit which is conferred upon history by the relinquishment of old family letters and diaries, the most valuable sources of information that we have on contemporary affairs. This diarist was the son of Elbridge Gerry the Signer, afterward Governor of Massachusetts and Ambassador to France, and at the time that his son’s diary was penned, Vice-President of the United States.

The account follows the incidents of young Gerry’s journey to Washington from his home in Boston but he took an exceedingly roundabout way to get there, for he was traveling for his health, and went on horseback. From Charlton, Mass., he was accompanied by “H. Orne and W. Donnison, Esqrs., counselors at law.” “They are going to the Western Countries to establish themselves in the practice of the law.” For the most part, the young man rode on very steadily, rarely stopping for more than overnight or a few hours on the way, and he was about two months on the journey.

Starting on May 3, 1813, he was at Harrisburg on May 20th. Here he discovered his horse to be lame and found a farrier who helped him some. He says of the town, “Harrisburg is the seat of government of this state. It contains four hundred houses, forty of them being taverns. There are three thousand inhabitants, and the town is very handsome. On one side, the Susquehanna takes its course, and is a mile broad; in it are many islands, and the river is an ornament to the town and country.”

They crossed this river on the 21st by ferry, though a bridge was then building, “which crosses a pleasant island in the middle of the stream.” “The country to Carlisle is very fine, and has many excellent farms.” “Carlisle is larger than Harrisburg and is as handsome.” He speaks of Dickinson College, “a handsome building.” Beyond Strasburg, “the people begin to talk more English. This state ’till lately have
been almost all Germans, and with difficulty we could make them understand us."

May 24th, they passed a place called Burnt Cabins, "an Indian town being destroyed during the last war in this place." They crossed the river Juniata by a chain bridge, which he describes. His companions were traveling by carriage, and through the mountains the carriage was continually breaking down, causing much delay. Having re-fitted at Bedford, they resumed their journey and came to Stoyerstown on May 27th, passing "the worst road, I may safely affirm, that was ever passed by a private carriage." The horses having been sick, they relieved them by sending on their baggage by a "Philadelphia waggon." "We crossed Laurel Hill and came to Ramsey's Tavern at Fort Ligoniard being ten miles in five hours. We are rewarded for our labor by reaching one of the best taverns in this state." As they descend, "The country begins to resume its cheering looks, and more farms are seen, producing flowing grain fields." They crossed Chestnut Ridge, the last mountain, and arrived at Greensburg, "Wet through and fatigued out." "The town is situated on the side and top of a hill and is pretty large. A handsome courthouse and other buildings are in its confines." May 31st, he is still in Greensburg. "A traveler left here this morn who gave a horrid account of the roads in the Ohio, and the different roads to Pittsburgh." . . . Many times this traveler was in danger of losing his horse in the mud, "and in crossing Turtle Creek, which is seldom too high to ford, his horse swam, and he came over in a skiff. We must probably wait till it falls. I mention these accounts, that the reader may learn how much worse the roads are than usual, and then they are dangerous for a carriage." This reference to the reader seems to indicate that young Gerry had some notion of publication. If so, it has taken many years to accomplish his intention.

"June 1st. The roads now benefited in some measure by the heat of the sun, we left Greensburgh and rode twelve miles to Stuart's Tavern, which excellent house we reached in the eve. My friends' horse tired at the end of the first mile, and I changed with them for the remaining distance to Pittsburgh"—thirty miles. The ride for the first half was very pleasant. The country again became delightful and the orchards of prolific fruit trees in parallel rows were once
more familiar to the sight. The travelling was far better than expected and some of the way was perfectly good. The last half, on the contrary, was remarkable for the bad quality. We came over a succession of hills, the chain being a full mile in length; and the whole range was a soft clay road full of deep ruts. . . . The country furnished an elegant prospect the whole ride, and was improved by many farms.” On June 2, they were afraid that they could not make the twenty miles to “Pitsburgh,” on account of swollen Turtle Creek, but after a fatiguing and delayed journey “of six hundred and twenty miles” they had “surmounted all difficulties and arrived safe.”

“Turtle Creek runs through a valley. The hills on each side cannot be described as too horrid. No hill in the U. S. is as bad.” . . . “The country east of Pittsburgh is clearing very fast, sides of hill and fields of dead trees or stumps are seen in all directions. The method for clearing land appears to be as follows: They first girdle the trees by cutting a circular strip of bark from the trunk; this kills the tree, the nourishment is no longer ascending through the pores of the bark. The trees being dead, and most of the branches falling, fire is applied to the root, which consumes the inside but never injures the bark. It then decays and falls; the body is soon changed to manure, and the stump afterwards. As there is but little underbrush and few bushes, the land can be cultivated soon after they are girdled, or as soon as the leaves have fallen; so that it is usual to see grain fields in a woods of dead trees.”

Although they reached Pittsburgh on June 2nd, he waits till they arrive at Marietta on June 10th, to write up in his diary his description of the city. “Various occupations at Pittsburgh, and inconvenience between that place and Marietta have prevented a regular addition to my detail.”

