

BIOGRAPHY OF
GEORGE W. SEARCH
1816-1905

EARLY PIONEER FAMILY OF THE WYOMING VALLEY

The Search Family bloodline has deep veins running through the history of Shickshinny and surrounding communities and has produced prominent, influential citizens for many generations. The members of this industrious family realized their potential during the early stages in their lives, being ambitious and motivated. The family had an inner drive to excel and did so with grace and dignity.

This biography will cover the lifespan of George W. Search. However, one cannot speak of George W. Search without speaking of his brother, Lot Search; their lives were closely intertwined from adolescence to their golden years. They entered into every business venture together. The two brothers accomplished more in their lifetimes than one could dream of in this time period. From simple farmers to our founding forefathers, these men were born with vision and drive. One of their greatest accomplishments, with the aid of two other business partners, was the purchase a 265-acre farm and turning it into a thriving community. This strong and thriving community was built upon morals and high standards. One example of these values can be noted by their purchase and donation of land for the purpose of providing the community with a church and a school.

George W. Search was born in Union Township, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania on December 06, 1816, the son of Lot and Christiana Fink Search. He was educated in common schools of the area and, as a young adult became a teacher. Later he clerked in a general store, and, in 1842, he embarked in general merchandising near Shickshinny, continuing until 1850. It was during this time that he married Ann Eliza Nicely, daughter of John R. and Polly Stuckey Nicely of Salem Township, in May of 1847.

In 1847, George W. Search first became involved in the real estate business, with siblings Lot, Jr., Thomas, Ellen, Christiana, and Elizabeth Search, they purchased 44 acres from John and Sally Hess of Plymouth. This is the first deed recorded involving George W. Search and marked the beginning of his real estate involvement in this area.

During their youth, George and his brother Lot clerked for various stores in the area. As clerks, they applied themselves diligently, learning every aspect of running a mercantile operation. That knowledge, in turn, helped them to later operate their own successful and prosperous businesses. Around 1850, the two brothers opened a General Store and Post Office on Union Street, an area commonly referred to as the "Narrows." The brothers conducted this business for 12 years, after which Lot operated it alone for eight more years. This initial business venture between the Search Brothers established a business relationship that would carry through the remainder of their lives.

In 1851, George was appointed superintendent of the Pennsylvania Canal, between Northumberland and Lackawanna, and he held this position for nine years. During this time, he continued to buy and sell real estate in the Union Township area, including the land for the railroad station near the canal waterway.

Shickshinny Mills:

In 1858, the Search brothers built and operated a series of mills, comprising of a saw mill, a flour mill, a plaster mill and a brickyard. The deed recorded in book 102, page 556, February 1866, noted the transfer of land from N.B. Crary to George W. Search et al.. The mill property, containing eighteen acres stretched from Main Street, along Vine Street towards the Furnace Dam, and then following both the West Branch and North Branch of Shickshinny Creek. The mills, known as the G.W. & L. Mills, were also commonly called Shickshinny Mills or Search's Mills and utilized four different runs of stone, which were quarried nearby while plaster for the mill was shipped in from Nova Scotia. Many of the mills' products were sold in the brothers' local mercantile store; they also did a thriving business shipping mill product to distant points, especially by canal boat. Their buckwheat flour was famous worldwide and the mills continued successful operations for a number of years, employing many local men.

Purchase of Shickshinny Borough:

The original proprietor of Shickshinny, including the entire valley reaching back to the hills, was Ralph Austin, the first permanent settler, arriving from Connecticut in 1782. His remains rest on the hill overlooking the town. It is said that a family named Crossley initially accompanied Austin but they returned to Connecticut with him after the Wyoming massacre. Austin and his family returned as soon as it was safe to do so, rebuilt their log house, and established a small farm. In addition to farming, Austin was known to take in travelers and strangers and thus became a hotelkeeper. The Yankee-Pennamite wars were fought over conflicting claims to the area between Connecticut settlers and those who had received grants from the family of William Penn. As a result of the final settlement of the claims by Congress in 1808, Ralph Austin had lost his lands. Matthias Hollenback came into possession of the Austin lands under the Pennsylvania claim and, by descent; it became the property of his daughter, Sara (Mrs. Chester) Butler.

