

Armstrong County

PENNSYLVANIA

HER PEOPLE, PAST AND PRESENT

EMBRACING

A HISTORY OF THE COUNTY

AND

A Genealogical and Biographical Record of Representative Families

IN TWO VOLUMES

ILLUSTRATED

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all the history I can find, either of record or tradition, is but a meager account of a long and busy life and an ancestry that was in this country for three quarters of a century before the Revolution, and which gave a number of sons to take part in that struggle.

The earliest history of our Hill ancestry of which we have any knowledge goes back to a time when they were Protestant refugees in Switzerland, having fled thither probably on account of religious persecutions elsewhere, but from what section we do not know. In Switzerland they were called Scotch, but we know they were certainly not Scotch, but more probably French Huguenots.

Later they had gone down the Rhine, making common cause with the French Huguenots. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 they were in the Palatinate in the Hunricher Mountain district and near Coblenz, where they were called Switzers.

Tiring of the unsettled condition of the country resulting from religious wars and persecutions, they came to America with the Palatine emigration in the earliest years of the eighteenth century. In America they are called Pennsylvania Dutch.

Among these emigrants were five Hills, said to be brothers; although two of them had the same name, Jacob, it was not an uncommon thing then, as we shall see later, for two or more of a family to be given the same name. Of these five Hills, Michael Hill settled in Montgomery county, Jacob, Senior, in Oley township, Berks county, Adam Hill in Frederick township, Montgomery county, Gottlieb in Lancaster county, and Jacob Hill, our ancestor, in Maxatawny township, Berks county. He was one of the founders of the Moselem Stone Lutheran Church in Berks county.

Another of our emigrant ancestors of equal or greater importance in the genealogy of at least some of us was John Crissman Merkle, or Markle, as it is now spelled, who was born in Alsace on the Rhine in 1678. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, when John Crissman was about eight years old, his parents with their family fled down the Rhine to Amsterdam, Holland. He married Jemima Weurtzin, a sister of the admiral of that name. He came to America in 1703, settling in Berks county, where he purchased 1,500 acres of land from the Penns. He was by trade a coachmaker; he there established a wagon shop, blacksmith shop and gristmill. Of his nine children we have only to do with two, Maria Appolonia and his youngest child, Gaspard.

HILL.—From a brief account of the early history of the Hill family, compiled by Lewis A. Hill, and read to the Hill heirs at the annual Hill reunion, 1907.

At our first reunion, as president of our association, I was expected to give some history of grandfather and of his ancestry. I got together some facts that were of enough interest to a few that I have been asked to repeat them, which I will do in substance to-day. Such a paper is necessarily brief, for

But to return to the Hills. The emigrant Jacob Hill had three sons, Daniel, Frederick and John Jacob. Daniel married Catharine Sieberl or Saberline. His son Jacob served in the Revolutionary war for over seven years. Jacob Hill of Oley township and John Frederick Hill of our lineage were also in that army. After his first wife's death Daniel Hill married again and some time after the Revolution came to Westmoreland county, where he died in 1813 or 1814. Frederick Hill married Maria Hottenstine, the seventh daughter of a French Huguenot family who brought with them their baptismal certificates from a French Huguenot Church in Alsace. He is the progenitor of the Hills on the north bank of the Susquehanna. John Jacob, the oldest son of our emigrant ancestor, was born about 1716, was married July 3, 1739, to Maria Apolonia Merkling, and settled in Windsor township, Berks county. He had ten children, Anna Maria, Anna Catarine, John Christian, John Jacob, Magdalena, John, John Peter, John Jacob, John Frederick, and John Casper. A remarkable feature of this family of John Jacob is that the sons all have John prefixed to a second name except the one born June 20, 1751, who was simply named John. A number of these Johns came West and probably some of them settled in Westmoreland county. One of them, which one I am unable to say, as among so many Johns one may lose his identity in a century or more, was married to Magdalena Hower, and had three children, John, Jacob and Hannah. John, the eldest of these, the grandfather of some of us, and the great- and great-great-grandfather of a still larger number, was born Feb. 25, 1772. In 1782, when grandfather was ten years old, his father was captured by the Indians. Of his fate we have only the traditional account of a Mrs. McVeigh, one of his neighbors, who was taken at the same time, and who by some means, either escape or exchange, was enabled to return to the settlement.

