



# The LIGGIE

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## From Our Collection:

### **SAMUEL LEEKE FRENCH - THE FIRST LVRR ENGINEER** - by Bill Potthoff

Joanne M. Hanley, president of the Gettysburg Foundation, and Ligonier resident, spoke at the Chamber of Commerce dinner this year about the importance of preserving local history. "History is to the country what memories are to an individual. Branches of our family tree of America tell the story of our country."

Occasionally when doing research you happen to stray from the main path and encounter a person or other subject you would like to know more about. One of our researchers, who researches all things LVRR, mentioned that he had found several patents issued to a Samuel L. French. We knew that Mr. French was an engineer on the LVRR so we started doing more focused research.

The first engineer for the LVRR, during initial construction days, before it opened for business in December of 1877, was Ed Fetterman (there is a conflict of names – one source cites Fetterman and another Putterman), of Allegheny and claimed to be a PRR engineer on the Middle Division. He was the engineer while they were constructing the road and on September 15, 1877, took the first train as far as Longbridge, which was as far as the tracks went at that time. He was dismissed when he showed an inability to successfully operate a locomotive. He was replaced by S. L. French, and Mr. French had the distinction of being at the throttle of the first train to be run through to Ligonier. As described by J.M. Myers, "The historic event was excitedly watched from the beginning at the road's platform, across from the Pennsylvania Railroad's water tank in Latrobe, to the ending at the as-yet unpainted station in Ligonier. All of the company's rolling stock at that time -- an engine, one freight car, and one passenger coach -- composed the train. Inside the beautifully refurbished coach proudly rode Judge Mellon, as backer of the enterprise with his wife beside him. Thomas A. Mellon, who had so much to do with the supervision of the work, was a happy passenger. Other passengers sat nearby. But probably the proudest and happiest of all was young Richard Mellon. Across the front of his cap was the distinguishing word, 'Conductor.' He ran the train. Charley Kuhn was the brakeman, Tom Dunlap, the fireman, and Samuel L. French the engineer on that eventful day. The trip took one hour."



Mr. French continued to work as an engineer for the LVRR for 20 years, missing only one month and 10 days in that period, according to an interview with his second wife Lydia in 1927, the 50th anniversary of the first run.

Samuel Leeke French (Leeke was his mother's maiden name) was born in Ohio on March 29, 1841. At age 20 he enlisted in Company B, Ohio 3rd. Infantry Regiment on June 3, 1861. He was promoted to full corporal on April 1, 1862, and was promoted to full sergeant on October 2, 1862. He mustered out on June 21, 1864.

He married Amanda Bundy, also of Ohio, on October 19, 1865. Sometime between 1865 and 1876 they moved from Ohio, probably to Latrobe as Mr. French was working at Saxman's and running a dinkey engine for M. Saxman, Jr., from the coal mine to the tipple in 1877. The tracks passed very close to the old home of the Saxmans. He was an experienced engineer and somehow came to the attention of T.A. or R.B. Mellon and was hired as an engineer, replacing Mr. Fetterman. His first wife Amanda, died on February 12, 1880, and he is listed in the 1880 census as a widower living in Ligonier with eight children. Amanda is buried in the Old Ligonier Valley Cemetery.

S.L. French was apparently very innovative. He took out a total of five patents between 1881 and 1895. In 1881 obtained patents for a force pump attachment (248,032) and spark arrester (245,621). In 1882 a spark arrester (265,056), in 1895 a forge (533,287) and in 1895 an air brake (533,286).

It's interesting to note that two of the patents for a spark arrester were filed jointly with R.B. Mellon. The second patent

continued on page 2

## Inside This Issue

<b>From Our Collection.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Recent Contributions .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>New Members .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Contact Information.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Up Coming Events.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Board of Directors .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mission Statement.....</b>	<b>4</b>



continued from page 1

was filed as an improvement on the first. Wood and coal-burning locomotives produced embers which are readily transported by the wind, and sparks from early locomotives caused fires along the right-of-way and were known to set ice houses and other structures on fire. The 1895 patent for the air brake was an improvement on the Westinghouse Air Brake and both Westinghouse and the PRR attempted to obtain rights to it.

The LVRR took pride in maintaining their operating schedule. This is from J. M. Myers: "If something interfered with the schedule, the entire crew would probably exhibit their wrathful feelings. R.B. Mellon used to delight in telling about an amusing delay in the early days. As the train was proceeding, an old farmer was seen standing between the rails and waving his hat. Believing the man wanted to board the train, R. B. stopped and proceeded to assist him aboard. When the old fellow resisted, R. B. admonished him to hurry and get on. Pulling away the man said: 'I'm not going anyplace, I hear the preacher is on the train this morning. I just want to speak to him.' As the train pulled away, the snorts of the steam engine were weak in comparison to the profanity emitting from the engineer, Sam French. This pride of schedule was still in evidence in the winter of 1950 when one of the heaviest snowfalls in the history of the road hit suddenly. With only one light snowplow to help clear the road, Conductor Piper only missed one trip, and that one was caused by packed snow on a highway crossing. That same snow tied up the Pittsburgh-Cleveland district for a week."

We have collected many newspaper articles mentioning Samuel French, too many to list in this article. An example is this one, from the Latrobe Advance, July 22, 1885. "Saturday morning the train over the Ligonier Valley Railroad did not arrive at the usual hour, and in a short time it was learned that it had met with a mishap by being thrown from the rails and wrecked. The accident happened near Gaynor Station in the ridge. Engineer French was

coming along at the usual schedule rate when he struck a calf which was loitering on the track. It got under the wheels and threw the engine, tender and three P.R.R. cars loaded with ballast, from the track. Fortunately the derailed cars went to the right side, against the hill, instead of left where they would have gone over the bank into the creek. The engineer and fireman both received slight injuries. Engineer French was almost completely buried under the coal and other things which were on the tender and which had been upset. If he had not been speedily removed, he would have been smothered. As it was he and Phillip Stump, his fireman, are both considerably bruised and will feel the effects of their jumps for some time. The engine, we understand, was badly used up. The passenger cars were in the rear and were not derailed."



