JEFFERSON COUNTY’S FIRST SETTLERS AND FIRST COMMUNITY

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IN a quiet, hilltop churchyard cemetery along Pickering Street in Brookville, Pennsylvania, above the Jefferson County courthouse, the weathered epitaph on a modest gravestone reads: “First settler of Jefferson County / Joseph Barnett 1754-1838 / Revolutionary soldier.”

His story, a narrative of the county’s first settlement at Port Barnett, is a case study in historic cause and effect. It was an incongruous, but for the times not unusual, result of service in the American Revolution; the “fair play” versus “common law” controversy and the oft repeated tales of early Western Pennsylvania exploration by George Washington and others.

The sequence of events that led to that settlement received an early impetus when Joseph Barnett’s father, John, came to Pennsylvania from Londonderry, Ireland, prior to 1730. He was apparently among the Scotch and Irish immigrants who settled along Swatara Creek, which flows southwest to the Susquehanna River at Middletown, not far from Harrisburg. Joseph’s mother, Sarah, was of Scotch descent and presumably from the same group. The Barnettts farmed for their livelihood and faced the insecurity of life and property from Indian raids that characterized the times.

Born in 1754, Joseph Barnett had at least one brother — Andrew. Their father, John Barnett, passed away in 1757, and their mother died shortly afterward. Joseph was brought up on a farm by relatives.

Joseph joined a locally recruited battalion of rifle militia in 1775 and apparently served in the Long Island area, where his papers were lost. He returned with Brigadier General James Potter’s brigade to suffer through the 1777-1778 winter in the legendary cold and privation at Valley Forge.1 His military service also included militia action in the Pennsylvania-Connecticut boundary disputes in the Wyoming Valley.

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1 By tracing the military records of three Joseph Barnettts who enlisted from the general area, coupled with precise facts in each case, it was possible to assign logically a number of references in the Pennsylvania Archives appropriate to each with assurance of accuracy.
Before the war, the Barnetts and their neighbors had ranged north to cut off hostile Indian bands and were impressed by the fertility and beauty of land along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. Joseph and Andrew Barnett, as soldiers of the Pennsylvania line, received revolutionary land warrants as bounties, which they exercised for 300 acres each in the then Northumberland County area at the mouth of Pine Creek, near what later became Jersey Shore, Clinton County.

In 1786, Joseph Barnett was named to assist the sheriff in the conduct of an election but also was named in a complaint to the state Board of Property which questioned the title to Joseph's land. On it he had built a sawmill (and lost his left eye, gouged out in a rough-and-tumble fight). On October 22, 1788, the board dispossessed him of his land and sawmill.2

The first United States census in 1790 showed Joseph Barnett and one other male over sixteen, probably his brother Andrew, and one female, in the rural Northumberland County household. At some point thereafter, Joseph Barnett and his family (including twin children, Sarah and Thomas, born in 1790) returned to Dauphin County and established a home at Linglestown, not far from his childhood home. For the next several years he worked at contracting for and building bridges.

Joseph Barnett and Elizabeth Scott were married in Northumberland County on July 3, 1794.3 It may have been at that point that the return to Dauphin County occurred, since a son, John, was born at Linglestown in June 1795.

**Exploration into Northwestern Pennsylvania**

In 1795, Joseph Barnett sent his brother Andrew and Samuel Scott, a brother-in-law and millwright, to explore the then famous region of French Creek in what became Crawford County. Frustrated in his earlier settlement effort, Joseph, like others, had heard of the

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2 Joseph Barnett was among those who had followed the doctrine of "fair play," a philosophy which gave local settlers preference in law to large tracts of land never used but held in absentee ownership under early British colonial grants. However, the "common law" doctrine came into operation, superseding the jurisdiction of "fair play."

3 It has not been ascertained whether this published wedding date might have been printed with error, whether the 1790 twin children could have been born of an earlier wife, or whether the 1794 marriage was, in the rural custom of the times, a solemnization of a marriage earlier consummated in law.
French Creek area as a result of the publicized travels of George Washington and other visitors to the area.

The first trail forged by white men through what became Jefferson County resulted from the excitement created in two Sunbury, Pennsylvania, residents by the reports of Washington and others. They were David and John Meade who broke the trail, moving westward from the future site of Curwensville through what later became Reynoldsville and Brookville, to Franklin and Meadville.

