

Captain A. J. Flesher

Flesher Family Looms Large In River History from the Huntington, WV "*Herald-Advertiser*", June 3, 1934

Johannes Peter Flesher Came To America in 1753 On The ship 'Neptune'; His Descendant, Captain B. T. Flesher, Established Ferry Business at Huntington About 1904, Operating It Through City's Greatest Boom Period.

By R. C. HALL

Some family names have become almost synonymous with certain industries or professions. For instance Ford and automobiles, Rockefeller and oil, Edison and electricity and even Hitler and dictatorship, if the latter can be truly called a profession. Of course there are other names than those just mentioned which also suggest automobiles, oil, electricity and dictatorships respectively, but this fact does not disprove our original contention. And so, along the Ohio River, there are many names that recall certain phrases of the steam boat industry. Few, in southern Ohio, are more nearly synonymous with boat building and boat operating than the name of Flesher.

This name first became prominent in boating circles about the year 1865, when Captain A. J. Flesher purchased the interest of H. R. Sherman and Issac Sherman in the old boat-yard at Murraysville, and together with the remaining owner, E. W. Skillinger continued the firm in the business of boat building. Murraysville is a small place on the banks of the Ohio River in Jackson County, West Virginia, where the chief industry for almost a century has been the building of steamboats and other craft for navigation on the Ohio, Mississippi and other inland streams in the United States. It became especially famous throughout the Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky section as many of the famous steamers that have plied the Ohio along the shores of those states have been built in this same old boat-yard.

Built Famous Boats

Among the names of steamers that were household words in their day and that were built at Murraysville, were the Amazon, the Miami, the Scioto Valley, the General Scott, the Oneida, the Congress, the Importer, the Fort Wayne, the Beacon, the Louis Philippe, the City Belle, the Oriole and many others. Besides steamers, the Murraysville boat yard has turned out notable craft of various other kinds, particularly the great wharf-boat for Captain McCoy¹ of Cincinnati and which, at the time, was perhaps the largest boat of any kind on any river in North America. Of course this business was already well established when Captain Flesher became interested in it, but it took on a new lease on life, so to speak, when he became a leading member of the firm. He had the vision of youth tempered by the wisdom of a wide experience already gained in steam boating and the boat business in general. Almost immediately new facilities for boat building began to appear at the boat-yard. Notable among these was the establishment of a fine planing mill which of course increased greatly the facilities of the concern for handling lumber so greatly needed in boat building. Under the leadership of Captain Flesher and his

partner, Murfreesboro became almost a model town for sobriety, good order and morality in general, which is saying a good deal for a river port where naturally men of almost all types are attracted for business or pleasure.

Frowned On Whiskey

A newspaper writer in 1876, commenting upon this fact, stated that there had not been a whiskey shop kept in the place for 30 years or more and added that "as long as Captain A. J. Flesher and R. W. Skillinger run the yard it may be safely predicted that whiskey will get but a poor foothold in the town". But although the Flesher name first became widely associated with the boat building industry at Murfreesboro, that is not the first place it appeared in history, by any means. Long before that time, various members of the family had attracted more than local attention as soldiers, scouts, pioneers and founders of towns along the frontier, especially in Virginia and what is now West Virginia. In an old record book, we find that one "Johannes Peter Flesher came to America, arrived at Philadelphia, Pa., September 24, 1753, on the ship 'Neptune', John Mason, master, from Rotterdam, Holland, via Cowes." He became the progenitor of the Flesher family in the United States. Like many of the early immigrants to Pennsylvania, he apparently migrated quickly to Virginia and down the Shenandoah Valley to historic old Augusta County, the records of which show that Peter Flesher was naturalized and became a citizen of the colony on August 22, 1770.

Peter Flesher was the father of the following children: Henry, Johanne, Peter, Conrad, John, Pulzor, William, Elizabeth, Barbara and Sophia. Of these Peter, who died in 1799, became a great land owner in Augusta County, while Henry served as a soldier in the American army during the Revolutionary war, thus following in his father's footsteps, for Peter Flesher was a spy under Captain John McCoy against the Indians in 1776.

