









Asa Packer

A Perspective

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THE ENTRY of Asa Packer into the domain of higher education was like a coal train gliding to a stop in a busy passenger station. It was certainly within the realm of possibility, but it caught people by surprise. Yet when Packer called on the Rev. William Bacon Stevens on that autumn day in 1864, with armies of North and South still fighting the Civil War, he had already decided what he was going to do. He would found a school of higher education for the intellectual and moral improvement of young men, and do so on a scale that would permit it to compete with the best in the nation.

Asa Packer was prepared to give generously of money and land. Supplying these was easy. The more difficult part was that of finding the right men—not those of middling competence, but the best available—who could advise, translate general ideas into precise operational form, and effectively supervise the work.

He was not mistaken in the choice of Stevens, who was assistant to Bishop Alonzo Potter of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. Stevens had studied and practiced medicine, written on historical subjects, and was proving himself an able administrator. Stevens had convictions and the courage to defend them. He believed, as did Packer, that reason, disciplined in the form of science, could discover the secrets of nature, and that rational man had an ability to use this science to reshape the world.

Stevens knew of the latest developments in chemistry, then considered the foremost of the sciences. He

understood chemistry in all its forms and applications—in biology, mineralogy, geology, metallurgy, and medicine; in agriculture, the mining and smelting of ores, and the fashioning of products for use. Stevens had also studied the new social sciences, especially history, then the rage among the intellectual *avant garde* of Philadelphia, where he lived.

Packer realized, too, that Stevens would sympathize with a patriotism that both shadowed and enlightened self-interest. Packer needed the same sort of intelligence and expertise for the success of his coal and railroad ventures as America had to have in order to become economically independent. Like other industrial pioneers in the great land of opportunity, he saw a wealth of resources of forest, field, and subsoil—and a poverty of skills to develop them. Europe had the artisans, the scientists, and the capital. There, in Britain, Prussia and other Germanic states, Austria, France, and the Scandinavian and the low countries, were the great universities and the most progressive industrial establishments. Europe had the models of mining, smelting, manufacturing, railroading, and banking that a young America would have to copy in order to achieve an independent economy.

Americans had abruptly gained political freedom; the labor of putting into place an economic foundation for that freedom was slower, less glamorous, and far more costly in terms of lives and money. Packer and other industrial pioneers were aware that they were building this foundation. They also believed that in serving themselves they were working for the best interests of the nation.

They acknowledged that the fortunes they had made entailed a moral responsibility quite apart from self-interest to use their money to promote the work of building the nation. But moral responsibility was something special and only part of what they felt. As

businessmen they viewed the situation in a practical way. It was simply good sense to make money serve many useful purposes. Packer had supported the St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Bethlehem thinking of the needs of both the community and his railroad. He understood that the hospital would give priority to the medical needs of his workers. It came naturally to him to want to use money not needed for immediate operations to create a reservoir of talent that would be available for himself and others and at the same time build up the power of the nation.

Packer's patriotic sense of nation-building was strong. He had favored the annexation of Texas and the 1853 Gadsden Purchase of the southern areas of Arizona and New Mexico, and had helped to mobilize and subsidize volunteers serving in the Mexican War from Carbon County, his Pennsylvania home region. As a member of Congress he had voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which was a forward step in settlement of the lands west of the Mississippi. Support of the latter cast a shadow over his stand with respect to slavery, inasmuch as the Kansas-Nebraska Bill left open the possibility that these territories might eventually enter the Union as slave states. Probably, however, Packer did not regard slavery as the most important issue in connection with the bill. Senators and representatives were seriously discussing the possibility of a railroad westward from Chicago to the Pacific Ocean. Packer surely realized with others that such a project was feasible only on the condition that a greater degree of law and order be brought to the trans-Mississippi West. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill would help.

As for slavery, Packer strongly opposed it. He voted against attempts by southern representatives to repeal the laws prohibiting the slave trade. When disputes between the northern and southern states erupted in civil war, he supported the Union even to encouraging enlistments by continuing the salaries of volunteers among his workers. The destruction of the southern slave-holding elite, the

freeing of the slaves, and the reunification of the nation on a basis favorable to the spreading influence of industry and commerce were personal as well as national victories.

