

The “Genealogy” of your House and Land

by

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In recent years people, especially those who own property in historic neighborhoods, have become interested in learning about the previous owners and determining when their house was built. Although genealogy refers strictly to an investigation of one’s ancestors and relatives the techniques used in tracing the chain of ownership of your house and land are somewhat similar to genealogical research especially in the sense that legal records filed in courthouses are the primary sources of information.

Union County residents who want to pursue such research will need to use the resources in the Union County Courthouse in Lewisburg and the Northumberland County Courthouse in Sunbury. Most of the research will be done in the Register and Recorder’s offices that are charged with recording deeds, mortgages, wills and some other legal documents. In some cases it might be necessary to visit the Prothonotary’s offices that are charged with maintaining records of court proceedings.

Another very useful tool is the 1868 atlas of Union and Snyder Counties.¹ This is a cadastral atlas which means that it shows the names of the owners of all properties on which structures have been erected. This atlas was reprinted in 1975 and a copy of the reprint is available at the Union County Historical Society.² A copy of the original printing is available for inspection in the Union County Prothonotary’s office. The original is somewhat easier to read than the reprint. In either case a magnifying glass will be helpful.

If your house is an old one it will almost surely be necessary to search tax records to determine when it was built. This is the most difficult aspect of the research.

¹ Beers, D. G., compiler, *Atlas of Union and Snyder Counties Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia PA: Pomeroy and Beers, 1868. Reprinted by The Mifflinburg Telegraph, 1975.

² In addition to a reference copy, the Union County Historical Society has a limited number of the reprints available for sale.

Getting Started

The starting point for your research is the most recent deed. If you are researching a property that you do not own or if for any other reason you do not have the deed you will have to go to the Union County Assessor's office in the Union County Courthouse in Lewisburg. All you need to know is the location of the property and a clerk will be able to tell you the Deed Book and page number where the deed is recorded.

All recorded deeds can be found in the Register and Recorder's office in the Courthouse. This office is in the process of computerizing the deeds so you will have to ask a clerk to show you how to use the computer and make copies. Since the computerizing is incomplete you will eventually have to search for deeds recorded on microfiche. A clerk can show where the microfiche are located and how to use the microfiche reader and make copies. (Having done courthouse research in over 50 counties in 17 states I can assure you that Union County Courthouse officials are among the most helpful and knowledgeable to be found.)

Every deed contains a lot of legalese that is of no importance to your search. The three most important things you need are the names of the *grantor* (seller) and the *grantee* (buyer), the description of the property, and the *recital*. The recital is a passage that refers to one or more previous owners and in most cases a reference to where (book and page number) the most recent previous deed was recorded. You may not wish to make copies of the entire deed but you should copy any page that contains the aforementioned information so that you can compare deeds to ensure that you are staying on the right track. The deed will also include the date of the transaction and the selling price. Part of a deed is shown in Figure 1. The grantors and grantees are named in the second paragraph as well as the indentation at the upper left. The description of the property is in the fourth paragraph. The recital is in the fifth paragraph.

