

# Old and New Westmoreland

Genealogical and Personal History under Editorial Supervision of

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(III) Brintnel Robbins was born March 22, 1756, and he was therefore a lad of nineteen when the day of Lexington set off the smoldering patriotism of the American colonists. He was one of the earliest to enlist for the long struggle, and he reënlisted in 1776, 1777 and 1778, serving throughout the war as a member of the Second Connecticut Regiment. He was commissioned in December, 1780, as an ensign, and in that capacity he served until the close of the war. He was engaged in the battles of Concord, White Plains, Long Island, Monmouth, Princeton, and was also at Valley Forge. He had married, in 1777, Mary Boardman, who was of the well-known Boardman family of Hartford, Connecticut, and one still prominent in that locality. After the close of the war, he engaged in trade with the West Indies, in partnership with his brothers, but in 1788 their ship was wrecked and Brintnel Robbins determined to forsake the uncertainties of the seafaring life and settle on lands offered to Revolutionary soldiers in Northwestern Pennsylvania.

During the summer of 1789, he put his family into ox-carts and wagons and journeyed by way of Wills Creek, now Cumberland, and the Braddock road to Dunbar. Here he arrived in the late fall and remained working during the winter and using his ox-carts to haul ore and fuel from the mountains, with which to burn charcoal and melt the iron ore at Dunbar Furnace for the making of tools and implements. In the early spring of 1791 he began to look up a location wherein to establish himself, it being his desire to start a mill and take up land for agricultural purposes. He finally decided upon a tract lying along the Youghiogheny river, near what was then known as "Rattles' Riffle," where there was ample water power, paying for it five hundred pounds, the record of the deed being still to be seen in the recorder's office of Westmoreland county, Pennsylvania. In 1796 he purchased another tract known as the "Sleeping Place" or "Crawford's Sleeping Place," the name being derived from the story that the ill-fated Colonel William Crawford slept with his feet in a spring of water located on this farm in order to keep from freezing, and fearing to kindle a fire lest the Indians should attack him. This was the Colonel Crawford whose expedition against

Sandusky resulted in his being taken prisoner by the Indians and tortured to death at the stake. In 1797 Brintnel Robbins purchased another tract adjoining the other two, and these are all on record with the first.

Immediately after the purchase of the first tract of land, he began the erection of a dwelling house, and the tradition is that with the help of neighbors such speed was made that a dance was held in it the first night after it had been begun. On February 26, 1796, he secured the passage of an act of Assembly in the Pennsylvania Legislature "permitting him to erect a dam in the Youghiogheny river" which would divert the water and give him water power for his mill. This mill became famous, and was known as the Robbins Mill, and because of the large stream supplying it, it was able to run at all seasons, and farmers were accustomed to bring their grain here from great distances. The mill having been put in successful operation, he cleared the land, which was a rich region known in those days as "Robbins' Bottoms," and covered with a heavy growth of gigantic walnut trees. As a portion of this tract had been used by the Indians for a grain field it was almost clear, and there was another portion where an extensive Indian village had stood, according to tradition, for many generations. There was also on the tract an Indian graveyard, and the spot where they buried their dead has always been left untouched.

Mr. Robbins proceeded at a very early date to establish a distillery to turn into whiskey the grain for which there was not much market in those days. He was soon engaged in many business operations, including milling, distilling, dairy farming, and the manufacturing of cheese and butter on a large scale. To assist in the marketing of his products he built a boat which he named the "Tillie," which was thirty feet long and of sufficient width to hold two barrels end to end and so built as to allow the men to walk up and down outside on the gunwales and pole the boat along through the shallow places. This boat greatly assisted his undertakings, as he thus was enabled to send his produce to Pittsburgh, from which it was transhipped to New Orleans and the other Southern markets. During his early business career he purchased a farm located near the forks of the road between Penn avenue and the Allegheny river, in what is now the Twenty-third Ward of the city of Pittsburgh, and here he established a dairy for the sale of milk from house to house. His method of delivery was to put the milk in a barrel, load it on a wheelbarrow pushed by a negro who rang a bell and served it out by the quart to customers.

