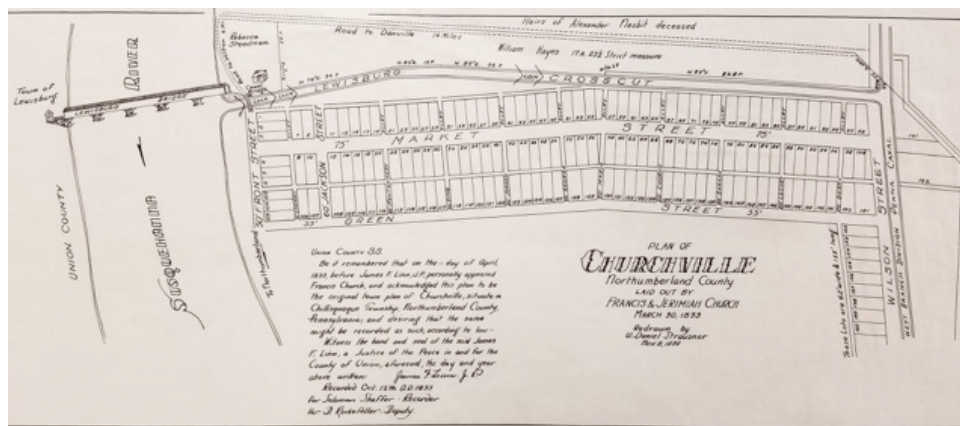


Churchville: A Lewisburg Crosscut Canal Community That Never Was

by
Georganna Fitzgerald Kresl

“How about taking a trip to Churchville with me?” I ask. “Where is that?” You reply. “Good question,” I respond, because it seems to have vanished from the face of the earth, as if it never existed. It looks like time travel is the only way to get to Churchville.



This map was redrawn by W. Daniel Strausner on Nov. 8, 1939 as part of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) under Roosevelt’s New Deal. The reason it was selected for reproduction and the location of the original from which it was copied are not known.

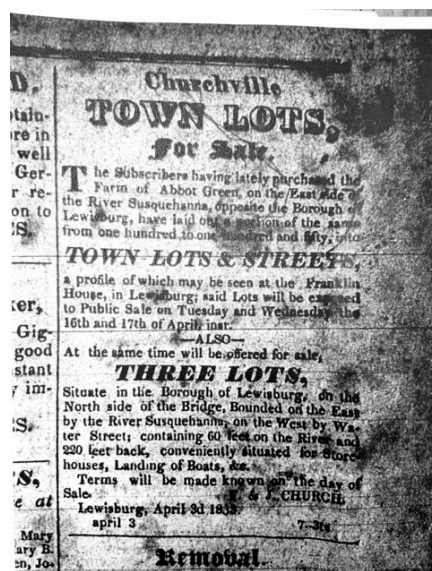
While doing research in the Northumberland County Historical Society I ran across something curious that really piqued my interest. Hidden away in two of the map drawers are different copies of detailed plans portraying a settlement called Churchville.¹ This town was laid out by Francis and Jerimiah [sic.] Church on March

¹ Map Drawer 2: Call Number 9011.318.320, *Plan Of Churchville Northumberland County. Laid Out By Francis And Jerimiah Church – 1833, WPA – 1939.* (This map, pictured above, is clearly the product of a professional draftsman); Map Drawer 5: Plans; Architectural, Canals, Sunbury Riverfront. Miscellaneous Items. Call Number 90.11.379-383, *Churchville – 1833, Also Petition to Abandon Same – 1861.* (This map is divided between 5 separate sheets of paper. It is a photocopy of a hand drawn map with red and

30, 1833, directly across the river from Lewisburg. Their drawing shows 160 numbered lots, with named streets and alleys, running along the south side of the crosscut canal.

Starting near the banks of the Susquehanna, roughly where May's Drive-In is currently located at the end of the Lewisburg bridge, Churchville is on the south side of Route 45, stretching east towards Montandon. Today, this locale is undeveloped, unoccupied, and uncultivated land, with no visible signs that there was ever a town, or even a single building, on that property.

