

END OF AN ERA

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CRAWFORD PROPERTY IS SOLD

They auctioned off Captain Benjamin Crawford's house near Hiller last Saturday. For the first time that anyone can remember, that house and the land on which it stands will belong to someone other than a Crawford.

I went to the auction. As I parked my truck and walked onto the property, I wondered if it could be true that the Crawford family had owned the land on which I was walking since before the American Revolution. If so, this would certainly be a landmark day, although it would be a bit melancholy to watch this land change hands for the first time in 230 years.

I was one of several dozen people who gathered on a sunny but cool morning to watch Wylie Rittenhouse sell the property. More than once I heard someone say, "I didn't even know this house was here."

Where exactly is the Crawford house?

The property and house that were auctioned off, consisting of approximately nine acres of a seventy-two-acre piece of land, are located along the west side of High Street between the South Hills Terrace public housing complex and Hiller fire hall. The 2½-story brick house on the site was built around 1900 and has a large lawn, but because of trees and undergrowth that surround the property, the house is nearly hidden from public view. Many longtime Brownsville area residents have driven by dozens of times without realizing that a stately century-old house stands behind those trees.

Access to the Crawford house today is from the rear of the property via a private dirt lane. The lane begins where Hiller's Third Avenue ends, just beyond the last housing unit in Luzerne Terrace. Until the past decade or so, a second unpaved lane had led from the house directly to High Street, intersecting High Street about twenty yards south of the entrance to South Hills Terrace. Over the past decade or so, this front lane has been allowed to become overgrown and is barely discernible to the passerby today.

Before I describe the auction proceedings, let me explain why I

found the sale of this particular property and house to have such historical significance for Luzerne Township.

The Crawford house was built around 1900, according to the information provided at the auction. More fascinating to me, however, was the possibility that the land on which the house stands has been in the Crawford family since before the American Revolution. Hoping to find evidence to support that conclusion, I searched the pages of Franklin Ellis' *History of Fayette County, Pennsylvania*.

Ellis tells the story of two Maryland brothers, Josiah and James Crawford, who arrived in Luzerne Township in 1770 or 1771 and purchased 1,600 acres of land that lay along the east side of the Monongahela River.

“James and Josiah Crawford were known to the Indians as Quakers and friends to William Penn,” wrote Ellis. “For this, it is said, the savages not only did not molest them, but took frequent occasion to show an exceedingly friendly disposition. . . . In the course of time, James Crawford concluded to go still farther west, and dividing the bulk of his property among his children, moved to Ohio.”

Both James and Josiah Crawford had many sons. When James Crawford left for Ohio, he divided most of his Luzerne Township property among sons John, Ephraim, William, and Joseph, all of whom died in Luzerne Township.

Josiah Crawford died in Luzerne Township at the age of eighty. His seven sons were James, Josiah, Jr., Benedict, Elijah, Levi, Ephraim, and Abel. Benedict was killed by Indians; Elijah, Ephraim, and Levi died in Luzerne Township, and the rest moved out of the township.

If I wished to prove that the property being auctioned had indeed been in one family since before the United States became a nation, I would need to connect one of James or Josiah Crawford's sons to the Crawford property.

Knowing that James and Josiah had eleven sons between them, I was not surprised to find that the maps in the 1872 *Atlas of The County of Fayette and the State of Pennsylvania* show many different Crawfords owning farms scattered all over Luzerne Township. I studied the atlas to see who owned the auctioned land along High Street in 1872. The atlas shows that the property owner's name was “E. Crawford.”

Who was “E. Crawford?” Charles Fuller of White Oak, Pennsylvania, is a researcher of the Crawford family. I asked Charles for his input, and he led me to a source who has satisfied me that the property auctioned last Saturday has been in the Crawford family since 1770.

“I had never heard of the Crawford house,” Charles explained to

me, “so I forwarded your note to Charles K. ‘Chuck’ Crawford, a researcher of the Brownsville/Luzerne Crawfords for many years and *the authority* on the Crawford family, as far as I’m concerned.”

Chuck Crawford, an eighty-year-old Luzerne Township native, came through like a champ. He called me from his home in Tucson, Arizona, and supplied the missing links in the story.

