

CATAWISSA RAILROAD, 1825-1896

INTRODUCTION: Over the last few years the letters written by Isaiah Willits Hartman, but also signed as I. W., have appeared in the Society's *Newsletter* at various times. He was a prominent and long time merchant in Bloomsburg. His mercantile career began in 1843 at the age of eighteen as a clerk in the firm of Eyer and Heffly. Five years later he and his brother Henry started their own general store, H. C. & I. W. Hartman, in the Arcade Building on the northwest corner of Main and Center Streets. It sold dry goods, groceries, hardware, willow ware [dishes], drugs, and an assortment of brandy, gin, rum, whiskey and wine. Over time the business shifted its focus to selling dry goods. By 1855 the business had done well, and the need for a larger building prompted the company to move to the northwest corner on Market Square. Fourteen years later I. W. purchased his brother's share of the company which he then renamed as the I. W. Hartman Store. Prior to his retirement in March 18, 1902, at the age of seventy-six, he had been a merchant for almost fifty-four years and was known as being the oldest continuous merchant in Columbia County. His son, Robert E. Hartman, became the new store owner.

Mr. Hartman had a record of involvement in community affairs. For several years he was the superintendent and treasurer of the Rosemont Cemetery, served as member of the school board and town council, and an active layman in the First Methodist Episcopal Church.

He died at the age of ninety-six on January 16, 1922. The obituary in *The Morning Press* described him as one of the few remaining links that connected Bloomsburg with its early history and one who had a wonderful ability to recall the past. "He was the last of the older generation of prominent Bloomsburgers remaining, and his wonderful memory went to make him the court of last resort in matters pertaining to the Bloomsburg of early days."

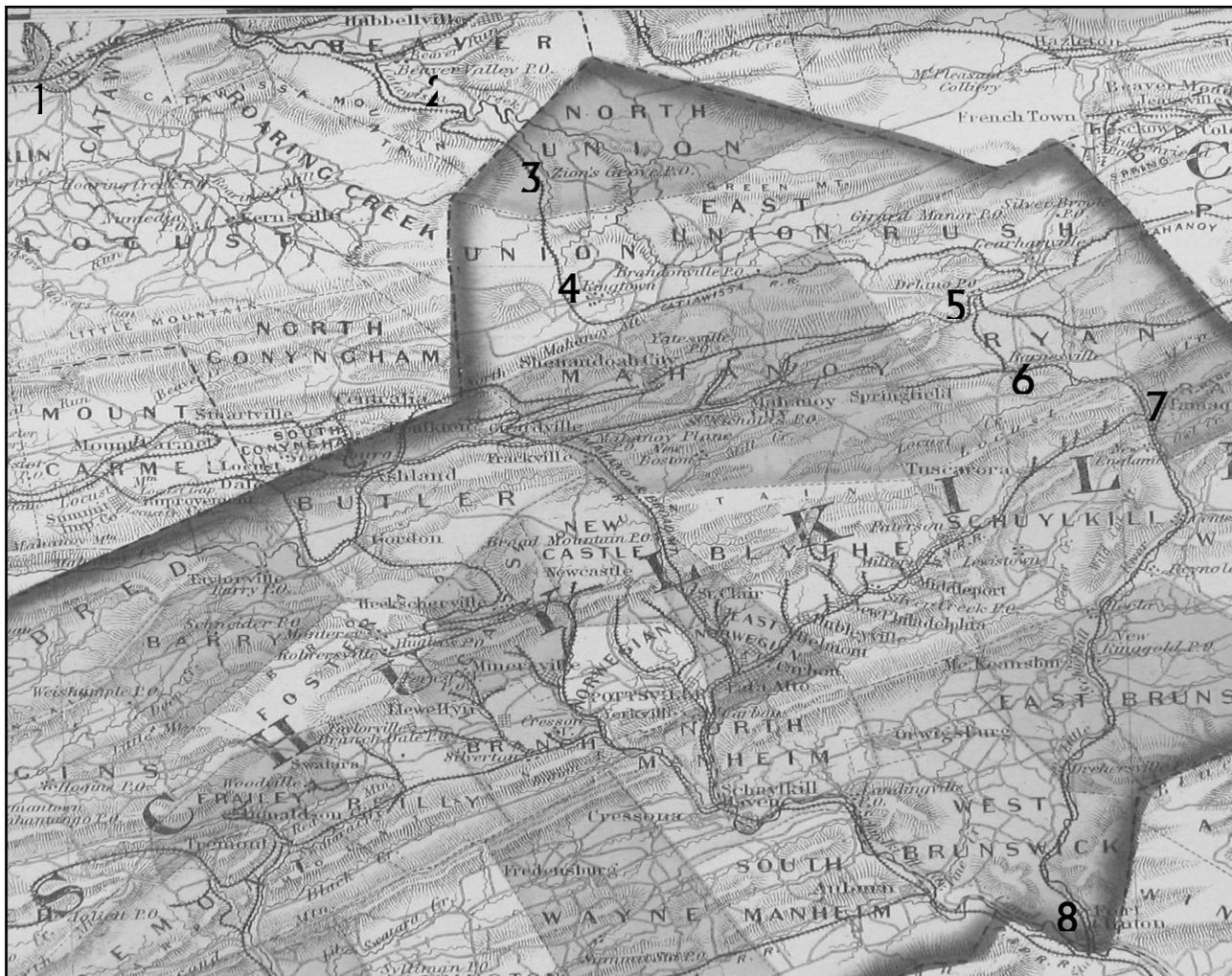
In a twenty year period beginning in 1891, I. W. Hartman wrote fifty some letters addressing a variety of subjects that appeared in three Bloomsburg newspapers: *The Democratic Sentinel*, *Bloomsburg Daily*, and *The Morning Press*. His writings were in part reminiscences, part chronicle of the times, and they offered a historical view of an earlier era from what he observed or experienced.

