

HISTORY
OF
MERCER COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA.

ITS PAST AND PRESENT.

INCLUDING

ITS ABORIGINAL HISTORY; ITS EARLY SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT;
A DESCRIPTION OF ITS HISTORIC AND INTERESTING LOCALITIES;
SKETCHES OF ITS BOROUGHS, TOWNSHIPS AND VILLAGES;
NEIGHBORHOOD AND FAMILY HISTORIES; PORTRAITS
AND BIOGRAPHIES OF PIONEERS AND REPRESENTATIVE CITIZENS; STATISTICS, ETC.

ALSO

A CONDENSED HISTORY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

ILLUSTRATED.

BENJAMIN STOKELY.—The subject of this memoir, Benjamin Stokely, was born in the State of Delaware in October, 1766. The family of which he was a member moved to the western side of the mountains in 1776. A short time afterward the western settlements were very much disturbed by murdering and plundering inroads of the Indians, incited by the British Government, the policy of which was so severely denounced by the Earl of Chatham in the British Parliament. The forts at Red Stone, Grave Creek, Catfish, etc., were the places that the settlers fled to for safety in Westmoreland, Fayette and Washington Counties. It was in these troublous times that young Benjamin Stokely received his early training in the life of a backwoodsman. Between 1779 and 1784 he learned to be both a shoemaker and a tanner, improving every opportunity in the meantime to go to school. In 1785 he found and embraced an opportunity to make a surveyor of himself, and in the fall of that year was employed as an assistant under Griffith Evans, of Philadelphia, who was then engaged in surveying the Third District of Donation Lands. From 1786 to 1789 he was a clerk in the office of the register and recorder of Washington County, during which time he studied Latin, and at the close of which he married Miss Esther Alexander, full sister of Benjamin and Joseph Alexander, and half-sister of William and John Alexander, all of whom afterward settled in this county, in the neighborhood of Mr. Stokely. In the year 1792 he was appointed surveyor of the Fourth and Fifth Donation Districts, which were united and called the Third, and which lie in the southern part of the county. In the fall of 1794 and the spring of 1795 a number of warrants were put into his hands in his office at Pittsburgh, and on the 1st of May he started to survey his district and to locate the warrants put in his hands. This surveying expedition came to a speedy end on the 8th of June, in consequence

of a letter from Capt. Heath, of Fort Franklin, informing him of the murder of two white men, near Conneaut, by the Indians, and advising him that he and his party were in great danger of being cut off. This letter was dated June 6, 1795, and sent by a friendly Indian, who delivered it on the 7th. In August of this year Wayne's treaty with the Ohio and other Indians was effected, after which it was deemed safe for the surveying party to return, which they did in October, continuing at their work until the first week in December, when, their provisions being exhausted, they set their faces for Pittsburgh. They sought what was to them a new route, starting from near where Mercer stands, and proceeding by way of the Shenango and Mahoning country, over streams swollen by recent heavy rains, wading swamps and suffering considerably from cold, hunger and drenching rains, until they reached the town of Beaver, previously known as Fort McIntosh, where they first got the great comfort of bread at their meals. The next spring saw Mr. Stokely and his party again at their surveys. The survey of the Third District had been completed the year previous, and his work then was to levy the warrants in his hands. This was completed in June, 1796, when the party returned to the settlement on the other side of the river. In the fall of this year, October, 1796, he moved his family to the farm he settled on the banks of the Cool Spring, in the township of that name, where he resided until his death in 1843. There had been several others who came out that year, but they all returned to the settlements when winter set in, so that Stokely and his family were without other society than the Indians and wild animals of the forest, until about the middle of February, 1797, when a number of settlers came out and took up their abode with him until they had picked out places for their own settlement. Mr. Stokely seemed to have somewhat of an eye to trade. In a manuscript left behind him it is stated that, in December following his removal, he got 600 pounds of flour and 300 pounds of corn meal brought out to him—that during the same winter he purchased about 3,000 pounds of venison from the Indians at 1 cent per pound, paying for it chiefly with powder at \$2 per pound, lead at 50 cents per pound, and flour at 1 shilling a quart, also rough tallow at 6 cents per pound; dressed buck-skins were purchased for \$1, and doe-skins for 50 cents. The venison hams he sold at Pittsburgh for \$1 per pair, or 6 cents per pound, and for the tallow, when rendered, he got 20 cents per pound. Stokely also relates that his cows and oxen started off on the 7th of December, when the snows were deep, returning on the 17th, and that three of them lived through the winter by his cutting small trees for them to eat; that about the last of March one of the cows was far gone for the want of food, but was saved through the use of straw found in the pads of an old pack-saddle, which was given to her in small quantities and eaten with great avidity, helping her along until spring came with its relief. In the fall of 1797 he sowed three bushels of wheat, which is claimed to have been the first sown in this county, and from which he harvested a good crop the following season. The spring of 1798 he planted twenty-one bushels of potatoes, which cost him \$1.33 per bushel, the proceeds of which were sold, but at what price is not related, although it may well be concluded that he was no loser in the operation, for the incoming settlers would be sadly in want of them for planting. It was along about this time, or the year following, that he built his first double barn, a log structure, with threshing floor in the center. The great trouble in this was to get enough men who could handle the ax, and were conversant with the mode in which structures of this kind were put up. White men were not numerous enough; he could get but six of such together, one of his corner men coming all the way from Franklin for the special pur-

