

Deconstructing Family Stories: Are They Fact, Fiction, or a Little of Both

Barbara Vines Little, CG, FNGS, FUGA, FVGS
PO Box 1273
Orange Va 22960
bvlittle@earthlink.net

Board for Certification of Genealogists® Martha Reisinger Lecture Series

We all have them—family stories—from Indian princesses and three brothers came to America to “We’re related to [you name them].” Some are blatantly false; others wishful thinking. but, others may be true or partly true. Discarding even the most outrageous without research is a mistake. They started somewhere and in that original story may be the answer to a brick wall problem. Finding the clues in family stories requires careful and thorough research, but that kernel of truth can be worth it.

SOME STORIES ARE WISHFUL THINKING

The family story we had often heard—it was even published in *The Tenacious Berkleys*—was accepted without question by many in the family. After all the author had a PhD and “everybody” had heard the story. Its origin had never been identified. But “everybody” knew Uncle Earl wouldn’t have published it if it wasn’t true. Unfortunately he had (published it), and it wasn’t (true). We weren’t direct descendants of Governor Berkeley of Virginia or at least not acknowledged descendants since the governor had no acknowledged children. And, even if we had been, the other part wasn’t true either. Our ancestors hadn’t lived in Berkeley castle—the governor was from the cadet branch. Some stories are easy to evaluate.



Others are just as easy to prove—neither Benjamin Franklin nor George Washington had children. However, as one researcher put it, if George Washington had as many aides as are claimed, he would have had to change them every fifteen minutes.

Due diligence will inevitably point to the truth or rather the lack of veracity and one moves on.



LEGENDS

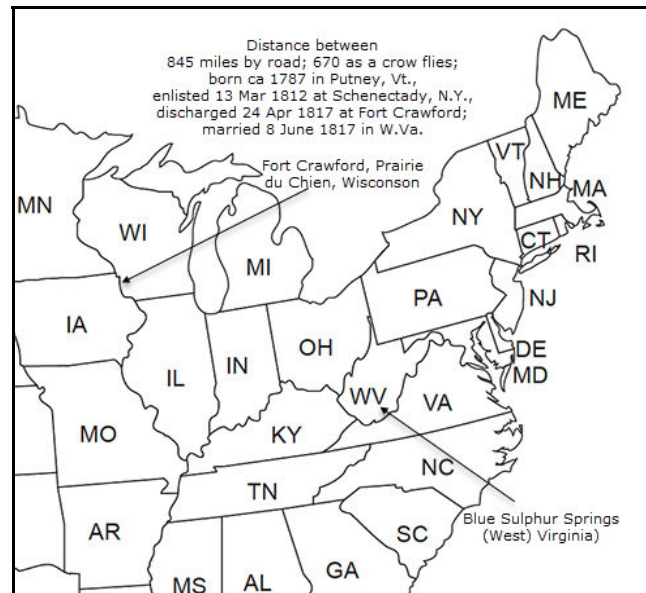
Legends are harder to deal with whether they include George Washington and a cherry tree, William Tell and an apple, or John Henry and a tunnel. They live on. And, in fact, many, if not most, may have some basis in fact and although they may tamper with the truth to make an individual look larger than life, they rarely impact others.

FAMILY STORIES CAN LEAD US ASTRAY

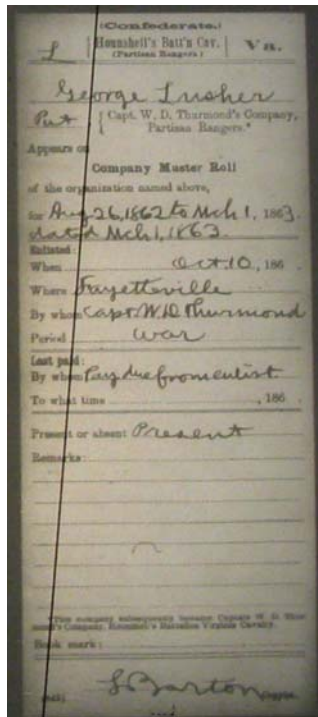
Some come from faulty research (often another aspect of wishful thinking).

The client's letter began "our family came from Culpeper County, Virginia," according to a letter written by a great aunt. She had discovered our great-great grandfather in the 1850 census in Kentucky, noted his birth in Virginia and located the family in Culpeper (or so her letter said). Unfortunately research presented a different picture, the man had arrived in Kentucky in the early 1800s owning no land and appearing in the tax records without so much as a horse for over five years; his supposed family in Culpeper was a rather wealthy landowner taxed on over a dozen enslaved individuals and varying numbers of horses. It was obvious that there was no direct connection except for the common name.