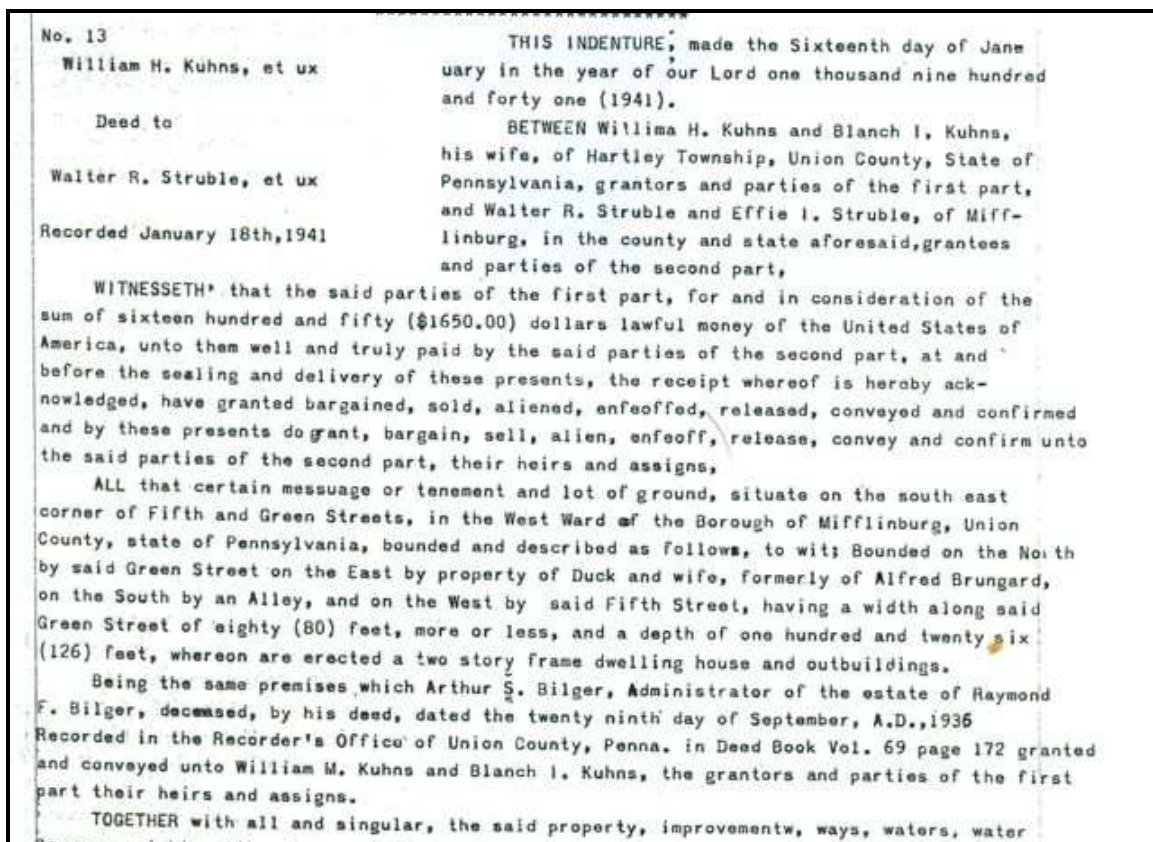


Figure 1

Overcoming Obstacles

Ideally every deed will contain all the information you need to continue your search but that is extremely unlikely. The most common obstacle is the failure in a recital to indicate the location of a previous deed. In fact, there is no legal obligation to record deeds and many were not recorded, especially in those days before the invention of the automobile when a trip to the courthouse might have taken up too much valuable time. Nevertheless, in most cases this obstacle can be overcome.

The two examples that follow refer to properties in Mifflinburg. However, the techniques used apply equally to properties located in any town with numbered lots and to a lesser degree to properties outside of towns.

Consider the Kuhns-to-Struble deed shown in Figure 1. The recital in the fifth paragraph tells you that Raymond Bilger was a previous owner. Although

that is not actually the case, let us suppose that when the administrator of Bilger's estate sold to Kuhns there was no indication in that deed telling how Raymond Bilger acquired the property.

In this case the first option is to consult a Grantee Index. Since Bilger's administrator sold to Kuhns in 1936 Bilger obviously bought the property before that so you would have to look at a Grantee Index that covers grantees whose surnames begin with B and years prior to 1936. There are two of these, one spanning the years 1813 – 1924 and one beginning with 1925 so you begin by looking at the more recent one. (These indexes are shelved toward the back of the Register and Recorder's office on the left hand side.)

TO LOCATE NAMES IN INDEX						
Determine the first key letter following the initial letter in the Family Name for which you are searching. Find the section number in the column headed by said key letter, opposite the given name initial desired. Names not containing a key letter after the initial letter in the Family Name, will be located under "Misc." All names other than those of individuals will be located under "CORPORATIONS, ETC." Always omit the article "The."						
Given Name Initials	Key Letters and Section Numbers					
	l	m	n	r	t	Misc.
ABC	11	12	13	14	15	16
DEF	21	22	23	24	25	26
GHI	31	32	33	34	35	36
J	41	42	43	44	45	46
KLMNO	51	52	53	54	55	56
PQRS	61	62	63	64	65	66
TUVWXYZ	71	72	73	74	75	76

Figure 2

The first page of the index explains how to use it. (See Figure 2). Use the Key Letter l since that is the first key letter in the name Bilger. Raymond Bilger's given name begins with R so going down the l column to the PQRS row you see that you have to look at Section 61 in the part of the book that contains surnames beginning with B. Figure 3 shows the top of the first page of Section 61 and you quickly find Raymond Bilger's name in the third row. You see that he bought a property in Mifflinburg from Emerson Albright and that the deed was

