

Bell Acres History...

Mary Pattison Irwin: Pittsburgh's First Female Industrialist

At a time when women's activities were limited to home life, one wife and mother defied social norms to provide for her family by becoming Pittsburgh's first female industrialist. Her name was Mary Pattison Irwin, matriarch in the early Nevin/Irwin families of Sewickley & Edgeworth.

Having met and married visiting American John Irwin in her native Ireland, Mary and John arrived in Western Pennsylvania in 1787. Seven years later, the couple began operating a 'rope walk' in the village of Pittsburgh. This was a factory where hemp fibers were twisted into different types of rope, including that used for rigging and anchor lines on ships (photo). Until specialized machinery became available, the work was for many years done by hand.

Because John was disabled from multiple wounds he received during his service as an officer in the Revolutionary War, it fell upon Mary to not only raise their four children, but also operate the business. A clear indication of her status was in the company's name, John Irwin & Wife.

Following her husband's death in 1808, Mary made her young son John Jr. a partner and renamed the company Mary Irwin & Son (photo). It was under Mary's supervision that rigging was manufactured for Commodore Perry's Lake Erie naval fleet during the War of 1812.

It is likely the company was also responsible for supplying ropes and cordage for the earlier Lewis & Clark expedition of 1804 since the Irwins operated Pittsburgh's only rope walk at the time the expedition's boat was built and launched here.

John Irwin, Jr. continued the business after his mother's retirement, moving the operation to larger facilities across the river to Allegheny where in 1828, he was elected the borough's first burgess (photo). The family, like those of many of Allegheny City industrialists, soon relocated to the up and coming Sewickley/Edgeworth area. Three Irwin siblings married three Nevin siblings whose families became notable in the clergy, banking, business and publishing. Prominent in the Nevin/Irwin family was Rev. Daniel & Martha Irwin Nevin. Nevin was pastor of both Fairmount and Sewickley Presbyterian churches before serving as principal of the Edgeworth Female Seminary.

Mary Irwin's determination and hard work not only insured her family's wealth and success, but also proved women could succeed in non-traditional roles of business and industry.

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