

The Surry County Washingtons

In the middle of the 1600's, not one, not two, but three different and distinct Washington families were founded in Virginia, by different immigrants named Washington.

The first to come and best known was started by John Washington, who settled in Westmoreland County, in northern Virginia, in the winter of 1657. Soon thereafter his younger brother Lawrence came, then returned to England for a few years, finally returning by 1667 to Virginia to stay. These two brothers both died about 1677 and left families. The older brother, Col. John Washington (ca. 1634-1677), was the great-grandfather of Gen. George Washington.

By 1663 there had settled, in the same Westmoreland County, oddly enough, an Edward Washington, who was too old to have been a child of either of the other Washingtons. He was burnt in the thumb for "murdering a man," (It is presumed to say involuntary manslaughter), and he later become Constable. He survived until 1710 and left a family of numerous descendants. It seems inconceivable that he could have been related to John and Lawrence. John was justice of the county court, led, with the rank of Lt. Col., a Virginia expedition against the Indians, owned several thousand acres of land, and clearly was the leading citizen of his area. There surely would have been some mention of this Edward by either or both brothers but there is none.

Meanwhile in 1658, far away in southern Virginia, in Surry County, there occurs another John Washington. In that year he married Mrs. Mary Ford, and by 1660 he had died, when his widow was remarried to Henry Briggs. He did leave one son, Richard Washington, who lived to marry and have thirteen children and numerous descendants. His most distinguished descendant perhaps was the poet, Sidney Lanier.

The European parentage of most immigrants in the 17th century to what is now the United States is completely unknown. Only in a rare exceptional case has the origin been preserved or later recovered. George Washington did not have any idea where his great-grandfather John Washington had come from, except that he thought (mistakenly) it was one of the northern counties of England.

Sir Issac Heard, then of the College of Arms, wrote to George Washington on the subject in 1791, and later formed a theory about the parentage of the Westmoreland County John and Lawrence Washington, which was accepted until 1863. At that point some people showed the theory was wrong, and a great deal of study was devoted to investigating the problem, until finally in 1889 Henry F. Waters found the documents that established the Westmoreland brothers as sons of Rev. Lawrence Washington (ca 1602-1652) and Amphillis his wife. Since then a number of students have expanded our knowledge of this family and its various connections.

In retrospect, and with present knowledge, this looks like a comparatively easy problem. In Virginia we had not only the two brothers, John and Lawrence, who both left wills naming each other, but there was also a sister Martha, to whom John left money in his will for her

to come to Virginia. And she in turn left a will naming her Washington nephews in Virginia and two sisters in England, Elizabeth and Margaret. If one finds in English records five brothers and sisters of the right period, with names John, Lawrence, Martha, Elizabeth and Margaret Washington, one certainly has a proven case.

Contrast this with the problem presented by John Washington of Surry County. We have no records of him except his 1658 marriage contract with Mrs. Mary Ford, and then records of his widow and son. There is no slightest indication in any surviving Virginia records of any other relatives or any other evidence. In order to trace him across the water, one has nothing to go on but the name John Washington and his approximate age, as marriageable in 1658. Mr. Waters pointed out in 1889 in connection with the other Washingtons, that there were families of the name in nineteen different English counties in the 17th century -- and then he finally found his clue to the parentage of the Westmoreland brothers in a twentieth! The Surry problem does look hopeless.

In 1925 Dr. Lyon G. Tyler published in his Tylers Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine a series of articles on the Surry County Washingtons with this unfortunate paragraph (Vol. VII, page 46): "John Washington and his brother Lawrence, of Westmoreland Co., Va., were sons of Rev. Lawrence Washington, rector of Purleigh in England, who had a brother Sir John Washington. Now Sir John married twice (1) Mary, daughter of Philip Curtis, of Northamptonshire; and (2) Dorothy, daughter of William Pargiter, of Gretworth, Eng. By the first marriage he had two sons John and Mordaunt. Now Theodore Pargiter, brother of Dorothy, writes a letter from London August 2, 1654, in which he mentions his 'cozen John Washington', apparently in Barbadoes. As many people emigrated from Barbadoes to Southside Virginia, there is no reasonable doubt that John Washington of Barbadoes was John Washington, of Surry Co., Va. Sir John Yeamans, Governor of Barbadoes, was represented in Isle of Wight (County, Va.) by his nephew Joseph Woory."

This is a fine example of leaping to a conclusion based on no evidence at all. First, it requires us to accept that Theodore Pargiter's "cozen John Washington" is indeed his sister's stepson and not some other John Washington. It should be noticed that the Pargiters and Washingtons had been intermarried and been cousins of each other since the 1540's. Actually, I do think it likely, though unproved, that Tyler's guess on the first point is right, and that Sir John Washington's son John is indeed the man mentioned in Pargiter's letter. Next, the text of the letter implies, but does not actually state that "cozen John Washington was in Barbadoes." But, third, it is a wild statement to say, that because other people from Barbadoes came to southern Virginia, John Washington of Surry is necessarily the John Washington who may have been in Barbadoes.

However, it is not necessary to judge how reasonable Dr. Tyler's guess was. Evidence has been available in print since 1889 to prove definitely that his guess was wrong, and that Sir John Washington's son John did not come to Surry County, Virginia and die there in 1658-60.

Mr. Waters in his classic article showing the parentage of John and Lawrence Washington

of Westmoreland County, (New England Historical and Genealogical Register, Oct., 1889.) gave an abstract of the will of Dame Margaret Sandys, sister of Rev. Lawrence Washington and of Sir John Washington. She left a legacy in 1673 to "my nephew John Washington, my dear eldest brother's son." Her eldest brother was Sir John, so this shows that his son John was alive in England in 1673, and therefore, did not leave a widow in Surry County, Virginia in 1660.

It is unfortunate that there has been all this confusion over the years about the history of the Surry County Washingtons. Prospects do not seem bright for ever determining the English parentage of John Washington of Surry. There seem to be no clues in this country, and I do not know how one could expect to stumble on information in one of twenty counties in England about a John Washington who by English evidence alone can be shown to have gone to Virginia and died.

The Surry County descendants should know that one branch which settled in Tennessee in the nineteenth century rose to a peak of affluence and magnificence that no member of George Washington's family ever came close to attaining.

To summarize:

- 1) The Surry County Washingtons were misled by bad research into believing that their family was related to George Washington's family.
- 2) The claimed relationship was that of first cousin to Gen. Washington's great-grandfather, and therefore, of fourth cousin to the General.
- 3) Prospects for determining the English origin of the immigrant ancestor John Washington of Surry County, Virginia are not encouraging.
- 4) If his English origin is ever determined, there is no way to predict whether he will be related to the family from which George Washington's great-grandfather came, or to some entirely different family.

John A. Washington