

"Fee Tail" 200 Years Ago this Year (2002)

Two hundred years ago, on August 19, 1802, Maj. William Lea completed his Will. The only record we have in our archives of Lea's thoughts and values is his Will. Using this as our guide, this article will try to make some assumptions about the Christian faith values he and his wife Dorothy, held as pioneer settlers in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Lea began his Will by giving his "soul into the hands of Almighty God Who gave it, and his body to the earth, to be buried in a discreet and Christian-like manner." He did not doubt that at the General Resurrection, he would receive the same again. He left his wife Dorothy her bed and bedding, two milk cows, two sheep and half of his kitchen furniture. As long as she lived, Dorothy was given the use of his plantation and all of his stock. Next, Lea divided his plantation of 393 acres equally, to William, Samuel, and Robert, plus one horse each. To his daughter Elizabeth he left 25 pounds plus one milk cow.

Finally, William Lea bequeathed "ten rods square of ground for the use of the Episcopal Congregation where the Church now stands." He gave only the use of his land, known as "fee tail" - tailing back to his family. Old St. Luke's does not have a deed for the land, only Lea's Will (The Allegheny County Will Book No.1, Vol. 1, page 163, #105).

His signature and seal were attached. William Lea did later that same year. Dorothy died in 1827.

We know that William Lea was born in 1737, and that he served under Gen. John Forbes and Col. Henry Bouquet to evict the French troops from Fort Duquesne, in the French and Indian (and British) War, 1754 - 1761. Of local interest, John Neville also served in that military action and the American Revolution, a did George Washington. In the period between 1765 - 1770, Lea claimed his land, which was awarded him by King George III. He chose acreage around the 1765 British outpost on the

There would be an occasional visit by an itinerant deacon or priest of the Church of England, but in most of those early years, Christian devotions were led by lay persons in their homes. We believe the Lea home was such a meeting place, through the Revolutionary War and up to 1790.

In 1787, the Church of England in the new United States was dis-established and reconstituted as the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Obviously, Revolutionary patriots had little favor for anything to do with England. Lea was an American patriot. It would have been easy for Lea, and his neighbor, John Neville, and others, to disassociate themselves from the renamed church and spurn anything related to its British heritage. They did not do so. In fact, in 1790, they, and other unknown contributors, cooperated to build the frame structure for St. Luke's Church on Lea's land.

The new federal government levied taxes to stabilize the new nation, including the excise tax on distilled spirits. We have no evidence that Lea was a rebellious anti-Federalist in the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion. We presume the St. Luke's Church was a meeting place for Federalists supporting George Washington's presidency.

The first vicar of St. Luke's Church was the Rev. Francis Reno, who served 1791 to 1797. There is no record of another resident clergyman here until 1832. Did William Lea and his family again take strong leadership after 1797 in maintaining Christian devotions in the frame church building? In 1802, his faith was still strong and his values secure. His bequest of the use of land by the church is a testimony of a pioneer man's faith. The Leas are buried at Old St. Luke's Church.

Chartiers Creek, where Old St. Lukes stands today.
He and Dorothy were married in February, 1774, and
their first daughter, Jane, was born in December.

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