

Chapter 1

Challenge at the Ferry

Most residents of William Penn's colony were still at their breakfasts when the two horse-drawn wagons cleared the top of a low ridge, bringing the Susquehanna River and Harris' Ferry into view. Wend Eckert, driving the second wagon, felt the first touch of the sun on his shoulders and looked back to see that the burning globe had now fully risen above the eastern horizon. He knew the withering July heat would soon have them in its grasp. Wend returned his attention to the team and noticed that the covered wagon ahead of his, which bore his parents and baby sister, was picking up speed and starting to pull away. He resettled the black, broad brimmed hat on his brown hair and slapped the horses' backs with the reins to close the distance. The pace quickened as they rolled down the mild grade of the road toward the river.

As the wagon jolted along the uneven track, Wend glanced at his ten-year-old brother seated to his left on the bench. "See, Bernd, I told you Father would rouse the horses on the way into town. He says you should always come in with a bit of dash! Hold on tight!"

"Well, you better be careful that you don't run off the road or can't pull up fast enough when we get to the landing!" Bernd grabbed the bench as the wagon bounced over a series of steep bumps. The harness trace chains rattled from the jostling and the wagon creaked under the weight of its load. "Watch out! You're not used to handling the team on a rough road. You'll be in for it if you spill the wagon or break an axle before we even get across the river!"

Wend shot back, "We broke camp before dawn to make an early morning ferry. If I drove us safely through the darkness and morning dusk, we'll be fine now that I can see the road." He concentrated on avoiding a rut, then continued, "Besides, I've handled things for the two days since we left Lancaster, so stop complaining!" He sighed to himself. The little brat was at an impish stage where he never missed an opportunity to criticize Wend, or better yet, embarrass him in front of adults.

But Wend had no intention of letting Bernd spoil the excitement of the moment. His family was moving from their home near Lancaster to Fort Pitt, the British wilderness outpost on the Ohio River which had been captured from the French in the prior year, 1758. Johann, his father, had just been appointed contract armorer to the garrison. And to Wend's great pride, at age fifteen, he was being trusted with driving the heavy wagon carrying all Johann's tools and trade supplies for the entire distance of 200 miles, two thirds of the way across the colony.

Wend looked at the village which spread out ahead of them. Scattered buildings were planted on the low-lying land along the eastern bank of the river, lacking any real focus save the ferry landing which constituted the settlement's main reason for being. The visually dominant building, sited in an open field south of the landing, was the large, two story log house which Johann had told them belonged to John Harris himself, the owner of the ferry and the trading post. A few taverns, shops, and warehouses which catered to travelers and wagoners were clustered near the landing. Randomly placed houses and small farms further back from the water completed the extent of civic development.

Wend glanced down at the water ahead and saw an opportunity to distract his brother. "Look Bernd, there's the ferry out on the river!"

Bernd shaded his eyes with his hand, and crinkled up his face. "It seems pretty small to me." Then, after further consideration, he said, "It looks like it has legs; sort of like a spider on the water."

"It's big enough, all right." Wend concentrated on the horses and the road, "And those things which look like spider legs are the poles which move the boat." He paused as he worked with the reins. "Just think: In a couple of hours we'll be in the real border country for the first time."

Despite Bernd's protestations, nothing untoward occurred as they rolled past the shops and taverns. Finally they pulled up at the building on the river bank which served as a combination ferry terminal and tavern. Their timing was near perfect, for they arrived just as the boat made its approach from the far shore. Wend saw that it was a large raft-like barge, nearly forty feet in length and ten feet wide. As the Susquehanna at this point was no more than a couple of feet deep, the ferry's motive power was ten men, five to a side, who pushed the raft along with long poles. Another man steered with a sweep oar.

Johann Eckert climbed down from his wagon to make arrangements with the ferry proprietor, who stood at the landing. Since there were only two men on horseback getting off the boat, the ferry was soon ready for them to go aboard.

Then Wend heard a loud shout from the direction of the tavern. "Hey! What is going on here?" A man strode rapidly toward the ferry proprietor, waving a brass-handled walking stick at the ferry man and Johann. He was of slight build, narrow-faced, and dressed in a fine, well-tailored brown suite. On his head he wore a powdered wig and one of those fashionable tri-cornered hats that were rarely seen out in the country. "Listen: I understood that my party was next on the boat! What are you doing loading these two wagons?"

The proprietor was still counting Johann's money. He calmly looked up at the approaching man. "So where are your rigs? If you want to go aboard you need to be ready when the boat arrives."

