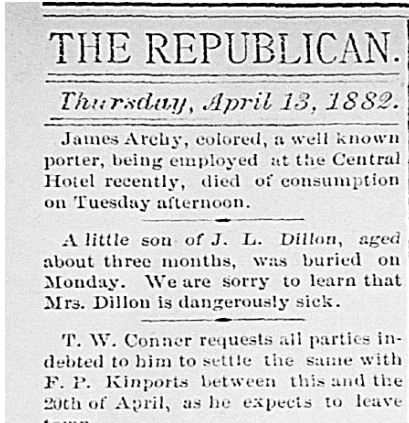


THE JUDGE

By Chris Sanders

It was the tiniest of obituaries in the *Columbia County Republican*, dated April 13, 1882, which caught my eye. The blurb read:



“James Archy, colored, a well-known porter being employed at the Central Hotel, recently died of consumption on Tuesday afternoon.”

I thought, “colored porter in Bloomsburg”? I wasn’t aware that Bloomsburg had “colored” citizens. Oh, I knew that the Underground Railroad was active in this area due to the huge Quaker population who assisted runaway slaves (in which my Kester ancestors played a role). I even knew there was an African Methodist Episcopal Church here at one time, but I was very much surprised to see an actual

obituary listed for a black man, tiny though the obit was.

Naturally, I had to find out more about Mr. James Archie (as spelled in the census), the porter, and immediately started pushing buttons.

Led into a revealing microcosm of African American life in the north—something no history book could explain or describe—I found that the black citizens were a big part of Bloomsburg and had very active lives after the Civil War (and even earlier).

The 1870 census shows James, age 22, born in Virginia, with his wife Martha (more about Martha later!), age 19, born in Pennsylvania, and their little son, J. Edward, age 1. James is a miner (probably iron). In 1880 James was a “day laborer” living at 85 Railroad Street, in Bloomsburg, with wife Martha, 29, sons Ephraim (named after Martha’s father), 10, Arthur, 6, and Clinton, 1. I was happy to see the little family growing, but then, of course, things started going downhill.

James died in 1882 as we know, and apparently Martha was having a hard time of it. The January 24, 1889, “Annual Statement & Expenses of Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania Poor District” listed \$5.00 for a coffin for Archie’s child and \$1.88 outside relief of coal to Mrs. James Archie. Then, sadly, an obituary for Martha in the June 12, 1890, *Columbia County Republican* noted:

“Mrs. James Archie, widow of James Archie, died on Saturday morning last. She was the oldest daughter of Ephraim Parks and was a little over 39 years old. She leaves one son. The funeral took place Tuesday afternoon. The one son left was Arthur Archie.”

Anxious to find out what happened to the sole survivor of the Archie family, I found Arthur in 1900, age 26, in Bloomsburg at 385 Rear Iron Street, living with James Parks and wife Henrietta, a black family. James cannot read or write, but Henrietta can. Arthur Archie is listed as a

nephew and a barber. Okay, that's interesting. What else? At the moment I had no idea the stories all this would tell! You know that old saying, "Truth is stranger than fiction?"

Arthur Archie moves on to Boston, Massachusetts in 1910, age 37, and is living with a Kate Tyler, 26, born in North Carolina. Kate is a servant and "does housework for families." Archie is still a barber. Both of them can read and write. This doesn't sound like much, but remember we are only a generation or two from slavery and most slaves were not allowed to read or write. This question was pertinent enough to be included in the census.

Arthur fades away at this point (to my chagrin) and I decided to "let him go" and backtrack a little. To my surprise (an OMG moment), I discovered Arthur's dad, James, had somewhat of "nine lives," as they say. The *Columbia County Republican* of December 21, 1876, states:

"On Monday night, James Archie had his throat cut at Giggers Hotel, in East Bloomsburg. A young man by the name of Struthers did the deed, and it was about a segar (cigar). There is no excuse for the act, since from all we can gather; there was no provocation to justify the crime. Archie however is a fortunate fellow again. Not long since he was severely stabbed within less than an inch of his life [Commonwealth vs James Stout, felonious assault on James Archie. *Democratic Sentinel*, December 15, 1876], and now his throat is cut and yet he lives."