Now, in 1864, rich and with a Union victory in sight, Packer was preparing the next steps: expanding railroad operations so as to make the most of a postwar prosperity, and establishing an educational institution to help fill a national need for enlightened leadership.

Packer attached one cardinal condition to this project for educating youth: While gaining knowledge, they must not lose faith in God. Packer was profoundly religious. He took literally the scriptural passage, "What shall it profit a man, that he gain the whole world but lose his soul?" Historians and journalists of later generations have misunderstood the religious motivation of Packer and other industrialists. These latter-day critics have chosen to rake over the methods by which the so-called robber barons gained their fortunes and have been inclined to treat the religious beliefs of the entrepreneurs as a sort of psychological compensation for antisocial action.

In fact, these critics have missed a motivation as deeply engrained in the 19th Century industrialists as was the desire for profit. Packer had generously contributed to Episcopal religious projects, such as the Divinity School in Philadelphia and the Church of St. Mark in his hometown of Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe). He had served as both a church warden and a vestryman. He held that as a man believes, so he will act. Consequently, a generation of youth that forgot its moral responsibilities, grounded as they were in a religious tradition, would be a disaster.

Packer accepted that the professors and the boys need not be Episcopalians; but they must be believers, and more: The course of study would have to provide for a continuing religious education. The new college or university was to serve an intellectual *and moral* purpose.

The country could be no stronger than the faith of its leaders. Religion must accompany science and technology. A house divided against itself, represented by a separation of and a continuing war between men of science and of religion, could not stand.

Here, too, Packer knew he had firm support in Stevens. A controversy raging among intellectuals was precisely this: What is it to be, Science or Religion? Would it be nature, as discovered by reason; or the supernatural, as comprehended by faith? Religion, once a political force in the hands of monarchs, was discredited as such in republican America and was on the defensive. The latest challenge to its authority came in the form of the social sciences, which demanded that supporters of the Bible, Christianity, Judaism, and of any religion or church whatsoever, justify themselves according to the canons of historical scholarship.

Packer was probably unaware of the finely spun arguments of savants such as Ernest Renan of France, John Henry Newman of England, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Stevens, however, knew the arguments and the positions taken by churchmen and philosophers. He could be counted on to devise a plan and recommend persons who would respect religion and use it to counteract, temper, and even promote science.

Let there be no misunderstanding concerning the religious dimension that Stevens, acting as Packer's alter ego, imparted to the new university. Lehigh in the first decade was an accurate reflection of the personality of Asa Packer. He kept no diaries, wrote no confessions of faith, nor in any other way left to posterity a personal description of his innermost thoughts. One approaches an understanding of Asa Packer only through examining his works; and the greatest, most comprehensive, and most annotated of these is *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY* in its early years.

Packer's concern with religion extended beyond that of

insisting on conventional rules of morality. He and his associates accepted without comment statements to the effect that faculty and students should behave as Christian gentlemen and that the faculty, supported by the trustees, should define and enforce rules concerning attendance at chapel, observance of the Sabbath, and general moral behavior.

Nor was Packer illiberal for the times in preferring the Protestant Episcopal to other churches. He did not ask the religious preference of people with whom he did business, and he would have his school observe the same impartiality. Packer provided that the president of the board of trustees would be the presiding bishop of the Episcopal diocese, but he established the university without formal church affiliation. (Before the end of the century, however, the bishop would serve as a member of the board but not necessarily as its president.) The university was financially independent of both church and state; and its trustees were (and remained for a generation after Packer's death) employees, members of the board, or friends of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Students of all religious faiths were welcome. Provision was made for them to attend the church of their choice.

Attend church they must. The curriculum would include Christian Evidences as a required subject, and the faculty would teach in ways respecting the evidences of Christianity. The boys would carry their religious instruction into practice by going to services and participating in church activities. Packer envisioned a strict union between theory and practice in the religious and the secular domains, with this proviso: Practice in religion meant for him active support of church and clergy.