The agitated man clenched his teeth and pointed back at the tavern. "My good man, we were finishing our breakfast in your very own establishment. My servant is hitching up our conveyances right now. Move these wagons out of the way and we shall be right here. I have important government affairs in Carlisle and must be there for meetings early tomorrow!"

The proprietor shook his head. "Sorry, these people were ready to load and have paid in good coin. I'm running a business here, not a special service for the Governor's officials!" He turned to Johann, who had climbed back up to his wagon seat, and with a conspiratorial wink, waved him aboard the ferry. Then he turned to the city man and said, "You want to make the next ferry, you better get your wagons out here in line before some freight waggoner gets hitched up and beats you to it!"

The man in the brown suit opened his mouth as if intending to say more, but then closed it and stood scowling at the Eckert's wagons, rapidly tapping the walking stick against his right boot in frustration.

Johann Eckert deftly maneuvered his wagon up the earthen ramp onto the boat's deck. Once aboard, he carefully eased the rig to the extreme forward end. Wend relaxed on the seat of the tool wagon as Father and the ferrymen worked to secure the wagon. Meanwhile, his mother Mary and four-year old Elise climbed down from their seats to the ferry's deck. As he waited for

his turn to board, Wend basked in a sense of pride and satisfaction at his competence in driving the team and heavy wagon over the long distance from Lancaster.

Then, with a single sentence, Bernd ruined his feeling of well being. "Look, Wend, there's not much room for us on the boat."

Wend looked at the ferry more closely and saw that his brother was right. There was barely enough space for his team and wagon. Then he noticed something which worried him even more. The earthen ramp up to the boat's deck was steep; much steeper than he had realized at first. He felt a surge of doubt and indecision in his stomach. *What was the proper way to load the wagon? Should he get off and lead the horses up onto the deck, or should he try to drive them up, as Johann had done?* Either way he could see the possibility of a big problem. If he led the horses at a walk, there might not be enough momentum to get the heavy wagon up the steep ramp. If he stayed aboard the wagon and drove the horses up at a rapid pace, could he get the team stopped in time to keep from running into the rear of the other wagon? Or might the horses actually balk at his command?

The unanticipated challenge deflated his confidence. Visions of an embarrassing accident crowded his mind and a knot of apprehension formed in his stomach. In his sudden doubt, he looked up, thinking that maybe Father would come to take over and save him from the necessity of making a decision. But Johann was talking with one of the men and paying him no attention.

Then suddenly things got far more complicated.

Wend glanced over in the direction of the tavern on the right and looked directly into the most incredibly blue eyes he had ever seen. The eyes were framed by golden hair under a smart hat, complemented by a small upturned nose, and nicely shaped mouth. All these features belonged to an elegantly dressed girl who had just come out of the tavern and was standing by the side of the man who had argued with the ferry proprietor. She was staring directly at Wend, her eyes seeming to bore into him, as the man indignantly described what had occurred. Wend suddenly felt a prickling on the back of his neck and quickly looked away. Sweat welled up on his face and on his hands where he held the reins. He had always had a tendency toward self-consciousness and it was now uncontrollably blossoming in the presence of this beautiful girl with the penetrating eyes.

And now the ferryman was motioning him to come onto the boat.

Wend hesitated, and after a long moment, Bernd impatiently elbowed him in the side. Then he said, in a loud voice everyone in the vicinity could hear, "Come on, Wend! They want us on the ferry."

"Be quiet. We'll go when I'm ready." Despite the embarrassment caused by Bernd's words, Wend resisted the urge to immediately start the horses forward. He sat still, forcing himself to concentrate and to plan every action he would take, working out the proper timing and thinking about what could go wrong. In his mind he felt the eyes of the girl on him, waiting to see how he would perform, and it took all his will power not to look at her again. Meanwhile, Bernd fidgeted on the seat beside him. Even the lead horse seemed to know something was up; he swung his head as far around as the harness would permit to see what Wend was doing.

Now Johann had stopped talking to the ferryman and was looking at him with concern in his eyes. Wend saw his father glance between the ramp and the remaining space on the boat and knew that he had recognized the difficulty facing his son. But he said nothing. And Wend was thankful for that because now he had worked out what he was going to do.