When Andrew Barnett and Samuel Scott, traveling along Meade's trail, came to Little Mill Creek, some forty or fifty miles short of their destination, they stopped for a couple of days. The creek (later named Red Bank) as far down as the present site of Summerville was explored. They quickly concluded that the Little Mill Creek junction site, where lofty pines towered over every hillside, was an ideal place for a sawmill and lumbermen. Returning to Dauphin County, they made arrangements to purchase the site that became Port Barnett from Timothy Pickering & Company.4

In the spring of 1797, Joseph and Andrew Barnett, Samuel Scott, and Moses Knapp — who in later years became the most legendary of Jefferson County lumbermen — returned to the Little Mill Creek site, then a part of Lycoming County. Well pleased with the location, they began building the area's pioneer cabin and mill in the wilderness.

Indians assisted in the construction effort, two slightly varied accounts of which have survived. One says that about nine Indians were involved but would not work until they had eaten all Joseph Barnett's provisions, which took three days. Then they said, "Me eat, me sleep; now me strong, now me work."

A Barnett employee later recalled that Joseph invited the Indians to dine with him on the day the framework was to be erected, probably aiming at getting their help. After dinner, one of the Indians was said to have remarked, "Dinner, Indian sleep an hour, then strong." Off they went into the woods, their host supposing that he would never see them again. But in an hour or so they reappeared and proclaimed that they were now strong enough to raise the framework.

That fall of 1797, Joseph Barnett returned to his family, leaving Andrew and Samuel Scott to finish some work. Shortly after Joseph's departure, Andrew fell sick and died. He was buried on the northwest bank of the junction of Sandy Lick and Little Mill creeks, across

4 Col. Timothy Pickering headed a company of land speculators active in north central Pennsylvania.
from the sawmill. Scott and two Indians were the only attendants at the “funeral,” after which Scott carried the news back to Dauphin County. Shortly afterward, the fourth child of Joseph Barnett, Andrew, was born in Dauphin County, apparently named for the recently deceased uncle.

In 1798, Joseph Barnett, Scott, Knapp, and a man by the name of Joseph Hutchison returned and renewed their work. Knapp and Scott finished the mill that year, and in 1799 the first lumber was sawed. That year, too, Joseph Barnett was assessed at the Port Barnett site with 225 acres of land.

In November 1799, he brought his wife and family over Meade’s trail from Linglestown, Dauphin County, to the new home prepared for them in the wilderness just east of the future site of Brookville. His possessions included two cows and seven horses, five of which were packhorses loaded with household goods, and two of which were ridden by the family. In 1800, Joseph was listed in county assessments as a farmer.

Lumbering Origins

The first lumber was rafted in 1801 on Red Bank Creek, with poles instead of oars, to the Allegheny River and thence to Pittsburgh. Early accounts differ as to whether Barnett, Scott, or Knapp, or two, or all of them, were involved in this initial piloting and rafting venture.

Joseph Barnett continued to raft lumber on Sandy Lick and Red Bank creeks for a number of years, despite expanding business operations that added a gristmill and tavern-hotel in addition to the sawmill. The high point each year for those involved was a rafting voyage to Pittsburgh, which provided a market for lumber as well as an opportunity to get supplies not available locally. The rafts of sawed lumber were run to Pittsburgh in the spring and a canoe taken along for the return trip. Lumber was sold at about twenty-five dollars per thousand feet.

Proceeds from the sale were invested in pork, sugar, whiskey, dry goods, salt, and such, which were loaded in the canoe and carried

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5 Red Bank Creek was originally known by the Indian name of Lycamahoning, derived from Lycoming and Mahoning. By common acceptance, the name Sandy Lick Creek was applied to the portion above the North Fork junction at Brookville. A 1798 legal statute formally applied the Sandy Lick and Red Bank designations.

6 Normally, about 4,000 feet of lumber were put in a raft, also termed a “two-platform piece.” The first rafting, however, may have been just a “small platform.”
on the rafters' backs. The rafters then pushed or poled the canoe up the river and creeks to Port Barnett. Joseph Barnett is reputed to have carried sixty pounds of flour, over half his weight, on his back from Pittsburgh.

Meanwhile, Joseph Barnett's sawmill was the basis that shortly made the new Port Barnett community the center of business for a widespread area. He added a tub gristmill to his sawmill and with his "Port Barnett flintstone binns" made an eatable, if not very desirable, flour. The Seneca Indians of Cornplanter's tribe, then in the area, were good customers. The mill nearest to Port Barnett was on Black Lick Creek in Indiana County, dramatizing the importance of Joseph Barnett's operations.  

