A LONELY HISTORIC GRAVE

HAROLD A. THOMAS

In the middle of a large cultivated field a mile or so northeast of the outskirts of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, there is a lonely grave-stone bearing the inscription:

JOSEPH
BROWNLIE
1 LIEUT 13 PA REGT
JULY 13, 1782

The writer came upon this stone quite by accident, while endeavoring to discover the site of "Miller's Blockhouse" where an Indian raid occurred during the Revolutionary War.

The owner of the property and other local people knew of the existence of the stone but they had no knowledge about the tragic historic incident connected with it. On the other hand, any person interested in local history can read about Brownlee's death and burial in the standard books of history pertaining to this region, among which books the best-known are those by Day, Albert and Boucher.1 However, many present-day educated persons whose knowledge of history depends upon printed pages have lost effective means of finding the exact spot where Brownlee's death and burial occurred, since the printed sources do not give this information with precision. This statement is true, even though a generation or so ago the site was well known to members of the now inactive Greensburg Historical Society, and even though a map showing the general location is given in Albert's book on Frontier Forts.

Mr. Thomas has again performed a service by pointing out that physical changes taking place around us are so transforming the landscape that permanent records such as this article will serve future public interest far beyond pure historical interest, so that our heritage may be preserved.—Ed.

This loss of present information about the exact location of a historic site is a good example of a process which is now taking place on a wide scale in Western Pennsylvania. A few generations ago the historian of an early event had the benefit of oral accounts from direct descendants of the actual participants, these descendants being usually farmers. Now that farms are passing out of possession of the old families and descendants of the original owners are scattered far and wide, this source of information is drying up almost completely. To remedy this loss, local people have in some cases created historical societies to preserve historic information, but, over the years, such organizations tend to wax and wane with changing fashions, and are likely to die out altogether. Except in cases where something unexpected happens, such as finding a forgotten gravestone, our knowledge of the exact sites where many historic events occurred is now vanishing forever.

Although Brownlee's death cannot be classed as a major historic event, being but one of many murders committed by the Indians during the Revolutionary War, nevertheless the incident has a peculiar poignancy of its own, due to the fact that Brownlee was brought to his end by the impulsive and unthinking words of two women, each of whom had every reason to wish to protect him. Thus his grave deserves to be recognized as a site of real historic interest, whose location is well worth preserving in print. It seems quite appropriate to use the pages of this magazine to rescue this particular site from the advance of oblivion.

All the well-known published accounts of the Brownlee saga stem from the same source — an article written by Judge Coulter and published in the Pennsylvania Argus of Greensburg some time during 1836. All copies of this article are now apparently lost. The article was first copied in printed-book form, with credit given to the original, in Sherman Day's Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania, dated 1847. The accounts in the later history books by Albert and Boucher follow Day with almost word-for-word fidelity.

The essential features of the often-repeated story of Brownlee's death are as follows: The site of the pioneer village of Hannastown, county seat of the original Westmoreland County, is located two miles north of Brownlee's grave. This village was burned by a party of 150 Indians and Tories on July 13, 1782, the very date carved on Brownlee's tombstone. By some writers, the attack on Hannastown is regarded as the last engagement of the Revolutionary War, major military operations having ceased with Cornwallis' surrender ten months before.
While the main party of Indians was attacking Hannastown a group of about fifty of them detached themselves to raid “Miller’s Blockhouse,” a strongly-built log farmhouse two-and-a-quarter miles to the south. On this day most of the young people of the Hannastown community had assembled at the Miller farmhouse to attend an “in-fair” or second day of a wedding celebration. At that time the Miller house was surrounded by a group of temporary cabins built for wartime refuge. Present at the celebration was a neighboring farmer and ex-soldier, Joseph Brownlee. During the recent war he had served as a lieutenant in the Eighth and Thirteenth Pennsylvania Regiments and also in a company of Independent Rangers, but at the close of his enlistment he had returned home to aid in the defense of his family and neighbors against Indian raids. He was a famous Indian fighter, widely known to the savages by reputation and bitterly hated by them. In the words of the oft-printed account (as quoted by Boucher), “he thought it his duty to kill an Indian as he would a snake or dangerous wild beast.”

