

Sketch: The Legend of Henry Wileman's Burial on the Dubois Homestead

The story below comes from "Legends of Shawangunk", by Philip H Smith, published in 1887. It was located at the USGenNet Website. It tells the story of Henry Wileman, and his burial on the DuBois homestead in Orange County New York. As with many legends, there are probably elements of truth here. But, no doubt, it stretches that truth considerably to create a memorable story. After the reader enjoys this fun tale, there follows a brief paragraph of explanation.

An early settler and patentee of Orange county, and one who figured quite largely in events pertaining to the frontier history of what is now Montgomery township, was Henry Wileman, an Irishman by birth, and a man of many sterling qualities. He was the proprietor of a tract of 3000 acres granted him in 1709; the estate was located on the east bank of the Walkill, below the village of Walden. His name appears on the records as a member of St. Andrew's church, as early as 1733. A church edifice constructed of logs, that had been built on his land for the use of the society, was standing in 1775.

Wileman was a free-liver, noble, and generous to a fault. He built his log palace on the site where afterward stood the DuBois homestead, of Revolutionary fame. It was a beautiful location; the soil was fine, and the patentee of 3000 acres entertained right royally. His convivial propensities frequently carried him to excess, and, if tradition is to be credited, the revelries in the Wileman log house were notorious through the country round.

In process of time Henry Wileman died, and it was meet that he should be buried as became a patentee of 3000 acres. It does not appear that he ever married; or that any relative had ever followed him to this distant clime. But the rich, when they die, never lack for mourners, or at least those who outwardly affect great sorrow for their death. So it came to pass that the friends of Wileman arranged to have the burial take place with all the pomp and splendor and outward tokens of regard for his memory that should characterize the funeral solemnities of a great man, according to the notions and customs of those early times.

It was then the prevailing usage to furnish liquor on all such occasions. No funeral was complete without it. They would sooner think of doing without the sermon than without the rum. As Wileman died possessed of his thousands of acres, it would be a lasting disgrace to limit the supply of liquor when celebrating his obsequies. The cellar was stored with the choicest wines; what could be more appropriate, or what could better voice the public sorrow, than that these wines should be drawn forth and made to do duty in assisting in the giving of suitable honors to the memory of their late owner!

In short, the people, young and old, were urged to drink. If any were backward, they were chided for their lack of respect for the memory of the departed, whose obsequies they were then observing; and the wine was handed round when they could not well help themselves.

At length the hour came in which the funeral cortege was to move from the late residence of the deceased to his place of sepulchre. This was before the day of black caparisoned steeds and heavily draped catafalques. The procession was more primitive in its make-up. All being ready, the bearers of the remains of the deceased, the bier carriers, mourners, friends and neighbors in attendance, started on foot to the little burial-place behind the log church, where the open grave awaited its tenant.

But the people had undertaken a greater task than they could accomplish. Overcome by the intensity of their sorrow, or by their too frequent and long-continued libations of the contents of the wine-cellar, the friends, mourners, and finally the bearers, one by one fell out by the way, either to sink insensible into the highway, or to make their way homeward as best they could.

In short, the corpse was let down in the road before they had proceeded half way to the grave, and there abandoned.

Among that number there was one sober enough to realize that the dead ought not to be left unburied, and that it savored too much of irreverence to leave the corpse unattended in the middle of the road. To convey the remains to the churchyard by his own unaided strength was simply impossible; it was no less impracticable to carry the coffin back to the house, and await a more favorable opportunity to complete the burial. Here was a quandary that would have puzzled the brain even of a soberer man. At last he hit upon a way out of the difficulty, and put the plan into immediate execution. He procured a shovel, and when he had dug to a sufficient depth he rolled the coffin over into it, and there covered up the mortal remains of the free and noble-hearted Irishman, the patentee of 3000 acres. With no monument to mark his last resting-place, this was all the sepulchre that was accorded him for many a long year.

By an alteration in the road the grave was thrown into an adjoining field; and when Mr. Peter Neaffle afterward excavated a cellar for a dwelling, he unexpectedly came upon the coffin and bones of Henry Wileman, and gave them a respectable burial.

The farm on which these occurrences took place was the property, at the time of the Revolution, of Peter DuBois, a British Tory and a refugee. In 1782 it was occupied by a detachment of the American army from the cantonment at New Windsor, sent here to protect some government property . . .

A closing note:

“Wileman was a free-liver, noble, and generous to a fault.” “So it came to pass that the friends of Wileman arranged to have the burial take place with all the pomp and splendor and outward tokens of regard for his memory that should characterize the funeral solemnities of a great man . . . ” The story above gives a delightful picture of Henry Wileman and it suggests that he was well thought of among his friends, family and neighbors. But, there are a few questions raised by such a tale. The most obvious flaw in the story is found in the statement, “It does not appear that he ever married; or that any relative had ever followed him to this distant clime.” In fact, Henry Wileman was an avowed family man. He married Rachel Van Bael, widow of Peter Bayard, and took on full responsibility for raising her five children, plus more children from their marriage. Evidence suggests that he was loved and respected by his wife and children, and it seems unlikely that they would be party to such strange “goings-on” as this story tells. My guess is that the story grew up around the unearthing of a coffin during a cellar excavation project. The coffin must have been found in an unlikely place, and it needed an explanation. Henry Wileman did have a step-daughter, Helena Bayard, who married John DuBois. Probably the Wileman homestead passed into the hands of the DuBois family.

Pam Garrett, August 2015