

History of 'James Gillespie's'

by Elaine J.C. Cochrane, (Form 3.c.) 1953

Chapter One

Edinburgh has many famous schools and colleges, and 'James Gillespie's' is as well-known as any of them. 'Our' school is 150 years exactly this year, and this is a very appropriate time to look back and write something about its Founder and about its history.

The following facts about 'our' Founder are fairly well-known. James Gillespie was born at Edinburgh on 28th April 1726¹. He and his elder brother John kept a tobacconist's shop at no. 231 High Street, Edinburgh. Many important people and lawyers from Parliament House came into the shop. There is a plaque on the wall there to show where the shop was.



The shop sign consisted of a small barrel marked 'Tobacco' in gilt letters and standing beside it the figure of a black boy smoking a long pipe.

During the American War of Independence (1775-1781) James Gillespie is believed to have speculated in tobacco and in this way made his fortune. He then bought Spylaw House at Colinton, beside the Water of Leith, and there erected a snuff-mill for grinding snuff.



Later on he purchased another mill at Upper Spylaw, Colinton³.

While his brother, John, attended to the shop in the High Street, James worked in his snuff-mills at Spylaw where he was known as 'The Laird'. He was a hard-working, kind man who went about in his

mills wearing a night-cap and a blanket over his shoulders, no doubt to keep the snuff off his clothes. He was also very economical, and his favourite saying was 'Waste not, want not'. Another saying of his was, 'Something's aye better than nothing'. But he was not miserly, for he would fill his friends' snuff-mulls without charging them anything.

As his fortune increased, he bought more lands including the estate at Bonaly, stretching to the top of the Pentland Hills. He also bought a big yellow carriage in which he used to come into Edinburgh. One day, when Mr James Gillespie was out in his carriage, he met the Honourable Henry Erskine⁴ and asked him for a motto for his coach. Every 'Gillespie' girl knows Erskine's famous reply –

'Wha would hae thocht it,
That noses had bocht it!'

In appearance, James Gillespie had a bulbous nose (and he was very 'touchy' about it) and a protruding, pointed chin.



There is an oil-painting of him which is now kept in the Merchant Company's Hall, painted by his friend and neighbour, Sir James Foulis, Bart. of Woodhall. It shows Mr Gillespie sitting on a rustic seat in his garden at Spylaw House, with his hands on his stick and his chin resting on his hands.



He remained a bachelor all his life and on 16th April, 1796, he made his will leaving his fortune for charitable purposes. He died on 8th April, 1797, and was buried in the churchyard of the Parish Church of St Cuthbert, Colinton.



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Further chapters will be posted here in the coming weeks.

Notes:

¹ Among the books that I looked at in the Edinburgh Room was a volume of John Kay's 'Original Portraits'. This said that James Gillespie was believed to have been born at Rosslin (Roslin) about six miles from Edinburgh and that he was the elder brother, and John, the younger. The copy of this book that I borrowed from the Morningside Library, however, gave different information. This second book was a later edition (1842) than the one in the Edinburgh Room. The following footnote, which appears on page 218 of volume two of the later edition, explains the difference:

"When the first edition (1838) of the work appeared, their relatives were under the impression that the youngest was the eldest and that they were born at Roslin or its, neighbourhood. Their parents' names being known, a search was lately made there, but in vain. The following extracts, however, from the Session-Clerk's books of this city, set conjecture at rest.

'Edinburgh, 18th January, 1724 – James Gillespie, Indweller, and Elizabeth Mcbaith, his spouse, A.S.N, (a son) John, born 12th inst. W. (witness) John Lindsay, taylor, and George Gillespie, indweller in Broughtoun'.

'Edinburgh, May 1st, 1726 – James Gillespie, Indweller, and Elizabeth Mcbeath, his spouse, A.S.N (a son) James, born 28th April last. W. (witness) Tho. Whytland, saidler, and George Gillespie, Tennent in Broughtoun'"

The third edition of Kay's Portraits, printed in 1877, went back to the original text, that of the first edition, and people taking any information about the Gillespie brothers from either of these editions have their information wrong.

² Spylaw House, Colinton. James Gillespie lived here. One of his snuff mills was at the back of the house and water from the Water of Leith, passed through it and turned a water- wheel inside the building. [In 1953] the house is now to be used by the Boy Scouts Association.

³ Before James Gillespie bought this second snuff mill, it had been a paper mill where playing cards were made. Then it was an inn where smugglers came, in 1766 it was raided by the Customs officers. After that James Gillespie bought it and when he died the mill became a dairy and later became a riding school – Spylaw Riding School as it is today [1953].

⁴ The Honorable Henry Erskine was born on 1st November, 1746, at Edinburgh. He was the third son of the Earl of Buchan. When he was nineteen years old, he became a member of the Faculty of Advocates. Twice he held the office of Lord Advocate – the principal law officer of the Crown in Scotland. Henry Erskine was very clever at 'cracking jokes' and making 'puns'.

⁵ James (left) and John (right) (From John Kay's collection of 'Original Portraits'.

John Kay was born at Dalkeith in 1743. He was a barber and also good at sketching. He came to Edinburgh in 1771 and set up business as a barber-artist. His shop was in Parliament Square, and it was always crowded with gentlemen waiting to have their hair cut and their wigs dressed. In his spare time Kay made many sketches of well-known local people. At length he gave up his barber business and worked only as an artist. He made in all, about 900 plates of people in Edinburgh in his day. A collection of 361 of his 'Original Portraits' was first published in 1838 and includes the Gillespie brothers. John Kay lived at no. 227 High Street almost next door to the Gillespie's tobacco and snuff shop and doubtless knew the Gillespie brothers well.

⁶ James Gillespie's Tomb. James Gillespie was buried in the churchyard of St Cuthbert's Parish Church at Colinton. Robert Louis Stevenson's grandfather, the Rev. Lewis Balfour was minister here from 1823 to 1860 and the little boy, Robert, often used to visit him and play in the churchyard. A long time afterwards he wrote about this churchyard in 'Memories and Portraits' and called it the place 'where the tombstones were this and after nightfall 'spunkies' might be seen - at least by children.

⁷ The inscription above the tomb

⁸ The inlaid floor of the tomb

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