

"Out-of-Place" Gravestone Helps Recall Lost Piece of Local History

By Ann F. Diseroad

It looks like an ordinary mid-nineteenth century gravestone, about knee high, carved of the mediocre quality, white granular limestone frequently sold as marble prior to 1850. The stone is so badly worn as to be nearly unreadable.

WHAT IS IT DOING IN THE SOLDIERS' CIRCLE IN OLD ROSEMONT CEMETERY?

The first soldier honored with burial in the Soldiers Circle was Samuel Walter, interred Christmas Eve, 1861 after having been killed December 20 in the Battle of Drainsville, Virginia. Everyone else subsequently buried there was also either a soldier killed in the Civil War or a veteran of that war who died later. That is, everyone except for Henry Ohl who died 14 years before Rosemont Cemetery was founded.

Thereby hangs a tale. The final chapter of Henry Ohl's story was not written until nearly seventy years after his death.

But let's start at the beginning.

This Henry, originally Heinrich and one of many Henry Ohls, was born December 9, 1753 in Marlborough Township, Philadelphia County (now Montgomery County). He is said to be the son of Andreas Ohl and Eve Elizabeth Gucker Ohl. Heinrich married Margaret Dorothy Sittsman on January 16, 1776 in Old Goshenhoppen Reformed Church where he was a deacon. In November of that year his first child was born, named Eve Elizabeth after her grandmother.

Meanwhile, on August 8, 1776, with the ink on the Declaration of Independence barely dry, Heinrich volunteered in the company commanded by Captain Mathias Shively which had been raised in Marlborough Township. The company marched from there to the city of Philadelphia where they boarded a shallop (a large, heavy two-masted boat) and sailed up the Delaware River to Trenton. The company landed and marched first to Princeton, then on to New Brunswick and Amboy where Heinrich was stationed until discharged in October of the same year.

The following May, he re-enlisted and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the company of Captain Peter Richards. In September 1777 he marched with his company to Swedesford on the Schuylkill River. Heinrich was there only a few days before being sent to Goshenhoppen to raise recruits. He was successful in this endeavor. As he was

marching the new men down to Swedesford, they met George Washington's army coming from the Battle of Brandywine and accompanied them to a place called the Trappe. On October 3, 1777 the weary soldiers marched to Chestnut Hill and Germantown. After the defeat at Brandywine, the captain and lieutenant of Heinrich's company feigned sickness to avoid further fighting. Heinrich seized the opportunity to take command. He received immediate promotion and fought in the Battle of Germantown. After the battle, the company marched in General Potter's Brigade across the Schuylkill into Chester County. Heinrich was discharged with the company at Fox Chase at the end of November.

The following month, he re-enlisted again, now a First Lieutenant, this time in the company of Captain Andrew Reed. The men marched from Marlborough Township toward the City of Philadelphia and were joined along the way by the regiment commanded by Colonel Frederick Antes and the army under the command of Major General Armstrong. This was a dark time for the Revolutionaries as the British army lay in Philadelphia. Several times Heinrich marched with the colonial army in the direction of Germantown.

He stayed with the army until January 1778, leaving briefly but returning later in the month to march a company of men to the lower part of Bucks County to apprehend some Tories who, with a party of the British, had taken a drove of oxen. He continued in the service, marching the party of men through Bucks and Philadelphia Counties in order to keep the Tories in check, until about the middle of 1778. Heinrich remained in the service as a Lieutenant until May 1780 when his commission expired.

Around 1785 Heinrich moved to Lower Saucon Township in Northampton County. He appears to have arrived with 2 horses and one cow. By 1788 his assets had increased to 61 acres of land, 2 horses and 2 cattle. His tax on these holdings was 12 shillings and 6 pence. In Northampton County Heinrich's family continued to grow, and he was active in the Reformed Church where two of his children were baptized, Margaretha in 1786 and Michael in 1794.

About 1804 Heinrich and Margaret with their family moved to what is now Hemlock Township in Columbia County. Heinrich originally came to oversee the land of General John Hiester. The Ohls settled along with numerous other German families including the Steckers, Hellers, Girtons, Leidys, Reichards, Hartmans and others in and near the area then known as the *Liebenthal*, a valley created by the west branch of Hemlock Creek.

While little is known about the rest of Heinrich Ohl's life, what we can ascertain is fascinating. When he arrived in this area there was no local government, nor any organized churches, newspapers or schools. Hence there are very few records. We do know that by 1820 he was known as Henry. His name, as well as those of his sons Henry Jr., Michael and Andrew, appears in that year's census.

Tradition says that Henry and Margaret had a daughter Susan, probably their last child, who was born around the time they arrived here. The 1820 census supports this

supposition with one of the two children in the household being a female age 10 to 16. Susan is believed to have been the second wife of Esau Girton and the mother of his three youngest children. Henry Ohl Senior and his ten or more children were the ancestors of many of today's Columbia County residents as well as people in many other states.