Archie raised some Cain of his own five months later per the *Democratic Sentinel* of May 18, 1877, stating that, "James Archie has again been placed in limbo. This time it is for threatening to take Jerry Cooper's life. The "onpleasantness" occurred on last Friday evening and in default of bail Archie was sent to jail." Soon after, the headlines show, the "Commonwealth vs James Cooper, Surety of the peace on earth of Jeremiah Cooper. The prisoner to give \$200 bail to keep the peace for one year, especially with Jere Cooper."

Martha, James' wife, and daughter of Ephraim Parks, was probably biting her knuckles while all of this was going on, but lest we shuffle Martha under the table, she has a tale of her very own to tell! Talk about "nine lives."

As stressed before, Martha was the daughter of Ephraim Parks (who has his own story—but more of that later!). Upon my initial research on him, some astonishing news popped up. The CCHGS website showed a *Daily Sentinel* news item dated December 14, 1897, stating "Parks child, colored, father Ephraim, drowned Nescopeck Flood of September 1850!" Another OMG!

Going to the article RIGHT away, sure enough there was the story of an A. M. Mausteller of Mifflin who stopped in the newspaper office with a copy of the *Berwick Telegraph* published Thursday, September 5, 1850, regarding the "Great Flood—One of the most destructive floods to life and property which this section has ever seen. The great flood of the Nescopeck Creek in which twenty lives were lost."

The detailed article (horrific beyond imagination—does Johnstown ring a bell?) describes the breathtaking rescue of Mr. Parks and two others from the roof of a house that was being carried downstream by the raging waters. The article ended with this paragraph:

“The Ephraim Parks mentioned as having been rescued, afterwards moved to Bloomsburg where he lived many years. He was the father of James Parks, Mrs. Glasco Cameron and Frank Parks and child drowned were his wife and child [sic].”

I did find William (Ephraim) Parks, age 30, living in Nescopeck in 1850 with his wife Elizabeth, 25, and Martha, 1, mulatto. I found no further information on poor Elizabeth, but guess what? Martha, the one-year old who supposedly also drowned in the flood, is the same Martha married to James Archie! She DID NOT drown. She survived! Unfortunately, we do not know the “rest of the story,” but can you imagine the joy of Ephraim when he found his little daughter ALIVE?

Ephraim did go on to build a new life in Bloomsburg, with his second wife, Catherine Ann (called Katz) Johnson, stepdaughter, and six other children. These children went on to have numerous children of their own and all with their own interesting stories. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves!

Back to Ephraim, in 1860, age 37, “Eph” was “teaming” meaning he drove a team of horses for hauling as an occupation. A small newspaper article dated January 7, 1876, stated “Ephraim Parks buried his horse ‘Dexter’ during last week. Ephraim’s luck in horseflesh is not as good as it might be. His horses act somewhat upon the principle of now you see it, and now you don’t.”

In 1870, about age 49, Ephraim, living in Bloomsburg West Ward, was a miner. He was born in Pennsylvania and his parents were born in Virginia. His “personal estate value” was \$200.00. On May 7, 1875, an ad in the *Democratic Sentinel* states “Clean Your Privies—Parties desiring to have their privies cleaned will find it to their interest to consult the subscribers, as they are prepared to do that kind of work on short notice and at reasonable rates. Ephraim Parks and James Archie.” So, Ephraim and his son-in-law were in business together!

Lastly, Ephraim, about age 65 per the census, and family are found in 1880 at 10 Chestnut Street in Bloomsburg and he is now a “hostler,” “one who takes care of horses at an inn.” (I looked it up!) He also did not seem averse to doing odd jobs to make a buck, or in this case it was \$.50! The *Columbia County Republican* of February 9, 1882, printed the “Statement of Finances of the County of Columbia,” showing Ephraim Parks was paid \$.50 for “work at the courthouse.”

