

HIGHTSTOWN



EAST WINDSOR

NEW JERSEY

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2002

MURDER IN HIGHTSTOWN, 1776 (PART TWO): The Death of Isaac Pearson

by Robert W. Craig

The March-April 1995 issue of the newsletter carried an article about the death of Isaac Pearson in 1776, including the speculation that Pearson was shot and killed in Hightstown. That article appeared at the beginning of what has become an intermittent investigation into the matter of his death. It's an interesting story of Hightstown at the beginning of the American Revolution, and it hasn't been told by Hightstown historians before now.

Pearson was an important political figure in western New Jersey. He was a vestryman in the Anglican church in

Trenton, and a justice of the peace, and he hired carpenters and masons in 1773 to build him what was probably the fanciest house in Nottingham (now Hamilton) Township at the time. Two years ago Hamilton Township bought the Isaac Pearson house to restore it, and an effort is now underway to have that house listed in the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places.

Killed at Hightstown ??

When I first wrote about Pearson seven years ago, I had learned very little about how he died and not much more

about his life. The information then at hand about his death was limited to Helen West's speculative account in her 1954 history of Hamilton Township, that Pearson was shot either in Allentown or in Hightstown, plus the brief report of his death carried in one of New York City's Loyalist weekly newspapers. It wasn't known where he died, when he died, or how he died. And it wasn't certain that any more could be discovered, 220 years later.

But it turns out that quite a few people were taking notice of Pearson's death at the time. And the more that

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House Tour October 6TH



The Society will hold its historic house tour, "A Stroll Down Memory Lane", on Sunday afternoon, October 6th, from 1 to 5 PM. Tickets are \$12 for Advance Sale available at Shop-Rite Garden Center, Step Back in Time Antiques, Old Hights Print Shop and the Reed House or by phone at 443-3906. Tickets will also be available on the day of the tour, at 12 noon, at Ely House, 164 N. Main Street, Hightstown, N.J.



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SEPTEMBER

9 7:30 p.m., Business Meeting, Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center

OCTOBER

6 House Tour, 1:00 - 5:00 p.m., "A Stroll Down Memory Lane"

7 7:30 p.m., Business Meeting, Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center

Hightstown Murder

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comes to light about how he was killed, the clearer it becomes that there must have been plenty of witnesses. Bill Dwyer, in his book *The Day is Ours* about the battles of Trenton and Princeton drew from Capt. Thomas Rodney's diary for his notice about Pearson. Rodney, a Continental Army officer from Delaware, was temporarily resting with his unit in Allentown, New Jersey on the afternoon of December 29th, 1776, when he reported to his diary that the body of Isaac Pearson was brought in by an unidentified group of soldiers who also brought in several prisoners. This strongly suggested that Pearson's death had just occurred within the past twenty-four hours, and that it had not taken place in Allentown but rather somewhere to the north of Allentown, because the returning American units at that time, according to the historian William S. Stryker, were coming back from Cranbury on an aborted mission to capture British stores at New Brunswick. So this account lent credence to that part of Helen West's speculation that Pearson might have been killed in Hightstown.

But Rodney's diary wasn't published until 1890, and in 1883 another brief account of Pearson's death was published, in Woodward & Hageman's *History of Burlington and Mercer Counties, New Jersey*. It noted that "Isaac Pearson, an active tory, was shot at Hightstown by a party who were pursuing him." This appeared on page 796 in that book, in the chapter on Hamilton Township, which was prepared, not by Woodward or Hageman, but by Joseph H. West, a local historian of Hamilton Square and father of Helen West. Two things became clear at this point. Helen West could have learned what she knew from her father's account, and his account must have come from a source independent of Rodney's diary, which hadn't yet been published.

Imagining how Pearson may have been killed gave further hope that the truth might someday be discovered. There must have been many witnesses. First there were the several fellow prisoners who were with Pearson when he was shot. Then there were many others who were in the house where the incident happened and possibly others nearby who might have heard the shots, there were all the persons in the arresting party who shot Pearson and those who saw his body in Allentown or elsewhere. Any one of these people could have left letters, a diary, or a memoir behind.

And of course there was Pearson's own family, who might have preserved their second-hand understanding of the event from hearsay or from what witnesses may have told them. And, that's actually what happened. In 1882, Allentown historian Charles Robbins Hutchinson wrote in one of his memorandum books that Joseph H. West told him how Pearson had been killed, based on the account that his father had told him. West's father explained that a tradition had come down through his family through a woman named Anna Stout, who had been visiting the Pearson family when Isaac's body had been brought back. He also said that his father's account, based on a local tradition, was consistent with his family's own recollections. Pearson, he said, was shot in Hightstown.

