

# More Than a Statistic: John Spillan (1837–1906)

Patricia Delich

**J**ohn Spillan, I'm your second-great-granddaughter, and I've been looking for you.

For years, you've been dropping me hints, bits and pieces of your story. Like many people who research their ancestors, I've found a few of your vitals—dates that place you in an era I can almost touch. But most of your story is still shrouded in mystery.

I will admit, at first, I was a bit embarrassed about you. One of the first things I learned about you was from your death certificate: died in Norristown, Pennsylvania, at the "State Hospital for the Insane" in 1906. This cold, hard fact stared at me for many years. But it was in your death certificate that your story started to come into focus.

In reading my other ancestors' death certificates, I've learned that many died from strokes, so seeing that you died from a cerebral hemorrhage didn't surprise me. It wasn't until I stumbled on an 1896 newspaper clipping from the *Allentown Leader* (Pennsylvania) that I learned that you, an old and well-known resident of South Bethlehem, had been struck by an engine on the North Penn railroad crossing. The article told me you were badly cut on the head, but at that time it was believed you were "not fatally hurt." You were 59 years old.

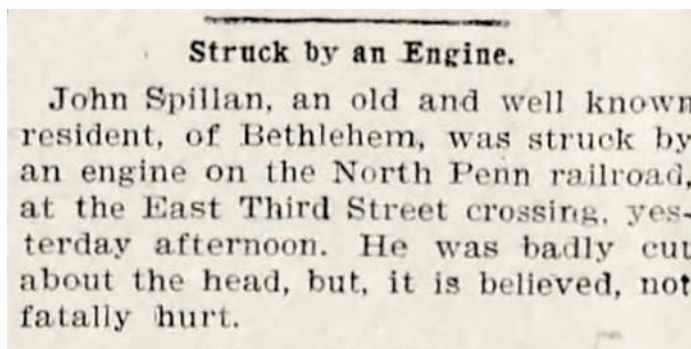
Reading that article struck me in my heart. At this point, I knew your wife, Margaret Mary (Allen), had died 16 years prior to your accident. And thanks to some research by Ken Raniere from the South Bethlehem



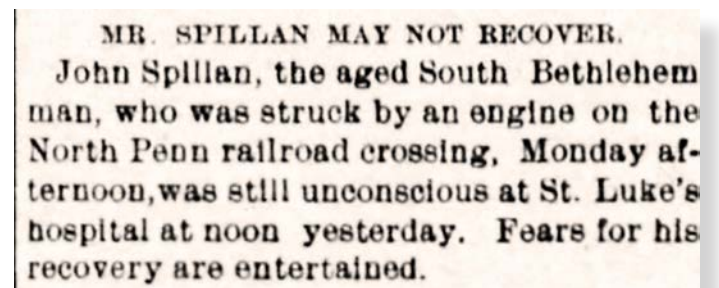
*Three generations of Spillans: Left to right, James "JD" Spillan (author's grandfather), William D. "Bill" Spillan (author's uncle who was born in 1927), and William David Spillan (author's great-grandfather).*

Historical Society, I found out this accident happened close to where you lived. Perhaps you were on your way home from work.

I've been lucky to find pieces of your story using an internet search engine. One night while researching you, I found a second article about your accident. This one wasn't as optimistic as the first one. *The Morning Call*, 18 November 1896: "Mr. Spillan May Not Recover." You were still unconscious, and "fears for his recovery are entertained." In this article, I learned you were taken to St. Luke's Hospital.



*Allentown Leader, 17 November 1896.*



*The Morning Call, 18 November 1896.*

It was these two short newspaper articles that brought me to look deeper into the data on your death certificate.



Norristown State Hospital, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Your doctor stated that he had “attended you” since February 19, 1897. That was 3 months after your accident occurred. This tells me that you were probably transferred from St. Luke’s to the state hospital at that time, perhaps because your injuries were so severe and long term that you couldn’t be kept at St. Luke’s. The doctor who signed your death certificate stated that he took care of you until you died, “9 years, 6 months, and 23 days” later. That’s a long time to live in a hospital, and I can’t

imagine what it must have been like for you, with a severe head injury, living at the state hospital for the insane.

Although your death certificate says you were married, I know mistakes are sometimes made. Your wife Margaret Mary died in January of 1880. By the time the federal census was taken in June 1880, it stated you were a widower and your children’s ages ranged from 19 to 2 years old.

John, it’s now 113 years since you died. The unfortunate way your life ended, holding on for almost 10 years, shows me your tenacity and will to live. Your courage is also shown by being the first in our family to immigrate to the United States, providing for seven children, and taking care of them as a single father after your wife passed. As one of the first residents of South Bethlehem, you were well-known. The articles that I’ve found in the local papers indicate to me that people in your community cared about you. I’m certain I can speak for your son William David, your grandson James, and all those who descended from you, that we’re grateful for what you’ve given us—the strength and determination to make it through hard times. You were more than your accident, more than the hard facts staring at me through the decades on these documents. I look forward to learning more about you as I continue digging to find your stories.

Form V. S. No. 2—Reprint by State Hospital, Norristown.

PLACED OF DEATH: *Norristown = 4178*

County of *Montgomery* Registration District No. *724* File No. *88870*

Township of *Norristown* Primary Registration District No. *1399* Registered No. *534*

City of *State Hospital for the Insane* Ward. *1*

FULL NAME *John Spillen*

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

Sex *Male* Color *White*

Date of Birth *1837* (Month) *12* (Day) *19* (Year)

Age *69* years, *—* months, *—* days

Single, Married, Widowed, or Divorced *Married*

Birthplace (State or country) *Ireland*

Name of Father *Unknown*

Birthplace of Father (State or country) *Ireland*

Maiden Name of Mother *Unknown*

Birthplace of Mother (State or country) *Ireland*

Occupation *Shoemaker*

THIS ABOVE STATED PERSONAL PARTICULARS ARE TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF.

(Informant) *M. M. Coffey, M.D.* (Address) *State Hospital for the Insane, Norristown, Pa.*

FILED *Sept. 13, 1906, Chas. E. White, Jr., Registrar.*

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA. Bureau of Vital Statistics. CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

Date of Death *9* (Month) *12* (Day) *1906* (Year)

I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from *2* (Month) *19* (Day) *1897* (Year) to *9* (Month) *12* (Day) *1906* (Year)

that I last saw him alive on *9* (Month) *12* (Day) *1906* (Year) and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at *11:40* P.M. The cause of death was as follows:

*Cerebral Hemorrhage*

Contributory *155* (Duration) *12* (Days)

(Signed) *M. M. Coffey, M.D.* (Address) *State Hospital for the Insane, Norristown, Pa.*

SPECIAL INFORMATION only for Hospitals, Institutions, Transfers or Recent Deaths. Name of Hospital, Institution, or Place of Death *State Hospital for the Insane, Norristown, Pa.*

Where was disease contracted *State Hospital*

Place of Burial or Inhumation *State Hospital*

Date of Burial *Sept. 13, 1906*

(Signed) *John J. Perry* (Address) *State Hospital for the Insane, Norristown, Pa.*

Certificate of Death for John Spillen [sic] from the State Hospital for the Insane in Norristown, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, on 12 September 1906.



Patricia Delich