

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON REMINISCES: BLOOMSBURG IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION: For many years the Bloomsburg newspaper, *The Morning Press*, had a daily column called “The Passing Throng.” It’s a treasure trove of historical information about our area. In late March and early April, 1942, there were six columns that included various excerpts from a lengthy article written by William Lloyd Garrison that described Bloomsburg in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Born in Bloomsburg on June 3, 1868, he spent his entire life living at 11 West Fifth Street. Death came at the age of eighty-one on January 7, 1950. At one time he was an employee of the Bloomsburg School Furniture Company and later worked for his brother-in-law, Charles H. Sharpless, who had a grocery store at the corner of Center and Sixth Streets. Over the years he often contributed articles to *The Morning Press*.

Garrison’s reminiscences come from “The Passing Throng” columns published on March 21, 1942, and an excerpt from one on March 27. He refers to the various neighborhoods that surrounded the town, daily life, different businesses, number of churches, trains, Sabbath observance, and how the community dealt with an outbreak of small-pox.

Other articles from “William Lloyd Garrison Reminiscences” will appear from time to time in subsequent issues of the *Newsletter*.



Lloyd Garrison turned over to us yesterday a lengthy article on “Bloomsburg of the Past,” written about the town as he has known it in a lifetime spent here.

He pictures the small village as he first knew it, with two large streams of running water, washing and watering the foundations of the majestic hills which surrounded it on all sides.

Forty-one degrees, North Latitude, crosses at the mouth of Fishing Creek. “Inside of the outer border of that village we had another border of small villages – on the north, Irondale, Welsh Hill and Rock Street; on the east, Smoketown and Tater Row; on the south Rabbtown, Port Noble and the Pennsylvania canal, and on the west, Scottown. It wasn’t difficult to picture that situation because that was the Bloomsburg we first knew. Port Noble then was more widely separated from Bloomsburg in point of travel than Catawissa is today. Each of the communities was distinct unto itself, although Bloomsburg was the center of their interests.

“Commerce was carried on by the Pennsylvania canal and the D. L. & W. [Railroad]. There was some rafting on the Susquehanna. We were connected with the south side of the river by a ferry operated by Ziba Barnes, near where the present bridge is located.

“Most of Bloomsburg’s inhabitants lived in small houses, with large lots and all enclosed with fences. Each resembled a small farm, with many of the householders engaged in agriculture, and raising of horses, cattle, pigs, chickens, geese and ducks. The cows were pastured on the streets, alleys and commons of the town. The latter afforded employment and revenue for many a lad, delegated to round up the cows in the evening and place them in the barn where they belonged.

“Benjie Rassmus depended on the boys to gather bones and rags and old gum shoes while Mr. Wyncoop hired boys to gather gypsing [possibly ginseng] seeds for him. The gas plant hired boys to light the street lamps at night and extinguish them in the morning.

“I served an apprenticeship at each of the above and not long after was called upon to be water boy for the first sewer placed in town. It was on the last lap of the job extending from the town-path of the Pennsylvania canal at Market Street, down to the river. In some places the pipe was buried over 22 feet deep. Market Street was then not graded down as it is today. Below Tenth Street, on both sides of Market, you still have some idea of the conditions that were faced.

“Industries then consisted on two pig iron furnaces, a car shop, a number of foundries, carriage and wagon making shops, a blacksmith shop at each point of the compass, with some thrown in for good measure. There were four brickyards for the manufacture of clay bricks, two potteries for the manufacture of earthenware, lumber yards, planing mills, handmade furniture and caskets and plants for the manufacture of candies and taffies.

“There were two marble cutters – Jacoby on the east and Gunton on the west, two undertakers – Correll and Furman, and two streams of water running diagonally across the town – Snyder’s run and Kinney’s run.

“There were twelve religious bodies in town and six graveyards.

“School facilities consisted of the normal school, the old academy, the Third and Fifth Street buildings and one-room schools in the villages surrounding us.

“Railroad cars and engines were of a small type, and coupled together was a three-link iron chain and iron pin. These and the brakes were all manipulated by hand.

“Sending of telegrams and express had to done at the stations. As for telephone or radio, we knew nothing, neither about them nor of the selling or reading of Sunday newspapers.

“There were no stations opened or trains run of the Sabbath. The Lackawanna was the only train service we had. The mornings were mostly given over to hauling coal. The first passenger train going north – or east was around 2:30 in the afternoon and that was still the service when the centennial was held in Philadelphia.”

Another memory that Garrison recalled was the outbreak of small-pox in the town in 1880. “A number of deaths took place. Private funeral services were held at night any time after 10 o’clock. Persons who had earlier suffered with small-pox or variloid would handle the interring. There was no minister – no undertaker. The latter would take a coffin or casket to the home where it was to be used; place it on the ground at the rear of the lot, and drive away. The four or five men who had been hired would come out of the house, carry the casket into the house, and place the corpse in it.

“Large barrels of tar were placed in the streets near where there were patients and these were set on fire to purify the air. The epidemic was not brought under control until the following year.

“A red flag was placed in front of each home where there was a patient. That was a sign that the house was quarantined. All those who had been exposed to the disease were placed under quarantine.”