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## Escaping the Scalping Knife

A unique engraving serves as a reminder of Pennsylvania's 'Great Runaway'

AT THE END OF A LONG COUNTRY LANE near the village of Buffalo Crossroads in Union County's Buffalo Township sits a 200-year-old farmhouse. Located on stones just under the house's easternmost roof peak are two inscriptions. One contains the initials of the original owners, Johannes and Susannah Sierer, and the year they built the structure: "J H S 1795 S N S." The other, more ambiguous, engraving is of a clock face, complete with numerals, with the hour and minute hands set at exactly 11:45.

Although more than two centuries have passed since the house was built, the story behind its unusual engravings has endured as a reminder of a deadly summer in 1778, when clashes between American Indians and frontierspeople were common.



JEFF FRAZIER

During the Wyoming Massacre in July of 1778, Iroquois raiders reportedly killed fleeing patriots after a fierce battle at Forty Fort near present-day Wilkes-Barre. The clock engraved on the Sierer farmhouse in Buffalo Township is forever frozen at 11:45 p.m.

Whenever new owners of the original Sierer farm take possession of the property, they are given two colonial artifacts that have been cherished through the years by every occupant of this historic site. The first is the original deed to the farm, which was conveyed to Edward and Joseph Shippen by Thomas and John Penn, sons of William Penn, in 1705. The second is the story of the clock face.

As the story goes, the Sierers originally lived in a log cabin just a short distance south of the present house. One night in 1778, their barking dog awakened them, and upon looking outside they spotted a stealthy band of Pennsylvania Indians approaching through their field in the moonlight. Because of the dog's timely warning, the family escaped and were spared a dangerous encounter with the Indians.

The Sierers, probably thinking it was divine intervention that saved them, wanted a permanent reminder of their safe getaway that night and, when it came time to build their new house, had a stone engraved with a clock face frozen at the precise time that their dog had warned them of the marauders.

This event took place during a period called "The Great Runaway," probably the time of greatest tribulation in Pennsylvania Indian-settler relations. After the Wyoming Massacre in Wyoming County in July of 1778, when Iroquois raiders reportedly killed fleeing patriots from a fierce battle at Forty Fort near present-day Wilkes-Barre, subsequent Indian raids occurred along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. Fearful for their lives, many settlers abandoned their homes for safer areas downriver.

"I took my own family safely to Sunbury and came back in the keel boat to secure my furniture," wrote frontiersman Robert Covenhoven from the West Branch Valley in 1778. "Such a sight I never saw in all my life. Boats, canoes, hog-troughs, rafts, hastily made of dry sticks, every sort of floating article had been put into requisition and was crowded with women, children, and plunder. The men of the settlement came down in single file on each side of the river to guard the women and children. The whole convoy arrived safely at Sunbury, leaving the entire range of farms along the West Branch to the ravages of the Indians."

Today, the engraved clock face on the old stone house in Buffalo Valley serves as a reminder of this turbulent period in our state's history, a chapter all but forgotten by most Pennsylvanians today.

—Jeff Frazier lives in Centre Hall and is the author of several volumes of *Pennsylvania Fireside Tales*.