

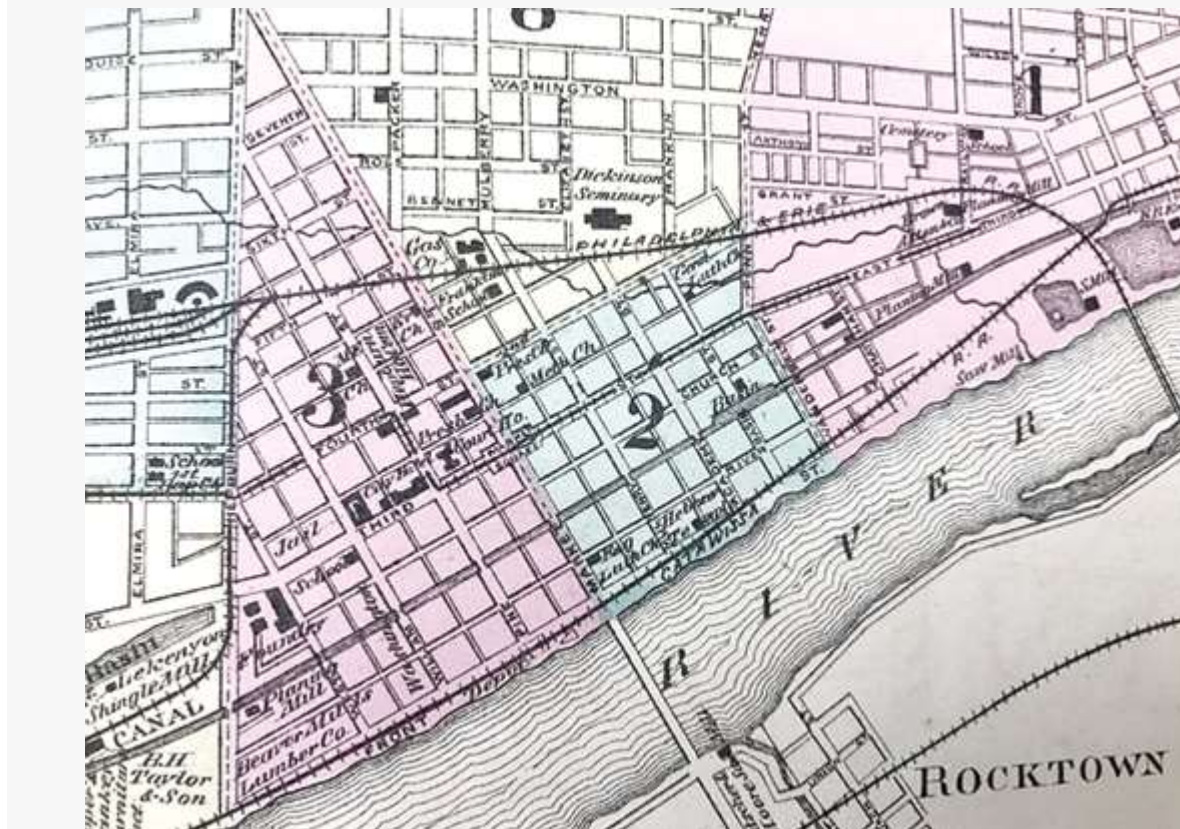
WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

Williamsport Women

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Special to the Sun-Gazette



Above is a map of Williamsport. A portion of the Atlas of Lycoming County, (A. Pomeroy & Co., 1873) showing the location of River Street. From the collection of the Lycoming County Genealogical Society.

First-person accounts of life in Lycoming County in the 19th century are rare. One story that has been preserved is that of Jane Ross, an African-American woman who was reportedly 108 years old when she was interviewed by a Gazette & Bulletin reporter for a series entitled “*Among the Old Folks: Those Who Know of the Colonial Times*” (Aug. 15, 1874).

Ross appears in at least two U.S. Census records. In 1850, she was living with her husband, John Ross, in Mifflin Township. In 1870, she was listed as a 94-year-old widow and a pauper. If this information is correct, she was born in 1776, the same year as the nation, and she actually was 98 years old at the time of the interview.