In thinking about the education that he wanted his university to provide, Packer gave no consideration to "liberal education" as 20th-Century promoters of the arts and sciences were to use the term—namely, as though

education might be enjoyable as good in itself or that there might be something obtainable in a university called education for life. Packer thought not at all in terms of concepts such as "life," "liberal arts," or "culture." Rather, he drew his thoughts from the well of his own deficiencies and those of the country as he saw them. His formal education as a boy had been brief, and his later work at self-education had been spotty. He knew neither French nor German, languages that provided keys for entry into the scientific treasuries of Europe. He wrote poorly and had never learned the art of public speaking. He knew some mathematics and a little chemistry. He was unaccustomed to reading books for pleasure. On the other hand, he admired the intellectual skill of the abler clergy, based as it was on a classical education and on extensive, disciplined study of the Scriptures.

Persons such as the aging Bishop Potter—too old for the task at hand—and Stevens, who exhibited the best of education in worlds sacred and profane, were the sort of men he needed. Stevens, destined to be Potter's successor, was the proper person to oversee an educational enterprise that would be radical in comparison with the classical course of study then standard at most colleges and universities; the education would be eminently practical in serving God and country, forming able and devout leaders.

Packer's convictions were few, simple, and deeply felt. He was a man of action for whom thought and speech were circumscribed by and directed to work. In his youth he had loved physical activity. He was tall, strong, and agile, possessing a great capacity for endurance. Born and reared in the Yankee tradition of piety, hard work, and frugality, he had carried these qualities with him to the farmlands of northern Pennsylvania, then to the anthracite regions of its mountains, and finally to the hub cities of Harrisburg, Washington, and Philadelphia.

Little is known about his early career or the joys and

sorrows of his personal life. He wrote nothing of note, delivered no speeches that were put on record, and preserved no correspondence. *The Congressional Globe*, which includes the verbatim debates in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, contains few remarks by Packer. Even in later life, when admirers gathered to toast his accomplishments, he generally remained silent. He spoke briefly at the ceremony opening *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY*, but his remarks were not printed. At a testimonial dinner held for him on the occasion of the founding of the university, he asked the Hon. Morton McMichael, mayor of Philadelphia, to respond for him. People who wrote for publication largely ignored him until he became famous as a railroad magnate and philanthropist.

Some records have survived, but most have been lost or destroyed by fire. Accounts of his early life, including some written during his lifetime and brought to his attention, do not agree in all respects. Still, he made no effort publicly to correct the errors, although he may privately have taken to task those who wrote wrongly about him; and he sent no letters to editors promoting himself and his enterprises or justifying his actions.

Yet some facts are known. His father was unsuccessful in business and unable to provide capital to give Asa a start in life. Asa was apprenticed for a few years to a tanner, but the master tanner died. Asa decided to seek his fortune in country that was still largely frontier. This was the upper reach of the Susquehanna River, in northern Pennsylvania less than two-hundred miles directly west of Mystic, where Asa had lived. The area had been claimed by Connecticut as part of its territory generations earlier. Connecticut Yankees had moved into the region and the so-called Pennamite wars had followed, ending when Pennsylvania gained undisputed control. But the Connecticut Yankees had remained and included several Packers.

Young Asa took up a temporary abode with a cousin, Edward Packer, in Hopbottom, later known as Brooklyn. He became an apprentice carpenter and thereafter moved to nearby Springville (later Dimock Four Corners). There, at the age of twenty-three, he met and married Sarah Minerva Blakslee, daughter of a farmer who was a member of a displaced Vermont family. Asa and Sarah settled on a farm, and in the winter he went to Tunkhannock on the Susquehanna and used his skill in carpentry to build and repair canal boats. For eleven years he worked clearing trees and planting and harvesting crops, practicing carpentry on the side. Then in 1833 he left the farm and made the short journey south to Mauch Chunk, hub of the recently completed Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company canal and a focus for shipping southward the coal that was being mined in mountains several miles to the west.

The Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company was mastering a situation made to order for talented young men such as Asa Packer. Josiah White and Erskine Hazard were still in control. Under their supervision E.A. Douglas was putting considerable engineering skills to work in extending the canal northward to White Haven. The Old Company, as it came to be called, had for the time being a monopoly over transportation from the upper Lehigh River Valley to Easton, at which place connections could be made with the Delaware Division of the Pennsylvania Canal to Philadelphia and the Morris Canal through New Jersey to tidewater opposite New York City.

