

Jane Lea Nixon, Pioneer Woman in the Chartiers Valley

A biblical scholar once said that while Genesis 5:27, says that "Methuselah lived 969 years; and he died," the only thing you could say about his life between his birth and death was a semi-colon.

Early American history is replete with recognition of men's contributions to society, especially our Founding Fathers. What they did and what they experienced is remembered in vivid detail. However, we know very little about the lives of pioneer and founding women, with some significant exceptions such as Dolly Madison and Abigail Adams. The joys and sorrows women experienced in our history ought not to be overlooked as though the gap between birth and death for women was only a semi-colon.

The genealogical history of Old St. Luke's Church does feature the men in the Lea, Neville, and Craig family lines. We also pay attention to the male clergy who have served this congregation over the decades as they sought to enrich and to sustain the fabric of this church. But what women have we highlighted? The answer is none, until now. It is our privilege to take note of the life of one pioneer woman, Jane Lea Nixon, what little we do know about her, and the noteworthy events that she must have experienced or observed.

Jane was born in December, 1774, to William and Dorothy Lea, who were married in Christ Church, Philadelphia, on February 2, 1774 by the Rev. Jacob Duche. Jane is reputed to be the first white child born in the Chartiers Valley, and in keeping with the Church of England, the first infant to be baptized in the area.

Jane's parents resided on a tract of land encompassing some 400 acres beside the Chartiers Creek, given to William by King George III for his service as a Major with General Forbes in the 1758 assault on the French Fort Duquesne. It is presumed that the Lea home, if not also his forge as a blacksmith, were on the high portion of the tract where Old St. Luke's Church is situated today and his farm would have been near the Creek.

Jane's infancy was set in the excitement of frontier life. Women faced endless overwhelming duties, leading to premature death before their husbands.. They faced the fear of attack by thieves and Indians, epidemics, and the pain of wounds and animal bites. Added to the family concerns was the resentment against British demands and the resulting American Revolution. Jane would have been home schooled, no doubt primarily by her mother Dorothy. Reading was a precious privilege, and she treasured the Book of Common Prayer and Bible.

As she passed through childhood into adolescence, she would have been present in Christian worship in her home, or in that in the home of their new and aristocratic

neighbor, John and Winifred Neville. There would have been the pleasure of meeting neighbors in weddings, funerals, house raising, quilting bees, even apple paring parties. One can only imagine the fellowship and pertinent conversations that Jane would have audited in these meetings, and following the morning devotions.

In 1790, when Jane was sixteen, her parents and the Neville family cooperated to construct a frame church on Lea's land he called Summer Hill. Jane and her three sisters and three brothers then had the experience of worship in a church building and the leadership of the newly ordained clergyman, Francis Reno.

Without a doubt, the Lea family conversation was dominated by the tax Washington's administration put on whiskey in 1791, and the impact it had on local farmers. Jane's father sought to support his near neighbor, John Neville was the target of protestor's violence in 1794. John and Winifred Neville relocated to Pittsburgh because their Bower Hill mansion was burned down. Their son, Pressley, remained for a while at the original Neville home "Woodville" beside the Chartiers Creek.

On August 19, 1802, Jane's father wrote his last will and testament, leaving Summer Hill to Dorothy, later to be divided equally between his three sons, and 25 pounds sterling each to Jane and her sisters. William died a short time later, leaving Jane as the oldest child to watch over her widowed mother, who died in 1827.

Jane married Thomas Nixon (date unknown), and they had three children: Thomas, Hezekiah and Samuel. Thomas died at the age of 45, and Jane spent the rest of her life as a widow.

Like most of their neighbors, Jane and Thomas did not own any slaves, as had been the case with the Neville family, but the topic of abolition was never ignored.

If Jane respected the 1790 frame St. Luke's Church, her excitement could have been lifted high when Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, initiated a new stone church in 1852 to replace the frame building. The new St. Luke's Church would be a "Chapel of Ease," to encourage greater participation and spare worshippers having to take horse or wagon seven miles into Pittsburgh. Imagine how she watched the stonemasons dress and place the stones in gothic arches and thick walls. She and others undoubtedly welcomed Bishop Alonzo Potter on February 23, 1854 when he consecrated the building.

Jane Lea Nixon was graced by God to live into her 85th year. She died in 1859. As an abiding memorial of her life, her cloak and bonnet are on display at her beloved church, Old St. Luke's in Scott Township, Pennsylvania.