



MASON-DIXON STARGAZER STONE

NEWLIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF THE NEWLIN TOWNSHIP AREA OF THE BRANDYWINE VALLEY

Executive Committee -- President: RoseLynn Malarek, Vice-President: Muriel George, Secretary: Diane McGowan,
Treasurer: Sandy Reber, Members: John O'Neal, Kate Roby, Kathy Conway
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From the President's Desk

Hello, Everyone!

We are pleased to announce that our **second general meeting will be held on April 15** at the Kampground of America Liberty Lodge in Embreeville. The meeting will begin at 7:00 with guest speaker and noted local historian Ray McKay who will speak on "Writing Your Own Legacy, Local History and Family Archives." After a short interval for refreshments, members will reconvene to discuss with Ray ways in which Newlin Historical Society can best research and write about Newlin's historic legacy. Our first research topic will be Early Industrial Development, including the Forge which was located along the Brandywine on the western edge of Newlin, and some of the early mining operations. If you have, or know of someone who has, information on these topics, bring it/them along with you. Please email me to ensure your seat.

We are now on Facebook (Newlin Historical Society), so be sure to "friend" us. If you have questions, contact our Facebook administrator, Sandy Reber, at cowslip@verizon.net.

Our website will soon have information on our mission, purpose, officers, meetings, and the list of places in Newlin on the National Register of Historic Places. The website will serve as the repository for research found by our members, an on-going operation that will ensure the preservation of Newlin's history.

Membership in the Newlin Historical Society is growing. Invite your history-minded friends and neighbors to attend our general meeting on the 15th and join us in researching and preserving our rich history.

Our featured article this month is the fascinating story told by Kate (Tolly) Roby about the mysterious deaths in 1732 of so many able-bodied men throughout Chester County including Newlin. Was it a great conspiracy? Witchcraft perhaps? Who knows? Perhaps after reading it you will come up with your own theory. We'd love to hear about it! Enjoy.

Looking forward to seeing everyone on April 15.

RoseLynn

MYSTERIOUS DEATHS IN 1732

Do you love a good mystery story? I know I do, and especially historical mysteries. Historical and especially medical mysteries are my favorites. If you have ever watched "Secrets of the Dead" on PBS, buckle up, because here is a local one. I need your help, because after discovering this one, and researching it for ages, I still haven't figured it out.

I live in the Harlan House/Stargazer Farm, Newlin Township, and have been researching the history of the house and the Harlan family for the past 36 years. Early on I was intrigued by the untimely death of George Harlan in 1732. He was 41 years old. You might think that was normal for the period, but the Harlan family seemed to be prolific and long-lived in Penn's colony (Harlan Genealogy). The two immigrant Quaker brothers, George and Michael Harlan, arrived here in 1687. A 1688 survey of Newlin Township/The Society Land, indicates that younger brother Michael Harlan had received a grant of 300 acres at this site. He either gave or sold it to his eldest son George at the time he reached his majority (at 21) or was married (at 25) in 1715. The Harlan oral tradition is that the older part of the house was built in the 1690's. If that is true, it would have been started by Michael, and possibly finished by his eldest son, George, who was living here by 1718, according to tax records, and having children here according to Meeting records. (There are no construction dates for the house, dendrochronology failed - but that is another story.)

George and Michael Harlan, the immigrants, had 9 and 8 children, respectively, who all lived to adulthood, and had many children themselves. Only one of the 3rd generation died young, and it may have been 1732/3. I noticed also that 1732 kept cropping up, because George's younger brother Stephen, who lived on the farm next door (Embreeville Center), also died then, at age 35, and Solomon, another brother, age 30, also died in 1732 at his father's farm in Chatham. Then I noticed that Aaron Harlan, George's first cousin also died in 1732 at age 40. I wondered if this was some family problem, possibly genetic. I noticed that the only member of the second generation who had died before 1732 was Ezekiel, immigrant George's eldest child. Ezekiel went back to England to claim some property and died there of smallpox in 1731. "The Small Pox prevailed to an alarming extent this year" (1731) in Philadelphia (Watson's Annals of Philadelphia, Vol 1).

