

# How a Story Develops: The Mary Severn Jones Diary

Mike Bertram and Heidi Sproat

In early 2016, Mike Bertram received an email message from one Richard Dorsey who wanted help with tracing his family tree. In return for the help he received, Richard offered the Society a transcription of a 19th century diary written by his relative Mary Severn Jones. She was one of seven siblings of a noteworthy Tredyffrin Great Valley area family who lived for a while on a farm abutting Swedesford Road. The diary was started in 1860, and the first 16 pages covered the period when the family lived in Tredyffrin, before they moved to Reading.

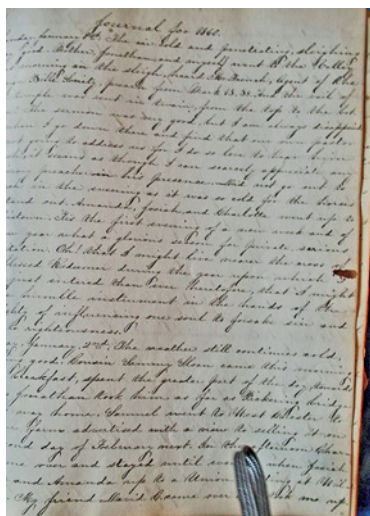
This narrative, describing how widowed mother Joanna somehow managed the family farm while raising seven children, intrigued Mike and he wanted to know more about the backstory. Mary Jones' father, Jonathan Jones, died in 1845 leaving his widow Joanna with children ranging from three to seventeen years. Somehow Joanna managed to provide for the children and gave them a good education, while also running the farm. Mary started this diary when she was 21 years old, having returned home after graduating from the Female Institute at Bucknell University.

After reading through the transcription, Mike contacted Heidi Sproat, another TEHS research volunteer, and the two discussed the possibilities of extracting additional historical information from the diary, pertaining to the Tredyffrin area, and how best to present the information to readers of the *Quarterly*. The authors decided that putting this information online in the Tredyffrin History Digital Archives section of the TEHS website (<http://thda.tehistory.org/18cTredyffrin.html>) seemed to be the most sensible location for members and website visitors to see the information presented in a logical, online, searchable fashion. To that end, Mike created a separate entry on the website's content page for Mary Severn Jones Diary, 1860 (<http://thda.tehistory.org/MaryJonesDiary/MaryJonesDiary.html>).

While Heidi devised a master index of people and place names, along with references to the respective pages quoted in the diary, Mike researched deed histories on the various

surnames and compiled a map noting property ownership at the time. He also successfully continued research into the family's ancestors.

Although the author's diary contains only 16 pages relevant to the Society's immediate geographical area, our researchers decided to explore other places and surnames mentioned in the diary. Many of these surnames might sound familiar to our readers, such as Mordecai Cornog or Dr. Rickabaugh, nearby property owners. And some of the surnames appear on the Breou's 1883 map (<http://thda.tehistory.org/MaryJonesDiary/PlacesMap.html>) that confirms property holders at that time.



Because many of the names in the diary are only first names, it was difficult to connect surnames with many of those mentioned. Heidi browsed through Census Records using various first and last names and limiting searches to Tredyffrin, successfully located several family names resulting in a few "ahah" moments. Several of the places mentioned in Mary's diary included churches—specifically, the Baptist Church of the Great Valley, the Great Valley Presbyterian Church, Malvern Baptist Church, Salem Church, and Vincent Baptist Church. Author Mary also discussed the churches' pastors. Mike was able to take many of the people

and place names in the diary and connect them to *History Quarterly* articles from years past.

We also discovered quite a bit about the Female Institute at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, and about the Roger Williams University, in Nashville, Tennessee, where author Mary (Severn) Jones served as a teacher from 1883 (?) to 1894. Mike devised a way to display each page of the diary and insert corresponding links to the people and places mentioned.