GRANTEE		GRANTOR	RECORDED	YEAR OF RECORD	LOCATION OR NATURE OF INSTRUMENT
Book	Page		Book	Page	
Bilger	Robert F.	Rufus F. Boop et al	55	112	1926 Hartley
Bilger	Robert F.	Olin B. Oelsel et al	"	113	" "
Bilger	Raymond P.	Emerson D. Albright	"	212	" Mifflinburg
Blair	Robert W.	Laura E. Albright	"	220	" 2 tracts 13-14-16

Figure 3

recorded in Book 55 on page 113. When you find that deed it is important that you look at the description of the property to ensure that it is the same property that his administrator sold to Kuhns. It is, but if it had not been, you would continue looking in this Grantee Index or the earlier one for other properties that Bilger purchased.

Using the 1868 Atlas

Now let us suppose that you could not find a previous deed by using the Grantee Index. In that situation the 1868 cadastral atlas can be a very useful tool although it is only useful when you have encountered an obstacle after that year (1868). The atlas will enable you to determine who owned the property in 1868 and you can then attempt to trace the ownership forward. The first 15 pages contains maps of the ten townships in Union County plus the six towns, *viz.*, Lewisburg, Uniontown (Allenwood), Hartleton, New Berlin, Mifflinburg and New Columbia, which were laid out in numbered lots. Properties in towns laid out in numbered lots are easier to trace than others. The difficulties involved in tracing farmland will be discussed later.

As an example let us assume that you have encountered an obstacle in trying to trace ownership of a property on the southeast corner of 5th Street and Green Street in Mifflinburg. When you find the map of Mifflinburg in the atlas the first thing you notice is that the names of the streets have changed. 5th Street was then called High Street and Green Street was called Thomas Street (See Figure 4). The atlas indicates that the owners in 1868 were R. and U. Weirick.