Profits would come from the use made of the canal. Increases in use depended on developing the resources of the Lehigh Valley and expanding the markets for its products. White and his associates were limited by their charter in what they could do directly. So they cooperated with other entrepreneurs and encouraged competition among them, reasoning that this would bring capital and

talent into the region and increase the volume of traffic on the canal.

Asa began his career in Mauch Chunk by operating a canal boat hauling coal to Philadelphia. He captained the boat himself and was almost immediately successful. Within a few years he was enlarging and extending his business to include construction and merchandising. He persuaded a younger brother, Robert, to enter into partnership with him and soon they were operating two transportation lines down the Lehigh and another from Pottsville south along the Schuylkill. Asa and Robert were reputedly the first to send coal in unbroken cargoes from Pottsville to New York City. They started leasing and mining coal lands. These included the Room Run Mines of the Old Company, which the brothers took over in 1839. By the time of Robert's death in 1848 they had increased by more than threefold the output of the mines. Asa also entered into business with others—for example, his brother-in-law James I. Blakslee for merchandising, and Ezekiel W. Harlan for rebuilding part of the Lehigh Canal after the devastation caused by the flood of 1841.

Sarah, who was nursing a year-old daughter, Lucy, when Asa left the farm, joined him in Mauch Chunk. There the couple lived simply. Although becoming wealthy, they did not spend lavishly. Other people might pride themselves on having servants, but Sarah apparently did most of her own housework. Besides Lucy, the children who lived to maturity, all born in Mauch Chunk, were Mary (1839); Robert (1842); and Harry (1850).

Asa became one of the town's leading citizens. He bought much land and helped to found St. Mark's. The voters sent him to the legislature in Harrisburg in 1841 and again the following year. There he assisted in establishing Carbon County. In 1843 he began a term as associate judge of Carbon County, earning the title of judge by which he was known for the remainder of his life.

An incident illustrating his courage during this period

is described in Uzal W. Condit's *The History of Easton*. Boatmen on the canal in 1843 went on strike for higher wages and tied up their boats, several hundred in number, between the Chain Dam near Easton and Freemansburg. Packer and other contractors rounded up strikebreakers and went to Easton, where they elicited help from the sheriff of Northampton County and magistrates and constables. The party proceeded up the canal to the dam, determined to remove the obstruction. Packer and several others went aboard one boat and without saying a word Packer began untying the cord that bound it to the others. Immediately a picket blew a horn, thereby summoning a mob of angry strikers who threw Packer into the river and pelted the remainder of the party with stones and other missiles. "Mr. Packer," the account concluded, "during the melee swam ashore and succeeded in making his escape; the disaffected boatmen remaining masters of the fleet."

The years of the 1830s and 1840s marked a period of great technological growth on the upper Lehigh, such as could not help but be an inspiration and an education to a person of Packer's intelligence and perspicacity. Josiah White and Douglas had accomplished an engineering marvel by designing and building high-lift locks on the upper canal; travelers from Europe found a side trip to see these locks worthwhile. White also conceived a gravity railroad, the Switchback, for hauling coal to the canal, possibly the first regularly operating railroad in the United States. Within a few years of its completion, the Old Company added a Back Track railroad, including inclined planes and stationary engines for hauling empty cars to elevations from which they might coast back to the mines.

Railroading was, indeed, receiving its first great practical use in the coal regions. The Stourbridge Lion, the first railroad steam engine in the country, imported from England, made its one and only short run in nearby

Honesdale in 1829. A number of horse- or mule-drawn and gravity railroads were in use in and about the mines. In the Schuylkill coal region, the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad was built and in 1844 carried almost 442,000 tons of coal to Philadelphia. Its Report of 1845 (reprinted in Rupp's *History of Northampton, Lehigh, Monroe, Carbon, and Schuylkill Counties*) contained the comments:

The late improvement in the construction of locomotive engines, by which they are enabled to draw two or three times as much as formerly, is calculated to cheapen the cost of transportation on railroads to an extent that few, if any, of us had ever imagined.

The improvements by Baldwin & Whitney, in connecting six wheels, and using them all as drivers, with the weight of the engine bearing equally on them, has increased the power of the engine immensely, as was clearly shown by a trial in October last, when 750 tons of coal was drawn by one of these engines, and since that time, they have been making regular trips with from 4 to 500 tons.

