

VIEWS

A LOOK BACK | STODDARTSVILLE

Keeping a dream alive

By DONNA TALARICO
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BUCK TWP. — John Stoddart laid a solid foundation for his dream town. It didn't work out like he hoped. But one of his descendants is building history.

Stoddartsville was supposed to be a thriving canal town with mills, shops, taverns and homes. It was supposed to be a bustling town that housed the families who worked at the town's mills. It was supposed to develop into a port city with tourist attractions. Instead, the Lehigh River town was washed away by natural and financial disasters.

Nancy Stoddart of California is a descendant of the town's founder. She returned to Stoddartsville in 2003 to bury her mother's ashes.

"I am the last Stoddart left. At the time my ancestor was the biggest employer in the area and many of the houses were occupied by his workers," said Stoddart, who is in her 50s.

Stoddartsville was laid out in 1815 starting with the construction of a stone gristmill and sawmill. Not too long after came a church, tavern, store, blacksmith shop and copper shop. About 40 houses were built, mostly for Stoddart's workers and other business owners.

"There was also a large 19th-century house, The Maples, which burned down when I was a child. You can still see the ruins," said Stoddart. The ruins show that the house was rather large. Steps and a gate lead to what used to be the front yard.

Ambitious beginnings

John Stoddart wanted to build a port town on the Lehigh Canal. He partnered with Josiah White, the man for whom White Haven is named, to improve navigation on the Lehigh River from White Haven for boats to transport goods to and from Stoddartsville. However, the dams only allowed for one-way travel, which meant barges that arrived in Stoddartsville could not return and instead had to be broken up and sold.

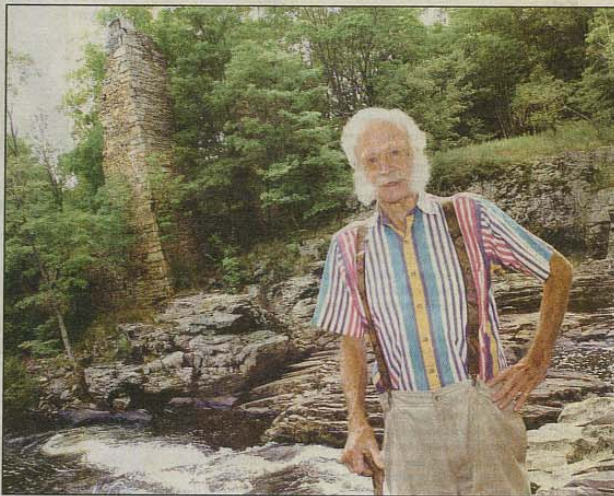
Stoddart got a dose of optimism when the mining industry grew and started using two-way canals. But White and his Lehigh Valley Coal Co. saw no benefit in extending a two-way canal 12 additional miles into Stoddartsville. Soon after, Stoddart went bankrupt.

By the 1830s, Stoddartsville was almost abandoned, making minimal income by selling lumber to the coal companies. In 1862, the dams were flooded and the gristmill and sawmill were destroyed. Later, forest fires ripped through the town, destroying nearly everything the water did not consume. In the 1950s, more fires and flooding destroyed much of what was left. But, even Mother Nature didn't totally wipe out the little town that never was.

Preserving the history

Today, Stoddartsville is nothing but scenic waterfalls, a few homes and ruins of the old gristmill and other structures. It was given a historical marker and placed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

A historic marker for Stoddartsville gives a quick history lesson.



John Butler, 86, has developed his Buck Township home into a museum of sorts preserving the history of Stoddartsville. He stands here overlooking falls and remnants of an old gristmill.

Some of the land was sold to the state for gamelands. The rest is privately owned.

"A man from another branch of the family, John Butler, now owns much of it," said Stoddart. Butler, who still lives close by, is many years Stoddart's senior. He has not only recorded the memories of the village, he has preserved some of them.

With white hair and bushy sideburns, John Butler Jr. is a walking, talking museum.

"I know everything there is to know about Wyoming Valley," said Butler, 86.

A 1940 graduate of Yale, Butler spent 25 years in the Navy. He taught science and geology in Bucks County and retired in Stoddartsville. He lives in a house built by his grandfather in 1875 just below the Lehigh Falls, picturesque scenery that he recalls was once used in a 1920s-era silent film. He shares the home with his beloved Jenny, a 2-year-old cocker spaniel that rarely leaves his side.

Speaking about the area, Butler eagerly shows off pictures and artifacts that adorn his museumlike home.

