

## Did You Know?

# BRUSH HILL...*Col. John Irwin's Mansion House*

*by Bob Cupp*

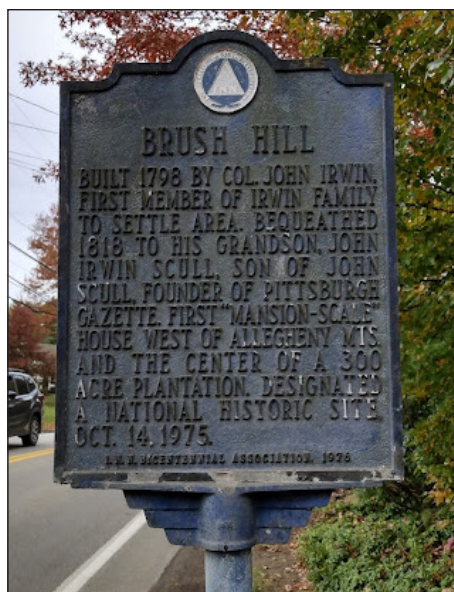
Motorists along Irwin's heavily-traveled Brush Hill Road seldom notice the weathered historical marker by the roadside. The marker honors the adjacent historic home which is known by the same name as the road, Brush Hill.

Although the historical marker doesn't attract much attention, that isn't the case with the handsome two-story sandstone house, situated perpendicular to the road.

British Army officer, John Irwin, came to Western Pennsylvania from Ireland in 1762. He was the Chief Commissary Officer for the army's western division, stationed at Fort Pitt, and married Elizabeth Cunningham, daughter of the fort's British commander. After leaving the King's service in 1769, he purchased land south of Brush Creek near Fort Walthour.

Col. Irwin erected a log building where he operated a fur trading post. It was burned by Indians in 1782. At the time, the Colonel was serving as Deputy Commissioner of Issue for the Western Division of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. Indian raids were common throughout the region that year as the war drew to a close.

Then Col. Irwin constructed a frame house on the site, but it also burned when struck by lightning. Determined to build a house "that neither the Indians nor the Devil can burn down," Irwin erected this distinctive two-story stone house of Georgian architecture at what is now 731 Brush Hill Road.



*"Brush Hill - Built 1792 by Col. John Irwin, first member of Irwin family to settle area. Bequeathed 1818 to his grandson, John Irwin Scull, son of John Scull; founder of Pittsburgh Gazette, first 'mansion-scale' house west of Allegheny Mts. and the center of a 300 acre plantation. Designated a National Historic Site, Oct. 14, 1975."*



*The home on Brush Hill Road was designed and built to withstand fire caused by lightning or Indians. (Early 1900s)*

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*John Scull founded the first newspaper west of the Alleghenies, now known as the Post-Gazette.*



*The living room boasts a warm, stone fireplace, used annually by the present owners.*



The house faced the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia Turnpike (now Pennsylvania Avenue) and had a tree-lined driveway that ran from the pike to the front entrance. Col. Irwin was instrumental in building the local segment of the highway, also known as the “State Road.”

Most of the area’s prominent early settlers visited the old stone mansion along the pike. The house’s walls were two to three feet thick. Sturdy, hand-hewn oak beams supported the floors.

Irwin also built a number of outbuildings, including a smokehouse, kitchen, washhouse, springhouse, slaves’ quarters, and a grist mill along Brush Creek. Unlike the stone house, none of these buildings have survived.

John Scull arrived from Philadelphia in 1786 to found the Pittsburgh Gazette, the first newspaper west of the Alleghenies; today it’s known as the Post-Gazette. Later that year, Scull married Colonel John Irwin’s daughter, Mary.

Col. Irwin accepted an appointment as Associate Justice of Westmoreland County. He also served as a representative in the General Assembly, and was called upon by his friend, Judge Hugh Brackenridge, to help quiet a mob of rebellious farmers during the Whiskey Rebellion.

The Colonel’s nephew, also named John Irwin, was the founder of Irwin Borough; his house remains at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Main Street.

In 1818, Col. John Irwin transferred ownership of the property, including his mansion house, to his beloved grandson and namesake, John Irwin Scull, for one dollar. The only stipulation was that he would continue to live there for his remaining years.

Col. Irwin moved his bedroom downstairs next to the library. By 1821, he’d become frail with age and resigned his position; he died the following year. Col. Irwin and his family were buried in their family burial ground, which is now the Irwin Union Cemetery.

The house remained in the Scull family until 1949, becoming known as the “Scull House.” Over the years, it went through a number of major remodeling projects. Around 1870, a six-room wing was added by George Ross Scull, Superintendent of Westmoreland Coal Co. It featured servants’ quarters, a large kitchen and butler’s pantry. It also included early indoor plumbing.

A large dance platform was added in front of the house; it was used for parties that lasted for several days. The guests arrived by carriage. The young ladies slept in the house while the gentlemen found lodging elsewhere. Irish music filled the air while rye whiskey and apple cider were served.

