

STEAMBOAT TRYING TO PASS THE FALLS IN 1826 EXPLODED

Tragedy Ended Attempts at River Navigation

Two Killed and Lie in Pine Grove

Injured Brought Up Banks to Berwick Homes

Editor's Note: The following historical article, reprinted from the *Berwick Enterprise*, June 26, 1936, is an account of the steamboat, *Susquehanna*, that exploded at Berwick rapids on May 3, 1826. The article appeared at the time of Berwick's sesquicentennial. However, a great portion of the article comes directly from page 196 in the *History of Columbia and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania*, by J. H. Battle, published in 1887 by A. Warner & Company. The article recounts how two men who were badly burned by the steam from the boiler died and were buried in the Pine Grove Cemetery. In a related article at the same time, a lengthy poem with the heading, "Attention to All," described the incident and asserted that five people died in the accident. Excerpts from the poem follow the article.



The steamboat explosion in the Berwick Falls was one of the extraordinary events in the early history of Berwick that left a deep impression and has since been recited in poetry and recalled by successive generations.

It had an effect on the history of the region as it marked the last of the continued efforts to navigate the Susquehanna River and to evolve boats of light draft and sufficient power to negotiate the shallow currents and rapids.

In 1771 the Susquehanna was declared a public highway by the provincial assembly and a sum of money appropriated to render it navigable.

The Durham boats, in which the first families ascended the river, derived their name from Durham, a town on the Delaware below Easton where they were made. They drew 20 inches of water under 15 tons burden. When manned by four men with setting poles a boat progressed at the rate of about two miles an hour against the current. Various improvements were attempted in the construction of boats. Isaac A. Chapman built a "team" boat, which was a horse driven ark, and named

it "Experiment." It was launched in July 1824, but was unwieldy in size and shape, and was abandoned.

The discovery of steam power caused attention to be directed to the Susquehanna by parties interested in the traffic thereon; and it was deemed feasible to operate steamboats in the trade.

The steamboat "Codorus" was built at York Haven in 1825 and launched in October of that year. She was 60 feet long, 9 feet wide, and had a sheet iron hull, and drew 7 inches of water unloaded. The hold was two and one-half feet deep, two boilers supplied the steam for a ten horsepower engine, and 70 persons could be carried. 30 in the cabin and 40 on deck. Under the command of Capt. John Elgart the boat made a successful trip up the Susquehanna from Harrisburg in March and April, 1826, up to Binghamton, N.Y.

The success of the "Comorus" caused the owners of the "Susquehanna" a larger boat to attempt the trip. The "Susquehanna," Capt. Collins commanding, was built in 1825 at Baltimore, was 80 feet long, 14 feet wide, drew 20 inches when empty, had an iron wheel, 9 feet in diameter, as well as an iron hull. It was operated by a 10 horsepower engine, had two boilers and accommodations for almost 200 persons.

Her speed was 10 miles an hour. The first trip was made in 1826 and on the afternoon of May 3, of that year an attempt was made to pass the Nescopeck rapids, where the Berwick bridge now stands. The current being too swift, the captain allowed the boat to drift down until she stranded on the rocks near the shore, about the center of the channel below the present bridge. This caused the stoppage of the wheel, and as one of the crew was holding down the safety valve, the strain became too much for the crude boilers, and one of them exploded.

The boat was not seriously damaged but two men were instantly killed and several scalded badly by the escaping steam. Among the passengers who escaped with little injury was Col. Joseph Paxton, of Rupert, who described the accident in an article printed in a Danville Paper. "With our pitch pine we succeeded in raising a full head of steam, and set off in fine style to ascent the rapids. The strength of the current soon checked our headway and the boat flanking towards the right bank of the river struck a rock. I stood on the forward deck with a long ash pole and was in the act of placing it in the water hoping to steady her, when the explosion took place. I thought a cannon had been fired, and short my head off." On board the ill-fated boat were Christian Brobst of Catawissa; William Woodside, William Colt and Sheriff Underwood of Danville; John Foster, William G. Hurley and Isaiah Barton, of Bloomsburg.

