

THE WILLIAMSPORT BOOM (Ep23)

Opening:

The story of Pennsylvania, first as a colony and later as the Commonwealth, is in many ways inseparable from trees. The name Pennsylvania, which means “Penn’s Woods,” is itself an indication that the territory was heavily forested when William Penn arrived and, nearly 350 years later, is still so today.

Before it became a powerhouse of manufacturing, Pennsylvania was an extraction state. Coal was mined, oil was pumped out of the ground, and trees were cut down for lumber. It may seem odd to think of timber as an extractable resource, but it’s really just different from the others in that it can be renewable.

While the lumber industry was present everywhere in the state, it was especially foundational to the development of north central Pennsylvania. It was for many years centered in Williamsport, in Lycoming County, surrounded by millions of acres of heavily forested mountains and the streams that flow from them. Williamsport itself grew into a city populated by lumberjacks, sawmill workers, and river workers, and run by a cadre of lumber barons.

So, step aside Delaware River. Move to the left, Allegheny River Valley. Over the next several episodes, we will cover the third major river system in the Commonwealth, the Susquehanna, and the origin story of the north central part of our state. We are going up top on this episode of Pennsylvaniana.

Script:

The name Pennsylvania – or “Penn’s Woods” – is truth in advertising. When William Penn arrived in 1682, over 27 million acres, or about 95%, of what is now the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was forested.

Settlers could (and did) see the value of the land as future farms or cities. But what was on the land already was equally important. Trees had tremendous value of their own, and Pennsylvania was essentially a natural warehouse of trees.

Early on, trees were cut down by Pennsylvania settlers for four reasons (1) for farmland, (2) for firewood, (3) for lumber to build boats, homes, furniture, etc. and (4) for charcoal to be used in iron forges.

Despite the name, charcoal isn’t coal – it’s wood that has been slowly burned in an oxygen-limited environment in carefully constructed mounds that could reach 30 feet wide and 12 feet high. This controlled partial burning, which removes water, gasses, and tree sap from the lumber, produces charcoal, which is over 80% carbon and can burn at the very high

temperatures needed to melt iron. Iron forges would become another of Pennsylvania's foundational industries.

There are 134 native species of trees in Pennsylvania. Of these, eastern white pines and eastern hemlocks dominated the northern tier of the Commonwealth. Trees in the southern tier were largely hardwoods like oak, and chestnut and hickory, as well as scrub pine.

Eastern White Pines could exceed 170 feet in height. The trees were prevalent throughout New England, New York and parts of Pennsylvania, and they were highly prized by the British. They were perfect for ship masts – so-called single-stick ship masts were better than those fashioned from two logs, and European forests were largely cleared of such tall trees. Pine logs were relatively light, resistant to rot, strong yet easy to work with. The British Navy was the largest in Europe, and King George I officially called dibs on all the Eastern White Pine in New England that was above a certain length and not on private land. This was known as the King's Prerogative. Royal surveyors were sent out to mark trees claimed by the Crown with three cuts in the bark – referred to as “a broad Arrow.” Anyone found harvesting that timber was subject to imprisonment and fines. Interior New England didn't have a lot going for it economically besides lumber, so the locals didn't much care for the imposition of the King's Prerogative. Needless to say, New Englanders were more inclined to ignore both the Prerogative and the King. What is known as “The Pine Tree Riot” took place in Weare, New Hampshire, in 1772, when a sheriff and his deputy arrested a mill owner for logging trees marked for the King. Once the owner was released from the local jail, he and a large posse of townspeople beat to a pulp both the sheriff and the deputy. Eventually, the perpetrators were caught and found guilty. They received... light fines. Some historical enthusiasts claim this incident helped inspire the Boston Tea Party that happened the following year. Certainly, the Pine Tree Riot became an emblem for early revolutionaries. Flags were created depicting a single pine tree and the motto “An Appeal to Heaven”, which was not a religious reference but a John Locke quote endorsing the option of armed revolt when a government violates the natural rights of its people. The Pine Tree Flag came to symbolize taking back from the King what belonged to the colonists.

Sailing ships weren't being phased out by the British Navy until the 1870s, so the need for wood for tall tree masts would last for some time. So, the old-growth pine forests of New England, the ones with the really tall trees, were still getting chopped down.

As the pine and oak trees were harvested in New England, especially in what is now the state of Maine but was then part of Massachusetts, the industry gradually moved to new areas, slowly migrating to New York State.