On the nineteenth day of February 1858, the land which encompasses all of what we know today as Shickshinny, 265 acres, was sold by the legal representatives of Sarah Butler to George W. Search, Lot Search, Nathan Garrison, and N.B. Crary, who plotted, planned, and laid out the Village of Shickshinny; Crary and Garrison taking possession of the land south of Shickshinny Creek, and the Search brothers taking possession of the land North of the Creek. Nathan Garrison died in 1862, shortly after this transaction, his interest falling to his heirs. On February 8th, 1866, George Search along with his brother Lot, purchased the remaining interest left by their former partner, Nathan Garrison, for any undivided land for which no deed had been written.

The four proprietors of Shickshinny created a strong core and infrastructure upon which the town would flourish for many years. The planning and excellent management provided an excellent environment for residential growth and flourishing industry. This village became a model for the county.

The 265 acres of land was divided into lots which were narrow and long, these lot boundaries would be a determining factor of the early architecture in Shickshinny, Pennsylvania. The construction of homes and businesses followed the lot dimensions laid out by the founding fathers of the town with the majority of the homes and businesses having similar architectural characteristics, being long and narrow, with a front gabled roof.

George Search had great influence in the planning and layout of the town as can be seen by his provision of land to build churches, schools and the public water system. Every aspect was considered during the development of this community, the residential areas of the town surrounded the business and industrial center. Heavy industry was located adjacent to Shickshinny Creek for its power and water. The business section of the community of Shickshinny was strategically located on its main thoroughfares, Main and Union Streets, so that both residents and visitors from afar would be required to travel through this business center upon entering or leaving the town. George was very successful in integrating the local industry with the local mercantile business. Products from the mills and factories were not only sold locally in the towns businesses, but exported worldwide via the canal waterway.

It was due to the great influence and encouragement of the Search Brothers that the growing village was incorporated into a borough. Shickshinny was formed from Union and Salem Townships, Union Township having been carved from Huntington Township in 1813. Three-fifths of the town's land came from Union Township and the remainder was taken from Salem Township. The petition for the incorporation of the Borough of Shickshinny was filed on August 1, 1861, signed by forty-eight prominent and influential citizens and on November 30, 1861, Shickshinny was incorporated as a borough. Shickshinny's first officers were: Burgess: Jesse P. Enke; Council: George W. Search. B.D. Boons, John F. Nicely, and Tom Davenport; Secretary: George W. Search; Supervisor: Samuel Sleppy.

Purchase of Property for Homestead:

It was during the division of this land into lots that George W. Search decided upon lots 215 and 216 to build his home circa 1859. It was a choice location uniquely situated on 3 streets; Butler, Furnace and South Main Streets. The home was set in Masonic due form fashion, the main entrance facing east. This location provided him an excellent view of the town and river while keeping the home protected from the frequent flooding of the Susquehanna River. The recording of the deed for lots 215 and 216 did not occur until April 8, 1861, as was customary for the time.

George W. Search was active in church, fraternal and community enterprises, as well as, Justice of the Peace, a Trustee for the Methodist Protestant Church, an Elder of the Presbyterian Church, and a member of the Masonic Lodge.

The Presbyterian and Protestant Methodist Church:

On July 6, 1861, George W. Search along with A.C. Nicely, Peter Masters, Lot Search, and Henry Baer, purchased land situated at the end of Furnace Street for the purpose of building and erecting a church for the Presbyterian and Protestant Methodist Societies. This was recorded in deed book 84, page 461 at the Luzerne County Recorder of Deeds Office (James S. Ferguson to A.C. Nicely et al.) As the first church established within Shickshinny Borough, it became known as the “Mother Church.”

Establishment of Sylvania Lodge No. 354 F & AM:

Brother G.W. Search was the first secretary of the Sylvania Lodge No. 354 F & AM. He personally recorded the minutes of a Grand Lodge meeting; dated June 29, 1865, during which time the Charter for Sylvania Lodge No. 354 was issued. At a second meeting held that same day he was admitted as a member of Sylvania Lodge No. 354. He served as the Secretary for the Lodge during its first year and then was elected and served as Treasurer of the Lodge for nine years.