But the Hightstown angle still lacked corroboration. It came from only one source. The Woodward and Hageman and Helen West accounts both relied on Joseph H. West, who in turn depended on his father's account, which we have in the version written down by Hutchinson. To put full faith behind the notion that the killing took place in Hightstown meant finding another source completely independent of the West family tradition.

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HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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To educate, while preserving for
future generations, our people and
our community's history.

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Hightstown Murder

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That was where things stood two years ago, but this past spring, the smoking gun was turned up by John Fabiano, president of the Allentown-Upper Freehold Historical Society. During his researches in Allentown's role in the Revolution, Fabiano found the account of a Captain John Clark, written in 1819 and published much later—in 1896—in the pages of the *Pennsylvania Magazine for History and Biography*. Clark stated in a single clear sentence that he had led the party of men who at "Hidetown" (which was the way that Hightstown was often rendered back then) had killed the "noted" Pearson. That was it, an eyewitness account that bore no dependence upon the West tradition. Finding it meant that there truly were two independent sources confirming that Pearson was killed in Hightstown.

How did it happen?

Rodney's diary makes clear that Pearson's death was part of a military engagement that also involved surviving prisoners, and Clark's statement tells that the killing took place in Hightstown and confirms that prisoners were involved. But in addition to his diary, Rodney also confided the story in a letter to his brother, Caesar Rodney, the signer of the Declaration. It's evident that he was referring to Pearson, even though he doesn't identify him by name.

"They [the Continental troops] surrounded a house where there was six Tories; took three of them; one got off; and one who run and would not stop [i.e. Pearson], was shot dead. They gave him warning, first by calling, and at last shot two bullets over his head, but he still persisted; and the next two shot, one bullet went through his arm and one through his heart."

Rodney wrote this letter to his brother on December 30th, 1776, just one day after his diary entry, when his

recollection of what he saw and heard would have still been fresh. His notation of where the wounds were placed seems to indicate that he inspected the body when it reached Allentown, and he probably would have had an opportunity to do so.

What is remarkable in the West tradition is that it preserved the memory of rather precisely where in Hightstown the deed occurred. By Hutchinson's account of what Joseph H. West told him, "Reaching Hightstown, [Pearson] was pursued by a party of militia, and took refuge in the house until recently standing, formerly the residence of the Rev. John Seger." John Seger had been the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hightstown for nearly twenty years and afterward he had become one of Hightstown's earliest photographers. He lived in what was known as the old Ward homestead, which stood along the west side of South Main Street somewhere north of Ward Street and south of Fountain Square, in other words within the triangle formed by Ward, Mercer and South Main streets.

A hundred years before, the house had been the residence of Benjamin Ward (1731-1797), who also owned the tavern at the corner of Main and Stockton streets where the former Cunningham's Pharmacy building stands. Ward, who had been born in Perth Amboy (which became one of the most Loyalist towns in New Jersey) and who must have maintained many friendly contacts there, was evidently seen by other Hightstowners as a Tory sympathizer. Ward, we know, was a friend of the very well-connected James Parker of Perth Amboy, a quiet Tory who owned some land south of Hightstown. But his reputation may have had more to do with Pearson than with Parker.

The West tradition states that Pearson left home on a "fleet mare," a fast horse, which suggests that he was

traveling alone. His family felt he was headed for New Brunswick, by way of Allentown (he could not go by way of Trenton and Princeton, for obvious reasons), to give over a signed oath of allegiance to the British, in the hope that by doing so he would safeguard his property. Yet when his body was returned to Allentown, it was in the company of seven prisoners.

It may be that only when Pearson reached the Ward house that he met up with the others he was captured with. Those fellow inmates, according to Dwyer, included a Trenton merchant, a Philadelphia citizen, a British light infantryman, and Neddy Shippen, a son of the Pennsylvania Chief Justice. Later in the war, Shippen's sister Peggy married Benedict Arnold.

It was dangerous company for Pearson. Shippen had already gone to New Brunswick earlier in the month of December to join the British and had evidently acted as an enemy scout. That all, or at least part of the group, was at Ward's house is indicated by Rodney's statement in his letter to his brother that there were six Tories there. Rodney's account and the West tradition agree that Pearson was in flight from the American soldiers. He was headed, the West account says, out the back door of Ward's house to a cedar swamp across a field behind the house. There are no cedars and no swamp in that part of Hightstown today, but in the eighteenth century the stream known as Grape Brook (aka Grape Run) flowed lazily through low ground between what is now Mercer Street and Rogers Avenue. Land title records have confirmed that there was a cedar swamp in this area. Pearson was seeking safety and escape in the heavy cover of the cedars that existed approximately where the post office stands today. He was shot dead before he made it.

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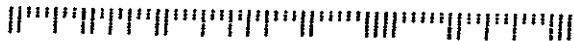
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