

HISTORY
OF
WASHINGTON COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA,
WITH
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

OF MANY OF ITS
PIONEERS AND PROMINENT MEN.

EDITED BY
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ILLUSTRATED.

PHILADELPHIA:
L. H. EVERTS & CO.
1882.

PRESS OF J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO., PHILADELPHIA.

Boat Building.—The firm of Axton & Pringle (successors to John S. Pringle), steamboat and barge builders, is one of which West Brownsville borough and Washington County can justly boast. Capt. John S. Pringle, the founder of this firm, was born in the old township of Frankstown,² Huntingdon Co. (but now a part of Blair County, Pa.), Oct. 23, 1804. When but twelve or thirteen years of age, having attained unusual proportions for a youth of his years, he engaged in keel-boating on the Juniata and Susquehanna Rivers. Thus he early became accustomed to rely upon his own exertions, as well as familiar with boat architecture, etc.

In 1826, being then about twenty-two years of age, young Pringle, it seems, concluded to try his fortunes on the western side of the mountains, and, shouldering his rifle, he crossed the Alleghenies on foot, and finally reached Little Redstone. There he found one Joseph Allen engaged in the construction of keel-boats. He at once became an employe of Allen's, receiving as pay fifty cents per day and board. Very soon thereafter, however, Richard Kimber, who had a boat-yard in Bridgeport, offered young Pringle one dollar and twenty-five cents per day, and thereby secured his services. Kimber was then building a steamboat for "Old Bob" Rogers, but as he had occasion to be

absent from the yard the greater part of the time, and left young Pringle in charge of the work, the latter was looked upon by Rogers as her real builder.

After this boat was completed, Mr. Rogers proposed that *Pringle* should build him a boat, assuming sole control architecturally and otherwise. Mr. Pringle as yet rather doubted his ability as a master-boat-builder, but upon being assured by Rogers that he (Rogers) would unhesitatingly take all the chances of success or failure, our young boat-builder, assisted greatly by such advice as the larger experience of his patron enabled him to offer, began and completed a boat which was an eminent success from the moment she was launched, whose hull, different from any to that time seen on Western waters, has since been copied by scores of Western boat-builders.

Mr. Rogers desired a boat that would displace as little water as possible, so that she could be run during low stages. The result was a flat-bottomed boat, which, as we have before stated, was a great success, as she was able to make her regular trips throughout the summer, while all others of her tonnage, and much less, were compelled to lie idle. Indeed, her owner or owners were offered several thousand dollars more than she cost within a very short time after completion. Mr. Pringle's fame as a boat-builder was now firmly established, and orders from the West and Southwest soon made his modest little boat-yard a very hive of industry. It was enlarged, and for years from thirty to fifty men were steadily employed, and from five to ten steamers, besides other craft, completed each year.

Until the spring of 1843 his business was carried on in Bridgeport, Fayette Co. He then purchased a large portion of Ephraim L. Blaine's plat of West Brownsville (the site of the present yard), including the latter's early residence and saw-mill. Increased facilities were obtained in West Brownsville. The town was given its first impetus and the capacities for boat-building were doubled. In 1864, W. W. Aull was admitted as a partner. The firm of Pringle & Aull, however, only continued one year, for in 1865 the former purchased the latter's interest and thereupon formed a joint-stock company, known as the "Pringle Boat-Building Company," the members being as follows: John Wilkinson, James Storer, John S. Gray, William Patterson, James H. Gray, John Starr, Alexander K. McKee, A. J. Smalley, James Blair, U. G. M. Perrin, Alfred S. Starr, Joseph Weaver, James Patterson, Andrew C. Axton, E. F. Wise, John Wiegel, Daniel French, Henry Minks, Robert Houston, George McClain, William Gray, John S. Pringle, J. D. S. Pringle, and Finley Patterson.

The "Boat-Building Company" continued about three years, when John S. Pringle bought out the other members and again became sole owner. On the 1st day of January, 1879, after having been engaged in boat-building in this vicinity for more than

² By referring to our own manuscript history of Frankstown township, we find that William Pringle (the father of John S. Pringle) was a native of Scotland, and had settled in the township mentioned before the Revolutionary war, or while it was yet a part of Bedford County. In 1788, according to the first assessment of Frankstown, as of Huntingdon County, William Pringle was the owner of two hundred acres of land (of which fifty acres were held by warrant and one hundred and fifty acres by location), two horses, and two cows. His property was valued at two hundred and one pounds, upon which a State tax of nine shillings and two pence and a county tax of four shillings and seven pence was levied for that year.

half a century, he relinquished the business to his son, J. D. S. Pringle, and son-in-law, Andrew C. Axton. The present firm built nine steamboats in 1881, and furnished employment to sixty men. Their works are extensive, covering about ten acres of ground, while the mill in use has a capacity of sawing sixteen thousand feet of boat lumber per day.

