

## Kepler Barn

The barn is located on the north side of route 45 about two miles west of Pine Grove Mills in Ferguson Township, Centre County. The barn faces southeast. Its main section is a 6-bay Standard Pennsylvania bank barn of frame construction, 100' x 50', with an integrated drive-through machinery opening at the west end. It has a large straw shed/covered loafing yard addition on the forebay side, and a drive-through corn (or possibly potato) crib to access one of the wagon floors on the ramp side. The Google Earth images below date from 2016, when the barn was in better condition than it is today.



I took photos of the barn exterior on February 5, 2024. The roof and west side of the ramp addition are in a state of collapse, and the main roof ridge has pronounced dips suggesting other structural damage. The roof damage occurred between 2016 and 2020, based on successive Google Earth images, likely from a windstorm.



East end of main barn



Barnyard straw shed from southeast



West end of main barn with drive-through machinery opening





West end of barn with damaged ramp shed beyond



Ramp side of barn from northwest



Damage to the ramp-side shed

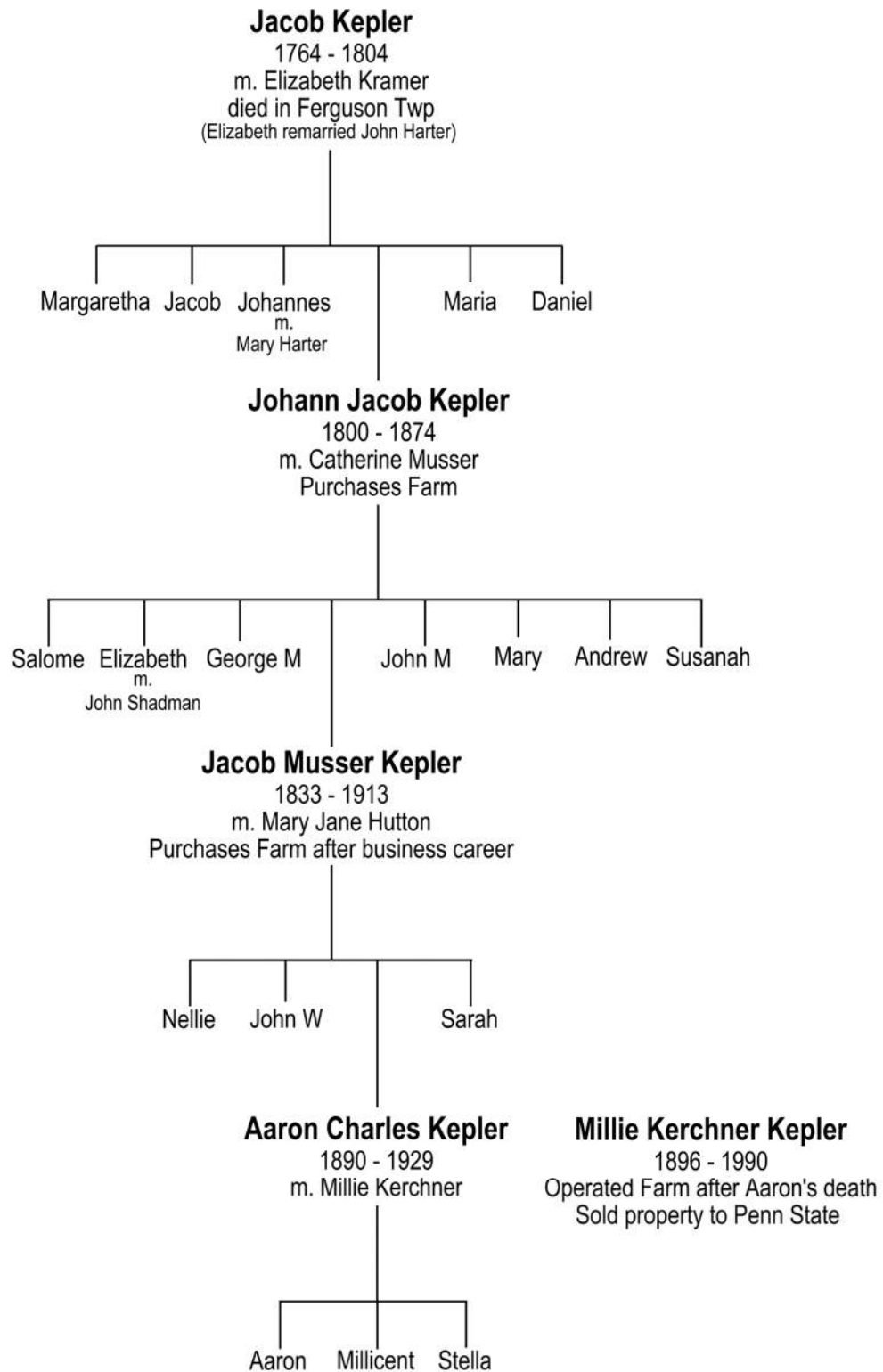
While there is an '1818' date applied to the gable, the barn's size and exterior appearance suggest a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century construction date, probably a 5-bay mow-runway-mow-runway-mow plan with a sixth mow and machinery bay added later to the west end. This 5-bay structure may have been expanded from an earlier, smaller barn. The straw shed and drive-through corncrib on the ramp side are later additions.