This Henry Flesher, himself, served as a private in a Virginia regiment. The records indicate that Henry Flesher enlisted in 1777 for two years, and was promoted on August 21 of that year to the rank of sergeant, and was discharged on August 19, 1778.

There is also information available to the effect that Henry Flesher was known as "major", but while his war records do not substantiate this claim, they do indicate that he qualified as a second lieutenant and was accepted as ensign on June 20, 1781, all of which at least indicates that if this is the same Henry Flesher mentioned above, he re-enlisted sometime subsequent to the expiration of his first term as a soldier.

At that time, Henry Flesher's home was in Pendleton County, Virginia, but the early history of Weston, West Virginia indicates that the first permanent white settlement made on that site was made by Henry Flesher who settled at the head of the West Fork River. Some may question the accuracy of the statement that this was the first permanent white settlement there, maintaining that it was not permanent, for in 1784, the Indians are said to have driven Mr. Flesher away. But, as he only went as far as the Thomas Hughes settlement on Hackett's Creek,

where he took refuge for a time, and the town of Weston soon sprang up, it is hardly unreasonable to call his settlement the first permanent white one made on the site.

Henry Flesher's will was recorded at Clarksburg, Harrison County, West Virginia and makes mention of the following named children: Andrew, Adam, Peter, William, Ann, Elizabeth, Mary and Susannah. Of these, Andrew was born in Harrison County, Virginia, now West Virginia, in the year 1771. The census records of Jackson County, Virginia, which is now Jackson County, West Virginia, for the year 1850 shows Andrew Flesher, Sr., as a resident of the latter county at that time. He was 79 years of age while his wife, Elizabeth Bibee Flesher was 72 years of age, they having been married February 21, 1793. Thus this branch of the family, in its migration, had reached the Ohio valley over a decade before the rebellion.

As to the details of the Indian attack upon Henry Flesher, some early records of what is now Lewis County, West Virginia bring out the following facts: It was just after the close of the Revolutionary War and the return of peace with England probably made some of the pioneers reckless, as the attitude of the Indians was not yet certain. It was, of course, not unreasonable to suppose that they would "bury the hatchet" now that their powerful ally had deserted them. The pioneers could not foresee that a hard war was yet to be fought with the Indians alone before General Wayne forced peace from them at the council at Greenville, in 1795.

The affair between Henry Flesher and the Indians was the first of the engagements in that war in that immediate section of the frontier. It occurred about the middle of October in the year 1784 and at the spot chosen later to be the seat of government of Lewis County. Henry Flesher had been engaged in hauling some logs for a stable to be built where the Baptist Church of Weston was later erected.

Flesher having started for the cabin to get a bell to put on his horse, which he was preparing to turn loose to graze in the woods, he was fired upon by Indians in ambush near, or in, the ravine which ran down the hill about where Bank Street, Weston, was later laid out. Although not killed, he was severely wounded by a ball which passed through one of his arms. Fortunately none of the shots took effect in his legs and he started at once to run for the cabin. He was immediately pursued by a band of howling natives who almost succeeded in overtaking him. In fact, they did come up with him just as he was about to enter the cabin door. The race was so close, however, that the Indian nearest to him became excited as he saw his quarry about to escape and attempted to kill him by striking him over the head with his gun used as a club. The two men were so close to the cabin by this time that the gun struck the cabin wall which broke the force of the blow, the stock of the gun being shattered against the logs. Mrs. Flesher then pulled her husband into the house and called upon others inside to fire, thus frightening the Indians away. Fearing a renewal of the attack, the family fled to the woods and it was then that Edward Hughes guided them to West Fork, where they remained for a time. Records, copies of which are now in the hands of descendants in this region, indicate that Andrew Flesher, Sr., had the following children: Isaac, William, Wesley, John and Andrew, Jr. In order to show the prominent part members of that generation of Fleshers played in the life of the times, it may be well to state that William Flesher was a captain in a Virginia company of the Federal army in the Civil War. Wesley was a Presbyterian minister, while Andrew, Jr., was a deputy sheriff of Jackson County, Virginia. The latter lived about five miles below Ravenswood, West Virginia, his

home being called "Pleasant View". It must have been well named for the spot is said to have been and to be still a lovely location.

