

The History of the Stephenson Family

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Courtesy of Fort Vance Historical Society

PREFACE

The history of the STEPHENSON family which is given here has been taken from several historical books, of which the principal ones are:

Henry Bedinger's History of Old Shepardstown,
Berkeley County, Virginia
Written by - D.Dandridge

Lineage Books of the National Society of the
Daughters of the American Revolution
Volume 78, page 185
Volume 82

Reference received from the Archives and History
Library of West Virginia

Reference Book: Immigration from the North of Ireland
to America

Acknowledgement is also made for the valuable history given to the author by James, David, and Thomas Stephenson.

This history is subject to research and correction.

This history is written for the purpose of commemorating our Revolutionary ancestors and soldier heros of the early American Wars, and to help us to keep always before us the principles and ideals they represented in the terrible struggle to free and make this country the greatest nation in the world today.

Mention is made in this brief history of our large family of some members of its various branches, so that as the years pass by the living ones will have no difficulty in tracing their descendency back to their respective forefathers.

The Stephenson's came to America from County Down, in the north of Ireland. The family which migrated here from a small farm of forty acres consisted of parents and thirteen children. John, James, and Hugh are named as the first ones to arrive in America in the year 1723. They settled in Berkeley County, Virginia. Berkeley County was part of the land which formed part of the eastern panhandle of West Virginia.

Our original family name was Stinson, changed later to Stephenson or Stevenson (both spellings are correct).

There is much confusion of names and branches of the Stephenson family, which makes the tracing of our family difficult in the years immediately following 1723. However, what is written is, we believe correct.

We are descended from Richard Stephenson who lived in Brillskin Creek, Virginia, on a farm of 196 acres. He was living there in the year 1775. He married a widow named Crawford who had two sons, Col. William Crawford and Valentine Crawford, by her first marriage. From her marriage to Richard Stephenson there were five sons: John, Hugh, Richard, James, and Marquis.

It is from this John Stephenson that we are descended. He was born in the year 1746 in Berkeley County, Virginia, near Shepardstown, which is now considered the oldest town in West Virginia and published the first daily West Virginia newspaper in 1797. He died on December 14, 1821, and was buried in Cross Creek Graveyard. He served as Sergeant in the First Company Pennsylvania Artillery for eight months during 1776. His commander was Captain Thomas Proctor. After serving in this company, John Stephenson applied on October 18, 1776 to the Honorable Council of Safety in Philadelphia for a better military position. From a reference made in the book of Old Monongahela, page 118, to Colonels John and William Stephenson, half brother of Col. William Crawford, we believe that he succeeded in getting an appointment. There is a photostatic copy of this letter or petition, of Sergeant John Stephenson which is very interesting to see. It was written by his own hand. For his services in the Revolutionary War, John Stephenson received a grant of 407 acres of land in Washington County, Pennsylvania according to a Virginia certificate dated June 4, 1780. This grant of land was called "Wild Roe", and was surveyed as Stephenson's Choice. This property is situated in Jefferson Township. Four homes are now on the "Wild Roe" tract. The adjoining tracts to the south were later recorded as lots called Eldersville, PA. It is part of Jefferson Township. It was a prosperous area of about 1,000 homes and had four stores. Today, there are only about 100 families living in Eldersville and the only store is the Post Office, which sells only bread and milk. The nearest stores are in Burgettstown, six miles to the north. In the old days, Jefferson Township prospered because of coal mines.

