

# This Place Matters

James Michener (1907-1997) would have understood. He wrote popular historical novels with titles such as ... Alaska, Chesapeake and Texas. He would choose particular geographic locales and develop sweeping across-generations' sagas. He would begin with the earliest known geological developments of the locales and then proceed to cover the lives of colorful inhabitants, some real, some fictional, telling stories based on historic events.

He could have spun a grand saga about *Locust Grove and its vicinity* based uniquely on what really happened here. Fiction would not have been required to make such a book fascinating.

The saga would begin over 200 million years ago when the river now named the Susquehanna began to flow across the ancient supercontinent of Pangaea. The saga would continue describing multiple glacial melt torrents from ice sheets to the north, with the last melt beginning about 18,000 years ago and raging for as much as 3,000 years. These melts formed river terraces like those you can see to the south of the mansion.

Michener could have continued his saga recounting the separate stories of pre-historic Indian hunting parties; Shenks Ferry, Susquehannock and Conoy Indian villages; French and Scot-Irish fur traders, Indian treaty negotiations, Swiss Mennonite farmers and their religious fervor, pioneer ferrymen, war heroes, politicians and industrialists, all unfolding around inhabitants and places *within a mile radius* of Locust Grove!

He could have told the stories of the Bazaillion, Brenneman, Engle, Galbraith, Haldeman, Hoffman, Smith and Wiley families who left their mark here. The Haldeman Family in particular spanned generations at this locale. They offer much to write about. Jacob, the Swiss immigrant, linked to the Revolutionary War through his serving on a local Committee of Safety, was a pioneer farmer. His son John, the Locust Grove patriarch settled here in 1785. He developed an industrial complex that was to make him a nationally respected businessman, politician and an international trader. John's son Henry continued in his fathers footsteps and became an industrial leader in his own right. He was a pioneer in the iron business as the nation pressed westward on iron rails. Henry in turn fathered a large family, his oldest son Samuel, became an internationally known scientist, whose local funeral was attended by foreign Ambassadors. Paris, another son, traveled by wagon train to the California gold fields to seek his fortune, and another son, Horace, went off to serve in the Mexican War and eventually settled in Texas and fought for the south in the Civil War. Yet another son, Cyrus, stayed behind, and served in the Northern Army, but a small part of his illustrious career.

Locust Grove is not the tip of the iceberg if you are looking for the most important place in the history of our nation. It is however, a solid part of the base. Its melting water --- its progeny and the achievements wrought here, from the earliest times, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century --- have spread across the land and helped to nurture, in a very thorough and exemplary way, the growth of our nation.

Exploring Locust Grove and vicinity, starting with the Haldeman Mansion, its historic nucleus, is not unlike the opening of a time capsule that has recorded our nation's history from its earliest beginnings:

*... when you stand on the porch of the Haldeman Mansion, and take in the panoramic view, you can gaze south to a field, a river terrace, where stood an Indian village, you can imagine the men, women and children going about their daily lives; you can gaze west across the broad Susquehanna River and imagine the bygone 18<sup>th</sup> Century pole-driven ferry crossing with its passengers, imagine a 19<sup>th</sup> Century steam engine's sharp whistle as it emerges out of the trees to the south with its trail of smoke and a mule-drawn barge moving slowly by in the canal; and then gaze to the north to the Conoy Creek where on both banks you can see the remains of what was a large industrial center spanning three centuries ... a four-story grist and commercial mill, saw mill, distillery, farm and livestock operations.*

As you view this panorama, you can visualize the historic breadth and depth of Locust Grove, you can experience a calmness of former times, and you realize time really is relative ... it slows down when you stand on the porch. You realize the mansion behind you is very relevant. You know, you just know, the **Haldeman Mansion** really does matter. It *is* an iconic symbol of our national heritage.