

The Link between the WILLSON Line and
Frontier Ferryman DANIEL STURGIS "of JOHN"

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Grandma **MARTHA WILLSON**'s odd collection of scribbled notes on scrap paper sat untouched and forgotten in a drawer for over 25 years until they were transcribed. They held valuable clues that when corroborated, through records involving previously unknown female ancestors, revealed a whole new branch of my family tree.

Grandma Martha's father, **JOHN ORR WILLSON** (1854-1933), was a livestock dealer and like his father, a farmer.¹ The family was aware that his forebears came to Ohio in the early days of European settlement, primarily from southwestern Virginia and South Carolina back country. Grandma Martha's handwritten notes say that a **DANIEL STURGIS WILLSON**, who was born in South Carolina, was the first of the **WILLSON** family to come to Ohio in 1821, due to opposition to slavery.² **STURGIS** was an unfamiliar name. Research revealed where **DANIEL STURGIS WILLSON** fits into both the **STURGIS** and the **WILLSON** families.

JOHN WILLSON's grandfather, the Ohio settler **DANIEL STURGIS WILLSON** (ca. 1796-1845), was the fifth generation of his family born in America.³ The first-known **STURGIS** ancestor to live in America was **JOHN STURGIS** "the first" (ca. 1637-1684) who had his passage from England to Virginia, circa 1660, paid by another man in exchange for a land certificate.⁴ Both his son, **JOHN STURGIS** Sr. (1662-ca. 1739), and grandson, **JOHN** Jr. (ca. 1693-ca. 1758), were born in Accomack County, Virginia. The next generation, **DANIEL STURGIS** "of **JOHN**" (meaning son of **JOHN**), was born ca. 1731 in Somerset County, Maryland and died in 1788 in York County, South Carolina.⁵

The **WILLSON-STURGIS** family link was initially discovered through **JANE (BRATTON) STURGIS**'s 1798 will.⁶ The will names **JANE**, the widow of **DANIEL STURGIS** "of **JOHN**," as the grandmother of **DANIEL STURGIS WILLSON** (who is the son of **JANE**'s daughter **MARY STURGIS WILLSON**). About 1796, daughter **MARY STURGIS** married **DAVID WILLSON** (ca. 1760 after 1850). These are the parents of the Ohio settler, **DANIEL STURGIS WILLSON**.⁷

JANE's residence is listed in the will as "of Indian Land" in "Old Nation Ford," York County, South Carolina. (See sidebar for more about Old Nation Ford, also known as Catawba Ford, and the road associated with it.)

At that time, this land belonged to the Catawba Indian nation. By the 1780s, after more than a century of regional inter-tribal warfare, territorial upheavals and disease, the Catawba population was decimated. The tribe, now allied with the European settlers, was known to lease their remaining land for desperately needed income. A record listing **DANIEL** and **JANE STURGIS**, daughter **MARY**, and husband **DAVID WILLSON** as "occupants of Catawba Indian Land" together with a lack of land or tax records would indicate they probably held Indian leases.⁸ In the late 1700s, only two remaining Catawba Indian villages existed, located on opposite sides of the Catawba River.

The Catawba Ford crossing located there was of strategic importance during the American Revolution.⁹

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In 1786, "**THOMAS SPROT**" and "**DANIEL STURGES**" were authorized by the South Carolina government to run a public ferry on the Catawba River near the Catawba Ford.¹⁰ The ferry permit had to be witnessed by state-appointed agents and signed by the heads of the Catawba Tribe.¹¹ Through this and other records, more details about **DANIEL STURGIS** emerged.

In about 1749, **DANIEL STURGIS** married Jane Bratton (ca. 1733-1801).¹² Land and tax records put him in Maryland and Delaware between 1760 and 1780.¹³ By 1786, **DANIEL** (then about 55), his wife **JANE**, and at least two of their sons, **JOSHUA** and **DANIEL** Jr., were in York County, South Carolina. **DANIEL** Sr. died two years later.¹⁴ His 1788 will states "one half of the profetts [sic] arising from my boat as she now stands" go to his son **JOSHUA**. Because **DANIEL STURGIS** and **THOMAS SPRATT** are named in the ferry's 1799 re-authorization, we know that the vested interests in the ferry remained in the **STURGIS** and **SPRATT** families.¹⁵

The ferries used during this time were sturdily built for rough daily use. The duties of public ferry owners included keeping and maintaining enough safe, serviceable boats to handle transport of all manner of goods, people, animals, and vehicles both day and night.¹⁶ As shown in the photograph, the upcountry ferries were typically flat-bottomed with sloped ends and sturdy railings to keep livestock and goods from falling overboard.¹⁷

