

Jerry Church

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Jeremiah Church, founder of Lock Haven and Cinton County, was born December 11, 1796 at Jericho, New York (now Bainbridge.)

History does not record the names of his parents, though he spoke kindly of them. They gave him a place to stay when he needed it, clothed him and fed him. His father was an alcoholic, reported Church in his journal—Alcohol consumed his life, and eventually caused his death.

Jerry Church attended a small, one-room school, taught by a schoolmaster in the winter, but a schoolmarm in the summer. Early on, Jerry was interested in females. In his journal, he claimed to have "thought the most of the ladies' summer school."

At age thirteen, he tried to kiss the schoolmarm. His parents were notified, and it was suggested that he leave the school. He left cheerfully enough, and claimed that he was interested in things that they didn't teach in school.

Travels and Businesses

Jerry Church's first job after leaving school was making shingles for a Pennsylvania market. He didn't make much money, since he only worked when he felt like it, and often leaving work early to attend parties. In his journal, he wrote that hard work didn't agree with him, and hurt his feelings.

He invested \$300 he'd saved, and purchased half a drove of cattle. The market value dropped, however, and he lost most of the money. Deciding that cattle weren't for him, he purchased a violin and studied music. His parents forbid him to play in the house, so he played alone in the barn.

Often, in his travels, he would be able to make a few extra dollars by playing.

Jerry traveled with a man named Porter, assisting with a traveling wax museum. After making a profit from this, he invested in a lumber raft on the Susquehanna with his brother. This was a disaster, their raft destroyed before making it to the destination.

Over the next few years, he worked as a sailor, a peddler, a farmer, and a grocer. Returning to New York, he went into business with his brother Jesse, buying a store. The community was very poor, and often the brothers were paid in promises of labor or lumber. The business lost money largely because Jerry, typically, couldn't resist giving unlimited credit to any pretty face who dropped by the store. When Jesse died, Jerry sold the rest of the business for what little profit he could, and left town again.

Jerry Church then traveled around New York and Pennsylvania. He gambled at both cards and horses, and lost money. He headed for North Carolina, and dug for gold. This ended up with a bunch of small gold nuggets worth thirty-seven and a half cents, which he carried in his pocket for years to prove he'd been a gold digger.

Founding Lock Haven

In 1833, Jerry came to visit his brother Robert in New Cumberland. Then he traveled to Milton, where he met his brother Willard, who had come down from New York to try and find an investment that would require little capital.

Willard knew of a good place to start a town. He described it as being at the head of the West Branch Canal, on the pool of the Dunnstown Dam. The two of them examined the land, owned by a doctor named John Henderson. Jerry recognized it as being a good deal and an excellent possibility.

They went to Williamsport, to sign on a lawyer Jerry knew as a sleeping partner. Armed with the promise of money, they went to Doctor Henderson and agreed to pay him five thousand dollars of the twenty thousand he was requesting, with the balance due in two years. The deal was to be finalized in April of 1834.

Jerry plotted out the town in October of 1833, and prepared to sell lots at a public sale by April. He called his new town Lock Haven, because of the canal locks that existed there.

When April came around, the sleeping partner in Williamsport backed out of the deal. He wrote Jerry a letter of resignation, which Jerry commented was a "beautiful note to write at that stage of the game." Jerry went back to Williamsport and found another investor, who loaned them three thousand dollars. He and Willard were able to make the payment to Doctor Henderson.

They marked off half the land for the site of Lock Haven, and sold off additional lots at a hundred and fifty dollars apiece. The biggest lot went to James Jeffries for nine thousand dollars, which enabled Jerry and Willard to pay off their debt a year early.

Willard married Mary Montgomery, of Milton, and along with Mary's brother Robert, opened a store in Lock Haven. Spending more than they made, however, left them with debts, and their interest in the town was sold to pay for them. Willard and Mary then moved to Missouri.

Many people think that Church Street is named because there was a church on it. In a way, that's true, but the church was Jerry Church. The alleys on either side of it are named Willard's Alley and Mary's Alley, after Church's brother and Willard's wife.

Clinton County

Jerry decided to campaign for a new county, which would contain part of Lycoming and part of Centre. He suggested Eagle County for the name. For six years, he campaigned the state legislature to create such a county, but they refused. Finally, he and some supporters proposed that the county be named after Governor Dewitt Clinton of New York, and the county was created, and called Clinton after him. The legislature didn't seem to realize that only the name had been changed.

He proposed to place the county seat in Lock Haven. "I concluded that having a county seat and law and justice so handy, we could get a judgement against our neighbors almost any time. I soon found out that the less a person has to do with the law and attending courts, the more money he can have in his pocket, and the happier man he will be."

After some opposition, Jerry placed the courthouse along Church Street, where Robb Elementary School still stands.

Church's Folly

Church's office building was eight feet above the ground, on thirteen pillars, representing the thirteen original states. The room inside was fourteen feet square. Architects asked him what order the building was, and Church responded that he never did anything according to order.

His tree house, a place for relaxation, was built in a cluster of black walnut trees. It was twenty-five feet above the ground, forty feet long, and seven feet wide. It had a railing around it, and a seat through the entire length. Stairs wound up to it around one of the trees. A German painter misunderstood Jerry when he asked for it to look like marble; he painted it full of black and white spots. Came to be known as "Church's Folly," and the citizens commented on the waste of money. Church replied that he sat far more comfortable on that seat than he did on a bag of dollars. He later commented, "All were willing to take a seat with me now and then."

No photo remains of Church's Folly. The structure can somewhat be seen in a painting of the town, now hanging in the period kitchen of the Heisey Museum.

Daughter Margaret

As far as history records, Jerry never married. He was a romantic, dashing young man, though, and had a more-than-healthy interest in women. The only surviving photo of him shows him in old age, a cheerful old man. But he was young and debonair once, and very popular among the ladies.

History also does not record the name of the mother of Church's daughter, Margaret. Jerry may have fallen in love with a girl from a wealthy Lock Haven family, who were scandalized by the out-of-wedlock pregnancy. A story related to Jerry's great-grandchild hints at the baby being left on his doorstep, with the family of the mother denying any relationship.

Jerry left Lock Haven in 1945, taking his daughter Margaret with him. For all his free behavior as a young man, he was reportedly a good father, educating and taking care of Margaret. She grew up mainly in Carlisle, Iowa, another town that Jerry founded after Lock Haven. Margaret grew up to marry a Doctor William Sproul Hull, and they took Jerry in when he was old and his adventures were over. Jerry Church, reportedly still a cheerful, vibrant old man, still played the fiddle for his friends, and socialized as much as he could.

Jerry Church died November 1, 1874, at the home of his daughter and her husband. He left everything he owned to his daughter, Margaret—Jerry Church had, by the end of his life, become an important man, and a property owner. It was a long way to come for a poor musician from New York.