

Sugarloaf Township

SUGARLOAF TOWNSHIP

An interesting and peculiar characteristic of the population in the extreme northern part of Columbia county is the tenacity with which the descendants of the original settlers have remained in the locality of their birth, while the Quaker settlers in the valley of Roaring creek and at Catawissa, with others of a different nationality and faith north of the Susquehanna, have been supplanted to such an extent that their family names are in many instances no longer represented. The larger proportion of the population of this section is descended from those hardy pioneers who first reclaimed its soil for civilization. The passing years have witnessed the appearance of successive generations of Hesses, Coles, Kiles, Fritzes and McHenrys, apparently well content to remain where their ancestors have lived, and where the circumstances of birth had placed them.

One hundred years ago there lived in Williams township, Northampton county, a wealthy farmer whose name was John J. Godhard. He was an Englishman, a patriot and a member of the Episcopal church. His wife had died previous to the time at which this history commences, leaving her unfortunate husband to support, protect and educate a large family of daughters. If any part of the skill in the culinary arts displayed by their descendants in this section has been inherited from them, it may be correctly inferred that their education was rather useful and serviceable in its character than ornamental and liberal, while the symbol of an unknown quantity, which appears as their respective signatures is an old deed, affords additional evidence to the same effect. The custom of the period, as well as a virtual expediency in this case, constrained the father to consent to early matrimonial alliances for his children, and thus relieve himself in a measure from the exercise of that care and solicitude of which they had always been the recipients, but which could not always be extended in view of the casualties of life. The son-in-law who particularly concerns this sketch was William Hess, while four grand-daughters of Mr. Godhard became respectively the wives of Philip Fritz, Christian Laubach, Ezekiel Cole and John Kile. With the exception of Mr. Fritz, who was engaged in business in Philadelphia, they were all engaged in farming in Williams and Forks townships, both of which border upon the Delaware river, while the Lehigh forms a mutual boundary. A considerable part of the area of both consists of the "dry lands," which are not remarkably fertile though fairly productive.

There was a strong tide of emigration from this section of country-Berks and Northampton counties in Pennsylvania, and the contiguous portion of New Jersey on the opposite side of the Delaware-to the lower valley of the "North Branch." It was a hazardous undertaking for those who inaugurated this movement; but, relying on the favorable nature of their reports, those who followed could do so with much more certainty and satisfaction. Among this number was John Godhard. He sold his plantation on the Lehigh some time prior to 1789, and invested the proceeds in a tract of much greater extent at the head-waters of Fishing creek. It appears that this purchase was made at the instance of Philip Fritz and William Hess.

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The former had seriously impaired his health by too close application to business, and wished to seek its recovery by engaging in other pursuits. The latter had a family of twelve sons and six daughters, for whose maintenance the limits of their farm on the "dry lands" seemed far too contracted. There were other members of Mr. Godhard's family and those among his neighbors who were also interested in the new country, the security of which, since the fortunate issue of the late war, seemed to invite immigration. It was prudently resolved to personally investigate the advantages claimed for this region before finally deciding to make it their home. Accordingly Mr. Godhard and those of his family already mentioned by name, with William Coleman, Matthias Rhone, Benjamin Coleman and others of their neighbors, made a journey on horseback to the valley of Fishing creek. They explored that stream from mouth to source, minutely examining the quality of soil, character of the land with regard to water, and the different varieties of timber which constituted its forests. This latter circumstance was regarded as an infallible criterion of the other two, indicating the presence of a fertile or a sterile soil, and affecting the permanent character of the springs of water. The price uniformly asked for lands was two dollars an acre. It is hardly necessary to acquaint the reader with their final decision, which seems unaccountable at the present day. It must be borne in mind, however, that the river could not confer a great degree of benefit as a highway of traffic upon a region for whose productions there was no market; while the canal and railroads which parallel its course had scarcely an existence in the most progressive minds. The best judgment of the prospective settler directed them to the region at present known as Sugarloaf and Benton townships as one of fertile soil, equable climate and abundant game.

