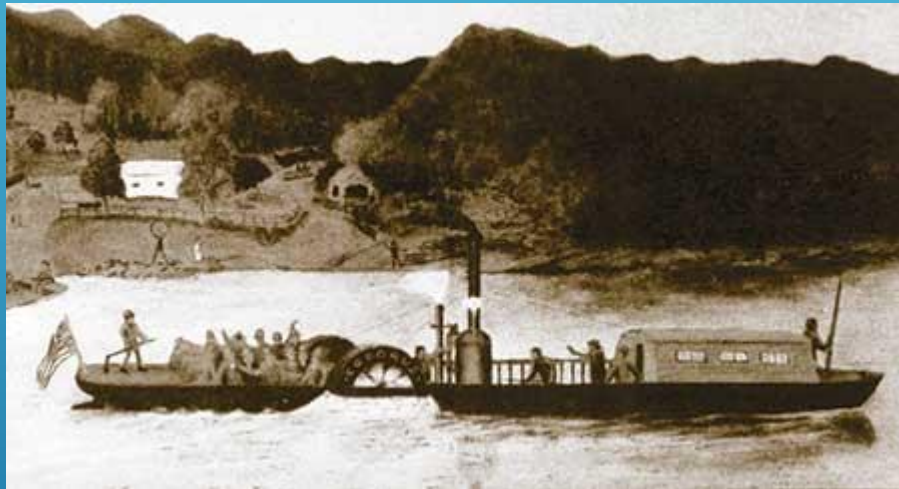


In the Fall of 2017 a program was given at the Annual Meeting of the Smithville Historical Society by John Buck. The presentation was using MS Powerpoint software. This .pdf file has been converted from the original Powerpoint program for ease of access on the internet. Certain animation features and photos obscure some of the outline text, but it is hoped that the reader can still find useful information from that presentation.

STEAMBOATS, LUMBER RAFTING, AND LOCAL YOUNG MEN ON THE SUSQUEHANNA RIVER



A newly discovered account involving
local young men Whitmarsh, Turk,
Fitch, and Rosa.

Smithville Historical Society
By: John H. Buck November 2017

Background to our 1826 story:

- Review of our local connection to the Susquehanna River
- Discussion of development of rafting and steamboats
- Review of some early families (Whitmarsh, Turk, Fitch, & Rosa)
- Finally – A newly discovered story of local men at Nescopeck Falls near Berwick, PA in 1826

(Warning – this is an interesting story, but there is a tragic ending ...)

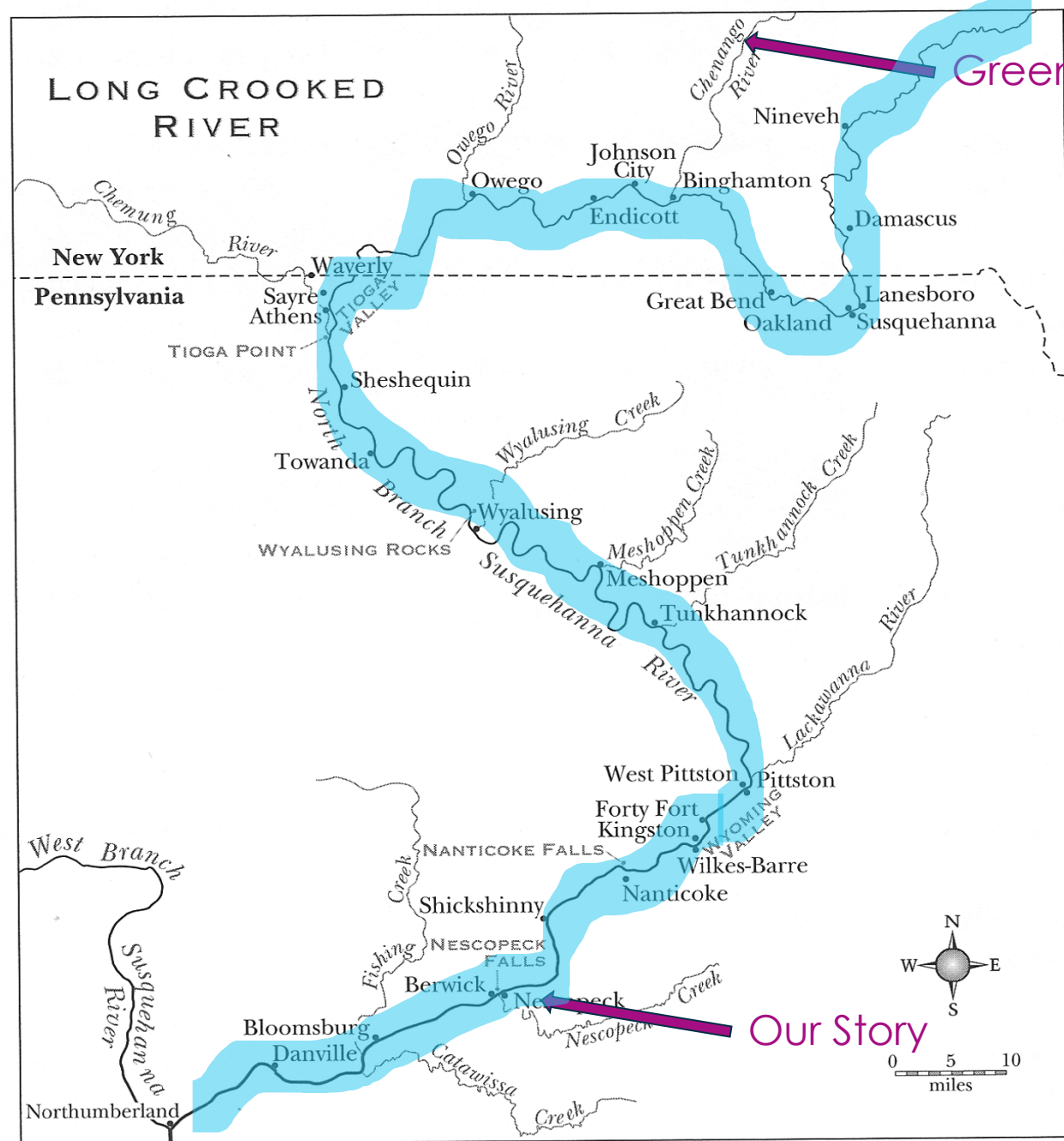
The Susquehanna River

- All of our local streams and rivers drain into the Susquehanna at Binghamton. (Chenango, Otselic, Tioughnioga, Genegantslet, etc.)
- Susquehanna headwaters are above Cooperstown. River is 464 miles long. One of the geologically oldest rivers in the world. (Said to pre-date glaciers by millions of years.)
- Three “branches”. Our end is the “North Branch”, “West Branch” meets at Northumberland, and the “Main Stem” continues to Harrisburg and on to Port Deposit and Havre de Grace, Maryland (a little north of Baltimore) in the Chesapeake Bay.

