

Stories of Pleasant Valley

The Writing on the Wall – 1865

By Larry Kidder

On July 21, 1865, a summer Friday, a curious event took place in the farmhouse at what is today the Howell Living History Farm in Pleasant Valley. It was just about three months since the end of the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln. But, on this summer day members of the Charles Miller family gathered in the upstairs room of the original stone farmhouse built by the Philips family about 1800. Henry Philips who started his married life in this house had prospered and about 1830 had added a two-story frame addition on the east side of the original stone house. The woodwork and other architectural details in this addition demonstrated that Henry Philips was prospering and able to show off a bit. The Miller family acquired the farm in 1860 after Henry's death and now was making its own addition to the farmhouse. On this Friday in July it appears they were celebrating the completion of the addition.

Unlike the addition made by Henry Phillips, the addition put on by the Millers was not new construction. Rather, they had moved a small, two-story structure from some nearby location and set it against the north side of their house. This addition was merely functional with no eye-catching architectural details. However, its second story now blocked a north facing window in the original stone section. The stone walls were over a foot thick and the window needed to be filled in because it was now interior space. It was essentially filled in with a smooth white plaster and wood frame. The plaster fill was not as thick as the stone wall so it was recessed into the wall of the older, original room. Eventually, the whole stone wall would be plastered over and the old window would disappear for over a century.

That summer day of July 21, 1865 the plaster plug in the old window was complete and looked something like a recessed picture – except for being solid white. The men of the Miller family gathered in the old room with the hired help living with them and decided to leave a message on this plaster before the wall was covered over. What they wrote remained hidden in the wall until mid-June 2010 – almost a hundred and forty-five years later. Their writing was uncovered during the restoration process for the Howell Farm farmhouse. The writing is instructive but also raises a number of questions. It is instructive because it gives a very strong clue to the time of the north addition. It had been estimated that the addition was put on in the very late 19th century but it now appears it was in or about 1865.

So, what did the Millers write? At the top is the word "Pennington, N.J." While the farm is some distance from Pennington and most Pleasant Valley people associated themselves with Titusville, the Charles Miller family felt a strong tie to Pennington. Both Charles Miller and his wife Mary were buried in the Pennington Presbyterian Church cemetery when they died so they hadn't identified completely with the Titusville area even after living there for almost forty years.

A couplet written just below the word Pennington is from a poem or song written by Thomas Haynes Bayley. Bayley was an early 19th century song writer and poet who lived from 1797-1839 and one of his best recognized songs is "Long, Long Ago." The poem appeared in *The New York Mirror* for October 22, 1836 on page 136. The complete poem appears below with the couplet written on the wall, the refrain, in bold.

You Remember It – Don't You?

By Thomas Haynes Bayley.

You remember the time when I first sought your home.
When a smile, not a word, was the summons to come?
When you called me a friend, till you found with surprise
That our friendship turned out to be love in disguise.

You remember it—don't you?

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You will think of it—won't you?

**Yes, yes, of all this the remembrance will last
Long after the present fades into the past.**

You remember the grief that grew lighter when shared;
With the bliss you remember, could aught be compared?
You remember how fond was my earliest vow?
Not fonder than that which I breathe to thee now.

You remember it—don't you!

You will think of it—won't you?

**Yes, yes of all this the remembrance will last,
Long after the present fades into the past.**

This is obviously the sort of writing used to commemorate an event that should be memorable. Creating more space for their home may have been important to the Millers.

In addition to the poem is a list of names relating to the Miller family and members of their household in 1865. The first name is "L Miller" and who this was is unknown, but presumably it is a relative of Charles Miller. It appears that this person lived at Larison's Corner as this is written after the name and is the only person not identified with Pennington. Larison's Corner is in East Amwell Township (just off route 202 on the way to Flemington today) and there were also Larisons living in the western end of Pleasant Valley near Belle Mountain in the 19th century. Charles Miller's father was James Miller so this must be another close relative.

Next is "C Miller" and is obviously Charles Miller who owned the farm. He was about 40 in 1865 and had purchased the farm in 1860. He gives his location as Pennington and this may indicate his origins. Next comes "Benjamin L. Miller" who was the son of Charles Miller. He was about 14 in 1865. His middle name was Larison and he was referred to as "Larry" Miller in a 1901 newspaper clip and another time that year as B. Larison Miller. Most of the time he was called Benjamin L. Miller, though.

