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PHILADELPHIA'S OLDEST FAMILIES

MARY ASHMEAD SETTLED HERE WITH HER THREE CHILDREN IN 1683

Among the little groups of Friends who came to the new province of Pennsylvania was a widow named Mary Ashmead, her three children, and several relatives.

Her husband, John, had died in his native Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, England, prior to 1682, and it would appear that Mary Ashmead would have thought twice before attempting to take three children into the wilderness of the strange land across the sea.

But she had a strong sense of religious conviction that balked at attempts by her country to regulate her conscience. She arrived with her family in 1683, the year after Penn's arrival.

The Ashmeads took up their residence in the northern part of what was then Philadelphia County but which is now Cheltenham Township named, apparently, after the community in England from whence they came.

Mary Ashmead's son, John, his brother-in-law, Toby Leech, who afterward became a prominent colonist, and two other emigrants obtained title to 1,000 acres. John's share was 250 acres. He tilled the soil until his death in 1688. He died the day before his mother.

The Ashmead family fortunes were furthered by John Ashmead's son, also named John. He purchased 500 acres at what is now Germantown Ave. and Main St., near School lane. There he built a stone mansion that remained a landmark into the 19th Century.

Two synods of the Moravian sect were held in the home. In 1742, Count Nicholas Zinzendorf occupied it on church business. The Moravian Seminary, now located in Bethlehem, had its first classes there.

John Ashmead married Sarah Sellers, daughter of the noted colonial family of Delaware County. After their wedding, the couple became followers of the Friend dissenter, George Keith. Eventually they left their faith and became Baptists. John Ashmead died in 1742, leaving five children.

One of this John Ashmead's sons, known as John Ashmead the elder, who was born in 1706, continued living in his father's Germantown home and carrying on his interests. He was married to Ann Rush, a descendant of Cromwell and sister of Dr. Benjamin Rush, famed Revolutionary physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

John Ashmead the elder's brother was Samuel, born 1710, who became a great jurist, patriot and a notable citizen of his day.

Judge Ashmead became first associated with Quarter Sessions Court. He was then selected for the Orphans' Court and became its first president judge.

When the winds of the Revolution began to blow about the land, Judge Ashmead became an ardent patriot. Too old to bear arms, he supported the cause by every other means he knew possible.

He was a member of the Provincial Convention in 1775. He was also a member of the Committee on Correspondence, of the General Assembly in the final years of the Revolution and a delegate to the State Convention in 1787.

As one of the trustees of the Germantown Academy, he was one of several from that institution appointed to offer President Washington the use of the Academy for Congressional sessions during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793.

His eldest son, also Samuel, was a private in the third Pennsylvania Continental Line during the Revolution.

Another of Judge Ashmead's sons who took part in the Revolution was Jacob, born 1742. He enlisted as a private and became a lieutenant with the First Pennsylvania Battalion.

He fought with Arnold in his expedition against Canada, 1776. He was in the assault on Stony Point, July 16, 1779 under Mad Anthony Wayne. Jacob suffered wounds during an engagement in 1777.

John and Anna Rush Ashmead had two sons, William and John, both of whom were colorful figures.

William born 1736, lived in the old Ashmead home in Germantown. He was a handy man with the tools. A citizen of the day noted that William was "an ingenious man who made a plough with a wrought iron mold instead of customary board one".

The improvement of the ancient agricultural instrument so impressed General Lafayette that he ordered four of them for his farm.

William Ashmead was a cousin of John Bringham, the famed Germantown carriage builder. Ashmead himself got into the carriage business. His name appears on a militia list in the Revolution but it is not known whether he served actively.

With the advent of British forces in 1777, Ashmead's fields became their camping grounds. He married Elizabeth Robbins and they had eight children.

His younger brother, John, born 1738 was a spirited chap who received the news of Lexington at Barbadoes where he was in command of a ship. He immediately set sail for Philadelphia and upon arriving volunteered his services,

The authorities thought he could best help by supervising the construction of ships. He saw to it that the brig, Eagle was properly fitted to meet its enemies. Later, when the Eagle was burned by the enemy, he supervised its reconstruction. Still later he served upon her as a privateer. His closing years were spent as warden of the Port of Philadelphia.

William (the ingenious) Ashmead who made the unique plough, had a daughter named Mary or Polly Ashmead born 1760, she was a girl of 17 when the British held the city. Her sauciness made her greatly admired by the Red Coat officers.

It is reported that she was in a room one day with a group of them when one Red Coat sat too near a fireplace. His coattails caught fire but Polly Ashmead remained silent and allowed the flames to publicize the fact. After a piercing yell and a quelling of the smoldering tails, the officer is said to have asked his colleagues: "What more could be expected of a little rebel?" From then on she became known as the little rebel.

The Ashmead family also served in the Civil War. Among the participants was Joseph Penrose Ashmead, who entered as a private in the First City Troop. He was killed in action and posthumously cited for gallantry at Spottsylvania near Todd's Tavern, Va., in 1864.

John Wayne Ashmead, born 1806, was a celebrated lawyer of his day who became a deputy attorney general for the Commonwealth. His son Henry Graham Ashmead, of Chester, was known as a journalist and historian, particularly of Delaware County.

Another Ashmead of the 19th Century was Lehman Preston Ashmead who served in the United States Navy. After his discharge he returned here and became active in civic affairs. He was the chief organizer of the Citizens Municipal Reform Association.

Another was Dr. Albert Sydney Ashmead, native of Philadelphia, who became a noted doctor of the 19th Century. He won wide acclaim as an authority on leprosy. His brother, William Harris Ashmead, was an entomologist of reputation.

There are comparatively few Ashmead descendants living in the immediate Philadelphia area today. One of the direct lineal descendants was Duffield Ashmead, Jr., an architect, who died last wide reputation.

Among surviving descendants is his son, Duffield Ashmead, 3rd, of Radnor; a daughter, Mrs. Nicholas McLean Trapnell, Jr., Pensacola, Fla., and a sister, Mrs. Roger S. Mitchell, of Glen Falls, N.Y.

Among other descendants are William A. Ashmead, 4816 Woodland Ave., Drexel Hill; John Ashmead, Jr., Haverford; Fred R. Ashmead, Abington; and S. B. Ashmead of Chestnut Hill.

my father