An example of the importance of Joseph Barnett's community in the early nineteenth century was demonstrated by the visit of a detachment of soldiers in 1814. Traveling over the state road to Erie for some War of 1812 action, the troops, commanded by Major William McClelland, rested from the vigors of their wilderness expedition for four days at Port Barnett. The settlers were glad to have them, since there was apprehension during this period of the war that an unfortunate turn of events could bring a frontier eruption of the Senecas.

The Indians at Port Barnett

Indian episodes and activities figured prominently in the life and times of Joseph Barnett in the early days of his new community. One event in the year 1802 nearly had serious consequences. Joseph had consented to act as banker for the Indians around Port Barnett. The Indians were all bimetals and had the silver craze, since their money was all silver. They brought their silver money to Joseph who received it and deposited it in their presence in his private vault — a small board trunk covered with hogskin tanned with the bristles on. On the lid were the letters "JB" made with brass tacks. The trunk became full, and the bank was considered a solid financial institution.

A short time later, the red men decided to withdraw their deposits and made a run on the bank in a body. Barnett handed over their trunk, and each Indian counted out his own pieces. But, according to their combined count, the bank was insolvent with a shortage of one

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7 Joseph Barnett was not familiar with the region to the south, his son Andrew later recalled, not being involved in any exploration in that direction. On one occasion when Joseph headed in that direction, he gave an Indian $4 to pilot him to Westmoreland County.
fifty-cent piece. Joseph induced the Indians to recount their silver, but the fifty-cent piece was still missing; the Indians then declared that he must die.

After surrounding the house, the Indians ordered Joseph to the porch to be shot. He complied, but pleaded with them to count their pieces a third time. If one was still missing, they could then shoot him. This the Indians considered fair, and the third count was made. One Indian found that he had one more piece than his own; the missing fifty-cent piece had been found. There was joy and rejoicing among the Indians, not to mention Joseph Barnett. Their banker was not a criminal, but a hero and friend to the Indians.

When the Barnett family settled at Port Barnett in 1799, there were two Indian families, those of Twenty Canoes and Tomahawk, plus two individuals, the Hunt cousins. Jim Hunt had been banished from his tribe for killing a relative. Captain Hunt, later known as Old Captain Hunt, was an under chief of the Muncy tribe, slaves to the Senecas; “captain” was the highest military title known to the Indians.8

Other Indians for many years came to the area to hunt. Two who came, about 1800, were John Jamison (Sassy John), whose seven sons were all named John, and a Mohawk Indian by the name of Crow, a savage feared by whites and Indians alike. Twenty Canoes and an Indian named Caturah stayed for several years after the Barnettts settled, and the Hunts were around most of the time until after the War of 1812 began.

Twenty Canoes and Sassy John returned once in later years to visit “Joe Blannett,” as they called him, not being able to pronounce Barnett. The last visit of Caturah was in 1833, when he was over ninety years of age. The visit was recalled by Nathaniel Butler, a son-in-law of Barnett, who was working in a sawmill on North Fork Creek when he saw the ancient, “nearly 100-year-old” Indian en route to Barnett’s.

Development of Roads

The first road was built through the Port Barnett area in 1802, which led to the establishment of a tavern and hotel by Joseph Barnett in 1803. As early as 1791, plans for a state road from Bald Eagle’s

8 Capt. Hunt had his camp on Red Bank Creek near the future Brookville and hunted for a living, proceeds of which went for whiskey, “of which he was excessively fond.” One year, he killed 78 bears, each skin bringing $3, nearly all of which went for his favorite beverage.
Nest, Centre County, through the area to Fort Le Boeuf in Erie County were discussed. But Indian troubles until 1794 delayed further consideration until war and purchases settled the dispute. In 1799, an act of the state assembly authorized the road.

When construction was completed in 1802, the road was from twelve to sixteen feet wide, making possible the use of wagons. Freight service was begun over the Milesburg-Waterford road, as it was later known, in 1803. The road was the successor to Meade's trail and the earlier Chinklacamoose path.

The nearest settlement eastward from Joseph Barnett's was Paul Clover's, thirty-three miles away on the West Branch of the Susquehanna River, where Curwensville now stands. Westward, Fort Venango, along the Allegheny River at the present location of Franklin, was forty-five miles away. What few whites there were within thirty or forty miles made Joseph's log cabin a stopping place for several days at a time, and the evolution of a tavern-hotel was a natural sequence.