According to Thomas Taber, a historian of the lumber industry in Pennsylvania, there were four eras of lumbering in Pennsylvania. The first was the “pioneer era,” the hallmark of which were small, water-powered and family-operated sawmills. By the 1800s, this gave way to the second era, which consisted of larger lumbering endeavors and wider markets

in what Taber calls, “the water transportation era.” Lumber mills depended on water to transport logs to them, and then to transport the finished lumber to markets to be sold for shipbuilding, home construction, furniture, and so on.

Colonial Americans tended to live near waterways because rivers and canals were the highways of their day. Pennsylvania has three major river systems – the Delaware, the Allegheny, and the Susquehanna, the last of which has both western and northern branches. Each of these rivers has its own place in the history of Pennsylvania lumbering.

The Delaware watershed was the first to be developed by the lumber industry and, by about 1880, the first to be over-harvested. The Susquehanna Valley south of Harrisburg was logged most heavily during the Revolutionary War period. Logging along the northern branch of the Susquehanna began around 1807, and featured log rafting. Trees were cut, and the lumber floated down river first via rafts, and then later by canal.

By the 1830s, there were still significant areas of Pennsylvania that were forested. The northern tier in particular was full of prized white pine, as well as hemlock and some hardwoods. Speculators began to purchase land in these regions.

The area hadn’t been much settled by Europeans until after the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix between the British and the six nations of the Iroquois, also call the Haudenosaunee. The Penn family purchased native American territory, which including the so-called “New Purchase” in Pennsylvania, a wide swath of land from the southwestern to northeastern corner of Pennsylvania, including the western branch of the Susquehanna River.

The western branch of the Susquehanna is 243 miles long and runs entirely within the Commonwealth, through rugged mountainous and high plateau terrain. Starting in Elmora in Cambria County and meandering to the northeast, the river then moves southeast until it reaches the main or Northern branch of the Susquehanna at Northumberland. Its many tributaries include the Clearfield, the Sinnemahoning, the Kettle, the Bald Eagle, the Pine, the Lycoming, the Loyalsock, and the Muncy creeks.

The still heavily forested land, lack of previous European settlement, and extensive river system all led to the lumbering industry taking hold in north central Pennsylvania, with the city of Williamsport as its increasingly populous center.

Williamsport was first settled by Europeans in 1796. It sat between the earlier settlements of Jersey Shore and Muncy, and was chosen as the seat of the newly formed Lycoming County. By 1830, its population was 833 residents. 20 years later, it had barely doubled to 1,615, so not a big town at the start of this tale.

Two man-made projects were key to the emergence of Williamsport as a center of lumbering.

The first was the West Branch Canal.

This canal was authorized by the PA State Legislature in 1828 as part of the Main Line of Public Works that we covered in our episode on the Allegheny Portage Railroad. The canal started in Farrandsville, just north of Loch Haven, and ended in Northumberland, where the West Branch of the Susquehanna River meets the main branch. It covered 73 miles in all, with 19 locks to raise or lower boats a total of 140 vertical feet. It followed the West Branch of the Susquehanna River and was 4 feet deep, 40 feet across at the top, 28 feet at the bottom. The project reached Williamsport in 1833, and the whole span was completed two years later.

The canal provided Williamsport with an easy means to ship lumber and its byproducts to market, and it fostered the growth of riverside towns like Milton and Muncy. Without the canal, the river wasn't really conducive to sending log rafts downriver. For much of the year, the water level was unpredictable and became too shallow at points. Here is a cruel irony of Pennsylvania's third major river system. It is often said the Susquehanna is a mile wide and a foot deep. It is rocky and prone to rapids at some points, and the changeable water levels renders it non-navigable to any crafts that draw more than a few inches of water. Only during spring thaws does the river really permit traffic going south, and it's pretty much impossible to go north. Today, it is the longest river in the continental U.S. that has no commercial shipping traffic.

While there were sawmills in Williamsport before the West Branch Canal, the project's completion marked the start of "continuous lumber manufacturing" in the town.

Williamsport was favored by a number of geographic features that would make it the center of lumbering activity, but it took an entrepreneur and a second man-made project to bring the Susquehanna and all those trees in the north central region together into a tremendous economic opportunity.

Enter a lumberman from Maine named John Leighton, who surveyed the area in 1836 and first saw the potential for a log boom in the area.

