

# THE MOUNT AMWELL NEWS

## Wealth, Law, and Politics: The Saga of Squires Point Forge (Part I)

By David R. Reading

The year was 1760 and the iron industry flourished in the Musconetcong Valley in Northern Hunterdon County. Ample water power from the Musconetcong River, vast wooded land unsuitable for agriculture but critical for the supply of charcoal fuel and available rich iron ore deposits had spawned several furnaces and forges along the river.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the success of the Norton Furnace (1743), Union Iron Works (1747), Oxford Furnace (1741), Changewater Forge (1741), and others inspired Martin Ryerson, Thomas Reading, Daniel Reading, and George Reading to build a pig iron forge near Ryerson's mine named the Squires Point Forge.

Martin Ryerson was the brother-in-law of John Reading recently retired from his 37-year service on the New Jersey Governor's Council



*The Mount Amwell Project repaired and reset the tombstone (stone on left) of Col. Abraham Bonnell with the assistance of descendant Hank Bonnell (pictured).*

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and twice temporary Governor. In retirement he had just completed a brick Georgian Style home on the South Branch of the Raritan River. Martin Ryerson was 62 and together with John Reading's sons Thomas, Daniel, and George appeared to have a firm financial and political basis for success. Martin Ryerson twice had been a judge in the Court of Common Pleas and had large land holdings in North Western New Jersey. The Reading sons were about to inherit significant land holdings from their wealthy father who was 74 and in poor health.

As early as 1763 Ebenezer Cowell, a blacksmith by trade, was hired to manage the Squires Point Forge that operated successfully, but some time before 1765 Cowell was not being paid by the owners and so he had to borrow money. With rising debts and facing a bleak economic outlook the four owners wanted to get out and advertised the forge and 2000 acres of land for sale in May 1765. The property is described in detail: "The Forge House is built of Stone, laid in Lime and Sand, contains two Fineries, a Chasery, and one Hammer, with a large Head of Water; there also stands on said Stream and Dam, a new Grist and Saw-mill. There also is erected on the Premises a new Frame House, with 4 Rooms on a Floor, and a Fire-place in each, an entry through the House, genteelly finished; there is a Cellar, Kitchen, and

Shop, below in the front, and three Cellars, conveniently partitioned off, back under said House, two large Coal houses, a Smith's Shop, a great Number of Out-houses to accommodate the Workmen, Tradesmen, &c. all good of their Kind". No one responded and the four owners had to borrow money.<sup>2</sup>

On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1765 Martin Ryerson, George Reading, Daniel Reading and Thomas Reading obtained a loan for £676.15.8 from William Allen and Joseph Turner. The loan was secured with a typical 18<sup>th</sup> century bond that carried an obligation to pay a penalty of £1,353.11.5 or double the loan amount if the loan is not repaid in one year. Joseph Turner had been a Philadelphia City councilman in 1729, an Alderman in 1741, and a member of the Pennsylvania's Provincial Council in 1747. William Allen was even more prominent. He was the Mayor of Philadelphia in 1735, Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court 1750-1774, and was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Philadelphia.

Allen and Turner had built the Union Iron Works in Union Township, Hunterdon County in 1742 approximately seven miles from the future Squires Point Forge. However, the project met severe resistance from squatters starting in 1747, and Col. John Hackett was recruited and eventually quelled the disturbances. Turner and Allen must have been impressed because Hackett then operated the Union Iron Works for them from 1749 until 1760. He also met and married the sister of Daniel, Thomas, and George - 25-year-old Elizabeth Reading in 1755, providing a connection to Allen and Turner.

The financial problems with the forge apparently didn't improve with the funds from Allen and Turner. George Reading saw what's on the horizon and on March 13, 1766, seven months before the bond was due, advertised in the Pennsylvania Gazette several properties for sale including his 1/4 share of the Forge. There were no takers, and sensing legal action, his father, John Reading, conveys to him the Georgian home on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1767 that George promptly sold to John Gregg on April 29<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

George's concern was well founded since Allen and Turner, having not received payment on their bond, had filed a Bill of Complaint with the Supreme Court of New Jersey against Martin Ryerson for the full penalty amount of £1,353.11.5 ½ on 21 April 1767.<sup>4</sup> They hired 26-year-old Joseph Reed as their attorney, someone not unknown to the Readings. In 1748, John Reading had purchased subscriptions to Ben Franklin's paper from Joseph's father Andrew Reed and had numerous transactions with Joseph himself while he lived near Trenton, then in Hunterdon County.<sup>5</sup> Joseph graduated from College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1757 and studied law under Richard Stockton until 1763. He went to England to attend law training at the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court serving as colleges for the education of lawyers exclusively entitled to call their members to the English Bar as barristers. Reed returned from England in 1765<sup>6</sup> and began law practice in Amwell where just a few months later he was retained by Allen and Turner to challenge the sons of a former colonial official.