Maps are not the only testimony pertaining to the town of Churchville. The April 3, 1833 edition of *The Lewisburg Journal and Union County Advocate*² contains an ad placed by Francis and Jeremiah Church ("the Subscribers") heralding the birth of this new community and announcing that the lots would be available to purchase at a public sale in two weeks.



This is followed by an article in the April 24 edition of *The Journal* proudly proclaiming that the property sale was a resounding success and excitedly announcing that houses will be constructed on the land in the immediate future. (see photo, p. 4)

blue colored pencil accents, but it contains no name of the "artist," date of creation, or other background information.) See also partial picture on p. 8 of this article.

² Microfilm collection of newspapers in the Ellen Clarke Bertrand Library at Bucknell University.

So, who are “Messrs. J. and F. Church,” founders of this Pennsylvania town that bears their name? According to a journal left by Jerry (Jeremiah) Church,³ they are brothers who grew up in Jerico, now Bainbridge, in Chenango County, New York. Their eldest brother, Robert Church, and a sister, Elizabeth Church, settled in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, across the river from Harrisburg. Robert’s Pennsylvania home functioned as a frequent refuge for Jerry throughout the years whenever he was ill or destitute.

Jerry appears to have been an eccentric entrepreneur whose primary skill was salesmanship. Though he sometimes peddled merchandise door to door, he never seemed to make much profit in this line of work, and he was perpetually broke.

“About the first of January 1831, my brother Francis came to Harrisburg from the state of New York with a fine horse and sleigh, going to the South and wished me to go with him. I told him that I could not go, for I had no money to go with. He said that made no difference for he had money enough for us both and I must go with him. He said that he intended to go into some speculation in some way, but could not tell what it would be, until something turned up in our travels, that we could make money at.”⁴

The two brothers then trekked extensively around the country during a period when America was rapidly expanding. Along the way, they were introduced to property speculation and decided to venture into the field of “land prospecting” as a profession. They purchased acreage, divided it into lots and sold them in Tennessee, as well as Illinois. Then they returned to Pennsylvania in 1833 to try their hand at turning a profit on sales in the Commonwealth.

That year was very eventful in the life of the Church brothers. Immediately before drawing up the plot for Churchville they bought a farm adjoining the borough of Williamsport and laid out what they called “Church’s addition” to that town.

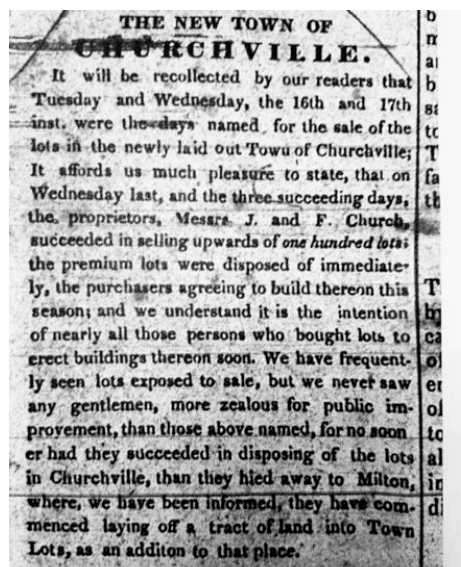
“The next town we made our appearance in was Lewisburg, formerly called Derrstown. We there made a purchase of one hundred and twenty-five acres of land, of Gen. Green, at forty-five dollars per acre, laying on both sides of the cross-cut, from the end of the bridge to the Pennsylvania canal, opposite the town of Lewisburg...”⁵

³ Jerry Church, *Journal of Travels, Adventures, and Remarks, of Jerry Church* (Harrisburg, 1845). Accessed online December 17, 2016 at <https://babel.hathitrust.org>. Digitized by Google, Original from Penn State.

⁴ Church, pp. 18-19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Following this, as the previously cited April 24 *Lewisburg Journal* article states (below), “they hied away to Milton, where, we have been informed, they have commenced laying off a tract of land into Town Lots, as an addition to that place.”