What's a log boom? It is a key component in the method of floating logs down river to the sawmill. Trees were felled in the forest, and the branches cut off to leave one long log. This is the early 1800s. There are few roads in the wilderness, and the railroads were just being built. Because logs float on water, one can transport them in a couple of ways on the river. Logs can be lashed together to create huge rafts that are steered downstream to the sawmill, which would be located on the river. There, the rafts would be disassembled and the logs cut into lumber for market. The other way is simply to float the logs down the river to the sawmill. But there needs to be something to catch the logs at the sawmill or they will just float on by. The log boom, then, is a mechanism to catch the logs so that they don't flow further downriver.

A log boom is comprised of large pillars anchored in the river. These were huge wooden cribs filled with rocks, spaced out along the catchment area and connected by a chain of linked floating logs. From above, it looked kind of like the floating lane dividers in a swimming pool. Logs floating downriver were guided into the lanes of the boom and held there for the sawmill operators.

John Leighton was familiar with the building of a log boom system because they already had them in Maine. Bangor, Maine, had a log boom along the Penobscot River. It was authorized by the state legislature in 1825, and built over the course of the subsequent years. One boom was over 3 miles long. Bangor had the advantage of being a deep-water port located only 30 miles upriver from the Atlantic Ocean. The log boom and the lumber industry it supported in the region, which had 150 sawmills by 1860, helped make Bangor the world's largest lumber shipping port in the coming decades.

Leighton visited Williamsport, scouted the Western Branch of the Susquehanna, and concluded that Williamsport was a perfect place for a large log boom.

First off, Williamsport is downriver from many of the tributaries that feed the western branch of the Susquehanna.

As Thomas Taber notes ***“the Susquehanna just above Williamsport was an idea place for a boom. The river had little fall so that water speed was slow; it was wide so that a large number of logs could be caught and stored, and it curved which caused logs to have a tendency to move to the outer edge where a boom would be located. A canal would allow for shipping lumber eight months of the year instead of depending on rafts that could navigate only during the erratic time periods when the river was sufficiently deep to get over riffles but not so deep as to cause high water speed. Finally, there were several thousand square miles of mountainous forest land that could be cut and floated to Williamsport.”***

What made Williamsport perfect for a log boom, however -- the slow, wide river -- made it imperfect for the sawmills at the time, which were needed to be powered by waterfalls, whether naturally occurring or created by dams. It was the advent of steam-powered sawmills, which arrived in Williamsport in the 1840s, that became the final piece in the development of the region's lumber industry. Still, not much came of Leighton's vision until 9 years later.

In 1845, Major James Perkins, also of Maine, came to town looking for a site on which to construct a lumber boom. Perkins and Leighton teamed up with a man named John Dubois to form the Susquehanna Boom Company in 1846, with Dubois as the President.

By the way, the arrival in Pennsylvania of loggers from Maine is typical of extraction industries. In lumbering, as in drilling for oil or natural gas, or mining for coal, copper, gold

or silver, speculators move from place to place, to wherever they see a new opportunity especially once a previous opportunity has been fully exploited.

The Williamsport-area boom was built in 1851 at a cost of more than one million dollars. The cribs were 30 feet high and spaced midriver in a line that followed the banks. A string of chain and logs ran between the cribs, and could rise and fall with the water level. As I described earlier, this created a holding pen on one side of the river for logs floated downstream by lumberjacks.

Ownership of the boom was by a few shareholders. While it was created by lumbermen, it was not a cooperative. Different people controlled the boom in different years.

The lumbering operation itself was seasonal in nature.

Trees would be cut down and the trimmed logs floated down the river. Obviously, this wouldn't work in the winter, especially given that a shallow, slow-moving river was liable to freeze over. So, loggers had to wait for the spring thaw, which is also when the water level is highest. To be ready when the spring thaw hit, lumberjacks spent the winter cutting down the trees, removing the branches, cutting off the bark, and dragging the logs to the shore of the river, positioned for transport when the time came.

In spring, the logs were floated downriver to the log boom, where they are captured to be taken to the sawmills. The sawmills stored the logs in water, in a big "log pond", and the logs could keep this way for a long time. The sawmills themselves operated seasonally, perhaps 8 months of the year, until the river and the log pond froze over again. After processing, the finished lumber was transported south, most likely by canal.

That's the big picture. Let's talk about the work at a more granular level and the meet the people who did it.

