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ARKING AND RAFTING ON THE COHOCTON RIVER - 200 YEARS AGO

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THE COHOCTON RIVER

The Cohocton River runs through the Town of Campbell and is part of the Susquehanna River Basin. It begins about 15 miles northeast of Dansville and runs 58-1/2 miles in a southeasterly direction flowing straight through the Town of Bath and Campbell and into the Chemung River at Painted Post, where it meets the Tioga River which flows from the south west to form the Chemung River. The Chemung River flows on to meet the Susquehanna River which eventually flows to the Chesapeake Bay.

The Cohocton River, was originally called the Conhocton River in the early days of the Town, but today it is commonly referred to as the "Cohocton". The word "Conhocton" was a native term (Ga-ha-to) which is said to mean "log floating in the water".

THE SUSQUEHANNA RIVER BASIN

The early settlers in our area, which at that time was part of the Town of Painted Post, discovered that the Cohocton River met the Chemung River at a fork where the "red painted post" was, and then flows on down to Athens, Pennsylvania, where it then merges with the Susquehanna River which then runs through the mountains of the State of Pennsylvania to places such as Harrisburg, Havre de Grace and Port Deposit and ends up in the Chesapeake Bay.

During this time, people were discovering that the streams were navigable at certain times of the year, especially in the spring thaw, and they used these waterways to get their products to buyers. Since the Town had a vast forest, the men in Campbelltown and Curtisville would cut down the trees as they could, during the low-river months; then in the spring they would be rafting the logs to buyers down the river.

In travelling all the way down to the Chesapeake Bay, one would find that there were some hazardous places downstream in the Susquehanna River, such as Conewago Falls, and from time to time, in those areas, work was done to build canals to by-pass a water falls or rapids area. Along the way, there were towns such as Washington Boro, Marietta, and Peach Bottom which had food and drink establishments where the raftsmen would make stops on the way. Those businesses would benefit from the rivermen's labor, as their work was dangerous and for that, they were paid well.

THE ARK STORY

It is believed that settlers arriving in what would become Campbell, in about 1801, learned by example, as illustrated by the story of Gen. George McClure, who came from Ireland in 1790. He happened to go to Northumberland [which is in the Chesapeake Bay] and there he saw a sign that said they were looking for carpenters to work at Bath, New York. So, he travelled up the river to Bath and met Capt. Charles Williamson who was glad to have him work. He learned to build arks and pioneers in neighboring towns followed suit. This was about 1795.

ARKING ON THE RIVER - OVER 200 YEARS AGO

In those days a typical ark was a sailing vessel crudely constructed of rough-hewn logs designed to hold together for one trip down the Cohocton to the Susquehanna. It was typically about 75 foot long and about 16 feet wide and was designed to be dismantled and sold as lumber upon reaching their destination. It was basically a long narrow boat containing a roofed cabin in which flour and other goods could be kept dry as they made the way to a market down-stream.

Arks were steered with back-breaking 30-foot oars, one on either end of the craft. Almost everyone floating goods down the Susquehanna in the early 1790's had stopped at Middletown and unloaded there, rather than take on the dangerous falls before the first canal circumvented the area in 1797.

RAFTING LOGS IN CAMPBELL -- 200 YEARS AGO

The first settlers in Campbelltown and Curtisville, in 1801, learned about lumbering and rafting in the area by the example of the settlers in neighboring settlements. Early-on, they copied other settlers up-stream, who were using the

Cohocton River's systems to transport logs and finished lumber in fleets downstream to buyers. This system gave rise to saw mills in Campbelltown and Curtisville, which helped to develop the area.

Settlers were aware that the Cohocton River was a big asset for travel and that it is part of the Susquehanna River Basin, navigable all the way to the Chesapeake Bay.

In the early days of Campbelltown, during the winter, the settlers would cut logs. Then in the spring, they would hook the logs together into rafts [with either chains or rope] and take them down the river to Baltimore, or to some sawmills on the way.

In early Campbelltown, the lumbering business was flourishing by the use of the natural resource of the Cohocton River, to send logs to buyers. The settlers found themselves fortunate to have a great supply of lumber and a convenient stream to provide a market of lumber and logs to the outside world.

Typically, to raft logs, they would use a crew of 6 to 10 watermen who would guide the rafts of logs through the Susquehanna's perils. This required that the leader, called the pilot, to have knowledge of the dangers and how to direct the log rafts. A team of raftsmen would wait at points along the river to float a segment of the journey. When they got to a particular point, the team would pass their rafts along to another team of watermen and then walk back to the point of origin for the next day's run. In this way, millions of feet of lumber found its way down the Susquehanna during the 1800's.

The reminiscence of Jonas Stevens in "History of Steuben County, New York" by Prof. W. W. Clayton in 1879, takes on a new meaning and makes sense when it says, "But when rafting time came, the whole country was shaken. As soon as the snow began to melt and the rivers to rise, an energy was begotten among us which swept everything before it. The old men felt it at eighty, and walked out to the river-banks to see the rafts go by. The little boys felt it at ten, and counted the years till they should be old enough to go down the river, too. And almost

the entire adult male population left home each year, for the long voyage, and come back and tell us of Northumberland and Harrisburg, of Port Deposit and Havre de Grace, of Philadelphia and Baltimore, as places they had visited while they were gone."

In the later 1800's, the supply of lumber in this area was basically used up and the Town businessmen found other ways to earn a living.

In 1825, the Erie Canal opened and this made for an improved way for settlers in northern Steuben County, especially in Hammondsport and Bath, to send their goods to market. The Erie Canal allowed for shipping goods faster and easier over to the Hudson River and down to New York City.

The Cohocton River, however, was still useful for rafting logs and arking for several more years.