Later the same year, Francis Church moved west to Clark County, Missouri. In September of 1833 he surveyed and laid out a second town called Churchville in that state. The Church family name bestowed on this Missouri town, however, was not destined to survive. “About 1848 or prior thereto the name of [Churchville] was dropped by the common consent of the people and that of Alexandria adopted for the whole town. The change of name was made on account of the alleged improper domestic relations of the original proprietor of the town.”⁶

Jerry Church, on the other hand, remained in Pennsylvania where he subsequently expanded his land speculation team to include his youngest brother, Willard Church. They jointly founded the town of Lock Haven in October, 1833, where Jerry continued to live for more than a decade. During his tenure there he advocated strongly for the formation of Clinton County, which was created from portions of Centre and Lycoming Counties.⁷ There was much opposition to the creation of this new

⁶ *A Directory of Towns, Villages, and Hamlets, Past and Present, of Clark County, Missouri*, compiled by Arthur Paul Moser. Accessed online December 18, 2016 at <https://thelibrary.org/lochist/moser/clarkpl.html>.

⁷ John Blair Linn, *History of Centre and Clinton Counties Pennsylvania*, (J. B. Lippincott & Co, Philadelphia, 1883), see map between pages 526 and 527.

district, directed specifically at Jerry, as reflected in an article in the *Democrat* on March 26, 1839.

“A gentleman from away down east (Jeremiah Church), who has traveled in different parts of the United States laying out towns has laid out one on the Susquehanna and desires to enhance the value of his lots and make a speculation; hence the project of clipping Centre County and enriching himself at the expense of her citizens.”⁸

Jerry eventually emigrated west in 1846 and founded several other towns,⁹ ultimately settling in the territory of Iowa where he founded a city named Carlisle. He then remained in that area for most of the rest of his life.¹⁰

Jerry states that in the meantime (1833) his brother Willard “married a lady living near Milton, Pennsylvania. His wife [Mary A. Montgomery¹¹] had an interest in a store with her brother Robert Montgomery. Of course [Willard] became a partner in the store, in the town of Milton, as large as life. They concluded they would move their store to our new town of Lock Haven, and did so; but it did not last long.” This is because Willard and his family lived beyond their means and failed to pay for the merchandise in their store. So, the sheriff seized their goods and sold everything to pay their debts. Willard, his wife, and brother-in-law then emigrated west, joined Francis in the state of Missouri, and settled there.¹²

This is the story of the family that founded the town of Churchville and bestowed their name on it, but it is not the last word about the community from one of the Church brothers. In his journal, Jerry writes:

“...Having been in the habit of making towns, we concluded that we could make one most anywhere, and we thought we would try a small one in opposition to the one on the other side of the river – Lewisburg. However, we did not frighten them much as a rival, but we got their feelings raised and blood up, so that they bought of us at beautiful prices. There was one gentleman who purchased seventeen acres at one hundred dollars per acre, the next day after we had bought it at forty-five. We laid out the balance into streets, alleys, and out-lots, and

⁸ Linn, p. 82.

⁹ J. F. Meginness, *Otzinachson; A History of the West Branch Valley of the Susquehanna* (Henry B. Ashmead, Philadelphia, 1857), p. 447.

¹⁰ Find A Grave Memorial #133218409 for Willard Church (1808-1851), accessed online December 18, 2016 at <http://www.findagrave.com>.

¹¹ John W. Jordan, *Genealogical and Personal History of Northern Pennsylvania*, Volume III, (1913), p. 937.

¹² Church, page 44.

called it Churchville. We sold out the whole purchase in two weeks, and made some money, but not much of a town.”¹³

It is difficult to confirm the accuracy of Jerry’s statements regarding his profits from the sales of land in Churchville, because only a single deed documenting the purchase of any property there is on record in the Northumberland County Courthouse. Curiously, it details the sale of thirty-three lots in Churchville by Abbot Green and his wife Margaret to Jeremiah Church on May 7, 1833, for “five hundred dollars in gold or silver money,” as well as the subsequent sale of the same thirty-three lots by Jeremiah Church to Alexander Graham on May 28, 1835, for \$280.00! This entire transaction was recorded in January of 1836 in a single document.¹⁴ No other deeds pertaining to Churchville or the Church brothers are contained in the Northumberland County records.