“Ephraim Crawford,” Chuck told me, “was born in 1803 and died in 1893. In fact, there is a very tall monument on his grave in Redstone Cemetery.”

I said to Chuck, “In 1872, he appears to have been the owner of the land that was auctioned off last week. I am trying to trace ownership of that land through the centuries to the person whose executor put it up for sale. Do you know who inherited Ephraim’s land when he died in 1893?”

“His wife Hannah was to have use of it as long as she lived,” Chuck replied, “and it eventually ended up in the hands of a son, Thomas B. Crawford, who was born in 1847 and died in 1932.”

“There’s Tommy Crawford,” I murmured to myself when I heard Chuck say his name. In recent days, several people had told me that many years ago, they called the Crawford property “Tommy Crawford’s field” or “Tommy Crawford’s farm.” Thanks to Chuck Crawford, I had discovered the elusive Tommy Crawford.

“There’s one last link I need to connect the property to the present day,” I told Chuck. “The lady whose executor is auctioning the house and some of the acreage near the house was the widow of Captain Benjamin Crawford. He died in 1963 and bequeathed to her the house and a lot of property. If we can show how the land got from Thomas Crawford to Benjamin Crawford, I believe we will have completed the linkup and shown that the auctioned land was in the Crawford family from 1770 until this year [2003].”

“When Thomas B. Crawford died in 1932,” said Chuck, “my records show that he left his land to a relative named Benjamin Crawford. I do not know exactly what the relationship was between the two men, but I do know that Benjamin was not his son.”

The final piece of the puzzle snapped into place.

“That clinches it for me,” I said to Chuck. “I am convinced that the land that the Crawford house stands on has been in that family longer than the United States has been a country. And last week, I was there when it was sold to a new owner. In my opinion, that makes it a noteworthy event in the annals of Luzerne Township history.”

Let me clarify which Crawford property was auctioned off and which Crawford property was not auctioned off.

When Captain Benjamin F. Crawford died in 1963, his widow, LaVenia Bawlard Crawford Barnes Rioli (she married twice more after his death), inherited the property, including the Crawford house. Her inheritance included well over 100 acres, much of it running along the west (river) side of High Street from Hollow Road all the way southward to Brashear Avenue in Luzerne Township.

According to researcher Chuck Crawford, when Ephraim Crawford died in 1893, he bequeathed 132 acres of land (including the future site of the Crawford house) to his heirs. Let us see if we can account for those 132 acres of land today.

At the auction, approximately 9 acres of property, including the house, were sold. The 9 acres were part of a larger 72-acre plot of land, and the remaining 63 acres are still owned by LaVenia's estate. The eastern edge of this 72-acre parcel borders High Street (from the entrance to South Hills Terrace southward almost to Brashear Avenue), and the property runs toward the Monongahela River, goes down over the hill toward the river, and ends at the rear property lines of residential lots on Second Street in South Brownsville.

In addition to that 72-acre parcel, LaVenia's heirs still own 38 acres of land behind South Hills Terrace. That land curves behind and around South Hills Terrace, running northward until it meets Hollow Road. This property also extends down the hill toward the river, ending at the rear property lines of more Second Street properties. (One small portion of this now-38-acre parcel was given by LaVenia to Edgar Rioli many years ago. It is now occupied by a car repair garage, formerly Rioli's service station, and a car wash.)

Finally, in addition to the 72-acre and 38-acre parcels, keep in mind that the land on which South Hills Terrace was constructed was formerly part of the Crawford farm. If you add up these three parcels, they appear to account for the 132 acres that Ephraim Crawford bequeathed to his heirs in 1893.

When Captain Benjamin Crawford inherited that property from Thomas Crawford in 1932, he was a 61-year-old riverboat captain whose much younger wife, LaVenia, is said to have met him while she was working on the boats. Several local residents have shared with me some of their childhood memories of the couple and of activities at "Crawford's field." Next we will hear from them, and we will watch as auctioneer Wylie Rittenhouse brings down the curtain on an era in Luzerne Township's history.