Isaac Flesher was born on the 22nd day of November, in the year 1796 and lived until the 29th day of June in the year 1841. On the Fourth of July, in the year 1817, he married Elizabeth Bonnett, descendant of Samuel Bonnett, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. Isaac lived up to the family tradition of honorable public service, having been a soldier in the War of 1812. He had the following children: William, Tabitha, Andrew Jackson, Eliza, Marion, Barbara, Benjamin, Elizabeth and Henry Harrison. There must have been some Democratic and Whig blood both in that family, since there was both an Andrew Jackson and a Henry Harrison in it. Or perhaps it was the military tradition rather than the political in the Flesher family which caused admiration of the name of Jackson and Harrison.

Isaac Flesher is the first of the family to become identified with the history of Ohio. His remains and those of his wife lie buried at Letart, Ohio, where monuments have been erected to their memory.

And so we have traced briefly the history of this branch of the Flesher family from the time Peter Flesher landed on the shore of America down to the birth of Andrew Jackson Flesher, the pioneer boatman with whom we started our discussion. Thus it appears that the descent from father to son on down the line ran as follows: Peter Flesher, the immigrant - Henry - Andrew, Sr. - Isaac to Andrew Jackson Flesher, the boatman.

Andrew Jackson Flesher was born on the 2nd day of January in the year 1827. He married Sarah Melissa Weaver September 5, 1847. They had the following children: Flavius J., Millard F., William A., Benjamin T., and Andrew Jackson, Jr. Elizabeth Bonnett Flesher proved a worthy companion of Isaac Flesher, as she came from the same sturdy pioneer stock and was imbued with the same noble ideals of character and patriotism. A brief sketch of her life is as necessary to a history of the Fleshers as is that of any of its other members. Elizabeth Bonnett was the granddaughter of Samuel Bonnett, a soldier in the Revolutionary War. Samuel was one of a family of five brothers, all of whom served in the American army during the Revolution according to Jacob Bonnett's pension declaration. These five brothers were named Peter, Samuel, John, Jacob and Lewis, the two latter being twins. Their family home was in Frederick County, Virginia, and a number of other prominent West Virginia families besides the Fleshers, such as the Staats and Holswades, were descended from them. They originally came to this country with some French Huguenots.

Left a Widow

Elizabeth Bonnett was born on the 4th day of October in the year 1802. Her parents, William and Barbara Bonnett, lived for a time in Harrison County, Virginia, now West Virginia, but having migrated to Jackson County in the same state, Elizabeth spent her girlhood there. In 1817, she married Colonel Isaac Flesher and became the mother of 11 children. In 1841, she was left a widow with eight children to support and very little with which to do it. A less resolute person would have yielded to the importunities of friends who urged her to put her

children among her acquaintances but she replied: "Never, while I can use the shuttle and spinning wheel."

The struggle must have been a hard one, but was somewhat relieved, in 1859, when she was allowed bounty land on Goose Island in satisfaction for the services rendered by her husband in the War of 1812. She was then 57 years of age and residing in Meigs County, Ohio. In 1878, she applied for a pension but it was not allowed, as it seems that the services of her husband had been rendered after the treaty of peace had been signed and the pension law at that time did not make provisions for such cases. However, she lived to see her surviving children all comfortable and happy and leading useful lives. She passed away on the 3rd day of March in the year 1880, near Reedville, Ohio, and her remains were interred at Letart Falls, Ohio. The following inscription appears on her monument:

"All my treasure is above, All my riches in His love. Treasured world farewell, Jesus calls, with Him I'll dwell."

