You Had To Ask

BY CHRIS POTTER
MANAGING EDITOR OF PITTSBURGH CITY PAPER AND WRITER OF THE WEEKLY "YOU HAD TO ASK" COLUMN

MY HUSBAND TOLD ME THAT
PERRYopolis, PA., WAS ALMOST NAMED THE
CAPITAL OF THE UNITED STATES.

IS THIS TRUE?

jaime r. swalin, belle vernon

It's hard to believe this Fayette County borough of fewer than 2,000 might have been the seat of federal power, but near-greatness is a piece of local folklore, arising from the fact that George Washington purchased 1,641 acres there before the American Revolution. Washington surveyed the site personally, and when Perryopolis was established in 1814, the town's founding fathers are said to have used a street pattern Washington had laid out on paper decades before. Washington called the site "as fine land as I ever saw" and built a gristmill there that operated until 1917.

The rest of the tale, however, is but grist for the mills of local historians. Apparently relying on information provided by the Perrysville Area Heritage Society, a Perryopolis website (www.as.wvu.edu/~lbrady/perryopolis.html) asserts that, "When George Washington owned land in Perryopolis, it was destined for a major role in history: Washington had planned to make it the capital of the United States and had even drawn up specific plans for the layout of the streets. These plans didn't materialize because Washington's estate sold the land after his death and history passed the small town by."

In fact, the historic record shows that Washington himself was trying to sell his Fayette holdings as early as 1785, and I could find no corroborating evidence for the rest of the claim. The Heritage Society was unreachable, but local historians and archivists I spoke to had never heard of the story. Several biographies of Washington turned up no mention of such plans, and neither did a handful of state and regional histories, including the 1882 History of Fayette County by Franklin Ellis, which discusses at length Washington's role in the area. Absent such evidence, the story seems highly dubious: the Founding Fathers were averse to a strong central government, but it's doubtful they would have located a capital so far from those they sought to govern.

Perryopolis does have a connection to the nation's capital, however. In 1853, it furnished a stone for the Washington Monument. The five-foot-long slab was taken by processional to "Washington's Diamond" at the center of town, and among those present was Simon "Funty Munty" Washington, formerly one of the general's slaves. "This old man occasionally pecked the stone," Ellis reports, "so that it might truthfully be said not only that the block was taken from land once owned by General Washington, but that it was worked by one of his former slaves." Why anyone would want to call attention to the fact that Washington owned slaves is another question.
ON WOOD STREET IN DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH, THERE’S A PLAQUE THAT SAYS:

"ON THIS SITE, WILLIAM THAW WAS BORN OCTOBER 12, 1818."

WHO WAS THAW AND WHY IS HIS BIRTHPLACE SO IMPORTANT?

BARRY HORTON, DOWNTOWN

The site actually commemorates two important Thaws: a railroad baron and the high-water mark of the March 1936 flood, as denoted by a plaque a few yards to the left of the one you mention. And the name of William Thaw, unfortunately, has been drowned out in a deluge of bad publicity surrounding his son, Harry K.

Harry Thaw became infamous in 1906 when he shot famed architect Stanford White in Madison Square Garden, which White designed. Thaw’s wife, a chorus girl named Evelyn Nesbit, had allegedly been intimate with White, and Thaw told police White “ruined my wife.” Author Cleveland Amory later castigated Thaw as “a sadistic pervert who became insanely jealous”; in fact, Thaw’s lawyer pioneered the insanity defense in his subsequent trial. Later, Thaw was accused of whipping a young boy in a hotel room.

Harry’s father, however, was the very picture of 19th century Pittsburgh propriety, such as it was. Thaw and brother-in-law Thomas Clarke operated several steamship and canal boat companies. In his book Pittsburgh: The Story of a City, Leland Baldwin writes that in 1839, “The three leading men in the business ... were Samuel M. Keir, Benjamin F. Jones, and William Thaw.” This was August company: Keir went on to establish Pittsburgh’s once-mighty petroleum industry, and Jones was the founder of Jones and Laughlin Steel.

With the rise of railroads, Thaw became a director of the Pennsylvania Railroad, for decades arguably the most powerful company in the state. Thaw was by some accounts the wealthiest man in Pittsburgh following the Civil War.

A prominent philanthropist, Thaw’s chief beneficiary was the University of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny Observatory, which the university operated. In 1871 alone, Thaw gave the university $100,000. That doesn’t sound like much today, but in those days it made headlines.

Thaw died in 1889, and lies interred with the rest of his family at Allegheny Cemetery. And to some extent, his legacy has been buried by the crimes of his son. As historian Walter Kidney writes, the style of “William Thaw’s [burial] monument... ironically, is of a sort that [Stanford] White might have designed.”