The next name on the list is "Samuel Chatten" followed by the word "Pennington." It is most probable that Samuel Chatten, about 20 years old in 1865, was living with the Millers and serving as a farm laborer in 1865. By 1870 he was a mason living in Pennington and he was the mason who did the stonework for the supports on the 1889 iron truss bridge over Moore's Creek on Hunter Road just down the hill from the Howell Farm farmhouse. Census records show that Charles Miller, whose only son Benjamin was mentally challenged in some way, consistently had a young man living with the family as a farm laborer. Charles and Mary Miller may have had a connection to the Chatten's and other families in Pennington.

The last name appears to be "S Chatsman" and it appears that Pennington was going to be written also but there is only the "P". This name is another mystery and could be the name of another hired man. The Hopewell census returns for 1860 and 1870 don't reveal any good candidates, though.

There is also an initial "M" standing alone that appears to be in the same hand as the Miller names. It is a mystery as to what it means. It appears that only males are listed and Mary Miller, Charles' wife, and Sarah E. Miller, their daughter, are not there – unless the stray initial "M" is for Mary. The Miller names appear to have been written by the same person and the Chatten and Chatsman by different people – perhaps the individuals named. Perhaps the names are the work crew who completed the addition and "signed" their work.

Then, of course, there is the date – July 21, 1865. This date is most likely not casual and very well may be the date the north section of the house was attached. In 1865 Charles Miller had owned the house and farm for about five years and was in his prime at age 40. Although he did not have a large family, he did house hired help and may have needed more space as he was

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prospering. He might well have added to his house in 1865. The value of his real estate increased between 1860 and 1870 from \$10,000 to \$15,000 and his personal estate increased in value from \$1,800 to \$3,000.

A striking feature of the writing is that four lines have been drawn across it almost as if to cross it out. When they were done did it all seem frivolous? The writing almost seems to have evolved rather than having been thought out in advance. There is no real unifying structure to the names, poem, and date. They must have known that the writing was going to be hidden soon and perhaps this was all just a lark.

Unfortunately, we can only imagine the event that led to the writing on this hidden wall. While the writing may have answered one question about the date of the addition, it raises a number of other questions. Just how was July 21, 1865 significant in the attachment of the addition to the Henry Phillips/Charles Miller farmhouse? Does the date relate to some other event in the life of the Millers? Why are lines drawn across the writing? What was the connection between the Miller and Chatten families? Who was the L Miller? Was he really from Larison's Corner? What was the connection between the Miller and Larison families? Where did the structure come from that was moved to enlarge the farmhouse on the north side? We hope that further research will answer some of these questions, but for now it is just exciting to have this link to a Pleasant Valley and Howell Farm family of the past. In their writing the Millers speak to us and they have made sure that when it comes to them -

Yes, yes of all this the remembrance will last,
Long after the present fades into the past.