Freightage over the road from Philadelphia to Port Barnett was six dollars per hundred pounds and took four weeks. Iron from the early Centre County furnaces was also shipped over Meade's trail to Port Barnett on packhorses and in wagons and sleds after the road opened. From Port Barnett, it was shipped down the creek on rafts.\(^9\)

The Milesburg-Waterford road was the first through the Port Barnett area, and the next was probably the Indiana-Port Barnett road. Petitioned by Indiana and Jefferson county residents at the September 1808 term of the Indiana County court, the road was from Brady's Mill on Little Mahoning Creek in Indiana County to the point on Sandy Lick Creek at Port Barnett where Joseph Barnett's store and tavern were located.\(^10\)

Court-appointed viewers, including Samuel Scott, Joseph's brother-in-law, reported at the next term, and the road was built about 1810.\(^11\) A turnpike charter — one of 220 granted by Pennsylvania from 1792 until 1832 — was enacted February 22, 1812, which

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\(^9\) Tradition has it that iron from rafts which upset, ultimately turned the banks of the creek red, whence the name of Red Bank Creek evolved.

\(^10\) Today, the key road intersection — U.S. Route 322 from east to west, and Pa. Route 236 south — is at almost precisely the same point.

\(^11\) About 1810, Scott, having saved $2,000 from lumbering and hunting, left the area and went down to the Miami River, presumably in southwestern Ohio, and bought a section of fine land that reportedly made him rich. However, he either maintained his interests in the Port Barnett area, or repurchased land in the area around 1820. It has not been determined whether he returned, however.
enabled the governor to incorporate a company to build a turnpike from the Susquehanna River in Clearfield County through Jefferson County to Franklin and Meadville.

Again, the Barnetts were involved. The governor was authorized to subscribe $12,000 in shares for the road building, and Joseph was one of two county men appointed commissioners to receive the stock. The 126-mile clay turnpike was completed in 1824, and the first stagecoach passed over it in November.

Acclaimed the best road in the United States at that time by some writers of the day, it featured stone mileposts and was a key link in a road system extending from Philadelphia to Erie. It also contributed to more improvement in business that caused further expansion of Barnett’s Inn, in 1826 one of six inns in the county and the only frame structure. By then, daily stagecoaches were passing through.

The Family and Community Progress

History credits Joseph Barnett in 1801 with having made the first wheeled vehicle in the area, a wooden oxcart. The wheels were sawed from a large oak log, and a hole was chiseled in the center for an axle made of hickory. At about that time, too, Joseph Barnett’s strongly rooted Presbyterian religion led him to bring a pioneer minister to Port Barnett.\(^{12}\)

Rebecca Barnett (August 6, 1802) was the first white child born at Port Barnett in what was shortly to become Jefferson County. She was followed in the Joseph Barnett household by J. Potter in May 1804, Margaret Annie in October 1805, Juliet in April 1808, and Joseph Scott in April 1812.

About 1802, a number of families began to settle to the west and northeast of Port Barnett, along Little Mill Creek, as the roads began to open up the wilderness. Among these was the L. Long family, including nine-year-old Bill, who became the “king hunter” of northwestern Pennsylvania legend in later years.

Jefferson County was created from Lycoming County on March 26, 1804, and was attached administratively to Westmoreland County until 1806, then to Indiana County until 1830, when it was formally organized on a separate basis. From 1806 until 1817, the county consisted of a single township, Pinecreek, officially established by an act

\(^{12}\) The first minister was Rev. Greer, a friend of Joseph’s, who came in 1801 and remained two weeks, preaching several times. He returned in 1802 and again preached.
of the state assembly in 1806. On March 31, 1806, Jefferson County was made into a separate election district by county law, elections to be held “at the house of Joseph Barnett on Sandy Lick Creek.”

The 1807 assessments, first in the county, listed Joseph Barnett with 100 acres of land, a distillery, one horse, and five cows, with a valuation of $329. The sawmill and gristmill were assessed to brother-in-law Samuel Scott, who along with his land and cattle, was listed at $600.

The county’s first license was issued to Joseph Barnett, Bald Eagle Road, on December 16, 1812. Joseph was the first constable of Pinecreek Township, named or elected as of March 18, 1814.

The single election district concept prevailed until after the general election of Friday, March 14, 1817, at which Joseph Barnett was one of two men elected as supervisor. Joseph had twenty-five votes. His early associate, Moses Knapp, was elected fence appraiser with seven votes.

