THE BURTNER HOMESTEAD:  
A LANDMARK TO REMEMBER  

Vera Burtner Ferree

In the quiet valley of the Little Bull Creek, beyond the noisy traffic of Route 28 east from Tarentum, in Harrison Township of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, stands the Burtner Stone House. Its massive walls measure thirty inches thick at the base, perfectly plumb on the outer surface but tapered on the inside to a height of three stories until they reach a thickness of one and one-half feet at the eaves. The open fields surrounding the house lie fallow where once grew corn and flax. The mill which ground the flour has disappeared from the bank across the creek and the busy hands that wove the linsey-woolsey now rest in the cemetery on the hill. Behind the house, and past the site of the farm tool-shed and smithy, rises Pine Hill, where game was always plentiful to the pioneers. The hill still boasts an overgrowth of small trees and shrubs, but many of the pines have been felled for the making of pitch. Below the hill Pitch Hollow extends to the Indian cave and the artesian spring at its upper limits. Here, before 1800, flourished a Cornplanter Indian settlement, but, upon the arrival of the pioneers, the settlement was moved to a spot along the Buffalo Creek. Downstream from the hollow, where the Little Bull makes a wide bend and changes the direction of its course, were the marshlands with their cat-tails and lilies to furnish food for the Indians. When the mill-dam was built this area became flooded. On the side of the hill above the dam and across the Burtner Road from the cemetery, is the remains of the spring upon which the settlers were dependent for their water supply. The water for it was channelled through bored-out trees into a wooden trough below the breast of the dam.

A grove of butternut trees stood on the creek bank, and, to the left of the house, the huge log barn was built about 1815. It burned in 1930, nine years after the centennial celebration at the Stone House that had attracted crowds from all areas of Western Pennsylvania.¹

¹ Vera Burtner Ferree, native of Butler County, Pennsylvania, is the great-great-granddaughter of Philip Burtner, the man who built the Burtner Stone House. She is a member of the faculty at Freeport Area Senior High School. Her research study of the Tarentum area has been in progress over the past twenty years.—Editor

¹ The Pittsburgh Sunday Post, August 21, 1921.
On the slope above the barn the fruit trees, brought as seedlings from the Negley orchard in East Liberty, bountifully supplied apples and pears. This orchard had been planted in accordance with an agreement drawn up with Willis Foulk, when he came to see the land which he had inherited. The one farm of 250 acres he sold to Philip Burtner for $2.50 per acre, and the other farm to Jacob Negley. Jacob's first purchase in the district had been the 202 acres at the mouth of the Big Bull Creek, on which he had paid taxes as early as 1795.

A short time after buying the farm, Philip added another room to his one-room log cabin. Then began the work on the barn. The eldest son, George, was thirteen years old at the time and was able to be of great assistance to his father.

The cornerstones of the house were laid in 1818. Plans for eight large rooms had been complete since January 14 of 1815. The builder probably recalled the Burtner homestead in Bethel Township, Berks County. He could have known the Negley House in Germantown, Philadelphia. He no doubt made comparisons with his own childhood home on the Pine Grove farm. During the Revolution his father had

2 Article of agreement made and agreed upon the twenty-seventh day of September, one thousand eight hundred and ten, between Willis Foulk of Cumberland County, state of Pennsylvania, of the one part, and Philip Burtner, of Allegheny County, state of Pennsylvania, of the other part: Witnesseth: That the said Willis Foulk for and in consideration of the covenant and agreement to be kept and performed on the part of the said Philip Burtner, doth lease, let and to farm all that tract of land situated in the Joshua Elder's District No. 16, containing 250 acres, Deer Township, for the term of five years from and after the first day of April next. In consideration of which the said Philip Burtner doth agree to clear 35 acres, put it under good fence, plant 100 apple trees, to leave one house and one barn with all other improvements in good repair, and to pay all taxes that may be assessed on the said premises during said term of years. Sealed and delivered in the presence of Jacob Negley. Signed by Willis Foulk — SEAL.


6 George was named for his father's brother who lived in the Murrysville area of Westmoreland County in 1800 census.


8 Pennsylvania Militia from Berks County. Philip Burtner, Sr., was fined during latter years of war for not attending militia drills.
served with the county militia in the same battalion as his brother's son, Jacob. The original Balsar Burtner had come to the Tulpehocken Settlement from the Upper Rhineland region of Germany in 1732. Here he lived and died. His children worshipped at the little Tulpehocken Church. They were baptized and married there by the Reverend John Casper Stoever.

It is reasonable, then, to assume that Philip had crossed the mountains since his marriage, where he visited again throughout Berks County. He may have travelled in Dauphin County to converse with cousins, first settlers at the town of Lykens. His research and planning is evidenced by the sound condition of our stone house after 148 years of wear and weather.

