James Scott Wead III
2025-07-24

<h1>From Ulster to Rocky Spring: The Story of John Wead</h1>

Rocky Spring Presbyterian Church (built 1794) stands on land that John Wead helped settle in colonial Pennsylvania. John Wead was buried in the church's graveyard in January 1790, a testament to the lasting roots he planted on the frontier. Born around 1710 in County Cavan, Ireland, John was part of the great Scots-Irish Presbyterian migration that carried industrious settlers from Ulster to the American colonies. He arrived in Pennsylvania in the mid-18th century seeking opportunity and religious freedom, and soon made his home on the rugged frontier north of Chambersburg. There, amid dense forests and rolling foothills, he and his family carved out a farm near a spring known locally as "Rocky Spring," laying the foundation for a new community.

<h2>Scots-Irish Roots and a New Life in Pennsylvania</h2>

John Wead's early years in Ireland instilled in him the resilience and faith of the Scots-Irish. These were Presbyterian families of Scottish descent who had resettled in Ulster (northern Ireland) and later emigrated across the Atlantic. Like many such families facing economic hardships and seeking religious tolerance, John ventured to Pennsylvania, which welcomed Presbyterian immigrants. By the 1750s, he had settled in Letterkenny Township in what was then Cumberland County (now Franklin County). This area—later the site of Rocky Spring Church—was at the very edge of colonial settlement. Life on the Pennsylvania frontier was demanding and often perilous. Colonists like John cleared timber, built log cabins, and tilled new fields, all while under threat of attacks during the turbulent French and Indian War. Neighbors banded together into militia for mutual protection, often plowing their fields with a musket at hand. In this environment, John Wead emerged as a determined homesteader and a respected member of the fledgling frontier community.

<h2>Frontier Service and a Father's Will</h2>

When the French and Indian War reached Pennsylvania (1754–1763), John Wead answered the call to defend his home. In 1758 he served in the Pennsylvania Provincial Troops, joining other local frontiersmen to guard the settlements of the Cumberland Valley from French-allied Native American raids. These years of warfare were brutal—settlers' homesteads were burned and families were forced to take refuge in forts or flee eastward. John's service in 1758–59 helped protect the Letterkenny settlers, though it came at personal cost. (Indeed, records show that as late as 1760 he was still owed back pay for his military duties.) Perhaps with the uncertainties of war in mind, John drafted his first will in 1760 to ensure his family and property would be cared for should anything happen to him.

John Wead's 1760 will is a revealing document that intertwines duty and legacy. In it, he bequeathed his "plantation" – the tract of frontier land and farm he had built near Rocky Spring – to his only son, Ebenezer Wead, who was then a teenager. By passing the homestead to Ebenezer, John ensured that the land would remain in family hands and continue to be developed. He also named his three daughters, Fanny (Wead) Boyd, Elizabeth, and Mary, leaving each of them a token inheritance of money or goods as was customary. Notably, the will makes a kind mention of the children of his "last wife," granting them a small sum – an indication that John had remarried at some point and cared for step-children from his wife's previous marriage. In a final touch that speaks to John's character, he directed that his **arms** (his musket and rifle) remain within the family. In the dangerous world of the 1760s frontier, a firearm was a vital asset, and John's wish to keep his weapons in family hands underscored his belief in preparedness and the defense of home and kin. This blend of providing land to his heir, remembrance of all children (by blood or marriage), and emphasizing family duty and protection captures the essence of John Wead's values.

<h2>Homestead Legacy: From Warrant to Community</h2>

Only a few years later, John's foresight in securing the family land bore fruit. In May of 1765, his son Ebenezer – just seventeen at the time – formally obtained a proprietary land warrant for the Wead homestead in Letterkenny Township. The warrant, issued by John Penn (proprietor of Pennsylvania), legalized a tract of approximately 479 acres that **John Wead had already cleared and improved**. In frontier practice, early settlers often squatted on and improved land before getting legal title, and John had done exactly that at Rocky Spring. The 1765 land patent explicitly notes that it was to cover "an improvement made by John Waid (Wead), the father of said Ebenezer, who by his will devised the same to him." In other words, the younger Wead was claiming his inheritance. The tract encompassed rich bottomland around Rocky Spring Run and would soon neighbor the Rocky Spring Presbyterian meeting house. By solidifying ownership of nearly 480 acres for his family, John transformed his personal toil into a lasting legacy. The Wead plantation became one of the anchor properties in Letterkenny, its boundaries abutting those of fellow pioneers like the Culbertsons, Boyds, Breckenridges and others mentioned in the warrant. Over time, a church would rise nearby and the area grew into a small but tight-knit Scots-Irish farming community. John Wead's role in establishing this homestead demonstrated not only his industry but also a kind of frontier leadership – he provided stability and continuity, literally planting roots that would nourish future generations.