Susquehanna



A Closer Look



Greene, NY

Our Story

Rafts and Arks on the Susquehanna

- “Arks” were used in the springtime primarily to move agricultural products to the markets in larger cities in Pennsylvania and Maryland. An ark was a roughly made barge with pointed bow and 1-2 large oars for steering.
- “Rafts” were for transporting logs or rough-sawn lumber. They were simply assemblies of logs or roughly sawn lumber and usually had a cabin for the workers.
- The upper Susquehanna was only navigable in early spring. Sometimes in New York State, a dam was constructed to gather water volume. Then the dam would be removed releasing enough water to carry the rafts and arks down the river and over rapids and small waterfalls.

Rafts and Arks on the Susquehanna

- “Arks” were used in the springtime primarily to move



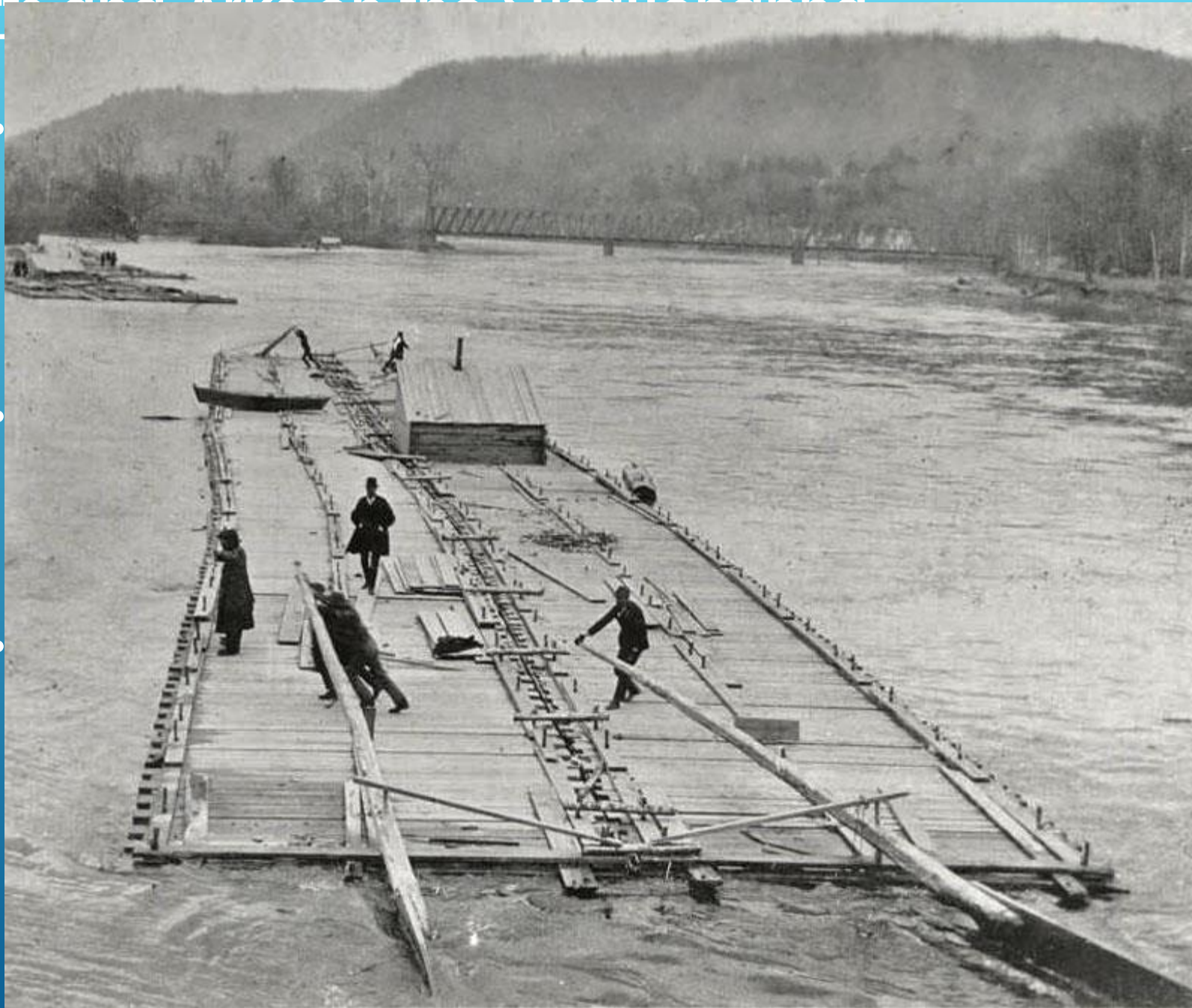
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Rafts and Arks on the Susquehanna