John Stephenson married Margaret Huston who died November 15, 1839 at the age of 84 and was buried in Cross Creek Graveyard. ^{Seven} ~~Three~~ sons were born of this marriage, they were Thomas, Andrew and Robert ^{Joseph, James, John and William} and ^{two} ~~one~~ girls, Jane & Isabella

The first house built on John Stephenson's land was a two-roomed structure made of logs, which is still standing today in a poor state of preservation, considering that it was built about 150 years ago. The spring of water near the door of the house was so sheltered that in case of prolonged attack by the Indians the family would not be without drinking water. Near the house a small portion of land was cleared for cultivation. This work was done by one half of the family while the other half kept watch for indians, because there was great danger of attacks by savages at that time. About one-half mile from the house was a branch trail used by several Indian tribes as a means of connection to the main trail of the Five Nations Tribe. Hardly a day passed without a visible sign of the Indians. This trail was a constant source of terror to the early settlers who lived in that neighborhood. During those dreadful days of Indian raids on the settlers, many people were killed or taken prisoner by the redskins. Many of these attacks were instigated by the three notorious renegades of Western Pennsylvania - Matthew Elliott, Alexander McKee and Simon Girty. These three men were employed by the British government and were responsible for more murders and raids on the early settlers than has ever been estimated.

Some time before John Stephenson came with his family to live on his grant of land - in fact, before the land was surveyed by the government - two or three trappers built a log cabin in a deeply wooded section of it, near what was later the Burgettstown Road. These trappers were murdered by the Indians and their cabin burned to the ground. Later, what remained of these men was gathered up and buried on the site of their burned cabin. For many years field stones marked their graves. While the Stephensons owned the land, this small field which was joined on two sides by Boles' and Stewarts' property, was never cleared or cultivated.

There were thirty-six forts or block houses within the present limits of Washington County. The nearest fort to the Stephenson home was the Vance Block House, situated about two miles away, near the Cross Creek Village of today. In 1814 the village of Eldersville was laid out. Part of the village is built on Stephenson land. One of the oldest houses in Eldersville today is the log structure formerly owned by David and Rachel Stephenson. This house was built on a small portion of land which was bought from the Stephenson estate by Christopher Bable who was a soldier in General St. Clair's army, in 1791.

Between the years of 1800 and 1804 a larger and more comfortable house was built by John Stephenson. There his family lived for many years. John and his wife Margaret Huston Stephenson, the pioneers of our family, were two outstanding characters. They were reliable, honest, courageous, and deeply religious. They were members of the old Cross Creek Church (Presbyterian). This couple was well fitted to take its place in the wilderness of the New World, to fight and to obtain freedom for us all. After the new house was built across from the old pioneer home, they realized the need for giving a home to the orphaned children whose parents were dead either from the war or from the Indian raids on the settlers. A home was provided for more than a few of these unfortunate children, who helped with the work when they were old enough and received a small wage for their labor. Their help was needed badly because of the poor facilities which the farmers had for carrying on their work. The hoe, Maddick sickle or scythe, the grain cradle and the grain flail were about all the implements they had to work with, but in spite of such poor equipment, the Stepbensons cleared the woodland and planted the fields. After the death of John Stephenson, his widow Margaret Huston Stephenson successfully carried on the farming activities with the aid of her sons, Thomas, Andrew, and Robert. She was blind for twenty years before her death. After her death, her oldest son Thomas and Isabel Stephenson took charge of the farm. They had better machinery and farmed on a large scale. They raised many cattle and several other kinds of live stock; they operated a cider press for all the farmers in that vicinity.

The Stepbensons owned and operated the blanket and woolen weaving looms where linen and cotton fabrics were also woven. In this way, the family was provided with some articles needed for household use. They also marketed all kinds of farm produce, including apple butter, jams, apple and maple molasses, soaps, dairy products and poultry. These articles were disposed of in Steubenville, Ohio, by the system of barter or exchange; in this way, the family got other articles which they needed but were not able to produce for themselves.

The Stephenson family grew more prosperous as the years passed. After the death of Thomas and Isabel Stephenson, the farm passed into the hands of Cyrus Stephenson who was engaged in several enterprises. He was a member of the Western Wool Growers Association, was a promoter with David Stephenson of fine stock, sheep and hogs. His hog breeds included Poland, China, Jersey Reds, and Chester Whites.