In this issue of the *Newsletter*, Hartman wrote about the first railroad in Columbia County and referred to some of the individuals who promoted it. He cited



the role of Christian Brobst of Catawissa who in 1825 conceived the idea of a railroad route from Catawissa to Tamaqua in Schuylkill County. His pro

posed route followed the Catawissa Creek Valley in an easterly direction to Mainville, then southeasterly through Beaver Township, and enter Schuylkill Count near Zion Grove. From there it proceeded to Ringtown, Brandonville, Delano, Barnesville, and Tamaqua in the Little Schuylkill River Valley. The initial effort to build the railroad started in 1835 but failed due to financial reasons. A second endeavor succeeded in the early 1850s when the Catawissa, Williamsport & Erie Railroad received a charter to construct a line that Brobst had envisioned. The first railroad in Columbia County began operations in July 1854 from Catawissa to Tamaqua. C. W. & E. had secured



Railroad route from Catawissa to Port Clinton: **1** Catawissa, **2** Beaver Valley **3** Zion's Grove, **4** Ringtown, **5** Delano, **6** Barnesville, **7** Tamaqua, and **8** Port Clinton.

Henry F. Walling and O. W. Gray. *A New Topographical Atlas of the State of Pennsylvania with Descriptions Historical, Scientific, and Statistical, Together with a Map of the United States and Territories.* (Philadelphia: Stedman, Brown, & Lyon, 1872), 75. (This atlas is in the Society's Library.)

the use of the Little Schuylkill Railroad tracks from Tamaqua to Port Clinton where one could make a connection to Philadelphia and Reading line to Philadelphia. Hartman explained how over time the railroad would ultimately become the Philadelphia

and Reading Railroad that served Catawissa, Rupert, and Bloomsburg. In addition, he commented on the economic impact that railroads had in the area.

In the latter part of his letter there is an interesting account about Hartman's experience going to Washington, D. C., in the spring of 1858 and attending a session of the Senate to hear William H. Seward, Republican Senator from New York, address the issue of the Lecompton Constitution and the question of admitting Kansas into the Union. The Kansas territory was in a state of turmoil over whether or not slavery would be allowed if it were admitted into the Union. Due to widespread fraudulent voting, the proslavery forces gained control on the convention that wrote the constitution at Lecompton which protected slavery. Seward and the Republicans opposed the expansion of slavery in the territories. Stephen A. Douglas, Democrat Senator from Illinois and a prominent leader in his party, strongly disagreed with President Buchanan, a Democrat, who supported the document. Historians credit Douglas, chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, for his leadership in convincing Congress to reject the proslavery constitution and denying statehood for Kansas in 1858. The Kansas debate highlighted the slavery issue which was divisive and increased sectional tensions in the country. Congress finally voted to admit Kansas into the Union on January 29, 1861, when it submitted a constitution that prohibited slavery.