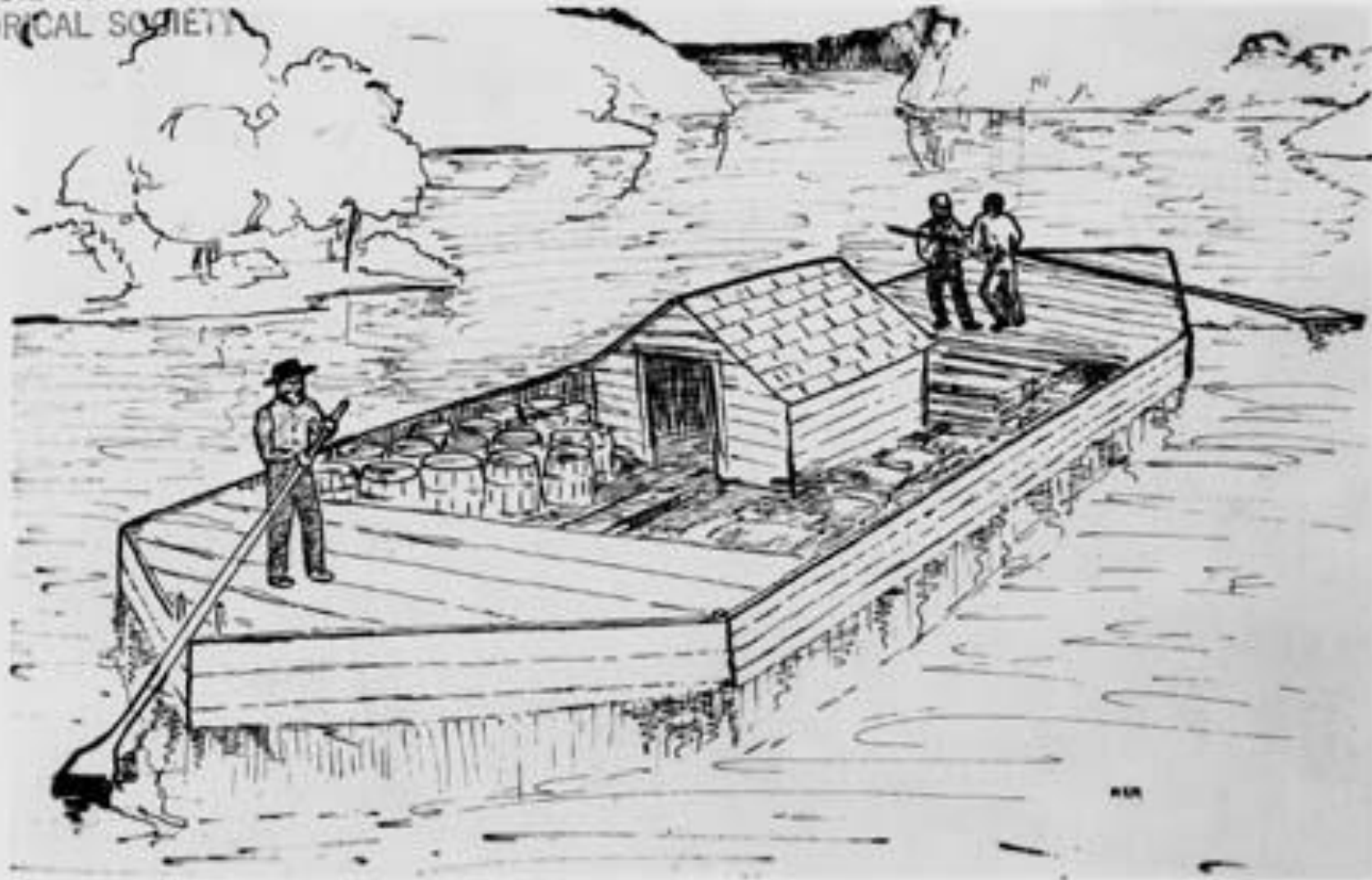


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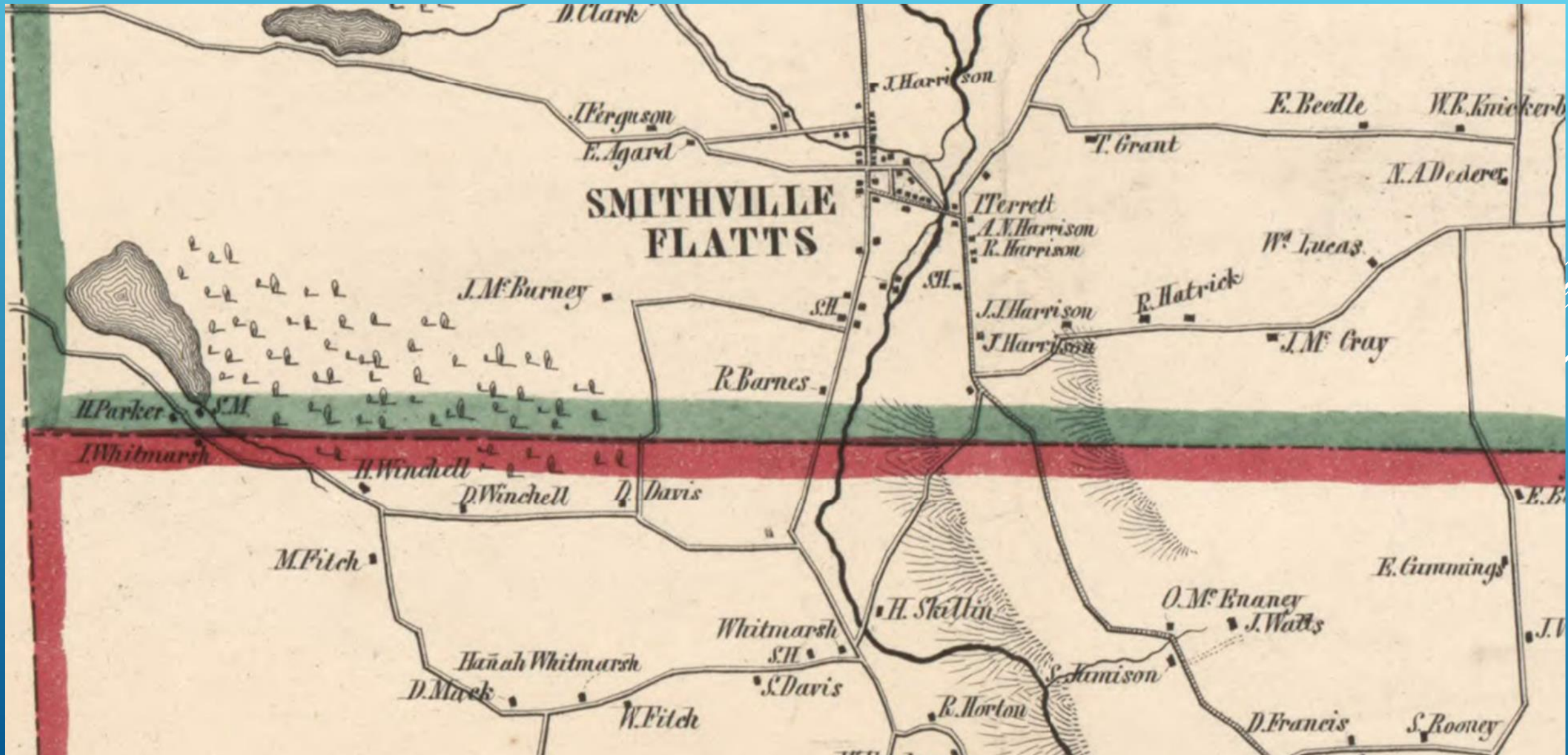
Rafting – more comments...

