

# LOOKING BACK FIFTY YEARS

## An Interesting Review of the Past Fifty Years

by one Who Has Lived Through it All.

**Introduction:** In the last few years the Columbia County Historical & Genealogical Society's *Newsletter* has from time to time included letters written by Isaiah W. Hartman in the late 1800s and early 1900s that were descriptive of Bloomsburg and other areas of Columbia County. Nearly all his letters appeared either in *The Democratic Sentinel* or *The Bloomsburg Daily*. 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.

He was born near Catawissa on October 20, 1825. When he was seventeen years old, he came to Bloomsburg to work as a clerk in Eyer & Helfy general store on Market Square. Five years later he and his brother began their own general store.

Hartman became a prominent and long-time merchant in Bloomsburg from the mid-1800s to the early part of the 1900s. He took an active role in civic affairs, serving as superintendent and treasurer of the Rosemont Cemetery Company, member of school board, and town council. He held the positions of class leader, steward, and trustee in the First Methodist Episcopal Church.

At the time of his death, January 16, 1922, at the age of ninety-six, *The Morning Press* obituary 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." The same source drew attention to his historical writings that people enjoyed and clearly implied that no other person knew the history of Bloomsburg as well as he did.

Hartman's article, "Looking Back Fifty Years," appeared in *The Bloomsburg Daily* on August 17, 1893. He described what Bloomsburg was like in the mid-1800s. As Bloomsburg celebrates its bicentennial year, his account offers an interesting glimpse of Bloomsburg 150 years ago. He concludes the article with a spirit of optimism for the town's future.

The endnotes are added to provide some additional information concerning items mentioned in the letter.

**Editor of Daily:**--Fifty years ago today [August 17, 1843] I came from Catawissa to Bloomsburg a half grown boy, fresh from J. J. Brower's school; began clerking for Eyer & Helfy in a general store, where my place of business now is. The only men (as I

remember) living now who were in business at that time are John K. Grotz harness maker; Philip Unangst shoe maker; J. K. Edgar tailor, constable and [tax] collector; Casper Kressler tailor; Wm. Neal had gotten beyond a clerk and was partner with his uncle Wm. McKelvy, Rev. D. J. Waller was preaching in the old frame Church on Third Street, where the parsonage now stands. A number of young men then are now in business who were either learning trades or off at school. Mr. Unangst and myself are the only persons who have continued in the same business to date. Bloomsburg's population was about 800.

The only manufacturing establishment was a small foundry owned by Lewis H. Maus, making stove castings, plow points &c. Snyder's and Chrisman's tanneries, with Sloan's & Ruggle's wagon shops gave employment to three or four hands each, a brick yard and [canal] boat yard each employed a few hands.

The only buildings which have not been torn down or remodeled outside, are the old Fry house on Rock or First Street, the Phillips frame house on Market Street, the Vanderslice (now Armstrong) stone house on Main Street and the Barney Seibert brick house on East Street.

The sound of the Rail Road whistle was not heard, but the blowing of the horn as heard in the distance indicated the near approach of the daily four horse stage coach, and the sweet notes of the packet boat bugle filled the Town with excitement and joy. A narrow muddy or dusty road was the one that led to the canal, passengers to and from the packet boat had to head that way.

All the goods from Philadelphia arrived by boat. McKelvy's ware house (which is still standing) was a busy place unloading goods, and loading grain. The only building then between Town or below Third Street and the canal was Sloans barn, where now stands the residence of Rev. D. J. Waller.

*Stand there to-day Mr. Editor,* and cast your eye over and around Bloomsburg. Would it be a great stretch of imagination on my part to predict that the next fifty years will bring your farm above Espy into the City limits of Bloomsburg, and that children living now will ride for miles in the electric cars on Susquehanna Avenue beginning at the junction of Fishing creek and the river. Bloomsburg is growing, its industries are all running, with one exception, giving employment to hundreds of men and women, with handsome school buildings for the education of children by the thousand. People are now talking financial depression and low prices. I well remember when we bought wheat for 56¢ in store goods, and in two years after paid \$16.00 per barrel for flour in the City, what has happened once may happen again. Thanks to a kind Providence these older men and myself have lived to see these changes in fifty years. Yours &c.

I. W. HARTMAN.