### Farm History

The farm was owned by several generations of the Kepler family through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, (see family tree on the next page), and the barn was undoubtedly built during the period of their ownership. John Blair Linn's 1883 *History of Centre and Clinton Counties*, a reliable source for township histories, only mentions the Kepler family in passing, so this account is drawn primarily from deeds, township tax records, census data, and obituaries. I went to Bellefonte for an initial look at land and tax records and plan to make a return visit to try to tie up loose ends, as well as a check-in with the Centre County Historical Society, so consider what follows a preliminary draft.

The Kepler farm was acquired as a series of purchases over time (see property map below). Jacob Kepler, 1769-1804, married Elizabeth Kramer, moved to Ferguson Township and died there at age 35, when his six children were still young. I have not found a deed from his lifetime in Centre County records. Since the county was founded in 1800, it's possible he purchased land prior to then when the area was still part of Mifflin County, or he may have been a tenant. Jacob's wife Elizabeth married John Harter, 1769-1848, after Jacob's death, so if she did inherit a farm from her first husband it was likely taxed under Harter's name.

Jacob and Elizabeth's second son, Johannes, 1798-1858, was born in Ferguson Township and married John Harter's daughter Mary, with whom he grew up. The earliest Kepler land transaction recorded in Ferguson Township is an 1827 mortgage which Johannes Kepler secured from the heirs of Robert Porter in order to purchase two tracts of land—the 116 acre 'Wellington' tract and a connected 41 ½ acre tract of mountain land. This property formed the west end of the Kepler family lands.



Jacob and Elizabeth's third son, Johann Jacob Kepler, 1800-1874, was born in Ferguson Township and married Catherine Musser, with whom he had eight children. Over a 21-year period Johann Jacob purchased three adjacent farm properties, including the land upon which the barn was eventually built. In 1831, at age 31, he purchased from William Stewart the 110-acre property on the east side of his brother Johannes' farm. Six years later, in 1837, he purchased the next adjoining 72-acre property to the east from David Ross. Fifteen years later, in 1852, he purchased the next adjoining 118-acre property to the east from his step brother, John Harter (Jr.). At this point Johann Jacob (now referred to as 'Jacob Sr.'), owned 300 acres in three connected properties. The Kepler barn is located near the center of this large farm.



John and Jacob Kepler Sr property purchases overlayed on 1960 aerial photo

Jacob likely rented the third farm before purchasing it and may have owned other property not recorded by a deed, because the 1850 agricultural census lists his farm as containing 250 acres of 'Improved' farmland and 100 acres of 'Unimproved' mountain land. The cash value of his farm is assessed at \$11,000, in the top 10% of valuations in Ferguson Township, where the typical farm in 1850 was valued



at \$3,820. Livestock of the farm in 1850 consisted of 8 horses, 5 milk cows, 10 other cattle, 25 sheep, and 28 swine. In that year the farm harvested 1,500 bushels of wheat, 200 of rye, 900 of corn, 800 of oats, and cut 20 tons of hay.

In 1866 Jacob Sr. sold the easternmost of his three farm properties to his oldest son George M Kepler. The sale occurred during the agricultural boom that coincided with the Civil War, and the purchase cost of the 118-acre property had increased in the 14 years since Jacob Sr. bought it from \$5,000 to \$9,000. George Kepler took out a mortgage for \$4,975 from his neighbor, Samuel McWilliams, to help finance the farm purchase. George may have fallen victim to the declining prices and farm income that followed the war, for he sold his farm and left the area, relocating to Erie County.

