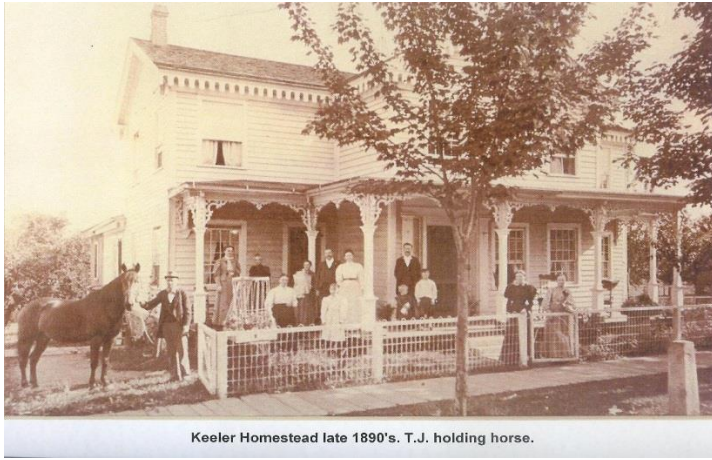


Jan. 29, 2014

TOURING SULLIVAN COUNTY'S MUSEUM . . . while dusting

With this winter's weather and getting a new heating system in the museum, the writing of these columns has fallen a bit behind. We are torn up, dirty and it's too cold to work in the building. So the worry has been that we may be interrupted in doing articles for you. (Matthew 6:27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? . . . but we still do worry,



Keeler Homestead late 1890's. T.J. holding horse.

don't we.) So, while stopping in to get the mail and check on the progress of heat, we'd received a correspondence from Deb Wilson. You may recall some past articles based on Deb's extensive work on the Keeler genealogy. She was sending more information on her great grandfather, Thomas Jackson Keeler, one of the early settlers of the town of Laporte. He lived, worked and worshiped with everyone who had a place in the history of the town. So Deb's imagination took flight in a fictional story based on actual events that involved many of the founding fathers during the inception of not only that town but also the county of Sullivan.

But before we tell you the story, a little background on the cast of (real) characters:

John Keeler (1796-1861) was born in Benton Township, Columbia County. He married Sarah Bartleson in 1824. In 1826, John and Sarah settled in Nordmont, Sullivan County. They were one of the original four families to settle in that wilderness which was known as "the Elk Lick" settlement. They cleared the land and made their living as farmers. Their son, Thomas Jackson (TJ) was one of eight children. In April 1861 John Keeler was returning from a trip to Columbia County with his team of horses when he fell from the wagon. The hind wheel passed over his neck causing instantaneous death. He is buried at Cherry Grove Cemetery in Nordmont.

Thomas Jackson Keeler ["TJ"] (1840-1919) was born in Benton Township, Columbia County and grew up on his family's farm. He received his education in a one room schoolhouse. In 1858 he went to work as a carpenter and practiced his trade in Sullivan and Bradford counties. He married Mary Ellen Ballard (1859-1924) of Wayne County on May 2, 1885 in Laporte. In the early 1860's he settled in Laporte and raised his family. TJ practiced his trade as a master carpenter then constructing homes, barns, churches and public buildings in Laporte, Eagles Mere, Muncy Valley, Montoursville and Williamsport for PA and also in N.Y., N.J. and Virginia into the 1870's.

Later generations of Laporte citizens knew TJ as a social historian. During his life he kept a daily diary in which he chronicled his business dealings, financial records, personal family events and valuable Laporte history. Deb has transcribed some of this which is in the Keeler family genealogy within the museum. His work also included that of the building of Michael Meylert's mansion. He details working on all facets of the great home. Active in politics, TJ served as borough tax collector, director and vice president of the bank, Overseer of the Poor, Justice of the Peace, county auditor and town council member. A devout Baptist, he was clerk of the Baptist Church in Laporte for thirty years and held all of the lay offices of the church. While conducting these affairs, TJ also owned and managed the General Store in Laporte from 1877 to 1905, taking trips to Philadelphia to order goods which would later be delivered by train. During WWI at age 78, he helped to build the cantonments at Camp Dix, N.J. and was involved with government construction work at the shipyards in Annapolis, MD. At age 79 he took ill while visiting his daughter's family in Lancaster County and was taken back to Laporte where he died May 15, 1919 and was buried at Mountain Ash Cemetery in Laporte.

We'll introduce the other players next week and then the story. Until then, you can contact the museum by phoning 570-946-5020 or emailing museum@scpahistory.com