

Robert Thompson Dedication



Robert Thompson's Gravestone at Shenango U.P. Cemetery where the bells toll for the end of the Turkey Bowl Game. Above—the gravestone in the 1990s. Below—the gravestone in 2012



In late summer of 1898, a New Castle News reporter visited the Shenango United Presbyterian Church cemetery where, as he dramatically put it, “many of the pioneer residents of Little Lawrence are sleeping, careless alike of the end-of-the-century bustle that has so little respect for men and things that were, and of the oblivion that has fallen upon their neglected tombs.” As he tramped through the churchyard overgrown with blackberry bushes, young trees, and rank weeds, he mused upon the lives of these men and women who “were in their prime when New Castle was still a thing of the future, and who saw the departure of the last of the red men; men and women who cleared the primeval forests and blazed the way for the westward march of civilization and progress; men and women who bravely faced the hardships and dangers of a frontier life in a land where the cry of wild beasts was heard during the long winter nights; men and women who had lived and died long before the possibilities of steam had been discovered and applied to the steamboat and the locomo-

tive engine; men and women whose virtues have been handed down to newer generations, the members of which are among the best families of Lawrence county.”

Many of the gravestones had fallen over, some obscured by dense vegetation or buried beneath the soil, the reporter finding these only by chance. Of those stones still visible and still legible, he recorded several of the inscriptions, paying particular attention to those with “quaint” rhyming epitaphs. Among the warnings “Ah, youth! Beware and do prepare to meet the master Death,” “Stop! Passenger, stop and read this stone; see how suddenly I have gone,” and “This lady died so young and fair, called hence by an early doom,” he noted the pious “That man hath perfect blessedness who walketh not astray, in counsel of ungodly men, or stands in sinners’ way” which was engraved on the stone of Robert Thompson who died June 8, 1834 aged 73 years. Imagine my surprise when nearly 100 years after this inscription was published in the New Castle News, I discovered that Robert Thompson was my great-great-great-

great grandfather and that he was buried right up the road from me!

Robert Thompson was born Apr. 21, 1761, very possibly in PA and is said to have been Scotch-Irish. According to oral family history, he had two children with a Delaware Indian named Maid of the Morning before marrying Jennet Sankey in 1790, with whom he had 13 more children. We descend from Robert’s eldest child Archibald. I recently took an Ancestry.com DNA ethnicity test, hoping to confirm or refute this interesting bit of family folklore, and when the results came back with the ambiguous “2% unknown,” the rest being Central European and British Isles, it was neither confirmed nor refuted, to my great disappointment. One intriguing clue to the veracity of this story is contained in Archibald’s 1852 will in which he bequeathed his buffalo robe to his wife. However, even that is rendered ambiguous by the fact that it was part of a list which included his buggy and his harness. Though I have never seen another bequest of a buffalo robe in all the other wills I’ve read, Archi-

bald's buffalo robe may have been a humble buffalo lap rug and not an heirloom from his mother. It remains a mystery.

One thing we can be sure of is that Robert Thompson is our pioneer ancestor in Western PA, predating the settling of our pioneer ancestor Peter Raub in what is now Mahoning County, OH, by five years. On Nov. 24, 1797 Robert made an agreement with the Pennsylvania Population Company to pay \$100 for 200 acres in what is now Lawrence County, PA. In a deed dated Aug. 6, 1801, Robert stated that he had complied with the Act of Apr. 3, 1792 which directed that the purchaser's land would default back to the Commonwealth of PA if within two years the person failed to "make or cause to be made, an actual settlement hereon, by clearing, fencing and cultivating at least two acres for every hundred acres contained in one survey, erecting thereon a messuage for the habitation of man, and residing, or causing a family to reside thereon, for the space of five years next following his first settling of the same, if he or she shall so long live," the only exception being if "any such settler, or any grantee in any

such original or succeeding warrant, shall, by force of arms of the enemies of the United States [i.e. Native Americans], be prevented from making such actual settlement, or be driven therefrom and shall perish in his endeavours to make such actual settlement," in which case the grantee retained possession of his land.

We know little of the life Robert Thompson and his family led as settlers on the frontier, but there are a couple interesting stories that were passed down through the descendants of his 7th son John J. It is said that one day Robert was boiling down sugar water, and a panther attacked his dog. Robert took up his froe (a small ax used to split wood) and slay the beast. Another tale concerns John J.'s future wife Nancy Bay. In 1814, the Shenango River, which passed through the northeast corner of Robert's property in the area now known as the Harbor, was flooded, and his wife Jennet had to cross it to assist in the birth of Nancy Bay. The next morning while waiting on the riverbank for a family member to fetch her, she spied a canoe of Native Americans paddling along the river and

hid until they passed by.

It's amazing to think that 200 years after these incidents occurred, descendants of Robert Thompson still live in Lawrence County. His great-great-great granddaughter Judy Thompson Veon of New Wilmington is the custodian of the invaluable Robert Thompson family Bible and of the family oral history that was finally written down by her aunt. And it was Helen, widow of another area Thompson, that alerted us to the deterioration of Robert's and Jennet's gravestones at Shenango and called upon those interested to donate towards the purchase of a new stone for our pioneer ancestors. In October, Judy, Helen, and I were present for the laying of the concrete base for the new gravestone, which will likely be in place by Thanksgiving. So, if any of Robert and Maid of the Morning's descendants care to visit the cemetery after the game on Saturday, I will happily act as guide.

The success of the fund drive for the Thompson stone has inspired me to consider calling upon the McCoy descendants to donate money towards the purchase of a stone for John James & Mary Ellen

Smith McCoy whose graves are unmarked at Riverside Cemetery in Poland, OH. I have little to no hope of ever learning as much about the McCoy's as I have about the Thompsons. The McCoy's were poor laborers from what is now Blair and Clarion Counties who owned no property, left no wills, and often were buried with no headstone to prove they ever existed. John McCoy didn't come to Lawrence County until after the Civil War, and like his forebears, left little evidence of his life except census records, tax lists, his death record, and his obituary. When he died in Slippery Rock Township on Feb. 28, 1894, he was first buried in Rose Point but was later moved to Riverside after his wife died in Poland in 1906. No stone exists for him in either cemetery, but those at the Riverside Cemetery office assure me he is buried in Riverside near his son James Day McCoy (whose wife was Nancy Ellen Thompson) and grandson Smith McCoy. If anyone is willing to contribute to the McCoy gravestone fund, let me know, and together we may be able to reverse the "oblivion that has fallen upon their neglected tombs."