It is presumed that the good neighbors and friends took part in the construction, as was the custom of the day. John Burtner regularly brought Michael Emerick of Saxonburg with him to give of a day's toil. Benjamin Sarver (Zerbe), one of the early settlers of Buffalo Township, had worked at the Negley Mill on Bull Creek since its beginning. His son John, with John Powell from across the county line, in Butler County, spent many hours with the building. There were David and George Dickey. There were Tom Ross and John Gravatt, Jacob Kuhn and James Harbison, James Fleming and William Smith, and Thomas Love. We could list many more names. Of course Felix Negley gave much time and his wife, Ruth Horton, helped Margaret prepare the food for those who worked.

One hundred and fifty years have passed since Philip began the building. He had planned well this house with its twenty double-hung windows. The front door gave entrance to a large sitting-room, which opened into a long hall with access to another room on the northerly side of the house. Stairs to the upper floors and to the basement-kitchen led from this hall. There were four bedrooms, each

9 Pennsylvania German Pioneers, by Strassburger and Hinke, II, 74.
12 John was Philip's brother who had settled in Clinton Township of Butler County in 1801 plus. Members of his family worked closely with Mr. Roebling at Saxonburg. John Burtner was listed in the 1800 census in Pitt Township, Allegheny County.
13 John Sarver (Zerbe) married Philip Burtner's niece, Margaret Burtner, daughter of Henry of Stark County, Ohio.
14 John Powell married Elizabeth Negley, daughter of Alexander and sister to Margaret Negley Burtner. They lived on a farm in southern Butler County.
having cross-ventilation. The large, finished room on the third floor had two gable windows on each end. Stone chimneys at the ends of the house contained two fireplaces each. On the kitchen hearth was the set of iron andirons and crane, still there, the dough tray used by Margaret and the spinning set which Great Aunt Mary, first child of the builder, used to weave the clothes.

The floors were laid upon timbers hewn from trees on the farm. These are as strong today as they were when placed in position, each running full length from wall to wall, cut more than a foot square, spaced a foot apart. They were fitted to pass over the main beam, which must have been a beautiful tree when Philip selected it. Native stones were used for the walls, the small ones sealed to the big ones for greater strength. The large cornerstones were chiselled in design and the date stones read 1821. Lime for the making of mortar was burned in the back pasture. A small quantity of animal hair was mixed with it to bind it well when it was set. This mortar still binds the stones. An incline was built to get the stones to position and a wheelbarrow helped to lift them high on the wall. Today, electricity and water have been installed. In 1854 the house was struck by lightning and a faint crack appeared down one wall, but this has caused no material damage. The above description of the house was compiled and presented by Clare Singer Burtner at the centennial celebration.

The Burtner Stone House represents the sweat of brow and the toil of determination of our pioneer fathers. It was here that issues of historical import were decided. Here was the voting place for the vast area then included in Deer Township. The last election held here was in 1864, when Abraham Lincoln was elected for his second term. On days of election the children surrendered their sleeping quarters to guests and sought shelter in the barn loft. Before 1829 the heads of families met here to plan the building of the first school, located on land now in the heart of Tarentum. Concern was manifested lest the following generation would grow up without an education, and so plans were made for securing a teacher. In 1834 the school was placed among the public schools of Pennsylvania, and by 1860 Tarentum boasted two teachers holding school sessions for five months each year.

Members of the first school board operating under the public school system at Tarentum were: John Harvey, James Robinson, Moses

---

15 Tax notice to Philip Burtner on January 16, 1835, has listed the county tax, the state tax and the education system tax for Deer Township.
Anderson, John A. Miller, Ezekiel Howe, Francis Karns and John Aber.\textsuperscript{17}

Very early in the religious history of the area, the names of its people appear. Listed are communicants, baptisms and marriages by the Reverend John William Weber and by the Reverend Mr. Steck.\textsuperscript{18} The first church was presumably built in the early 1820's on land which later became known as lot No. 89 in the Brackenridge Plan. Philip Burtner paid the expenses for the resident pastor that first struggling year. Thus the Union Church of Tarentum came into being.\textsuperscript{19} From this congregation the Reformed Church was formed.\textsuperscript{20} From this same Union Church the Lutheran Church grew.\textsuperscript{21}

Adjoining the church was the churchyard where John Burtner, first child to be born in the Stone House (July 13, 1821), was buried in 1833, his mother in 1837 and the builder in 1848. Their stones were placed several years ago in the Burtner Cemetery, Natrona Heights.\textsuperscript{22} This cemetery had been given in 1863 by the second master at the Stone House as a community burial plot.\textsuperscript{23} At that time the Burtner Road was just a farm lane with a fording at the creek below the mill-dam. A foot-bridge was built when Jacob died (March 31, 1863), the necessity arising from the swollen stream. William Hunter, whose land bordered the Burtner property, led the procession.\textsuperscript{24}

When Philip first settled on the land in 1800,\textsuperscript{25} he followed a foot trail made by Indians and by roaming animals. It followed the creek through the valley, developing through the years into a lane from the house to the junction of the Little and Big Bulls, where had been erected in 1783 the Orr Blockhouse. Farther down stream was the place where the gristmill had been built by Felix Negley and Philip Burtner. Chartiers Old Town had reportedly thrived in this area before and after 1750.