pose of assisting. The Indians around, however, were willing—it was a frolic they desired to enjoy—and between twenty and twenty-five of them assembled on the occasion. As a matter of course, whisky was used by both white and redskins, care being taken that its consumption did not reach the danger limit, but enough to exhilarate and keep the party in good working humor. The following night, however, was nearly a sleepless one from the hilarity and fun kept up during most of it by the Indians, whose appetites had been gratified in an unusual luxurious manner by the food prepared for the occasion. They were in no hurry to leave when the barn was up, like the whites, but stayed most of the next day to help cut out the doorways and to get in the sleepers for the threshing floor, besides other necessary work in the finishing up.

In the manuscript alluded to as having been left by Mr. Stokely, mention is made of a heavy frost occurring on the 19th of August, 1800, which killed all the corn and most of the potatoes, causing a very great deal of distress among the early settlers. It was in this year, and the year previous, that the first missionaries made their way into the county. Messrs. Stocton, McCurdy, Wick and Tait, of the Presbyterian Church, and Mr. McLean, of the Secession. Stokely, although then a doubter, had previously been a member of the Methodist Church, and continued to entertain a friendship for its organization. This, however, did not prevent his accepting a trusteeship, along with William McMillan and John Alexander, to receive the voluntary contributions of others, in the shape of butter, sugar and some other kinds of trade, for the support of the pious missionaries, and handing over to them their value in money out of his own funds. It was in 1800 that the first Presbyterian Church was put up for Mr. Tait, in the neighborhood of Stokely's residence, when he rendered so valuable a service to the builders by taking his ox team, the only one in the neighborhood, to haul the prepared logs into position for the raising, crying out as he was seen approaching, as related by Eaton, in his History of the Presbytery of Erie, "with his great merry voice, 'Here comes the devil with his oxen to help you build your meeting-house.'" Stokely was undoubtedly an original man, and by many deemed eccentric, and hence his indulgence in the habit of speaking irreverently of things held sacred by most of his neighbors. Nevertheless he was always fond of entertaining the preachers of any persuasion that called upon him, treating them with great kindness and a liberal hospitality. Although priding himself in unbelief, he was yet the regular patron of the itinerant Methodist as well as the helper of other organizations. Many anecdotes are told of him in this relation, some of which will bear recital here. For a year or two he had been entertaining a certain Elder Bronson (who, by the way, organized the first Methodist class in Mercer, in 1819), who found it convenient to stop with him, as the nearest house to his place of preaching. When the last appointment was filled, on the Monday morning following, on rising from the breakfast table he was informed that the time had come when a settlement of their business must be made. Young Bronson was astounded—he had not expected to be charged, having little or no money with him, and he accordingly made known his inability to pay for the accommodations he had received. Stokely could not be put off in this way, and with a serious and determined face said to him, "D—n it, sir, we must settle anyhow before you leave," and proceeded to read to his astounded and distressed hearer his bill of items, so many meals at 25 cents each, so much for the different nights' lodging, and so much for horse feed, the whole amounting to a sum in the neighborhood of \$10 or \$15. "Well, Mr. Stokely," said poor Bronson, "I am unable to pay this bill now, but as soon as I can do so, I will discharge the debt." Stokely replied that there was another side of the ac-