The following year (1792 in all probability) the actual immigration occurred. The route pursued was the Susquehanna and Lehigh road from Easton to Nescopeck falls, laid out by Evan Owen in 1787. In their progress up Fishing creek they passed a few houses in the vicinity of Light Street, one at Orangeville, the Klines above the Knob, and Daniel McHenry at Stillwater. William Hess owned a tract of land four miles in length, extending from Coles mills to North mountain. He built a log cabin near a small spring, the site of which is on land in possession of Andrew Laubach. His sons, George, John, Andrew, Tobias, Conrad, Frederick, Henry and Jacob took up their residences in the valley of the creek above their father in the order of their names. John Kile and Ezekiel Cole located in the immediate vicinity of William Hess. Christian Laubach settled at first in Montour township (then Mahoning) prior to 1795, and about two years thereafter removed to Sugarloaf township. John G. Laubach, his grandson, has succeeded to his land. When Leonard Rupert, the near neighbor of Christian Laubach in Montour township, had returned from assisting to move his effects to the North mountain country, he is reputed as saying that that region was certainly at the end of the world. Whether it was or not, Philip Fritz followed his relatives thither in 1795 and took possession of "Fritz's Hill." Jonathan Robbins arrived in the same year from Bethlehem township, Huntingdon county, New Jersey. He located upon land now owned by David Lewis and planted an orchard at that place with seeds brought from his former home. Two brothers of Mr. Robbins, Daniel and John, also settled in this region.

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Godfrey Dilts and William Bird, from New Jersey, David and Jacob Herrington from New York, became residents of this section at a later period. James Seward, Jesse Hartman, James A. Pennington, Ezekiel Shultz, William Shultz and others have crossed from Fairmount township, Luzerne county. The population of Sugarloaf in 1800 consisted of the Hesses, Kiles, Laubachs, Robbins and Cole's. Expecting a comparatively small element of the inhabitants the same remark applies equally well to-day.

The North mountain country has always sustained an excellent reputation among the patrons of gun and rod. The Fishing creeks and their numerous tributaries were literally alive with trout, if the stories of old residents may be credited. The successful angler was not, as now, an exceptional personage; nor was the shooting of a deer or bear an unusual occurrence. The chase was pursued by some for adventure and by others for profit, while with the majority of hunters the two motives were combined. An incident of more than ordinary interest at the time occurred in the winter of 1836, and forcibly illustrates a phase of hunting experience of which it can be stated that there has not been a similar occurrence in this region. At this time much of Sugarloaf township was a wilderness, and game of all kinds was plenty. A deep snow fell in February, and after successively thawing and freezing, a crust was formed on the surface, which, as it was not strong enough to bear the weight of either deer or hunters, greatly impeded the progress of the former, while it placed the latter at no serious disadvantage. On a morning in the month of March, John Hoover, John Harp and Joseph Dugan, residents in Luzerne county, crossed over into Columbia on a hunting excursion. They traveled all day, and became so fatigued and exhausted that but one of their number, John Harp, was able to exercise himself sufficiently to keep warm. When he found that his comrades could go no farther he left them to seek assistance and finally reached the house of Robert Moore, to whom he made known their unfortunate condition, but was unable to conduct him to them. Mr. Moore started with food and stimulants and reached the perishing men by following Mr. Harp's tracks. Hoover was able to eat and drink, but Dugan was not. Both were unable to walk, and as Mr. Moore could not carry them himself he was obliged to leave them in order to get assistance. When he returned, Dugan was not able to speak, although he still showed faint signs of life. He expired soon after being removed to Seward's tavern, but his comrade recovered. The place where the men lay in the snow was a few rods west of where Alem White now lives.

An instance of how two planters gratified their feelings of revenge, quite natural under the circumstances, and were well remunerated for so doing, occurred at an earlier date. The object of their vengeance on this occasion was a panther, and this animal in general seemed to have been most destructive in its incursions upon the cattle and sheep of the farmers. Frederick and Henry Hess found one of their cattle mangled by one of these unwelcome visitors, and took prompt action to punish the marauder. A steel trap was baited, and on the following morning the brothers had the satisfaction of seeing this wily thief successfully ensnared. It was beyond the county line that the trap had been set; in order to secure the bounty of ten dollars, a crotched stick with a noose attached was thrust over the neck of the brute, which dragged the trap, nolens volens, a mile or farther into Sugarloaf township, and was then killed.

