

The Lord High Admiral

(And the Elephant Who Tied Up River Traffic)



Thousands of timber rafts once rode the spring freshets to markets located along the lower Delaware River where the vessels were disassembled and the pine and hemlock logs fashioned into spars and masts for the lordly ships of the British Main.

Daniel Skinner, according to local historians, was among the first loggers to make the trip. Sometime during the 1760s he and two mates launched an 80-foot long raft of lashed logs from the Catskill Mountain settlement of Cochecton, N. Y.

Shipbuilders offered up a rousing welcome when Skinner and one of the mates (the other reportedly drowned) came ashore in Philadelphia, some 200 miles downstream. Overjoyed with the fresh supply of timber, the shipbuilders honored Skinner (some say he honored himself) with the title “Lord High Admiral of the Delaware.”

For years Skinner had a lock on the title and the river’s timber trade. He was a pioneer whose ingenuity changed the face of a major waterway. His river adventure had opened up a new trade route—the New World’s woodlands now providing timber once harvested from fabled British forests felled by the axe of colonization.

The wood was used to make furniture and in the hand-laying of large vessels. Stout logs became masts for warships like the U.S.S. Pennsylvania, a 120-gun frigate completed at a Philadelphia shipyard in 1837 for the fledgling U.S. Navy. It was said at the time

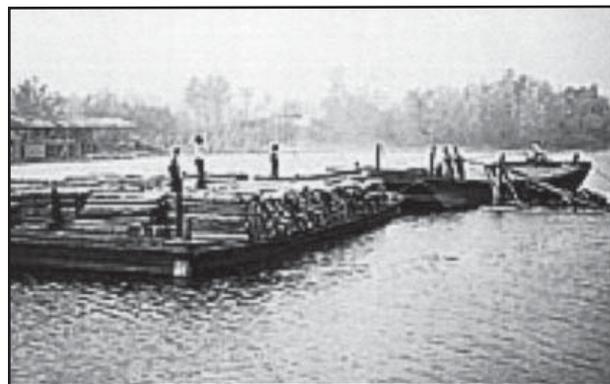
to be the largest sea-going vessel in the world. The young nation’s lumber carried sails through battles with Barbary pirates at Tripoli and in engagements against the British fleet during the War of 1812.

In time, the New World’s forests became as barren as the ones in England. Sarah Gallagher, in a book recording the history of Lambertville, N.J., lamented:

*The hillsides are shorn of their forests,
Handsome dwellings adorn the plateau.
What’er was romantic or rustic,
There is naught of it left, that I know.*

Daniel Skinner died in 1813. Almost 200 years would pass before his honorary title would be given to a new generation of folks drawn to the river. In 1997, the title, and a modified version, were bestowed on a handful of people who became the first “Lady and Lord High Admirals” of the Delaware River Sojourn, another watery adventure which celebrates the river’s outstanding natural beauty.

It has since become a tradition of the sojourn that “High Admirals” are selected each year as tributes to those who have made outstanding contributions to protect



A Delaware River timber raft

the health of the longest un-dammed river east of the Mississippi.

Sojourners travel in canoes and other non-motorized water craft guided by professional safety patrols. Paddlers traverse mostly placid water, interrupted by scattered riffles and relatively tame rapids on a waterway free of major obstructions.

Skinner and the other frontiersmen who challenged nature's fury in search of riches encountered a much different journey.

Leslie Wood, in his classic *Rafting on the Delaware River*, describes a leg of a logger's trip in which his craft encounters a seven-foot high man-made dam with spring flood waters surging over its top:

"The forward end of the raft floated out a few feet in midair and then suddenly plunged down into the water below, the raft bending in the middle from the force of gravity on both ends, and the forward oarsmen, who sometimes stood two feet in water when the raft plunged, were hidden from the sight of those on the rear end. A tremendous pressure was exerted on all parts of the craft when going over the dam, the whole framework creaking and groaning like a huge monster in terrible agony."

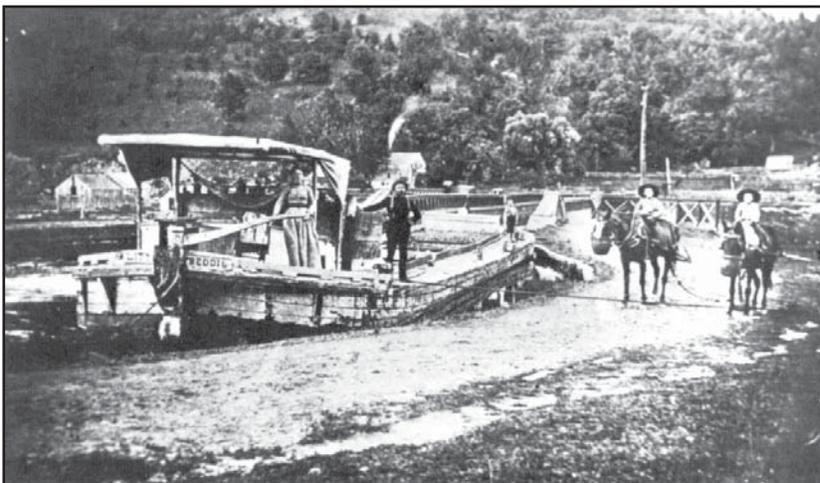
Rafts slammed into ice jams, coal barges, ferry boats, and other rafts that had been slowed by slack waters up ahead. Gunfights broke out among nerve-tattered boatmen desperate for landfall. One raft ran into an elephant. No wonder then, that at the end of many a voyage raftsmen would be known to partake of an invigorator from the whiskey jug.

The elephant accident happened in 1869. A circus was headed to Milford, Pa., for a

performance. Fearing the bridge spanning the Delaware would not support the elephants, they were led into the water at Port Jervis, N.Y., for the trip to the opposite shore.

It was about this time that the luck of timberman Frank Walton ran out and his eyes became the size of half dollars. Hurdling downstream at the mercy of a flood current churned by a valley's worth of spring snowmelt, with no way to stop and no time to veer away, his raft slammed into Tippoo Sahib, a mean old pachyderm that recently had killed its trainer. Fending off with oars and blasphemous shouts, Walton and crew managed to force the crazed animal off the badly listing raft and back into the water.

According to accounts at the time the men weren't injured.



The canal boat "Little Freddie" sits idle on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware Aqueduct in the 1890s. Two boys on mules rest on the towpath. (Courtesy of the Wayne County Historical Society.)

There are no known accounts of whether the crew ever told the tale of the elephant to other raftsmen who might well have found merriment in examining its veracity, or whether for once in their lives they chose a safer course, taking it with them to their graves. 

-A bit of history brought to you by the Delaware River Basin Commission (www.drbc.net)