Archives

November 2024

Wilkinsburg Historical Society Newsletter
Volume 30, issue 10

Major General John Wilkins, Jr.
(December 22, 1761 -April 20,1816)
(Picture from the Army Quartermaster Foundation)

The American Revolutionary War, also known as the American War of Independence, was an armed conflict that was part of the American Revolution, in which the American Patriot forces organized as the Continental Army and commanded by George Washington defeated the British Army. It began April 19, 1775 and ended November 3, 1783.

John Wilkins Jr. enlisted with the 4th Pennsylvania Regiment in 1777, while still a teenager. and was given the position of Surgeon's Mate. He served throughout the war. After the war, he became a merchant and contractor in Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg. In 1793 he then was appointed by Governor Thomas Mifflin to be Brigadier General of the Allegheny County Militia, where he was a part of Pennsylvania's response in the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion. In June of 1796, President George Washington appointed Wilkins to be Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army, a position he would hold until it was abolished by Congress in March of 1802.

After leaving the Army, Wilkins returned to his business interests in Pennsylvania, including serving as President of the Pittsburgh branch of the Bank of Pennsylvania.

John Wilkins Jr. was the eldest son and namesake of Captain John Wilkins Sr. (Born June 1, 1733, died December 11,1809). John Wilkins Sr. was married twice and had eleven children with each of his wives. John Wilkins, Sr. was a Revolutionary War Continental Army Captain in George Washington's Army. George Washington was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army on June 15, 1775 by the Second Continental Congress. He participated in the 1777 Battles of Brandywine and Germantown. Captain John Wilkins spent the winter of 1777 with George Washington at Valley Forge. Captain Wilkins became a prominent Pittsburgh legislator, pioneer, and County Court Judge. He died in 1809 and was interred in Pittsburgh's Presbyterian Burying Ground on 6th Street in downtown Pittsburgh. Later, in 1882 his remains and those of his son John Jr. were removed and re-interred in Homewood Cemetery. Another son of Captain John Wilkins Sr. was William Wilkins, born December 20,1779 and died June 23, 1865: William Wilkins was a U.S. Senator, 1834; Minister to Russia, 1835; Congressman 1843-44; Secretary of War, 1844-45; Judge of the United States District Court for Western Pennsylvania; first president of the Bank of Pittsburgh. William's residential estate, Homewood, included 650 acres and was in the eastern part of Pittsburgh. After his death some of the acreage became Homewood Cemetery with the monumental Wilkins mausoleum being the first to be built on the late William Wilkins property.

Dunning McNair (1762-1825) also served in the Revolutionary War and became a close friend of John Wilkins, Jr. who was just six months older than Dunning. There was rapid expansion of land sale and development in the decades following the Revolutionary War. Dunning McNair was an agent of the Pennsylvania Population Company in Pittsburgh and Erie. The company was backed by eastern financial interests. From 1792 to 1812, the company purchased frontier lands from the government, leased them to farmers for development, and then resold the lands at a higher price. By 1789 McNair purchased 266 acres of land in the area seven miles from the point in Pittsburgh later to become Wilkinsburg(h).
In 1790 Dunning McNair laid out a street plan in a grid design with the primary streets being Main (later Penn Avenue), Wallace Avenue, North Avenue, Ross Avenue and South Avenue. Roads which ran parallel to Main were designated as "Avenues", whereas those running perpendicular to Main were designated as "Streets". The primary streets were Wood Street, Hay Street, Center Street, Coal Street, Mill Street and Water Street, (later renamed Swissvale Avenue.) Initially Dunning McNair named his newly created village "McNairstown".

McNair married in April 1786 and built a log home for himself and his wife Ann Stewart McNair on Main at Coal Street and named it "Crow's Nest". After that home subsequently burned down, McNair built a new stone home near Hay Street and named it Dumpling Hall. They had seven children and named their youngest child after his close friend John Wilkins. The young son was named John Wilkins Washington McNair, born February 22,1809, died 1836. The middle name Washington was added to his name because of his birth date.
As McNair was busy in the Pennsylvania legislature, there were land plot disputes regarding boundaries for the frontier counties. He was not meticulous in surveying the lands for accurate borders. Titles for the properties weren't clear and prospective owners were increasingly reluctant to purchase plots in McNairstown due to unclear titles.