- In the early 1800s, the adventures of “rafting the Susquehanna” would have been a great attraction to young men.
- The trip back would also have been a great adventure, as there were no trains and rafters would not have had horses.
- According to Mildred English Cochrane’s book:
 - Local lumber rafts went to Columbia, PA (south of Harrisburg).
 - In 1827 Ira Palmer and Ira Watson operated both the “River Mill” (below the Round Barn) and the “Corners Mill” (at Genegantslet, now Beardsleys’ Sawmill).

Rafting – more comments...

- Palmer was “rafting” to southern markets on the Susquehanna, and he was gone about two months each time.
- The construction of the Chenango Canal apparently changed Palmer’s strategy as he shipped lumber to NYC via canal in 1848, 1849, and 1850.
- According to newspaper accounts, we believe that local young men **Ceber Whitmarsh, John Turk, Walter Fitch, and David Rosa** had been involved in early 1826.

Now a look at some of these neighboring families near the Greene/Smithville Town line (1855 Map)



The Whitmarsh Family

Two brothers, Ezra and Zachariah, and their families came from Hudson Valley (originally Mass.), and settled on two farms in Town of Greene in approximately 1806.

Zachariah (youngest) settled on (now) Echo Lake Road where Matt and Lynn Lee now live.

Ezra settled at the bottom of Echo Lake Road at the intersection with the Genegantslet Road. Ezra had a large family including Mulberry, Eber, Ceber, Andrew and Martin. ("Whitmarsh Boys" and Ellen Quarella descend from Mulberry.)

Ezra's son Ceber (b 1802) is one of the subjects in our story. (not to be confused with his well-known nephew Ceber who had stone quarry)

The Turk Family

Thomas Turk and his wife Catherine were among the early settlers of Greene and are buried in the Whitmarsh Cemetery. Their first son John was born in 1804 and is one of the subjects of our story. Their second son, Thomas Turk, Jr. was born in 1814. The Turks settled on a road off of Echo Lake Road, now called Turk Road. A large swamp on their farm is referred to as “Turk Slashings” on the Geodetic Survey map.

Thomas had a son named Frank Turk that was a well-known citizen in Greene and held various political positions. Thomas also had a son, John, presumably named for his brother.

The Fitch Family

Walter and Thankful Fitch came from Massachusetts in about 1810. They settled near the Whitmarshes and the Turks. Walter's daughter Sarah **Hannah married Eber Whitmarsh** and several of the Fitches lived along Echo Lake Rd.

At the time of our story (1826) Walter Fitch would have been 42 years of age.

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The Rosa Family

Isaac Rosa (or Rose or Roosa) came to Greene in 1796 and became the Town's second supervisor. He later kept a public house at Genegantslet. He was an early officer in the Masonic Temple.

Thomas Rosa lived in Smithville in the 1830 census. **James and Abraham Rosa** later served in the Civil War.

David Rosa's family connections are unknown and his fate following our story remains unknown.

Development of Steamboats (& into our story)