The house went through a number of owners; it stood vacant for a period of time and fell into disrepair. During the 1950’s, it was acquired by Dr. John Hudson and his wife, Helen Lauffer Hudson. Dr. Hudson relocated his dental

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practice here, converting the back entrance and rooms into an office and waiting room. He also removed the 1870 addition.

Later owners, Arthur and Maureen LaSalle, recognized the historical significance of the house and successfully petitioned for it to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

*Brush Hill, 1955*



Since 1977, Brush Hill has been under the loving care of present owners, Don and Dilly Miller. They took on the task of restoring the house to its former glory, starting from the ground up.

To correct structural problems, Don Miller, a retired electrical engineer, dug-out the basement, jacked-up and supported the sagging walls. He removed layers of flooring that had previously been added to level the original oak plank floors, which he then refurbished.

*An elegant staircase leads from the foyer to the upstairs bedrooms.*



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*Don and Dilly Miller bought the house in 1977 and have accumulated information about Brush Hill as well as the genealogy of the Irwin and Scull families.*

The wiring, plumbing, heating system and windows were all replaced. The house was completely insulated, all the rooms were re-plastered and the wood-work was repaired or replaced.

The Millers added three additions to the property. The garage with a 2nd floor workshop was built in 1999. A large gourmet kitchen was added in 2001. Both additions were designed to match the main house, using stone that matches it. In 2013, the 2nd floor of the side porch was closed-in and now contains a 3rd bathroom, a laundry room and a sun room.

In the process of renovating the house, the Millers made some unusual discoveries, including bear's claws and boar's teeth. They also found a vial of mustard seeds in the outer stone wall, directly above the front door at the top of the wall. Mustard seeds were known to bring good luck. The seeds were probably placed there when the house was constructed. "It's interesting to touch something that you know hadn't been touched by anyone else for two centuries," Don Miller expressed.

The Millers have accumulated an extraordinary amount of information regarding Brush Hill, as well as the genealogy of the Irwin and Scull families. Over the years, visitors have helped them piece together the house's history. The Sculls had a reunion in the area about 35 years ago. They toured the house and provided Don and Dilly with a ton of information, including their family tree. Lois Hancock, a local Scull descendent, was also a major source of knowledge.

Although the house is a private residence, the Millers are very aware of its historical value to the Irwin community and never hesitate to open their home for public display.

*A recent photograph of the home reflects the care it has been given over the years.*



It's already been on the Norwin Historical Society's Holiday House Tour four times and the couple has hosted annual parties for the tour committee and host families. Over the years, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, Scull Elementary School students and many other organizations have also toured the house.



Occasionally, people will stop and ask if they can see the house. “Once, after finding our house on a list of historic places in Pennsylvania, someone stopped here thinking this was a public place, opened the front door and walked in unannounced,” Dilly Miller said with a grin.

Although the house may appear like a museum from the outside, it’s actually a warm and cozy home inside, especially so during the holiday season. With a warm glow coming from one of the five working fireplaces and the scent of pine in the air, it’s easy to imagine that you’ve stepped back in time to a Christmas long ago.

“Both our sons have tremendous compassion for the house,” Dilly Miller explained. “Growing up here influenced them to be history majors in college. Now Ian is in the building industry and Reed is a history teacher in Santiago, Chile.

“Since it’s a historic house, it should be shared with the community,” Dilly Miller continued. “We’re just the current caretakers of the house’s distinguished history. We hope that our efforts will allow the house to survive for the enjoyment and education of future generations.”

Thanks to the Millers, Brush Hill remains a prominent part of Irwin’s heritage. Col. John Irwin would surely be pleased.





— Norwin Historical Society presents —

# Homes for the Holidays Tour

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3rd, 2022

FROM 3:30 PM TO 8:00 PM

Tickets available starting early November at the Norwin Public Library and Norwin Chamber of Commerce, or to purchase by credit card, order from our website at [www.norwinhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.norwinhistoricalsociety.org) for a \$25 donation.

V.I.P. TRANSPORT TOUR\*: \$45 includes Tour Ticket.

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We will be having A Basket Raffle at Greenhouse Winery the Night of the Tour!

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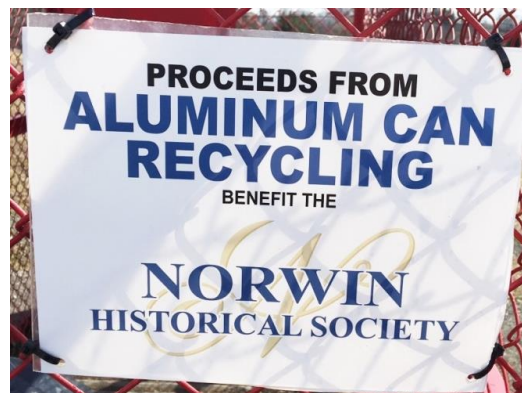
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