

“Accused Bigamist Spent 1900 Christmas in Jail”
Carroll County Times article for 17 December 2000
by Jay A. Graybeal

The local 1900 holiday season was interrupted by a sensational court hearing involving a Pleasant Valley woman and an accused bigamist. Not surprisingly, the case received considerable press coverage, including a lengthy article in the December 15th issue of the Westminster American Sentinel newspaper:

“Robert Harrison Wilson, or John J. Tremper, the latter being his correct name, had a hearing before Justice William Moore, of this city, on Tuesday afternoon upon the charge of bigamy, in having married Mrs. Susie C. Myers, of the vicinity of Pleasant Valley, on the 11th day of July, 1900, when he had a lawful wife living in Newburgh, N.Y. The presence and testimony of Mrs. Tremper, who claims to have been his wife for a period of 35 years, and to have borne him 13 children, 6 of whom are living, gave the hearing something of a sensational turn, and the Justice’s office was packed to suffocation with spectators, eager and anxious to note every incident that occurred and to hear all the testimony.

Before the accused was brought from the jail to the place of hearing Mrs. Tremper sat quietly waiting by the side of State’s Attorney Weant, but with an air of expectation and a look of distress or anxiety upon her face. She is a prepossessing woman for her age, being, as she testified, about 54 years old. She is above medium height and was neatly dressed in a black silk waist with skirt of a modest brownish color with dark blue stripes, and wore a tastefully trimmed bonnet.

While awaiting the appearance of the accused it transpired that he was, in addition to the crime of bigamy, to be charged with perjury, in having made oath before County Clerk Billingslea, when he obtained the license to marry Mrs. Myers, that he was a widower. Mrs. Tremper made an affidavit before Justice Moore detailing her marriage to him and their subsisting relations as husband and wife from that time till the present, thus giving the basis upon which the charge of perjury was laid. Upon this charge the defense waived a hearing for the present, and he was held in default of \$2,000 bail for further action.

Before taking any testimony upon the charge of bigamy State’s Attorney Weant moved an amendment to the warrant upon which the accused was arrested, and in which it was alleged that he married Elizabeth A. Wilson on July 11th, 1865. The actual date of the marriage was December 6th, 1865, and the motion was to strike out the date first named and insert the latter date. To this J. M. Reifsnider, the attorney for the accused, objected, and declared that it was not in accordance with law to make such an amendment; that the proper proceeding was to issue a new warrant and rearrest the accused upon a definite charge. In replying to this State’s Attorney Weant stated that he had frequently known Mr. Reifsnider, when State’s Attorney, to ask for such amendments. Mr. Reifsnider interrupted him to say this was not so. The State’s Attorney repeated the statement and reiterated it several times, Mr. Reifsnider as repeatedly interrupting, and finally stigmatizing the statement as untrue in very emphatic language. “I will hold you personally responsible in the matter,” he said, addressing Mr. Weant, “and it can be settled outside.” For a moment it looked as if a collision might occur between the excited attorneys, and the bout caused quite a commotion, but quiet was speedily restored by the appeals of the Justice to the excited attorneys. When the excitement subsided Justice Moore decided that the warrant could be amended as moved by the State, and when that was done the hearing on the charge of bigamy proceeded and was speedily concluded. But two witnesses were sworn—Bailiff William N. Beaver, of this city, and Mrs. John J. Tremper, of Newburgh, N.Y.

Bailiff Beaver merely reiterated the details of the arrest of the accused in Baltimore, with the additional information that he knew him both as Robert H. Wilson and John J. Tremper. He had known him as Wilson for about five weeks and as Tremper for three weeks. He had seen in the hands of the accused several letters or envelopes addressed to John J. Tremper—saw them by looking over the man's shoulder.

