

## **William Cameron and the Silsby Steam-powered Fire Engine**

In 1874, a No. 2 Silsby steam-powered fire engine, valued at \$10,000 (about \$210,000 today) was given to the borough of Lewisburg by William Cameron, one of his many gifts and investments in his community. This engine is now in the museum of the William Cameron Fire Company at N. 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Lewisburg, next to the current fire station.

William Cameron was a grandson of immigrant Simon Cameron who brought his family to the American colonies from Inverness, Scotland in 1755, settling in Lancaster County, PA. Among Simon's children was Charles who was born in Scotland about 1750.

Charles, his wife Martha Pfoutz (of German descent) and their children moved from Lancaster County to Sunbury in 1808, and then to Lewisburg in 1810. Charles Cameron was a tailor. He died 16 January 1814 and Martha died 10 November 1830. Their children were William, John, Simon, James, Daniel, Eliza, Jane and Catherine. Simon Cameron (1799-1889) was active in business and politics, and served briefly as Secretary of War under Lincoln. James Cameron (1800-1861) died in the first battle of the Civil War at Bull Run in 1861, a colonel of the 79<sup>th</sup> Highlanders of NY.

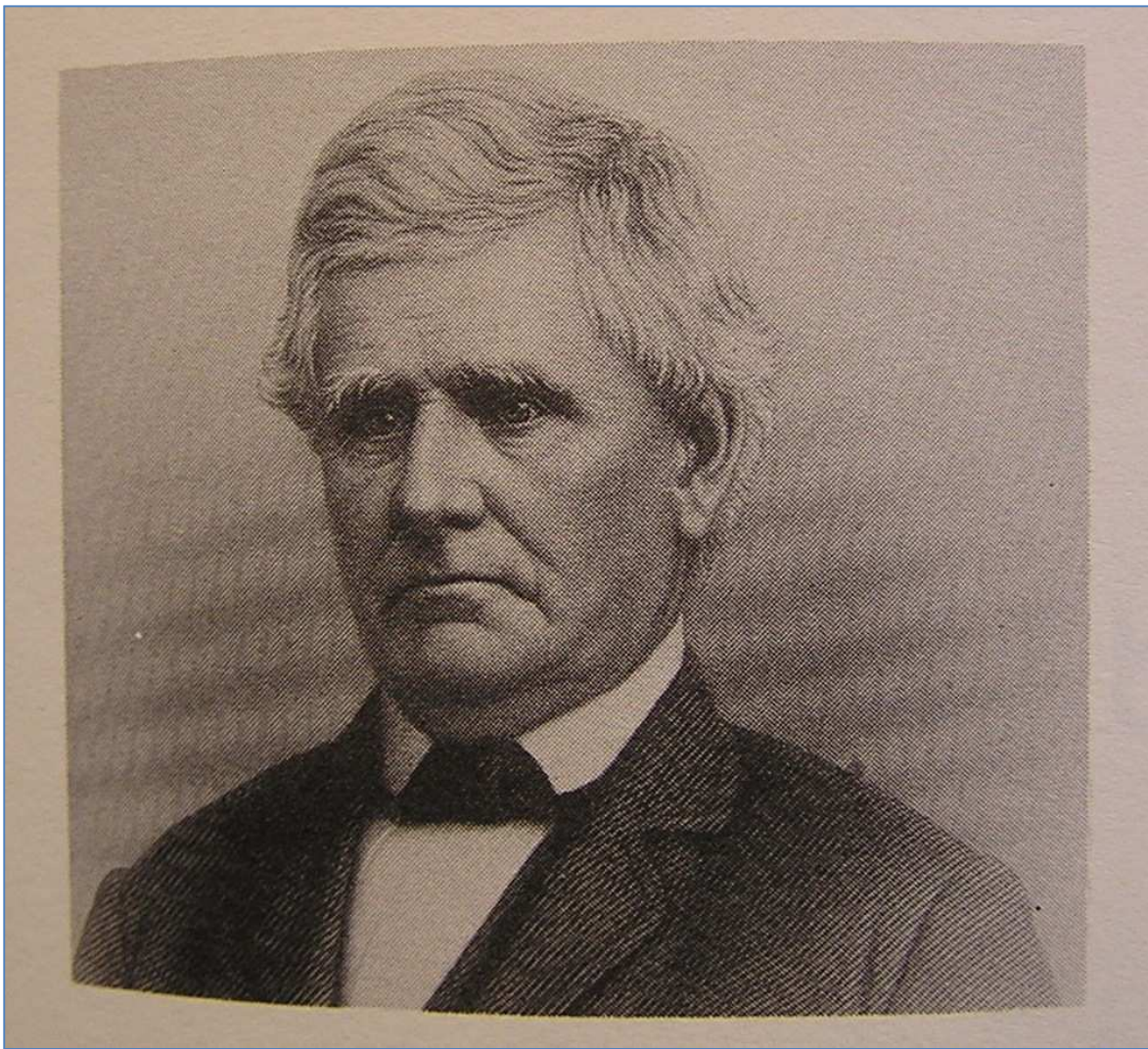
William Cameron was born 15 October 1795 in Maytown, Lancaster County. He began his work life as a tailor, following his father's trade. As a young man in Lewisburg, he also worked on the river taking produce to market. In 1820 he married Eleanor McLaughlin (1803-1886), a daughter of Hugh McLaughlin. Eleanor was an energetic and resourceful person in her own right. While William was involved in business, she managed the family homes, their first being a log cabin at Market and Fourth streets. Of their eight children, four died in childhood; two died young: William Jr. and Elizabeth (married John A. Green); and two out-lived their parents: Mary (married John B. Packer) and Jane (married Francis Harrison, MD). William and Eleanor Cameron built a large brick home at the corner of Market and S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street on the foundation of an earlier building. The home was remodeled by their daughter Jane Cameron Harrison in 1887 and again in 1893. This beautiful house with gables, oriel windows and tower, has been preserved by current Lewisburg resident Betty Cook.