I thought perhaps the Harlans had all succumbed to small pox in 1732, but it made no sense that it was only the men in their 30's and 40's and no women or children. I began to look further afield in Chester Co. and found that many other men had died in 1732. The eldest, Joel Baily was 74, and he was George's father-in-law. The majority were men in their prime. Other relatives of George's who died in 1732 were his brother-in-law, Isaac Baily, and Robert Johnson, Isaac's father-in-law. Others included Nathaniel Newlin (age 42) who owned land next door but lived and died in Concord Twp., Moses Mendenhall (age 38) Kennett Twp., and many others.

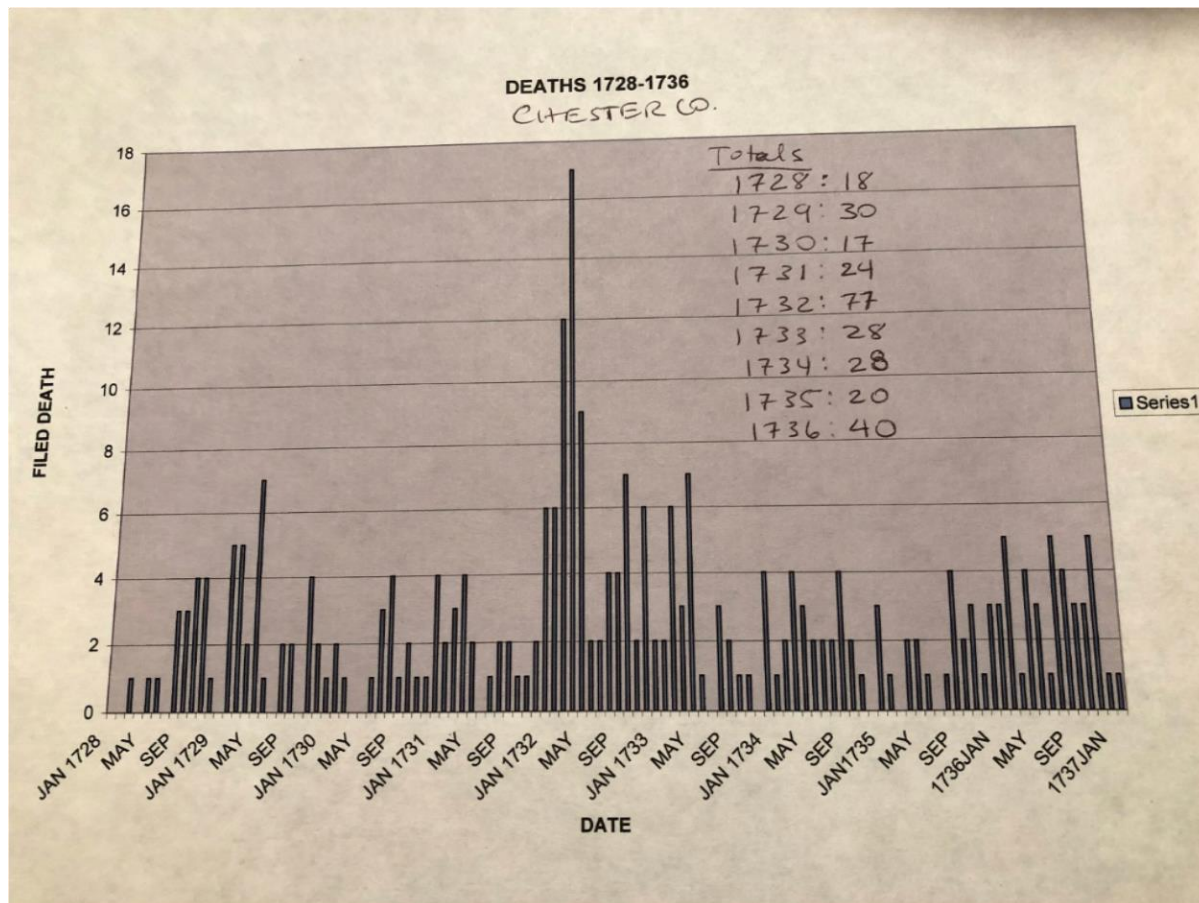
I decided to go to the archives and start looking at the wills and intestate papers to see if I could figure out what happened to all these men, and if there were others who did not have wills who may have died. I knew the entire Harlan family's women and children had survived (64 in total), and I found no evidence that they had been ill. There were a few deaths from smallpox in 1731-2, ("medicine for smallpox" in account/'accompt') but there were deaths of children in the home as well, unlike the vast majority of cases where it was only the male head of household who died.