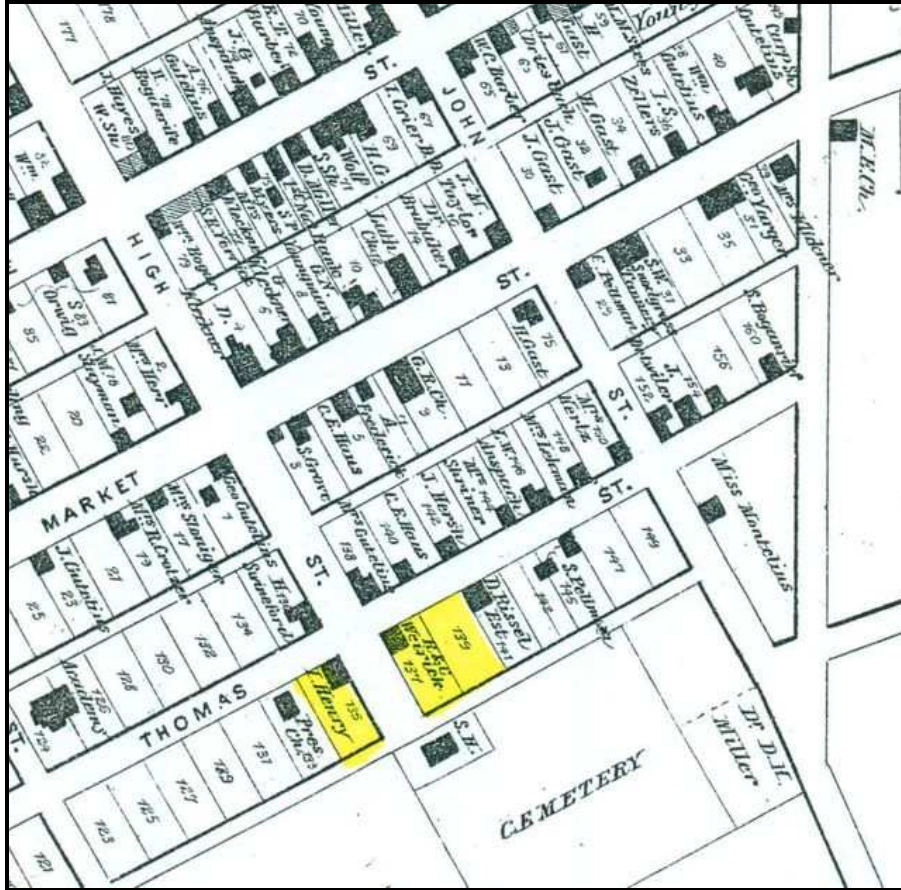


Figure 4

Now you can use a Grantor Index to try to determine when this property was sold. The Grantor Index for this time period has a different system from the Grantee Index you used earlier (See Figure 5). You are looking for a grantor named Weirick. The first key letter in Weirick is r so you have to go to Section 4 under the letter W. The top of the first page of Section 4 is shown in Figure 6. Here you see that the surnames beginning with W and having r as the first key letter are sub-divided into five groups based on whether or not there are other key letters in the name after the r. There are no other key letters in Weirick so you find the name in the first column under R. The number 3 opposite the name directs you to page 3.

In using this index there are three important things that enable you to use it efficiently. First, the next to last column indicates the year when the transaction was recorded (not always the same as the year of the transaction). Since the Weirichs owned the property in 1868 you can quickly scan that column

TO LOCATE NAMES IN THE INDEX

Determine the first Key-letter after the initial letter in the Surname. In the column headed by the Key-letter in the name for which you are searching, the number of the section is designated where the name will be found. Surnames not containing a Key-letter, are found in the section designated by the number in the column headed "Misc." All names other than those of individuals are found in the section designated by the number in the column headed "Corps., Etc."

Key Letters	l	m	n	r	t	Misc.	Corps., Etc.
Section Numbers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Figure 5

GRANTOR INDEX

4
1

All Names contained in this section are arranged in these columns. The number following a name indicates the page of this section where all entries of that name may be found.

Frey	R	1 Weaver	5 Wareham	9 Wirth	10
Whear		1 Weeber	5 Wornly	9 Wirtz	10
Wheir		1 Weiser	6 Wornley	9 Werth	10
Whears		1 Wisser	6 Woernly	9 Worth	10
Whear		1 Weisor	6 Wickersham	9 Wertz	10
Weire		1 Wasser	8	R H	Wartz
Worck		2 Weiker	8 Warntz	9 Warty	12
Ward		2 Weykar	8 Warren	9 Ferritt	12
Wbary		2 Wiker	8 Warner	9 Wertman	12
Weary		2 Woodruff	8 Woerner	9 Wharton	13
Warford		3 Woodward	8 Warrenner	9 Weikert	8
Weirick		3	R L	Worden	9
Worick		3 Worley	8 Waring	10	
Weirich		3 Warley	8 Woodring	10	
Wirick		3	R M	R T	
Werick		3 Wireman	8 Wright	10	
Wardasee		5 Weirman	8 Wirt	10	
Watschuck		5			

Figure 6

and eliminate earlier records. Second, the grantors are separated into three columns based on their given names. The third of these covers letters Q-Z so this is the column you need to use in looking for names beginning with R or U. Finally the last column gives the locations so you can ignore everything except Mifflinburg. Thus, it is not until you get to page 4 that we find appropriate entries (See Figure 7).

Weirick	Mary A		Derr Geo L	V 34	1872	P of A
Weirick		Robt	Lytle Chas H	V 316	1873	Mifflnbg
Weirick	John	al	Union Co Recdr	V 499	1873	P of A
Weirick	Mary	al Saml	ux Glover Robt V	W 585	1875	Hart Tp
Weirick	Danl	ux	Kleckner Michael	X 618	1877	Di of Asgmt Tps
Weirick	Daniel By Asgn	al	Yarger John L	Y 352	1878	Limestn & Lewis Tps
Weirick	Catharine By		Yarger John L	Y 352	1878	Limestn & Lewis
Weirick	Mary	al Saml	ux Beck Saml L	CC 85	1884	Asgmt
Weirick	Harriet N	al Wa H	al Wilson Jane M	EE 574	1888	P of A Hart Tp
Weirick	Harriet N	al Wa H	al Wilson David B	EE 577	1888	Hartn So & Tp
Weirick	Harriet N By	Trus & al	Wa H By Trus & Wilson Sarah L	EE 581	1888	Hartn So & Hart
Weirick		Robt	Heise Wm A	NN 256	1902	Mifflnbg
Weirick		Robert By Exr	Brown Ralph F	OO 78	1904	Mifflnbg
Weirick		Uriah	Weirick Franklin Exr al	Ms 3 435	1905	Rel
Weirick	Harriet L		Weirick Franklin Exr al	Ms 3 435	1905	Rel
Weirick		Robert By Exr	Gutellus Flaher	OO 264	1905	Mifflnbg
Weirick	Kate A By Treas		Loas Amnon A	OO 469	1905	Lewis Tp
Weirick		Robert By Exr	Kostenbader David H	OO 545	1905	Mifflnbg
Weirick		Robert By Exr	Yohn David	PP 111	1906	Mifflnbg

