



Portrait Courtesy of the
York County Heritage Trust, York, PA

Michael Edwards

1767-1876

Every man can expect to see changes during his lifetime. But few have seen as many as Michael Edwards. Born before the Revolutionary War, he lived to see not only the birth of our country but also the ravages of war within its borders over eighty years later.

Michael was born in August 1767 in “York Town” (now York Borough), York County, Pennsylvania. He is the only known child of Michael and Elizabeth Edwards. Little is known of their ancestry except that they were of German descent.

When he was eight years old, his father joined the ranks in the county militia. He belonged to the Independent Light Infantry company, First Battalion of York County Associators. He is listed in Captain William Bailey’s Company on June 14, 1776. In later newspaper interviews, Michael said his father participated in the Battle of Trenton, although no records exist to substantiate this as fact. His father is listed as a member of the York militia in 1778 and a few years later as a security guard at Camp Security, a Revolutionary prisoner-of-war camp which housed British and German soldiers and their families. It is possible that he served much of his military service as a butcher.

Michael sometimes aided his father in this business but also apprenticed as a gunsmith under the Welshans family. He continued in that vocation until he was 90 years of age. Examples of his “Kentucky” long rifles are shown in several books by James B. Whisker, Ph.D.

Many events and people of 1800 York were recorded in sketches by German folk artist Lewis Miller. Michael is mentioned in six drawings: at a local funeral procession honoring George Washington in 1799; a fire in 1800 at the bore mill used by York gunsmiths; a meeting at Furry’s Tavern on the day Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated in 1801; the membership list of the Laurel Engine Company in 1803; and a horse race held in 1804. These are part of the Lewis Miller collection housed at the York County Heritage Trust. A sixth drawing of Michael in 1803, in private possession, is shown in [Gunsmiths of York County, Pennsylvania](#) by James B. Whisker, Ph.D.

Michael and his parents moved from York to Washington County, Pennsylvania around 1805. There Michael was wed to Eleanor Cady. They had four sons while living in Washington: Andrew (1807-1880), Michael, Jr. (1808-1891), William (1814-1876), and George (1823-1909). The family (excluding his father, who died 11 Feb 1826) moved to Wheeling about 1835. All but Michael, Jr. moved to Moundsville about 1838.

He was quite well known in the Moundsville and York, PA communities, partly because of the good health and memory he enjoyed in his advanced age. In 1870, at age 103, Michael attended the County Fair in York and amid much fanfare was presented a gold-headed cane by the Laurel Fire Company to

recognize him as the oldest living fireman in the world. His portrait and leather fire bucket are on display at the York County Fire Museum in York.

Members of the Laurel Fire Company were notified of his death on March 26, 1876 at the age of 108 years, 5 months, and 14 days, and several traveled from York to attend his funeral. The York Gazette, Tuesday, 4 April 1876, p. 3, states: "On Wednesday last, at 1 o'clock P.M., the fire alarm bells on the several engine houses, in this borough, were tolled for one hour, it being the time announced at which the funeral of Michael Edwards, Sr., would take place in Moundsville, West Virginia. This event, so solemn, was one of general sorrow in this community, and while the bells were tolling quite a number of York's most respected and oldest citizens came to the Laurel engine house and asked if they might toll the bell once in honor of this old and highly respectable citizen and fellow fireman. The request was of course granted them.... Indeed, we cannot recollect of an occasion heretofore which seemed to cause such heartfelt sorrow as the death of this venerable old man.

"The Laurel Fire Company was represented at the funeral by a committee...{which} left York on Tuesday last, arriving at Moundsville the next afternoon, the funeral being delayed a short time awaiting the arrival of the committee. There was an immense concourse of people in attendance from near and far, and the committee say at many points on the route there were evidences of mourning, indicating that the death of the old gentleman was universally known and deeply regretted...."

J. H. Newton, in The History of the Panhandle, West Virginia (1879), describes Michael's life and character in this way: "He comes from a long lived ancestry, as do most persons who attain great age, his mother having lived to be upwards of 103 years of age....His funeral was one of the largest, and the occasion one of the most solemn ever witnessed in Moundsville. He was a kind and faithful friend, an indulgent and affectionate father, and an upright man in all the relations of life. To the poor he was kind and liberal and many a penniless beginner, as he started on his voyage to fight the battles of life has been cheered on by the kind assistance and good counsel of Michael Edwards. He was strictly honest and he has left behind him a bright record and illustrious examples. Cheerfully he bore his sufferings, waiting patiently and trustingly for his release, ever looking to the author and finisher of his faith...."

