



Rose Tree Tavern today



The Hunter House



Hunter Farm Map

The MURDER of SQUIRE HUNTER

“If I kill the witness to a will, does that invalidate it?” How many people have asked that question throughout history, and how many have followed up on it with action? And how much misery has that combination of greed and evil caused in the world? One of the earliest reported murders in Newtown Square resulted from that question and the murderer found his answer at the wrong end of a rope in a field outside the city of Chester.

Edward Hunter Sr., grandson of one of the earliest settlers in Newtown, lived on a farm near the present day Teca restaurant in 1817. He and his wife, Hannah Maris, had raised two sons and five daughters on this farm and while Hannah had died and his sons had moved off, he still had a 10-person household in the 1810 census and so many of his daughters were still at home.

Hunter had been appointed as a Justice of the Peace in 1791 and was still serving as such in 1817. As a mark of respect for the office, he was called “Squire” Hunter. A justice of the peace was the small town judge of the times and helped people with day to day legal issues. Typically, he was not a lawyer but a learned man who was respected in the community.

In February of 1817, Squire Hunter was summoned to the bedside of Isaiah Worrell near the Rose Tree Tavern in Upper Providence to witness his will. The owner of the tavern, Isaac Cochran, was there as well and also witnessed the will. Squire Hunter then made his way back home about three miles along the Newtown Street Road. Isaiah Worrell died shortly afterward, leaving one surviving son and three daughters, including daughter, Martha, and her husband, John Craig. His will was promptly submitted for probate and in reading it, Martha and John were upset with what she was to receive and so filed a challenge to the will. Then as now, the law can move slowly and so a hearing was scheduled for August of that year.

That left John Craig with too much time on his hands to ponder what to do about the will chal-

lenge. Not wanting to wait and risk an adverse result, he decided to put his thumb on the scale of justice.

On Saturday afternoon, July 19, 1817, 69-year-old Squire Hunter left his house and walked to the barn to mount his horse. There was a loud explosion and a flash of light behind him. Hunter thought he had been struck by lightning. His daughters rushed out to find their father on the ground, bleeding from a bullet wound to his back, right above his left hip. He was taken inside the house and the girls called for help. A search in the vicinity turned up an old musket hidden in nearby bushes from where the shot was fired. But otherwise, there was no trace of the person who had laid in wait and pulled the trigger. Squire Hunter lingered several days, but the damage was beyond repair by 19th-Century doctors. He died the following Monday and was buried in the burying ground at the Newtown Square Quaker Meeting house.

The old musket must have had some distinguishing characteristics, as it was recognized as belonging to John Craig. As it turns out, John Craig never came home that day and, in fact, disappeared. And everyone recognized that John Craig had a motive. The hunt was on.

So how would you search for someone in 1817, in a day without cameras for photos or any type of mass communications? Squire Hunter’s sons took action, and in August had handbills printed, and ran advertisements in area newspapers:

“Stop the murderer! Whereas, John Craig, of Charlestown township, Chester County, PA, did on the 19th of July, 1817, wilfully and maliciously shoot Edward Hunter, Esquire, of Newtown, Delaware County. This is to give notice that the sum of \$300 will be paid by the subscribers for apprehending and bringing to justice the said John Craig. He is a blacksmith by trade, about five feet ten inches high, stoop-shouldered, stout build, a little

knock-kneed, very much sunburnt, freckled, thick lips, sandy complexion, large whiskers; had on when he left home light nankeen pantaloons, snuff-colored cloth coat, green oil cloth on his hat and shoes, but it is most likely he has changed his dress, as he took a bundle with him.”

That did the trick. In early September, a man hired to chop wood in Easton, Pennsylvania recognized his fellow chopper from the description in the ad and turned him in. Craig was seized and brought back to the prison in Chester to be held for trial. He was indicted for murder, and when he could not afford a lawyer, two local lawyers were assigned to provide a defense. At the trial at the old courthouse in Chester in April 1818, “... the commonwealth examined forty-seven witnesses, and so admirably had the testimony been sifted that the prosecution succeeded in tracing Craig from the moment he took the gun in his hands until his final apprehension at Easton.” After a five-day trial, the jury retired and after four hours brought back a verdict of “guilty.” As the historian Ashmead noted, “for fifteen minutes, while Judge Ross wrote his address to and sentence of the prisoner, the silence was so profound that the scratching of the quill-pen his honor was using could be heard in every part of the room.”

Two months later, Craig was marched out of his jail cell next to the old courthouse in Chester, and helped into a cart, containing his coffin, and driven by the hangman. They rode out to the gallows in Caldwell’s meadow, near a stream called Munday’s Run. Upon arrival, the public had gathered to hear three ministers offer prayers for his soul; and then “Craig, kneeling on his coffin, offered a prayer aloud, his voice showing no indications of fear, then arising he spoke to the assemblage, and in an earnest manner warned his hearers to avoid the sins of lying, swearing, and stealing, but more especially to refrain from raising their hands against the life of a fellow-man. In conclusion, he acknowledged that he was guilty of the crime for which he was about to suffer.” The rope was well measured and tied, and justice was sure and swift.

In a written statement, Craig had admitted that the murder was to eliminate witnesses. He had also tried to murder the other witness but had never gotten a clear shot. And in the supreme irony, several months later the court heard the challenge to Isaiah Worrell’s will and set it aside as invalid because Worrell was on his deathbed and “in extremis” at the time.

The Hunter family spread far and wide, with the Squire’s son, Edward Jr., becoming one of the earliest leaders and Presiding Bishop of the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City. And some Hunter descendants remain in Newtown today, including Marple Newtown High School history teacher Ashley Hunter, and District Justice Lee Hunter, serving the community in the same role as his first cousin (5 times removed!), Squire Edward Hunter.