

# Hugh Steen, Serial Entrepreneur of Tredyffrin

Mike Bertram

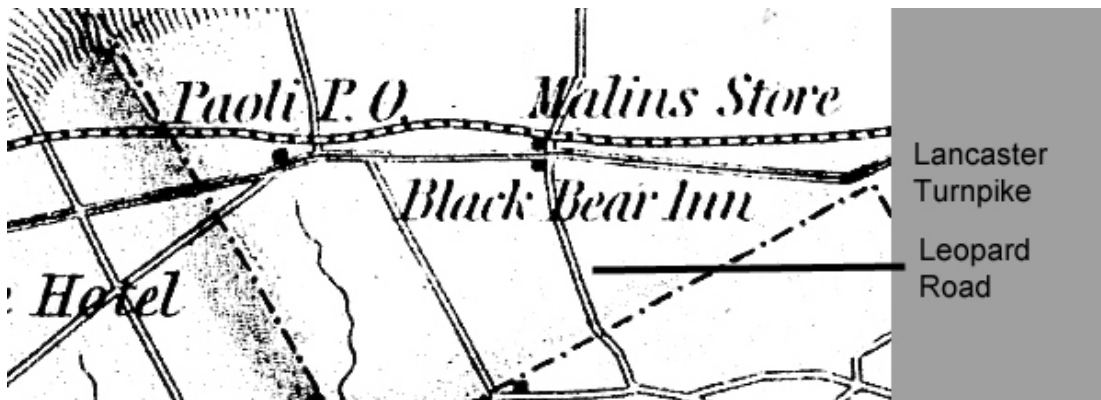
In the 19th century men generally selected a trade when they were young and then pursued it for the rest of their lives. Hugh Steen was not such a person. He ran a series of businesses and was not deterred in following a new vocation.

Hugh J. Steen was born in Newlin Township on the 27th March 1818. He grew up on his parents' farm and entered the businesses of farming, horses and lumber.

In 1842 he married Maria Guest. They had 3 children, Howard, who died in October 1873; Annie who married John Beitler; and Sarah Emma who died in 1849. Maria died in July 1871, aged 53. Steen married a second time in May 1878 to Mary Lobb, the widow of Henry Fritz (founder of the lumber business in Berwyn). They had one child Emma May.

In 1849 the Steen family moved from Newlin to Tredyffrin. Hugh rented 80 acres of land that he farmed and also became the licensee of the Howellville Inn.

In 1851 Steen purchased at a Sheriff's sale<sup>1</sup> a portion of the Paoli property of Randel Evans who ran into financial difficulties. The farm of 54 acres included the Black Bear Inn (see the following article in this issue). The property was located on both sides of Leopard Road (now route 252), south of the Lancaster Turnpike, in Paoli.



Part of an 1847 Map of Tredyffrin

Hugh continued to run a teaming business from the farm until 1859 when he sold his animals and equipment (see following advertisement).