The injured were borne to homes as they were brought up over the hill at the foot of Mulberry street. Some of the victims were taken to the old brick building at the corner of Front and Mulberry streets. The floor was covered by cotton saturated with oil and in this the sufferers were rolled. The stains of the oil were on the floor until the building was torn down to be replaced by the Dickson building, now occupied by the Montgomery Ward store. The house owned by Mrs. Anne Jackson on the south corner of Front and Mulberry, lately replaced by the Sinclair gas station, was also opened to the injured.

This explosion was perhaps the most extraordinary event of the early history of Berwick. This fatal attempt of the "Susquehanna" deterred other boats and the navigation of the river was abandoned.

Buried in Pine Grove

Near the entrance gate of the cemetery are the graves of the two victims of the explosion, the tombstones being of sandstone, crudely carved with quaint lettering and ornamentation, the inscriptions being as follows:

Editor's Note: The two men who died from their burns, John Turk and Ceber Whitmars, were buried in Berwick's Pine Grove Cemetery located between Mulberry and Market Streets. Their graves are near the south entrance off of Market Street.



Whitmars' grave on left and John Turk's grave on the right

In memory of Ceber Williams in the 21st year of his age

This dust and ruin that
remain
Are precious in His eyes.
These ruins shall be built
again
And all that dust shall rise.

In memory of John Turk who expired at the explosion of the steamboat at
Berwick, May the 3rd in the 23rd year of his age.

Farewell to all my dearest
friends,
I rest me here from pain
I hope when Christ shall call
me hence
To see you all again.

A Poem Describing the Steamboat Explosion:

ATTENTION TO ALL

Ye raftsmen all of every state
Come and listen of what I relate.
A melancholy tale indeed,
Which almost makes my heart to bleed.

(Because of a tear in the newspaper page, the next two stanzas are
deleted since it was impossible to determine the poem's text.)

At Berwick Falls she did arrive.
To gain the riffles hard they strived.
Cries one on board, this is the course!
To give her steam, we will her force.

O! Stop! Replies the engineer
With consternation and with fear.
Press on aloud another calls.
I think we can go up the falls.

Aloud the engineer replies,

All clear the deck and save our lives.
Alas, his counsel was in vain,
For soon the boiler burst in twain.

But, oh, that fate they did share –
Their bodies flying in the air.
A watery grave, two of them found,
And three of them soon died of wounds.

How shocking did the sight appear.
The deck was in an instant clear.
Full fifteen miles they heard the sound.
It shook the water and the ground.

Two young men, in their youthful bloom,
Are gone down to their watery tomb.
The rest were to a house conveyed
And on their dying beds were laid.

The doctors tried their utmost skill
Their scalded bodies for to heal.
But they soon yielded up their breath;
They have gone down to the shock of death.

Their families are left to mourn
For them that can no more return;
The mother then let fall a tear,
The children crying, father dear.

With aching hearts they grieved full sore.
Farewell! Farewell! Forever more.
They did within a foreign land
We cannot give a parting hand.

But, oh! The fate of these three men.
It cannot be described with pen.
For in the deep long time did lay-
The fishes on their bodies preyed.

But when their friends came this to hear
To Berwick town they quick did steer;
They raked the deep their friends to find
And soon completed their design.

Then to their graves they were conveyed
And in their silent mansions laid;

Just like a flower cut down at noon.
They fade and die in youthful bloom.

It almost broke their parents' heart
To think they must forever part.
No more their children see
This side of eternity.

The mother wrung her hands and cried.
Saying, "Son for thee I would have died!"
In dotting accents thus she run.
Crying, "Alas! my son! my son!"

Now to conclude, there's a sad call
So be prepared one and all.
That when we hear death's quivering voice
In heavenly raptures we rejoice.

See how they strove in youthful bloom
Was launched into a watery tomb;
No time had they to make a stand
But took their fight to unknown land.