Seven hundred and fifty tons of coal was as much as fifteen canal boats could carry. By 1847 the Old Company had completed and was operating a short line from Wilkes-Barre to the canal at White Haven. Building the road had involved difficult tunneling and grading. The line was called the Lehigh and Susquehanna.

Reconstructing the sequence of ideas that passed through Packer's mind and resulted in a drive for his own railroad through the Lehigh Valley is impossible. When were the key decisions made? An anonymous account of his life, "An Outline of the Career of the Hon. Asa Packer of Pennsylvania" (Bethlehem, 1867), maintains that for years he urged the Old Company to build a railroad as an auxiliary to the canal. The statement implies that at a

relatively early date he had computed costs and arrived at a conclusion that overland transportation by rail would be more reasonable than the tried and proven method of transportation by water.

Certainly such a conclusion would have been contrary to the opinion held by almost everybody, excepting perhaps the operators of the Philadelphia and Reading. The managers of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company considered the model of the Philadelphia and Reading as inapplicable to the Lehigh Valley situation. True, canals were closed by ice in winter and subject to damage from unpredictable floods such as had occurred in 1841. But railroads were expensive to build and maintain. The managers with some justice emphasized the efficiency of their existing system. The mines were located so as to be easily reached by branches from a single trunk, and grades were such as to permit transportation by flow of gravity. Coal could be loaded into cars as it was mined and coasted down to the canal, where it could be dumped without handling into boats.

Failing to interest the Old Company in a railroad, Packer joined another group of businessmen and with them petitioned the legislature for a charter for a road along the Lehigh to be called the Delaware, Lehigh, Schuylkill, and Susquehanna. The legislature granted the charter in 1846. Still, neither Packer nor the others pushed the project forward. Five years went by, and the small amount of work needed to keep the charter alive remained undone. In the meantime the legislature granted the Beaver-Meadow Railroad and Coal Company authority to extend its line from Hazleton to Easton.

Then in the spring of 1851, with the charter about to expire, Packer decided to act. He became a member of the board of managers in April and several months later bought much of the stock that already had been subscribed, launched an effort for further subscriptions, and did the grading necessary to save the charter.

Construction began in earnest the following year; the first trains between Easton and Mauch Chunk—over a line that had been renamed the Lehigh Valley Railroad—began regular service in the summer of 1855.

The years of building the main line of the Lehigh Valley road marked the growth of a new image of Asa Packer. A wealthy, small-town businessman became a railroad monarch with a national reputation. His personal fortune did not immediately increase, for he put everything he had into the hazardous enterprise. Other entrepreneurs regarded his project with little enthusiasm. He had to contend with cholera among the workers, especially in 1854, and in that year also had to weather an inflation that artificially increased costs and led to trouble with subcontractors. But he also made friends among the top personnel of other establishments, including railroads such as the Jersey Central, Camden and Amboy, and Philadelphia and Trenton, which regarded a line penetrating the Lehigh coal region as an asset. His business took him to Philadelphia, New York, and Washington. People at the Merchant's Hotel, a gathering place of businessmen in Philadelphia, saw more of him than did the bankers at Mauch Chunk.

This period of railroad building roughly coincided with his service as a congressman. From 1853 to 1857, Packer spent two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Why he wished to do so, and what he gained from the experience, are puzzles yet to be solved. One account of his life avers that he served his constituents well. Perhaps so; nothing is cited by way of supporting evidence. His attendance on the floor of the House was marred by many absences, especially during his second term. The committees on which he served were not the most powerful: Post Office and Post Roads during his first term; Expenditures in the State Department during the second. He supported the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and upheld laws prohibiting the slave trade; but he was not

present to vote on the Homestead Bill of 1854. During his second term he voted with the majority to unseat Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina for his caning of Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. He consistently opposed measures for lowering duties on imported goods.

