

# Which Oliver Miller?

by Norma W. Hartman

THE passage of the federal whiskey excise tax in March of 1791<sup>1</sup> touched off what has been called the first civil war in our country. Known today as the Whiskey Rebellion, it was the first test of the federal government's authority.

The farmers of Western Pennsylvania resented the tax on their only source of hard cash. Distilled spirits were far more economical to transport for sale in the East than the grain from which the spirits were made. Diplomatic exchange between the government and angry farmers failed to resolve the conflict, and farmers in Western Pennsylvania joined forces to prevent collection of the hated tax. Acts of vandalism attributed to "Tom the Tinker"<sup>2</sup> and the "Whiskey Boys" grew more numerous, and on July 16, 1794 violence erupted.

One of the farmers who feared being ruined if forced to pay the excise tax or the legal costs of fighting it (about \$250) was William Miller. In June 1794,<sup>3</sup> he had sold part of his plantation named "Millvale" (near present-day Bethel Park in suburban Pittsburgh), and was preparing to leave Pennsylvania for points further west in the fall. General John Neville, federal revenue inspector, and U.S. Marshal David Lennox appeared at Miller's home on July 15, 1794 with an arrest warrant. But Neville and Lennox were forced to flee after a group of farmers working with Miller fired on them or into the air above them.<sup>4</sup>

Later that evening, enraged by the day's occurrences, John Holcroft and a party of local men set off for Neville's home at Bower Hill. Arriving at daybreak on July 16, the men marched up to the house and were challenged by Neville and his servants, who fired upon them through windows. Several men were shot.<sup>5</sup> This is the most famous confrontation of the insurrection. According to Holcroft's testimony at the 1795 trials in Philadelphia, a man named Oliver Miller was among those shot, and he later died. His death has been widely recounted by local historical agencies in

the Western Pennsylvania area and in several published accounts.<sup>6</sup>

But which Oliver Miller? Was it the Oliver Miller, Sr., who had settled in Western Pennsylvania in the 1770s and had served as a justice of the peace?<sup>7</sup> Was it his son, Oliver Miller, Jr., who inherited a tract of land as well as his father's still and vessels?<sup>8</sup> Or was it the grandson of Oliver Sr., also named Oliver Miller?<sup>9</sup> Documents in the Washington County Courthouse in Washington, Pa., answer this question.

Oliver Sr.'s will was written February 3, 1782 and was probated on March 12 of that year.<sup>10</sup> The final account of his estate was presented by his executors on September 19, 1786<sup>11</sup>; thus, Oliver Miller, Sr. was not living at the time of the Whiskey Insurrection.

On May 30, 1785 William, Thomas, and James Miller posted bond to administer the estate of their brother, Oliver Miller, Jr.<sup>12</sup> A vendue (sale) was held at which all of Oliver Jr.'s goods were sold to family members, with his brother William purchasing the still that their father had willed to him at his death in 1782.<sup>13</sup> Oliver Jr.'s estate was settled on February 6, 1787,<sup>14</sup> so he was not alive at the time of the insurrection.

That leaves us with just one more Oliver Miller, and he was the grandson of Oliver Sr.,<sup>15</sup> and the son of Alexander and Jean Miller.<sup>16</sup> The 1790 census lists them as parents of two sons under age 16.<sup>17</sup> They were no doubt Oliver and Alexander, Jr., because their third son, Thomas, was not born until 1791.<sup>18</sup> So, it must be this Oliver Miller, a teen-age boy, who died that day at Neville's house.

Re-writing history is not easily accepted because the longer the story is told, the more it is believed. However, when researchers locate primary documents, the truth must be published for all to see. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd Crumrine, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1882), 265.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>3</sup> "Deed of Sale from William and Rachel Miller to Conrad Sailor Exec. of Peter Sailor, dec'd," dated 9 June 1794 and recorded 22 March 1797, Deed Book 6; 255-257, Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Allegheny County Courthouse, Pittsburgh, Pa.

<sup>4</sup> Although historians generally disagree about whether the men shot at or over the heads of Neville and Lennox, the

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account given here is from Hugh H. Brackenridge, *Incidents of The Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794* (Philadelphia, 1795), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Leland D. Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels* (Pittsburgh, 1967), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, vol. III, 134. Confusion generally has reigned since Holcroft's testimony, and in several publications the wrong Oliver Miller has been identified as the man killed. These include William Degelman's *History of Bethel Presbyterian Church* (1936); Baldwin's *Whiskey Rebels*; Elizabeth J. Wall, ed., *Men of the Whiskey Insurrection in Southwestern Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1988); and various brochures, including the one distributed at the Oliver Miller Homestead historical site in South Park, Pa.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Thomas Wiley, *The Whiskey Insurrection* (Elizabeth, Pa., 1912), 51.

<sup>8</sup> "Will of Oliver Miller," 3 Feb. 1782, Washington County, Pa., Will Book 1, 7-9, Washington County Courthouse,

Washington, Pa.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Account File No. 12 M 1786, Estate of Oliver Miller, Washington County Courthouse, Washington, Pa.

<sup>12</sup> Account File No. 6 M 1787, Estate of Oliver Miller, Washington County Courthouse.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Will of Oliver Miller," 3 Feb. 1782, Washington County, Pa., Will Book 1, 7-9, Washington County Courthouse.

<sup>16</sup> "Deed of Sale from Alexander and Jean Miller to Melzar Tannehill," 7 April 1800, Allegheny County, Pa., Deed Book 10, 85, Allegheny County Courthouse, Pittsburgh.

<sup>17</sup> 1790 U.S. Census, Allegheny County, Pa. (Baltimore, 1970), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Headstone inscription for Thomas Miller, Bethel Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Bethel Park, Pa.

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