Sadly, his wife Catherine only had one more year to live at this point. She passed away on March 3, 1883, age about 61.

The *Columbia County Republican* of Thursday, November 27, 1884, reported on a serious accident at the Democratic Jubilee on Friday night. A large quantity of Greek fire (not sure what that is—probably some sort of fireworks) and Roman Candles were put on a wagon with the intention of setting them off during the evening. However, as the team passed Main Street, the whole supply took fire in front of the Exchange Hotel. The horses became wild with fright, running up the street while flames enveloped the driver who was badly burned about the legs and feet.

And in the next paragraph of the paper, as if that wasn’t excitement enough, it relayed that a mistake was made when the “banners and transparencies were distributed to the faithful—a mistake that assumed something of a burlesque.” The article went on to explain that the “rear

guard of the parade was composed of Ephraim Parks, the colored Democrat and Elijah Shutt, an old-fashioned Jacksonian Democrat,” who had borrowed the banners. Some wag (humorous person) however had given the banners inscribed with the Republican mottos of “The Constitution our safeguard,” and “We love the Constitution” which were very much out of place in the hands of colored men until the Republicans passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. But “guileless Ephraim” enjoyed the joke, the paper stated. Apparently out of the whole Democratic Jubilee, these two items—the fireworks explosion and the trick played on the “colored Jacksonian Democrats” were the only two events worth mentioning!

Ever in the news, Ephraim Parks had more information revealed about his life in the *Columbia County Republican*, dated April 25, 1889. It stated, “Ephraim Parks after a faithful service in the employ of Judge Elwell for the past sixteen years has received his honorable discharge. Ephraim seems to think that he is entitled to a pension.” Judge Elwell was instrumental in the founding of what is now Bloomsburg University. He also was presiding judge at the Molly Maguire trials in 1877 when the three Mollies were tried, convicted and hanged. I’m sure “Eph” was up on all the events!

Ephraim wasted no time making the best of his retirement. The *Columbia County Republican* announced on September 19, 1889, that “Ephraim Parks took advantage of the excursion to Carlisle this week to visit the house of his boyhood in Cumberland County (Carlisle). The ‘Judge’ will no doubt be enjoying himself.”

Finally the *Columbia County Republican* dated July 30, 1891, gave a short notice of Ephraim’s death: “Ephraim Parks died of dropsy at the residence of his son-in-law, Glasco Cameron, on Tuesday afternoon aged about 80.” Glasco lived at 631 Iron Street, Bloomsburg, and the house is still there, an insurance agency. On July 31, 1891, a more elaborate obituary was published in *The Columbian*, the headline with his name in bold letters: “Old Ephraim” as he has been for many years familiarly known, has gone the way of all men, and his mortal remains were buried on Thursday afternoon at 2 o’clock, from the house of his son-in-law, Glasco Cameron. For several months he has been suffering from the effects of grippe, but was able to be up and dressed. On Tuesday he remained upstairs, eating his dinner there. About two o’clock his daughter found him lying on the bed, and a moment later he gave one gasp and died. His age is not surely known, but it is supposed to be about seventy-three years.

Everybody knew Ephraim. His quaint speeches had made him a unique reputation. No one else could ever make the same speech, and he never attempted to reproduce exactly the same words, for they were not in the dictionary. He found much enjoyment in thus amusing others. Parks was born in Carlisle, but he lived here for a long time. For nearly twenty years he was employed by Judge Elwell as gardener and hostler. At one time Ephraim started to have a history of his life written out, and had gotten along far enough to tell some interesting incidents, but literature was not in his line, and he gave it up.

He voted the Democratic ticket for many years and rejoiced in the reputation of being the only colored Democrat in town. Though luring baits were sometimes offered to shake his political faith, we believe he always stood by his convictions.

To him, at last, is ‘Justice revealed.’”