Johann Jacob Kepler died intestate in 1874, resulting in a protracted settlement among his heirs. The agricultural census of 1880 does not list any farming operations by a Kepler in Ferguson Township, but John Shadman, who married Johann Jacob's second daughter Elizabeth, is listed as owning a 106-acre farm and renting a 163-acre farm, which likely derive from the large Kepler property.

Johann Jacob's second son, Jacob Musser Kepler, 1833-1913, grew up on his father's farm but had a long non-farm career before returning to agriculture. He took courses at the Pine Grove Academy to qualify as a school teacher and taught for several years. In 1859, at age 26, Jacob moved to Phillipsburg to operate a hotel and store, marrying Jane Hutton in 1863, with whom he had two children. In 1871 he moved his family to Venango County to work in the oil business, and then to Tionesta in Forrest County to work as a supervisor and in lumber and mining operations, eventually acquiring a lumber company. He launched a newspaper, the Forest National Democrat, which he edited from 1880 to 1892, and in 1885 built an office block in Tionesta. In the same period, he purchased his father's and adjoining Kepler family farms--475 acres in all--and retired from business to resume farming in Ferguson Township in 1892.

Jacob married again after Jane's death, and had two additional children with his second wife. His son, Aaron Charles Kepler, 1890-1929, grew up on the farm and attended Penn State, where he studied agriculture. Aaron inherited the farm when Jacob died in 1913, shifting the focus of the farm to production of potatoes. Aaron married Millie Kerchner, 1896-1990, and they had three children. When Aaron died in 1929 at age 39, Millie Kepler took over active management of the farm, which she guided through the Great Depression and owned until the end of her life. I have attached a short profile of Millie Kepler from a 1941 *Biographical Survey of Centre County*. She seems to have been a remarkable person.

The DeHass family purchased the farm from the Millie Kepler's estate in 2000 and sold the property to Penn State six years later.

Draft report on PSU Kepler Barn  
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## MRS. MILLIE M. KEPLER

PINE GROVE MILLS, PA.

MRS. MILLIE M. KEPLER was born in Lycoming at a small place called Tomes Run in 1898, the daughter of Jacob and Matilda Kercher. Her mother died when she was five years of age and she was raised by Mrs. Dora Fisher at Unionville, Pa., after she was seven years of age, and up until she was married to Aaron Kepler in 1916 when she, as a young bride, went to live on the old Kepler home-  
stead about one mile west of Pine Grove Mills.

In 1929 Aaron Kepler, her husband, died leaving her in possession of the large farm of 475 acres badly encumbered financially and three children to care for, a son twelve years of age and two daughters ten and five years respectively. To add to the sum total of her burden, two years later her son 13 years of age was instantly killed in front of their home: but this further tragedy did not daunt the courage and perserverance of this remarkable woman. Summoning all her agricultural experience, which was of a very few years, she supplemented it with scientific advice to the end that she was able to carry on in a highly intelligent manner the operation and success of this large farm which a few years before had seemed to her to be an insurmountable effort.

In the ensuing eleven years since the death of her husband this remarkable woman has not only given much of her time and care to the education and refinement of her two splendid daughters but has also, with a remarkable knowledge and great industry, succeeded in overcoming many of the obstacles that confronted her after the death of her husband, and has gone on to a most successful career as an outstanding farmer and particularly potato specialist of Central Pennsylvania. Her large farm not only is producing the maximum of general farm crops but as the potato queen of Pennsylvania she is producing annually about 15,000 bushels of potatoes, some 40,000 quarts of strawberries and a highly diversified crop.

She not only has learned the science of agriculture to a large degree, but has so familiarized herself with all the types of farm machinery that the mechanism of them is very familiar to her. Under similar circumstances most men would have given up in despair and gone down to defeat, but this remarkable intelligent, courageous woman has smilingly gone on to success.

Her home on the Kepler farm with her two lovely daughters, Millicent M., age 19, and Stella Ann, age 16, is a most interesting home where hospitality is very manifest and where it is a great delight to this courageous woman at any hour of the day to show friends or strangers over her large farm, explaining the rotation of crops and how she manages with only two farm hands to successfully operate this large acreage and yet find time to look after the training of her two daughters, and the entertainment of the many friends and travelers who stop to converse with her.

Excerpt, page 62 from William Marks, *Biographical Survey, Centre County*, 1941  
Penn State University – Digital Collections, <https://digital.libraries.psu.edu>