Submitted by Mary Keeney, 4th Great Granddaughter

Article regarding his funeral, The Wheeling Intelligencer, March 30 or 31st, 1876:

“The Funeral of Mr. Edwards.
Moundsville, March 30, 1876
Editors of the Intelligencer:

“It was my intention to send you an account of the funeral of Michael Edwards, which took place yesterday in time for this morning’s paper, but it was impossible to prepare it in time for the boat which passed our place early in the evening. So this morning I will endeavor to give a few items concerning it. The funeral was to have taken place at 1 o’clock P. M., but owing to the fact that a telegram was received that a committee from York, Pa., composed of members of the old fire company, of which he was one of the original members, was on its way to attend the funeral, it was decided to wait until their arrival. The committee arrived at about 3 ½ o’clock, and the funeral procession moved at once to the place of interment. The religious services at the house were conducted by the Rev. H. C. Sanford, the resident minister of the M. E. Church at this place. Rev. S. R. Wilson of the Disciple’s Church was also present.

“It was elicited from the remarks of the minister that the deceased had for many years at one time in his life been a member of the Lutheran Church, and from the many conversations had with him during the last few weeks of his life he was led to believe that his peace was made with his Maker. He was anxious to listen to the reading of God’s word, and was especially interested in readings from the book of Job. We were reminded in his death, though his life had been so long – he having lived for more than a century – that we must all meet the common conqueror sooner or later.

“The pall bearers were H. McClain, David Staley, Michael Dunn, John Ferguson, Colonel William Alexander, J. D. Morris, Colonel V. L. Cockayne and I. Bryson – all old citizens of Moundsville and vicinity. The coffin was a plain but very beautiful one.

“The order of the procession from the house to the vehicles in waiting was as follows:

1. Ministers followed by pall bearers, the two oldest in front, four bearing the coffin, and two in the rear.
2. Committee of firemen.
3. Friends of the deceased, followed by all others in attendance.

The service performed at the grave was the usual burial service of the M. E. Church, conducted by Rev. Sanford.

“Though it is no uncommon sight to see a funeral, it seemed that all considered this one in a different light from what we generally view such an occurrence, and we seem to realize the great length of this man’s life, now that he is gone, as we never did before. How many thousands, yea, millions, born since his birth have lived and died old men many years ago! He was several years older than our country, and had he been permitted to live but a few months he would have seen the hundredth birthday of the nation which was ushered into existence when he was quite a lad. What emotions would have filled his mind had he been permitted to attend our Centennial, as we had all hoped he would be permitted to do. But he has gone the way of all the earth. His life has run its course. He died

peacefully and quietly at the great age of nearly 109 years. His death forcibly reminds us of the words of the poet – ‘like an old clock worn out with eating time, the weary wheels of life at last stand still.’

“The committee from York, Pa., consisted of three persons. It was not our pleasure to be permitted to talk with them as they remained in town by a short time, but we learned from those who did that on Monday, when the dispatch was received announcing his death, the bell of the fire company, of which he was a member, was tolled one hundred and nine times, once for each year of his life, and before the bell had ceased tolling the cause was known throughout the city, as news had been received several days previous that his death was expected any moment.

“The bells of the city were tolled yesterday by the order of the Mayor between the hours of 1 and 4 o’clock.

“I was very sorry that I did not have the privilege of conversing with the members of the committee as no doubt many items of interest could have been obtained from them. They were spoken of in the highest terms by all who had the pleasure of seeing them. They were all young men of fine appearance, and very gentlemanly deportment. Their coming so great a distance to attend the funeral of the oldest surviving member of their company, shows the esteem in which the deceased was held and it surely speaks volumes in his favor.

“The four sons of the deceased were all at the funeral, the youngest being over 50 years of age while the oldest is over 70. Many remarked that it was a sight not often seen, four as old men as they are following the last remains of a father to his grave. They all seemed deeply affected by the sad affliction and they have the warmest sympathies of the entire community.”

(signed only by ‘X’)

Other mentions of his death:

The Richwood Gazette, Richwood, Ohio
6 April 1876

“Michael Edwards, Sen., died at Moundsville, W. Va., March 27, in his one hundred and ninth year. Up to a very recent period he retained all his faculties perfectly, and exhibited but few of the indications, and none of the infirmities, of his ripe old age.”

Spirit of Democracy, Woodsfield, Monroe County, Ohio
4 April 1876

“Edwards, Michael, Sr.

Michael Edwards, Sr., who resided in Moundsville, West Va., died the 27th ult, aged 109 years. He had voted at every presidential election from the formation of the Government to the present time.”

Archives at The York Daily Record (ydr.com)

“Firemen lose a link to past

Michael Edwards Sr., a member of York’s Laurel Fire Company since its birth in 1790, dies at the age of 108. ‘He was the representative fireman of the past,’ a fire department history states, ‘the connecting link between the fire department of ladders, bucket, basket and hand engine brigade, and the firemen and their apparatus today’. Many people at the funeral comment that it is unusual to see four sons as old as Edwards’ at a funeral. The ages ranged from more than 50 years in age to 70 years-plus.”