

From the archives: The colonel from Erwinna

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Staff Writer The Intelligencer

The Daily Intelligencer ran this story July 30, 1975 in the first of a four-part Bicentennial Commemorative Edition. The goal of the series was to "... provide our subscribers with stories about events which made history and the people who lived here over the past three centuries."

I've got a copy of the original papers, and though tattered and torn, they're wonderful. This one is about the Erwin family of Tincicum Township.

The colonel from Erwinna

Son was captive for four years, imprisoned on British ship

By SHEILA W. MARTIN

As River Road in Upper Bucks County winds its way through the beautiful country lying next to the Delaware River, it passes the tiny settlement of Erwinna.

There can be seen the Erwin Family burying ground, the resting place of the family for whom the town is named.



Figure 1: June 20, 1975 - Harry and Dorothy Robson inspect the Erwin grave site. Photo by Rudy Millarg, The Intelligencer

A marker placed nearby by the Bucks County Historical Tourist Commission and American flags placed reverently on three of the graves indicate that soldiers who fought in the American Revolution he in the brick-walled cemetery.

The head of the Erwin family, Arthur Erwin, was a Scotch-Irish immigrant who landed in Philadelphia on Aug. 18, 1768. The voyage from Ireland on the ship, Newry Assistance, was a sad one for Arthur Erwin and his six children. His wife, Mary Scott Erwin, died at sea two weeks after giving birth to a baby who also died.

At first the Erwins stayed with Arthur's brother, William, in Dyerstown, just above Doylestown. This was temporary as he was eager to establish his own home for his motherless children.

So in March of 1769, Arthur Erwin bought 944 acres in Tincum Township, the site of the town of Erwinna. He was to buy a lot more land in later years and by 1780 was the largest landowner in the entire township.

Tragedy was to touch the Erwins again two weeks after moving into their new home in May 1769; four-year-old Arthur drowned in the Delaware River.

The Erwin family were members of the Red Hill Presbyterian Church in Ottsville, and old records show that Arthur Erwin was active, a member of the building committee in 1770.

On July 27, 1771, Arthur Erwin married Mary Kennedy of Springfield Township. They had six children.

Soon after this, the colony of Pennsylvania joined with the other 12 American colonies in the struggle for independence from Great Britain. Patriotic men and boys from Bucks County joined the Associators and the Bucks County Militia. Arthur Erwin enrolled as a captain in the Second Company of the Tincum Associators and his oldest son John enlisted as a private in the same company.

Arthur Erwin was commissioned a colonel of the Second Battalion of the militia on May 6, 1777, at the age of 51 and served with distinction throughout the Revolution.

He had been active before the Battle of Trenton and had assisted .in the transporting of Washington's troops across the Delaware on that significant Christmas Day in 1776.

In July, 1776, John Erwin enlisted as a second lieutenant in the Bucks County Battalion of the Flying Camp (which was a detachment of Bucks County Milita serving with the Continental Army wherever needed most).

Unfortunately, 20-year-old John was captured by the British at Fort Washington on Nov. 16, 1776, and was a prisoner of war for over four years. He was held on a prison ship off Long Island, in Wallabout Bay.

Conditions were very bad on the British prison ships, with poor sanitation, rotten food, and disease. John's health rapidly declined and finally on Feb. 25, 1781, he was paroled and exchanged for a British prisoner.

He petitioned for half-pay from the military authorities since he was practically bed-ridden. One year after his release, John Erwin died as a result of his disabilities. His grieving family inscribed the following on his tombstone: Died in February 1782 — John Erwin, an officer in the Federal Army. Aged 26 years. In respect to whose memory his surviving brothers have placed this stone.

Another Erwin son, William, also served his country in the Revolutionary War. He was commissioned a captain of the First Company, Third Battalion of the Bucks County Militia on May 14, 1781, at the age of 21 and made colonel in the Fourth Regiment on Aug. 1, 1793.

William married Achsah Rockhill of Hunterdon County, N.J. He served as a member of the Pennsylvania State Senate from 1808 to 1816. It is in his will that provision was made for the Erwin burying ground.

Hugh Erwin, another son of Colonel Erwin, waited until he was 50 to marry. The marriage contract between Hugh and Edith Hepburn contained an unusual provision. She had a nice sum of money of her own, \$2,241.81 to be exact, and wanted to hang on to it.

The contract drawn up Feb. 3, 1817, stipulated that "she and he shall use the \$2,241.81 as they think proper as long as it may please God that they shall live together as husband and wife," but that the money would revert back to Edith if Hugh died first, and if she died first, he was to pay it to the persons named in her will.