### **Cameron's Contributions to the Community**

One of William Cameron's many public works projects was a contract for the cross-cut canal at Lewisburg. The cross-cut, which opened in October 1833, connected the town with the canal along the east side of the Susquehanna River. The canal increased businesses and residences in Lewisburg. In 1830, Lewisburg had 924 residents; in 1850, more than 2,000. New businesses included a foundry, machine shop and boatyards. The canal was instrumental in bringing area products, including grains and flour to points south, as far as Baltimore, and bringing American and imported goods into central Pennsylvania.

Cameron and other investors obtained a charter in 1853, for the Lewisburg, Centre and Spruce Creek Railroad, with plans to connect Lewisburg with rail lines in the Susquehanna and Juniata valleys. Construction of the rail line was delayed by the Civil War and funding problems. A bridge eventually connected Lewisburg to Montandon and the first train arrived in the borough 23 July 1869. During 1872-3, railroad construction continued west, finally being completed to Centre County in July 1877.

In 1853, William Cameron founded the Dime Savings Bank (later the Lewisburg National Bank). In 1874, he bought the Revere House. Renamed the Cameron House it was a popular traveler's stop (now the Lewisburg Hotel). Another endeavor was the Rentschler (Rengler) Mill, subsequently run by his daughter, then his grandson. An accomplished businessman, Cameron was also said to be generous to the community. For example, he would have coal dealers ensure that coal was given to the needy during the winter. And, of course, his donation of the steam-powered fire engine established the fire company that still proudly bears his name.



William Cameron 1795-1877, influential businessman and investor in Lewisburg in the 1800s.





The Wm Cameron Engine Company's Silsby Steam-engine in front of the Fire Engine House, built in 1877 by contractor Joseph Musser, on S. 4<sup>th</sup> Street. The 4<sup>th</sup> Street fire house was razed in July 1968 and is now a parking lot.

The Union County Historical Society will observe Fire Safety Month with a tour of the William Cameron Fire Museum on Thursday, October 9 at 7 PM. The program is free and open to all. Call UCHS at 570-524-8666 for more information.