

Remembering Mary

By Gloria Forouzan

The only trace of her life is a brick size marker in Allegheny Cemetery with one word on it: Mary.

Years of painstaking research have resulted in enough threads to weave together an account of the remarkable life of this woman, Mary Pattison Irwin. Remembering Mary is my contribution to recognizing Women's History Month, March 2021.

On the night of March 17, 1784 Ireland's Viceroy held the first ever St. Patrick's Day Ball at Dublin Castle. The ballroom shimmered under hundreds of candles' light. For Mary Pattison, a country girl from a village in far off Northern Ireland, it must have seemed dreamlike.

Although no official account of their meeting exists, at some point Mary's gaze fell on Major John Irwin. John, a seasoned veteran of the American Revolution, was likely surrounded by admirers clamoring for tales of his time with George Washington.

Although 30-year-old Mary was engaged to a doctor, by evening's end she decided John held the promise of a future she desired. A few months later, Mary took a remarkable leap of faith and married him. The following year they left County Tyrone for America.

Drawn by the land being awarded to Revolutionary War veterans, they made their way to Pittsburgh in 1787. According to her granddaughter's account, when Mary first saw the three rivers she wisely predicted they would soon fill with boats. She well knew how much rope boats needed.

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MARY IRWIN,
*At the corner of Liberty and Third sts.
Pittsbuaurgh, Nov. 15, 1808.*

It is astounding that 234 years ago this woman from the tiny Irish village of Cookstown, envisioned that rope making would lead to prosperity in her adopted town. In that era Pittsburgh was considered a remote, frontier backwater.

To his credit John agreed with Mary's assessment, and registered their business in 1794 as John Irwin & Wife. Listing a woman on an official business document was unusual in that era.

As their ropery prospered so did their family, eventually growing to include four children. Sadly, John never recovered from the multiple wounds he received during the 1777 Paoli Massacre. With each passing year his ability to work



Mary Pattison Irwin was one of western Pennsylvania's first industrialists, and she did it all while caring for her four young children. She also played a role in our NATION'S history. In 1811 Mary Irwin made the rope for the steamboat New Orleans. This history making boat was the first of its kind to travel from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. Thousands soon took advantage of this new mode of transportation to move people, products, and goods.

diminished. Mary took on all aspects of running the business, she knew that both her family and workers relied on her. Her business acumen is evidenced by her need to relocate the ropewalk to ever larger sites due to the growing demand.

In the late 1700s workers' pay included daily rum rations. No doubt this led to problems at work sites. Mary was the first employer in Allegheny County to end the rum ration.

When John Irwin died in 1808, Mary immediately re-registered the business as Mary Irwin & Son. She sustained a highly successful enterprise despite operating in a society that limited women's freedom to engage in commerce. She must have been an able leader as her ropery generated great wealth for future generations of Irwins. The world she succeeded in was all male, from workforce, to suppliers and clients.

In 1812 Mary was ready to retire. She'd well prepared her eldest son to take over the business. But fate intervened. Oliver Hazard Perry arrived in Pittsburgh in April 1813 with a huge contract for rope that dwarfed all that Mary had ever seen. In just 4 months she made the 8,000 pounds of rope Perry needed for the navy he was assembling on Lake Erie. She sourced the hemp, hired extra workers who must have worked like demons to get the rope made in record time. Mary personally oversaw the operation, including the packing for transport up the Allegheny. It boggles that she got the cordage to Perry in time!

Mary Pattison Irwin's remarkable legacy merits our recognition.