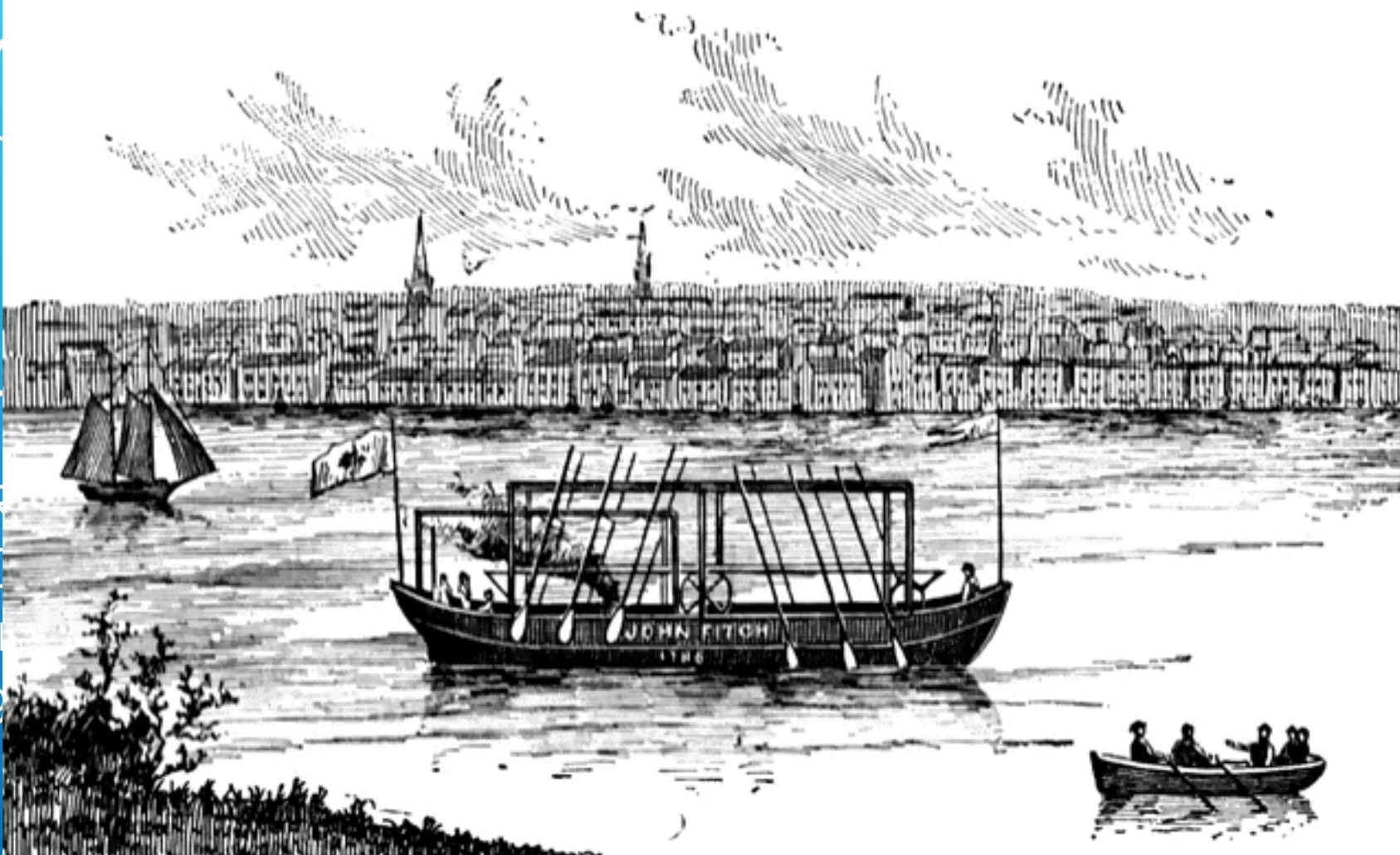
- James Watt developed the rotary motion steam engine between 1763-1775 (at about the same time as the American revolution).
- About 1785 John Fitch ran a steamboat commercially on the Delaware River between Philadelphia and Burlington, NJ, but it was not a commercial success.
- In 1807 Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston teamed to place a Watt engine in the “Clermont” and ran passengers and freight on the Hudson River between NY and Albany, NY. The race was on to develop commercial shipping on inland rivers.

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Development of Steamboats (& into our story)

- James Watt (at about 1763-1775)
- About 1780 the Delaware River became successful
- In 1807 Robert Fulton in the "Clermont" between New York and Albany shipping



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Delaware
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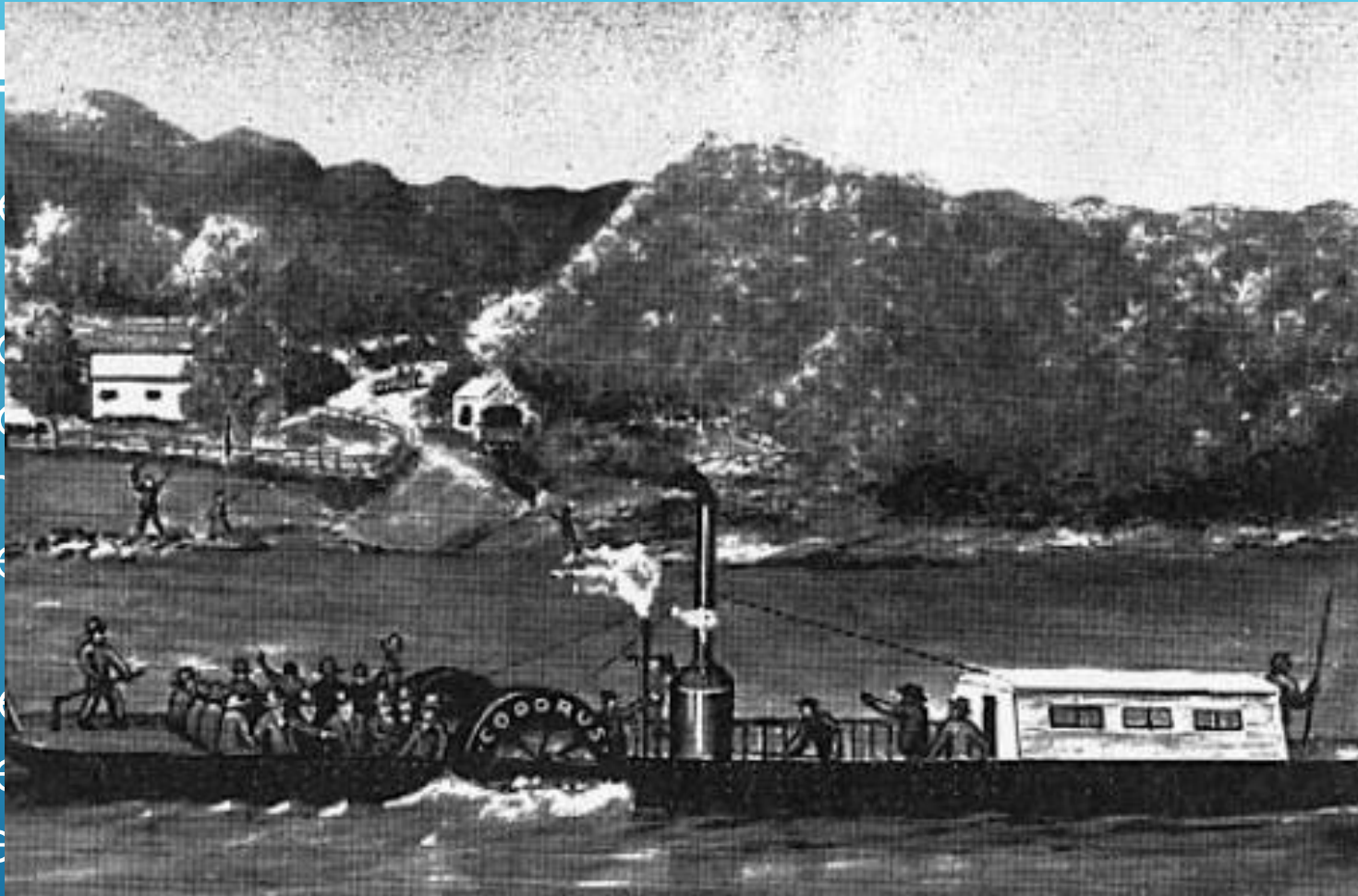
Watt engine
on River
commercial

STEAMBOAT DEVELOPMENT – Cont'd...