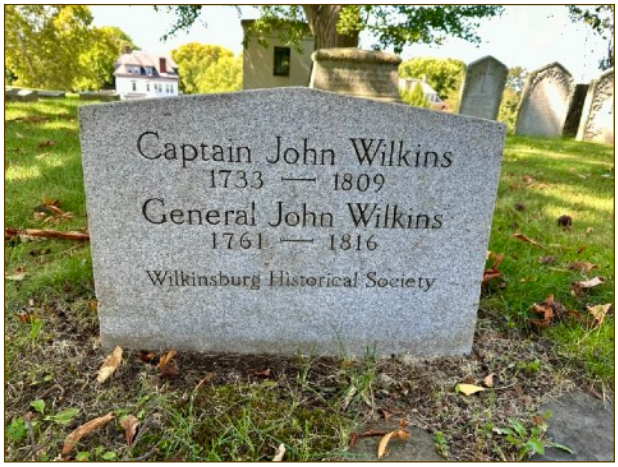
Sometime prior to 1812 McNair renamed his village "**Wilkinsburg**" and used that name in all documents relating to the village. Due to the close friendship of Dunning McNair with General John Wilkins, the naming of his youngest son after John Wilkins in 1809, it is believed that by 1812 the village was definitely named for **General John Wilkins**. On September 15, 1812 McNair sold two lots, Nos. 27 and 28 General Plan, in Wilkinsburg to Patrick Green, (1764-1830). Green was also a veteran of the Revolutionary War.

John's brother William, eighteen years younger than John, studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1801. He was involved as a "second" in Pittsburgh's last duel where Tarleton Bates was shot and killed January 8, 1806. Although William did not participate in the duel, he did not stop it. Afterwards, he moved to Kentucky during 1806 and 1807 to wait for the furor over Bates' death to subside. He returned in 1808 and worked to clear his reputation. By 1820 William was president of the Bank of Pittsburgh, president of Pittsburgh City Council, 1819 PA State House of Representatives, PA Court of Common Pleas, US Minister to Russia, Secretary of War 1844, PA State Senate 1855-57, and other high positions in Pittsburgh. Due to his extensive resume, in November 1821 when Wilkins Township was established, it was named for William Wilkins who served in both houses of Congress and as U.S. Secretary of War.

Sources include: Annals of Old Wilkinsburg and Vicinity, PA Senate Library library.pasen.gov, Find-A-Grave.com, The Pittsburgh Post Sunday June 4, 1916, ancestors.familysearch.org: Wilkinsburg Public Library files, Pennsylvania Society Sons of the American Revolution yearbook 1903 Francis Heitman Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army 1914, quartermaster.army.mil Pennsylvania Archives Executive Minutes 1790-1817,1907, Images of America-Wilkinsburg, 2007.

Presbyterian Burial Ground and Homewood Cemetery, RIP for the Wilkins family

First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, on 6th Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh is the fourth iteration of this church. Initially it was a log structure, built in 1773. The cemetery was Pittsburgh's first burying ground, eventually having over 4000 graves. When the church expanded, many graves were removed along with their tomb slab.



This granite marker placed by the Wilkinsburg Historical Society identifies the location of the tombs of Captain John Wilkins and his son General John Wilkins in the Wilkins plot of Homewood Cemetery. Their graves were removed from the Presbyterian burial ground and re-interred here April,1882.

Pressed-in-concrete words inscribed in General John Wilkins 1816 tomb have eroded over the past 208 years. The surface has delaminated and flaked off. Some words ARE readable: pure integrity, active beneficence, dauntless spirit, generous

William Wilkins, General John Wilkins' younger brother, died in 1865 and was buried in the Allegheny Cemetery. In 1878, 178 acres of Wilkins' estate became Homewood Cemetery, where Wilkins mausoleum was built. He was re-interred in January, 1881.

