

Over Povershon Hill Came a Stager to Found a Clan

FROM FRANK SPEER

FROM across the Watchung Mountains in that part of the upper Passaic valley known as "the great swamp" came young John Stager, forerunner of a fiery and productive clan which left its mark on Nutley and whose blood still, directly or indirectly, flows in the veins of many town families.

Young John came up from the swamp, walked his way over Povershon Hill to Spring Valley, and found a job with Captain Abram Speer. Speer, a hero of the Revolution, had wooed and won Emmetche Wouters, the daughter of a rich blacksmith, Abe Wouters, who built a house at the corner of Church Street and Valley Road for his daughter. That house still stands, surrounded by more modern homes.

Captain Speer had come back from the wars with an idea of becoming a land owner as fast as possible and enacted his intentions by confiscating all the lands of the Tory, Van Giesen. That made him the richest man in Nutley - in extent of land. Young John had the wisdom to pick well when he took a job.

In those post-Revolution days, about 1780, there were six stone houses at the foot of Povershon Hill - Captain Speer's house, Abe Wouters' own place, the Thomas Van Winkle farm, Tom Ryker's place, the Daniel Pake house and a place which John Stager proceeded to build for himself.

Captain Speer's land empire stretched from the Passaic River all the way back to Pine Brook. He was a slave owner and just behind his home he built a stone house where his black slave of the household, Nancy, lived. The home and the slave house are intact today - Trench Home.

When young John asked for a job, Captain Speer took him down to his grist mill near where the Woman's Club stands today on the Third River. Stager was a willing worker and became a good miller. Busy, he nonetheless found time to court his boss's daughter, who apparently fell enamored of him, married him and proceeded to bear five children-dying young in the fifth childbirth.

Captain Speer and his wife, known familiarly as "Fady" and "Oty" took on the job of raising the motherless brood, five strapping sons-John Junior, Henry, Richard, Harmonious and Abraham. When Captain Speer died in 1834 at the age of 90, he left his land to the five grandsons and they each picked up plenty of real estate which today would be worth millions.

Of the Stager sons, Henry grew into a prolific family man. He built his home on High Street near Bloomfield Avenue, and eventually that part of town became known as "Stagertown" to distinguish it from "Speertown," where the Speer descendants congregated near the present Allwood traffic circle.

Old records show that Henry Stager, or "Hank" as he was known by all, gave

the land for the site of the Franklin Reformed Church and cemetery in 1860. Four years before he had given the land for the site of the Church Street School, the big area where the Nutley Historical Society is building its Colonial Gardens.

The red brick school which has been converted into the town museum was not the original building. The first school was a frame structure, which was heated in winter by a wood-burning, pot-bellied stove. In bad weather, each pupil carried a split log to school every day to help heat the building. Boys took turns at feeding the stove and, apparently, one enthusiastic stoker set fire to the school. The neighbors saved the books, but the school was lost. That was in 1874.

Hank's brother, John Junior, lived on in his father's house at the foot of Povershon Hill, and married Margaret Van Winkle, daughter of Henry Van Winkle. Albert Chappell, the school teacher, who lived just across a field, married Margaret's sister, Ann. In the vast and growing Stager clan, they were known as "Aunt Peggy" and "Aunt Ann."

John Stager had a wonderful water-cress patch in his front yard when Bearskin Brook ran along where Bloomfield Avenue now is. When the street was built, the brook was piped and John lost his water-cress.

John Junior had three children, John Speer Stager, Abraham Henry Stager and Ellen Sophia. Of the three, Abraham was a town character and figured in much of the local legend. He was popularly known as "Abe Hen" or "Big Abe." The story is told that long before the Olympic Games were revived, "Big Abe" was quite a jumper. When he went from the house to the barn, he loped down the lane, picked up speed and cleared the six foot high panel gate which closed the lane.

"Big Abe" married Margaret Stager but after presenting him with two children, Herbert and Laura, his young wife died. He then went courting a girl down Bristol way and a story is told of how on one of his trips to Bristol he wandered over to the village smithy, with its usual gathering of town characters, and swapped stories.

"Big Abe" was sitting on a nail keg with his back to an approaching horse and wagon when he remarked to the crowd: "Effen I was in Franklin now t'would be easy to tell you the name of that there horse a-comin' down the road."

The chief of the town police who had been hanging out with the crowd took notice of the remark and when the wagon approached, the policeman walked out into the street and questioned the driver. The man's evasive answers led to his being taken to the local jail. There, under questioning, the man admitted that he had stolen the horse in Franklin. An inquiry confirmed it.

"Big Abe" later married Hattie Force and they had five children, Wilford, a local police sergeant for many years, Fanny, Violet, Emma and Clara.