- The “Codorus” was built as the first steel-clad hull steamboat in 1825 in York, PA. At 60’ length and 7” water depth, it was propelled by two sidewheels, as was the Clermont. It successfully navigated the Susquehanna from Harrisburg to Binghamton, NY twice in March and April of 1826 and was greatly acclaimed.
- The “Susquehanna”, a larger competitor, then attempted the same feat in May 1826. It was propelled by a single sternwheel and was less maneuverable. At 80’ length and drawing 20 inches of water, it could hold almost 200 people. Because it was late in the spring, many “rafters” were on their way home north and were on board.

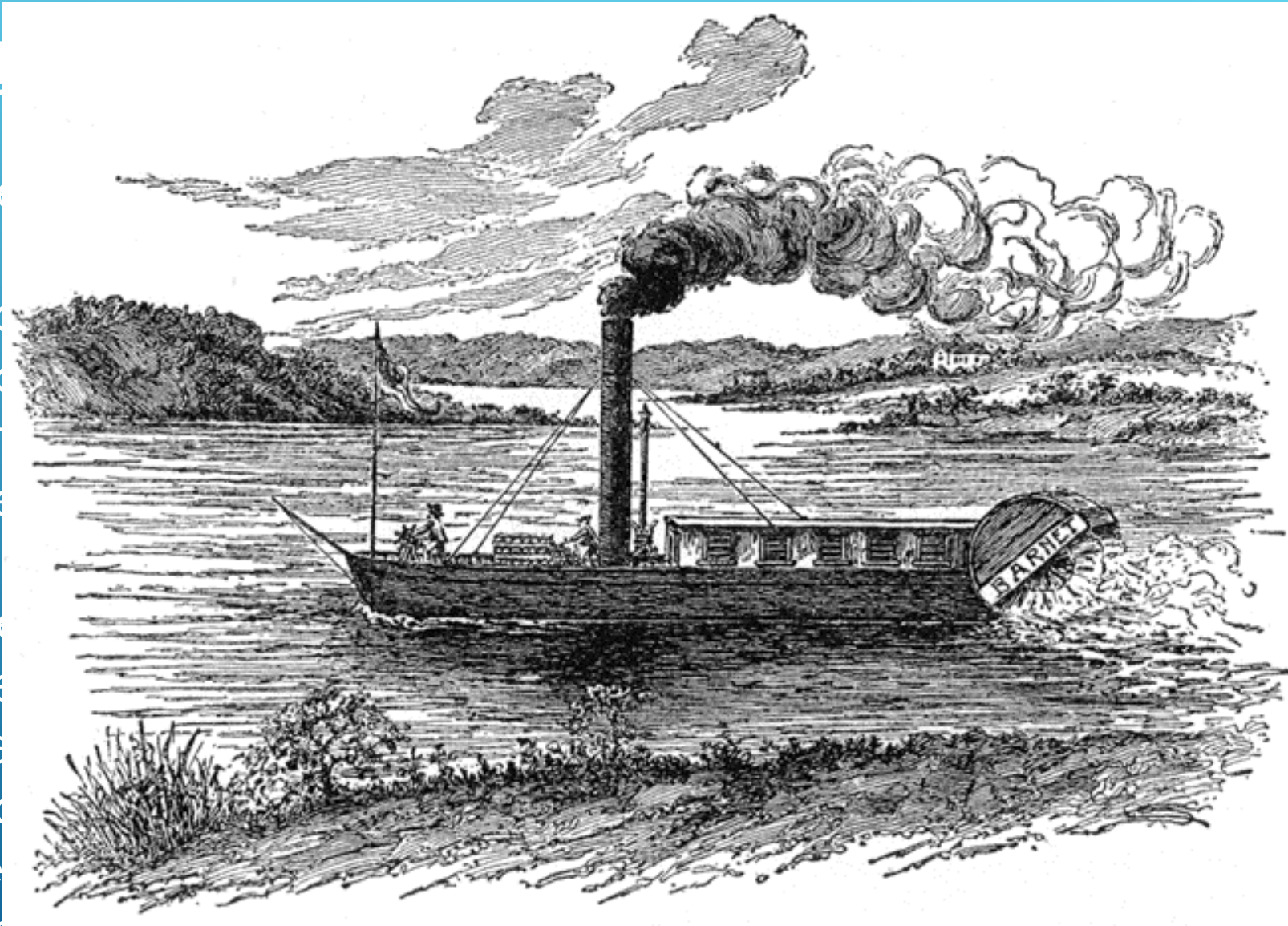
STEAM

- The first steamboat in the world was built in 1783 by James Watt. It was built in Glasgow, Scotland, and was used to transport coal from the mines to the ships. It was the first steamboat to be used for commercial purposes.
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The “Melancholy Catastrophe”