### *Personal Property of Public Sale*

HUGH J. STEEN, TREDYFFRIN TOWNSHIP

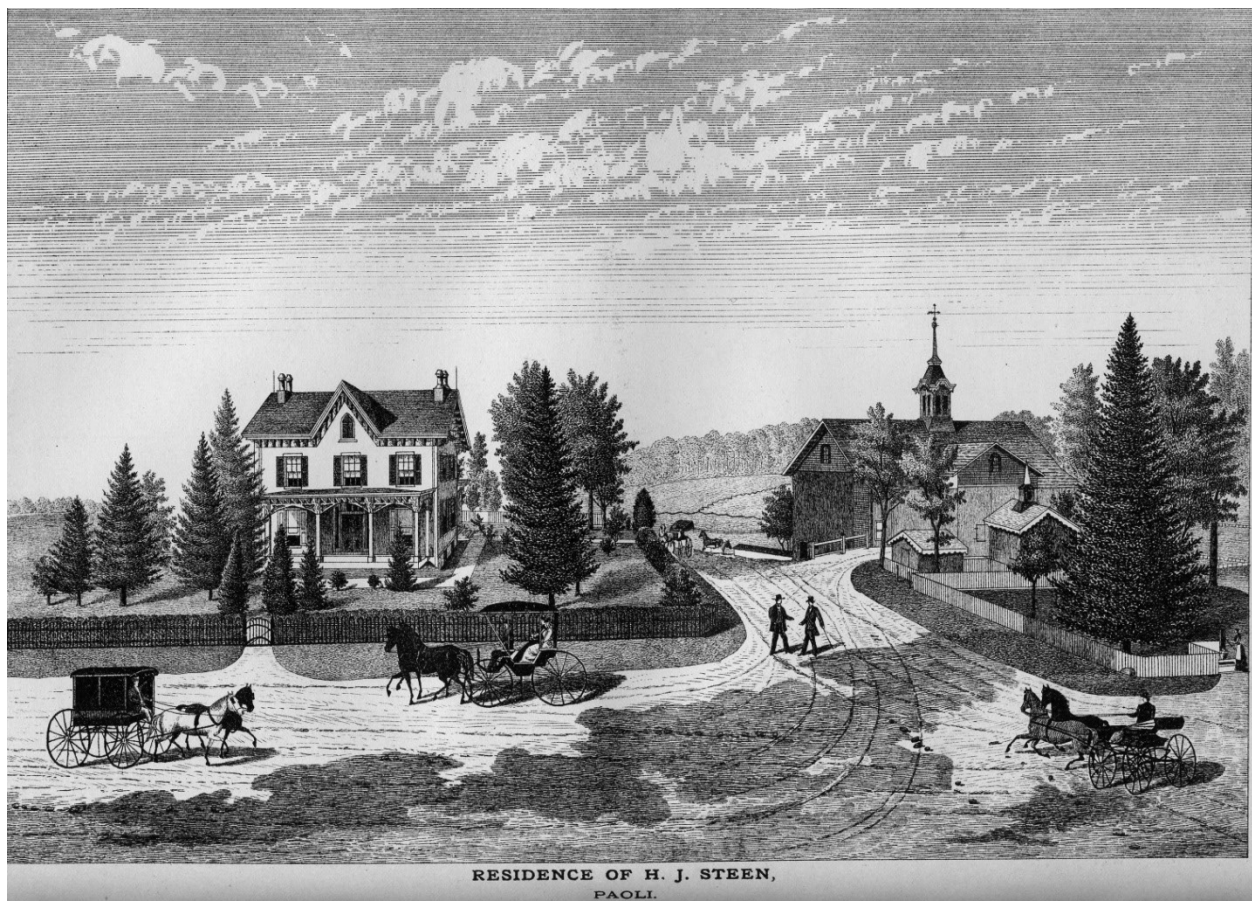
SATURDAY, MARCH 19, 1859

*The subscriber being about to decline the teaming business, will sell at public sale, at his residence in Tredyffrin township, Chester county, on the Lancaster turnpike, half a mile east of Paoli, the following described Personal Property, to wit: NINE HEAD OF HORSES; among the number is the well-known horse AROCHROKO, and a young horse of fine style and action, calculated for light harness and the saddle; the remaining seven cannot be surpassed for beauty, strength and durability; there are three excellent single and double leaders among the number; they are all calculated for draft and farming purposes. One pair of well-broke WORKING OXEN of good size; TWO GOOD COWS with calves by their sides; one BULL, two years old. Two sets of quilers, good as new; three sets of good lead gears; collars; head and blind halters; five good housens; three sets of fly traps; wagon and side saddles; broad wheeled road wagon, nearly new; fifth, forked and carroing chains, double and single trees. A set of Blacksmith Tools, such as bellows, anvils, sledges, hammers etc. Sale to commence at 1 o'clock. Conditions by HUGH J. STEEN.*

In 1872 Steen had cattle stolen from the farm. The story of the recovery of the animals and the apprehension of the thieves is told in an article from *The Jeffersonian* newspaper <sup>2</sup>.

It is likely that Steen continued to live at his Paoli residence until his marriage to Mary Lobb in 1878. The house and farm were probably then leased out. The executors of his estate sold his Paoli property to J.H. Dingee for \$21,000. This farm later became part of the Tredyffrin Country Club that existed between 1918 and 1943.

It was a substantive building as can be seen in the following lithograph.