count to read, and proceeded with the credits he had entered. He allowed so much for each blessing asked, so much for leading in family prayer each time, so much, according to his estimated value, for each sermon, and when the sums were added together, to his feigned chagrin and disappointment, he found himself indebted to the preacher just \$2.75. The joke was then out, the heart of the preacher relieved, the money paid over, and the parting made with the best of feeling on both sides. On another occasion he engaged a needy local exhorter to preach in his barn to such an impromptu gathering as could be assembled on the occasion, for which he agreed to give him fifty pounds of flour. The sermon was duly delivered in the noisy fashion of the speaker, and when Stokely came to pay therefor he weighed out a hundred instead of fifty pounds of flour. The exhorter, in the innocent honesty of his heart, suggested that he was getting too much, that his only claim was for half that amount. "You preached so well and so loud, that you scared all the rats away from my barn, and as this was not in the contract, I give you the extra fifty for that service." In 1802 Mr. Stokely was elected lieutenant-colonel of the Mercer County regiment of militia; in 1808 he was appointed a justice of the peace by Gov. McKean, acting in that capacity afterward for over thirty years, when the office was made elective by a change in the State constitution; in 1825 he was elected one of the county commissioners.

Two camp-meetings were held on the plantation of Mr. Stokely, the first in the year 1827, and the second in 1834. On these occasions he prepared the grounds and entertained all of the clergy in attendance. On some of the clergymen expressing some surprise at his choice of location, he told them that he had a particular purpose to serve in that matter. A gentle pressure to arrive at a knowledge of this purpose elicited the fact that the woods in which the selection was made was the resort of foxes, skunks, owls and other vermin, that stole his poultry, and he thought the noise made in a good rousing camp-meeting would drive them out and give him comparative security in the future, to effect which he hoped the preachers, who loved to feed on chickens and ducks as well as himself, would aid him to the best of their ability. When the second camp-meeting was held he selected a different place, the reason for which was that he then wanted the vermin driven back to their old quarters. The first wife of Mr. Stokely died in May, 1814. She was the mother of ten children. He was married the second time, in 1817, to Mrs. Elizabeth Snyder, of Pittsburgh, formerly Miss Stephenson, of Salem Township, Mercer County, by Bishop Roberts. The second wife, who died in the year 1876, was the mother of seven children. Mr. Stokely was an independent thinker, and original, if not eccentric, in his ways. He was well read, and far in advance of the most of his neighbors in his knowledge of history and general learning. He was a ready and correct writer, and, after a newspaper was established in Mercer, contributed a great deal to its columns. Before physicians had established themselves in the country, his advice and assistance were often solicited. He would bleed and prescribe for the sick. On one occasion, when there was a general alarm, he inoculated thirty persons in five families for the small-pox in one day, every one of whom passed safely through the disease. This was before the introduction of vaccination into this country. The persons thus treated were previously prepared by a proper dieting, so that the danger of inoculation was not deemed very great.

In a paper dictated a short time before his death, in 1843, he left the following account of his religious experience. He says: "It is seldom, if ever, any person writes their own obituary notice, but the subject of this, being somewhat eccentric in opinion and habits, has thought proper to say that in a

long life he has passed through three or four different conceptions of religion. First, when a lad between seventeen and eighteen he took the opinion of others near to him as correct, without noticing technical distinctions. Second, he, at the period above stated, became fully convinced of the necessity of a reformation in principle and practice, and that through the merits of the Saviour only was salvation to be obtained. Third, at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two, or perhaps from twenty to twenty-five, he gradually became sceptical in most things of a religious nature; in this state he continued for upward of forty years. Fourth, in the latter part of 1839, or at the age of about seventy-three, in a state of indisposition of body and nervous affection, he began to see the approaching prospect of temporal dissolution, which excited an inquiry what was best to do to prepare safely for the change. And now he feels fully persuaded that to die in a full reliance on the mercy and merits of the Lord Jesus Christ is the best and only sure and peaceful way to leave the world. He will not conceal according existing difficulties to his judgment in the plan of redemption, but in this interesting crisis he dares not to raise any direct opposition to it, and therefore yields up his breath and his all to Almighty God who gave him existence." Such was the life of Benjamin Stokely, the first settler in Mercer County.—*By Garvin.*