

Who is Dennis Kelly?

Dennis Kelly was born in Trubach, Donegal, Ireland in July of 1779.

His wife Mary Boyle was born in Donaghmore, Donegal in 1783. They married in Ireland in 1804, at the ages of 25 and 21 respectively. They arrived in Philadelphia in 1806 with their one-year-old daughter, Margaret.

At this time Pope Pius VII will not create the Diocese of Philadelphia for another 2 years. Thomas Jefferson was President. King George III was the King of England, and the Victorian age will not begin for another 30 years.

In 1809, at \$3.50 per person, the Kelly family left Philadelphia for Pittsburgh with a dream of going west and owning a ranch with horses and cattle. They never made it to Pittsburgh. "One of the passengers was a very vulgar man, and of all the people in the world, God was about to express His Will through this fellow". Mrs. Kelly had heard enough and she refused to continue, so they got off the wagon.

It is not know where they got off, but with 61 taverns along the 66 miles of the Lancaster Turnpike, they probably didn't have far to walk. It is suspected that it was in the area of Ardmore. They would have their choice of places like "Ye Olde Buck Tavern, which Dennis Kelly would one day own. The Buck Tavern was sold in 1969 to be replaced by a "Hot Shoppes Restaurant". Today there is a Lexus Dealership there.

They would eventually find their way to the Villanova area.

It is recorded by Dennis Kelly's daughter, Mrs. Mary Ott that the Kelly's second child Hannah was born while living at John Guyger's place, which is now part of Villanova University.

Dennis Kelly's first job, however was at a dam mill on Cobb's Creek, near present day St Denis. There were ponds along the creek to hold the water, which would be released to furnish a head of water to turn the mills. One large pond was on Merwood Park, where the creek runs behind the houses on Cherry Lane. Another was located where Karakung Swim Club is today. The last of the ponds used by Dennis Kelly was further down by Manoa Rd. This was known as Kelly's Pond, and was famous for winter ice skating. High School students and others who walk along Mill Rd, either to get to school or for taking a stroll probably never think about it, but they are using one of the oldest roads in the country. As a young laborer, Dennis' work along the creek was disrupted by the stampers at Nitre Hall Powder Mills. Later in life, as was the case with each place Dennis worked, he would eventually own Nitre Hall, which is still located on Karakung Drive just beyond Mill Rd. Nitre Hall Powder Mills earned a reputation as a high quality producer of black powder, used in the manufacturing of gun powder. As on of the largest producers in the country, they were a major competitor of E.I. DuPont. Mr. DuPont praised Nitre Hall's products, but remarked that they were inferior to his.

Having been apprenticed to a linen mill as a boy in Ireland, Dennis Kelly noticed a lack of cotton and woolen mills in the area. He was well trained in the milling process and soon realized that this was how he would make his fortune.

As an Irish Catholic, Dennis Kelly was virtually alone. There were others spread out in Garrett Hill, Radnor and Villanova, but these were exceptions. The Welsh Quakers were the major landowners. If Dennis Kelly were going to succeed, he would need to study the customs and manners of these people. After working long hours at the mills, he would meet with them to cultivate their friendship. In time, a large area of the Welsh Tract would be taken up by St. Denis Parish.

As America was growing, so was the demand for textiles. Dennis Kelly had plans to grow along with them. The success of the new mill, and additional purchases of mills marked a change in the socio-economic pattern in Delaware County. The Irish immigrant was able to break through the patterns set by the Welsh Quakers.

As his wealth increased, Dennis Kelly invested in real estate. He owned 124 acres of land on the hillsides which rolled down to Cobb's Creek. This tract of land ran west of Eagle Rd. to what is now Merion's East course and between Cobb's Creek and Darby Rd. It was a parcel of land at the top of the hill which he donated for the establishment of St. Denis' Church and Cemetery. The surrounding land, eventually belonged to Mrs. Mary Ott, Dennis Kelly's daughter. Her farmhouse still stands down around the corner on Cherry Lane.

From a young laboring family man to a country gentleman, from humble beginnings to a very generous land donation, the legacy of Dennis Kelly and St. Denis' parish is still flourishing. Those of us who grew up here, and those who still live here have every right to be as proud as Mr. Kelly would be, at how far we've come.

The summer of 1864 was a sad one for the residents of the area. The figure of Dennis Kelly was missing from his usual haunts along the valley he loved so much. In the 55 years since the Kelly's arrived in this country, generations had come to love and respect this man. On Wednesday, July 20th, Mr Kelly's health took a turn for the worse. Neighbors suspected that Mr. Kelly caught a chill on a recent visit to town, and perhaps he was not dressed warmly enough. The doctor came out to "the Mansion", as it was called, to leech Mr. Kelly, but he was too weak for the treatment. It was Thursday morning, July 21st, 1864. Dennis Kelly died at age 85.

The solemn Requiem Mass ended, and for the last time, the benefactor of St. Denis left his beloved church. After the casket was blessed, it was carried down the very narrow aisle, barely more than a yard wide, hardly wide enough for the coffin. While the rain poured on the umbrellas and on the vestments of the priest, the celebrant intoned:

“May the angels take you to paradise
May the Martyrs come to welcome you on your way
And lead you to the Holy City, Jerusalem.
May the choir of Angels welcome you, and with
Lazarus who once was poor,
May you have Everlasting Rest”