The boats built by the Pringles on the Monongahela have always stood at the head of the list as regards speed, neatness of finish, thorough workmanship, and the quality of material used in their construction. They have built more than five hundred steamers of all classes for the trade of the Monongahela, Ohio; Mississippi, Missouri, Cumberland, Tennessee, White, Red, Arkansas, and other rivers of the West and Southwest, and some of them have been sent to ply on South American waters.

In concluding this article we will add that the pioneer boat-builder, Capt. John S. Pringle, still occupies the dwelling in West Brownsville purchased from Ephraim L. Blaine (father of Hon. James G. Blaine) in 1843. He has been married twice, and is the father of fifteen children. Two sons (J. D. S. and William H.) and one son-in-law (Andrew C. Axton) served in the Union army during the war of the Rebellion. At the beginning of the war William H. Pringle was a resident of Sacramento City, Cal. He there joined a volunteer cavalry company, which was sent around Cape Horn to the port of Boston, Mass. At the latter place this company of California volunteers, as Company L, was attached to the Second Massachusetts Cavalry. They performed gallant service in the field. Unfortunately, however, young Pringle was taken prisoner by the enemy, and for long weary months endured all the privations and horrors of the Andersonville prison-pen. He never recovered from the inhuman treatment there experienced, but died, like thousands of others, soon after his release and before reaching home.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

JOHN SNYDER PRINGLE.

Venerable for his ripe old age and well-spent life is John S. Pringle, of West Brownsville, in which place he has resided many years, actively identified with its business and growth. He is the only son of William Pringle, a Scotchman, who emigrated to America when a young man, and Elizabeth (Snyder) Pringle, who was of German descent, and was born Oct. 23, 1804, near McKee's Gap, Blair Co., Pa. He had three sisters, but one of whom, Mrs. Esther Frederick, who is seven years his senior, is now living. His opportunities for an education were such as the subscription schools of neighborhoods in which he resided during his minority afforded. He employed his spare moments in the study of business men and methods, and by the time he reached his majority he was fairly equipped for the work which was to engage his attention in after-years. When eighteen years of age he left his father's house, which was then in Bedford County, and came to "Redstone Old Fort." The first work which he performed after coming to Fayette County was in the boat-yard of Joseph Allen, at the mouth of Little Redstone Creek. He developed a fondness and an aptness for boat-building, and after remaining with Mr. Allen one summer was employed as foreman in the yard of Robert Rogers, of Brownsville, for whom he built the first flat-bottomed boat launched west of the Alleghenies. The superiority of this boat over others then in use was manifest, as was also Mr. Pringle's ability as a boat-builder, and orders for vessels like unto this one were so numerous that he determined to embark in business for himself. He began in the yard at Brownsville, and remained there until 1844, when he purchased the Ephraim Blaine property in West Brownsville, and upon it graded and established a boat-yard, which he operated until 1879, when, incapacitated by old age and disease, he transferred his business interests to the care of his son, John D. S.

Pringle, and his son-in-law, Andrew C. Axton, both of whom are noted for their energy and business ability.

Mr. Pringle is a courteous, hospitable gentleman, and his life has been honest, busy, and useful. He has long been a member of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, to whose benevolent enterprises he is a liberal contributor. He started in life with a sound and vigorous constitution, and, being temperate in his habits, he preserved a hale and healthful body more than threescore and ten years. He is respected by his neighbors, esteemed by his friends, and sincerely loved by his family.

He was married May 3, 1832, to Elizabeth P. Horner, who died Nov. 29, 1844. By this marriage there were six children,—Elizabeth, who married Jacob Walter, is dead; Ann is unmarried, and resides with her father; William H. was a soldier in the late war, and died of disease contracted in a Southern prison; George W. died when a young man; Sarah is the wife of Andrew C. Axton, who served as a soldier in the late war, enlisting in the old Washington Cavalry, which after eighteen months' service was incorporated in the Twenty-second Penn-

sylvania Cavalry. His maimed body bears witness that he loves and has served his country well. Mary died in infancy.

Mr. Pringle was married to his present wife, Sarah Ellen Snider, Oct. 16, 1845. They have ten children, all living. They are John D. S., who did good service in the war of the Rebellion as a member of Company F, Eighteenth Pennsylvania Cavalry, married Cornelia Deems; David S., married Nancy J. Gamble; Nancy, married Newton McClaine; Ella, married William H. Michael; Isabel, unmarried; Esther, married William H. Harrison; Mary, married John W. Thompson; Simon P., married Margaret Moorehouse; Christian S. and Andrew A. are unmarried.

Politically Mr. Pringle was originally a Democrat. He continued in that faith until the organization of the Republican party, since which time he has acted with it. His business life in this vicinity extends over a period of more than half a century, and in that time he has launched over five hundred boats upon the Monongahela. The largest one in that number was the "Illinois." She was three hundred and four feet long, had a fifty-two-foot beam, and was seventy-five feet across her deck.