Isaac Flesher, having received Goose Island in the Ohio River near Letart as bounty land for his services in the War of 1812, established himself there where he passed away June 29, 1841. Andrew Jackson Flesher also made his home there during his youth and that fact - the close association with the river and river folk - perhaps largely determined his subsequent career. At any rate his biography is largely a history of navigation and boat building in this section during his lifetime.

Captain A. J. Flesher began the building of boats when he was but 16 years of age and continued at that business for 55 years. We have already mentioned some of the famous steamers constructed during that boat-building period. It may be well, however, to mention here a few of the more noted ones that Captain Flesher himself built at his own yards. Perhaps the one best remembered today was the "Henry M. Stanley", but there were the "St. Lawrence", the "Sydney", the "R. W. Skillinger", and the "Hudson" Numbers 1, 2, and 3, also.

Captain Flesher for a time owned the old sawmill and boat yard at the little village of Antiquity, in Meigs County, Ohio, but soon purchased an interest in the boat yard at Murraysville, West Virginia where, as we have seen, he became one of the foremost boat builders of the Ohio valley.

It is interesting to learn that as a youth, and at the same time at which he entered upon his professional career, he also entered a religious career which doubtless brought him more comfort if not more prosperity than any of his other activities.

Joined M. E. Church

At that time, at the age of 16, he joined the Methodist Episcopal Church and during all his days is said to have lived an exemplary life. We have already noted how he kept his boat-yard and vicinity free from the baleful influence of intoxicating liquor. But he was not only a good disciplinarian in this respect as well as others but he set a good example himself as being very

temperate in all things, apparently. It is said by those competent to speak on the subject that Captain A. J. Flesher never used tobacco in any form and during his whole long life he was never heard to utter a profane word of any kind. In fact he is said to have expressed himself thus forceably (sic) on this subject: "No one who had one jot of respect for themselves or their God would use His name profanely." It is no wonder that he was so widely honored and respected. As may have been suspected, Captain A. J. Flesher soon became prosperous and, at one time, is said to have had \$110,000 in cash in the bank. The great Ohio River flood of the year 1884 swept away a large part of his wealth, but he accepted in with Christian resignation saying that Providence intended it that way and that there was no use for him to worry over it. He was always generous with whatever worldly goods he possessed and for a period of 20 years or more he was practically the sole supporter of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Murraysville, West Virginia.

Captain Flesher having had no advantages of an early education himself, nevertheless realized the value of such advantages and schools being few and far between at that period, he employed a teacher himself and paid him out of his own pocket and invited his neighbors to send their children to the school thus established at his own expense.

Being a man with a keen sense of humor he was able to secure a certain amount of employment out of many incidents which some people might have interpreted in a vastly different spirit. For instance, he used to love to tell of a neighbor who sent his son to Mr. Flesher's school and in spite of the fact that Mr. Flesher was bearing the entire expense of the school, this man objected to certain subjects, particularly algebra, saying that he didn't want his boy taught "al-gee-bricks", even if "the Flesher boys did want such durned foolishness". In spite of such a discouraging attitude on the part of some of his neighbors, Captain Flesher went right on with his educational work. That his efforts were well rewarded is shown by the fact that his son, Benjamin T. Flesher, while still in his youth, received a certificate to teach in Jackson County, West Virginia. This certificate is still in possession of his daughter, Mrs. Frances Moore of Chesapeake, Ohio. Mrs. Moore must appreciate even more the note which accompanies the certificate and which reads as follows: "This is to certify that B. T. Flesher is a person of good moral character. This April 26, 1873. A. C. Tidd". We shall have occasion to speak further about this son a little later in this sketch.

Captain Flesher's first wife passed away in the year 1867 and sometime later he married for his second wife Miss Sarah M. Barrett, who was a sister of Captain John Barrett.

Owned Thirty Boats

Captain Flesher owned altogether, although not all at the same time, 30 Ohio River steamers, while he built over 150 vessels for others. The first steamer he built is said to have been the "Lago", while the last one he built was the "Argand". At one time he was the largest real estate owner in Jackson County, West Virginia, and the largest taxpayer in that county. Needless to say, he employed a large number of men.

