

Origins of the Oliver Miller Homestead

I would like to take you back to a summer day in 1933 when Anna Thomas, a spunky, red-haired ten year old went by street car to South Park for an outing with her mother and sisters. It was on that day when she first set eyes on the old ivy covered stone house in the middle of South Park. As she peered through the windows, she wondered who had lived there.

Anna grew up, went to Chatham College, became a teacher, married John Connor and was the mother of four children. Her love for history never faded. After she and her husband moved to Bethel Park, Anna attended the Bethel Presbyterian Church. It was there that she met Edna Miller Maits and learned who had lived in the old "Stone Manse" as it had been renamed by the County.

Mrs. Maits was a direct descendant of Oliver and Mary Miller, pioneers who settled in the area in the year 1772. The first home built there was a two story split shingle log house. This was replaced with a stone house in the early 19th century by Oliver's youngest son, James. Allegheny County acquired the property by eminent domain in 1927, buying the house and land from 5th generation Millers, who were reluctant to leave their home.

In 1969, Anna Connor, as a member of the Treehaven Garden Club, asked the County's permission to allow the group to clean the old home, decorate it and let them to give tours during the Christmas season. The stone house was filthy, in disrepair, lacked security and had become a loafing place for County employees. Permission was granted. From this idea grew a far-more lofty one. Anna and a small group of people dedicated to preserving the history of the area, told through the Miller family, asked permission to enter into a contract with Allegheny County. The goals of this group would be; to research and study the history of the Oliver Miller family, pioneer settlers in western Pennsylvania, and their homestead located in South Park, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; to restore, furnish and preserve the Miller home in a manner consistent with the lifestyle of an American pioneer family in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and to operate and maintain the Miller home as a public museum, all in order to actively interpret, demonstrate and promote pioneer skills, values and lifestyle as a heritage of great worth to modern Americans.

On January 22, 1973, a meeting of the first five members of the Oliver Miller Homestead Associates was held in the Historical Room of the Bethel Presbyterian Church. In the mid-70's, several members of the group were told at a workshop at Landis Valley that it was virtually impossible to run a historical site using volunteers alone. We are very proud that, as of today, the site now known as the Oliver Miller Homestead has increased in size to seven buildings and, thanks to the efforts of our very dedicated members, the Association is stronger than ever.

Anna Connor died on May 6, 2002. When we open the 2006 season on April 30th we will dedicate our new barn to her and our other founding members. I'm sure she would be as pleased and proud as we are.

M.P. Swauger March 13, 2006

The Oliver Miller Homestead Associates - OUR HISTORY

The first discussion of the possibility of organizing a group to work at the Oliver Miller Homestead took place at a meeting of four people headed by Ann Connor, whose dream it was, and a representative of Allegheny County, whose property it was, in January 1973.

From this beginning, a group of dedicated volunteers came together—men and women skilled in heritage crafts and arts, and interested in the history of the area. At its beginning the Oliver Miller Homestead site included the original Miller stone house and spring house.

There are now over one hundred Associates—Honorary, Sustaining, and Active—acting in various capacities—some as guides to show the historic house to the public, others doing everything from housecleaning to churning butter, baking bread, spinning, weaving, quilting, forging, working with tin, and woodworking. All generously share their talents and their time.

The Homestead is now open Sundays from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. and other days and times by appointment.

The “old stone house in the park” is becoming well known, even to out-of-state travelers, and increasing numbers of people have visited it. Special group tours of school children, scouts, church groups, senior citizens, historical societies, and clubs of all sorts have come to see the Homestead.

From the first informal working arrangement with the Allegheny County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Conservation, the Oliver Miller Homestead Associates now officially act as the volunteer curators of the Oliver Miller Homestead under an approved agreement with the Allegheny County.

In telling the story of the Miller family and the events of the Whiskey Rebellion, our guides make every effort to be as accurate as possible. The first following list represents the actual family records which the research of the Oliver Miller Associates has uncovered to date. The second list is representative of some of the volumes we have been fortunate to acquire for our library, which is open to all members of the Associates.

Over the years, the property maintained by the Associates has expanded. In 1988, a log house was completed to serve as a meeting area and to show guests what the first Miller home might have looked like. In 1991, a working blacksmith’s forge was built on the property. A demonstration shelter was built in 1997. It started as an open area to hold outdoor activities in case of rain, and, with the addition of doors, evolved into the demonstration shed that is used every Sunday to show tools and skills of the era. The property line also expanded as the park removed tennis courts and allowed the Associates to fence in more land. In 2006, the newest building, the Miller barn, was dedicated. It now houses the Miller Whiskey still, a gift shop known as the Trading Post, a children’s area, a number of exhibits and serves as the Associates new meeting area.

Records of the Miller Family

Miller Family Bible—On display at the Bethel Presbyterian Church, Bethel Park, PA

Oliver Miller Trading Post Account Book (dated 1750 – 4) *

Oliver Miller Land Title (dated July 4, 1772)

Sale of Property in Bedford County (July 1, 1775)

Will of Oliver Miller (February 3, 1782; probated March 12, 1782)

History of the Wolfe Family and Allied Branches (Preston Wolfe, 1936)

Pledge of Allegiance signed by James Miller (November 8, 1794)

License to Operate a Still (December 14 – April 14, 1816)

James Miller Account Book*

Inventory of the Estate of Oliver Miller, deceased - An Itemized List of Miller Belongings, 1782

Yohogania County Courthouse Record Book

*photographed for enlargement by consent of Mrs. Miller Maits

RESEARCH SOURCES

History of Oliver Miller Family. by Albert Miller

Miller Family Genealogical Account Written During the Pastorate of Rev. C. Wycoff

History of the Wolfe Family and Allied Branches. by Preston Wolfe, 1936

Historical Narrative of Bethel Presbyterian Church, 1776—1936, pages 28 – 30

Incidents of the Insurrection by Hugh Henry Brackenridge written in 1795

The History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania by William Findley 1795

The Pennsylvania Archives Second Series Papers Relating to What is Known as the Whiskey Insurrection of Western Pennsylvania 1794

Story of the Oliver Miller Family compiled by Harold R. Phillips

The Scotch-Irish in America by John Walker Dinsmore, 1906

Family Research by William Barton (descendant of Mary Miller Wallace)

Research on the Oliver Miller Family by Alvin Dinsmore White

The Homestead's library houses a large collection of books and articles relating to western Pennsylvania history and the Whiskey Rebellion.

A collection of old and very rare books on the Whiskey Rebellion was a gift of Preston Wolfe, a Miller descendant.