REMEMBERING “TOMMY CRAWFORD’S FIELD”

In the previous article, we determined that the Crawford property in Luzerne Township, which was sold at auction on April 11, 2003, had been in that family since 1770. Next we will learn more about the Crawfords who lived there in the twentieth century. Then we will watch auctioneer Wylie Rittenhouse sell the historic house and grounds, ending 233 consecutive years of Crawford ownership.

The auctioned house and property were part of the estate of LaVenia (“Molly”) Crawford Barnes Rioli, who died on February 13, 2002. She was the widow of Captain Benjamin F. Crawford, who died in the Crawford house on December 29, 1963. He spent fifty years on the Monongahela River as captain of Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation tow boats, and in the latter part of his career he was general manager of transportation for the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation.

Some folks remember Captain Benjamin Crawford and his wife Molly, but few have first-hand memories of the property’s previous owner, Thomas “Tommy” Crawford, who died at age 85 in 1932. After the previous article appeared in the newspaper, I received a phone call from 96-year-old Anna Murphy of Gibbon Glade. Anna knew Tommy Crawford and his wife, and she revealed the connection between Tommy and his heir, Benjamin Crawford.

“My late husband and I lived on Green Street Extension in Woodward Plan many years ago,” Anna told me, “and we knew Thomas Crawford and his wife very well. In fact, we liked them so much that we named our daughter, Clara Amelia, after Mrs. Crawford.”

“How did you meet the Crawfords?”

“My husband Francis worked for the Monongahela Railroad, and he asked Mr. Crawford for permission to cross his property as a short cut to get to work in South Brownsville. Eventually my husband spent time after work helping Mr. Crawford tend to his house and yard or look after his gas wells. I visited the house often and knew their hired girl, Verna Tirpak, very well.”

“Anna, I am not clear on how Tommy Crawford was related to the man to whom he bequeathed the property, Benjamin F. Crawford. Do you know what the relationship was?”

“Yes, I do. Thomas was Benjamin’s uncle. Thomas and Clara had no children, and since Clara died before Thomas did, he left the property to his nephew.”

When Benjamin died in 1963 at age 92, the Crawford house and acreage were inherited by his widow, LaVenia Bawlard Crawford, who

was said to have been working on a river boat when she married the much older Captain Crawford. Some readers remember this couple, and others recall childhood adventures in what they called “Tommy Crawford’s field,” part of which became the site of the South Hills Terrace public housing complex in the early 1950s.

“When we were kids,” recalls Bob Bakewell of Morganton, North Carolina, “we used to go up to Tommy Crawford’s hill in the spring to fly kites or pick Johnny jump-ups. Every spring we knew that the whole hillside would be on fire to burn off the tall wild grass that grew there. We all assumed that Captain Crawford set it on purpose, but every kid would have fun helping to fight it.”

Eugene Allison of West Palm Beach, Florida, remembers those annual field fires.

“Back in the late 30s or early 40s,” Eugene said, “a friend and I would often take a sandwich and roam up to Tommy Crawford’s farm. At least once a year there would be a big grass fire, which we would watch from Hollow Road. We always thought it would get the Crawford mansion, but it never did.”

Some neighborhood kids occasionally talked to the captain or to LaVenia; others never saw them. Harry Hackney, now of Tampa, delivered newspapers in the neighborhood.

“I delivered a newspaper to that house for a year or two,” Harry told me, “and I never saw anyone around the place. But I got a ten cent tip every week, the only customer on the whole route that gave me a tip. The Crawfords got along well with the kids because they never bothered those of us who played football in ‘Crawford’s field.’ Once in a while you would see a car enter or leave the driveway, but I cannot say for sure what anyone in that house even looked like.”

Not so for Hiller native Annette Kaiser Haymon, now a radio talk show host in Monmouth, New Jersey, who has fond memories of the captain.

“I grew up in Hiller,” Annette told me, “and our house was next to Crawford’s field, which went all the way from our house to the old steps the miners used to go down to reach Bridgeport mine. We kids all played in the field, and Mr. Crawford often rode a machine to cut the tall grass so we could play there. It was so well kept that I remember when one of the Sabos from Bull Run Road landed a Piper Cub airplane in the field, and all of us kids were there in a flash to see it. Mr. Crawford was very nice to us kids.”