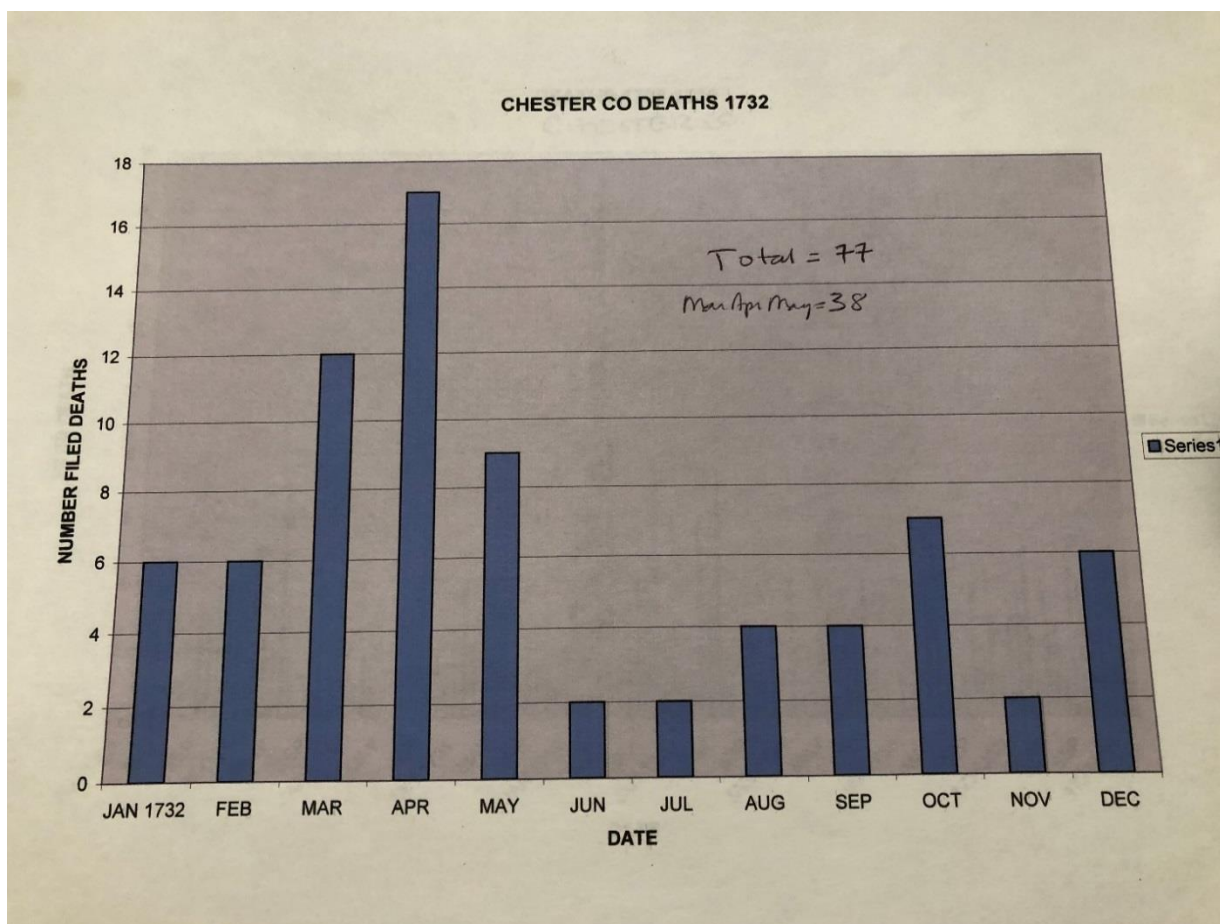
I decided I would have to have data from years before and after 1732 to compare, so I looked at all the wills and intestate papers from the 4 years before 1732 and the 4 years after. A graph of all the filed deaths in Chester Co. from Jan 1728 to Jan 1737, shows that there was a large spike in deaths (77) in 1732, compared to the previous and following years. The population growth was rapid during this time, and I do not have estimates of the total population for each year, but there were far more deaths in 1732, with about half (38 of 77) in March-April and May. The wills and intestate papers often provide many details of the person who died, as well as their family, and especially the wives and children were living. Whatever the illness was, many knew they were seriously ill and had time to write wills. A few became ill and died so quickly they had no time to write a will. There is an especially poignant record of George Harlan's illness and death, because his widow Mary contested the will (most unusually, there were no provisions for Mary in the will; every other will of this period that I have seen has detailed provisions for the wife/widow). Court records state that George