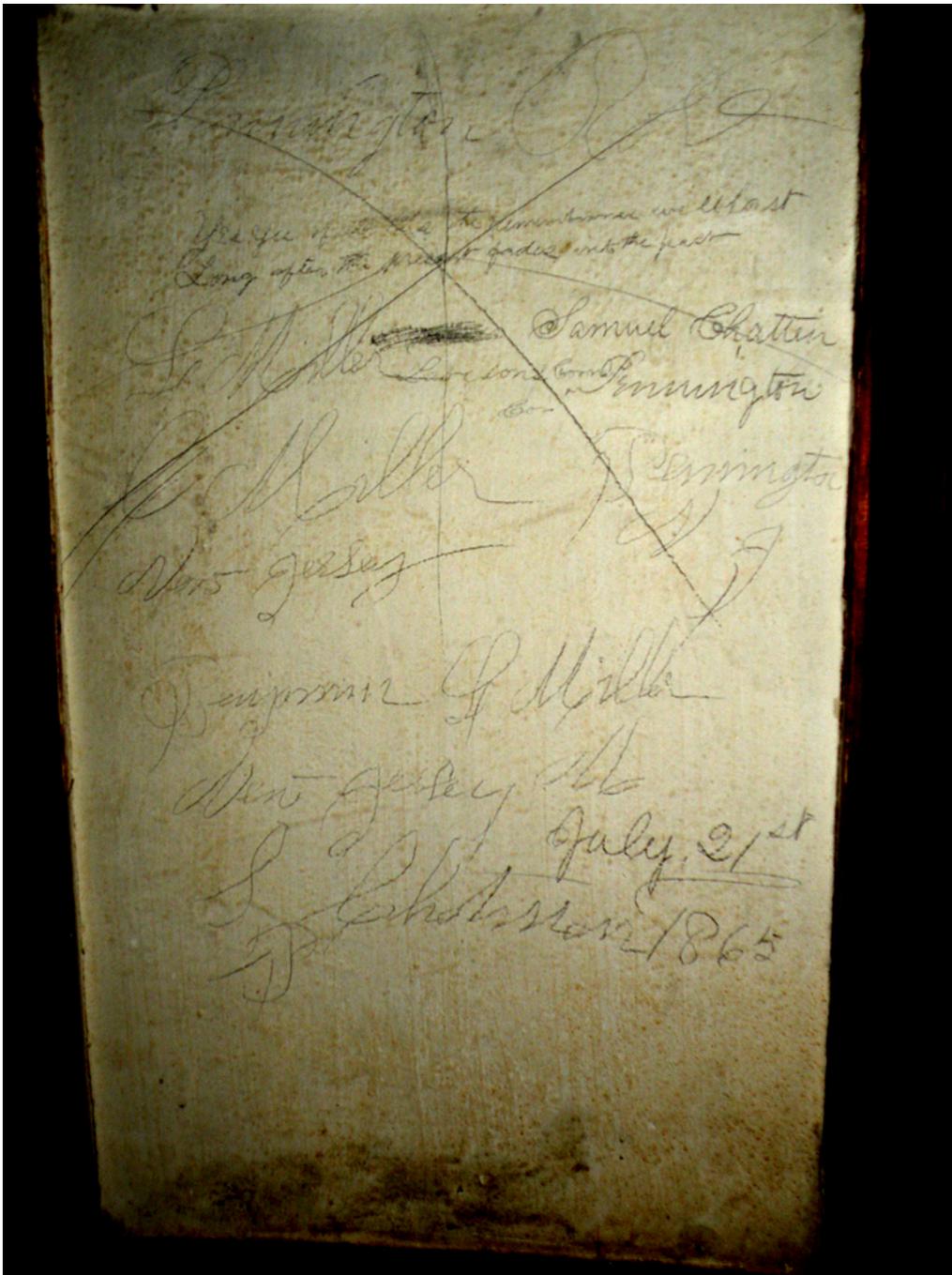


Plate 1 – The complete writing found in the wall of the Henry Phillips farmhouse.

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Plate 2 – Photo showing the location of the writing in the space of the former window on the north wall of the original stone section of the farmhouse. The door to the left of it gives entry to the addition brought to the farm possibly in 1865,



Plate 3 – Photo showing how the writing fit into the opening for the north wall window.

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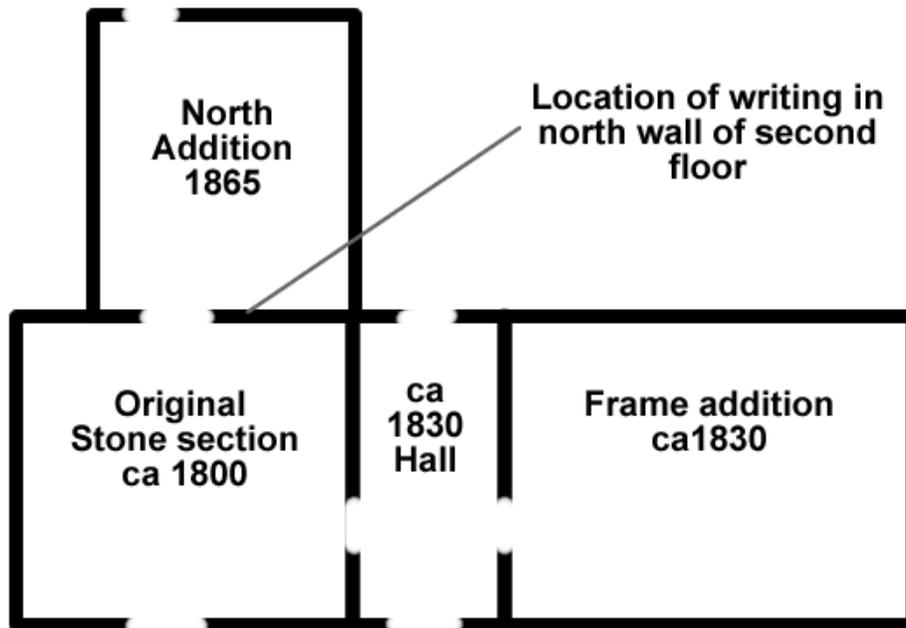


Plate 4 – Floor plan of the Henry Phillips Farmhouse showing location of the writing in the wall.