Mrs. Crawford also had admirers. As a boy, Jack Lawson, now of Baltimore, visited his relatives at South Hills Terrace. He recalls childhood conversations with Mrs. Crawford, whose home was adjacent

to the housing complex.

“I have a childhood memory of this nice lady that lived on the hill above South Hills Terrace,” Jack told me. “My grandparents lived in South Hills Terrace, and I spent my summers there, playing and running around with my friend until the street lights came on.

“A couple of times a week, my pals and I would trudge up the hill to the Crawford property and yell for Mrs. Crawford to come out. After a few minutes she would come to the tall hedges that surrounded her house and visit with us. Every time she came to the hedges, she always brought us a snack, such as cookies or cake, that she had just made.

“This wonderful lady kept our young minds full of wonder,” Jack observed. “We would carry on long conversations with her. She would tell us stories about how she could fly to the moon, and she told us that her deceased husband was a river boat captain. I believe she liked to keep a mystique about her, perhaps so we wouldn’t wander onto her property.”

Around 1947, a young man named Edgar Rioli did some upholstery work for LaVenía Crawford, and when he finished the job, he refused to accept payment from her.

“I don’t want anything for the work,” Edgar told her, “but I’d like to buy some property from you.”

Edgar Rioli, who is now 83 years old, recently explained to me that after he and LaVenía agreed upon a 1.66-acre section of the Crawford property at the top of Hollow Road, she refused to accept any money for it.

“That’s where I built my service station,” Edgar told me. Rioli’s service station was a fixture there for many years. The property has since changed hands, but the friendship between LaVenía Crawford and Edgar Rioli would last more than half a century.

After Captain Crawford died in 1963, LaVenía married a fellow named Barnes. After Mr. Barnes died, she lived alone, then moved into Dainty’s Valley personal care home. There she became friends with a lady who was related to Edgar Rioli. Edgar, whose wife Helen had died in 1996, visited the personal care home frequently to see a relative. While there, he and LaVenía renewed old acquaintances.

“Molly was good friends with my relative,” Edgar said. “They became like sisters, and when I would visit, the three of us would go to dinner.”

Edgar told me that after his relative passed away, LaVenía explained to him that she would like to leave the personal care home, but could only do so if she had someone with whom she could live.

“She asked me if we could get married,” Edgar said, “and after we

talked about it, I agreed. I moved her into my house in Alicia Heights, where she enjoyed living with me for several years until her health deteriorated. She died last year, and since then I have tried to look after my own home in Alicia Heights while maintaining the empty Crawford house in Hiller, but it was just too much for me to handle. So I asked my attorney, Daniel Webster, to handle the sale of the house and some of the property.”

I attended the auction on April 11, curious to see who would purchase the century-old home. Edgar Rioli showed me through the house a few days before the auction. I admired the foyer’s oak staircase that ascends three floors, supplemented by hidden servants’ stairs to the upstairs and the basement. Beautifully mantled fireplaces grace nearly every room, including the second floor bedrooms. Other features that stood out were the cut-glass sidelights that flank the main entry, the house’s hardwood floors, a lovely dining room chandelier, the still-functioning dumbwaiter, and an enormous cedar-lined linen closet on the second floor.

Several dozen people attended the real estate auction that sunny morning. Wylie Rittenhouse’s plan was to auction off the house and the nearly five acres surrounding it as a single parcel, then sell approximately four more acres located between the house and Brashear Avenue. The bidding started at \$50,000 and quickly turned into a two-bidder contest won by Frank Bobek of Brownsville, who bought the house and grounds for \$88,500.

Next, 24 vacant lots between the house’s southwest property line and Brashear Avenue were auctioned off. The winning bidder, Scott Yeardie of Brownsville, purchased all 24 parcels for \$420 each and indicated that he may build homes on some of the lots.

Just like that, after a few minutes of intense bidding, it was no longer the Crawford house. And for the first time since 1770, the property was not Crawford land any more.

Mrs. Bobeck has told me that she was raised in a similar historic home, and she and her husband have already begun planning to restore the house in a manner sensitive to its heritage. Unlike the unhappy fate that befell the Isaac C. Woodward house just a few blocks away, it appears that the Crawford house will remain a part of the local landscape and a reminder of the role the Crawford family played in the early history of Luzerne Township.