Quite a fisherman, "Big Abe" figures in a legendary story along with Joe "Jakie" Garrabrant and Al "Cronk" Cockefair. The three went fishing at Pine Brook, in the Passaic River, about where Route 6 runs at present. Arriving in the night they baited their drop lines-a line with two hooks and a lead sinker - and tossed them into the stream. Two of them had fair luck but the third had nary a bite. With daylight they discovered that in heaving his lines he dropped them on a mud island in the river. The tale was told many times, but, charitably, none of the three ever identified the unhappy fisherman.

"Big Abe" was cutting wood when he went to the Civil War by one of those snap decisions for which he was famous. Nutley's big exodus into the Union armies began shortly after President Lincoln called for volunteers to preserve the Union.

It began in "Speertown" when one of the Speers started on foot for Newark to volunteer. Coming down Bearskin Brook through "Stagertown" he saw "Big Abe" cutting firewood. "Come on Abe Hen it's time we joined," he cried. "Big Abe" dropped his axe and went along. On their way towards Newark they picked up Simon Tuers, who dropped his hoe in a potato patch, and Silas Chappell, who was pruning his grape vines. They all fought the war together, along with Dick Cueman, Jim Blair, Josh Dodd, Bon Day and many other sons of Franklin, in Co. 6, 26th Regiment, New Jersey Volunteers, which fought - and lost - the battle of Fredericksburg, among many other campaigns.

Harmonious, brother of Henry and John Junior, built his house at 379 Bloomfield Avenue, once the Vollmer home. It was built before 1800 and in 1932 as part of the celebration here of the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth, a marker was placed on a huge elm tree in front of the house. The tree died of the blight and was removed, so the plaque was transferred to the house. The Vollmer house was demolished to make room for Radcliffe School.

Harmonious married Ann Moan and had four sons - John, William, Theodore and George. In turn, Theodore married Anne Faith and they were the parents of Francis E. Stager, who was a Town Commissioner here for many years.

Richard Stager, the fourth of young John's sons, was born a century and a half ago, in 1801. He married Elizabeth Snyder and they built their home on what is now Ravine Avenue. They had no sons but three daughters, Mary-Magdaline, Barbara and Rachael-Elizabeth. Being left a widow early in life, Elizabeth developed into quite a town character and was known to one and all as Aunt Betsy.

Her land ran all the way from Prospect Street down to the Third River and it was some of this property that in later years "Uncle Dick" Booth gave to the town for Booth Park. "Uncle Dick" came into possession of Aunt Betsy's land through her sister, Mary-Magdaline, who married into the Booth family.

Aunt Betsy lived to be 90 before she died early in 1898 and she kept her land

intact including a vast strip known as Aunt Betsy's woods which bordered Prospect Street from Centre to Chase Street.

Abraham, the last of Young John's five strapping sons, owned the land where Yantacaw School now stands. The wooded hill across the Third River which, under the able hands of William Lambert-the man who developed half of Nutley-became Nutley Park. He set up a blacksmith shop and a house on Passaic Avenue, just off the Third River and after his death, his widow, Margaret, inherited the vast property where several hundred homes, a school and a town park are now situated.

Those were the five sons of Young John, who in turn founded big families and from whom many present day Stagers here descend. The youth who came alone out of the big swamps just at the end of the Revolutionary War is represented today by at least 400 descendants still living in Nutley.

Among those successive generations of subsequent Stagers there were many characters. One of them was Thomas Stager who married Hannah Vreeland. He did not like the traditional spelling of Thomas, so he signed his name "Tomas" and to the town he became "Tome." For a while he lived in the old home of Harmonious Stager.

He was a builder, as were three of his five sons, Dick, Ralph and Albert, the latter also known as "Spieler" because of a gift of gab. A fourth son, William, was also known as "Buffalo Bill" or just simple "Buff" and the fifth son was the popular "Dick" Stager who died in 1942.

"Buff" was one of the long line of owners of the Old Military Hall which dates back to the Revolutionary War. It was owned and run by a man named Jack Dooley when "Buff" took it over in the early 80's. "Buff" ran it as a tavern and inn and secured a transient hotel license, but to get it he had to consent to keep a certain number of rooms for travellers, stable and shed room for a fixed number of horses and wagons and also had to promise to provide lodging for anyone the town Poormaster sent to him. "Buff" ran the old hall for 10 years and sold it to Charlie Jones.

One of "Buff's" sons was Harry Stager, who took the name "Hank" and died only recently. He was one of the charter members of the original Franklin Fire Department organized in 1894 and was third in line among the chiefs who led it. The first of the chiefs had been Dr. A. H. Van Riper and the second had been Arthur Stager, also a builder, who sat on the Board of Education and forced the use of concrete in building Washington School, the only one of its kind here.

And that's the story of how the Stagers moved in on Nutley that day Young John walked over Povershon Hill down to the house of Captain Speer and asked for a job.

Tags

- [Stager](#)
- [Speer](#)
- [Vreeland](#)
- [Booth](#)