Figure 7

Now you can begin looking at the deeds whose book and page numbers appear in the sixth and seventh columns. There are six of them so you will have to read the description in each one until you find one that matches the last deed found earlier before you met an obstacle in trying to trace the property back in time. You can continue to use the Grantor Index to trace the property forward in time and hopefully reach the point where you had encountered the obstacle. For example, in this case the correct deed is the third one. The grantee in that deed is Ralph F Brown so you could now continue the search by looking for his name in the Grantor Index.

After finishing the process you can then go back to the appropriate Grantee Index and continue tracing ownership back in time beginning with the Weiricks, using recitals when they appear. If all goes well you will reach a point at which you find a recital to a sale prior to 1813 with a deed recorded in Northumberland County. Then the search continues in Sunbury.

The Grantor and Grantee Indexes in Northumberland County use a somewhat different system from those in Union County but with the experience you have gained already you should have no problem figuring it out. Here you will have to look in the original deed books that are stored in the basement. You

can obtain a key to the storage rooms at the main desk in the Register and Recorder's office. The earliest deed books can be found in a second room to the left after you enter. There's a copy machine but you might have difficulty using it.

Properties Outside of Towns with Numbered Lots

Generally speaking, town lots are of uniform, easily described dimensions. Other properties, especially farmland, are usually irregular in shape and descriptions found in deeds are more complicated. Farmland has often been subdivided, either to divide it among heirs of the original owner or parts of it have been sold off to create building lots of unusual shapes.

Farmland in Pennsylvania is generally described in deeds using the system of "metes and bounds" which uses compass directions and distances along with the names of adjoining landowners and sometimes geographical features. The directions and distances are normally spelled out in words.

The following is an example from an 1843 deed for land in Hartley Township. (To save space I have given the distances numerically and used the abbreviations N, S, E and W for the directions and ° for degrees.)

"...Beginning at a post thence by land of Thomas Barber N 8° E 313 perches to a post thence by land of George Rhule S 64° W 67.3 perches to a post thence by land of David Stitzer S 3° W 69.2 perches to a post N 87½° W 44.5 perches to a post thence by land of William Frederick S 2° E 85 perches to a post S 11° E 38 perches to a post N 79° E 12.6 perches to a post S 7° E 92.2 perches to a post thence by land of John Shively S 83° E 29.5 perches to the place of Beginning Containing 105 Acres..." (1 perch = 1 rod = 16.5 feet).

Software exists that can be used to sketch the outlines of properties like this. Although it is time consuming you can also sketch it by hand using a protractor and ruler using ½ mm = 1 perch as your scale. However, a sketch is not necessary.

You can trace the ownership of farmland such as this using the same techniques described above for town lots. Comparing the description from one deed to another is more time consuming and there are a few problems that you might encounter. You might notice minor differences in the number of degrees. This is because compass bearings are based on magnetic north and the position

of the magnetic pole shifts back and forth over time. You can ignore these minor differences.

Another problem is that sometimes the clerk who recorded the deed made an error and omitted one of the courses. Errors of this nature can be easily spotted and ignored. You should also not be concerned about differences in the names of some adjoining landowners since this is merely an indication of a transfer of ownership.

Sometimes a new survey is made by going in the opposite direction around the boundaries. That changes the compass bearings and reverses the order of the courses. For example, using the tract in the example above the last course would be first in the new survey and the direction would be N 83° W instead of S 83° E. Similarly, the first course would be last in the new survey and the direction would be S 8° W instead of N 8° E.

Virtually no farmland tract in Union County has remained intact from the day it was first settled until today. For example, in the deed cited above the description is followed by these words, "It being part of a larger tract of land..." This is followed by a recital indicating the location of the deed that was executed when that larger tract was sold. Reference to that deed enables you to continue your search.