With this sort of arrangement, it is not surprising that they separated after only a year and a half of marriage.

Seventeen years later, when Hugh's wife died, he received the news from a friend, William Potts:

My old Friend, The painful task has fell to my lot to communicate to you the Sad Tidings of the death of your wife about ten days ago. Going to or at meeting she caught cold and got worse fast so bad that on Saturday last she quit this world in full hopes, no doubt, of a better. On Monday she was taken to her grave by a collection of Dry eyed Relations and Neighbors.

I understand that she has cut you off in her will without a Shilling. She has left all to a Blue skinned Parson of the name of Wilson — except her funeral expenses. Her furniture is to be sold to pay that expense. I understand that Mr. Wilson gets about Seventy Dollars. I suppose it was all the Cash.

The remaining Erwin son by Col. Erwin's first wife was Joseph. Apprenticed at 14 to James Budden and William Striker who had a counting house in Philadelphia, Joseph evidently inherited his father's good head for business. He became quite wealthy as a trader and speculator during the war years. His mercantile activities often took him abroad, which put him under suspicion of trading with the enemy and smuggling.

In fact, Joseph Erwin's name was on a list of persons "since been discovered to have joined the enemy in Phila." He was mistakenly labeled a Tory for he continued his business enterprises and was appointed warden and surveyor of the port of Philadelphia from 1787 to 1791.

Joseph never married but remained close to his family, joining with his father in land investments in Tioga County and spending summers in Erwinna at William's home. Always aware of a good opportunity, Joseph recorded the following in his diary:

The summer of 1784 I passed in the Country with my brother William. In the Fall of that year I gathered 130 Barrels of Winter apples which I sold for \$2 a barrel — not to be idle.

Joseph finally carried on the family tradition of military service when in August of 1793 when he enlisted as a major in the Fourth Regiment of Pennsylvania Militia. He also served in the Pennsylvania Assembly.

Col. Erwin's second marriage must have been a stormy one and it ended in a dramatic way. In a petition to the Court of Quarter Sessions at Newtown, then the county seat for Bucks County, Mary Erwin asked the court to order her husband to give her some money for these reasons:

"That your petitioner having had, some time ago, the misfortune to fall under the displeasure of her said husband, he took revenge of her in a most indecent and inhumane manner by beating and abusing her, driving her out of his house in the night time without shoes or stockings or necessary clothing, and publishing her in the newspapers that no correspondent should trust her upon his account and discharging tenants and near neighbors from taking her in and harboring her in their houses, meaning not only to deprive her of the comfort and satisfaction of enjoying the company of any of her children which she has had by him"

It is obvious why neither Mary Erwin nor any of the children from her marriage to Arthur Erwin are buried in the family cemetery.

After leading such a full life, with much drama in it, it seems almost inevitable that Col. Erwin's death should be unusual. On the evening of June 9, 1791, while standing in the doorway of the house of his land agent in Luzerne County, Arthur Erwin was shot to death by an unknown assailant.

The words on his gravestone sum up the feelings of his family:

On the 9th of June, 1791, died at Tioga Point in the County of Luzerne. By the Hand of an Assassin Arthur Erwin, Esqr. of Bucks County, aged 65 years. Whose Life had been devoted to pursuits useful to his friends, to his family and to his country. His body was conveyed to and interred in that particular Ground, which, in his Lifetime, he had pointed out and this stone placed as well to designate the Spot, as to reverence his Memory by his Descendents.

The Erwin Family burying ground, with its 12 graves, had fallen into disrepair through the years. In 1960, a piece of land which contained the burying ground was bought by Mr. and Mrs. Harry C. Robson. After building their home, Lakeside, they turned their attention to the difficult task of restoring the historic graveyard.

They hired a skilled stonemason to repair the tuck-pointed brick wall which enclosed the graveyard, cleaned up the debris deposited thoughtlessly in the graveyard, and straightened the gravestones.

The Robsons were commended by local historical societies and neighbors for the love and care they spent to make the little graveyard a dignified and beautiful resting place for the colonel from Erwinna and his family.

— Rayna Polsky, Intelligencer Librarian

As the Librarian here at The Intelligencer, I thought readers would be interested to see some of the photographs and stories I come across in our

archives as I go about my day. With more than 200 years of history, The Intelligencer has covered myriad issues of great significance, both local and worldwide, since its founding in 1804. History is who we are: We learn from the past, and it is of great importance to our growth as a people that we not forget it.

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