But to remind you of the condition of the country at this time I want to call your attention to a few facts not just appertaining to this history.

At the time of grandfather's birth, Westmoreland county was still a part of Bedford county. Westmoreland was not organized as a separate county until the year following. Pittsburgh was at that time a village of such minor importance that litigants there were accustomed to take their disputes to Hannastown for adjudication. Hannastown was destroyed by Indians later. In 1781 a company

of one hundred men from Westmoreland county, under the county lieutenant, Col. Archibald Loughry, going down the Ohio river to join an expedition under George Rogers Clark against Indians, while preparing a meal on a sand bar in the Ohio river, were surprised by Indians under Brant, and all were either killed or captured and afterward murdered.

During these closing years of the Revolutionary war frontier settlements and garrisons had to care for themselves without much help from what little there was of a central government, so about this time, 1781, the garrison at Fort Pitt was reduced to very short rations, and to replenish their larder sent out hunting expeditions for considerable distances into what was admittedly Indian country, and in reprisal the Indians ravaged this section until the settlers were scarcely safe any distance from the forts or stockaded houses to which they could flee in time of alarm. One of these marauding parties captured our great-grandfather while he was returning home from a distance with a load of fruit trees he had procured for planting. He with other captives, was taken to a point up the Allegheny river locally known as Hickory Flats. Of the exact location we are uncertain. Some reports say that it was near the mouth of French Creek in Venango county, others that it was nearer the New York State line in Warren county. There they were required to run the gauntlet, which great-grandfather did successfully, and while he was standing by watching the fate of the others Mrs. McVeigh fell and was being clubbed; when our great-grandfather ran through a second time, he picked her up and carried her through, thereby doubtless saving her life. Mrs. McVeigh after her return said that by such deeds of strength and daring great-grandfather had gained some favor in the eyes of the Indians, had been allowed some freedom, and had been able to perfect a means of escape, having secured and concealed a canoe on the river bank, intending to leave on a certain night. That day he confided his plans to a fellow prisoner, a German, offering him the chance of escape, too. The German, to gain favor, revealed the plan to the Indians, who securely tied great-grandfather to a tree, and left him to whatever form of death the wilderness might bring.

It was in such a frontier life that grandfather received his earliest schooling, with such men around him, then considered worthy of emulation, as Captain Brady, and John John or "Jackie of the Forest," as he called

himself, in honor of whom Johnstown was named, and with whom grandfather spent days, camping and hunting. Grandfather was one of the company who went in pursuit of the Indians who captured Massey Harbison. However, they failed to overtake the Indians. Amid such surroundings, grandfather grew up into a fine type of pioneer, strong, energetic and resourceful.

Grandfather was twice married, first to Elizabeth Waltz, of whose ancestral history I have learned very little, but to us of the second family it may be of interest to go back to the Gaspard Markle or Merklin already mentioned.

He was born in Berks county in 1732, married Elizabeth Grim and came to Westmoreland county in 1770. Soon after his wife died, and he returned to Berks county, where he married Mary Roedermel, whom he brought to his home in Westmoreland county. His residence was the post of refuge to which the settler fled in time of Indian alarms and was known as Markle's fort, at which Col. Loughry and his company spent their last night in Westmoreland county before starting on the expedition referred to above. Gaspard Markle entered large tracts of land along Sewickly creek and in 1772 built a gristmill. Here was made some of the first flour made west of the Allegheny mountains. It was transported in flat boats as far as New Orleans. For a while all the salt used in this section was transported by the Markles, Gaspard's sons, from eastern cities on pack horses, there being no wagon roads.

