One summer’s day in 1768 a certain Aeneas McKay, a resident of Fort Pitt who had served in the British colonial government, took off on horseback to explore the country to the east of Pittsburgh. He was enjoying a pleasant ride in the country when he came upon a grassy glade just north of the Turtle Creek which he thought might be ideal for a homestead. He immediately applied to the local authorities, and in 1769 Mr. McKay was granted a warrant for a 300-acre tract of land in the Turtle Creek Valley.

In time McKay’s land became known as the “Dirty Camp tract.” The name derived from an incident during the recent war the British had waged with the French and local Indians. In 1763 a band of Amerind warriors had made camp at a site just north of the Turtle Creek. After a skirmish, a victorious British expedition comes upon the hastily abandoned camp; its leader, Colonel Henry Bouquet described the site in his journal as the “Dirty Camp.” The nearby stream was soon called “Dirty Camp Run.”

But Aeneas McKay’s plans to settle on his new land in the Turtle Creek Valley were put on hold at the sudden outbreak the American Revolution when he volunteered to lead a regiment of troops into battle. Col. McKay would die in 1777 on a grueling winter march; his land would go to his daughter Elizabeth and her husband Major Stephen Bayard. Eventually the Bayards moved on, and the land they left behind was sold in 1835 to a John McGinnis to eventually form the core of the modern Borough of Pitcairn.

In 1841 John McGinnis began selling lots at the crossroads of Tilbrook and the Great State Road (today’s Route 130); a place he would call “McGinnisville.” In 1849 the village became part of the newly-incorporated “Patton Township.”

At first a mere handful of famers settled around McGinnis’ property, and the settlement might have remained an insignificant farming village, were it not for a major event that occurred in 1850. By that time, the growth of the Railroads were transforming American life, and the flourishing Pennsylvania Railroad was about to begin a regular east-west service from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. And so in 1850 the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) bought a right-of-way 66 feet wide from John McGinnis.

In the next few years it became apparent that while Pittsburgh could serve as a hub in the PRR, the city yards at 28th Street were much too small to accommodate the large number of trains expected as operations expanded. In 1874, Robert Pitcairn, divisional superintendent of Pittsburgh operations, began to look for more open space to relocate the Pittsburgh yard. Bruce Kish (1993) continues the story:
“Pitcairn gazed eastward toward the sparsely wooded upper Turtle Creek Valley where lay the farmlands of the McGinnis, Brinton, Wall and Toohill families. In 1874, he purchased 215 acres of this land, about 15 miles from Pittsburgh. The tract would serve as the new home for the Pittsburgh rail yard and its workers. For the next 20 years, the neighboring hillsides resounded with the thud of axes and the pounding of hammers as the forests yielded to a growing company town its residents called Wallurba.”

The new rail yards gradually grew. The first receiving and classification yards were completed by 1892. By late 1905, the Westbound Hump yard in Pitcairn was opened where rail cars are pushed up a hill (hump), uncoupled, and then rolled downhill into remotely controlled sorting tracks. Two years later, the Eastbound Hump near the site of the old Wall family farm was finished. A series of four tracks ran up to each of the humps and fanned into 35 others in the receiving yards.

Thus began the decades- long love affair between Patton Township and the Pennsylvania Railroad culminating, by the end of the 19th century, in the massive Pitcairn Railroad Yards. For many years all east and west bound freight of the Pittsburgh Division of the PRR was channeled through the Pitcairn as the Yard grew into one of the largest and most strategic classification yards on the PRR system.

By the 1890s dissatisfaction with Patton Township’s administration caused the residents of Wallurba to petition for their own charter. With the support of the PRR, a charter was quickly granted, and in 1894 the village was incorporated as a Borough, adopting the name of the visionary Railroad Superintendent -- “Pitcairn.”

The next few decades saw considerable growth as the one-time farming village developed into a flourishing industrial community. Frustrated by a lack of service by local electric companies, the Pitcairn Council floated a bond to finance its own electric light plant and distribution system; electricity for homes became a reality. And then in the early 1900s Broadway, Second and Third Streets were all paved; a bridge was built over Dirty Camp Run, and the Pittsburgh and Wilmerding Street Railway Company began a trolley service along Broadway -- with a fare to Pittsburgh of 15 cents.

Authorities of the growing town took steps to improve public health by draining swamps and ponds, laying out roads, providing for police, fire services, water, sewerage. More schools were needed; the Pitcairn High School was dedicated in 1916. The need for more land to support the town’s growing population lead to annexation of northern Pitcairn. Street lights and traffic lights were installed as Broadway became a booming business district.

Throughout two world wars the Borough flourished, supporting war efforts through the vital part played by the railroad, and by the active support of the Pitcairn community for our troops overseas.
In the decade following the end of World War Two, a gradual decline set in as the railroad began gradually moving their operations out of Pitcairn, one after the other. By 1959, the peak employment at the Pitcairn Yards of 4700 had dropped to 1350.

Operations at the Pitcairn yards continued to be downsized and would eventually phased out completely. In 1959 the PRR gave the town its final gift – The YMCA Pitcairn Community Building. Other railroad facilities would eventually be restored to the Borough such as the Pitcairn Park land on Broadway. Conrail (the successor to the PRR) ended an era when it shut down the last of its operations in the Pitcairn Yards in 1979.

Along with the economic decline, the population dropped from a peak of 6000 to 3224 in 2009. The declining population brought other changes as well, as when the Pitcairn Schools were joined to the Monroeville Schools in a jointure – the Gateway school System.

As the borough adjusted to the new economic realities in the 1970s, plans for urban renewal were being made under the Turtle Creek Valley’s “Model Cities Program.” The Pitcairn Park Building was opened in 1975 to serve as a meeting place and home to the community, and its many organizations and civic groups.

In 1979 a disastrous flood devastated the community when Dirty Camp Creek overran its banks flooding North Pitcairn and sending flood waters cascading through the town. A massive clean-up effort followed and flood prevention measures were put into place. Flood cleanup efforts continued even as a re-vitalization project for Pitcairn’s business district began in the 1980s. In 1982 the community gained some 38 acres in the area around the Park Building and at Sugar Camp in north Pitcairn.

Also in the 1980s the Conrail’s (later, Norfolk and Western’s) inter-modal terminal across the Turtle Creek utilized some of the old PRR Yards to bring new commercial life to the valley by acting as a transfer point for the trans-shipment of cargo in containers hauled by trucks to trains.

One measure of a community’s character is the number of religious, civic, social and fraternal organizations it has fielded over the years. And here, Pitcairn’s record has been outstanding! Here are just some of the community groups that have appeared in Pitcairn’s History:

Lion’s Club, Pitcairn Civic Association, Pitcairn Food Pantry, Meals on Wheels, Pitcairn Ambulance Association, Senior Citizens Club; these along with various unions, sports, and church groups too numerous to mention.

Such civic organizations reflect the commitment the people of Pitcairn have to building and strengthening their community.