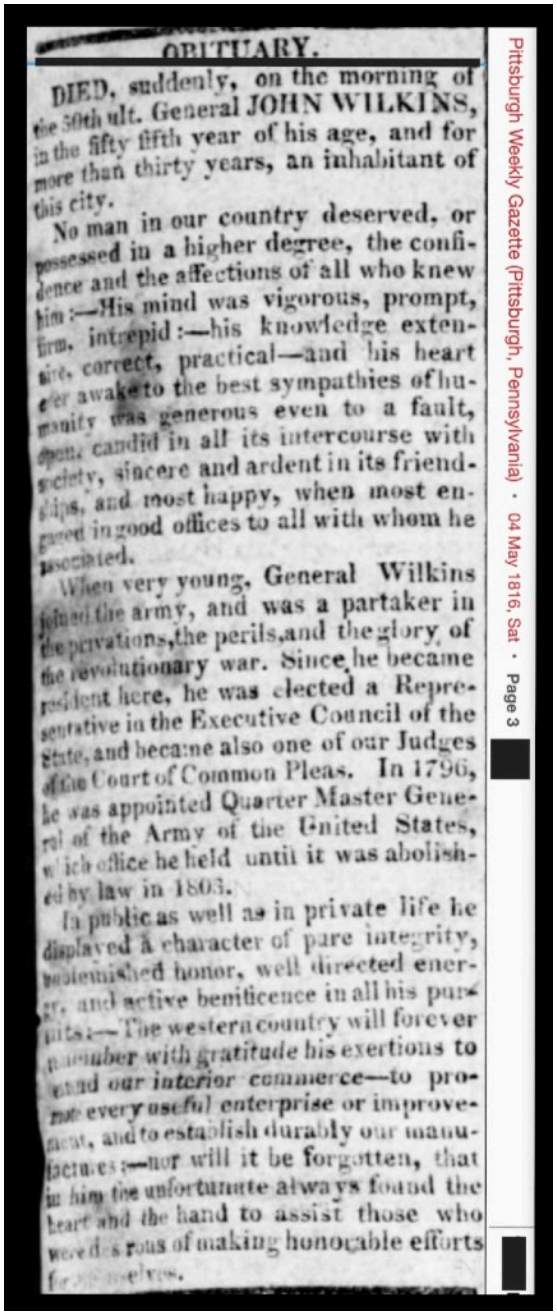
The obituary for **John Wilkins, Jr.** was placed in the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* on **May 4, 1816**. The newspaper copy is difficult to read, so it has been transcribed here. It is interesting to note that no family members are mentioned, but many of Wilkins' personal virtues are extolled.
Although many of the words on General John Wilkins original 1816 tomb slab have eroded and flaked off, some of the existing words mirror those in this obituary. John Wilkins, Jr. was widely regarded as truly honorable, virtuous and trustworthy.
Wilkinsburg can be proud that the Borough is named after this man, John Wilkins, Jr.

OBITUARY
Died, suddenly, on the morning of the 20th ult General John Wilkins, in the 55th year of his age, and for more than thirty years, an inhabitant of this city.

No man in our country deserved, or possessed in a higher degree, the confidence and the affections of all who knew him: -his mind was vigorous, prompt, firm, intrepid: -his knowledge extensive, correct, practical—and his heart ever awake to the best sympathies of humanity was generous even to a fault, open, candid in all its intercourse with society, sincere and ardent in its friendships, and most happy, when most engaged in good offices to all with whom he associated.

When very young, General Wilkins joined the army, and was a partaker in the privations, the perils, and the glory of the revolutionary war. Since he became a resident here, he was elected a Representative in the Executive Council of the state, and became also one of our Judges of the Court of Common Pleas. In 1796, he was appointed Quarter Master General of the Army of the United States, which office he held until it was abolished by law in 1803.

In public as well as in private life he displayed a character of pure integrity, unblemished honor, well directed energy, and active beneficence in all his pursuits: -The western country will forever remember with gratitude his exertions to extend our interior commerce—to promote every useful enterprise or improvement, and to establish durably our manufacturers: —nor will it be forgotten, that in him the unfortunate always found the heart and the hand to assist those who were desirous of making honorable efforts for themselves.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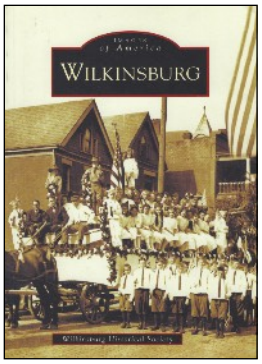
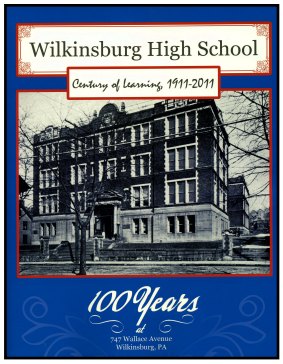
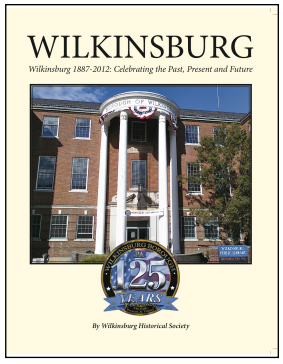
Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) · 04 May 1816, Sat · Page 3







These are the three books that the **Wilkinsburg Historical Society** wrote and published during the past twelve years. They help to promote and preserve the history of Wilkinsburg and raise funds for the various projects of the Society. All three books are still available to purchase from the Society. Another way to support the activities of the Historical Society.