Hartman's letter, "Catawissa Railroad, 1825-1896," appeared in *The Democratic Sentinel* on May 8, 1896. It is published here with a few editorial changes for clarification and readability.

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Editor of *Bloomsburg Daily*: I want to lead the young man or maiden as far back as my birth year 1825, in which year Christian Brobst of Catawissa, conceived the idea of a rail road over the mountains from Catawissa to Tamaqua, it is said by older historians that he traveled the distance first on foot, studied the lay of the mountains and the Quakake Valley, and concluded that the route, though difficult, could be overcome.

He interested Colonel Joseph Paxton in it, and he, through his persistency, interested parties from Reading and Philadelphia, among them Moncure Robison an engineer, who went over the route with others on horseback, and was favorably impressed of its feasibility. In 1831 they applied and had an act passed, authorizing Christian Brobst and Colonel Paxton of Catawissa, William McKelvy and others of Bloomsburg, and two or three capitalists of Philadelphia and Reading to receive

subscriptions for the stock of the "Little Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rail Road Company."

They took measures to carry out the plans, Edward Miller an engineer was employed to survey the line, contracts were entered into for the building of bridges, and excavating and grading of the road was done. J. H. Battle's *History of Columbia and Montour Counties*, from which I have gathered some of these dates and ideas, further says, "The collapsing of the United States Bank of Philadelphia in 1838, which had previously agreed to furnish the money to carry on and build the road, put a stop to the enterprise." And the contractors were compelled to abandon their work.

For about eleven years the line remained in an unfinished condition, bridges which had been partially constructed decayed and fell down; walls and embankments crumbled and became worthless, in fact the whole line became a wreck and could only be traversed by footmen. In the spring of 1849, Col. Paxton and others still adhering to their future impressions, that the road if completed would be an important line between the North and West branch rivers, and Philadelphia and New York, interested new parties, and reorganized under the name of Catawissa, Williamsport and Erie Rail Road Company, and began the work energetically, all the former work and contracts had to be gone over, and renewed, bridges rebuilt, and in some instances lines changed, all of which required about five years to complete.

William McKelvy and others of Bloomsburg, as also men of Catawissa, received contracts for building bridges and tunnels. I well remember seeing loads of powder going from McKelvy's store Monday mornings with large covered wagons, starting for the tunnels. The men lived all along the line in board shanties.

The first locomotive which was put in use on the road, came from Philadelphia by canal boat, and was taken off at Catawissa bridge, and taken over the river on a flat boat, people from all over the country and some of us young men went over to see them land it, and by machinery draw it up the bank, and place it upon the track. The rails also came by boat and were hauled over the river bridge; from Catawissa they began laying the track east. The road was completed from Catawissa to Tamaqua, and if my memory is correct, the first passenger train came into Catawissa July 4th, 1854 (although the history which I have referred to says the 16th of July 1854). The bridge over the river at Rupert was not completed until the next year.

After the road was finished from Milton to Rupert and passenger trains were put on, the passengers for Philadelphia and other places east were transferred at Rupert by omnibus to Catawissa by the way of the rock road, and over Catawissa drive bridge; those from the city going west were taken over the same route. Freight trains were

also put on as far as Catawissa, we began getting all our goods there, and continued until the bridge at Rupert was finished. Then all goods for this side came to Rupert. My brother William still living at Catawissa, built the depot and freight house at Catawissa, and assisted in building the same at Rupert. George Hughes, father of Mayberry and Douglas (all three being dead) was the first ticket agent at Catawissa, George Gilbert living still at Catawissa was the first agent at Rupert. Wesley Flemming was the first freight agent at Rupert and is still in the same position, and probably now the oldest continued agent upon the whole line.

The new company was not financially a success, and in 1860 when the Philadelphia and Reading Rail Road leased the road for ninety nine years. It is now known as the Catawissa branch of the Reading Road. In connection and through the opening of this road the whole country was more or less developed not only along its line, but the effect reached far out into the interior country, business grew and changes in all kinds of business, with a general opening of new avenues of trade, created competition in our business, so much so, that we were compelled to make more frequent visits to the cities, at least six times a year. Two trains were put on the road each way. The first train for Philadelphia would leave Rupert at 4:40 in the morning and arrive in the city for the late dinner about one o'clock p.m.

