

# UP FRONT



## MEADOWCROFT

By David Scofield, Director,  
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### Yours Truly, James Simpson

In Meadowcroft's corner of Washington County during the late 19th century, the preeminent local historian was James Simpson (1824–1902). In Boyd Crumrine's 1882 *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania*, Crumrine acknowledged his dependence on Simpson: "There is no person living who is as well informed as James Simpson on all matters pertaining to the history of the western and northwestern part of Washington County, and it is from him that most of the facts given in this work in reference to the northwestern townships of this county have been obtained."

In the lineage of local historians, Simpson was followed by the venerable A.D. White who died in 1994 at the age of 99. Close on the heels of White was Albert Miller (1911–1999), the historian of Meadowcroft.

By virtue of Miller's effort to preserve local history, several objects from the Simpson farm found their way into the museum collection, including stone gate posts, a stone water trough, and a stone upping block to assist in mounting your horse. All were hewn on the family farm from local sandstone and inscribed with the year they were created. My personal favorites are a pair of sandstone obelisks fitted with iron pintles for hanging gates. Simpson spent a considerable amount of time embellishing these by adding to one of the stones the



**James Simpson (seated) and his family pictured in front of their stone farmhouse in 1894.**

Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village Collection, Simpson Family Papers and Photographs, 1810-1972.



**James and his wife Catherine in an undated 19th-century photo.**

Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village Collection, Simpson Family Papers and Photographs, 1810-1972.



**Photo from Simpson's 1894 book, *History of the Cross Creek Graveyard and the Cross Creek Cemetery*.**

Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village Library.

names of himself, his wife, and his eight children. To the matching stone he inscribed a brief historical note for posterity.

Another important item in the Simpson Collection is a carpenter's tool chest. This chest contains a nearly complete set of tools for general carpentry including saws, measuring and marking tools, wooden bench planes and molding planes, chisels and gouges, and even miscellaneous nails, screws, and hardware.

In 2015, family member Barb Salvini

donated a trove of James Simpson archival material. This incredible collection contains hand-bound books, correspondence, legal documents, photographs, genealogical notes, newspaper clippings, and books spanning the mid to late 19th century. Most of the collection consists of small, hand-bound booklets made by Simpson. Some of these served the purpose of a daily journal, which he kept from the 1850s until 1900, and some for the purpose of recording the daily weather and farm accounts, also over half a century.

As I reviewed the archival box full of these small hand-stitched journals, curiosity urged me to inquire what James Simpson recorded here in Washington County on July 1–3, 1863, while 200 miles away in Adams County, the battle of Gettysburg was raging. As it turns out, those miles separated two entirely different realities. The bloodshed and the deafening sound of canon in the fields of Gettysburg could not be in more stark contrast to the simultaneous experience of Simpson on his Washington County farm:

July the 1st 1863  
 Went to Alex Mason's in the forenoon  
 fixed at the sheep house in the afternoon

Thursday the 2nd  
 Shelled corn in the forenoon Piled up  
 manure in the afternoon

Friday the 3rd  
 Worked [sugar] Cane to Day and Piled  
 up manure

News of the battle would not appear in either the *Pittsburgh Gazette* or the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* until July 3, the last day of fighting. However, it would be 12 days after the fact when word of Thomas C. Hays' death on the second day of the battle reached Simpson and his community.<sup>1</sup>

Tuesday the 14th  
 Got word to Day of the Death of  
 T.C. Hays who Was Killed at the Battle  
 of Gettysburgh [sic]

Thursday the 23rd  
 Went to Middletown to Get A Rough  
 Box for T.C. Hays Coffin in the Evening

Friday the 24th  
 Helped to Dig Thomas C. Hays grave in  
 the forenoon.

Simpson buried Hays in the Cross Creek Cemetery, which lies seven miles northeast of Meadowcroft. And, in his role as local historian, James Simpson also wrote the *History of the Cross Creek Graveyard and The Cross Creek Cemetery*, which was published in 1894. ☀



**Stone gate post hewn by James Simpson dated 1885 and listing the names of his entire family.**  
 Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village Collection.



**One of James Simpson's hand-bound journals with a notation by A.D. White that he had read it and taken notes.**  
 Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village Collection, Simpson Family Papers and Photographs, 1810-1972.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Hays was a sergeant in Company K, 140th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry and was killed in action at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863.