

Penns Creek Arks and Butter Rock

Penns Creek is a shallow, winding, rocky waterway, yet it was once part of an important route for transporting goods from the interior of Union County to the Susquehanna River and beyond to Harrisburg, and tidewater markets on the coast.

The first settlers grew only enough for themselves, then some excess to trade with neighbors. By 1800 farmers began to produce surpluses. Grains were milled into flour and distilled into whiskey.

According to early accounts, by the 1820's the county annually shipped many thousands of bushels of wheat, thousands of barrels of whiskey, tons of pork each year, plus maple sugar, clover seed, cured meat and butter.

These goods were carried on arks, large flatboats built along the creek from the timber that was readily available. Early historians such as R. VB. Lincoln and A.D. Kerstetter described the arks as 60 to 70 feet long, about 16 feet wide, 4 to 6 feet high, and drawing 18 inches when loaded. They were steered with long oars and poles.

At sawmills along the creek, arks were constructed on platforms in such a way that the deck of the ark was laid first, then the bottom, made of partially hewn timbers that were pinned, or spiked, together. Thus the ark had to be "turned" so that the bottom landed in the water, after which the sides were built.

Arks were floated on Penns Creek when the water rose due to spring floods. Similarly, the Susquehanna River, being shallow and full of rocks and falls, was navigable, yet dangerous, during those spring flood times. It took one day to travel down Penns Creek and another two or three to reach the tidewater ports at the bottom of the Susquehanna. Goods might be sold as close as Selinsgrove, at towns along the river, or as far away as Baltimore, depending on demand and price.

One landmark in Penns Creek earned its name from an incident in the 1820's.

According to local stories, several arks came down from Coburn, Centre County, some carrying barrels of butter. There had been rain and wind the previous day. The creek was over its banks and the current was strong.

Along one stretch of the creek, near Weikert, there's a large rock just below a curve and more rocks beyond, with the navigable channel to the right. As the first ark approached the curve the boatman saw a tree had fallen from the storm, blocking the channel. Perhaps the boatman attempted to go left of the rock and avoid the tree - there might have been about 18 feet of shallow water clearance between the rock and the shore. Perhaps the ark hit the tree. It is unclear what caused the first ark to crash, but in any event, all the arks wrecked and, legend has it, the barrels of butter broke on the rock. Thus this large rock became known as Butter Rock.

Today careful boaters can meander down Penns Creek from the western end of Union County past New Berlin - the old county seat - into Snyder County, to Selinsgrove, the Isle of

Que, and the Susquehanna River, and imagine the ark trips of long ago when Penns Creek was an important commercial route.



View of Penns Creek in New Berlin