“When the Indians arrived, Brownlee was in the blockhouse, most likely as a guard, and Mrs. Brownlee and her children were also there. He seized his rifle and ran out to intercept two Indians who were just entering the yard. He could easily have escaped and it was probably his intention to do so with the hope of forming a strong party and overtaking the Indians should they capture and carry away the women and children. But his wife cried to him ‘Captain, you are not going to leave me behind, are you?’ The brave man turned around and gave himself up as a prisoner.”

After setting the blockhouse on fire the Indians withdrew toward Hannastown. “The captured prisoners (about twenty) were made to carry the goods stolen from their houses. The women and children were driven in a flock. Brownlee kept up his courage and undoubtedly added strength to the disconsolate party. At length an unthinking woman, said to have been Mrs. Robert Hanna, through her tears said ‘Captain Brownlee, it is well that you are here to cheer us up!’ This unfortunate remark was undoubtedly the first intimation the Indians had that their docile prisoner was their fearless enemy Captain Brownlee. — Immediately there were hasty glances from one Indian to

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2 This word is given as “Captain” in Boucher’s version of the story, while it is given as “Jack” in the versions by Day and Albert. In copying Albert’s version almost verbatim, Boucher apparently realized that the “Jack” could not possibly be correct, but he avoided the issue by omitting all mention of Brownlee’s first name.
another and two of them conversed in guttural tones together. In addition to his burden Brownlee was carrying one of his children on his back. As he bent to enable the child to cling more tightly with its arms around his neck, a savage sneaked up behind him and buried a hatchet in his brain. Brownlee fell dead and the child rolled over him. As it was scrambling to its feet the Indian killed it in the same way. A woman near by screamed and fell swooning to the ground. She met with the same ill fate, the Indians doubtless mistaking her for Mrs. Brownlee. Mrs. Brownlee, on account of her daughter, was compelled to witness these barbarous deeds in the silent agony of despair."

An item overlooked by the historians who wrote this standard version of the Brownlee story is given in a letter written by Michael
Huffnagel, a farmer living near Hannastown, the day after the Indian raid (Frontier Forts, II, 308). From this letter we learn that the woman killed by the Indians at the time of Brownlee's murder was a Mrs. White and that her two children were also murdered. Presumably the Indians had the erroneous impression that these children belonged to the Brownlee family.

The Brownlees' bodies and those of the woman and her two children were found about one-fourth of a mile northwest of Miller's, and were buried, as was the custom then, on the spot where they fell.

At the present time, one may reach the site of Brownlee's grave by automobile as follows: Start from the eastern part of Greensburg where Route U.S. 119 passes under the Pennsylvania Railroad by a concrete arch, proceed northeast 1.25 miles on Route 119 and turn right on the local paved road which leads east toward the mining village of Bovard. A ride of 0.1 mile on the latter road leads to the entrance driveway of the Wile farm, on the right. The gravestone is 150 yards east of the larger Wile farmhouse, on the hillside in the middle of a large open field.

The attempt to investigate Brownlee's military record brought out the surprising fact that many books and publications give the name of the murdered man as "John" rather than "Joseph" Brownlee. This use of "John" occurs repeatedly in the historical books written by both Day and Albert and also crops up unexpectedly in the Pennsylvania Archives. The main facts regarding the military record of the Brownlees during the Revolutionary War and associated Indian fighting are summarized in Footnote No. 3, which was written by Edward G. Williams. It appears that two different men, John Brownlee and Joseph Brownlee, both served in the same regiments or military units, John being a private and Joseph a lieutenant.3 Their personal relation-