Cyrus H. Stephenson was known in nearly every state in the Union as a successful important farming gentleman. But by a sad turn of fate, the Stephenson's property was lost, and the old farms passed into other hands. They never seemed to regain their old prosperous look, and kept receding in value.

Since Thomas was the oldest son of John and Margaret Stephenson, he naturally inherited the farm. The other two boys, Andrew and Robert, received their inheritance in money. Andrew Stephenson was Postmaster in Burgettstown for some time, and his descendants today live in the district. Robert Stephenson moved to the South and invested his money in different enterprises. Thomas Stephenson received the farm, but left it to serve his country during time of war. He enlisted and served in the war of 1812 from May 5, to November 1813. He served in the Pennsylvania Militia, commanded by Col. Rees Hill, Capt. George Record's Co., 147th Regiment, First Brigade, 11th Division. Thomas Stephenson received for his services in the War of 1812 a valuable grant of land of 160 acres in Iowa. He was born March 12, 1794 and died December 26, 1846. He married Isabel Martin who was born October 9, 1796 and died February 22, 1872. To this marriage eleven children were born.

Isabel Martin Stephenson was a widow for many years before her death. She managed the farm with the help of her sons James, David, Cyrus and Thomas. She sold off the grant, a farm to her brother James Martin, which is near Eldersville. James Martin married Nancy Boles. The farm is now owned and operated by Nannie Cooper Walker. The old family farm is owned by "Doc" Boles. The old revolutionary homestead farm is now owned by Peté Davidson. These three farms mentioned here comprise the original Revolutionary land grant to John Stephenson.

I hereby submit a copy of the record taken from grandmother Isabel Stephenson's family Bible. This copy was sent to me by Anna Beatrice Stevenson Beall, and gives the names of our family, with the dates of births and deaths. (We do not have this at the present time.)

BROTHERS OF GREAT GRANDFATHER JOHN STEPHENSON

James Stephenson, son of Richard Stephenson

He was born in Berkeley County, Virginia in 1740 and died in Pennsylvania in 1813; he is buried in Cross Creek Graveyard.

He was a brave soldier in the Revolutionary War where he served as Captain and Paymaster in the 13th Virginia Regiment in 1776.

His descendants live near Cross Creek.

William Stephenson, son of Richard Stephenson and brother of John Stephenson

William Stephenson was a Lieutenant with the George Rodgers Clark Expedition--one of the most important events connected with the Revolutionary War.

David Stephenson, son of Richard Stephenson and brother of John Stephenson
David Stephenson was a Major with the Daniel Morgan's Rifle Corps in the Revolutionary War.

David Stephenson, son of Thomas Stephenson, was named for this uncle.

HISTORY OF THE BROTHERS OF GRANT-GRANDFATHER JOHN STEPHENSON

I now quote from Henry Bedinger's Historical Book of Old Shepardstown, Berkeley County, Virginia, and also from the unfailing memories of James, David and Thomas Stephenson, who well remembered reading the treasured letters written by Col. Hugh Stephenson to his brother, Grandfather John Stephenson. These letters were wonderfully well written and had the appearance of steel engravings.

Here is a brief history of some of the brothers of John Stephenson and his half-brother Colonel William Crawford.

Colonel William Crawford was born on Bullskin Creek, Virginia. He was a surveyor by profession and assisted George Washington in his survey of that part of Virginia. He was a brave soldier in the Revolutionary War. He was with the ill-fated expedition against the Indians in the year 1782 in which he was captured and burned at the stake on the plains near Sandusky, Ohio. His mother married Richard Stephenson and from this marriage six sons were born. They were Hugh, John, Marquis, James, William and David. The Stephensons and Crawfords lived together on Bullskin Creek, Berkeley County, Virginia, where they took up land in 1747.