was very ill when he wrote and later signed the will. They show that he was seeing a hair in the tip of the pen when he tried to sign (nothing there), and shortly after signing, he became delirious. Two of the witnesses to the will, testified he was in his right mind at signing, and one said he was not. Mary lost the case, the will was upheld and she held the estate for her eldest son John (age 16) until he came of age.

I have asked many historians and medical doctors if they have any ideas what would cause such an unusual pattern of deaths, and neither they nor I have been able to explain it. Toxins, like aflatoxin or heavy metals, should have affected all exposed, not just men in their 30's and 40's. Infectious diseases do not affect populations this way unless it is vector-borne disease, and only this group was exposed to the vector. How could that happen in 1732 Chester Co? Plotted on a map by township, the cases are spread throughout the county with highest concentrations where there was likely the highest population density. There was no armed conflict at that time, and most of these men were Quakers anyway.

If you love an unsolved mystery, have at it, and let me know what ideas you have. There must be some explanation we haven't thought of....yet. What an extraordinarily difficult time this must have been in Chester Co, with so many of the heads of household and breadwinners dying unexpectedly. I wish someone had written about it at the time, but I have been unable to find any contemporaneous account of that year. Let me know if you can think of some way to solve this mystery. Tolly Roby.





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Tolly Roby was born and raised in Germantown, Philadelphia attended the Quaker School, and is a birthright Friend. She graduated from Trinity College in Hartford CT, majoring in biology and minoring in ancient history. She attended the Veterinary School at the University of Pennsylvania and completed two residencies at the New Bolton Center, one in Clinical Pathology and one in Internal Medicine. She did a Research Fellowship in Nephrology at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. She practiced small animal medicine in PA, DE, and the British Virgin Islands. In addition, she has published a number of research papers and is the co-author and editor of *The Pill Book Guide to Medication for Your Dog and Cat*. She also founded the Delaware Valley Academy of Veterinary Medication, a monthly continuing education seminar.

Tolly, who has had a long-term interest in history and historic preservation, bought the Harlan House/Stargazer Farm in Newlin in 1983 and has since been studying the history of the farm, the early history of Chester County, and William Penn’s experiment in his Colony. She is a member of the Newlin Historical Society Executive Committee. She also enjoys renaissance and classical music and has sung in many choirs and choruses since high school.