One thing is for certain: Heinrich Ohl was a leader in his new community. He served on the committee in 1818 to amend the Articles of Agreement for St. Paul's Union Lutheran and Reformed Church in Bloomsburg, one of the earliest churches in the County, founded in 1808, and the second to be built in Bloomsburg. Later he served on a church committee convened to conduct an investigation regarding a deacon who was said to be incompetent. In the same church, he and Margaret were sponsors at the baptisms of several of their grandchildren. Heinrich also served as an early teacher of one of the first schools established in Hemlock Township.

On November 7, 1832, long after Heinrich had become Henry and his wife Margaret had been deceased for a decade, laid to rest in the burial ground of the church in which he was active, he appeared before the Court of Common Pleas of Columbia County to apply for a pension for his Revolutionary War service. On February 19, 1833 he was granted the sum of \$149.19 annually.

Henry Ohl died March 20, 1840, aged 86 years, 3 months & 11 days, at the home of one of his children near Buckhorn. He too was buried in the churchyard of the union church, a union which would dissolve within a few years.

Although the Lutheran and Reformed congregations each built their own churches in the early 1850s, around the same time (1854) that Rosemont Cemetery was founded, the old union church burial ground continued to be used by members of both congregations for a number of years. By the turn of the 20th century, however, the graveyard was an eyesore, covered with poison ivy and sumac and used as a rendezvous place for unsavory characters. Bones were sometimes exposed and carried off by dogs as the soil eroded away on the hilly site. Negotiations to move the bodies buried there were periodically begun, but for some reason the two churches, the Town of Bloomsburg and the cemetery company were not able to all reach an agreement until the land was needed for a new high school in 1925. Meanwhile many of the families who had relatives buried there removed their family members' remains to family plots in Rosemont and other cemeteries.

It was during this period of neglect and failed negotiations, in April 1908, that some descendants of Henry Ohl rescued his body and gravestone from the oblivion of the overgrown old churchyard and had them put in a place of honor. H. V. (Heister Vanderslice) White, who was responsible for the removal from the old union graveyard to Rosemont, was a descendent of the General Heister who brought Henry Ohl to this area. His wife Clara Elizabeth Aikman was the great-granddaughter of Henry himself.

At the time of the removal, Henry's remains sparked a great deal of interest. A newspaper article reports:

Superintendent Ringrose took a great deal of care in moving the body which was remarkably well preserved. His hair was red and the color was unchanged. His skull and most of the bones of his body were in exceptionally good condition.

Attesting to the special care taken with Henry is the fact that his removal cost \$7 compared to only \$5 each for three other removals made at the same time.

The first decade of the twentieth century was a period of great interest in local Revolutionary War soldiers. The same day that Henry Ohl's remains were moved, the Ft. McClure Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution celebrated its third birthday with great fanfare. We may never know if the two events were connected or coincidence, but simply that they occurred at the same time seems significant.

Only a handful of graves of local Revolutionary War patriots are known. Not only were many of the early Columbia County burials moved, but only a small percentage of the people who died prior to the 1820s ever had any gravestones at all. Nearly all of the few stones which do survive from that period are simply pieces of fieldstone with no markings to indicate who is buried beneath while most of the rest are clearly homemade. Most professionally carved gravestones in Columbia County with dates prior to 1820 were placed years after the death had actually occurred. Even the location of the grave of James McClure, one of Columbia County's earliest and most famous settlers whose house became the fort for which the local DAR chapter is named, is unknown.

Columbia County census records show very few people over the age of 45 living here in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Thus a Revolutionary War veteran who lived long enough to get a professionally carved gravestone was rare indeed, making the Henry Ohl marker a significant artifact.

There are only 35 known Revolutionary War veteran graves in all of Columbia County. Henry Ohl's grave is the only one in Old Rosemont. It is fitting that in 2004, the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Henry Ohl in Columbia County, his gravestone should no longer be a mystery but now be recognized as the treasure it is.

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Author's Note: I first noticed Henry Ohl's gravestone in the Soldiers Circle several years ago. It looked out of place among all the official Civil War stones, almost as if it had been put there by mistake. It didn't have a flag, and there was nothing in the inscription to indicate that Henry Ohl was a veteran of any war. The carving was so worn that it was

impossible to tell for sure whether he had died in 1810 or 1840 although the type of stone made 1840 the more likely date.

It was quite by accident that I found the newspaper clipping describing the removal of Henry Ohl's body to the Soldiers Circle. A photocopy of the clipping was in the Ohl genealogy folder at the Historical Society, sent to us by a descendant living in Tennessee. The clipping was undated and there was no indication of the newspaper from which it had come. Typography and headline style suggested the article was from *The Morning Press* and research into the Rosemont Cemetery records indicated that it should have been published April 10, 1908. When I searched the microfilm for that date, however, the article was not to be found. Further searching revealed that prior to microfilming, the outside half of the sheet containing pages 3 and 4 of the April 9 issue had been torn off and lost. I am convinced that is where and when the article was published.

The account of Henry Ohl's Revolutionary War activities comes primarily from a typewritten transcription of Henry's testimony before the Court of Common Pleas when he applied for a pension some 45 years after the war.

I am still searching for documentation of the birth and marriage of Henry's daughter Susan. If any readers are aware of the existence of any official records about Susan, I would appreciate hearing from them. I may be reached through the Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society.