

Memories of Pitcairn

Louis A. Chandler, Ph.D.



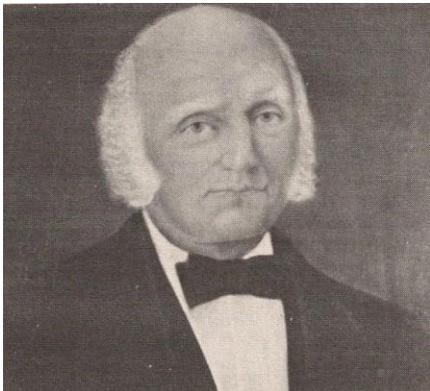
PITCAIRN, PA.

Today it is a grassy patch of land along the Turtle Creek, overgrown with weeds and scraggly locust trees. A path meanders through the underbrush, and a walk along that silent path, echoes with a time when there was a trembling beneath the feet – the very earth shaking to the thundering roar of massive locomotives as they rumbled through the night. It was a time when the very air was pierced with the screech of high-pitched whistles, the clang of bells, and the shuddering squeal of air brakes as mighty steam engines lumbered across the landscape. It was the time of the railroads!

And on this very spot, stood the largest railroad marshalling yards east of the Mississippi -- the Pitcairn Yards. This massive facility was the crown jewel of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Eastern Division. This is the story of the yards, the town, and its people. It is the story of Pitcairn.

Chapter 1: The Coming of the Railroad

It was in 1835, when a tobacco farmer named John McGinnis bought a piece of farmland just to the east of Pittsburgh. He soon began selling lots at the crossroads of Tilbrook and the Great State Road -- a place he would call "McGinnisville."



1. John McGinnis

At first, only a handful of farmers settled around McGinnis' property. And the place might have remained nothing more than a scattering of farms, were it not for a major event that would dramatically change the history of the small village.

That event happened in 1850. By that time the Railroads were transforming American life, and the flourishing Pennsylvania Railroad was ready to begin its east-west service from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. And so it was, that in 1850 the Railroad bought a narrow right-of-way from John McGinnis. It then established its first station in the area -- "Wall Station".

By the time of the Civil War in the 1860s, the railroad business was booming. Railroads on both sides became vital to the war effort. Pittsburgh was to become the arsenal for the Union, as the Iron City was called upon to produce the heavy cannons for the war. Cannon barrels cast at the Fort Pitt Foundry had to be tested, and rural Patton Township was selected as a site for test firings. The “Wall Proving Grounds” were established on the banks of the Turtle Creek a short distance east of the Moss Side Bridge.

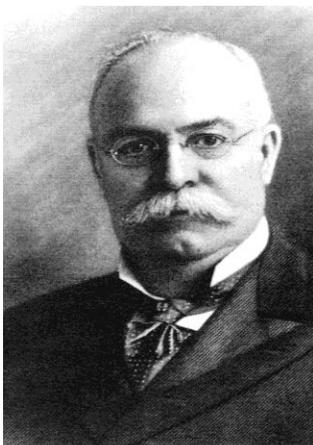


2. Cannons were tested by firing across Turtle Creek

This location was ideal. It was on the railroad right-of-way -- completed ordinance was already being moved along this corridor. Cannons could be hauled from Pittsburgh to the proving grounds by train, then tested by firing into the hillsides across the Turtle Creek. Larger guns could even be fired directly from railroad flatcars.

Soon the growing railroad was running out of room at its facilities in downtown Pittsburgh; the city yards at 28th Street were proving much too small to accommodate the large number of trains expected as Pittsburgh was becoming a major hub.

In 1874, Robert Pitcairn, who was then divisional superintendent of Pittsburgh



2. Robert Pitcairn

operations, began looking for more open space -- a place to re-locate the Pittsburgh yards. Pitcairn was eyeing up some farmland in the Turtle Creek Valley just to the east of the city. It was a relatively flat expanse of valley floor where the railroad yard might be re-located.

In time, all east-west freight of the Pennsy would be channeled through Pitcairn as the sprawling Yards grew into one of the largest classification facilities on the Penny's extensive system.

Newspaper Reporter **Bruce Kish** continues the story:

"Pitcairn gazed eastward -- toward the...Turtle Creek Valley where lay the farmlands of the McGinnis, Brinton, Wall and Toohill families. In 1874, he purchased 215 acres of this land, about 15 miles from Pittsburgh. The tract would serve as the new home for the Pittsburgh rail yard and its workers. For the next 20 years, the neighboring hillsides resounded with the thud of axes and the pounding of hammers as the forests yielded to a growing company town."

The Railroad referred to the growing company town only as "acreage near Walls Station," but soon it would be named "Wallurba," and in 1894 the village was incorporated as a Borough, adopting the name of the visionary Railroad Superintendent -- "Pitcairn."