

**Christian Brobst's Grand Dream:
The Catawissa Canal**
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In 1825 Catawissa merchant Christian Brobst proposed a fabulous idea: constructing a canal to connect the Susquehanna River across the mountains to the Little Schuylkill River and thence to Philadelphia. He published a letter in the *Danville Watchman* on January 20, claiming that he had worked out a practical route for such a waterway.

At the time, the U.S. was in a canal-building frenzy. The Erie Canal was nearing completion—it opened on October 25th that year—and grand claims were made for the potential of canals across Pennsylvania. In July, Brobst was a delegate to a Canal Convention at Harrisburg that promoted the building of canals throughout the Commonwealth.

Despite Brobst's best efforts, the Catawissa Canal was never built. His dream of a connection over the mountains to Philadelphia eventually came true, however, by use of a new technology, the "Iron Horse." Just three years after publishing his canal proposal, he was in the legislature urging state support for a railroad along the same route, connecting Catawissa with Tamaqua and from there to the coastal cities. Technological progress had made Brobst's original plan obsolete, but his intent was eventually fulfilled with iron rails.

Before he published his letter, Brobst had been busy in support of his idea. Not content just to dream, Brobst had set to work and actually surveyed and mapped the proposed route. He was a millwright, not an engineer, but like a great many Americans at the time, he was an ingenious tinkerer. He developed homemade survey tools and showed, to his own satisfaction at least, that a canal was possible.



The map he drew (a photocopy is in the Society's collections) succinctly describes his project in its title: "Map of the proposed Canal to connect Susquehanna and Schuylkill, by means of Cattawissa creek and Little Schuylkill, and their several tributaries—representing also the situation of the adjacent country. Distence 45 miles." The map is dated June 1825 and its scale of "One Inch to the mile" provides room for notation of existing roads, trails, taverns and grist mills through what was then a wild mountainous area of the Commonwealth.

In 1825 Christian Brobst was a merchant miller and leading citizen of Catawissa and Columbia County. In 1795 he had come from his home in Berks County to rebuild the Bridge grist mill beside Catawissa Creek in Columbia County. When that job was completed, he elected to stay in the village of Catawissa and make it his home. In 1799 he built a dam and the Old Stone Mill a quarter-mile farther up Catawissa Creek; in 1802 he extended the building to add a cider mill.

This impressive stone structure became the leading grain mill in the region until after Brobst's death in 1849.

The mill's very success, however, posed a problem for Christian: he acquired many barrels of flour, but had no feasible way to get the product to the major markets at Reading and Philadelphia. The cart road over the mountains—the Old Reading Road—was too slow and difficult to be economical.

So he set out to prove that a canal over the mountains to Philadelphia was not impossible. Though he had had little schooling and was not trained as a surveyor, Brobst was a self-confident and energetic man. He designed and constructed a homemade level: a tin tube having at each end a bottle attached upside down and half-filled with water.

With the aid of this device and two of his sons, he traveled on horseback up Catawissa Creek to its headwaters and laid out a possible route for a canal connecting with the Little Schuylkill River and an already-completed canal to Philadelphia. His homemade device was accurate enough that a later professional survey differed by less than six feet from the levels he published.

Brobst's plan did not envision digging a canal bed alongside the creek—the usual pattern—but instead aimed to navigate on the creek itself by aid of numerous dams to provide deep water, with locks to raise and lower the boats past the dams. At the eastern end of the route, the proposed canal would turn south on Messer's Run and thus come within a short distance of Lofty Creek, which emptied into the Little Schuylkill. In between was a narrow mountain ridge, which would require a tunnel of less than a mile's length. (This tunnel location would be, in today's terms, southwest of Hazleton about a mile west of mile marker 137 on I-81.)

Brobst's vision didn't end with this 45-mile canal. His 1825 newspaper article proposed a canal link from Philadelphia to the Great Lakes, by way of his Catawissa Canal, then down the North Branch and up the West Branch, then using the Allegheny River and its tributaries westward and ending with a 20-mile canal to the town of Erie, a port on the lake of the same name. This lengthy canal route would provide direct competition to the Erie Canal in upstate New York, and could make Philadelphia rather than New York City the prime ocean port for goods from the interior.

But not the first shovelfull of dirt was turned to build the Catawissa Canal. Instead, within three years Brobst was in the state legislature advocating Commonwealth support for a railroad over the same Catawissa Valley route. In 1831 he succeeded when the legislature passed an "Act to Incorporate the Little Schuylkill and Susquehanna Railroad Company." This Act authorized a rail line from Tamaqua to Milton, provided for a sale of stock to raise \$1,500,000, and granted to the corporation the right of eminent domain to acquire land along the route.

When the stock sale opened on April 16, 1831, railroad excitement was high. The Act authorized sale at each of five cities: Philadelphia, Reading, Pottsville, Catawissa and Bloomsburg. At Catawissa, the stock was sold at the home of Brobst's son, Christian A. Brobst. Enthusiasm for the venture reached such a pitch that in Catawissa the entire offering of 6,000 shares sold out in 25 minutes!