1881 lithograph drawn from the viewpoint of the railroad embankment looking south down Leopard Road (now route 252); the Lancaster Turnpike (route 30) crosses in the foreground. Notice the shadow on the road caused by the smoke from a steam locomotive. From *Futhey & Cope, History of Chester County*.



The house and barn in the lithograph can be seen on the following extract from an 1887 atlas:



Dallin aerial photographs from 1924 showing the farm and barn, then part of the Tredyffrin Country Club.  
*Courtesy of Hagley Museum.*

## Deeds and Mortgages

Even in the 1850s Steen seemed to have acquired substantial financial resources. He financed a number of mortgages in Chester County (see Appendix A). We also know he financed a mortgage of \$8,000 in Norristown as a dispute about the mortgage reached the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. It is likely that there are other mortgages still to be uncovered.

He also undertook a little land dealing (see Appendix A) buying and selling property in a number of townships.

## The Howellville Property

In August 1871 Steen had the opportunity to purchase another property in a Sheriff's sale <sup>3</sup>. This was a tract of land in Howellville consisting of 16+ acres that he bought for \$7,010. The property had previously been owned by Daniel Stetson who was the Postmaster of the Chester Valley Post Office (see sidebar). It is not clear how many buildings were on the property when Steen purchased it but later it consisted of 4 houses (2 twins) and a store that was also the Post Office. The buildings were located on the east side of Howellville Road. The buildings can be seen on the following extract from a 1912 atlas.



Hugh Steen was an enthusiastic member of the Odd Fellows. Part of the entire second floor of the store building was used by the Odd Fellows.

In 1872 Steen took up a new occupation, post master at the Chester Valley post office in Howellville. He was officially Post Master until 1886 but in 1877 he sold the property to his daughter, Annie Beitler, the wife of John Beitler for \$12,000<sup>4</sup>. In order to finance the purchase John and Annie took out a 100% mortgage with Steen. The income from the houses and store must have been substantial since the mortgage was completely paid off in 9 years, but soon after the completion of the mortgage signs of financial stress appeared.

Steen entered into a new line of business in 1883 in partnership with Mr. Johnson. They installed a stone crusher on a farm in Charlestown. It is not clear how long the crusher was in operation.

In 1890 the store in Howellville became a polling place<sup>5</sup>. The Beitlers' business must have taken a downturn in the 1890s as Annie and John needed to take out a \$4,000 mortgage on the property in 1892<sup>6</sup>. They also borrowed money from Hugh Steen.

During late 1893 and early 1894 John Beitler borrowed money from his friends. In January 1894 he disappeared<sup>7</sup>. Beitler was at the time the postmaster of the Chester Valley Post Office and had stolen some of the money the Italian quarry workers were sending back to their home country. His wife thought he had committed suicide and the quarry ponds were searched but no body was ever found.

John Beitler was not dead, just in hiding, and he quietly infiltrated back into the village. He was clearly in financial trouble. In March of 1894 he and his wife sold the Howellville property back to Hugh Steen for \$8,000<sup>8</sup>.



Steen also sued his son-in-law Beitler and his daughter Annie for the \$10,000 they owed him<sup>9</sup>. This was likely a financial maneuver to protect assets from other creditors. The suit was uncontested and the property and contents were sold in April 1894. The contents of the store listed in the court documents were as follows:

*Dry goods – Groceries – Boots & shoes – Drugs – Glass and Queensware<sup>10</sup> – Hardware – Wood and Willow ware<sup>10</sup> – Tobacco and Segars.*

The household goods which were also sold included a piano and an organ. Besides the store the first floor consisted of a parlor, sitting room, dining room, kitchen, hall, back hall, and 3 other rooms:



Beitler Store in Howellville<sup>5</sup>

Among the court records of Steen's action is an interesting letter from the Atlantic Refining Company stating that Beitler had an oil tank, barrels and oil that belonged to the company. The oil was probably kerosene used for lighting and/or heating - an early use of petroleum products.

John Beitler is in the tax records of 1895 and 1896 as an inmate (i.e. not owning the property he was living in). When Hugh Steen died in 1899 he bequeathed his property in Howellville to his daughter, Annie Beitler. John Beitler and his wife appear in the 1900, 1910, and 1920 census returns. In 1920 John and Annie sold the property to Angelo Meoli<sup>11</sup> but the mortgage was not satisfied until 1928. It is not clear when John died but he is absent from the 1930 census. Annie was living in West Grove when she died on the 8th January 1932.

