

# FERRY SERVICE ACROSS THE RIVER

**Introduction:** "Ferry Service Across the River" was the subject of "The Passing Throng" column that appeared in the Bloomsburg newspaper, *The Morning Press*, on October 31, 1941. It gave a brief overview of the reliance on ferries when there were few bridges over the Susquehanna River. Columbia County had six ferries between Berwick and Catawissa. The writer, with some detail, described the ferry service that Mr. LaFountain operated between Bloomsburg and East Bloomsburg. The destruction of the Berwick and Catawissa Bridges in the 1904 flood prompted both communities to re-institute ferry service for a few years.

We had probably known it before, but forgotten it. However, that may be, we confess to having experienced some surprise yesterday when we drove into town from East Bloomsburg and noticed at Tenth Street a street marker indicating the street intersection as that of Tenth Street and Ferry Road. Just a short distance about it becomes Poplar, and Poplar in turn losing its identity at Seventh Street, where it merges into East.

Ferry Road means nothing to the present generation, but until 1894, when the East Bloomsburg Bridge was completed, the significance of the same was well understood.

The road led to the ferry connecting Bloomsburg and East Bloomsburg, and its importance is all the more appreciated when it is stated the North & West Branch Railroad, which came under control of the Pennsylvania in 1886, was built by the Rev. David J. Waller, Sr., of Bloomsburg in 1881. Not only was there heavy traffic because of the railroad station on the other side of the river, but the ferry was used by many who found it a shorter cut to their destination than to drive to Catawissa and over the toll bridge then, which was first opened to traffic in 1833.

There probably were others who handled the Bloomsburg ferry business, but the only name we ever knew associated with the ferry was that of LaFountain, a Frenchman, who was the ferryman through many years. Youngsters called him "Frenchie," and he didn't like it.

There were times when a flatboat was used, suspended from a cable, but the rowboat was the more frequent means of transportation. A bell near the ferry was used by prospective passengers to hurry the ferryman to his job. The house in which the LaFountains resided is still standing there.

Bloomsburg and Mifflinville were about the last in this section to abandon ferry service, with that at Mifflinville continuing until 1906. The Espy and Lime Ridge ferries disappeared with the completion of the Bloomsburg and Mifflinville bridges.

Both Catawissa and Berwick were to experience the trials and tribulations of ferry service when the 1904 flood carried both bridges away.

There was a big rush to secure ferry rights at Berwick, while the Columbia & Montour Street Railway Company sprang into the breach at Catawissa by inaugurating steamboat service with the *Mary Ann*, still remembered by many.

But the public wasn't satisfied to have any private interests operating the ferry. It demanded free transportation, and proceeded to give the county commissioners all sorts of headaches.

The commissioners finally heeded the requests and instituted free service at both places. As so frequently happens, the free service soon sadly deteriorated and proved unreliable. Business just naturally gravitated to the privately operated ferries.

Catawissa at that time had ferry service for four years, but it was not until 1908 that the bridge was finally rebuilt. The Berwick bridge was completed in 1906. It was fine at the time, but today its abrupt approaches and the condition of the road bed go to make it one of the most poorly maintained bridges under state control.

Ferry service on the North Branch was mere child's play in the old days as compared with that at Liverpool, where the river is more than a mile wide and where the added width presented all sorts of problems.

Even so, there were times when the North Branch could make plenty of trouble. And how well we know!

It was the night of December 10, 1907. We had taken the early evening train from East Bloomsburg to Mifflinville to cover the story of the carrying away of the false work on the Mifflinville bridge, then being built for the second time. Three spans of the first bridge had been carried away by the flood of 1904. The second span had just been completed late in the afternoon on December 10, 1907, when flood waters in the river carried away the false work as the span was being fastened to the pier. The entire span went down, and carried forty men with it. All were rescued but seven. It was several months before all the bodies were recovered and many them far down the river.

We had the story – we had gotten out of a sick bed to take the train, but means of getting back to Bloomsburg quickly were lacking.

Abe Foulke, the Mifflinville ferryman, said we were foolish to attempt to get across by row boat because we would have to wade through the canal bed to reach the trolley line. He was willing to make the trip on the flooded waters if we were willing to risk it.

He got us safely across, but no farther than the tow-path of the canal. That we waded, with the water up to our neck before we got across. We can still recall Jim Saltzer's amazement as we flagged the trolley car and boarded it at the rear.

By the time we had filled several columns for The Associated Press and then written our own story it was early morning.

We got up later in the day feeling fine.

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