When the War of 1812 broke out, the Americans were unprepared, as they have been since, and seeking to attack the British in Canada, needed boats to transport the troops on the Great Lakes. As Mr. Robbins was a ship builder he was invited by the government to take his workmen, ox-carts, tools, etc., and go up to Lake Erie and there build boats for the use of Commodore Perry in his operations against Canada. This he did in the spring of 1813, journeying to Cleveland and cutting the timber where it stood, building the boats and making the other furnishings. Constructed in haste out of unseasoned lumber, these boats were the best their builder could produce, but after delivery to the government a severe storm put them to a serious test during the ensuing summer, and a number of them were destroyed and lost. The government refused to pay for them and in the financial straits to which this brought him, he was obliged to sell his Pittsburgh farm. It was not until 1824 that his claims were finally paid (H. R. 18 Cong., 1 Sess., page 9, war warrant 3560), but in the eleven years he had lost the most valuable of his possessions, the farm which lay within the limits of the city of Pittsburgh. Not long after this he sustained another great business loss in the dishonesty of a Captain Gray, who was in command of a ship laden with his produce for Cuba. This man took the ship to Cuba, sold it and the cargo and disappeared with the money.

The latter part of his life he devoted himself particularly to the local markets rather than sending his merchandise to the South. In 1729 he purchased from the

Westmoreland Bank an additional tract of land containing three hundred and twenty acres. He thus owned between nine hundred and one thousand acres of land in one continuous tract, being all the land on the Youghiogheny river in North Huntingdon township, and extending over into Sewickley township. On this land he had a large grist mill, a distillery, and a cheese house and factory. On it there were also established three mansion, or dwelling houses. The stone house which afterwards came to Joseph Robbins was built in 1803, and an additional front erected in 1819. This house stood until 1914, when it was torn down. On the William Robbins tract of the land was erected a large frame house with a center chimney, which furnished the draft for large fireplaces. This house was rebuilt in 1895, and the frame part of the old building is still used in the present structure. The other house which stood on the tract which came to Hezekiah Robbins, and has since been owned by the heirs of Jacob Greenwalt, is still standing.

Mr. Robbins was a great friend of the slaves, and was connected with the "Grapevine Road," and assisted many of them to escape. It is a noticeable fact that there have always been a large number of negroes in the employ of the Robbins family. He also was accustomed to maintain in his house what was known as the "Poor Room," where the poor of the township were kept and cared for, supported partly by charity and partly by the small services they could render.

In 1818 Mary (Boardman) Robbins, the wife of Brintnel Robbins, died. There were ten children born of this marriage: 1. Archibald, born in 1778. 2. Keziah, born in 1780, married William Newlin. 3. Hezekiah, married Mary Wilson. 4. Polly, born in 1787, married Alexander Woods. 5. Joseph, born in 1789, married Rebecca Woods. 6. Moses, born in 1793, married Margaret Power. 7. David. 8. Rachel, married Samuel Gordon. 9. William, of further mention. 10. Betsey, born in 1805, married James McConnell.

A number of years before his death, Brintnell Robbins determined to divide all his land among his children. The mill with the land adjoining thereto he gave to his son David. This mill continued in operation until impaired by slackwater navigation in 1848. The western part of his land he gave to William Robbins, the eastern part to Moses Robbins, and the "Still Farm" or higher land to Hezekiah Robbins. Brintnel Robbins then came to Greensburg, and started in the hotel business at the corner of West Otterman street and Pennsylvania avenue, in a building that stood on the site of the Stark building. The stone on the gable still bears the date 1796. Here, January 27, 1820, Brintnel Robbins married (second) Mary Goodlin. After keeping the hotel for several years he purchased what was then known as the Wegley farm, three miles south of Greensburg, and removed there, and he died there, July 25, 1836, and was buried in the Harrold church-yard, two miles south of Greensburg borough, his tombstone still indicating the spot where he lies. This tombstone was repaired and relettered by the order of his great-grandson in 1915, and the cemetery itself incorporated through the efforts of the same man, and an endowment raised which now amounts to one thousand, five hundred dollars, for the purpose of caring for this which is one of the oldest burial places in the western part of the State.

Brintnel Robbins was a remarkable man in an age which produced many men of great force of character. In his religious views the stout old Puritan strain was to be noted in its most stalwart form. He was one of the founders of the old Bethel United Presbyterian Church, and was a constant attendant there until he left the Robbins farms. It is said of him that he frequently journeyed out to the church on Saturday to start the fires for Sunday. He was a strict disciplinarian and on occasion would announce to his family that the next day being a fast day no one of the household should eat from sunrise to sunset, and not even the baby should be given any nourishment. His descendants have always attended either the Bethel or the Long Run church, and four generations are buried in the Long Run church-yard.