On the far left is ***"Images of America - Wilkinsburg"***, a 128 page soft-bound book printed by the Arcadia Publishing Company. It includes over 220 black and white photos depicting the history of our town from the early land patents in the late 1700s up to the 75th celebration of Wilkinsburg in 1962. The book is available from the Wilkinsburg Historical Society for $20.00, plus $3.00 for shipping.

The middle book above is ***"Wilkinsburg High School - Century of Learning 1911-2011"***. This book chronicles the history of the local high school from its early start in the late 1880s, the creation of the magnificent structure in 1910, and each decade since with highlights of the events that were important in the lives of the students and the Wilkinsburg community. For over 100 years the Wilkinsburg High School served the Borough of Wilkinsburg students and this book has several hundred photos showing much of this important history. This *Century of Learning* book is available from the Wilkinsburg Historical Society for $15.00, plus $3.00 for shipping.

The book on the far right is ***"Wilkinsburg - 1887-2012, Celebrating the Past, Present and Future"***. This book was produced by the Historical Society in 2012 to recognize the 125th anniversary of Wilkinsburg's incorporation as a Borough. This soft-bound book has 196 pages and includes chapters on the history of Wilkinsburg, the celebrations from the past, information about Wilkinsburg's government, and all the events that occurred during the 125th celebration. There are several chapters about the clubs and organizations in Wilkinsburg as well as the churches and worship centers in the Borough. The "future of Wilkinsburg" section recognizes advertisers and sponsors who helped to fund the creation and printing of the book. This book, originally $15.00, is now available for $10.00, plus $3.00 for shipping.

Make check or money order payable to: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society**
Orders can be mailed to: Wilkinsburg Historical Society, P.O.Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235

Images of America - Wilkinsburg ($20.00 + $3.00) = $23.00 Quantity____ Total _____

Century of Learning 1911-2011 ($15.00 + $3.00) = $18.00 Quantity____ Total _____

Wilkinsburg 1887-2012 ($10.00 + $3.00) = $13.00 Quantity____ Total_____

Name_____Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip _____

the Wilkinsburg Sun

inside

Made in Wilkinsburg, New Sculpture Dedicated at Veteran Housing

WILKINSBURG GIVES THANKS, November 21—See page 7

Don't miss out on **The Wilkinsburg Sun**, a free monthly community newsletter published by the volunteer Wilkinsburg Community Newsletter Board, with the support of the Wilkinsburg Borough, the Wilkinsburg School District, the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce and the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation.
The Sun accepts submitted articles provided they are related to Wilkinsburg and are civic-minded.
https://wilkinsburgsun.wordpress.com

Sign up to receive The Sun by email at:
http://eepurl.com/v0iBP and friend The Sun on Facebook.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society has a website, to share more information about the history of Wilkinsburg. wilkinsburghistory.wordpress.com
Mailing address: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society, P.O. Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235**

The "Archives" Historical Society newsletter is published monthly, March through November.

We do not usually publish the Archives during the three Winter months of December, January and February.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society yearly dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society are:
$20.00 INDIVIDUAL Member, $35.00 FAMILY Membership
$10.00 STUDENT or ASSOCIATE Members Please keep your membership dues up to date.
Contributions are needed for "Lights for Lincoln", to get improved lighting for the Lincoln Plaza area. Abraham Lincoln stands in the dark after sun-down. Your donation can help us illuminate this outstanding area overlooking the Lincoln Highway.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society - Membership application
Help promote the valuable history of Wilkinsburg.

Name _____
Address _____
City, State, Zip _____
Home Phone _____ Cell Phone _____
E-mail address _____

( ) $20 Individual membership
( ) $35 Family membership
( ) $10 Student or associate membership
( ) $_____ Additional donation

Please make check payable to: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society**
PO Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235

Anytime is a good time to pay your dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society. We have many preservation projects going on, and providing displays for Wilkinsburg events. Many thanks to those of you who have already sent in your membership dues. Please use the address on the form, our PO box.