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The Conestoga River flows on

by Stephen Schmalhofer

To settle the Crown's debt to his father, Admiral Penn, William Penn received forty-thousand acres carved out of the English colonies in North America. Penn wanted to name the land "New Wales," but he bent under royal pressure to honor the Admiral and named the new colony Pennsylvania. In 1682, Pennsylvania's Quaker government codified The Great Law of the colony, which guaranteed religious liberty and guarded against "Looseness, Irreligion & Ath[e]ism." Around 1615, French and Dutch explorers were among the first Europeans to enter the future Pennsylvania. Etienne Brulé, who claimed to be the very first in an account recorded in Samuel de Champlain's 1619 book *Voyage*s, arrived from the Great Lakes and traveled down the Susquehanna River to the Chesapeake Bay. The route quickly became popular with French fur traders and members of the Susquehannock tribe who joined them in the business of selling beaver pelts.

French missionaries tested the colony's commitment to tolerance. In 1742, a Protestant minister in New Jersey, Rev. Colin Campbell, complained that Quakerism in Pennsylvania harbored a threat worse than a brood of vipers: "a nursery of Jesuits." Newly arrived French Jesuits learned to follow the Susquehanna River inland and discovered new tributaries. They met and baptized members of the Conestoga tribe near present-day Lancaster. The Conestoga are now gone, but the Conestoga River flows on.

Along the banks of the Conestoga River, German Seventh Day Baptists, colorfully known as Dunkards, settled and established family farms. Among the Dunkards was Johann Conrad Beissel, the founder of the co-ed, celibate, vegetarian Ephrata Cloister community. German Mennonite and Anabaptist settlers crafted the Conestoga wagon, ingeniously upturned at each end to prevent goods from shifting during travel. Conestoga wagon drivers smoked long, thin cigars, which gave rise to the slang term "stogie" in American English. The horse teams that pulled the wagons were rigged with bells, from which we retain the expression: "I'll be there with bells on." In 1777, a fast-acting Pennsylvania farmer and applejack distiller on his Conestoga wagon saved the Liberty Bell from the British army in Philadelphia and stowed it away in an Allentown church until after the war.

The headwaters of the Conestoga are on the border of Lancaster and Berks counties flowing into a series of tight bends south of Lancaster City. The river runs sixty-one miles through the Conestoga Valley watershed before emptying into the Susquehanna River, which forms the border between Lancaster and York. For twenty years, an all-star football game was played between the two counties on Thanksgiving Day. Naturally, it was called The War of the Roses. During the American Civil War, ten miles upriver from the mouth of the Conestoga, Union troops burned the Wrightsville bridge. "I called on the citizens of Wrightsville for buckets and pails, but none were to be found," writes the Southern general John Brown Gordon in his wartime memoirs. "There was, however, no lack of buckets and pails a little later, when the town was on fire." This halted Confederate troops aimed at the state capital in Harrisburg, and Philadelphia via Lancaster. The burned bridge turned the Confederates back towards Gettysburg, drawing the high-water mark of the Confederacy.

A proud Virginian, Gordon was nevertheless enchanted by Pennsylvania's fertile river valleys. "It was delightful to look upon such a scene of universal thrift and plenty . . . broad grain-fields, clad in golden garb, were waving their welcome to the reapers and binders," he writes. The Conestoga's annual overflow fertilizes cornfields, and the floodplain is green with meadowlands shaded by sycamores, hemlocks, and boxelder maples. Lurking among spring wildflowers are stems of burn hazel, a nettle covered in irritating hairs. As a child, my grandmother soothed my nettle-inflamed skin with peppermint toothpaste and distracted me from the pain by handing me a hot dog to roast by the creek. In central Pennsylvania patois, it is pronounced "crick." This is an important point of pride in the history of the Conestoga: is it a river or a creek? In 1912, the Lancaster booster and newspaperman Frank Diffenderfer made his "Plea for the Conestoga River." He counts Conestoga's twenty-seven mills and over two hundred tributaries in favor of her dignity as a river. He compared her to other famous rivers and found that the Conestoga is longer than the Rubicon, deeper than the Trebia in the Po Valley, faster than the Cam where Cambridge sits, and wider than the Bannockburn immortalized by Robert Burns. Diffenderfer ended his remarks with a poem from another Scotsman, a Mr. James D. Law, "which does for our river what I have been pleading for, full and exact justice:"

> Not Turner's noted crook of Lune,
>
> Nor Byron's wide and winding Rhine,
>
> Nor Burns' banks of Bonny Doon
>
> Nor boasted Tweed, nor lauded Tyne,
>
> Not Delaware nor Brandywine,
>
> Nor Spey, nor Tay, nor Don nor Dee,

Nor Shakespeare's Avon, still more fine.

E'er seemed so beautiful to me—

As tranquil Conestoga!

My grandmother and grandfather raised eleven children at the end of Second Lock Road, so named for Lock Number Two (out of nine) on the Conestoga's old slackwater navigation system. In his new book, *The Conestoga River: A History*, the local historian Donald Krautz records the history of this early riparian venture. In 1825, bids were requested and shares sold to finance the construction of dams and locks. Rather than a parallel canal and towpath, dams were built at intervals along the Conestoga, "such that the water behind one dam would back up all the way to the next dam upstream." This allowed for a broader field of navigation across the entire width of the river while the pond-like surface created in between each dam deepened the draft of the river. Stonewalled locks lowered or raised boats at each dam. By 1830, coal and lumber prices were substantially lower in Lancaster due to the cheaper cost of river transport. Mid-state distillers floated arks of whiskey to thirsty Philadelphians. But in 1832, an ice flood on the river damaged many of the locks. Lock Number Two suffered shattered lock gates and splintered framing. The status of the next lock is recorded by the stockholders with poetic relief: "No. 3. A beautiful lock and dam, is safe, awaiting the commerce of the river."

Today Second Lock Road meets the Conestoga at the end of a long country lane flanked by cornrows. The hill down to the river has seven bumps, which slowed the horse-and-buggy traffic that once crossed the river over the longest covered bridge in Pennsylvania. Built out of wood timbers in 1857, its length of 349 feet was supported midstream by an island pier. It was a perfect example of the master bridge designer William Burr's arch truss. The white pine arches were as beautiful inside as the shingled roofs, red barn siding, and cut stone piers were on the outside. A Connecticut Yankee and the cousin of Aaron Burr, William Burr first made his name with bridges in the Hudson Valley. His Union Bridge was the first to cross the lower Hudson and it stood for one hundred years. He raised American bridge building to an art form; the English art critic C. A. Bushy declared that a Burr bridge is the "only specimen of carpentry that ever impressed me with the idea of grandeur." In 1968, teenagers with delusions of grandeur and too much beer set off fireworks from the bridge. Firemen strived to save it but fire claimed the wooden structure.

The innocence of childhood can end on such nights. Swords of flame still bar us from Eden. When Dante meets Matilda in Purgatorio, she reveals that the earthly paradise was here along the river bank. In Allen Mandelbaum's translation: "Here, mankind's root was innocent; and here/were every fruit and never ending spring;/these streams—the nectar of which poets sing." For those who stop to listen, the Conestoga River still whispers secrets on her bars, and in her locks echoes the songs once sung in Eden.

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