

Steamboats, Livelihood and Fire

Over the years this newsletter has published many accounts of early settlers in the Chartiers Valley, beginning with Maj. William Lea and the land grant he received from King George III in 1765. While we have focused on their lives, we have not emphasized their livelihood. We have briefly noted that Maj. Lea was an ironworker and a farmer. Other family members were machinists and at least two generations earned their livelihood as part of the steamboat industry in Pittsburgh. Their shop was located close to where Trinity Cathedral, downtown Pittsburgh, is situated today.

Thomas Nixon, the son of William and Dorathy Lea, worked as a steamboat engineer on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. On October 15, 1833, Thomas wrote a letter to "Dear Cousin," (perhaps David N. Lea) telling him that he was 200 miles up the Mississippi River, where the steamboat was caught in low water at Columbus, Georgia. The boat had been built with green timber and in the warmth of the south, the wood dried and was twisted. The engines also had to be worked on, but nobody in Columbus knew how to make these repairs. He added that he was ill with fever and ague. He lamented that he had been away from Pittsburgh for eleven months. Thomas died of yellow fever in New Orleans in 1834. We do not know the place of his burial.

At an unknown date, a steamboat boiler was installed to heat Old St. Luke's Church. The installation might have been made by David Nelson Lea, who died in 1895, or his brother, Robert Lea, Jr. The Nixons and Leas were related and each one was involved with steamboats and steam engines..

One of our archival references says that the January 22, 1898 issue of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* reported a boiler explosion at Old St. Luke's Church, which caused a fire resulting in damage to the plaster, woodwork, and church records. If this date is correct, a young Church Army officer, Gouverneur P. Hance, who would later found St. Barnabas Free Home, Gibsonia, was a leader at that same time, from 1897 to 1899, in efforts to restore the building and reactivate the congregation.