First, I've been referring to the men who cut down trees as "lumberjacks," But in Pennsylvania at the time, they were called "**wood hicks**." Wood hicks were all independent contractors hired by a jobber assigned to cut in a specific section of forest. Because the wood hicks felled trees from the late Fall to early Spring, which coincided with the relatively dormant post-harvest period on farms, many of the wood hicks were also farmers.

To fell a tree, first, an axe was used to cut a notch in the side on which the tree was to fall. Then, two lumbermen sawed through the trunk using a crosscut saw. From the felled tree, they cut off the branches and the top. The bark was then peeled off the logs. This last step was done by cutting around the tree with an axe every four feet, and then using an instrument called a bark spud to pry off the bark in as large pieces as possible. Removing the bark made the logs more buoyant and hydrodynamic for their trip down the river.

Because the logs sent downriver were owned by different lumbermen and needed to go to different sawmills, they were branded with a tool called a stamping iron on the ends with the registered marks of the owners, as recorded at the court house in Williamsport.

If the trees were cut far from the river, and on hilly terrain, which they often were, logs slides were created to move the timber to the river more efficiently.

Log slides were created by taking two pieces of timber laid side by side with the flat sides up creating a trough. During the winter wood-cutting season, water was poured on the slides to ice up and make them slippery. Logs would be placed in the slide; gravity and ice would do the rest. In areas without a steep enough decline or an uphill climb, a team of horses would pull the logs.

The work could be dangerous. The steeper log slides sometimes had spikes to slow the speed of logs travelling downhill. But these spikes could cause logs to leap off the slide altogether. As one wood hick described it, ***“When I worked in the camps, several men got killed. One man was killed when a log on a skidway jumped out and struck him on the head. Another old fella was hit by a falling branch when he was piling bark. Two others went into a [bar] and got drunk. On the way back they took a shortcut and got lost. They were found lying dead bout 25 yards apart. They had been drunk and the snow and cold rain had overcome them.”***

There were only a handful of job classifications in the woods:

- Jobber who was responsible for the work
- Wood hicks who cut the logs
- Teamsters who moved the logs
- A blacksmith
- The cook – good cooks were especially prized and jobbers could fill their rosters of men if they had a reputation of having good cooks

Wood hicks lived in lumber camps, which were pretty rudimentary in the early days. Downstairs in the camp cabin was typically a kitchen, dining area and lobby. Upstairs there was a loft with bunk beds of straw. A cabin could house more than 100 men, with some having to share a bunk. The wood hicks strove to keep warm by wearing layers of wool clothing. There were no bathing facilities and no outhouses, and the wood hicks would go for months without a bath and in the same clothes for weeks. The beds were filled with lice and bedbugs. Sometimes beds were sprayed with kerosene in an attempt to kill the bedbugs. In other words, the living situation was kind of gross. The kitchen was vital – the work was hard, and food powered the lumbermen, who were called in for lunch with a bell – people didn’t own watches.

11½-hour days were typical. Breakfast was served at 5:30am, and the men had to be at work in the woods at 6am. The meal was hearty and caloric because it had to keep workers going until lunch at 11:45am. They were back at work from 12:30pm to 6:15pm.

There was no refrigeration, obviously, but a “spring house” – a small structure built over a naturally cold spring to keep the water clean for drinking – helped to prevent meat from spoiling. At the end of the long work day, the wood hicks were more or less on their own. As one lumber camp cook interviewed by the historian Taber recalled, “***some men stayed in the camp [the whole time]. Others went out, got drunk, and returned after their money ran out.***”

Apart from a switch from log drives on the river to transporting logs by rail, much in the Pennsylvania lumber industry went unchanged for 70 years. Taber notes, “There were no power tools. Everything was muscle power. You never saw an overweight man working in the woods.”

As Spring arrived, the work really started for the people down river at the sawmills.

Once the log booms were constructed, the logs could be floated individually down the river instead of first lashing them together as rafts. But it was a choreographed endeavor that required many workers to manage log drives.

As I’ve said, the river was deeper and more swiftly running during the Spring thaw, which was really the only sure time for the log drives. So, the March drive was the really big one, but there could be drives in May or June, and again in the fall if the river was swollen by heavy rainfall.

Log drives on smaller tributaries were aided by splash dams, which had gates that could release the elevated water in a rush to keep the logs moving.