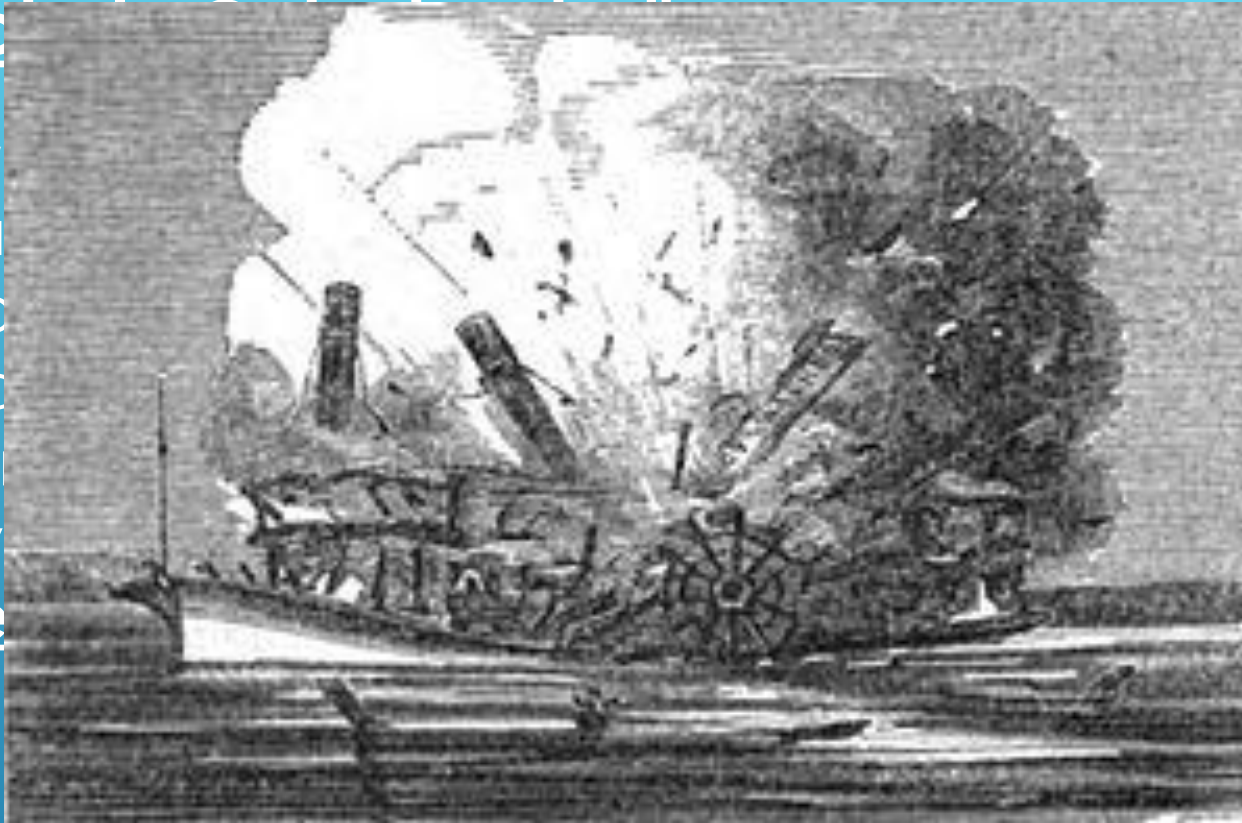
(Geneva Gazette 5/17/1826)

“The steamboat **SUSQUEHANNA** arrived opposite this town (Berwick, PA) on the afternoon of 5/3/1826, when she unfortunately burst one of her two boilers, and we regret to say that two persons, **John Turk and Seber Whitmarsh** of Green, Chenango County, NY, were thrown overboard and have not yet been found; seriously scalded or wounded were **David Rosa and Walter Fitch** of Chenango, NY (and fifteen other named persons).”

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The “Melancholy”

(Geneva Gazette 5/18/1875)
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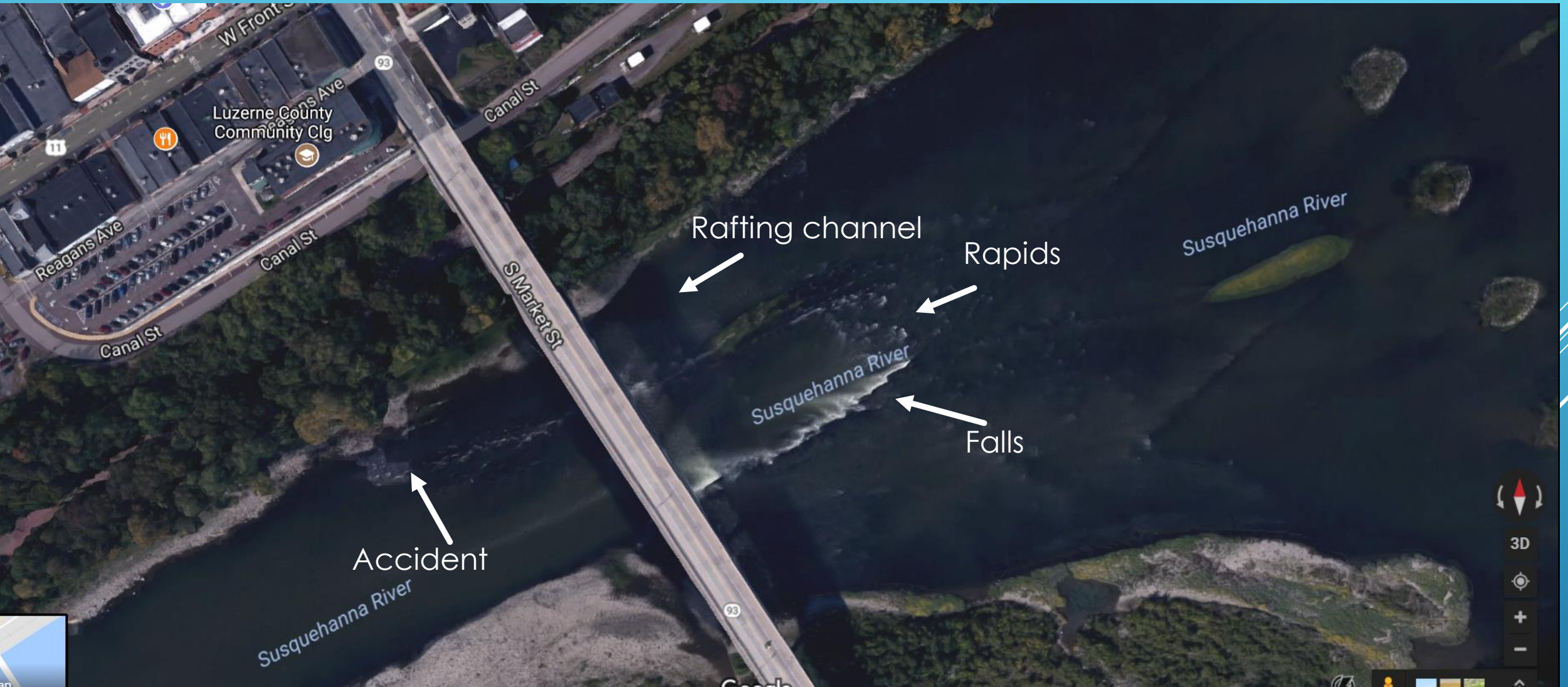


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What Happened?