Further evidence of the importance of Barnett’s Inn in that era came after the first Jefferson County commissioners were elected in 1824 (including Joseph’s son, Andrew). The first meeting was on November 12 at Joseph’s place, at which a room was rented in Barnett’s Inn for an office “at the rate of $1 a week for the time occupied . . . and a closet in the said room to be in the use of the county continually.”

On January 4, 1826, Joseph Barnett was appointed postmaster. Port Barnett was the first post office in the county, established slightly more than a month earlier than the one at Punxsutawney.

The zenith of Port Barnett as the center of Jefferson County business began to diminish by the late 1820s. By 1830, Jefferson County had 2,005 persons within its 625 square miles, with most of the growth by then coming at Brookville and Punxsutawney, which ultimately became the county’s principal communities.

When Jefferson County became completely independent in 1830, three nonresident commissioners, who had been appointed by Governor J. Andrew Schulze to meet at Joseph Barnett’s house in September 1829, selected the site of Brookville for the county’s seat of justice. The town was laid out in the spring of 1830, lots were sold that June, and it was incorporated as a borough on April 9, 1834.11 By 1835, there

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13 In 1795, Joseph’s brother Andrew was recognized as having been the first to set foot on the ground where Brookville was to stand. Moses Knapp, a Barnett associate, was its pioneer settler with a log house and stable at Mill and Water streets.
were 135 people living in Brookville, and one of its main streets was named for the Barnetts.

The community of Port Barnett was never formed into a separate municipality and exists today as a part of Pinecreek Township (1970 population of 1,181). There is a Barnett Township in Jefferson County's extreme northwestern corner, named for Joseph Barnett when it was formed in 1833.

The Death of Joseph Barnett

The patriarch of Jefferson County, Joseph Barnett, died April 15, 1838. His wife, Elizabeth Scott Barnett, passed away four months later in her sixty-fifth year. History records that Joseph Barnett was a small man physically, having been five feet eight inches tall and weighing about one hundred and eight pounds. He was known as having "a smooth shaved face and a frank and open countenance."

In 1877, Judge Peter Clover of Clarion County wrote, "Joseph Barnett and Samuel Scott... were men of great energy and industry... Joseph Barnett was a very eccentric, high-minded man, and took a part in all the leading business transactions of the day; a man long to be remembered by those who knew him."

The Children of Joseph Barnett

The children of Joseph Barnett also figured significantly in Jefferson County history and development. In addition to his service as a county commissioner, Andrew Barnett served as county treasurer from 1829 until 1831 and was a pioneer school director. From 1831 until 1842, Andrew maintained a licensed inn at Port Barnett, succeeding his father in its operation. When the county's first militia was authorized by the state legislature in 1826, Andrew was elected major, second in command of the original battalion, advancing to lieutenant colonel in 1828.

John Barnett settled on a ninety-six-acre tract bought in 1825 in Union Township. He sold this property and migrated west in 1840 but left behind the distinction of being Jefferson County's pioneer tax collector, serving as such in 1825 in Pinecreek Township.

Thomas Barnett, a twin and Joseph's oldest son, in 1818 bought a log sawmill and gristmill where North Fork waters entered Red Bank Creek but apparently died before 1824. At that time, James Parks, his brother-in-law, came to run the mill and lived in the area of Brookville until 1830. The 1830 census listed one slave in Jefferson
County, named Sam, who served as a miller at the Barnett-Parks gristmill, having accompanied Parks from Westmoreland County.

Sarah Barnett Graham, Thomas's twin sister, achieved a lifetime span of 105 years before her death on October 27, 1895. She also figured in the county's first recorded marriage when she wed Elijah M. Graham, March 30, 1807. Born in Dauphin County in 1772, Graham was an original Jefferson County explorer in 1794 under deputy surveyor John Broadhead. Elijah returned to the county's wilderness in 1804 and worked at Joseph Barnett's mill for three years before he married Sarah.

Rebecca Barnett, in 1827, married Nathaniel Butler, one of several New England brothers who settled at Port Barnett around 1820. They gave land on their farm for the first public school in the area, located along the then Ridgway Road (now Route 28 at a point just north of the Keystone Shortway Interchange). Nathaniel served as county treasurer and in various township offices.
The Society will remain open during the month of August this summer in order to serve the needs of visitors to the area, as well as those of our regular patrons. The hours will be: Tuesday through Friday, 9:30-4:30, and Saturday, 9:30-12:30.