He gathered around him in those years a group of capable assistants whose stature grew with his, men who became closely identified with his accomplishments. Some of these were related to him by blood or marriage. Packer, like many other industrial pioneers, was willing to give preference in employment to members of his family, provided they proved to be reasonably competent. Thus was his "rugged individualism" tempered by a paternalism inherited from the past. Among Packer's "boys" were his brother-in-law, James I. Blakslee; Robert Lockart, who supervised construction of the line through the Lehigh Gap; Dr. Garrett B. Linderman, who married Packer's daughter, Lucy; William H. Sayre; H. Stanley Goodwin; and especially Robert Heysham Sayre and Elisha P. Wilbur.

Robert Sayre, son of William, became Packer's chief engineer for building the railroad and eventually superintendent of all operations. He had worked as a surveyor helping to enlarge the Morris Canal and later had been in the employ of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company for repairing the canal and helping to build the Switchback and Back Track railroads. Sayre and Wilbur had been educated in Mauch Chunk schools. Wilbur was a nephew of Asa, being son of a sister named Eveline. Wilbur had worked in one of Packer's stores, served as a rodman in a group surveying for the Lehigh Valley Railroad, and then moved over to the counting house. In 1856 he became Packer's private secretary and was soon in charge of financial operations for most of Packer's enterprises.

These assistants shared the work of bringing the railroad into existence and extending it into a system that

eventually stretched from the Great Lakes to New York City. They were the people who, under the general supervision of Packer, bought or built additional railroads; improved rails, rolling stock, bridges, etc.; established supporting enterprises such as the Bethlehem Iron Company and the St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital; secured financing; and helped to realize philanthropic works such as *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY*.

Several other men joined the group of assistants in later years. Chief among these were Packer's sons, Robert and Harry. Robert served as president of several branch lines within the Lehigh Valley system and eventually established a residence at Sayre, Pa. Harry was graduated from Lehigh University in 1870, in the second graduating class. He built a mansion next to that of his father in Mauch Chunk and, after Asa's death, became successively vice president and president of the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

Packer encouraged a fraternal spirit among his associates. They became a railroad family with Packer as father. One result of this was that the outside world came to accept the official word of one of these assistants as expressing Packer's own thoughts. Packer became, in fact, many men cooperating in a grand design of putting together a railroad empire. Another result was that the assistants shielded Packer from public view. People could not be sure what decisions were actually his and what were those of his subordinates, unless he or his associates took care to let the public know specifically from whom the initiative came, as they did in connection with the founding of *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY*.

Packer's conduct with respect to the university well illustrates the relationship between him, other members of his railroad family, and outsiders whom he trusted. After announcing to Stevens the intention of founding an institution of higher education and deciding on the membership of its board of trustees, he went to Europe. He

was not present at the important organizational meeting held at the Sun Hotel in Bethlehem on July 27, 1865. The trustees—and especially Stevens, Robert Sayre, and Wilbur—did most of the work. Sayre was responsible for negotiating the purchase of Christmas Hall, the first building on the campus. Sayre worked closely with the architect, Edward T. Potter, and the man chosen as superintendent of construction, Capt. James Jenkins. Stevens took the lead in securing the services of Dr. Henry Coppee as president and toured other institutions of higher education. Coppee undertook the tasks of seeking other faculty members and articulating courses of study. Packer frequently made suggestions, especially concerning the appointment of key personnel such as Potter and Coppee, whom he may have known previously. Potter, son of Bishop Alonzo Potter, was well known as an architect. Coppee was a West Pointer who had served in the Mexican War and Civil War, taught literature, rhetoric, and logic at the University of Pennsylvania, belonged to the American Philosophical Society, and was generally well received by the governing aristocracy of Philadelphia.

Packer's assistants kept him informed. He often exercised a power of decision in both important and relatively trivial matters. "He heard others patiently," said Coppee, "but he always decided for himself. When the architect brought him the plans of Packer Hall, to be built of brick—'We will build it of stone,' he said." A letter to Capt. Jenkins dated October 29, 1866—one of the few surviving letters in Packer's handwriting—reads as follows: "Dear sir—Yours of the 25th came to hand on Saturday morning and contents noted. I think the largest lined machine would be preferable as recommended by you. Therefore I think you may consider the matter settled and go on with it."

Another letter to Capt. Jenkins from William H. Sayre, Jr. (Robert's brother) gives notice of a meeting: "Will you

please notify Mr. [John] Fritz [superintendent of the Bethlehem Iron Company and a trustee of the university] that there will be a meeting of the building committee at Robert's office 1:30 p.m. Want you and Mr. Edw. Potter present. Judge will be down if well enough."

