

The History of Belle Vernon and North Belle Vernon

Bellevernon, as it was originally spelled, was laid out in 1813 by Noah Speer in northwestern Fayette County. French for "beautiful green," this was the name chosen by both Noah Speer for his little community on the Monongahela River and later by his son Louis, who founded a town with nearly the same name just up the hill (North Belle Vernon).

Noah Speer was the father of Louis M. Speer, Esq., born in a log cabin on the Speer homestead/Gibson farm in 1810. The younger Mr. Speer was quite the business man and played a large role in the development of Belle Vernon. During his lifetime, the population grew to about 700 and there was a steam ferry connecting Belle Vernon with Allen Township across the river. The little hamlet also boasted 5 dry goods stores, 4 groceries, 2 glasshouses with 87 employees, a boot and shoe, cabinet, chair, wagon, saddle/harness, blacksmith/tanning shops, and 2 sawmills. Louis Speer owned a sandbank outside of town which produced the best quality glass sand. He also owned a large coal works and a large boat yard with more than 50 employees. Louis resided on the NW corner of Main and 2nd streets.

Boat hulls were built at his boatyard (owned in partnership with a man named Gaskill), located on 3rd street in the 1830s and 1840s. Several steamboats are noted to have come from the yard including the *Minstrel* which in 1842 fell of its building docks killing one and injuring 10. The *St. Anthony* bound for Galena, IL and the *Cassandra* headed to Knoxville, TN came from the Belle Vernon yard. Two boats bound for customers in Pittsburgh were the *Alert* and the *Avalanche* (1847).

In 1853, Mr. Speer built a sawmill with partner William Latta, a boat builder, below the mouth of Speers Run. It was destroyed by fire in 1877 and rebuilt by his son William F. Speer. William, who spent 3 months in Libby Prison during the Civil War, left the army after attaining the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. William went bankrupt soon after completing the new mill and sold it to the Belle Vernon Saw and Planning Company in 1880.

The small village of Speers across the river, laid out in 1860 by a kinsman, also gets its name from the same family. North Belle Vernon, in Westmoreland County, was laid out in 1872 by Louis and was incorporated in 1876. Lois died two years later in 1878 and is buried at the Rehoboth Presbyterian Church Cemetery.

Samuel Dougherty, a carpenter, is claimed to have built the first dwelling in North Belle Vernon on Broad Avenue near Spring Alley. He was a very influential person and at one time was justice of the peace, council member, school director, and judge of election, all at the same time. The first two industries were a foundry in 1873 on Broad Avenue above Spring Alley and a flour mill on Speer Street in 1874. Most of these early buildings surrounded the intersection of Short Street and Broad Avenue. Lots were not sold until 1900 and the area beyond Arch Street then began to build up. The population was 435 in 1890 and by 1910 it grew to 1520. The 1960 census showed 3,184 residents, followed by 2,916 in 1970, 2,245 in 1980, and 2,112 in 1990, and the most recent count in 2000 was 2,107.

Sources:

<http://www.bvasd.net/hs/bvahistory.htm>

<http://northbellevernon.org/history.htm>

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