The second train would pass Rupert at 10:40 a.m. and arrive in Philadelphia sometime about dark, taking about eight hours for the trip. We now go over the same route in about five hours, going so frequently, we naturally would become familiar with the road and its employees and generally found them a class of men above the average for gentlemanly conduct, and frequently as it was in our nature born to us, would crack a joke with them on the way. My mind just now brings to me a joke published a few years ago upon a conductor on a train, and it was located not far from Port Clinton. The story was that a German woman had purchased a ticket and made a trip to a neighboring town to make some purchases, and said to her half grown daughter, I will return in the afternoon train – the little girl was very anxious to meet her mother upon her return, and not satisfied to wait at the station, walked a mile or two in the direction her mother was coming from, and when she saw the train at a distance, waved her handkerchief. The engineer and conductor supposing it was a signal of danger ahead stopped the train in order to ascertain what the trouble was. When the little German girl walked up to him and said in German, "*is de momme druff,*" meaning and being translated, is mother on the cars, whilst no doubt the conductor felt indignant, and we supposing he had been taught in the Sabbath school,

“That a soft answer turneth away wrath” and that out of two evils choose the least, no doubt he invited her to get aboard and ride with her mother to the station.

I repeat that the building and opening of this road did give new life to business in Bloomsburg and surrounding town, especially to Catawissa, which in a few years doubled its population; produce was shipped extensively to large cities and coal regions; men, women and children who had never seen a locomotive until the trains stopped at Catawissa, Rupert, Danville, Milton and other stations.

Not many years after the opening, I remember the first time an agent from Philadelphia came to Bloomsburg with a few samples of goods in a small hand satchel, his name was Henry Serrils from a notion house. He came more as a visitor to the town, and pay his respects to old customers – thought he would bring a few special bargains to show us. Other agents had visited the larger places with grocery samples, etc. My brother and I did not accept freely for a time the intrusion of traveling salesmen, but preferred making our usual trips to the city. I could bring to the young people many incidents and historical facts of interest, but as my letter is growing lengthy, will only refer to one special trip I made, the remembrance of what I saw and heard has been to me the pride of my life.

It was in the spring of 1858, and during the agitation and excitement of the admission of Kansas into the union as a state. One evening in the hotel at Philadelphia as I was reading the evening paper, I learned that Stephen A. Douglass had made his great speech that day in the United States Senate in opposition to its admission under the Lecompton Constitution, and that William H. Seward had obtained the floor for the following day; ascertaining that I could take the midnight train for Washington City, and arrive in time to hear, and return the same night. I dropped the buying of goods for the time, and left, arrived in Washington early next morning, took early breakfast, made good use of my walking powers, seeing the city, as it was my first visit, saw nearly all the public places – could not get a glimpse of President Buchanan or get into the White House, but got a big glimpse of the gold and silver in the Treasury Building, more than Billie Ferguson’s best team, or any two teams in Bloomsburg could pull up Market street. At twelve o’clock gained a seat in the gallery of the old Senate Chamber, and for four hours was “held spell bound” by Seward’s eloquence, only heard Douglas speak as he referred to Seward’s remarks and asking the privilege of an explanation upon his speech the day previous, but it was sufficient to confirm in my mind that he was in reality the “Little Giant,” and whilst small in statue, he was equal to any in intellect.

Before going into the Senate gallery, I purchased a diagram of both houses of Congress, giving the seats and names of members. As I had read much about prominent men I wanted to see them. John C. Breckenridge as Vice President was in the chair. I well remember Jeff Davis, Joshua R. Giddings, Alex H. Stephens, Charles Sumner, Samuel Houston of Texas with his deer skin vest on, Stephen A. Douglas, Wm. H. Seward, Salmon P. Chase, Benj. Wade and many others. In the House of Representatives James L. Orr, of South Carolina, was speaker, I spent but little time there; both houses on that day was under great excitement, as Douglas and many others had taken strong ground against President Buchanan's special message urging Congress to accept and ratify the "Lecompton Constitution." I regret that I did not have both diagrams framed, but at that time they did not impress me as historical as they now would, and they have long since passed into the waste basket.

The same evening I returned to Philadelphia and resumed my purchases. Since then the Reading road acting wisely, extended a branch to Bloomsburg from Rupert, and whilst other roads have reached us by which a choice of trips can be made to Philadelphia and New York, none have been able to give a shorter route or make quicker time than the Catawissa branch of the Reading.

Yours res'y.

I. W. Hartman

April 27, 1896

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