### **Chester Valley Post Office<sup>12</sup>**

When a post office was opened at Howellville in Tredyffrin Township, it was given the official name of Chester Valley. The post office opened on April 25th, 1857, and continued in operation for almost fifty years, closing on September 29th, 1906 - its patrons then being served by rural delivery from Berwyn. The first postmaster was Canby Smith, a storekeeper, who served as postmaster for eight years. He was followed by Samuel Hawley, who was postmaster from 1865 to 1867, succeeded then by Daniel A. Stetson, postmaster from 1867 to 1872. The longest term of office was that of Hugh J. Steen, who was the postmaster for the next fourteen years, from 1872 to 1886. He was followed by James S. Todd, who served from 1886 to 1889, and then by John Beitler, Jr., who served from 1889 to 1893.

The first postmistress was Ella V. Pedrick, the wife of the village blacksmith, who held the position from 1893 to 1897. She moved the office from the old store into her home, which was next door. The post office was moved again in 1897, to the railroad station, when Edwin Trainer became the next postmaster. He was followed five months later by William H. Kraatz, who was postmaster for three years before being succeeded in 1901 by John F. Myers, the last postmaster of the Chester Valley post office.

## The Later Years

Sometime after his marriage to Mary Lobb in 1878, Steen moved his residence to her house in Berwyn. He lived there until his death on the 21st April 1899. He was active in the affairs of the Trinity Presbyterian Church, Berwyn for many years as described in the Church's history<sup>13</sup>.

Hugh Steen lived in Tredyffrin for 50 years becoming a respected and well-known member of the community. He pursued many lines of business, some of which are probably still to be uncovered.

## Acknowledgements

Herb Fry helped me with this article. I also incorporated research undertaken by Barbara Fry.

## Appendix A – Deeds & Mortgages

### Hugh Steen Land Purchases

| #  | Seller                 | Cost           | Area                            | Date                | Deed book reference & Comments                         |
|----|------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|--|
| 1  | By Sheriff             | \$4200 + \$310 | 54 acres 17 perches + 0.5 acres | 1/30/1851           | P5-391, Paoli; Black Bear tract                        |
| 2  | Daniel Abrams          | \$8500         | 125 acres 23 perches            | 4/10/1860           | S6-140, Willistown                                     |
| 3  | John Walton            | \$1171         | 14 acres 102 perches            | 12/28/1864          | X6-374, Easttown adjacent to Black Bear tract          |
| 4  | Jonathan Millard       | \$885 6c       | 12 acres 103 perches            | 3/30/1865           | T7-148; East Nantmeal                                  |
| 5  | Nathaniel Jones estate | \$1510         | 17 acres 150 perches            | 2/4/1868            | F7-565 Baptist Road (with Henry Root)                  |
| 6  | Henry Root             | \$1000         | 99 perches                      | 1869                | O7-160; corner of Turnpike & Howellville Road          |
| 7  | Joseph Gowdy           | \$1            |                                 | 1870                | Right of way to Crum Creek in Willistown; Misc. 14-125 |
| 8  | By Sheriff             | \$7010         | 16+ acres                       | 8/1871              | Sheriff's deed vol. 7, p. 103 Howellville              |
| 9  | Robert Glenn           | \$560          | 4 acres 75 perches              | 8/28/1885           | E10-281; Tredyffrin; part of Henry Root's estate       |
| 10 | ?                      |                | 12+ acres                       | 1883, Breou's atlas | Tredyffrin (with Robert Glenn)                         |
| 11 | Annie Beitler          | \$8000         | 16+ acres                       | 3/1894              | D11-446, Howellville                                   |