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John McHenry was the most famous representative of that class of hunters who were such as much from practical considerations as from a keen enjoyment of the chase. Born in 1785, he shot his first deer at the age of thirteen years, and his last seventy years afterward, having killed in that time upwards of two-thousand deer and a number of wolves, panthers, bears and smaller game. He took pleasure in recounting the varied experiences of his life, and was urged to comprehend the interest such reminiscences would possess, and only replied that "it might help young hunters." He preferred the "still hunt," and could pursue the game with a stealth, caution, and cunning rarely equaled. The only instance in which he admitted that his life was endangered was in an encounter with a bear at a narrow defile in the mountains. The brute had received the contents of one barrel of his gunk, but was only infuriated by the wound. Rising upon his haunches he advanced upon the hunter in a threatening manner.

McHenry took aim with his usual precision, but to his surprise and discomfiture, the gun missed fire. He threw the weapon aside and advance with his tomahawk for a life or death struggle with his dangerous foe. Several well aimed blows dispatched him, and his glossy coat was added to the trophies of his veteran antagonist. The latter, with numerous other professional hunters, spent several months of each year in the woods.

They preserved the salable portions of the deer they had killed, usually by suspending them some distance from the ground on stout saplings bent over for that purpose. The saddles were collected and hauled to Philadelphia, where they were converted into money or such supplies as were needed in "back country" households. The mutual confidence placed in each other by these hunters, in thus leaving their game exposed and unprotected for days and weeks, suggests thoughts of a practical honesty which is not universally characteristic of human nature.

The chase did not so completely absorb the energies of the people as to leave no time for the pursuits of a farming community. Agricultural implements were simple in construction, serviceable, durable and easily replaced. It may surprise certain of the present generation to learn that much of the land was first broken with wooden plows, manufactured at the smithy and carpenter shop in the neighborhood. The first step in the transition to the present construction of the plow was the substitution of an iron point for one of wood, and the addition of a coulter to further strengthen the implement. Subsequently the wooden mould board was covered with sheet iron, which was regarded as a great improvement. John Knopsnyder was an expert workman in making plows. His services were not required for pitch-forks and harrows, which every farmer could make for himself. Grain drills and cultivators date their introduction from a comparatively recent period. The general status of Sugarloaf township as a farming region has been greatly elevated with the past few years. A Grange is well sustained, and numbers among its membership the most progressive farmers of the region. Buckwheat is a staple agricultural product, and the flour manufactured here is well-known in various sections of the country.

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Cole's mill was built some time in the last decade of the last century. The summer of the previous year was extremely dry. Vegetation suffered and small streams were literally absorbed by the intense heat. There was at this time a mill on a branch of Huntingdon creek in Luzerne county. The volume of water in that stream was reduced to such an extent that the mill could not be operated. Catawissa thus became the nearest milling point, and continued such during the following winter, which was one of unusual severity. The farmers at the head-waters of Fishing creek resolved to have a mill, and they got it. Four generations of Coles have successively owned the mill of that name, and as many different structures have occupied its original site. Like the Irishman's knife, which received a new handle one year and a new blade the next, but still continued "the same ould knife," the Colt's mills of to-day are nominally identical with the Cole's mills of nearly a century ago.