"Hold on, Bernd!" Wend gave the horses a first, gentle touch with the reins. That started them at a normal pace and, more importantly, got the heavy wagon rolling. Then in the next

instant he stood up and slapped the reins down on the horses as hard as he could and at the same time shouted, “*Ha!Ha!Ha!*” at the top of his voice. It had the desired effect: The team, startled by the suddenness and urgency of his signal, literally jumped up the incline and onto the boat’s deck, their racing, iron-shod hooves making a loud clattering on the planking. Wend conquered the urge to pull them up as the distance to Johann’s wagon closed rapidly. He knew he had to keep up the momentum until the rear wheels were on the boat deck or the wagon’s weight might force them backward down the ramp. Then, at the instant he felt the rear wheels cross to the deck, he leaned back with all his might on the reins and shouted “Whoa!” at the top of his voice. He braced himself against the front of the wagon bed and jammed his right foot down on the brake lever. For a moment he thought he had waited too long to kick the brake, but it worked out just right with the horses’ noses ending up mere inches behind the front wagon. The lead horse snorted, then looked around again and Wend swore he could see surprise and grudging approval in his eyes.

Wend felt a surge of relief and dropped down onto the seat. Drops of sweat from his hatband rolled down his forehead, but the tension drained out of his body. He felt the same relief he had experienced when he successfully passed an examination by Master Dreher, the stern, demanding teacher of his former school in Lancaster.

His thoughts were interrupted by Johann’s voice. “Are you going to sit there for the whole boat trip, Wend? Come down here and help us secure the wagon.”

Bernd had already jumped down to the deck. Wend stood up and looked back at the landing. He was surprised to see that the girl still had her eyes on him. But as their eyes met, she frowned, then abruptly turned and walked away from the landing, following in the steps of the man in the brown suite.

The boatmen and Johann were lashing down the wagon and putting blocks at the front and back of the wheels. Wend got down and helped finish the job. As he worked, his father stood beside him and leaned down with his hand on his shoulder. He spoke quietly so only Wend could hear. “It seems you may have the makings of a good waggoner.” That was all, but Wend felt a warm glow of pride spread through him to replace the feelings of insecurity which he had experienced only a few minutes before. His father was a stern taskmaster who used praise sparingly. So Wend had learned to cherish those words when he earned them.

Soon the boatmen took up their poles and moved the ferry off toward the far bank of the river. Johann struck up a conversation with the man at the steering oar, “How long will the passage take?”

“Well, the river is near a mile wide here,” he replied, “So between working against this current and unloading your wagons, it will be just short of an hour until you get back on the road.” He moved the oar and adjusted the boat’s course into the current. “Where are you bound?”

“To Carlisle,” Eckert said, meaning that was their next stop. “How far do you make it?”

The boatman hesitated and looked at the sky while he considered. “If the weather holds up and you don’t waste any time along the way, you can make it by dark tonight. It’s less than twenty miles and the road is not too bad this time of year.”

Wend lost interest in the conversation. He watched the ferry landing slowly recede into the distance. His thoughts were on the blue eyed, blond girl he could still make out on the shore. He wondered if he would ever see her or a girl like her again. As he thought about it, he was surprised at how much he could now remember from glances of only a few seconds. He was intrigued with that idea and concentrated his thoughts to build an image like a painting of her in

his mind. He realized she was tall for a girl, because she had stood nearly as high as the man who he assumed was her father. He thought about her clothing. Her dress had been blue, of a shade which blended well with her eyes. And it was of excellent quality; undoubtedly custom made by a tailor. Wend was proud that his family was reasonably well off, at least for that of a craftsman. But he had few purchased items of clothing, really only shoes, hats and a belt or two; things that Mother couldn't sew. So the girl came from a wealthy family, probably from Philadelphia. That would fit with the clothing she and her father wore. Suddenly, Wend's mind and his Germanic practicality jerked him back to reality. He thought: *Why am I standing here dreaming about a girl I saw for less than a minute? How would we ever meet? And if our paths would cross, what would an English girl from Philadelphia and a German country boy serving as his father's apprentice ever find in common?*

The answer was very clear to him: *Nothing*. Undoubtedly she would consider him on the same level as a servant and not even worthy of talking to except in the way of business.

So he resolved to put her out of his mind.

That resolution lasted all day. He concentrated his mind on the road and the team as they traveled through the rolling woodland interspersed with farms and hamlets that marked the way to Carlisle. They stopped only to rest the horses and munch on some cold food Mary had cooked the night before, arriving in a small clearing on the eastern side of the town shortly after dark. Wend and Bernd unharnessed the horses and tied them to a picket rope run between stakes. The family set up camp in the glow from the settlement's lights until Johann had a fire lighted.

Wend had never been to Carlisle, and was looking forward to seeing what he knew was the fastest growing settlement west of the Susquehanna. So he settled down to sleep in the warm blankets under the wagon with a sense of anticipation. But, with the onset of sleep, he lost control of his thoughts and his earlier resolution went by the board. His mind, unfettered by will power, took him right back to visions of the unforgettable girl at the ferry landing. It was a restless sleep, and toward dawn he woke up, surprised to find himself fully and painfully aroused.