Martin Ryerson retained his son-in-law, Jasper Smith as their attorney and he filed a plea with the Supreme Court to quash Allen and Turner's complaint on August 6<sup>th</sup> 1767. The basis of this challenge is that the names of the Reading brothers were not listed in the bill. This attempt apparently is denied because on September 5<sup>th</sup>, the court commands the Sheriff of Sussex County to "take Martin Ryerson, George Reading, Daniel Reading and Thomas Reading if they be found within your Bailiwick and thence safely keep so that you have their Bodies before us at Burlington on the second Tuesday in November to answer Allen and Turner's plea for payment."

John Reading, who was nearing the end of his life and saw where the claims against his sons are going, writes a codicil to his will on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1767, one week before his death, in which he puts several tracts of land in trust to his grandsons thus protecting seizure by the courts. Thomas Reading's tract of 400 acres in Hunterdon was protected but not the lands in Sussex and Morris Counties.

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, the Court commanded the Sheriff of Hunterdon County to “take Martin Ryerson, George Reading, Daniel Reading and Thomas Reading if they be found within your Bailiwick and thence safely keep so that you have their Bodies before us at Perth Amboy on the second Sunday in April to answer Allen and Turner’s plea for payment.” The debt still hadn’t been paid. On December 8<sup>th</sup>, Joseph Reed finally answered the request to quash with a list of six reasons why the request is not valid. Jasper Smith submitted another request to the court to quash on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1768. The request is apparently rejected as no more is heard of the quash after that.

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1768 the Court again commanded the Sheriff of Hunterdon County to “take Martin Ryerson, George Reading, Daniel Reading and Thomas Reading if they be found within your Bailiwick and thence safely keep so that you have their Bodies before us at Perth Amboy on the first Tuesday in September to answer the debt of £1,353.11.5.1/2.” George Reading, probably out of concern for his family, apparently petitioned the New Jersey Assembly for debt relief under the Assembly Act of Dec 1765 that permits release from debt if the debtor takes an oath declaring himself or herself insolvent.<sup>7</sup>

Georges’ petition was apparently accepted and when brought before the Supreme Court for the third time on August 25<sup>th</sup>, he was not included with Martin Ryerson, Daniel Reading, and Thomas Reading. They signed a new bond for £1,353.11.5.1/2 which was the first bond’s penalty amount or obligation and it has a new penalty of £2,773.13.4. They also sign a “Warrant of Attorney” that authorizes Joseph Reed to confess for them in court that they agree to be obligated for the new penalty amount and won’t contest it further. Feeling the pressure, they advertised the Forge for sale a second time on October 17, 1768.<sup>8</sup> Daniel had just died in a hunting accident on October 15<sup>th</sup>, but is still listed on the notice.

Presumably based on the warrant, the Supreme Court on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1769 issues a Writ

of Fieri Facias, a legal instrument by which the sheriff of a county may seize the assets of a judgment debtor, to the Sheriff of Morris County to collect Goods, Chattels, and Land of Martin Ryerson and Thomas Reading for the first bond penalty amount of £1,353.11.5.1/2. George and Daniel are out.

Joseph Reed filed another complaint on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1769 with the Supreme Court for nonpayment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> bond amount of £2,773.13.4, plus damages of 52 pounds. The Supreme Court issued a second Writ of Fieri Facias on September 9<sup>th</sup> to the Sheriff of Sussex County to collect Goods, Chattels, and Land of Martin Ryerson and Thomas Reading. Probably feeling a little desperate, the two again try to sell the Forge for the third time on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1769<sup>9</sup> with the same negative result.

There are now two Writs authorizing the sheriffs to take and sell at public auction chattels, goods, and lands of Daniel Reading, Thomas Reading, and Martin Ryerson. Four deeds dated March 1, 1770 record the sale of their properties in Morris and Sussex Counties. These deeds show that the properties totaling 3,650 acres were sold at public auction to Allen and Turner for £804.<sup>10</sup> A few months later 875 acres of Martin Ryerson and Thomas Reading is sold in Morris County to Turner and Allen for £564.13.6.<sup>11</sup> These land sales were supposed to provide Allen and Turner the recovered cash for the unpaid bond, but they faced the same economic conditions that the Squires Point Forge owners had faced – nobody wanted or could buy land. So, they purchased the land themselves at greatly reduced prices.