Viewed as a whole, it is clear that the Church brothers had a financial investment in Churchville, in the short run, but they had no vested interest in its ultimate success in the long run. Put in plain and simple language, they were solely land speculators out to make a dime and line their own pockets.

That begs the question, however, of what happened to Churchville. Years later Jerry Church stated, “It was a very pleasant place for a town, but there were no houses built in it but one, I believe, and that was a hotel; and in order to let the people know that that was the town of Churchville, the proprietor of the house had the name written on a large sign – ‘CHURCHVILLE HOTEL,’ and I am very thankful to the gentleman for keeping up appearances.”¹⁵

According to the April 24 article in the *Lewisburg Journal*, previously cited, the Churchville lots sold almost immediately, and the owners indicated plans to build right away. Why, then, was nothing besides a hotel constructed? In his *History of Northumberland County*, Herbert C. Bell suggests a reason. He indicates that this planned community constituted the earliest attempt to locate a settlement on the east side of the river between Milton and Northumberland. “This effort to establish a town no doubt indicated considerable enterprise on the part of the projectors, but the place

¹³ *Ibid.*, page 38.

¹⁴ Deed Book, Vol. Z (1836), pp. 476-477, Northumberland County Courthouse, Sunbury, Pennsylvania,

¹⁵ Church, p. 38

failed to materialize, owing in all probability to the fact that the country was not so thickly settled at that time as to require an intermediate trading point between Milton and Northumberland.”¹⁶

The fact remains, however, that an “intermediate trading point” was already in existence on the west side of the Susquehanna, a place christened the Port of Lewisburg when the crosscut canal was constructed in 1833. The crosscut was aimed directly at that prospective commercial center.¹⁷ Though Lewisburg was already emerging as an established settlement by that time, perhaps the Church brothers overlooked or underestimated its importance as a competitor with their planned community. Jerry’s statement that “we did not frighten them much as a rival, but we got their feelings raised and blood up, so that they bought of us at beautiful prices” is open to interpretation. Could he have meant that the good citizens of Lewisburg bought up the property in Churchville, but never built houses there, in order to prevent the establishment of a rival community that might have meant competition for them?

We will probably never know the real reason for Churchville’s failure to spring to life and thrive during the 1830s, but we do know it was dealt a final death blow three decades later. That becomes apparent in a document included with the Churchville maps. This is addressed to the “Honorable [sic.] Judges of the Court of Quarter Sessions of the Peace of the County of Northumberland at August Sessions A. D. 1861.” It is a “Petition of John Kinkead to have certain streets & alleys in Churchville vacated.” The document states:

“The Petition of John Kinkead respectfully represents that about the year 1833 the town of Churchville in Chillisquaque Township in said County of North’d. was laid out, but streets and alleys never opened and nor was said plan of a town built up That said petitioner is owner of nearly all the said territory

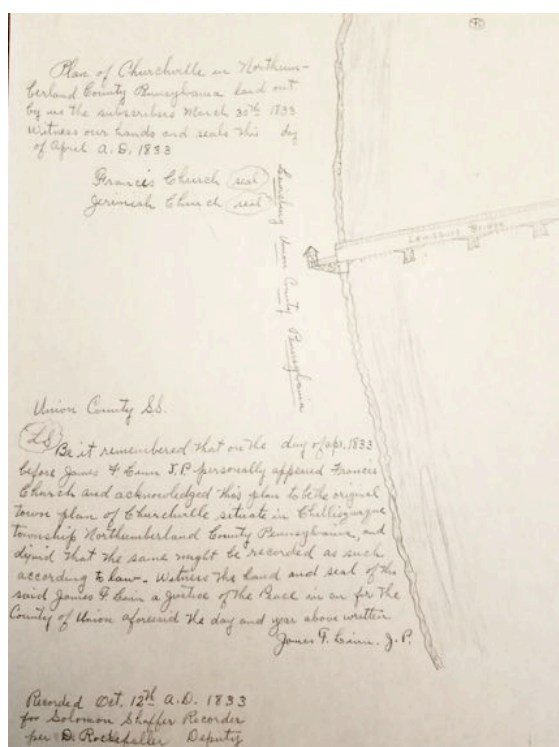
¹⁶ Herbert C. Bell, *History of Northumberland County Pennsylvania* (Brown, Runk & Co., 1881), pp. 720, 723.