Those who worked the boom were called **boom rats**. Crews of workers started upriver and moved down with the logs, often working waist deep in frigid water. The workmen wore long underwear with leather boots, which meant that they would get wet and stay wet the entire log drive.

To maneuver the logs, they used long poles with a spike at the end called peaveys, or long gaffs called cant hooks. With these tools, they pushed the logs from the shore to the water, and then *en route* to break up log jams.

The log drives themselves could take 4 to 6 days from the when the splash dam gates were opened until the logs arrived at the boom. The logs floated overnight, and every morning teams of men would work the shoreline to refloat stranded logs,

Obviously, such a mass of moving logs on the river could get snag, turn sideways , and create log jams. Workmen had to go out on the river to identify the log or logs that were holding everything up, dislodge them, and then get out of the way. It was perilous work. A fall in the water with thousands of moving logs would probably be fatal.

. Many of the boom rats were young men who had quit school at 14 or 15 to work on the boom. It was typical for a boom rat to work for several years, and then transition to work in a sawmill. But others made outdoor lumber work their yearlong career. They cut timber in the woods in the fall and winter, then worked the boom during the spring.

Like the wood hicks, the boom rats weren't day laborers – they didn't commute from home to work on the river each day. Boom rat crews were housed together and ferried by three wooden arks (curved roof sheds built on a raft) that were constructed for the log drive – one ark for sleeping, one for eating, and a third for horses. There was little to no heat on the arks. The sleeper arks had a stove and platforms of straw for beds. Here, the boom rats would sleep – in wet clothes, packed side by side, shivering under blankets. Because they couldn't travel back upriver, the arks were dismantled at the end of the log drive. From the construction of the log boom to the strategic placement of splash dams and the efforts to clear streams or widen them along the way, the whole operation was labor intensive. Up to 200,000 logs were transported downriver at a time.

Once the boom rats had guided the logs downstream to the boom, and sorted them into the appropriate pens for each sawmill, the logs were tied into rafts and towed by a Boom Company steamboat to the holding ponds of the sawmills that owned them.

So, with lots of difficult, dangerous work by Pennsylvania wood hicks and boom rates, trees standing in the forest became logs floating downriver to the log booms, and transported from there to the sawmill holding ponds. The next step was to get them up to the mills to be cut for lumber.

This was done with an incline chutes or log slip. Unlike the ice-coated chutes that needed only gravity to get logs to the river, the sawmill chutes had a conveyor –chain with spikes, known as a jack ladder or jack chain, that caught the logs and brought them up the chute. While the logs were hoisted up, they were sprayed with water to remove dirt and grit that would increase wear on the saws. At the top of the chute, each log was rolled onto the deck and then into a log carrier, which was a long platform set on a track. The log carrier held the log in place for the up-and-back movement against the head saw that turned the log into slices from which boards could be cut.

SAWMILL TECHNOLOGY CHANGED DURING THIS PERIOD

The first sawmills had an up-and-down saw originally powered by water, and later by steam. These were replaced by circular saws like the ones depicted in old-time cartoons and favored by comic-book villains.

Band saws later replaced circular saws. They were thinner and caused less waste because they turned less of the logs to saw dust when cutting. They also eventually had teeth on both sides of the band, which was perhaps 8 inches wide and 30 feet long.

The sawmills were often two or three stories. The sawing was done on the second floor. The first floor is where the steam engine would be that powered the machines on the second floor. The boilers were in a separate building because they would occasionally blow up.

Outside the second floor were often trestles where finished lumber would be piled up – perhaps 24 feet tall – and stored.

As it was at every stage of lumbering, work in the sawmill was physically challenging. Lumber is, obviously, a very heavy product. The machines were dangerous, and workers were at risk of accidental amputation or death. The noise of the saws was deafening. The air was filled with sawdust that got into the lungs. This is all pre-OSHA. There was no government agency to compensate injured workers, provide unemployment benefits, or compensate families for the death of a worker. Whether one were a wood hick, a boom rat, or a sawmill worker, the job was exhausting and dangerous, and the workday was long.

At this time, because they were reliant on the river for log drives and the canal for shipping, the sawmills operated only in the seven months that the waterways weren't frozen. The mills had no heating, and there was a lot less daylight in winter. This was when sawmill workers went into the forests to work at the beginning of the process by chopping down. The mills typically started up work again in April.