While this initially seemed to be a laborious task, the two researchers found the exercise liberating and enlightening because it was an open-ended mission: how to present the information gleaned from a handwritten diary in a cohesive manner tied in with past *Quarterly* articles. There were also

other town names to explore—Centerville, Chester Valley, Great Valley, Howellville, Paoli, Phoenixville, Pughtown, Reading, Salem, Valley Forge, West Chester, Willistown—as well as exact businesses or physical structures like Diamond Rock Hill, Malin's Store, Pickering Bridge, and the Post Office, to name a few.



Memorial plaque (c. 1925) for Mary Jones' great grandparents Joseph Jones (d. 1793) and his wife Lydia Roberts (d. 1787). *Photo courtesy of Mike Bertram.*

## Research Techniques 1

### Mike Bertram

The Society receives inquiries through our website, telephone calls, emails from requestors, and sometimes libraries who recognize the Society's familiarity with Tredyffrin and Easttown townships. The number of inquiries we receive is quite variable; months may go by with no queries, and then multiple inquiries may be received within a week. This article is the first in a series describing various research techniques used to answer these queries.

The query to be used as an illustration in this article was received via Tredyffrin Library:

*"I would like to locate a house built on Foxhill Lane in Paoli that was built and owned by Ruth and Wayne Hughes. Do you have city directories you can reference? The house was built in 1932 but perhaps they lived there for a number of years so later directories could be referenced?"*

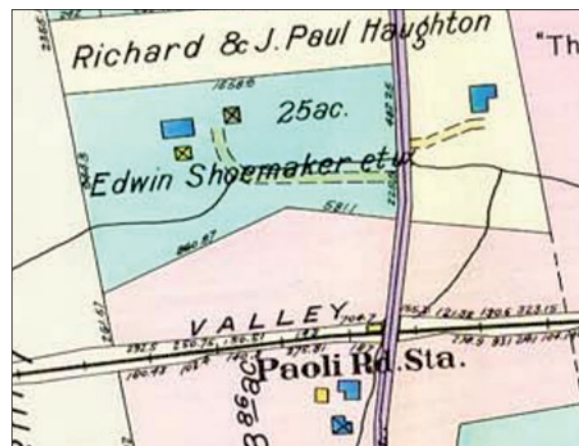
There are no Paoli directories of which I am aware. Locating Foxhill Lane on a map was the first step (I use Google Maps at [maps.google.com](https://maps.google.com)). The lane is off North

We decided to write this short article so that our readers might have an idea about how we took an historical document, in this case the Mary Jones diary, and using today's technological tools, explored possibilities for historical research and presented them to our readers. You never really know what historical resources may be "out there" until you start to investigate, or follow up on a lead. We were fortunate that we received the transcription and that our contacts Mr. Dorsey and Nan Stevens (a relative who transcribed the diary) were so forthcoming with other relevant information.

We hope you have enjoyed reading about what we did, and how we decided what to do, and why, and also hope that you take some time to read Mary Jones diary yourself. (available online at <http://thda.tehistory.org/MaryJonesDiary/MaryJonesDiary.html>) Perhaps you too have a story to add to this research, or a separate historical gem you wish to explore. As always, please send an email to [18c@tehistory.org](mailto:18c@tehistory.org) with any corrections, questions, and/or comments.

Valley Road. It was noticeable that it seemed to be a modern development given the density of houses.

The next step was to look at the historical atlases. I frequently consult Andy's Antique Atlases at <http://andysantiqueatlases.com/>. There are atlases from 1873 to 1950 in the collection, though many are railroad atlases and do not necessarily cover all of either Easttown or Tredyffrin. I used the 1933 and 1950 atlases. Neither atlas showed a Foxhill Lane, nor was there any Hughes property identified in the vicinity.



Extract from the 1933 Atlas, Plate 3, courtesy of Andy's Antique Maps; Foxhill Lane now runs through the Edwin Shoemaker property.