THOMAS "KANAWHA" SPRATT (ca. 1731-1807) also had business interests in the ferry. The Catawba Indians knew **THOMAS** as a loyal, lifelong friend who played a key role in protecting their interests.¹⁸ Surely, this bond of trust was a key factor in obtaining permission for the ferry charter. **THOMAS**'s parents were among the first white settlers to come into the upland country of South Carolina, near present day Charlotte. He grew up in the wildness of the frontier's edge and typified the general characterization of Scots-Irish frontiersman as rough, raucous, quick-tempered, and litigious. As a young man, he was known for going on wild "sprees" with his friends and could display a vicious temper.¹⁹

Discord between the partners appeared in 1787, one year after the ferry charter was granted, when, in April, **DANIEL STURGIS** Sr. sued **THOMAS SPRATT** and **BISHOP HICKS** in the York County court for trespass. Three Catawba Indian Land Commissioners were assigned to investigate and return with a report. The next entry in the County court minutes is another lawsuit: "State vs. Thomas Spratt," and another entry in July 1787 is headed "State vs. Bishop Hicks." On July 10, 1787, the court ordered a jury assembled, and they found for **STURGIS** and held he was due payment for damages and costs from both Thomas Spratt and Bishop Hicks.²⁰

Soon after, on August 11, 1787 a statement, signed by four Delaware men, was recorded in a York County, South Carolina, deed book. It said: "We whose names are hereunto subscribed do hereby certify that **DANIEL STURGIS** late of Sussex County in the Delaware State, lived in good repute for several years in said County, and that during the late Contest between America and British, he and his sons acted as good citizens of these United States and otherwise supported reputable Characters as far as hath come to our knowledge."²¹ A January 1788 York County court entry states: "A certificate from under the hands of several Gentlemen in the state of Delaware respecting the Character of **DANIEL STURGIS** & family was ordered to be recorded."²² From this circumstantial evidence, including the post-lawsuit timing of the certificate's submittal to the court, it seems reasonable to assume that because he was new to the area and with his and his family's good standing and his ferry operation interest at stake, **DANIEL STURGIS** wanted to set the record straight

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regarding his character. Thereafter the ferry is referred to as "STURGIS's ferry" in the York County court record entries regarding road building and appointment of road overseers.²³

What motivated the **STURGIS** family to move to York County remains unknown, but it may have been to join other family, or perhaps the lucrative ferry opportunity was presented to **DANIEL STURGIS** Sr. Just as the will provided me with the first verifiable link between my **WILLSON** and **STURGIS** lines, I hope additional research in the future will help me answer this question.

THE GREAT WAGON ROAD: THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY OF ITS TIME

The crossing at Catawba Ford was a major route for goods and people moving through York County, South Carolina. It was part of the network of roads that made up the Great Wagon Road, stretching over 700 miles from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Augusta, Georgia. Originally Indian paths and sometimes buffalo traces, this road came into increased use for movement of goods, animals, and people. Soon after the Treaty of Lancaster was signed in 1744, the lands east of the Appalachians became off-limits to the warlike Iroquois and the Cherokee Indians, and therefore the area became relatively safe for European settlement. The Great Wagon Road's heyday lasted about 100 years, until the building of railroads began around 1850. Before upland cotton was planted, goods going to market on the Wagon Road included skins, fur, wool, hemp, ginseng, grain, cheese, and butter. Incoming wagons brought patent medicines, shoes, salt, iron, and other hardware. Drovers herded cattle, pigs, and sheep to market. Stagecoaches and mail wagons made scheduled runs. The heavy traffic caused portions of the road to be either a sea of slippery mud, or deep ruts filled with clouds of dust. With few established churches, traveling ministers and preachers of various religions would ride in regular circuits, performing marriages and baptisms, and giving sermons to followers and new converts. Fords and ferries, roadside inns, taverns, and trading posts made of hand-hewn logs were commonplace.²⁴