The boom contained several miles of logs for different sawmill owners, making continuous supply a challenge so when facing a mismatch either sawmills had to temporarily shut down or else sawmill owners needed to make a trade

The largest sawmill in Williamsport was the Dodge Mill. Completed in 1864 by Phelps, Dodge & Company of New York City, it had four jack ladders to bring logs in from the log pond to feed 112 different saws. It produced over 200,000 board feet of lumber daily. Board feet are calculated by multiplying the thickness of boards in inches by the width in inches by the length in feet, then dividing by 12. The Mill was the first in town to adopt the flexible steel band saw. It employed about 200 men, making the adjacent neighborhood of company houses seem like its own company town.

Despite the size of this mill, lumbering was not much of an industry for vertically integrated corporations; it was more a business of fluid partnerships and contractual relationships. Most sawmills were owned by partnerships that could change over time, or they might be sold because the timberlands owned by one of the partners had all been cut down. Some sawmills didn't own timberlands, but were contracted to cut the trees owned by others. Woodcutting contracts were often not bid. The area to be harvested was broken in tracts and contracts were handed out to jobbers on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Sawmill owners typically had rights to certain forest lands, and they ran the sawmill, but that may have been about it. They hired others to cut the logs on their land for them and get them in a spot to be transported to the sawmill. Jobbers were hired to cut a specific

section of forest over the course of the year. They were responsible for felling the trees, cutting them into logs of 10 to 16 feet in length, stamping them, and delivering the logs to the creek. If the log was not stamped then it would be lost in the sorting bin the jobber would not get paid.

Sawmill owners decided how much of their timberlands they would cut each winter, based in part on how much inventory they had on hand in the log ponds at the mill.

The Susquehanna Boom had a dual effect. As you'll hear, it led to a surge in the number and size of sawmills at Williamsport, but it also rendered sawmills upriver less competitive. There were actually smaller booms upriver at Jersey Shore and Lock Haven, but scheduling was a challenge because during log drive season the vast majority of the logs would be heading downriver to Williamsport. Below Williamsport, there was a smaller boom at Muncy, and another at Montoursville, which handled logs coming down the Loyalsock Creek as well as any strays that floated past Williamsport.

By the 1850s, conditions were increasingly in place for the success of Williamsport's logging industry. Steam sawmills and the log boom had been built. In 1864, the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad arrived, which provided an alternative to the canal for shipping finished lumber. In the 1850 census, the population of Williamsport was 1,615. 20 years later, in 1870, the population had grown 10 times its size to 16,030.

By 1873, the peak year of production, there were thirty-seven sawmills with steam-driven circular saws. The boom had been expanded to a total of seven miles in length, with four hundred cribs. To be technical, there were 7 separate booms that were developed by two companies that each received a charter from the legislature, and which later merged into one company. All told, the boom could hold more than 300 million board feet of lumber at a time, though that capacity was rarely reached.

White pine was the most valuable timber and the first to be cut. Because it was so lucrative, the money that could be devoted to infrastructure was cost effective – hence, the business case for the cost of the boom and splash dams.

For all its success, the industry was susceptible to disaster. The Susquehanna could and did flood. If the water level rose above the top of the boom cribs, the logs could float free. This happened in 1860. About 50 million board feet of logs floated downriver. The same thing happened again the following year. To reduce future losses, the boom company added larger, heavier cribs between the existing ones and extended the boom over time. That worked until 1889, when the river rose to three feet above the top of the cribs, and 200 million board feet of logs headed downriver.

During the 1870s and 1880s, Williamsport was known as the lumber capital of the United States and, according to Thomas Taber, was the only city to ever hold that title, although perhaps Bangor, Maine, would disagree.

[THE PEOPLE OF WILLIAMSPORT AND THE LIVES THEY LED]

The lumber industry brought great wealth to Williamsport. Industry leaders were known as “lumber barons.” The most well-known and one of the most colorful of the lumber barons was Peter Herdic; his name became synonymous with Williamsport.

Herdic was born the youngest of seven children in Fort Plain, a town in upstate New York. As a young man, worked in a sawmill. He was industrious and frugal enough that he managed to save a lot of money, so much so that, in 1846 at the age of 22, he was able to move to and invest in a small sawmill in about 18 miles north of Williamsport. In 1854, he moved to Williamsport, which he rightly sensed was on the verge of explosive growth in the lumber industry. He was obviously a shrewd businessman who both knew how to run a business and had a keen sense of business strategy. Like all business speculators, he was also a risk-taker. He bought and sold several tracts of timber and sawmills, acquiring a fortune in the process that enabled him, along with business partners Mahlon Fisher and John Reading, to purchase the Susquehanna Boom company. It was during their time as owners that saw the greatest physical expansion of the boom. It has been said that nearly all of Herdic’s business ventures were profitable, but none so much as his ownership of the Boom on which the many of Williamsport’s sawmills relied.