In the year 1892, Captain Flesher moved from West Virginia to Levanna, Ohio, where he engaged in various pursuits associated with navigation and continued actively engaged in boat-building until within two years of his death which occurred on January 16 in the year 1898. Shortly before that date, he had removed to Ripley, Ohio, where he purchased the Ripley ferry boat and franchise. These he passed on to his son, Charles T. Flesher, who continued to operate the Ripley ferry. This and considerable other property was left to his widow, who survived him. He was also survived by 12 children, he having had altogether by both his marriages 14 children, and by 34 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. So there seems little likelihood that this distinguished family will become extinct for many generations to come. After funeral services in the Methodist Episcopal Church at Ripley, the remains of Captain Flesher were laid to rest in Maplewood cemetery, nearby. A brief quotation from a tribute to Captain Flesher, signed by A. C. Tidd and G. T. Douglas, two leading citizens of Murraysville, West Virginia, is worthy of consideration here. Said these old friends and neighbors of the captain:

Tribute From Friends

"A more agreeable and accommodating neighbor was nowhere to be found. As a business man he was exceedingly energetic, and persevering in all matters of business; and few men along the Ohio River have transacted more business during the past 30 years, or given employment to more poor people, or proved themselves a greater benefit to their neighbors than Mr. Flesher. And while naturally inclined to be talkative and jovial, he seldom ever spoke a harmful word against any neighbor, whether friend or enemy. We have had many settlements of book accounts with him, and always found his books and all his accounts correctly and honestly kept. May his memory ever be cherished in the hearts of many friends. Peace to his ashes."

While it would be interesting to follow the careers of all of Captain Flesher's children, we shall have time and space to consider but one briefly. We shall consider Captain B. T. Flesher briefly for two reasons, first because he followed so closely in the footsteps of his father and second he lived so long and rendered to great a service to the public in this immediate section of the country.

Benjamin T. Flesher was born 79 years ago [1855], in what was then Jackson County, Virginia, but is now Jackson County, West Virginia. He was educated chiefly in the school established and maintained by his own father and which we have already discussed. His certificate to teach school was secured, however, not because he had planned to enter the teaching profession but for a far different reason.

Bennie, as he was called, was in love with a young lady of Murraysville, so the story goes, but soon learned that he had competition in his campaign for her hand. One evening when he "went sparkin'" as he loved to say when relating the story years afterward, he found the fair maiden deeply engaged with his rival studying for the teachers' examination which was scheduled to be held the very next day. The two boys, it appears, were not especially friendly to each other and, in fact, before the evening was over their conversation led to an argument and, perhaps, some bitter words on both sides.

The girl probably did not have as much feeling in the matter as the boys did, of perhaps she wished to choose wisely and knew of no better way to than to choose intelligently - that is if intelligent choice meant the choice of the one displaying the most intelligence in "book learning". At any rate, she settled the argument by saying that she would favor the suit of the one who should make the best grade in the examination to be held the following day. Up to that time young Bennie Flesher had no intention of taking the test, but he immediately accepted the challenge, departed for home and burned the midnight oil while he probably indulged in an orgie (sic) of "cramming" which would have put to shame the most adept college laggard who tries to do a term's work in one night.

Fortune smiled on him, for he not only passed the examination with flying colors, but had the satisfaction of seeing his rival fail to pass. During his young manhood he entered the business his father had been in so long and opened up business for himself at Middleport, Ohio. There he built boats and operated a ferry for some time. About 30 years ago he established himself in the ferry business at Huntington, West Virginia, beginning the operation of a ferry at the foot of Tenth Street and running between there and the old Frampton Landing, or Rockwood Landing at Rockwood, Ohio, which is now a part of Chesapeake. As Captain Flesher entered business here just as the city of Huntington was entering upon a period of remarkable expansion and prosperity, he quite naturally prospered also. Moreover this prosperity spread to the little Ohio village and soon the ferry between the two places became an important means of travel and transportation. It rendered an important service to both Huntington and Chesapeake.