Or once again, in my own family, my fourth great grandfather, George Washington Lusher, fought in the War of 1812; in 1937 his great-grandson sent off to Washington for the pension record and there he was, born in Putney, Vermont, enlisted 30 Mar 1812 in Schenectady, New York, and discharged at Fort Crawford [no state mentioned] on 24 April 1817. He married on 8 June of that year in Blue Sulphur Springs (West) Virginia. A reconstruction of his service record and the consequent identification of the location of Fort Crawford (in Port du Chien, Wisconsin) strongly suggested there might be a problem. And there was; a **rejected** pension file for George survives identifying him as living in 1885 in Green Sulphur Springs not too far from where he was married and supposedly enlisting in 1812 in Randolph County, (West) Virginia. Scratch one family story. However, the other did turn out to be true.



Some questionable family stories are true. George did serve in the Confederate army at the age of about 70. George Lusher appears on a company muster roll dated 26 August 1862 to 1 March 1863 (at



Camp Echols near Packs Ferry) for W.D. Thurmond's Co. in Hounshell's Battalion Virginia Cavalry, which notes that he was recruited by Capt. W. D. Thurmond and enlisted 10 October 186_ at Fayetteville for the war, that he was present and that pay was due from enlistment.¹ He was a wheelwright, a much needed talent in the Confederate army; it is extremely doubtful that he served as an active soldier although the local history books state that at the age of 99, "he walked the distance of seventeen miles on foot."² No witnesses were identified so that walk like so many stories will remain "unproven."

Even George's son got into the mix. Andrew Jackson Lusher, who, as a budding genealogist, I stated with "authority," could not have been a red-headed Irishman as my grandmother claimed. Lusher was not an Irish surname. And it wasn't—the family was German. I was right, **but** so was my grandmother, Andy's father was George Washington Lusher—his mother was Mary O'Harrah and her family had dropped the O' the generation before. Chasing the Harrah/Harrows instead of the O'Harrahs is another story.

Then there is that is the old game "gossip" that now has 4000+ iterations on the Internet. I was struggling with how to put this together and paused for a break with coffee and the newspaper, and there was the comic strip "Baby Blues" where a young daughter hears parents discussing the family schedule that includes soccer practice and a baseball game at the same time, obviously they will have to "split up," which is all the "eavesdropper" hears before running to her brother with the story that mom and dad are going to split up. I wonder how many children hearing part of a conversation start the family story.

And, lastly, the stories that will never die, only adapt when questioned—A particularly famous Virginia one concerns the two Woodson boys known as Tater Woodson and Tub Woodson for their supposed hiding places in a potato hole and under a tub during an Indian raid. No one has ever proved that it didn't happen, but then again no one has ever proved it did even if the Virginia Historical Society has the gun supposedly used to stave off the Indian attack. [We'll explore some of the versions and see what you think.]

Most stories have a beginning—and like Topsy—they grow with added details until the original is hidden among the frills of the additions. But somewhere under all the embellishments is the original story. The story that tells us something about our ancestors. Unraveling the story can be difficult, but it is often well worth the journey.

¹ George Lusher, Capt. W. D. Thurmond's Co., Partisan Rangers, Hounshell's Battalion Va. Cavalry, Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Virginia, NARA M324, reel 206.

² James H. Miller, *History of Summers County from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (1907; reprint, n.p.: n.p., 1981), 497.

Testing the Story

- **Can you identify with reasonable accuracy the source?**

Evaluate the source and any apparent motivation for embellishment or inaccuracy.

Often what is supposed to be a long-time family story was created by a later researcher, who did not do in-depth research and/or whose research was based on faulty reasoning.

- **Is the time and place of the event compatible with the age, status, and residence of the individual? Remember to adjust assumptions based on location (frontier, urban, rural), time period, religion, economic and social status, occupation, and ethnicity.**

Uneducated individuals were usually not officers.

Men and women did not typically marry outside their social group.

Age was usually not a factor in migration if the individuals were traveling with a group (older family members moving with younger ones).

Proximity was important when relationships are being considered, but occupations such as drover, wagon master, canal boat operator, etc. can alter this.

Consider both sides of a relationship when looking for sources of actions, residences, ethnicity. Remember the red-head Irishman.

- **Is it logical? Not possible, but logical (within the norm) based upon the time and place**

Twelve-year-old boys are not executors of wills; eighteen year-old executors are outside the norm.

Sixty-year-old women do not have babies (at least not until the 1990s); fifty-year-old mothers are outside the norm.

Same name does not equal same person, either male or female.

- **Do you have enough evidence to make a determination?**

Have you verified the historical context?

Have you created a timeline to support your conclusions?

Have you explored all of the individuals involved.

- **Do the events in an individual's time line fall within the norm and cross those of others at appropriate times?**

A person cannot be in two places at one time

Typically a man will not be married to two women at one time

- **Remember—outside the norm is not wrong; it just means that you need additional evidence.**

Old George and his Civil War service was outside the norm, but true.