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TOM QUICK An Infection in the Body Politic



Minisink Valley map

It's been 209 years since Tom Quick's death, and though the story of his brutal life is little known outside the small towns and villages of the Upper Delaware Valley in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, he remains one of the most controversial figures in American history. Much of his story is shrouded in mystery and conjecture. Few documents exist to support the stories that have grown up around him, and some historians now suggest that many of the details that have survived, including the tale of his deathbed demand for one more victim, may have been embellished over time. Some believe that his victims, who almost certainly included women and tiny children, totaled no more than a dozen. Some say no more than six.

Still, like any powerful legend, the details of his story, the body count and the justifications that started it have assumed the force of truth.

For most of the past two centuries, Quick has been regarded almost without question as a romantic figure. To those who still admire him, he was a rugged and independent frontiersman, a hero who almost single-handedly wrested the lush mountains and fertile river flats along the Delaware from brutish, heathen savages, clearing the way for progress and winning the hearts and souls of the vulnerable settlers along the way.

In this view, he was a man of courage and integrity, a classic American loner who not only challenged the Indians, but also defied shortsighted white authorities who tried to rein him in. In the years after his death, fawning books were written about him, a monument was constructed in his honor on Sarah Street in Milford, Pa., a wide, tree-lined boulevard at the center of the town his family had founded. His bones, or at least those that could be found when the monument was constructed in 1889, remain there, in a vault surrounded by carefully tended flowers. Even today, the Tom Quick Inn, a whimsical and rambling Victorian building that lords over Broad Street, reminds everyone who passes of the legend of Tom Quick and his exploits.



Tom Quick Inn sign

Recently, however, others have taken a far different view. To them, the legend of Tom Quick is not a cause for celebration but a scar left by a wound on the nation's history. To them, the real story of Tom Quick is a tale of how an entire community, crippled by its own fear and gripped by a fever of greed, turned a blind eye to the bloody excesses of one deranged man. In this view, Tom Quick was not a hero, but was instead one of the first symptoms of a contagion, a deadly disease that would soon spread across the country, driving Indians from their traditional homes, from their traditional lives, often into very untraditional graves. Tom Quick was Patient 0 in an epidemic that, in their minds, still infects the bloodstream of the body politic today.

To them, the infection that appeared early in Tom Quick goes even further. It is a peculiar American disease in which the myth of individualism and rugged self-reliance sometimes gets contaminated and mutates into that most American of pathologies, the mass murderer.

In short, to those who resent the honor accorded him, Tom Quick was nothing more than one of America's first serial killers.

In 1997, on the anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre, vandals armed with a sledgehammer shattered the monument to Tom Quick on Sarah Street in Milford. Two years later, local residents, including Indian activists, succeeded in a petition drive to stall the town council's plans to replace it. But Tom Quick's bones remain. And so does the controversy.

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