- The “Susquehanna” approached the Nescopeck rapids from the southwest and disembarked many of the passengers due to the engineer’s concern about the risks. (Whitmarsh, Turk, Fitch, & Rosa remained onboard.)
- The two boilers were stoked for maximum pressure and firepower. A “center-channel” approach was attempted.

What Happened?



What Happened (cont'd)

The boat made progress up the center channel, but Captain Cornwell realized they would not make it and allowed the boat to retreat thinking they would shift to the inside “rafting” channel and try again.

With the boilers still at full fire, the sternwheel struck a rock which stopped the engine’s rotation. The safety valve had reportedly been held fast and both ends of the cylindrical boiler blew open from the excess steam pressure.

Whitmarsh and Turk were standing at the end of the boilers and were both reportedly killed instantly and blown into the river and their bodies lost. All passengers were also scalded and blown from the boat. The citizens on the bank recovered everyone except Turk and Whitmarsh and brought them into local homes for medical care. Three other men (including Rosa) died later from their burns.

What Happened (cont'd)

According to a touching poem published in a local Berwick paper, parents and friends of Turk and Whitmarsh came from Greene and launched their own search for the missing young men's bodies and recovered them a few weeks after the explosion.

The Susquehanna steamboat was salvaged, but this episode effectively marked the end of attempts to commercially navigate the length of the Susquehanna River.

Both boys were buried at a prominent position in the local graveyard in Berwick, PA. Both have beautiful gravestones. To this day the explosion is remembered by local Berwick historians, although the details have been somewhat obscured with time.

Pine Grove Cemetery at Berwick, PA

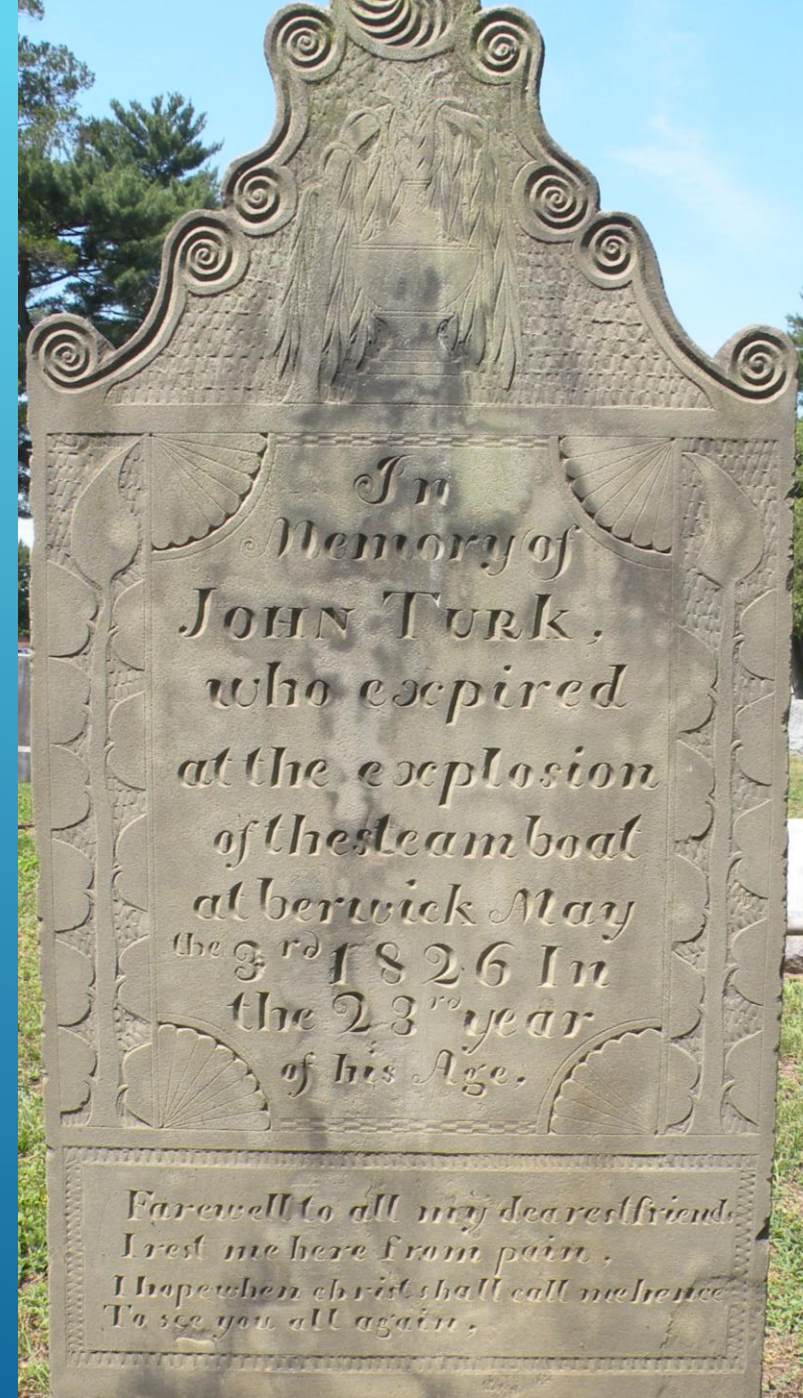




Gravestone of Ceber Whitmarsh



Gravestone of John Turk



The fate of David Rosa is not known with the certainty of Ceber Whitmarsh and John Turk, but at least one account indicates that he died from his burns.

Walter Fitch returned to his wife and family and lived the rest of his days at his home on Echo Lake Road in Greene, NY, next to his neighbors the Whitmarshes and the Turks.

With the re-discovery of this story, perhaps some of us will visit the beautiful gravesites of Ceber Whitmarsh and John Turk in Berwick, PA.

End of program