



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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Thomas Twiss, Indian Agent

Long time residents of Wynantskill remember the stately white house on Main Avenue as being the home of Philete Craver who was Town Supervisor and Rensselaer County Sheriff for many years. Currently the building houses Hannan's Waste Disposal and Forever Young Hair and Nails. However, I'm going to relate the story of the building's owner in the mid- 1800's, Thomas Twiss.

Twiss was born in 1803 and lived his early life near Troy. He was accepted at West Point and graduated second in his class in 1826. During his time there, Twiss corresponded with Emma Willard, whose son was also a cadet and needed mentoring. Thus began his lifelong friendship with the famous educator.

It was through this relationship Thomas met his future wife Elizabeth Sherrill who was a protégé of Emma Willard. When Elizabeth moved to Georgia to manage a female academy, Twiss resigned from the Army, married her and the two of them ran the school. It was in the south that the three Twiss girls were born, the oldest being named for their friend and mentor Emma Willard.

However it was during this period of childbirths that Elizabeth's health became impaired and Thomas bought the Wynantskill home and moved the family north. He continued teaching and then held various manufacturing and engineering jobs until he rejoined the army in the 1850's. Although employment kept him away from Wynantskill for much of the time, he wrote to his by now invalid wife and the children that he was always glad when he could return to his "City of Refuge" in New York.

In 1855 Twiss was named Indian Agent for the Platt River Agency in Wyoming. His job was to settle the disputes between various Indian tribes and mediate the many conflicts between the army, the settlers and the Indians. By all accounts he was quite successful.

He still spent time visiting his family in Wynantskill; in fact he is listed as living there in the 1860 Federal Census. His wife died in 1867 but according to the 1870 census, Thomas was living in Nebraska with his Indian wife and seven Indian children. Evidentially Thomas Twiss lived a double life. Having a family in Wynantskill but also fathering children out west in the 1850's and 1860's well before his "eastern" wife died.

Did the Wynantskill family know this? Possibly not. His wife's will speaks of her "loving husband" and I found that he is buried in Oakwood Cemetery next to Elizabeth and daughter Mary. However there is the oral history from his Indian children that Thomas' sister traveled west to ensure his Indian wife didn't lose her land. Also, the sister brought several of the Indian sons back East to educate them, but that they were "too wild" (for Wynantskill)?

We'll probably never know the whole story, but at least it should give you something to think about whenever you drive past the house on Main Avenue.