Several of his sons served in the Indian wars, and George gained considerable distinction in the defense of Wheeling. His brother Jacob was in the naval service, and was with Commodore Barney on board the "Hyder Ally" at the capture of the "General Monk." His nephew George was in the Revolutionary army. His son Joseph was the Whig candidate for governor in this State in 1844. His daughter Esther married George Ament, another soldier of the Revolution, who spent the winter with Washington's army at Valley Forge. Among other things he is said to have told his children, indicative of the hardship suffered by the soldiers that winter, that often when they would awaken in the morning their long hair, such as the men wore in those days, would be so frozen to the ground on which they had slept that it would have to be cut off before they could get up. His homestead was on the property now occupied by the town of Export. His daughter

Susannah was the second wife of grandfather.

As the oldest of the family grandfather came into possession of his father's house, where he lived until he was probably about twenty-eight years old. At an early age he engaged in other business enterprises which, while they do not seem of much importance to us now, were nevertheless of considerable value to the community as well as remunerative to grandfather at that time.

One of his ventures was the manufacture of gunpowder. He had a sawmill and gristmill near Salem on Beaver Run, to which patrons came from such distances that it seems incredible to us at this time; and customers would wait days (doubtless visiting old friends) to get their grists home with them, and the mill would be run night and day in a busy time.

In the autumn of 1800, or near that date, grandfather built a crib in the Kiskiminetas river at what is now Bagdad station on the West Penn Railroad, but which was formerly known as Hill's Mill, where grandfather and his sons owned and operated a mill for many years. Returning in the spring and finding that the crib had withstood the high water and ice of the spring freshets, he at once commenced the erection of a mill, first getting a water wheel and grinding machinery in operation, and then covering them with a building. At first the flour was bolted through a common sieve, then a bolting cloth was procured and each customer was required to take hold of the crank and turn it to bolt his own flour.

In 1812 grandfather bought and moved onto the farm that has since been known as the Old Hill Farm. This farm was taken up by P. Berrickman, who received his title from the State April 20, 1793, and was called in this and subsequent transfers the "Hustings Mill Seat." Berrickman sold it to George Crawford, Crawford to Nicholas Klingensmith, and Klingensmith to grandfather by deed dated April 18, 1812; signed in German, and witnessed by Henry A. Weaver and Philip Bolen. I have heard that Mr. Klingensmith said if a certain very large tree on the farm should fall he would sell, as he would never take the time necessary to clear it up. A storm having uprooted the tree, the farm was sold to grandfather, and with the exception of two or three years the farm has been in the possession of the Hills ever since, and is now the property of Edward Hill.

Soon after coming onto the farm grandfather planted an apple orchard of one thousand trees, and a large cherry orchard. This

cherry orchard seemed to be as much the property of the public as if it had been growing on the commons. There never was any question as to the proprietorship, however, as grandfather was allowed always the privilege of boarding the pickers who were so freely helping themselves to his cherries. Of all this planting I do not think there is one tree standing to-day.

Grandfather was an expert with the axe, and for some time engaged in the building of houses and barns and was considered an adept in the erection of the log structures of those days. He had also considerable reputation as a manufacturer of wooden mold-board plows. Grandfather was always interested in education, having a small building fitted up for a schoolroom. He employed teachers at his own expense for the instruction of his family and allowed his neighbors to send their children to the school.

The first of the teachers so employed it seems would become weary in well-doing, or possibly having imbibed too freely of the "good cheer" of those days would sleep the greater part of the day in school. Then upon awakening, to stimulate the lagging interest of the children, and possibly to thoroughly arouse himself, he would whip all the children in school.

After four or five teachers had been thus employed, a house of Mr. Riggle was used as being more centrally located. Then grandfather made a frolic to build a schoolhouse; he furnished all the extras, everything except the logs, and boarded the men while they were working at the building. Afterward the building was used for the free schools.