Public School System:

For the purpose of providing a public school, on July 22nd, 1873, the Search Brothers, sold for ten dollars a piece of land situated on the North end of Main Street. Details of the deed specified “to have and to hold the said piece of ground, so long as the said school district occupy and use the said described premises for school purposes and if at anytime the said district fails to occupy or use the said premises for school purposes for the term of one year then in that case this obligation shall be null and void.” (Deed Book 168, page 466, George W. Search et al to the Shickshinny Borough School District.)

The First Presbyterian Church:

A few years later, the individual religious groups decided to separate and form their own churches. George and Lot Search sold the land at the North end of Main Street to the First Presbyterian Church of Shickshinny, and were trustees and elders of this church. This deed was recorded in book 201, page 418, dated February 13, 1877.

Public Water System:

On December 13, 1884, G.W. Search and Lot Search sold land to the Shickshinny Water Company, (Book 401, page 430, Luzerne County Recorders of Deeds Office), for three thousand dollars in stock of the company. The deed expressed the following purposes: “For the right and privilege of taking the water from the West Branch of the Shickshinny Creek to supply the water main and for supplying water to the public; also for the purpose of the right to lay water main pipes through the land owned by the Search Brothers, at a point where the said line crosses the West Branch of Shickshinny Creek to the North Branch of Shickshinny Creek near the old bridge. The employees or agents of the said Shickshinny Water Company shall have free access to the said land at all times for making repairs to their water lines.” George Search was the first president of the water company.

Political Involvement:

The Search family played a very influential role, not only in the Borough of Shickshinny, but throughout all of Luzerne County. Many family members, including George W. Search, a supporter of the Democratic Party, held various public offices on the local and county levels among which were Justice of the Peace, County Treasurer, and Sheriff of Luzerne County.

As evidence of his political support, on November 20th, 1863, George Search joined others in posting a \$40,000 bond on behalf of their winning candidate, Luzerne County Treasurer George A. Crockett. (Luzerne County Recorder of Deeds Office Book 93, page 241.) Others also signing were George A. Crockett himself, George W. Search, George T. Steel, William Major and Anthony Emily. The bond read “Said George A. Crockett shall in good faith perform all as Treasurer aforesaid all the duties enjoined upon him by law in behalf of the Commonwealth and shall account and pay over to said Commonwealth according to law all the money received by him to the use of the said Commonwealth.”

Family:

George and Ann Nicely Search were the parents of five children, two of whom, Monroe and Martha, died in early infancy. The three surviving children were Hendrick W. Search, Amanda Search Boone, and Florence Adele Search Johnson. Two children of this industrious couple would become prominent members of the local society.

Amanda Search married Charles Boone, who established the first local newspaper, the Mountain Echo, and the First Bank of Shickshinny. He was also proprietor of a local quarry by the name of Bound and Boone.

Hendrick Search was appointed Clerk of the Commissioners for Luzerne County, which office he held for three years. He then became the assistant clerk of the Orphan’s Court, for two years before being elected Sheriff of Luzerne County. Mr.

Search was one of the organizers of the Shickshinny & Huntington Railroad, of which he was treasurer and director. Hendrick Search married Elizabeth Church with whom he had four children.

George W. Search, one of Shickshinny's best and well-known residents, passed away on September 17, 1905. He had been a lifelong resident of that town and was widely known throughout the county. He was laid to rest in the Pine Hill Cemetery of his beloved town.

Shickshinny today, is a small town, surrounded by other rural communities. Much of the history of the town has been overshadowed by that of the more densely populated areas of Luzerne County and its history cannot be found in any great abundance. The town has lost many of its earliest buildings due to the vast flooding in the low-lying sections of the town.

The George W. Search Homestead is one of the finest examples of early architecture in Shickshinny, retaining its integrity due to the preservation and restoration efforts put forth by the second and third homeowners, Dr. Miron Briggs and Francene Tearpock-Martini.