<h2>Later Years, Faith, and Family</h2>

John Wead lived to see the American colonies fight for and win their independence. Through the 1770s and into the 1780s, he remained in Letterkenny, an elder figure in his community as the new nation was born. By 1783, tax records still listed John Wead as a landowner in Letterkenny Township. Despite being in his seventies, he was noted as having at least one servant in his household, an indicator that his farm was

productive enough to require hired or bound help. He had likely slowed down physically by then, but his presence loomed large – a patriarch watching over the land he first claimed decades earlier. John's Presbyterian faith, always a central pillar of his life, continued strong in his old age. Rocky Spring's congregation was formally organized around 1780, and it's easy to imagine John worshipping in the outdoors or simple log meeting house with his well-worn Bible in hand. (When an inventory of his estate was later made, it included numerous religious books – among them a Presbyterian **Confession of Faith**, a commentary on scripture, and several Bibles – speaking to his devotion.)

As he neared eighty, John prepared to settle his affairs one last time. In 1789, he wrote a new will to replace the old one from nearly 30 years before. Much had changed since 1760: his daughters were grown, his son Ebenezer was established on his own land, and John had remarried in his later years. His second wife, Janet (Gabby) Wead, was now his companion and caregiver. In this final will of 1789, John made sure Janet would be provided for – he left to "my beloved wife Janet" a generous share of his personal estate, from household goods to livestock, to secure her welfare. He also named a grandson, John McConnell, reflecting his pride in the next generation. In a poignant nod to the family he had left behind in Ireland so many years ago, John included his brother, William Wead of Bailieborough in County Cavan, as a beneficiary. William was to receive a portion of John's estate, showing that despite decades and an ocean apart, the bonds of kinship endured. This transatlantic bequest speaks volumes about John's character: he never forgot where he came from. The witnesses to John's 1789 will were three neighbors – James Mitchell, Nathaniel Mitchell, and Christian Grove – the same local men who had proven themselves trustworthy over the years. (In fact, one of them had even witnessed John's first will in 1760.) The continuity of having close friends and fellow churchmen involved in both of his wills underscores the close-knit nature of the Rocky Spring community that John helped create.

John Wead died in January 1790, around 80 years of age, closing a remarkable chapter of early American pioneer life. He was laid to rest in the Rocky Spring Presbyterian Church cemetery, the very ground he had helped settle. His grave joined those of other frontier families beneath the Pennsylvania soil, in a burying ground that still bears 18th-century stones. Though he likely died before the present brick church was built in 1794, John's spirit was very much present in the congregation's history – a founding patriarch whose life of faith and perseverance set an example for all who followed.

<h2>From Pennsylvania to the Western Frontier: John Wead's Lasting Legacy</h2>

John Wead's legacy lived on not only in Pennsylvania but also far beyond. The homestead he established at Rocky Spring stayed in family hands for some years, but like many Americans after the Revolution, his children and grandchildren soon caught **"western fever."** Within a decade of John's passing, the next generation of Weads set out in search of new frontiers. His son Ebenezer Wead and his family left Pennsylvania in the 1790s and headed first to the Kentucky frontier, settling near Lexington for a time. There, Ebenezer's sons learned trades, started families of their own, and prepared for the next journey. By 1798, the Weads joined the great migration across the Ohio River into the Northwest Territory. They moved into the wilderness of southwestern Ohio, claiming land in Greene and Montgomery counties (not far from the newly founded town of Dayton). On that raw frontier, John Wead's descendants once again built farms from scratch, hewed churches out of the wilderness, and even petitioned the government for protection during Indian unrest in the 1790s. Ebenezer Wead lived until 1830, his life spanning from the colonial era through the formation of the United States and into the era of Ohio statehood.

The westward movement of John’s progeny meant that the values he lived by – devout faith, attachment to land, hard work, and readiness to serve – were carried into the developing American heartland. The musket that John had insisted remain with the family may well have traveled in a wagon across the Appalachians, a symbol of both protection and patriotism. His children and grandchildren exemplified the restless but optimistic spirit of the young nation, pushing ever westward but always mindful of the sacrifices and lessons of those before them. Today, the story of John Wead is remembered as a vivid example of the Scots-Irish American experience. It is a story of a man who crossed an ocean, defended his home in a new land, and laid down roots so deep that his family tree would spread across a continent. From the hills of Ulster to the fields of Pennsylvania and onward to the frontiers of Ohio and Kentucky, John Wead’s life journey reflects the saga of early America – a legacy of migration, resilience, faith, and frontier leadership that continues to inspire his descendants' heritage.
