

Once upon a time.....

Union County was the frontier of European settlement in Pennsylvania.

Native American Indians

The area that is now Union, Snyder and surrounding counties was home to American Indian nations including the Susquehannocks, Lenni Lanape, Shawnee, and Iroquios. American Indians had been living in central Pennsylvania for thousands of years. Early nomadic hunting cultures (10,000 to 15,000 BCE) gradually evolved to settled village cultures more than 3,000 years ago. They farmed corn, squash, pumpkins, beans, fruit and sunflowers; gathered nuts and berries; hunted game and fished. They had developed extensive trails throughout Pennsylvania and neighboring states - trails that the new settlers used to move into the area, and that form the basis for many modern-day roads.

Early Settlement

By 1769, when the area was opened to European settlers, most of the American Indians had moved away from the encroaching settlements.

Europeans from Scotland, Ireland and England, and the earlier-established eastern Pennsylvania counties, were among the first to settle in Union County. They came for land - which was limited in Europe due to population pressures, inheritance practices, and politics - for religious and cultural freedom, and for economic opportunity.

In 1775 there were about 248 families in Union County. Men from these families joined militia to support the Revolution against English rule. Some fought in eastern battles. Others defended the area against incursions from the north by the English and Iroquois, allies in the colonial conflict.

During "The Great Runaway" in 1778, many settlers abandoned their homes. For several years, the area was sparsely populated and those who remained dealt with Indian attacks, bad winters, and scarcity. Afterwards, some original settlers returned to reclaim their farms. They were joined by Germans from southeast Pennsylvania and the Palatinate districts in southern Germany, traveling on the old Indian trail, the Tulpehocken Road.

Africans were also among the early inhabitants of the county, as free Blacks from eastern Pennsylvania and the south, and as slaves in the household of early settlers. In 1790, 48 families held slaves in Union County. The 1840 census is the last to record Blacks as slaves in the county, with free Blacks remaining across the county. The Underground Railroad ran through and around the county for those seeking freedom in the north.

Many current residents can trace their families back to the original European and African settlers.

Formation of the County and Towns

In 1813 Union County was formed when land west of the Susquehanna River (present-day Union and Snyder counties) was separated from Northumberland County. The area was divided into Union and Snyder counties in 1855.

The principal towns in Union County developed at different times. New Berlin's courthouse, sheriff's office and jail, Presbyterian Church, and many of its houses date from the early 1800's. New Berlin was the original county seat (1813-1855).

Lewisburg, on the Susquehanna River, became a market town with the building of

the Pennsylvania Canal in 1830 and was selected as the county seat in 1855. Many Federal-style houses from the mid-1800's comprise the borough's historic district.

Mifflinburg grew during the horse and buggy era (1850-1920). It was recognized as the "Buggy Town" because so many of its people were involved in buggy building. Much of Mifflinburg's late Victorian character is still evident.

West Milton grew up next to its railroad yards and roundhouse in the early 20th century and it continues to reflect the architecture of this era.

Named for the "union" of American states, Union County's eastern boundary is the Susquehanna River. The north and south boundaries are Appalachian-range mountains that come to a point in the western end of the county. Between these mountains is "Buffalo Valley."

Learn More

Find out more about Union County history - visit the Union County Historical Society office in the county courthouse in Lewisburg, attend programs (see Current Newsletter), read Society publications (see Book Sales) and other articles on our website.