Within two years of moving to Williamsport, Herdic had built a 20-room mansion at 407 West Fourth Street, designed by Eber Culver in the Italian Villa style. Over a period of 30-plus years, Culver would go on to design other buildings for Herdic, as well as several other grand homes on West Fourth Street.

Among Herdic’s real estate development ventures in Williamsport were the construction of a large office building and an opulent hotel. He also owned the local gas and water works, as well as a local newspaper.

Herdic was also a natural if somewhat ruthless leader, which perhaps runs counter to the stereotype of a youngest child, and he had political aspirations. He was not shy about using his influence. He led the charge in 1866 to charter Williamsport as city rather than a borough. He persuaded the state legislature and Governor to let Williamsport incorporate the nearby villages of Jaysberg and Newberry, as well as some farmland along Lycoming Creek – in part by presenting a doctored petition indicating that the expansion had local support among the residents. The villagers were not happy.

Herdic convinced the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad to move their passenger station in town to the hotel he had built. And he spent a lot of money getting himself elected Mayor in 1869.

Like so many affluent people in America’s Gilded Age, Herdic was also a philanthropist, donating land or funds to build several churches.

This was a heady period for Williamsport. Successful lumber barons sought to outdo each other in different ways, but especially in the building of grand residences. The newly fashionable west Fourth Street, where Herdic built his home, became a stretch of a magnificent homes and grand churches. The street became known as Millionaire's Row, and included Mahlan Fisher's "Million-Dollar Mansion," built in 1867 by stonemasons and woodcarvers specially brought in from Europe. It was a massive stone villa with twin towers, balustrades, statuary, fountains, and gazebos. The John Reading House was designed in the Second Empire style with the style's signature mansard roof and cast-iron cresting, and a black marble fireplace in every room. Local lumber barons also purchased works from the well-known still-life painter Severin Roesen, who was living in Williamsport at the time.

The moniker "Millionaire's Row" exists to this day, and many of the Victorian-era homes are still standing and well-kept. In fact, Williamsport's "Millionaire's Row" is a historic district of 263 contributing buildings, which makes for a great walking tour – in fact if you check out our Instagram page, Pennsylvaniapod, you can see a 30 second video clip that shows 16 different Millionaire's Row mansions.

At its peak, Williamsport was said to have more millionaires per capita than any city in the United States. I've visited several cities that make the same claim for different eras – for example, Salem, MA, when it was a shipping capital around 1790. And Hartford, CT, when it was a manufacturing center after the Civil War. But Williamsport seems to be the only one where the "Millionaire" moniker survives, a legacy of the lumber barons.

[Side note:] In 1905, the local minor league baseball team became known as the Williamsport Millionaires. In the 1930s, the Williamsport Area High School adopted the same name for its sports teams. The school's logo, adopted in the 1960s, is a top hat resting on a pair of white gloves, a walking stick, and a red carnation.

This episode started with the men who did the manual labor – the wood hicks, the boom rats, and the sawmill laborers. It was tough and dangerous work under often miserable conditions. And we met their overlords, the lumber barons, who were profiting immensely from their work and living grandly on the proceeds. Did the wood hicks get along with their wealthy higher-ups? Did the boom rats get along with the fat cats? Did the mill workers get along with the millionaires?

Curiously, there was for many years only one major labor struggle that emerged in the Williamsport lumber industry the so-called the Sawdust War of 1872.

That year, the sawmill owners formed the West Branch Lumberman's Exchange to standardize lumber products and appoint quality inspectors. This had the side effect of creating an official association of employers.

Within a few weeks, as it happened, a labor convention was held in Williamsport. Unionizing at the time was mostly focused on the coal industry and railroads. This labor convention might have planted the seed of a labor action among lumber workers, given the struggle that emerged that summer.

In late June, a large meeting of lumber workers was called to petition for a reduced workday. The standard was 11½ hours, for which they were paid between 80 cents and \$1.50 per day. Four years previously, the PA State Legislature had made an 8-hour day the legal standard, unless workers agreed to a contract that stated otherwise. However, the penalties for violation were zero, and there was no enforcement. The next year, the Legislature voted that workers had a legal right to form and join labor unions, but all this really meant was that organizing worker unions no longer carried liability for criminal conspiracy.