A circumstance in this connection illustrates the manner of laying out roads at this period. While Ezekiel Cole was building the framework of his mill with a sound of axe, chisel and hammer, quite unusual in the quiet depths of the forest, a party of hunters from Huntingdon heard the noise from a neighboring mountain (or hill, in deference to popular usage), and descended to ascertain its cause. They were agreeably surprised to see the almost completed structure, and returned in a few weeks with their ox-teams and sled loads of grain. No serious delays occurred in crossing the country, although it was covered with a hitherto unbroken forest. They avoided ravines and water courses as much as possible, as the dense undergrowth and heavy timber there found would have greatly hindered their progress. They ascended hills by the steepest way if that was the most direct route to the summit, as there was then less danger of upsetting, and the view from the eminence thus gained aided in directing their course. The axe was used in removing obstacles where it was absolutely necessary; corduroy roadways were constructed in marshy places; and thus the first road eastward through Sugarloaf was laid out. It need hardly be stated that it was hilly to a remarkable degree. It was traveled extensively for many years, but finally gave place to an easier and more direct route. The ox-teams have also been superseded to a great extent. People usually traveled on horseback to weddings, venison dinners, church, and in attending other social occasions. The carriage of the period would correspond to the spring wagon of the present, excepting the springs, which were "D" shaped, seasoned white oak, and placed directly under the seat. Elliptic Springs were introduced about 1840 and at once became popular. The next addition to the traveling facilities of this region will far surpass anything in that direction that has yet been attempted. When the railroads under construction have been completed, the unrestricted development of farm, forest and mountain, will work such changes as must be relegated to the future historian for discussion.

Herrington's Foundry was established by Newton R. Herrington in August, 1866. This building is 26x50 feet, and they originally made sled shoes and plows. In 1882 a saw-mill was built in connection by the same party, and now they make plows, sled shoes, mill gearing, bells, shingles, etc. The capacity of the shingle and circular saw-mill is 4,000 to 5,000 shingles per day, if kept busy.

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Here they intend to continue the business in all its branches, and the place will be known as Pioneer Station, Coles Creek.

While the past has witnessed gratifying progress in the material prosperity of the people, their educational advantages have correspondingly increased. Philip Fritz taught the first school in Sugarloaf township in a log building which marked the site of Saint Gabriel's church. The first house for school purposes was built on West creek. The public school system was established in 1836 with John Laubach, William Roberts, Matthias Appelman, Henry H. Fritz, Samuel Krickbaum and William E. Roberts as directors. Eighty-eight voters were present at the election. Two schools were started, Hess' and Cole's creek. In 1885 there were seven schools in the township.

There are three post-offices in Sugarloaf-Cole's Creek, Guava and Central. Central was established in 1836 under the name of Campbell, through the exertions of a doctor of that name. Upon his removal the office was discontinued until 1850, when Peter Hess was commissioned as postmaster. Joshua B. Hess succeeded to that position in 1861, Henry Hess in 1876, and Elijah Hess in 1886. Cole's Creek was formerly known as Sugarloaf. Ezekiel Cole, Alinas Cole, Benjamin Cole and Norman L. Cole have successively been incumbents as postmasters. Guava was established May 11, 1883, at Andrew Laubach's store. He has continued in charge of the office. These points are on the mail route from Benton to Laporte, Sullivan county.

While the industrial, social and educational character of the people was being formed, religious bodies were assuming a permanent and influential condition. The Sugarloaf "log church" was the only structure of its kind in the two townships during the first fifty years after their settlement. It was begun in 1810 and finished two years later, though not dedicated until July 15, 1828, when Right Reverend Henry M. Onderdonk performed the ceremony of consecration agreeably to the ritual of the Protestant Episcopal church. The following names appear in "An account of the subscribers to the building of Saint Gabriel's church on a settlement had on the 26th day of December, 1812:" Caleb Hopkins, William Wood, Ezekiel Cole, Matthias Rhone, James Peterman, John Keeler, Philip Fritz, Jacob Cough, Conrad Hess, Henry Fritz, Uriah McHenry, John Kile, William Osborne, George Hess, William Hess, Sr., Daniel Stone, Jacob Hess, John McHenry, Tobias Hess, John Knopsnyder, Andrew Hess, Cornelius Coleman, Frederick Hess, John Roberts, John Hess, Daniel Robbins, Levi Priest, George Rhone, Jonathan Robbins, William Edgar, Benjamin Coleman, Abraham Kline, Sr., Jacob Rine, Conrad Laubach, Peter Yocum, Abraham Whiteman, William Hess, Jr., Samuel Musselman, Paul Hess, Jonathan Robbins, Henry Hess, William Waldron, William Yorks, Christian Pouts, Edward Roberts, Casper Chrisman, Emanuel Whiteman, Daniel McHenry, Jesse Pennington, John Emery, William Willson, Thomas Miller, Frederick Harp, Benjamin Stackhouse, Silas Jackson, John Whiteman and Jacob Whiteman. The structure was built of hewn pine logs, with galleries around three sides of the interior. After being occupied sixty-four years as a place of worship it was burned to the ground on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1876. It was jointly owned by Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Lutherans.