Mrs. Elizabeth A. Tremper then testified. She had exhibited considerable emotion when Wilson (or Tremper) was brought into the Justice's office. She sat within five or six feet of the man and directly facing him, with the justice's table between them. She stood up calmly to be sworn and was then directed to sit down. She was then asked if she knew John J. Tremper, and if he were present. She replied, looking unflinchingly at the accused: "Yes, that is he." Then, in agitated tones: "He is my husband. Before the God of Heaven, he is my husband. He has done this thing and almost broken his daughter Nellie's heart." With a strong effort she controlled herself and stated that she was 54 years old on the 4th of last July; that her maiden name was Elizabeth A. Wilson, and that she was married to John J. Tremper, the accused, in Newburgh, N.Y., December 6, 1865; that she has been the mother of 13 children, of whom he is the father, six of them being now alive, and all residing with her except two, one of whom is married, and lives in Goshen, and another is in jail for robbery. Tremper, she said, is an engineer by trade. He left Newburgh July 10th, 1900, telling her he was coming to Maryland with some oil cups for a Mr. Wilbur, who had purchased them and wished him to travel and sell them. She did not tell when he reappeared in Newburgh, but stated that he left there to come back to Maryland November 10th, and that he was in Carroll county this last time.

A handsome, large, finely bound illustrated family Bible was produced, in which a marriage certificate was entered. The accused interrupted with the exclamation: "I wrote that myself," and intimated that it was not lawful testimony. She then proceeded and said he had copied it into the Bible from her old marriage certificate. When asked if she still had the certificate, she replied: "No, it was destroyed." "She burned it," interpolated the accused. Mrs. Tremper identified a photograph of Tremper, herself, and several of their children. She also identified a photograph of Tremper alone. When Mrs. Tremper's testimony was concluded she broke down and wept quite bitterly for a moment, but soon regained her self-possession.

The State offered to prove by Dr. J. H. Billingslea, Clerk of the Circuit Court, that he had personally issued the license to Tremper, as Robert H. Wilson, for his marriage with Mrs. Susie C. Myers, on the 11th day of July, 1900; and by Rev. Dr. P. H. Miller, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, that he had performed the ceremony uniting them in marriage on the same day, but the defense admitted the proof and these witnesses were not examined. This concluded the hearing and Justice Moore promptly decided to hold the accused for the action of grand jury. Bail was fixed at \$2,000, making the whole amount required, on the two charges of bigamy and perjury, \$4,000. No attempt was made to procure security and the accused was remanded to the custody of Sheriff Motter.

As Mrs. Tremper was about to retire from the office she was brought face to face with the accused, and asked him to shake hands with her. At first he refused and shook his head, but, upon her saying "I am not doing this; I cannot help it," he grasped her hand and their lips met in a long and loving kiss. Mr. Tremper burst into a fit of weeping and sympathetic feelings of all present were strongly moved by the incident.

At Mrs. Tremper's request she was granted an interview with her husband in the privacy of the rear room of the justice's office. What transpired there is not known, but it has been hinted that she desired

him to transfer to her a pension of which he is a recipient from the United States for services in the Navy during the Civil War. Tremper served in some capacity on board the United States ship Nerius for two years and six months during that period. The result of the interview, however, has not been ascertained.

Mrs. Tremper reached here Tuesday morning, having come from Newburgh at the request of State's Attorney Weant, who wired her the previous day. She left for her home again after the hearing.

Wilson's, or Tremper's, Maryland wife was not present at the hearing and, it is stated, will have nothing further to do with the man who is accused of having so cruelly wronged her. Mrs. Wilson writes to the manager of the SENTINEL, denying very earnestly the published reports that she ever advertised in the New York Journal for a husband, or ever offered Wilson any sum of money to marry her. These stories, she declares are utterly false."

By coincidence, the same issue of the newspaper contained an article about another local woman who had recently discovered her husband had used a bogus minister to marry the couple. Faced with prosecution, the husband consented to a real marriage.

Photo caption: J. Milton Reifsnider, Esq., photographed in c1885, represented accused bigamist John J. Tremper (a.k.a. Robert H. Wilson) in December 1900. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.