Finally, if your search has been successful you will eventually find a deed that refers to a *patent*. In this context a patent is a deed that was executed by either the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania or the Proprietors of Pennsylvania, i.e. the heirs of William Penn as grantors and a private citizen as the grantee. Patents can be found at the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. You can also obtain copies of original surveys and warrants, documents that gave permission to have a survey made. For more information visit the web site by typing PA Land Records and then click on Land Records – Home – Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

When was Your House Built?

If you are lucky your house might be one of the sites listed in Historic Preservation Plan of Union County. This loose-leaf booklet is available for

inspection at the Union County Historical Society. Most of these sites are in towns and many are commercial properties but there are some farm houses. It includes addresses, photographs and descriptions of hundreds of sites throughout the county. The descriptions often include the date when the structure was built, the names of the contractors and the person for whom it was built, but there is no guarantee that this information is accurate.

The best way to determine when your house was built is to use tax records. However, you first need to limit the search of these records to a time period that you can determine using the deeds you have copied. The descriptions in the deeds always refer to structures on the land if there were any. You need to find the earliest deed that contains a reference to a house on the land and the previous one which contains no reference to a house. The dates of these two deeds determine the time period that you need to search. The name of the grantor in the later deed tells you the name of the owner when the house was built.

The tax records are available on microfilm at the Union County Historical Society. Depending on the time period you are searching you might encounter two types of assessments. A part of the first page of the triennial assessment for East Buffalo Township in 1814 is shown in Figure 8. All names of residents are

East Buffalo Triennial Assessment for 1814					Valuations			Tax
Occupants Names	Owners	Acres	Buildings & adjoining lots	Real	Personal	Real	Personal	Tax
Anderson James	Widow Beaty			1	Weaver	12	100	3 25
Stuple Christopher	John Seabolt			1	Weaver	12	100	3 25
Durant Abraham		151	LH & Barn	Solomon Beaty	Single	500	50	50 0 50
Tit		70	6	W.L. Swan Hill		420		50
Albiston Jacob				1	Farmer	46		2 10 10
Alpauch Matthias		133	18 LH & Barn	Friedrich Thier	Farmer	2394	148	350 20 10
Alpauch Jacob					Single			50
Anderson Andrew				1	Single			6 50
A. I. A. I.		25	30 LH & Barn	Christman	Cropper	570	12	70 3 25

Figure 8

listed in roughly alphabetical order by surname. If the occupant was a renter the property owner is listed in the second column. The most important thing to notice is in the fifth column headed "Buildings." Here were listed any structures

on the property under the name of the owner. Note that the initials in “L H and Barn” means “log house.” Thus, you can see that Abraham Aurant owned a property on which there was a log house.

Triennial assessments were conducted every three years. Assessments in the intervening years do not contain references to buildings. The example in Figure 9 is from White Deer Township in 1791. Using the triennial assessments

Persons Names	Land	Horse	Cow	L & B	Persons Names	Land	H
Falls James	...	2	2	" 1 "	Moore George	150	...
Fullerton Alex	300	2	2	" 13 "	Moore Joseph	100	...
Gray W ^m	190	3	1	" 9 "	Moore David	100	...
Gray John	50	1	2	" 3 "	McLanaghan W ^m	110	...
Croninger Leonard	200	3	2	" 5 "	McLanaghan And ^{rs}	150	...

Figure 9

you will be able to find two successive ones, the earlier of which does not list a house while the later one does. There should also be a substantial increase in the valuation of the real property from one to the next. This narrows down the time period for the building of the house to three years. Now you can look at the valuations in the intervening two years to determine exactly when the valuation increased. The earlier of those two years will be the year in which the house was built.

Unfortunately this is very time consuming. Each reel of microfilm contains all of the municipalities in the county for each year covered by the film. There are no page numbers and there is no index. Furthermore, the only pages that indicate the name of the municipality are the first page for each one which charges the assessor with his duties and the first page of the list of taxable residents. Finally, it is important to remember that towns with numbered lots will not be listed separately until the year in which they were actually

incorporated, or at least well established. Thus in the earliest years Lewisburg residents will be found in East Buffalo Township, Mifflinburg in West Buffalo Township, etc.

Searching these records can be very frustrating but the rewards are worth the effort. Good luck!