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The Episcopal church organization was effected July 1, 1812, when Christian Laubach and James Peterman were chosen wardens and William Willson, Jacob Rine, John Roberts and Matthew Rhone were constituted the vestry.

Reverends Caleb Hopkins, ----- Eldridge, Benjamin Hutchins, James De Pui, ----- Burns, George C. Deake, ----- Harding and John Rockwell have been connected with this church as regular pastors. On Easter Monday, April 17, 1876, a meeting of the congregation was held in the grove to consider ways and means for the rebuilding of Saint Gabriel's. Reverend John Hewitt of Bloomsburg presided, and Jacob H. Fritz was chosen secretary. On motion Thomas B. Cole, John Moore, Montgomery Cole, Benjamin Cole and John Swartwout were constituted a building committee. The corner-stone of the new structure was laid May 23, 1876. A number of clergymen was present, and Colonel John G. Freeze delivered an eloquent address. The dedication occurred May 1, 1877, Bishop Howe officiating. Reverend T. F. Caskey, now in charge of the American chapel, Dresden, preached on this occasion. Saint Gabriel's is the only Protestant Episcopal parish within a radius of twenty miles. Three other denominations, the Church of Christ (Disciples), Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Protestant are also represented. Elders John Ellis, J. J. Harvey and John Sutton introduced the doctrines of the sect first mentioned in the autumn of 1836, when they held a protracted meeting in Hess' school-house. It resulted in a number of conversions; four persons, John Kile, Richard Kile, Rebecca Cole and Sarah Steadman were baptized near Guava on the 8th day of December, 1836. These were the first accessions to this faith in Columbia county.

In 1855 Elijah Fulmer, a local Methodist Episcopal preacher, conducted a revival at the School-house near Central post-office. A number of persons were converted and a class was formed. Ten years later, during the pastorate of the Reverend John A. DeMoyer at Berwick, he conducted a protracted effort, and at its close began to agitate the building of a church. This was forthwith accomplished, and the church named Simpson chapel, in honor of Bishop Simpson. The appointment at this place is filled by the resident pastor at Benton. A second class was formed some time since, and with the aid of other persons in the neighborhood, the "Lower Hess" church was built. It is now the place of worship of a flourishing Methodist Protestant society.

The necessity for separate political organization, and the obvious convenience and advantage of such an arrangement became apparent with the gradual but permanent increase of the population. In April 1812, a petition was laid before the court requesting a division of Fishingcreek township. It was granted and the name "Harrison" conferred upon the new division by authority of the court. The record does not show in what manner this was supplanted by "Sugarloaf," although it is obvious that the latter was suggested from an important natural product of the region. The record of elections begins as follows: "October 1, 1813-This day a meeting was held at the house of Ezekiel Cole in and for this township of Sugarloaf for the purpose of voting for by ballot, agreeably to law, the several township officers, to wit-one assessor and two assistant assessors; nineteen voters present; the candidates were as follows: for assessor, Philip Fritz, John Keeler, Alexander Colley and Matthias Rhone.

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Philip Fritz was clerk of the meeting. At the second election, March 18, 1814, twenty one individuals availed themselves of the highest prerogative of citizenship. The several candidates were, for constable, John Kile and Daniel Robbins; for auditors, Philip Fritz, Christian Laubach, James Peterman and Alexander Colley; for supervisors, Philip Fritz and William Willson; for overseers of the poor, John Roberts and Conrad Hess; for fence viewers, Jacob Rine and William Hess, Jr.; for judges of the meeting, Alexander Colley and Christian Laubach. There were at least fourteen office holders, two thirds of the number of voters. This was certainly the golden age with aspirants for political honors and emoluments in this section.

The Sugarloaf Township history was transcribed by Rosana Whitenight.