In order to serve those growing communities better, Captain Flesher organized the Huntington Chesapeake Ferry Company and improved the service in many ways. At the time of his death, which occurred on the 23rd day of January in the year 1928, this company was operating three ferry boats, viz. the City of Huntington 2, the Helen and the Linda Lee.

Thirteen years earlier, Captain Flesher had taken up his residence in Huntington where he became a member of the First Methodist Episcopal Church and several fraternal orders. He was survived by his son, O. H. Flesher, of Huntington, and four daughters, Mrs. Charles Rathburn of Middleport, Ohio, Mrs. Austin V. Wood of Wheeling, West Virginia, Mrs. Robert L. Hamilton of Chesapeake, Ohio, and Mrs. W. T. Moore, with whom he made his home in his latter years, but who now resides at Chesapeake, Ohio, also.

Keep Tradition Alive

It is interesting to know that Mrs. Moore and her husband still keep alive the Flesher traditional love of the river and patriotic service to the public. In spite of the fact that river traffic has had to yield much in recent years to more modern and convenient means of travel and transportation, especially in the ferry business, the Huntington-Chesapeake ferry is one of the few along the Ohio that still maintains its regular schedule. This is done, perhaps, more because of a love of the work and a desire to accommodate old friends than as a strictly business proposition. Mrs. Moore is also active in the social and political life of southern Ohio, being a

leader in many women's organizations and in the Republican party organization of Lawrence County, Ohio.

The Flesher family in America offers an interesting study in the comparative influence of environment and heredity. Students of both schools can find in such a study ample evidence to substantiate their claims, all of which provide to the unbiased student that individual character is largely determined by both heredity and environment. For instance in the family that we have been considering, there is a constant recurrence in almost if not quite every member of each generation of the characteristics of religious and moral character, public service, either military or civil or both, and an ability to conquer obstacles which would have defeated many others. These characteristics appear today as strong, perhaps, in the members of the family of this generation as they did in those of the family of Peter Flesher when he first set foot on the soil of America over 180 years ago. All this is well calculated to make the enthusiast for heredity stand up and shout "blood will tell".

But wait a minute. There appears no proof whatever that any member of the family was especially devoted to "old Man River" prior to the time that one of its members came to live on Goose Island in the Ohio river. But from then on, practically every member of this branch of the family was born and raised in the atmosphere of river people, trained in the knowledge and lore of the beautiful river and practically every one of them has always since been an enthusiast for all that is best and noble in live on and along the river. Certainly this scores a point of equal value for the proponents of environment. But to come down from the realm of speculation to that of more practical things. Practically speaking, the importance of any family in the history of the community depends largely on the part it played in that history. In this respect we have seen that the Flesher family has always been an important one. From the foregoing facts it is easy to see that there is hardly a community along the river from Wheeling, West Virginia to Cincinnati, Ohio that has not benefited by the work of members of this family either directly, by ferry and other steamboat service, or indirectly by the many boats they constructed and put into service on this section of the Ohio river. May their descendants long continue to emulate their example.

1 The original article was accompanied by a drawing of A. J. Flesher, by R. C. Hall, and captioned "PIONEERED IN BOAT BUILDING - Captain A. J. Flesher, above, in 1865 purchased an interest in a boat-building firm at Murraysville; later, the name Flesher became almost synonymous with that industry in the Ohio valley; Captain Flesher was the father of the late B. T. Flesher of Huntington."

2 The original article was accompanied by a drawing of the vessel, by R. C. Hall, and captioned "FERRY OPERATED FROM HUNTINGTON FOR 25 YEARS - The steamer 'City of Huntington' was owned and operated as the Tenth Street Ferry at Huntington by Captain B. T. Flesher for 25 years; recently it has been replaced by a small boat operated by R. L. Hamilton, son-in-law of Captain Flesher."

Note: I am indebted to Larry G. Flesher for this article which was given to him by his father.