Grandfather was a lifelong Democrat. He was a justice of the peace for a number of years. In that capacity, together with dispensing justice, he was more frequently called upon to perform the marriage ceremony than usually falls to the lot of a justice in our day. In this connection there are a couple of anecdotes I would like to relate, if I am not trespassing too far on my time; but then you will please remember that our committee selected the very longest day in the year for our meeting so that I could have time for all of this.

At one time the father of the bride accompanied the bridal party and in the service where those having objections are to speak, or "forever after hold their peace," the father objected. Then, when grandfather would not proceed with the ceremony, the father of the bride said he did not object to the ceremony, but that they were poor, and he had thought

in that way to make a little to start the young people in life.

I remember hearing an old woman, long since dead, tell of when she and some other girls were at grandfather's of two of them disguising themselves and impersonating a bride and groom. They came across a field where some of the boys were at work and inquired the way to Squire Hill's. The boys, supposing this to be a bridal party, skipped to the house to be present at the marriage, which to their chagrin did not take place.

We should not measure grandfather's influence as a citizen in a pioneer country entirely by his active business life. He was a good neighbor, always willing and more than willing to help where help was needed. He was a man of sound judgment, whose advice was much sought after, and usually followed to advantage.

In those days doctors were not as numerous as nowadays, consequently the people enjoyed much better health. But even then it was not always what would be desired, and in minor ailments and accidents grandfather's prescriptions were considered very beneficial, and in more serious accidents, resulting in broken bones, etc., he was frequently called upon to reduce the fracture, at which, if we accept the tradition, he possessed no small amount of skill.

Grandfather was a man of religious tendencies, and a member of the Lutheran Church. Before there were any churches in this locality his large barn was frequently used for church services and was free to all denominations. When one of our pioneer ministers in the course of his circuit would come, there would usually be services for several days. To these people would come quite a distance, remaining for all the services, finding the most hospitable entertainment at grandfather's, and among his neighbors.

About 1846 Justice Charles Shultz of Leechburg, a German doctor, who had frequently been a guest at grandfather's house and partaken of his hospitality, got an idea that he had been offended by some members of grandfather's family, and made threats that he would burn grandfather's barn, and kill all the family then at home. In March, 1847, he made the attempt, but only succeeded in burning the barn and in blowing up grandfather's office, a small building in which the boys, my father and one of his brothers, slept. That night a neighbor boy was with them. The boys were awakened by the light of the burning barn, so they were up at the time of the explosion of

the powder Shultz had placed in the building, through a broken window, for the purpose of killing them. The force of the explosion was such that the boys were thrown in different directions. The one end of the building and the door were blown out, but the boys were not seriously injured. Shultz, however, did not fare so well. He had been about to break into the dwelling house where the other members of the family were sleeping, but heard the boys getting up, and fearing the powder would not do its work until the boys had left the building he had gone back to the door, with a rifle, and a butcher knife, to meet the boys when they would open the door, but he just got there in time to receive the full force of the door as it was blown outward by the explosion, and was so badly injured that he was disabled for the time. His face, too, was very much lacerated by the butcher knife, which he was holding between his teeth at the time. By this time the inmates of the house were aroused, and it was necessary for all to give their attention to saving the house, as the roof was already ignited by sparks from the barn. The house was saved without being very much damaged.

The next day Shultz was taken to Kittanning, and lodged in jail. He had his trial at the June term of court, and was found guilty of arson, and sent to the penitentiary, where he died.

Grandfather's barn was the largest in Allegheny township, which then comprised what is now three townships, Gilpin, Parks and Bethel. At the time it was burned it contained one thousand bushels of wheat, besides other grain, but the loss that grandfather felt most was the fate of his fine horses, burned in the barn, especially of his favorite riding horse, on which, when increasing age had made walking tiresome, he would take short hunting trips, frequently using its head as a gun rest when desiring a steady shot.

Such a calamity was a heavy burden for a man already worn by many years of toil in a frontier life, and may have hastened grandfather's death. After a short illness he died, Jan. 8th, 1848, and is buried in a spot of his own choosing on the old farm.