L&A Treasures

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Dunning McNair

With the stroke of his pen, State Rep. Dunning McNair forever changed the names of two Western Pennsylvania counties. McNair (1762-1825) was a prominent citizen and businessman of Allegheny County and is recognized as the founder of Wilkinsburg, just east of Pittsburgh. McNair was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature in October 1799, and along with James Sample, represented Allegheny County.

In January 1800, the legislature debated a bill submitted by McNair to carve eight new counties from the existing counties of Allegheny, Washington, Westmoreland, and Lycoming. At the time, Allegheny County extended to the New York border. McNair’s bill proposed what would become Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Crawford, Erie, Mercer, Venango, and Warren counties. But Beaver and Crawford were not the names in the original draft; McNair’s proposal had them named Ohio and Conyneaut counties.

The proposal was granted a second reading on January 17, and the committee to draft the bill was formally established with McNair as chairman. The bill was reported on January 28, 1800, with additional information on county seats, the machinery for drawing the boundaries, and McNair’s two name changes.

The bill was passed by the legislature on February 17, 1800, and became law on March 12, 1800. Shortly after the founding of the eight new counties, Dunning McNair and his brother David were involved in the construction of a road from Presque Isle southward through Erie County to LeBoeuf (now Waterford) along the current path of U.S. 19.

The History Center Archives holds the personal papers and business records of McNair and his family. Shown here is the printed version of the above-mentioned bill with McNair’s hand-written changes. His papers do not indicate how he came up with any of the names or his rationale for altering those of Conyneaut and Ohio.

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