ENDNOTES

1. **DAVID STURGIS WILLSON**: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Consolidated Lists of Civil War Draft Registration Records (Provost Marshal General's Bureau; Consolidated Enrollment Lists, 1863-1865); Record Group: 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau (Civil War); Collection Name: Consolidated Enrollment Lists, 1863-1865 (Civil War Union Draft Records); ARC Identifier: 4213514; Archive Volume Number: 3 of 6; Obituary for **JOHN ORR WILLSON**, Genealogical and Historical Records of Preble County, Ohio, accessed online 10 September 2014, (www.pcdl.lib.oh.us/), record ID obill1g33102.
2. **MARTHA E. WILLSON GRAY**, Personal papers.
3. **GERALD E. COLLINS, JOHN STURGIS** (1757-1825) of York County, South Carolina and Morgan County, Illinois: some of his ancestors, siblings and descendants who lived in Maryland, South Carolina, Georgia and Illinois and other points (Maryland: self-published, undated), pp. 8-41.
4. **MINOR T. WEISIGER**, compiler, The Virginia Land Office, Library of Virginia Research Notes Number 20 (Virginia: Revised September 2009), (www.lva.virginia.gov): accessed 20 April 2015. Author's note: From about 1624 through 1775, a private land distribution method evolved in the royal colony of Virginia, known as the headright system. Under this colonial policy, each person who came to settle in Virginia was awarded 50 acres. In common practice, the land was given to the person who paid the cost of the emigrant's transportation. Only those emigrants who paid their own passage received land. **GERALD E. COLLINS**, p. 8. Author's note: According to this book, the first immigrant was **JOHN STURGIS** "the first," born about 1637 in England, who in 1661 married Dorothy Savage in Hunger's Parish, Northampton County, Virginia.
5. Ibid., pp. 8, 14, 21, 31. Author's note: Another **DANIEL STURGIS** "of DANIEL" also lived about the same time in Accomack County, Virginia, and I am thankful that past researchers have revealed land, will, tax, and marriage records that sort out the two individuals as uncle and nephew.
6. Occupants of Catawba Indian Land of York District, South Carolina, 1786-1807, South Carolina Magazine of Ancestral Research, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1985. Jane Bratton **STURGIS**'s will abstract:
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~scyork/Wills/6.htm> . Accessed 15 July 2014; Original data: York County, South Carolina Wills (1770-1812), Microfilm #C1689, C1695.
7. **GERALD E. COLLINS, JOHN STURGIS** (1757-1825) of York County, South Carolina and Morgan County Illinois: Some of His Ancestors, Siblings and Descendants who lived in Maryland, South Carolina, Georgia, Illinois and Other Points (Maryland: self-published, undated), pp. 32, 41.
8. "Catawba People," Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catawba_people): accessed 20 April 2015. Occupants of Catawba Indian Land of York District, South Carolina, 1786-1807, South Carolina Magazine of Ancestral Research, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1985, p. 86.

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9. "Multiple Property Documentation Form, Resources of the Nation Ford Road Area,' United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places (<http://nationalregister.sc.gov/MPS/MPS047.pdf>).

Author's note: "It can be argued that the Catawba River is responsible for the surrender of the British army at Yorktown, Virginia because a swollen Catawba River prevented the British from catching the patriot forces and caused the British to burn many of their supplies in order to lighten the load so that they could cross the river.' Excerpt from "Early History,' Catawba Riverkeepers (<http://www.catawbariverkeeper.org/about-the-catawba/history-of-the-catawba-wateree-river>) ; "Nation Ford Road is a historic roadbed located near Fort Mill, York County, South Carolina. It dates to pre-historic times and is one of the oldest documented travel routes in the southeast. It provided one of the few reliable crossing places on the Catawba River and was being used by white traders as early as 1650. The presence of the road led many early European settlers to locate in the area.' – excerpt from "Nation Ford Road" Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org): accessed 2 September 2014.

10. **DAVID J. MCCORD**, editor, The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 9, Containing the Acts Relating to Roads, Bridges and Ferries, with an Appendix Containing the Militia Acts Prior to 1794, (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston), 1841, p. 304. Author's note: On page 472, reference is made to the location of the ferry being "at the plantations of **THOMAS SPRATT** and **DANIEL STURGES**, on the Catawba River" implying a more complex business relationship between the two men.

11. **GERALD E. COLLINS**, p. 36.

12. Ibid., pp. 31, 32.

13. Ibid., pp. 29, 20, 24, 32-36.

14. Ibid., pp. 36, 37.

15. Ibid., p. 37; **DANIEL STURGIS**'s will abstract:
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~scyork/Wills/6.htm>. Accessed July 15, 2014
Original data: York County, South Carolina Wills (1770-1812), Microfilm #C1689, C1695.

16. **DAVID J. MCCORD**, editor, The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 9, Containing the Acts Relating to Roads, Bridges and Ferries, with an Appendix Containing the Militia Acts Prior to 1794, (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston), 1841, p. 305.

17. **PARKER ROUSE**, Jr., The Great Wagon Road: from Philadelphia to the South, (Virginia: The Dietz Press, 1995), p. 101.

18. **DANIEL W. PATTERSON**, The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in the Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 273.

19. Ibid., pp. 164, 271-272.

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20. **LAURENCE K. WELLS**, York County, South Carolina Minutes of the County Court, 1786-1797, (Columbia, S.C.: [South Carolina Magazine of Ancestral Research], ©1981), pp. 27, 29, 30, 39.

21. **GERALD E. COLLINS**, p. 34.

22. **GERALD E. COLLINS**, p. 40.

23. **LAURENCE K. WELLS**, pp. 159, 162, 169.

24. **PARKER ROUSE**, Jr., The Great Wagon Road: from Philadelphia to the South, (Virginia: The Dietz Press, 1995) pp. 51, 161; "Great Wagon Road," Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), accessed 10 September 2014.

Elizabeth is a retired land use planner. She enjoys gardening, cooking, spending time with her rambunctious rat terrier and cat, and doing a variety of research.

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