The following paragraphs contain various excerpts from the article, along with several annotations added for clarification. A full transcript of the article is available in the Lycoming County Women's History Collection.

The unidentified reporter interviewed Ross as *“she wander(ed) about the yard surrounding her humble home on River Alley, with the assistance of a curiously shaped stick that was cut from the forests of this county over forty years ago.”* She was white-haired, bespectacled and dressed in the style *“so often seen in the old colored women upon the plantations before the war, scrupulously neat and clean, even to the white cap upon her head.”*

River Alley was later renamed Jefferson Street and was near where Starbucks is today.

As the Gazette & Bulletin did, we will let Aunt Jane tell her own story.

Aunt Jane's recollections

“Why bless your soul, honey, it's been so long since I was born that I forgot how old I was, but I hearn um say a good long time ago that I was over a hundred. Old Mrs. Weatherhead, in Delaware State, he got it down in the big book when I was born.”

“Why child, I forgot to tell you I was born out on a wharf in the Delaware river, right where Delaware city is. My master, a good old man, came there from Maryland, and he set all his colored people free. But it have been so mighty long that I don't have much recollection about that old place. Old General Washington used to come by there on his way to Washington from Philadelphia. “

“Did I ever see him? Why he stopped there and took dinner, he and a man that they called Light Horse Harry Lee, and the general was the

nicest looking man I ever seed, with his gray hair and black eyes. He was followed after by five hundred Indians, the ugliest looking men not to be devils I ever came across. I was a little girl then, but I can recollect everything that happened, because when I handed him corn bread at the table he said 'thank you, so pretty.' “

“Why did I come to this state? Why I was a little girl, and it was a mighty short time after I seed Washington. I came fust to Muncy, where I lived with lawyer Petriken (William A. Petriken practiced law in Muncy for many years), and there wan't no more un two or three houses there, and after I have live there three years I came to Williamsport.”

“Was it a small place? Why bless your soul, child, there wan't but two or three houses here, and me and my folks come up here to see if we couldn't get some work. These three houses was lived in by Judge Woodward, Mr. Peter Vanderbilt and Mr. Updergraff. There were lots of Indians who lived on the mountains and used to come here, but they wan't so very pestiferous as they was once; they used to come to look around to see what they could pick up and then mind their own business.”

“The main road, my child, was Third street and that's whar I lived when I got married. It was always wide right whar the square now is, and my house stood right in the middle of it, and they couldn't get me out 'cause I had no other place to go, and Mrs. Huling give me a piece of ground down on the side of the river and I put me up a shanty.”

Aunt Jane's hearty laugh

At this point, according to the Gazette & Bulletin, *“the old woman broke into a hearty laugh, and in response to the enquiry what amused her so much she said that it was a story she did not like to tell.”* But she did go on to tell the story of how she and her husband's “shanty” was flooded in what was most likely the great flood of 1865.

More of Aunt Jane's

recollections

"There was two grist mills, one was owned by Mr. Lloyd [most likely Thomas Lloyd, a founder of Montoursville], on Loyalsock creek, and the other was up 'twards Lock Haven. All this country was a farm, and we used to go to mill once a week in a cart."

"My husband drove the baggage wagon for General Washington once, and was set free by his master Mr. Joshua Kinnard, of Maryland, when he was twenty one. Them was good old days, and I recollects mighty well how they used to walk around with their white hair, puffed shirts and knee breeches. Folks that could live in a brick house them days was mighty rich. The houses I told you bout was all down town, and it's been so long since I was down there that I don't know how to find it."

Aunt Jane's goodbye curtsey

When the reporter from the Gazette & Bulletin went to shake Ross's hand as he departed, *"she, to his surprise, got up quickly and taking the proffered hand shook it warmly at the same time making a curtsey as gracefully almost as any young woman could have done."*

Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. Her column is published the second Sunday of each month and she can be reached at lcwhcmanager@gmail.com.