French held the title of Master Mechanic from at least 1884 through 1896. Samuel L. French died in 1900. According to the Ligonier

Echo, "S.L. French – formerly an engineer on the Ligonier Valley Railroad, but who was compelled to quit that calling on account of ill health, died at his home in West Latrobe at 9:30 o'clock last Sunday night, April 15th, at the age of 59 years. The funeral will be held Wednesday morning. A High Mass is to be celebrated in the Holy Family Church, after which the remains will be taken to St. Vincent for interment." And the following week, "The pall bearers at the funeral of S.L. French last Wednesday were Geo. Senft, T.J. Dunlap, R.B. Negley, C.H. Kuhn, F.A. Knox and John W. Rhay."

George Senft was the general manager and the other pall bearers were long time employees, which indicated the high regard they held for Mr. French.

He and his second wife Lydia are buried in St. Vincent cemetery.

For a list of source materials, please contact us at the Museum – 724-238-7819.

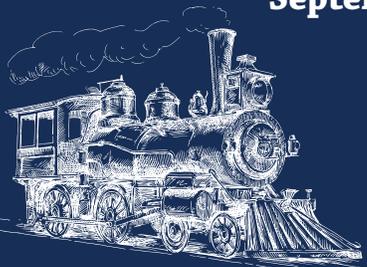
Researchers – James Aldridge, Peggy Gideon.

## First Annual Railroad Days

September 27, 2014 • Ligonier Valley Rail Road Museum  
9 AM until 5 PM

The event will feature tables with RR items for sale such as:  
Lanterns, model trains, and other railroad artifacts.

Additionally there will be activities for the kiddies,  
vendors selling unique crafts,  
and entertainment for the whole family.



### New Members

LVRRA Welcomes new members

J.A. Glasstetter • Jeff Guiler • Tony Mastrorocco • Richard Staten



The LVRRA would like to thank the following volunteers for their efforts with the planting, weeding, and caring for the beautiful flowers that have greeted visitors this spring. Those responsible are:

**Ruth Campbell**  
**Jack & Rita Horrell**  
**Tom Hunter**  
**Gladys & Phil Light**  
**Bill & Karen McCullough**  
**Dick & Carol Sheats**  
**Bob Smithley**  
**Bob & Carolyn Stutzman**  
**Sally Walker.**



## *An Evening with Author Robert Stutzman*

**Saturday, August 23, 2014 • 7 PM**

*Join us at the Ligonier Valley Rail Road Museum to hear Bob discuss his new book, **The Ligonier Valley Rail Road**. Bob's discussion will explore the writing process, how he went from local historian to author.*

Admission is free but reservations are strongly encouraged. Guests are free to browse the museum prior to Bob's talk. Light refreshments will be served.

Call to reserve your seat: 724-238-7819.

*This event is sponsored by the Ligonier Valley Rail Road Association*

## Recent Contributions

Thanks to all contributors for the following items that have been donated to the LVRRA since the last Liggie publication.

**NANCY & DALE RICHARDS** ~ Photo of Aunt Dorothy Taylor Bates at Millbank Station

**DAVE HUFFMAN** ~ Book of PRR 1887 Summer Excursion Routes

**TOM HARROLD** ~ Book titled: Locomotive Engine Running and Management by Angus Sinclair, D.E. – 1915

**ROBERT BENNER** ~ Black and white photo of train and personnel – 8"x10" mounted on 11"x14" cardboard background

**LATROBE HISTORICAL SOCIETY** ~ Annual Report of the Ligonier Valley Rail Road Co. to the Interstate Commerce Commission for the year ending June 30, 1892

**LIGONIER VALLEY RAIL ROAD ASSOCIATION** ~ Book titled: Railroading – Merit Badge Series. Copyright 2003 Boy Scouts of America ; Book titled: Farmers' Bulletins nos. 2014.10 451-475. U.S. Department of Agriculture. May 22, 2014

**DAVID HAINES, JR.** ~ Book titled: The Search for Safety – an illustrated history

**E-Version of The Liggie**



If you prefer to access the newsletter in electronic format rather than to receive a hard copy, please notify the office at **724-238-7819** or send an e-mail to **www.lvrro.org**

## Board of Directors

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 Jim Aldridge  
 Bob Stutzman  
 Pat Wallace

## Upcoming Events

- ★ **Saturday, Aug. 23, 2014:**  
 An Evening with Author Robert Stutzman  
 (see details to left)
- ★ **Saturday, Sept. 27, 2014:**  
 1st Annual Model Train Railroad days  
 (see details on page 2)

## CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

If you would like to volunteer at the museum, stop in or give us a call at **(724) 238 – 7819** to discuss available opportunities.



Ligonier Valley Rail Road Association

P.O. Box 21

Ligonier, PA 15658

# THE MISSION of the LVRRA

*Ligonier Valley Rail Road Association*

*Organized in 2004:*

**To Preserve** the legacy of the LVRRA

**To Conserve** vestiges of the LVRRA

**To Collect** memorabilia of the LVRRA

**To Educate** the public about the history of railroading in Ligonier Valley



**Find us on the web**  
[www.lvrra.org](http://www.lvrra.org)

## Hours of Operation

Wednesday through Saturday  
11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

724-238-7819 [info@lvrra.org](mailto:info@lvrra.org)

Please consult the website for changes  
[www.lvrra.org](http://www.lvrra.org)

## Contact Information

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**The Liggie is published**  
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