The situation continued thus as long as Packer lived. The entire railroad family participated in the work of the university, endowing, supervising, encouraging, supplying skills, attending functions—in short sustaining it in every way but those of admitting, disciplining, and teaching students. Packer's attention never flagged. He was always present when needed to make crucial decisions. He was responsible for the abolition of tuition in 1871, by which the doors were opened to all qualified young men; and he subsequently paid the bills that tuition might have been expected to cover, sending checks for expenses. Packer made the decision to build a library against the advice of others, who argued that it was not yet needed.

The year before he died he met a group of young alumni who asked that *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY* be transformed into a strictly technical institution; he quietly observed that the university seemed to be getting along fine as it was.

He made millions, becoming reputedly the richest man in Pennsylvania, but he and Sarah still chose to live simply. Work in furthering his enterprises absorbed most of his energy. He seems never to have had time-consuming hobbies or to have taken long vacations. The trip to Europe in 1865 is unique and remains unexplained; it was possibly made for his health or for pleasure, but was more likely a combination of business and pleasure.

In 1860 he had completed in Mauch Chunk a mansion exhibiting everything by way of architecture, landscaping, and furnishings that people expected the home of a millionaire to have. Yet the house as it stands today expresses the personality of neither himself nor his wife.

Even without the ornamentation added by his heirs it exists apart from what was genuinely Asa Packer. Sarah reputedly was never as happy there as she was in her former, more modest homes. He and Sarah used the place to entertain family and friends. Perhaps he built it as a concession to his children, who shared with the populace an image of the proper abode for a railroad king.

Asa also bought a house at 722 Spruce St. in Philadelphia and spent much time there on business. Probably Sarah went to the Philadelphia house infrequently. She stayed in Mauch Chunk knitting his socks. A.K. McClure wrote of him: "He had no taste for society; indeed all formal duties were extremely irksome to him. His greatest pleasure was to have three friends join him in the evening at his Philadelphia residence, play euchre until about half past ten, and then join him in a drink of good old rye and adjourn."

He enjoyed occasional praise. He was proud of what he had done and listened with no show of false modesty to adulation such as that given by Bishop Stevens at the University Exercises of 1869. He accepted that friends and associates might give him a testimonial dinner, approved the date of November 23, 1865, and characteristically listened stone-faced to the encomiums heaped upon him by civic and industrial leaders. He had his portrait painted by Boutelle. While refusing to allow the trustees to name the university after him, he raised no objection to having the principal building called Packer Hall. When friends and relatives wanted to celebrate Asa and Sarah's golden wedding anniversary, he opened his house and royally entertained a crowd of well-wishers who came from far and near using free passes on Lehigh Valley trains.

Perhaps this succumbing to praise was a weakness of old age; possible it was charity, a sacrifice of allowing people who wanted to honor him thus to intrude on his privacy. The writer who covered the University Exercises of 1869 for *The Daily Times* (Bethlehem) speculated that

the judge was tired of constantly listening to praise. Probably so, but nevertheless, a temptation to enjoy the spotlight seems to have been present, however much it may have clashed with his love of privacy. He permitted politicians to put his name into nomination as a favorite son for the Democratic presidential candidacy in 1868. The Pennsylvania delegation stuck by him until the fifteenth ballot, when it switched to General Hancock. The following year he accepted the Democratic nomination for governor of Pennsylvania. Although he did little campaigning, he lost to Gen. John W. Geary by fewer than five-thousand votes. In short, he came close to winning an election that would have involved a radical change of lifestyle.

In 1875 Packer wrote a last will and testament that stands as a monument to his sense of responsibility for the welfare of all who depended on him. The Lehigh Valley Railroad was the key. Everything that mattered to him hinged on its continued prosperity. He wrote, "I have spent a large part of my life in projecting and building up the Lehigh Valley Railroad. It has been remunerative to me, the stockholders have given me their confidence and I have a deep interest in its future welfare and prosperity and in the welfare of those who have invested in it and have been associated with me in the enterprise. I wish my estate to be identified with it and the trustees to have an influence in its management for as long a period as it can be done consistently with the best interest of the company and of my estate and in the judgment of the trustees it may be judicious or proper."