3 Note regarding Lieutenant Brownlee. Confusion has been rife regarding the correct identity and the given name of the Lieutenant Brownlee killed after the capture of Miller's Station. Each particular writer concerning the event, for a century and a quarter, has called him John or Joseph as his whim dictated. Boucher, in his Old and New Westmoreland, when giving his narrative, sidestepped the issue by designating him simply Captain Brownlee. Even the Pennsylvania Archives have complicated the matter by showing Lieutenant Joseph Brownlee leaving the 13th Pennsylvania Regiment to take service in the 8th, where he appears as Lieutenant John Brownlee with the same date of commission. Pennsylvania Archives (5th ser.), III, 694; 334. Previous to service in the 13th, Joseph appears on the roster of Col. Samuel Miles' Rifle Regiment as Second Lieutenant, while John appears as a private with the notation that he was discharged at Valley Forge in 1778, and resided in Donegal Township, Washington County, in 1814. Pennsylvania Archives (5th ser.), IV, 584. This is the same man who, in 1814, made pension application, giving the same address and service.
ship, possibly that of brother or cousin, is nowhere apparent. John's application for a pension in 1814 affords indisputable evidence that he survived the Hannastown raid by at least thirty-two years.

At the present time the fact that Joseph and not John was the man murdered by the Indians during the raid on Miller's Blockhouse can be proved incontrovertibly by existing old documents which relate to Joseph Brownlee's wife and property. The land once occupied by Joseph Brownlee's 600-acre farm, centering about one mile north of the grave, is now owned in part by St. Emma's Convent. The Benedictine Sisters at the convent have in their possession the old sheep-skin deed by which their portion, 150 acres, of the Joseph Brownlee farm was conveyed in 1789 to Daniel Turney by John Guthrie, the father of Joseph's widow and the executor of Joseph's former estate. This deed fits in with other facts which we know about the woman who at first was Joseph Brownlee's wife and later his widow. The unearth-

_Pennsylvania Archives_ (5th ser.), IV, 584.

To add further to the confusion, _Frontier Forts Survey_, II, map 320, marks the grave of John Brownlee at the place now occupied by the tombstone inscribed "Joseph Brownlee," and also shows him as the former owner of the farm now owned by E. C. Bothwell and definitely identified as the main part of the original Joseph Brownlee estate. In his narrative, taken from Judge Coulter's article printed in the _Pennsylvania Argus_ of Greensburg, in 1836, George D. Albert quotes Mrs. Brownlee as addressing her husband as "Jack," universally the familiar nickname for John. Hence Albert's work is consistent in that narrative and maps both agree on John Brownlee. The narratives published by all writers about the period copy the _Argus_ story, which first appeared in historical publication in Sherman Day's _Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania_ in 1843.

A more concrete piece of evidence has come to light in the form of the original parchment deed to the property now owned by St. Emma's Convent, part of the original Brownlee estate. This deed shows that it was Joseph Brownlee, not John, who was the owner. If, as Albert implies, the owner of this property was the man killed by the Indians on the day of the attack on Miller's Station, then Joseph Brownlee was indeed the man.

All references to Brownlee's service in the Ranging Company at Fort Hand and Kittanning simply designate him as "Lieutenant Brownlee." _Pennsylvania Archives_.

Finally, Francis B. Heitman, _Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army_ (Washington, D. C., 1914), 127, gives the following service record taken from official and pension records: Brownlee, Joseph (Pa.), 3rd Lieutenant 2nd Battalion of Miles' Penna. Rifle Regiment, 15th August 1776; taken prisoner at Long Island 27th August 1776; exchanged 9th December 1776; 1st Lieutenant Penna. State Regiment, 18th April 1777; resigned 22nd June 1777. Also reported ( unofficially) as having been killed by Indians at the burning of Hannastown in 1782.

Some time between 1931 and 1936 the Greensburg Historical Society (no longer functioning) set up a tombstone on the farm belonging to Robert H. Wile, to mark the grave of the fallen hero.

The name inscribed on the tombstone, Joseph Brownlee, is therefore correct, according to official records, notwithstanding _Frontier Forts_ narrative and maps.—E.G.W.
ing of these facts was apparently done by Boucher, the following account being published in Volume I of his Old and New Westmoreland:

"In February 1829 a petition was presented to the Legislature of Pennsylvania by the wife of Captain Brownlee asking for a pension, and from it we gather the following: She was born in Londonderry in 1755, her maiden name being Elizabeth Guthrie, and was a daughter of John Guthrie. — In 1775 she was married to Captain Brownlee who was with Erwin as a rifleman in the Revolution. — After serving his time in the Revolution he engaged in Indian warfare until the burning of Hannastown. He and his wife and children were captured at the Miller Blockhouse. It is also stated in the petition that it was Mrs. Hanna who mentioned Brownlee's name in the presence of the Indians, thus bringing about his death.