Actual construction work began soon after, but because of the great difficulties of the mountainous route, progress was slow. The firm chose a right-of-way not beside the creek bed but higher up the mountainsides. The engineers laid out a roadbed with a uniform grade rising 33 feet per mile all the way from Catawissa to the summit 35 miles to the southeast, a lift of over 1000 feet. Most of the roadbed was completed when fate intervened and brought the work to a halt.

The enterprise, already pinched for funds to complete work, fell victim to the Panic of 1837, a national financial crisis. The stock market crashed and hundreds of banks failed. As a result, funding for the railroad dried up, and the corporation failed. Work would not resume for over a dozen years, when a new corporation named The Catawissa Railroad took over the rights and properties of the defunct firm. The story of that finally successful effort will be the focus of an article in a future *Newsletter*.

Christian Brobst, however, did not live to see the fruition of his original dream. When the Catawissa Railroad opened for business, he was already in his grave. His continued support of new technology had involved him in a tragedy—an explosion on a steamboat—which marred his life and led to his death.

Despite this setback, Christian Brobst had a full, productive life. We know basic facts of his life because he wrote a brief autobiography on four pages of his family Bible. “My grandfather Philip Brobst,” he tells us, “came from Germany Dominions of Lower Lapson in Europe and settled in Pennsylvania in 1694. In what is now called Albany township, Berks County. . . . He was by trade a potter, but necessity drove him to farming, in 1730 his children came to maturity [3 daughters and 3 sons named] Martin, Michael and Valentine who remained on the old farm. Martin and Michael each built himself a mill in the same neighborhood. . . .

“I Christian born [on September 14, 1767] a son of the above Michael Brobst and Elizabeth by birth Albright. Beloved parents of mine had 18 children all Baptized and ordained members of the Lutheran Church except two girls who died young. . . .

“In 1795 I Christian Brobst moved from Berks County to Catawissa in Northumberland Co., with no more than my household goods and carpenter tools and enough money to pay the moving expense. I lost my portion from my father in Continental money, which brought me to depend altogether on my Heavenly Father, in 1799 I built the mill and contracted a large debt and I paid the first debt to him I owed most. The first money the mill made I give to build a church to worship God with my family and neighbors. . . .” Christian and his wife Barbara in September 1802 deeded land to “St John’s Lutheran and Reformed Church . . . whereon to build a church and inclose a burying ground.” The first known grave was that of Christian’s two-year-old daughter Sarah, who had died 8 April 1799.

His life-sketch goes on to detail his marriage to Barbara Drumm in Albany Township on 24 September 1789 and to list the births and baptisms of eleven children born by 1809. Throughout the sketch he shows his strong religious faith, taking care to credit God for his successes and quoting often from the Bible.

After he came to Northumberland County, Christian was a leading man not just in Catawissa but in the region. In 1804 he was chosen Grand Master of the first Masonic lodge in the area, which met at Bloomsburg. He was a Captain of the 4th Company, Northumberland County militia, in the War of 1812. (He may have served in the Revolutionary War when still a boy—years later a man of that name received a veteran's pension). For years Christian and Col. Joseph Paxton led an effort to build a covered bridge across the Susquehanna River at Catawissa, a project which finally reached completion in 1833. In 1827 he was one of five men who organized the town's first fire company, the Catawissa Hose Company.

Christian was also active in local and state politics. In 1816 he and General Daniel Montgomery represented five central counties at a state convention to nominate a slate of "independent republicans." In 1826 he was at Harrisburg as a delegate to the Democratic state party convention to choose a candidate for governor. At that time he was serving in the state legislature.

The tragic accident which injured him severely and limited his later public activities came about from another of his projects to support transportation in the region. He was one of several men who worked to prove that steamboat navigation on the shallow North Branch was feasible. In April 1826 the steamboat *Codorus* successfully sailed from Harrisburg all the way up to the New York border. The next month a larger boat named *Susquehanna* tried to duplicate that trip. A number of legislators and local dignitaries were aboard the steamer when it came to the Nescopeck Rapids opposite Berwick on May 3rd. The boat stalled in the strong current and hit a rock; the boiler exploded, killing several persons and injuring others, including Christian Brobst. From this time on, his public activities were curtailed. He died at age 81 on January 14, 1849 and was buried in the cemetery which he had founded.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Brobst's autobiographical sketch is printed in Schuyler Brossman's *Our Keystone Families* (undated collection of photocopies), Column No. 632; Roberts and Albright's *Catawissa: 200 Years* (1974) provides considerable information about Brobst's civic contributions; numerous early newspaper notices of Brobst are available online from *GenealogyBank* (but must be distinguished from notices of another Christian Brobst of Tulpehocken Township); legislative acts pertinent to the Catawissa Railroad are reprinted in *Charters and Acts of Assembly. Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company* (1875).