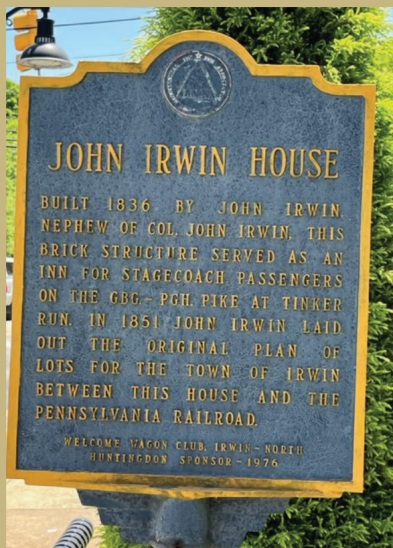


2023 FALL NEWSLETTER

Did You Know?

John Irwin's House ...It's Still in the Family

by Bob Cupp



This historical marker was erected along Main Street in 1976 to recognize the historic significance of the 1836 John Irwin House.

This old photo of John Irwin's house was taken from the old Lincoln Highway (now Pennsylvania Avenue). The iron fence also extended around the corner along Main Street.



Squire James Irwin came to America from Ireland in 1783. He settled along what is now Verdant St. in North Huntingdon near Jacksonville, and married William Fullerton's daughter, Jane. His property extended east to the Brush Hill Estate of his brother, Colonel John Irwin. James and Jane's son, John, was born October 9, 1811.

John Irwin, the founder of the town of Irwin, was raised on his father's farm. He attended school near the Long Run Church and clerked in Fullerton's Jacksonville store. John became a local merchant and, eventually, inherited his father's land, as well as part of his Uncle John Irwin's property, extending his holdings to Wardentown. Around 1830, John and his friend, William Larimer, Jr., operated a freight line on the Pittsburgh – Philadelphia Turnpike. On January 9, 1834, he married Lydia Hurst of Mt. Pleasant.

The population along the turnpike, also known as the "old state road," grew rapidly. John Irwin built his house in 1836 beside the pike near Tinker's Run. It's located at the corner of what is now Irwin's Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. It was a well-built, rectangular, red brick structure with a large front porch facing the turnpike. The massive timbers used in the construction remain in place and are visible in the basement. The building served as a hotel for passengers on his stagecoach line, "The Good Intent," that ran from Stewartsville to Youngstown.

The house had a circular driveway, lined with hitching posts and poplar trees. Inside was a large bar room with a fireplace, a sitting room, dining room and pantry. Several out-buildings, including a wash house, smoke house, a bake oven and servants' quarters, have since been demolished. There was also a barn across the street near what is now the entrance to Irwin Park.

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Using his house as the base for linear measurements, John Irwin laid out the first plan of lots for the town of Irwin in 1851. The Pennsylvania Railroad was completed

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ed through the area the following year. The lots extended from the railroad south to Fifth Street and as far east as Chestnut Street.

Then known as Irwin Station, hundreds of new residents were attracted by the town's strategic location between the railroad and the turnpike, along with development of the area's coal and gas industries. In 1864, the Borough of Irwintown was incorporated; finally, in 1884, the Post Office changed the name to Irwin.

Although the hotel once did a thriving business, when the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal opened and, later, the Pennsylvania Railroad, John Irwin's stagecoach business began to decline. As the coal industry was becoming prosperous, he began selling his land for \$100 an acre.



The front of the house faces Pennsylvania Avenue, which has been known over the years as the Lincoln Highway, the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia Turnpike, and the Greensburg-Pittsburgh Pike.

John Irwin died June 7, 1875. After his death, his only son, Thomas Irwin, moved into his father's house. For years, people referred to the house at the corner of Main and Pennsylvania Avenue as "Tom Irwin's Corner." Later descendants, George Irwin and his daughter, Lydia Irwin Altman, also lived in the home. Ownership passed from Lydia to her son, George Altman, and his wife, Edie McCormick Altman, who had the following children: George II, Sandra Altman Jenkins and Edward Altman.



This 1872 "servant's call box" remains in the kitchen today. The family could push a "call button" at four different locations in the house. When the bell rang, a number would flip down, identifying the room where the servant's assistance was needed.

In John Irwin's time, friendship and teamwork were necessary if the community was to prosper. That spirit carried over to the 20th century. Edie Altman once described what the house was like when she was dating her future husband, George, prior to their marriage in 1939. "Irwin was much more social in those days. There were always bridge parties and lots of entertaining at the house." The prominent Irwin families who were entertained there included the Gauts, Wilsons, Flemings and Hockensmiths."

There was a "call button" in the dining room. The family would simply push the button when they were ready for the servants. Additional call buttons were located in the living room, at the front door and in an upstairs bedroom.

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Edie Altman also recalled that, "In the winter, they did the wash in the cellar and carried it all the way up to the attic to dry. Because the heat rose, it was very warm up there." You can still see the hooks used to anchor the clothes lines, attached to the horse hair plaster walls. The sturdy oak plank floor boards remain in the attic, just as they were when the house was built.



