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The Trustees of Reservations

Based on a report by Myron O. Stachiw

In Ashley Falls, not far from the Housatonic River, stands a modest looking Colonial house, its appearance belying the history contained inside. Built in 1735 for John and Hannah Ashley, it was once a center of economic and political power in Sheffield. Colonel John Ashley was the wealthiest and perhaps most influential man in Sheffield. He was a lawyer, businessman, politician, and a leader in drafting the Sheffield Resolves in the Revolutionary era. Ashley owned several slaves, one of whom, Mumbet, successfully sued for her own freedom in 1781. At the time of his death in 1802, Colonel Ashley owned thousands of acres of farm and woodlands, several houses and mills, and a general store. Today, there is little left of this empire.

This history is presented to visitors to the Colonel John Ashley House, a historic house museum owned by The Trustees of Reservations. But the study of history is not static, and staff decided that more in-depth study of the Ashley family would improve the interpretation of the house.

With a grant from the Bay State Historical League and the Massachusetts Humanities Foundation, The Trustees hired historian Myron O. Stachiw. Stachiw, a historian who worked at Old Sturbridge Village for many years, took on the task of carefully sifting through real estate records, tax records, and account books for data about the Ashley family's economic, civic and political life.

All of the records were useful, but the account books were perhaps the most interesting to read. According to Stachiw, "They are a remarkable record. They provide an extraordinary picture of the material and social world of the Ashleys and their neighbors in Sheffield." Many of the surviving ledgers and daybooks from the 1760s to the 1840s are owned by J. C. Hurlburt of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who loaned them to The Trustees. Mr. Hurlburt is the descendent of the Hurlburt family that acquired and occupied the William Ashley House in Ashley Falls in the late nineteenth century. When that family sold the property in the twentieth century, they took the Ashley account books with them, preserving them to this day.

The surviving books represent only a fraction of the volumes used by four generations of Ashleys to record their financial affairs. These included extensive farmland; the raising, grazing, and slaughter of livestock; potash works; sawmill; gristmill; nail factory; plaster mill; carding mill; ironworks and iron mines; weaving and spinning accounts; records of storekeeping; and labor accounts. The quality of the records varies, from haphazard memoranda about laborers and work to be done, to sophisticated bookkeeping procedures that include daybooks and a series of ledgers with coded entries for purchases in the

store. Entries in 1771-1773 helped confirm the construction date of the house of General John Ashley (the Colonel's son) at the intersection of Rannapo and Cooper Hill Roads.

By the late eighteenth century, the Ashley family in Sheffield dominated the town's social, civic, political, and economic life. Col. Ashley, the reigning patriarch of the clan, had been the leading taxpayer in the community for nearly half a century. By the 1760s, probably his most prosperous decade, it appears that he was operating a store, sawmill, gristmill, potash works, cider mill, tanneries, and the ironworks. By the time of his death in 1802, he owned more than 3000 acres with sixteen dwelling houses. Ashley's lands produced large quantities of hay, corn, rye, oats, flax, fruit for cider, wheat, and tobacco; the extensive meadows provided forage for herds of cattle and sheep; his woodlands yielded charcoal for the ironworks.

Colonel John and Hannah Ashley had four children. Son John (later referred to as General John Ashley) was born in 1736; a daughter, Jane, in 1738. Two more daughters followed in 1740 (Mary) and 1744 (Hannah). John Ashley was a leader in the local militia, ending his active career with the rank of Colonel.

Col. Ashley played an important role in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary history of the region. In January, 1773, Ashley was one of the authors of the Sheffield Resolves, a series of resolutions proclaiming the rights of Englishmen in relation to the English Crown. The Resolves were a statement of the rights Americans had and grievances under which they labored, including the familiar revolutionary-era cry: "No taxation without representation!"

The Ashleys were among the main participants in a drama that contributed to the end of slavery in Massachusetts. Col. Ashley owned African men, women, and children as slaves, who labored in his household as servants and on his farms and in his mills. The 1771 Massachusetts Tax Valuation listed five slaves in the Ashley household. At that time fourteen households in Sheffield owned slaves. In 1781, one of the slaves, a woman known as Mumbet who had been purchased from Mrs. Ashley's family in Claverack, New York, was upset with what she felt was unnecessary violence and the unfairness of human bondage. She, together with another slave named Brom, brought suit against Col. Ashley in the County Court of Common Pleas. Represented by Col. Ashley's friend and colleague, Theodore Sedgwick, Mumbet and Brom won their freedom when the jury found that they were freemen illegally detained in servitude by the Ashleys. This case was one of several in Massachusetts during the early 1780s brought by slaves and challenging the institution of slavery in the Commonwealth. Eventually the cumulative effect of these cases was the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.

Visitors to the Ashley House in the 21st century notice evidence of several renovations. It is likely that Col. Ashley improved the interior of his own house sometime during the 1760s or early 1770s. The improvements included the installation of elaborate paneling and a fireplace in the study, plastering of ceilings, and re-trimming the exterior of the house. It is likely that the kitchen at this time was still in the southwest room or what is

now the southwest parlor. The rooms at the rear of the house (present kitchen, pantry and southeast bedroom) were unheated and in a different configuration.

In 1790, Hannah Ashley passed away in her seventy-eighth year. Col. John Ashley remained alone in his house with three elderly African men – former slaves, now servants - who remained after the 1781 lawsuit. Joining him in the house during the latter part of the decade and until his death in 1802 as a housekeeper, nurse, and companion was a widow, Mrs. Jane Steel.

Another blow came in November 1799, when the heir-apparent to the Ashley wealth and status, Gen. John Ashley, died unexpectedly. This divided the holdings prematurely and diluted the wealth of the family. By 1838 both the Col. Ashley House and General Ashley House, and most of the lands once held by Col. John Ashley had been sold out of the family. A grandson, William Ashley, retained control of the mills, store, and ironworks until his death in 1849, but did little to expand and pass on the Ashley wealth. With his demise, the Ashley presence in Sheffield largely disappeared.

The story of the Ashleys in Sheffield is a remarkable one. They rose to dominate the town for nearly a century, and then as a result of death and other circumstances the wealth and status could not be sustained.

Stachiw's research answers many questions, but raises others: How could such wealth and prominence be lost? What was the lasting impact of the Ashleys on the town? Visitors are encouraged to visit the Ashley House (opening Memorial Day weekend) to learn how history continues to evolve.

The Trustees of Reservations' website is www.thetrustees.org