¹⁷ With the creation of the crosscut, Lewisburg then had direct access to the canal system, as illustrated on the map. This entrée was unavailable prior to the crosscut because the West Branch portion of the Pennsylvania Canal, from Northumberland to Muncy, was actually built east of the Susquehanna River, not directly adjacent to it. The distance between the river and the canal, on the Northumberland County side of the Susquehanna, was approximately three-quarters of a mile. When the crosscut was constructed that opened the door for Lewisburg to utilize the waterway. Once it was connected to the main canal system this critical linkage enabled the town both to gain admittance to a major transportation thoroughway for its use and to become accessible to others utilizing the canal system. For more information see *The Amazing Pennsylvania Canals, 17th Anniversary Edition* (American Canal and Transportation Center, March 2001) by William H Shank, P.E., and “How Lewisburg Became A Canal Port” by J. Orin Oliphant (Northumberland County Historical Society, 1996).

embracing said Churchville and uses the same as a farm. He therefore prays the Court to appoint viewers to view and vacate that part of Market st. extending from East corner of lot No7 to the West branch Canal also that part of Jackson street between Franklin alley and canal alley also that part of Franklin Alley between Jackson street and Cherry Alley and also that part of Cherry Alley between Franklin Alley and Market street, and make return of their proceedings according to law.”

This record functions as the official obituary of Churchville, a town that died without having ever lived, and which was then ultimately subsumed within a local farmer’s field.

There is one remaining chapter, however, in the history of Churchville – the mystery of the maps. Both copies of the historical society maps that led to this investigation are clearly much more recent than 1833, which is given as the date when the original plan was drawn up. The WPA map shown at the beginning of this article is dated as 1939, a century after the original plan was created, and the other map (pictured in part below), is undated, but is obviously not vintage. There is no information with either copy to explain why it was created or where the original map from which each was drawn is located.



When Bell wrote his History of Northumberland County in 1881 he described the original plan in some detail and stated that it is on record in the “county archives” at

Sunbury; however, there is no map in the Northumberland County Courthouse, nor is there a copy of the deed for this land.¹⁸ Those records have apparently been missing for decades, as they were reported to have been “detached and lost” as long ago as 1955.¹⁹

Fortunately, however, in 1833 a duplicate Churchville map was drawn up for someone in Union County at the same time the original one was created for Northumberland County. Though the site for Churchville was not in Union County, a notation on all the maps states that in April of 1833 Francis Church personally appeared before “James F. Linn, Justice of the Peace in and for the County of Union” where he “acknowledged this plan to be the original town plan of Churchville situate in Chillisquaque Township Northumberland County Pennsylvania, and desired that the same might be recorded as such according to law.” This authentic map was retained by the aforementioned James F. Linn, of Lewisburg, and eventually gifted to the archives in the Bucknell University Library by his son, Merrill W. Linn.²⁰ In April of 2011, however, it was transferred to the Northumberland County Historical Society where it is now housed in their library’s special collections.²¹ Because of the age and condition of this map it is not openly accessible to the general public, but the society generously made it available to be photographed for inclusion in this article (see next page).

