

The Genealogy of a House

by Joe Langella, WVHS board member

My wife Donna and I decided on living in the Upper/Lower Gwynedd area with the hope of buying an older fixer-upper (or as a realtor might describe it, “something quaint”) with a bit of extra backyard. What we ultimately bought (in 1996) was an old Lower Gwynedd stone farmhouse, circa 1786, that needed much attention and that sat on close to three acres of heavily-wooded, overgrown land.

We purchased our home from long-time Lower Gwynedd resident **Mary Bassett** (of Bassett’s ice Cream fame). Mrs. Bassett occupied the home for close to sixty years, twenty of those years as a widow. She lived mostly on the first floor - to “save her legs,” she told us - allowing the “bramble and briar” to take over. At settlement, Mrs. Bassett proudly handed us a list of those she believed were the previous owners of the home, going all the way back to 1789! There were gaps of time on this list, specifically a significant one from 1789 to 1876, but many of the owners’ names harken back to old Gwynedd’s past. Not to mention that a few are downright peculiar.

The first owner on the list, and perhaps the person who built our home, was named **Cadwalader Jones**. According to *Wikipedia*, the name Cadwalader, used as a name or surname, is decidedly Welsh and often spelled with two “L’s”. It “was used most notably held by **Cadwaladr**, a seventh-century King of Gwynedd, who was also the last Welsh King to claim lordship over all of Britain.”

Other former owners with interesting (as well as alliterative) names included **Conrad Clemmer**, **Selina Slaymaker**, and **Charles Credo**.

In addition to these owners, at least one owner had a quite colorful past: **George S. Mitchell, Jr.**, who is listed as owning our home from 1916 until at least 1919. According to his obituary (published in the *North Penn Reporter* 1929. Mitchell was variously “an Indian fighter, scout, close friend of **William “Buffalo Bill” Cody**, a railroad conductor, and a hero of the Johnstown Flood.” At the age of eighteen, he enlisted with **General George Custer**’s cavalry and rode with Buffalo Bill in what were then called the “Indian Wars”.



When his brief military career ended, he joined the Pennsylvania Railroad and spent the next 49 years as a train conductor. When, in 1889, the South Fork Dam on the Little Conemaugh River broke, devastating Johnstown, Pennsylvania, he was tapped to restore train service to the area. His swift work saved hundreds of lives. Our online research also revealed that his son, **John H. Mitchell**, was a life-long resident of Gwynedd and served for a time as Tax Collector, Justice of the Peace, and a director of the Ambler Trust Company. Both father and son are memorialized by a mausoleum at the Lansdale Cemetery



Photos above right: *Portions of the mausoleum (located in Lansdale Cemetery, Lansdale, PA) dedicated to George S. Mitchell (1850-1929), frontiersman and Johnstown Flood hero; and his son, John H. Mitchell (1877-1944), a local government official.*

The original section of our house, made of field stone, is an ell - with the straight, somewhat Georgian-style, two-story front, turning back at the right. On both sides of our front door, various former residents and visitors have taken the liberty to carve their names into the stone, with some carvings showing more detail than others, and some even including dates.

The most discernible engravings say **Andrew Godfrey 1882, Samuel T. Godfrey 1882, and Lilies H. Warwick.** The maps in the book *Fair Land, Gwynedd* by Phil Johnson Ruth (1991) indicate that the Warwick family lived in our home from some time in the mid-1850s through the mid 1870s. Incidentally, two relatively recent carvings are **Claudia E. Langella and Maura R. Langella 2011.**

Another carving is that of **Mary S. Strawn**, and the most prominent (a la Hancock) carving is of **C. F. Strawn, 1866.** (See photo) An online history of the American Strawn family (originally spelled Straughan) indicates that the carving was almost certainly done by **Charles Foulke Strawn.** He never lived in our home, but his wife did. She was **Mary S. Warwick** before she became **Mary S. Strawn.** Her parents were **Charles and Mary Warwick**, and we believe she and Lillie Warwick were sisters. Evidently, Strawn's in-laws gave him permission to engrave their house!



Photo above right: *C. F. Strawn 1866" engraved at the author's Lower Gwynedd residence. A descendent of the founding Foulke family, Charles Foulke Strawn, whose wife grew up at the house, was a Quakertown postmaster, and was, although a Quaker, an Enrollment Officer during the Civil War.*

When we learned his full name, we found that Charles was a Strawn and a Foulke. His mother was Jane Foulke, a member of the Foulke family, one of the founding families of Gwynedd. A Quaker, he was born in 1836 and lived most of his life in Quakertown. Over the years, he made a living as a farmer, carpenter, cabinetmaker, and, for a time, Quakertown's postmaster.

During the Civil War, he was the Enrollment Officer for Richland Township (Bucks County). It is curious that, as a Quaker, he served in this capacity but an explanation rests in the law. Quakers and other religious sects (i.e. Amish, Dunkards, Mennonites) sought status as "conscientious objectors", so, that as a result of the Draft Act of 1863, most were granted exemptions as they served in noncombatant positions.



Charles died in 1921 at the age of 85, and he and Mary are interred at the Richland Friends Meeting Burial Ground. (See



photos above - left and right.)

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Sources for this article include FindAGrave.com and Wikipedia.

Do you live in an historic home? Please consider sharing its story.