Hundreds of cars pass the house daily along Irwin's busy Main Street. John Irwin's stately old home is admired by locals and visitors alike.

Over the years, the house has undergone extensive remodeling. A sun room, kitchen and servants' quarters were added on the Main Street side of the building, and a first floor bathroom was added. The out-buildings eventually outlived their usefulness and were torn down. The grand old house has changed quite a bit over the years, but the original masonry and timber beams are still in excellent condition, and it remains a rock-solid fixture in the Irwin community today.

The John Irwin family and descendants lived in the house continuously until Lydia Irwin Altman passed away in 1976. Edie Altman recalled that, "After she died, we didn't know what to do with the place. It was too big for us." The only thing for certain was that they wanted to keep the house in the family. Finally, after the house sat empty for a few years, Irwin Real Estate approached the family and convinced them to allow some renovations so they could open an office there.

Other businesses also occupied rooms in the house for periods of time. The first such venture actually occurred in 1863 when John George opened the town's first store in what was then John Irwin's residence. Since 1980, a bridal shop, a women's lingerie and jewelry shop, a country variety store, a craft shop, antique shops and several other businesses have occupied various rooms in the house.



Sandy Altman Jenkins, John Irwin's great-great-great-granddaughter, opened Ye Olde Teddy Bear Shoppe in what was once her grandmother's sun room. The entrance was from Main Street. (2005 Photo)

In 1984, Sandy Altman Jenkins, John Irwin's great-great-great-granddaughter, opened Ye Olde Teddy Bear Shoppe in what was her grandmother's sun room. Sandy remembers visits to her grandmother's house as a young girl. "When we came to visit, we always entered the house through the sun room. It was full of green wicker furniture and oriental rugs."

When the craft shop moved out, she expanded her business into the living room. What changes that room has witnessed over the years! It went from stagecoach inn bar room to an elegant family living room to a teddy bear lover's paradise. You could find almost any kind of teddy bear imaginable here, and if it wasn't here, Sandy would try to find it for you. She also had a wide assortment of other plush animals and collectible dolls.

Ye Olde Teddy Bear Shoppe finally closed around 2008. Currently, the fol-

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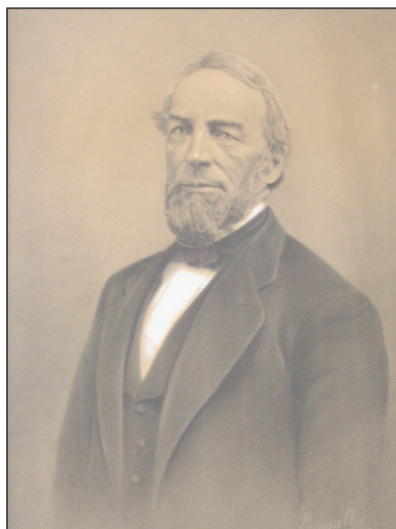
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This is the main entranceway on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the house. It's decorated with vintage photos of Sandy Irwin Jenkins' ancestors. (2023 Photo)

lowing businesses occupy the John Irwin House at 624 Main Street: Rico Counseling, Rana's Music Studio, and CJ's Photography

Sandy and her husband, Bill Jenkins, took over the home in 2014 and proceeded to make improvements/renovations from the basement to the attic. They restored original light fixtures and redecorated the main entranceway, eliminating the existing wallpaper. Using a collection of recently discovered, newly-framed Irwin family pictures, the entranceway tells the story of the family's history. The old family photos are contrasted with more modern ones from Sandy's travels. Several landscaping projects have also been completed and the house's exterior has been repainted. More projects are in the planning stages.



John Irwin's presence remains in the house today. A large, distinguished portrait hangs in the hallway leading to the main entranceway on Pennsylvania Avenue. It's almost as though he's still overseeing the commercial ventures run from the house. John would, undoubtedly, be pleased to see that his stately home remains in the family after all these years.



The massive oak timbers used in the home's construction remain visible in the basement. They don't make them like they used to!

THE END

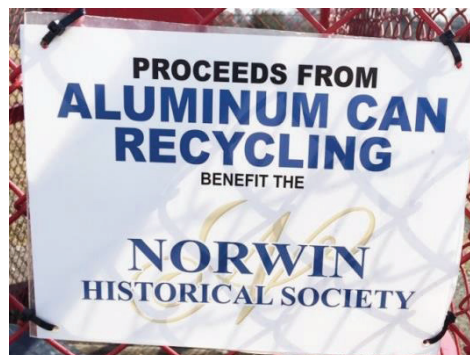


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- **St. Agnes Church Parking Lot**
- **Rear of Straw Pump Fire Dept.**
- **Irwin Playground Parking Lot**
- **L&L Fleatique in Adamsburg**



THANK YOU!



2023 FALL NEWSLETTER

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