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1769, The New Jersey 21<sup>st</sup> Colonial Assembly passed the “Act for the Relief of Insolvent Debtors”.<sup>12</sup> It’s similar to the act of 1765 in which the debtor upon petitioning the assembly and swearing or affirming insolvency is released from confinement. The act also codifies that George Reading has given all his effects for the use of his creditors and therefore free from confinement of imprisonment. However, the sale of land does not satisfy the debt because Thomas Reading,

probably inspired by George's action, advertised in Pennsylvania Gazette, August 30, 1770, notifying his creditors, Allen and Turner, that he intends to petition the New Jersey Assembly under the Act mentioned above.

*Whereas the subscriber has been concerned in trade, and carrying on iron-works, for a number of years past, by which, meeting with many losses, and, by the hardness of the times, is unable to procure money to pay the debts contracted at said works, whereby they, and the lands, belonging to them, which cost several Thousand Pounds, have been sold, by execution, for only as many Hundreds, as also a large estate besides, sold nearly in the same proportion to its value; I am therefore under the disagreeable necessity of giving my creditors notice, that in order to free my body from confinement, I intend to petition the legislature of the province of New-Jersey, at their next sessions, for relief in the premises.*

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<sup>1</sup> Peter O. Wacker, *The Musconetcong Valley of New Jersey*, (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1968), 104.

<sup>2</sup> William Nelson, editor, *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New Jersey, Series 1, Vol. XXIV*, (Paterson, N.J., The Press Printing and Publishing Co., 1905). 527.

<sup>3</sup> George Reading to John Gregg; Amwell and Readington, Hunterdon County, 29 April 1767, "Deeds, Surveys, and Commissions, ca. 1650-1856 (SSTSE023)", folio 269. Non-governmental Records - East and West Jersey Proprietors; New Jersey State Archives, Trenton.

<sup>4</sup> New Jersey, Supreme Court Case Files, 1704-1844, Case No. 1102, Allen Turner and William Allen vs. Martin Ryerson, Thomas Reading, George Reading and Daniel Reading, 1767-1768; New Jersey State Archives, Trenton.

<sup>5</sup> David R. Reading, editor, *John Reading's Diary* (Mount Amwell Project, 2009), 27, 115, 125, 127, 137, 147, 153, 165.

<sup>6</sup> William B. Reed, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed*, (London, Forgotten Books, 2018) 26-28.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Bush, *New Jersey Archives. Third Series Volume IV Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey 1760-1769* (Compiled by Division of Archives and Records

Three weeks later, on November 18<sup>th</sup> the court orders the Sheriff of Morris County "to have the monies recovered from Thomas Reading before the court in Perth Amboy on the first Tuesday in April [1771]." Joseph Reed had recently returned from a trip to England was still representing Allen and Turner in the final action against the Squires Point investors. Presumably, Thomas Reading was released from confinement and the case was closed. In summary, Allen and Turner received an estimated 4,525 acres of land in Morris and Sussex and recovered £1,308 of their own money. Their costs were the original bond amount of £676.15.8 plus legal fees and costs. \*\*\*

*Part II of this story will be in the Fall edition of this newsletter. There's more to tell regarding the characters involved with the Squires Point Forge in pre-revolutionary Hunterdon County.*

Management, New Jersey Department of State Trenton, N.J. 1986), 316-323.

<sup>8</sup> William Nelson, editor, *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New Jersey, Series 1, Vol. XXVI*, (Paterson, N.J., The Press Printing and Publishing Co., 1905). 302.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 582.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Reading (by Sheriff) to William Allen; Joseph Turner, Near Pequannock River, Roxbury Morris and Sussex Counties, 7 Mar 1770; Deeds, Surveys, and Commissions, ca. 1650-1856 (SSTSE023), folio 486; Thomas Reading (by Sheriff) to William Allen; Joseph Turner, two tracts, Roxbury Township Morris and Sussex Counties, folio 490; Daniel Reading (by Sheriff) to William Allen; Joseph Turner, two tracts, Oxford Township Sussex County, folio 507; Martin Ryerson (by Sheriff) to William Allen; Joseph Turner, two tracts, Mansfield Township Sussex County, folio 513.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Reading (by Sheriff) to William Allen; Joseph Turner, two tracts, Oxford Township North Warren County, 1 Aug 1770, Deeds, Surveys, and Commissions, ca. 1650-1856 (SSTSE023), Folio 513.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Bush, *New Jersey Archives. Third Series Volume IV Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey 1760-1769*, 570-577.