\textsuperscript{17} Court House of Allegheny County. County Bldg. Deedbook 101, 372.
\textsuperscript{18} Births and Baptisms, Westmoreland Co., Della Reagan Fischer, 1967.
\textsuperscript{19} Sherman Day, \textit{Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania}, 1843, 92.
\textsuperscript{20} Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds. Deedbook 210, 130.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Memoir History of the Pittsburgh Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1748-1845-1925}.
\textsuperscript{22} The tombstones have been well preserved. The dates are clearcut. The style of the stones is typical of the time. Henry and Martin Luther Burtner hauled the stones from Horton Alley in Tarentum to the Burtner Cemetery. Clare S. Burtner had them placed in the cemetery, May 3, 1965.
\textsuperscript{23} Will Book, Jacob Burtner, Allegheny County Courthouse. 346 Will Book 10, 440.
\textsuperscript{24} William had come as a boy of eight with his father to settle on the farm. He married Lydia Evans of Tarentum, daughter of Jesse. Their son Robert married one of the Burtner twins.
\textsuperscript{25} United States Census, 1800.
Philip and Felix were scouts along the Allegheny frontier during the '80's. When Philip returned to the Western Region in 1790, after the settlement of his father's estate, they again worked together at the Alexander Negley Mills in Pitt Township. It was there that Philip met and courted Alexander's daughter, Margaret.

Margaret Negley Burtner, first mistress at the Stone House, spent her childhood on the homestead farm in East Liberty. She knew Negley Avenue as a country lane leading to the Forbes Road. In 1778 her father had brought his family to this land from his 300-acre farm at Ligonier. She recalled those days when, on July 18, 1820, her husband accompanied her to the inquest for the settling of her father's estate.

Jacob Burtner was the second master in the Little Bull Creek Valley. He was only four years old when his father began to build the house. He became its master in 1841 when he married Martha Byerly. Jacob's father had been active in community affairs and Jacob was like him.

Martha Byerly Burtner had lived all of her life in Butler County. Jacob Byerly, her father, had moved to the county when he married Suzanna Hepler. Martha's grandfather, Francis Byerly, served his country in the war of the Revolution. He was born in Lancaster in 1754 and was brought west with General Braddock's army. His father, Andrew Byerly, settled at Bushy Run; his land was surveyed on location in 1769.

The third and last mistress at the Stone House was Ellen Harvey Burtner, wife of Martin Luther Burtner. She also brought to this house a heritage deep in the early history of Butler County.

What is to be the fate of the old house? It has been scheduled to be torn down to make room for an interchange to the Allegheny Valley Expressway. Due to pressure brought to bear by community groups, the Department of Highways has agreed to let it stand temporarily until provision can be made to move it to a new location.

26 History of Pittsburgh and Environs (American Historical Society, Inc., 1922), (Biographical Volume), 57-58.
28 Summons to attend and serve as a Grand Juror, September 1, 1833.
Surveyed on the 20th May 1785, the above described lot of a conic section on the west side of the Allegheny River on the W. side of Bull Branch containing two hundred fifty acres, allowance of one hundred 20 acres, in consideration of a lawful bill of sale, the 12th day of March 1782, entitled an Act for the sale of certain lands for the purpose of redeeming & paying certain certificates of Depreciation given to the officers of the Pennsylvania line No.


I certify that the above is a copy of the original remaining filed in the Surveyor General's office.

Andrew Porter Esq.

Site of Stone House. See footnote 3.
Received the 9th of October, 1821, of Mr. Philip Burtner, two dollars and two cents in full of his county tax for the year eighteen hundred and twenty-one, by me, Will.Timberlake.

To Mr. Philip Burtner
SIR—Your property is valued at $1349. Dollars. The rate per cent. is 24½ Mills on the dollar. Your County Tax for the present year is $37 Cents. The Court of Appeal will be held at the house of John in your township, on the 26th day of March, 1829.

McCool
Jonathan Porter, Assessor.
The west end of the Stone House

Original cast-iron andirons still to be seen at the Stone House
Allegheny County, Sept. 1833

Sir—YOU are hereby summoned to attend and serve as a Grand Juror, at the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions of the Peace, to be held at Pittsburgh, for the County of Allegheny, the Fourth Monday of October next, at 10 o’clock in the forenoon.

WM. LECKY, Sheriff.

To Philip Burton

To Mr. Philip Burton Esq.

Sir,—Your property is valued at $1159—the rate per cent. for County Tax is Three mills on the dollar; the rate for State Tax, 1 mill; and on personal property worth __ dollars, 1 mill, per act of 1831; and for General Education, one mill on the dollar. Your taxes for the present year will be as follows, viz.

County Tax,............ $9 48
State "................. 1 16
Personal "............. 1 16
Education System,..... 5 80

appeal at the House of John McCabe on the 16th day of January 1835

Ezekiel Miller — Assessor of

Township for 1835.