"This is Stoddart and his wife. And this is his mansion, that's the Maples. It's a big house. All that's left is the gate and the stone foundations. And, that's the old mill ruins before more of them fell down," he said, identifying pictures on the wall.

Butler's family history dates back to Zebulon Butler of Connecticut, who fought in George Washington's army (he has the commission paper to prove it) and helped settle the Wyoming Valley as a founding member of the Susquehanna Company. The Butlers married the Stoddarts twice. John Stoddart's son Isaac married Lydia Butler, and his grandfather, Wilkes-Barre lawyer George Butler, married Gertrude Stoddart.

"He met her theoretically while he was out here fishing because she was up here at this house with her father. He met her fishing and fell in love with her and married her," he said.

Another Butler, Lord Butler, started the Easton-Wilkes-Barre turnpike, a toll road that went right through Stoddartsville. A bridge across the Lehigh River took travelers right by the Stoddartsville Inn. In a 1955 flood, that bridge caved in and was rebuilt upriver on the current state Route 115. Al-



Remnants of the old gristmill near the falls on the Lehigh River in Stoddartsville in the late 1800s are seen in this photo owned by John Butler. The town took advantage of canal transportation.

though the old bridge has sentimental value to Butler (he proposed to his wife there "Say yes, or you're going over!") the flooding and bridge relocation helped preserve Stoddartsville as it is today.

"The road was very busy. It was difficult for me to keep the bad people off the falls. They'd go down there and drink beer and destroy everything," he said.

Combining tourism with history

For a period of time, Stoddartsville was a vacation destination for Philadelphians. Butler explains that after Stoddart went bankrupt, a local lumberman with the surname Stull bought land lining one side of the river.

Stull had six children and gave each one an acre and they built cottages, which eventually became rentals during an era when people, generally, did not have summer homes, Butler said. He added that the Pocos became popular and big resorts were built, so visitors no longer came to Stoddartsville.

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Remnants of an old gristmill near falls on the Lehigh River in Stoddartsville, around 1906, in a photo provided by John Butler. Another prominent landmark in town is the ruins of a grand house called The Maples.

DREAM

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Butler could have sold his homes and land and retired somewhere warm. Yet to him, Stoddartsville is important, so he didn't want it to turn it over to tourists.

"When it was a canal town, it had everyone you'd ever need to do anything. There were coopers who made barrels, stables and on and horses and people you'd need to take care of them. There were blacksmiths who made chains for boats, and there were chickens and goats and sheep. It was a real rural town in the old days," he said.

Butler constructed a pentagon-shaped museum in which every era of Stoddartsville is recorded. Inside the museum are pictures of buildings, logs of who stayed at the inn (for \$4 per night), century-old artifacts that were dug up from beneath the ruins, a model of the bear-trap dam that began Stoddartsville.

Butler also has a section dedicated to the Navy with a real mess table and authentic admiral silverware. Additionally, shelves are filled with books on Luzerne County history, one of them being a book on Zebulon Butler, the foreword written by the museum curator himself.

Butler also preserved much of the Stoddartsville land. In 1998 he finally achieved a years-long goal of making Stoddartsville a historic district.

"It took a long time," he said of his battle. "This means that there can be no houses on less than 10 acres. By having it a historic district you also have to keep a house within the era. I can't just make another modern house, which is great. I want to change a house it has to be in the Victorian 1890s."

Butler was also able to purchase houses as they became available. He bought the Inn and its lands as well as eight other houses. He owns land on both sides of the river.

"I think I have enough area around me to protect it. I have about a hundred acres and nine houses. I bought the summer houses as they became available," he said. "I was lucky to have a wife who had an inheritance. But I was able to buy these houses for \$6,000 and \$14,000, which is unheard of now. Timing was everything."

Butler has given tours of his holdings to the local historical society as well as canoe trips that float down the Lehigh. Canoeists stop for a day in Stoddartsville to look at the falls, and Butler gives them a history lesson.

"I had the Wildlands group from Emmaus. There were 50 canoes and 100 people, two people to each canoe," he said, adding that he would like to see more of this.

Butler has a concern, though. "It takes someone to be here. I'm 86 and I'm not going to be here very much longer, and that

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John Butler Jr.

From another branch of Stoddart family

concerns me. Someone has to be on site for maintenance with nine buildings."

Today, mostly year-round renters inhabit the houses Stoddart owns, but some still serve as vacation rentals. The old mill house is empty and waiting for his daughter to move back.

He also hopes the Luzerne County Historical Society will

get involved in his preservation effort.

He said, "I want tours to come out and want to make the museum more attractive. I want people to see what we've interpreted."

Donna Talerico is a correspondent for the Times Leader.