Out of this meeting of workers, a committee was formed to draft a resolution that became the mission statement of the group. It read as follows:

***“Whereas the invention of labor-saving machinery has only benefitted our employers who have saved through them the price of labor which the machine accomplishes, it is only just and equitable that a portion of the labor those saved should be deducted from the workingman’s hours of labor in order that he may reap some benefit from those inventions and improvements, and,
Whereas the workingmen in the saw mills of the city of Williamsport work from 11 and ½ to 12 hours per day, a period longer than that worked by other workingmen in the United States, which is an injury to the human system, and
Whereas the workingmen in the principal cities are demanding a reduction in hours from 10 to 8, and we believe that if 10 hours is too long for them twelve or thirteen are certainly too much, and so be it
Resolved: That ten hours is just and fair...”***

The mill owners responded to this activism not by bashing heads, but by offering a raise of \$0.25 or \$0.50 a day.

The workers didn’t accept it – they wanted a cut in hours, not a raise in pay. Recall that the mills at this time operated only 7 months of the year. The rest of the year, most workers left home to work in the lumber camps, so getting more time to spend with their families was especially important to them.

So, the activists went from mill to mill asking workers to quit, and many did.

As a local newspaper recounted: ***“The workers went on a 22-day strike beginning July 1st of 1872. First assembling in front of the Lycoming County Courthouse, the group marched to each sawmill to gather more sympathizers and shut down production***

across the board. As they marched, with banners and drums beating, their slogan rang clear: 'Ten Hours or No Sawdust'.

On July 9th, the West Branch Lumberman's Exchange, speaking on behalf of the mill owners, said "no" to the workers' demands, but instead granted a 25-cent raise, effective immediately.

Some individual mill owners nonetheless did offer a 10-hour workday. Those who didn't faced strikes.

On Saturday, July 20th, the mill owners announced they would be re-opening the mills in two days. That Monday, crowds of striking workers asked their coworkers not to return. Things got heated. The police showed up, guns drawn. Some workers threw bricks. A riot ensued. Mayor Seth Starkweather, who was also a mill owner, called Pennsylvania Governor John Geary to request troops to quell the riot, and 500 were deployed from Williamsport, Harrisburg, and Lebanon.

The following day the troops arrived and arrested dozens of strikers. Perhaps surprisingly, Peter Herdic bailed them out and, supported by a petition signed (for real this time) by 2000 citizens, he convinced the Governor to quickly issue a pardon for the strikers. Within a few days, all the workers returned to their jobs. The mills that had switched to 10-hour days promptly switched back to 11½-hour days.

As with so many labor struggles in the 1800s, the workers organized, mobilized, and struck to protest low wages and poor working conditions. Too often, the result was a step forward followed a step back.

So to recap, the Williamsport Boom was a technological advance that opened up North Central Pennsylvania to development. But it had its downsides.

- Log drives occurred largely in Spring, so it was seasonal
- Sawmills could work only 7-8 months a year until the river or the log pond froze
- The whole operation was labor intensive, including building splash dams and clearing rivers
- Sorting logs in a 7-mile-long boom for many different sawmill owners led to continuous supply challenges
- The boom focuses harvesting on trees nearest to a river or stream capable of carrying them, and in those areas the forests have been getting harvested

The industry itself was on the verge of a shift. The limitations of the Boom were a hindrance. The dense forests of Eastern White Pine were being depleted. The resulting deforestation, especially so close the river banks, caused increasing environmental degradation, loss of animal habitat, soil erosion, mud slides, and flooding. Aquatic life was negatively impacted by the log runs, added sediment, and fouled water. The flow of the river itself was disrupted by the log booms and log jams. On the business side, the once-

vibrant ecosystem of small companies and individual contractors had gone as far as it could.

The answer for the Williamsport lumber industry was driven by two new technologies, one complicated, one simple – and by vertical integration.

We are moving away from the Water Transport Era into the Railroad Era of lumbering. From industry fragmentation to consolidation. The Eastern White Pine is about to exit the spotlight, and in its place will stand the Eastern Hemlock, in a role so important it would later be named the state tree of Pennsylvania.

Join us in two weeks, as we continue our story in the next episode of Pennsylvania.

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