George Washington knew and esteemed the Stephenson and Crawford families, and at one time roomed and boarded in their house while he was making surveys of land in that part of the state. Before the Revolutionary War, Hugh Stephenson rented some land from George Washington. There is a letter from him to Washington dated 1768. This letter is now in the Congressional Library at Washington, D.C., as is also one other letter which I will submit as it was written. George Washington valued the ability of his brave rifleman very highly; Col. Hugh Stephenson stood well in his favor. I here give the copy of Washington's and Stephenson's letters as they were written so many years ago.

Wallabout Bay, Long Island
Staten Island, April 8, 1776

May it please your honor

Yesterday about 10 o'clock, the ship Savage and the James pilate boat came up the Sound under cover of thick fog to the watering place of this land. Each sent a boat of 11 men to take in water of which I received intelligence and prepared to attack them. They received information of our approach and a signal gun was fired for their retreat which was endeavored to effect under cover of a brisk and almost constant fire from the Savage, but being closely pursued were obliged to leave behind them one standard, one musket, one boat, 27 ironbound barrels, one cable, anchor and buoy, one speaking trumpet, one iron pot and two watch coats. Ten men were taken prisoner in the boat, and in the water, attempting to make their escape (one of whom was wounded). One man being shot fell into the water, and two others fell on board, of which were confident many were wounded but I cannot with certainty you'll please refer to four deserters who came ashore last night from the Phenix, for better information, two boys from New York who went on board the Black Yoke Saturday and were towed in their canoe by the James to the watering place yesterday morning and landed, are supposed to be the persons who have the ships crews notice that the riflemen were approaching, and are therefore made prisoners.

The Passing of the Back House

When memory keeps me company and moves to smiles or tears,
A weather-beaten object looms through the mist of years,
Behind the house and barn it stood, a half mile or more,
And hurrying feet a path had made, straight to its swinging door.
Its architecture was a type of simple classic art,
But in the tragedy of life it played a leading part.
And oft the passing traveler drove slow, and heaved a sigh,
To see the modest hired girl slip out with glances shy.

We had our posey garden that the women loved so well,
I loved it too, but better still I loved the stronger smell,
That filled the evening breezes so full of homely cheer,
And told the night-o'ertaken tramp that human life was near.
On lazy August afternoons, it made a little bower
Delightful, where my grandsire sat and whiled away an hour,
For there the summer mornings its very cares entwined
And berry bushes reddened in the streaming soil behind.

All day fat spiders spun their webs to catch the buzzing flies,
That flitted to and from the house, where Ma was baking pies
And once a swarm of hornets bold, had built a palace there
Ant stung my unsuspecting Aunt - I must not tell you where.
Then Father took a flaming pole - that was a happy day -
He nearly burned the building up, but the hornets left to stay.
When summer bloom began to fade and winter to carouse,
We banked the little building with a heap of hemlock boughs.

But when the crust was on the snow, and the sullen skies were gray,
In sooth the building was no place where one could wish to stay.
We did our duties promptly, there one purpose swayed the mind.
We tarried not, nor lingered long on what was left behind.
The torture of that icy seat would make a Spartan sob,
For needs must scrape the goose flesh with a lacerating cob,
That from a frost-encrusted nail, was suspended by a string,
My father was a frugal man and wasted not a thing.

When Grandpa had to "go out back" and make his morning call,
We'd bundle up the dear old man, with a muffler and a shawl.
I know the hole on which he sat - 'twas padded all around.
And once I dared to sit there - 'twas all too wide I found.
My loins were all too little, and I jack-knifed there to stay
They had to come and get me out, or I'd have passed away.
Then Father said ambition was a thing that boys should shun,
And I just use the children's hole, 'till childhood days were done.

And still I marvel at the craft that cut those holes so true,
The baby hole, and the slender hole, that fitted sister Sue,
That dear old country landmark; I tramped around a bit,
And in the lap of luxury my lot has been to sit.
But ere I die I'll eat the fruit of trees I robbed of yore, then
Seek the shanty where my name is carved upon the door.
I ween the old familiar smell will soothe my jaded soul,
I'm now a man, but none the less, I'll try the Children's hole.

- James Whitcomb Riley