### Hugh Steen Land Sales

| #    | Purchaser      | Cost       | Area   | Date       | Book reference & Comments                |
|------|----------------|------------|--|------------|--|
| 5    | William Ham    | \$5,050    | 17 acres 150 perches                               | 4/2/1868   | P7-509, Baptist Road (with Henry Root)   |
| 4    | William Benner | \$250      | 12 acres 103 perches                               | 6/24/1869  | T7-149, East Nantmeal (with James Guest) |
| 2    | Joseph Gowdy   | \$2549 80c | 67 acres 16 perches                                | 4/1/1870   | Y7-171, Willistown (part of S6-140)      |
| 9    | Rush Beaumont  | \$500      | 4 acres 75 perches                                 | 12/18/1868 | E10-254 Tredyffrin                       |
|      | Annie Beitler  | \$12000    | 16+ acres  | 1877       | X8-335, Howellville                      |
| 2    | Joseph Gowdy   | \$1400     | 56 acres 54 perches                                | 3/30/1893  | G11-32, Willistown (remainder of S6-140) |
| 1, 3 | J. H. Dingee   | \$21000    | 54 acres 2 roods 27 perches + 14 acres 102 perches | 2/14/1902  | G12-527; Paoli, by executors             |

In the tables above the parcel record number (#) identifies matching parcels that were purchased or sold by Hugh Steen. Note: a "rood" is a quarter of an acre, and a "perch" is a unit of lineal measure equal to 5 1/2 yards or 16 1/2 feet, with 160 square "perches" to an acre.

**Hugh Steen took out the following mortgages:**

| Mortgagee              | Amount  | Taken out | Satisfied | Book reference & Comments                             |
|------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|---|
| Joseph Corom           | \$2,000 | 1/30/1851 | 4/5/1853  | F2-352 Tredyffrin                                     |
| Daniel Abrams          | \$4,500 | 4/10/1860 | 4/7/1862  | O2-373 Willistown                                     |
| Chester Co. Hospital   | \$3,500 | 2/14/1894 | 3/13/1902 | Q4-301 Tredyffrin                                     |
| Elizabeth C. Sharpless | \$1,300 | 7/19/1894 | 2/19/1902 | E4-411 Tredyffrin: 2 tracts (54a & 0.5a) Easttown 14a |
| Nathan L. Pratt        | \$1,000 | 4/28/1896 | 2/19/1902 | Q4-477 Tredyffrin                                     |

**Hugh Steen funded the following mortgages in Chester County:**

| Mortgagor               | Amount   | Taken out | Satisfied | Book reference & Comments  |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|--|
| Mary Ann Baily, et. al. | \$800    | 1/21/1861 | 3/7/1862  | Mortgage book O2-166; Newlin & East Marlborough. Assigned to Joseph W. Hawley in N2 -457 |
| Phillip N. Steele       | \$3,500  | 3/4/1869  | 4/7/1875  | T2-382; West Nottingham  |
| Joseph Gowdy & wife     | \$2,000  | 1868      | 4/3/1883  | U2-519: Willistown   |
| Isaac Yearsley jr.      | \$4,275  | 1874      |           | B3-459; West Caln; reassignment. Assigned to Steen in P2-534                             |
| Everett N. Anderson     | \$4,000  | 1875      | 10/4/1887 | D3-321; Charlestown  |
| John Beitler & wife     | \$12,000 | 1876      | 5/11/1886 | E3-469; Howellville, Tredyffrin.   |

**References**

1. Chester County deed P5-391.
2. 'A Race After Cattle Thieves' from *The Jeffersonian* Newspaper, Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Quarterly, volume 20, #4 (October 1982).
3. Sheriff's deed, volume 7, page 103.
4. Chester County deed X8-335.
5. 'Where We Voted in the 18th and 19th Century' by Bob Goshorn, Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Quarterly, volume 26, #4 (October 1988).
6. Mortgage Book E4-318.
7. 'Howellville' by Sue Andrews, Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Quarterly, volume 39, #3 (July 2002).
8. Chester County deed D11-446.
9. The Beitler's financial troubles also affected Steen. He took out 2 mortgages in 1894 and another in 1896 (see Appendix A). These mortgages were not paid off until after Steen's death.
10. Queensware, Woodware, and Willowware were patterns of china.
11. Chester County deed O15-491.
12. 'Folk Names and Other Places No Longer on the Map of Tredyffrin and Easttown Townships: Part III', Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Quarterly, volume 17, #4 (October 1979).
13. 'Trinity remembers ...', by Barbara M. Fry, completed by C. Herbert Fry, Masthos Press, Morgantown, 2012.