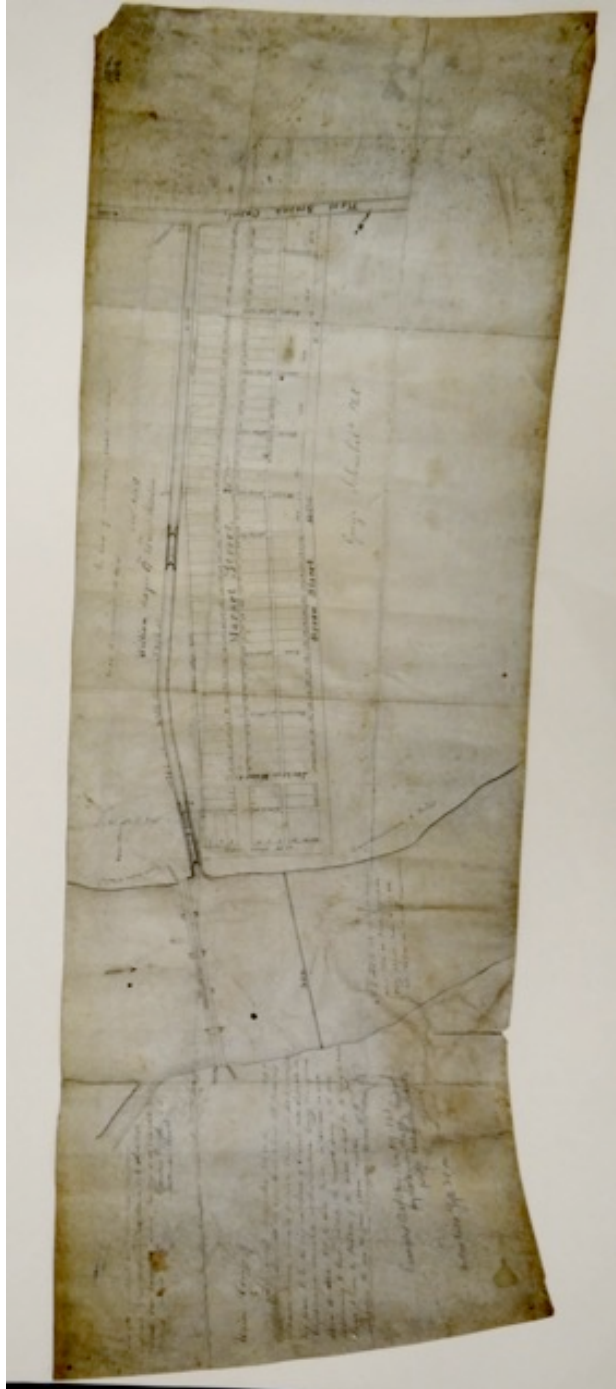
Thus ends the saga of Churchville, a Lewisburg crosscut canal community that really never was, doomed forever to an obscure existence at best, though now partially resurrected postmortem in this document.

¹⁸ There is an entry for Churchville in Index Number 1, the *Index to Charters and Town Plots in Northumberland County*, which cites Vol. Z, page 20 ½ and states the record was filed Oct. 12, 1833, but no such page exists in the record book and no corresponding document could be located among the historical records from that era in the basement of the courthouse, where they are stored.

¹⁹ Oliphant, p. 62; original paper presented at meeting of the Northumberland County Historical Society on November 11, 1955.

²⁰ Montandon Alumni Association, *West Chillisquaque Township, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania: The Historical Development of a Community 1700-2000*, pp. I-4, I-5.

²¹ Information provided by Isabella O’Neil, Head of Special Collections and University Archives in the Ellen Clarke Bertrand Library at Bucknell University. According to library records it holds a “Photostat copy of [the map] for use in the library instead of original.” Additionally, the Montandon Alumni Association work cited immediately above states that the map was “reproduced by the specialist at the Bertrand Library and instructional Media Services Graphic/Photographic Services” at Bucknell, and a photograph of this is included in the Alumni Association’s publication; however, Mrs. O’Neil states the department which took the picture is no longer in existence at the university, and the aforementioned photostat copy is not currently in the library’s holdings.



The Original Town Plan of Churchville dated March 30, 1833. It appears to have been drawn up on parchment, which has a yellowed tinge to it, and over the years the ink has faded, making the detail difficult to see. The Lewisburg bridge is barely visible in this picture, however one can make out the crosscut canal extending from the Susquehanna out to the point where it forms a “T” with the West Branch Canal. Parallel to the crosscut are numbered lots, neatly laid out along Market Street and Green Street. The straight line across the river shows the location of a dam, which is not shown on the later maps.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to the staff in the Ellen Clarke Bertrand Library at Bucknell University, the employees in the office of the Northumberland County Recorder of Deeds, and the volunteers at the Northumberland County Historical Society Library for their assistance in conducting this inquiry. Most especially, I want to thank Ann Roll at the NCHS Library. Without her skillful navigation through the detours, dead ends, and roadblocks of research this investigation would have met with an untimely demise much faster and more final than that of Churchville.