"After Brownlee's murder the prisoners were taken to Buffalo, where the Indians concluded because of Mrs. Brownlee's weakness, she being greatly reduced by fever and ague, to burn her at the stake. However, a white man, Captain Lattridge, persuaded them that she was too far reduced to afford them any amusement, and prevailed on them to sell her for whiskey which would afford them more pleasure. — When peace was declared she returned to the Hannastown district. Two years later she was married to Captain William Guthrie (presumably a relative) who died in 1829. By act of 1829 she was paid $60 a year as long as she lived."

The above-mentioned documents and facts definitely settle the John-Joseph controversy in favor of the latter. The mistake which erroneously brought John Brownlee into the story of the Miller Blockhouse raid doubtless existed in the original newspaper article by Judge Coulter.

From the National Archives the writer has obtained photographic copies of several old documents pertaining to Elizabeth, wife of Joseph Brownlee. These show that her marriage certificate was lost when the Brownlee cabin was burned by the Indians on the day of her husband's murder. After her death in 1842, in order that her children could continue to receive her pension payments, it became necessary for them to furnish affidavits which proved that she had actually been the wife of Joseph Brownlee, an officer in the Revolutionary War. The above-mentioned documents are these affidavits. Among them is one by her sister, Sarah Beatty, who was an eyewitness of the wedding. Three others are by Joseph Brownlee Guthrie, a son by her second marriage, who describes incidents often related by his mother. These affidavits
repeat the story of Joseph Brownlee's murder and his wife's captivity with only minor variations from the version which has been given in these pages. The documents show that Elizabeth had two children by her first husband — a boy about three or four years old when killed by the Indians at the time of his father's murder, and a daughter, Jane, who accompanied her mother during captivity in Canada and survived to old age. By her second husband, Elizabeth had four children. In the affidavits it is mentioned that Brownlee resigned from the army because of a foot injury. The documents include a photo of the certificate of the pension awarded to Elizabeth's children, dated 1849. This brings out an item which appears nowhere else in the historical record — that Joseph Brownlee had a definite right to the title of "Captain," his service record being given as 22 months 27 days as lieutenant and 1 month 3 days as captain.

After a somewhat difficult search, the writer found that the site of the former Miller Blockhouse is on the summit of a hill or north-south ridge one-fourth of a mile due southeast of Brownlee's grave. It is one-eighth of a mile north of the Pennsylvania Railroad. To help identify the place in the field it may be noted that the white Sears service building on the far side of the tracks bears thirty degrees east of south. The Millers' two-story log farmhouse which stood here, together with several nearby cabins, was burned during the Indian raid. During his investigation the writer found that local traditions regarding the whereabouts of the former Miller Blockhouse have completely vanished, and that present-day historians have apparently lost track of the site in spite of a description which was printed eighty-two years ago in Albert's *History of the County of Westmoreland*. That description identifies the blockhouse site with that of the barn on the William Russell farm. The present difficulty in utilizing this description is that old farmhouses and outbuildings in this area have vanished completely. However, the Pomeroy *Atlas of Westmoreland County*, dated 1867, contains an excellent map of Hempfield township, whereon a small square dot initialed "W.R." indicates the site of the William Russell farmhouse, thus permitting an accurate present identification of the original Miller Blockhouse site. Quite an extensive area around this place is now uninhabited. Fields long uncultivated are grown up with woods, brush and weeds.

In the generations subsequent to Brownlee's death, his grave was marked by a large wild-cherry tree, or a succession of such trees. According to the present owner of the land, Mr. Robert H. Wile, the
stump of the last of these was in existence about 1931. Mr. Wile states that the present marble gravestone was erected some time between 1931 and 1936, while he was away from home. The Benedictine Sisters at St. Emma's Convent have a newspaper clipping from a series of five articles about the history of their land, published in the Greensburg Daily Tribune beginning March 22, 1954. This clipping states that the marble stone marking Joseph Brownlee's grave was erected by the Greensburg Historical Society. At the present time this Society has apparently died out completely, all its papers and records having been destroyed several years ago.