Accordingly, he willed his fortune to five trustees, namely, his sons Robert and Harry; Elisha P. Wilbur; Robert H. Sayre; and the president of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, whomever that might be. Because his fortune included the stocks and bonds by which he controlled the railroad, this amounted to assuring that the members of his railroad family would operate the road after his death.

Other clauses dealt with bequests that the trustees were to make. The largest bequests, one of which went to *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY*, involved promises of a continuing income from the profits of the railroad. In effect these provisions virtually assured the beneficiaries an annual stipend equal to or greater than that received during his lifetime. For example, Lehigh University was to enjoy the interest from \$1,500,000, which at four percent (then considered a reasonably good rate of interest) would be \$60,000 a year—at the time somewhat more than Packer had been paying and enough to keep the university in the black for the foreseeable future.

It came to pass as he had intended. When in 1879 he died, none who depended on him suffered financial hardship. The value of the Lehigh Valley securities remained firm; the trustees took control of the railroad, which for many years they continued to expand with profit to themselves and all concerned; and Packer's railroad family variously maintained and enlarged their support of the institutions that had been dear to him and branched out to include others of which he undoubtedly would have approved.

Countrymen honored Packer for his fortune, his railroad, his university. These indeed deserved to be respected. But his greatest accomplishment was that of inspiring the people who worked for him and especially the members of his railroad family—the Packers, Wilburs, Lindermans, Sayres, and others whom he had found in obscurity and given a chance to prove themselves. They were, like Packer, independent and strong-willed. They did not always agree among themselves; but he had bound them together by a common interest, which several of them furthered by means of marriage. When danger threatened from without, they worked as a team. They represented his continuing presence in the valley, in the church, in *THE LEHIGH UNIVERSITY*, and in the America that he had loved so much.



THESE IS no definitive biography of Asa Packer and none is likely to appear, for the simple reason that sufficient primary sources are lacking. Even the few accounts about him that appeared during his lifetime contain errors that he apparently made no attempt to correct.

Yet these and other accounts are useful. Among them are "An Outline of the Career of the Hon. Asa Packer" (Bethlehem, Pa., Anon., 1867); the introductions to the printed accounts of the testimonial dinner given on November 23, 1865, and the golden wedding anniversary; William Bacon Stevens' University Day Address of 1869, "The Lehigh University, Its Origin and Aims"; the obituary of Asa Packer in *The Daily Times* (Bethlehem, May 24, 1879); the memorial address by Henry Coppee given at the University Day Exercises in 1879; Bishop M.A. de Wolfe Howe's Founder's Day Address of 1879; Milton C. Stuart's "Asa Packer, 1805-1879," a Newcomen Address (1938); biographical entries in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Biography*, *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress*, Charles R. Stark's *Groton, Connecticut, 1705-1905*, Emily C. Blackman's *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (1873), and Mathews & Hungerford's *History of the Counties of Lehigh and Carbon* (1884); reminiscences by Henry S. Drinker in the *Lehigh Alumni Bulletin* (October, 1929); Samuel H. Missimer's article on Asa Packer in the same journal (November, 1959); and Robert C. Cole's booklet, *Asa Packer* (1968).

Other useful sources include M.S. Henry's *History of the Lehigh Valley* (1860); I. Daniel Rupp, *History of Northampton, Lehigh, Monroe, Carbon, and Schuylkill Counties* (1845); Alexander McClure, *Old-Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (1905); Fred Brenckman, *History of Easton, Pennsylvania* (1885); *The Congressional Globe*; the early Registers and financial records of Lehigh University, minutes and accounts of the Asa Packer Estate, and miscellaneous correspondence and newspaper clippings in the Lehigh Collection of the Linderman Library, Lehigh University; various issues of *The Daily Times* (Bethlehem) and *The Moravian* (in the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem); John Thurbur Packer's *History and Genealogy of the Packer Family*; the unpublished diary of Robert Heysham Sayre (in the Canal Museum Library, Easton); and the annual reports of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company and the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

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All errors and interpretations of events are the responsibility of the author.

W. Ross Yates
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