“On account of the celebrity of it,” he says that he will attempt to give an accurate and plain description. And he does, as well as a detailed one. “The eye is first attracted by the black volumes of smoke issuing from the numerous furnaces and darkening the whole atmosphere around.” He remarks that the town “is not made visible by tall spires or stately buildings” an observation that would not be as true today as his first statement still, alas, is. “Low houses and log huts,” “streets wide and buildings crowded,” “a confused and
intermingled sound of the hammer, the machine and the mill,” “surprising degree of business transacted,” and “industry with regularity appears in every direction” are some of his more telling phrases. “All seem cheerful, and join pleasure with profit.” “The town is filled with stores and warehouses of all kinds, and most of them are productions of the place and country.” He describes the courthouse and market house, and mentions old “Fort du Quesne”, afterwards Fort Pitt. “The intrenchments still remain, and within is the magazine, built of stone. This is new information, no other traveller of so late a date mentions these two details so accurately. “Fort Fayette is the present garrison and is on the south side of the town.” This would indicate that like most visitors to Pittsburgh, he had found it hard to keep the points of the compass in mind. Fort Fayette was near where Ninth crosses Penn Avenue, and would have been to the north-east of the town as it then lay. He notes “numerous ferry boats, filled with men, horses and vehicles.” He descended a few of the coal mines, one quite extensive. He speaks of the advantages and disadvantages of the cheapness and availability of this fuel, “The particles of smoke . . . incommode the ladies' dress very much.” He was, as appears from his account of his experiences in Washington, exceedingly attentive to the beauty of ladies, and makes the following observation in Pittsburgh. “The ladies after residing in the town some years have a gradual swelling or lump called a goitre come under the chin, as low as to appear a cushion to the chin. This is not general, but only on particular persons. The reason assigned for this singular incident is, that the vaporous particles of the coal smoke, are too impure for the delicate skin of the ladies. Thus only that description are afflicted.” (Does he mean that only delicate ladies, or only those with delicate skins, are afflicted with goitre?) “Others ascribe it to the waters. It produces a curious appearance in the cushioned ladies, but a change and short residence in a distant town entirely removes this unwelcomed being.”

From this profound medical study, he turns to prophesy, “Pittsburgh in a few years will beyond a doubt be the most important manufacturing town in America.” The advantages bestowed by nature, in the way of waterways, are given as a reason for his sanguine prediction.
He had a letter to "a respectable lawyer of the place," and this gentleman became their guide around the vicinity. They visited "the glass house," where "small boys with facility completely formed a cruet in less than thirty seconds." He describes somewhat minutely the operations in the wire manufactory, a "steam manufactory for iron" (a primitive rolling-mill) where horse-power was substituted for the water-power with which the New Englander was more familiar, and they were also shown the inside of public buildings. He gives a very good account of market-day. Men are continually riding through the town, crying horses for sale, as the travelers who come to Pittsburgh over the mountains by horse or by wagon, here take the boats and require them no longer, occasioning "a crowded market of horses."

He regretted that he had brought no letters which would give him the "advantage of visiting," but the acquaintance of a new friend repaired the defect, "and by his attention, I was soon introduced to many ladies."

A connoisseur in these matters, his judgment is gratifying to local pride. "Their education and accomplishments are much attended to, and their manners are easy and sociable, and very attentive to strangers."

They purchased a skiff to descend the Ohio, shipped their horses and the carriage of his friends, supplied their boat with ham, beer and so forth, and commenced the voyage to Marietta, "the extremity" of his journey.

The description of the journey down the Ohio is very interesting and the most vivid that has been met with in the accounts of travelers. He was a lover of nature, and knew well how to describe its beauties.

The reviewers, as well as the author of the preface of the book have remarked with wonder the fact that in the diary he pays so little attention to the events of the war then going on. This seems especially remarkable in his notes on Pittsburgh and Marietta, as we find the newspapers of that date in Pittsburgh full of the seige of Fort Meigs, which was then at its most doubtful stage, and of the floating of Perry's boats over the bar at Erie. It can only be accounted for by his assertion that he undertook the journey for his health. As he lived to the ripe age of ninety-two, and underwent experiences on his journey that would have tested the strength of the most robust, it may be supposed that he
was sufficiently self-centered and perhaps hypochondriacal, to think more of his own immediate contacts than of the affairs of the nation at large. Any young man of his background who could have resisted the call to arms at that time must have had a peculiar psychology, and reference to his portrait, and the fact that he was the youngest and probably most petted son of a venerable and wealthy father, would give some grounds for this judgment. Finding such frank statements of what he thinks of others, one is irresistibly urged to wonder what they thought of him, and regrets the dearth of local diaries and letters to help in learning whether the "educated and accomplished ladies" of Pittsburgh were equally attentive to all strangers, or found anything especially deserving of their interest in the young man from Boston.