

Susan Whitaker Puckett (1800-1877), Ancestor 47¹
By her great great great granddaughter, Linda R. Horton, 16 January 2022

As an infant and small child, Susan Whitaker surely spent many hours at camp meetings such as the one depicted below.¹ Her father, Mark Whitaker (1760-1812), was an itinerant Methodist minister in southwestern Virginia, eastern Tennessee, and the Carolinas at a time when Methodism grew exponentially in the region.

A camp meeting might last eight to ten days. Families would arrive from miles around, pitching tents on the grounds. They attended preaching, Bible readings, and classes all day and into the evening.² Periodically voices filled the air, as hymns provided solace to hardworking adults and lullabies for drowsy children. Thanks to the talents of Charles Wesley, the brother of Methodism's founder, John Wesley, the denomination's evangelists possessed a rich canon of hymnology for use in camp meetings and, as churches were built, also in bricks-and-mortar places of worship.

*Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling, All thy faithful mercies crown.*³

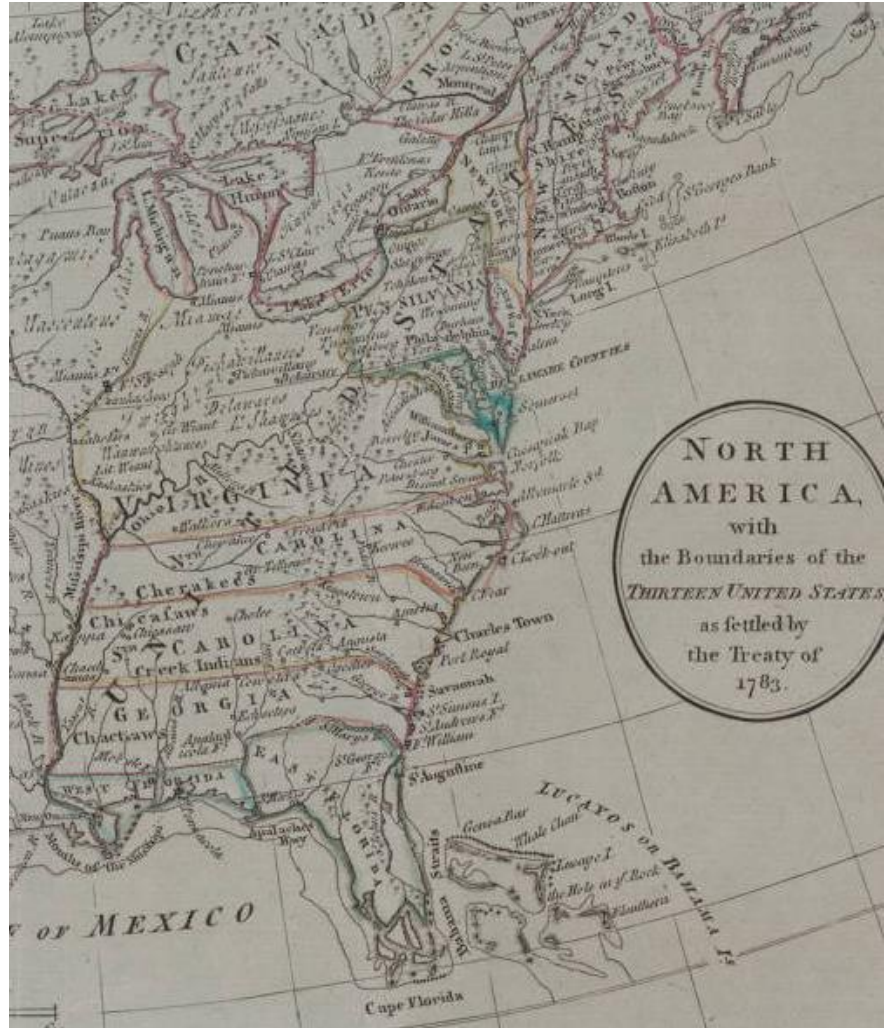


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There was no need for hymnals, for a song leader would “line out” each hymn by singing one line at a time, to be repeated by the many.⁴ Call-and-response singing was vital part of ministering to the largely illiterate populations in the religion-starved areas where traveling preachers like Mark Whitaker served.

Through this technique, the gathered crowd could eventually learn all the verses of the hymns. But when the leader began hymns like *The Doxology* that the gathered worshippers already knew, we can be certain that the crowd belted the familiar line and tune, “*Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him, all heavenly hosts; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*”

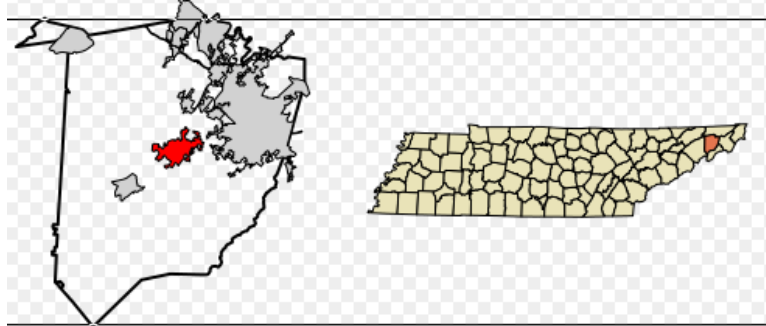
When the choral dynamic changed so abruptly, we can imagine the babies napping on blankets in their family tents may have startled briefly before their eyelids dipped again, when the singsong call-and-response resumed in softer voices. Older children may have puzzled (as I once did) over the reference to a Holy Ghost. Perhaps they gazed warily into the woods surrounding their tents, wondering if a divine apparition, beckoned by song, might appear.



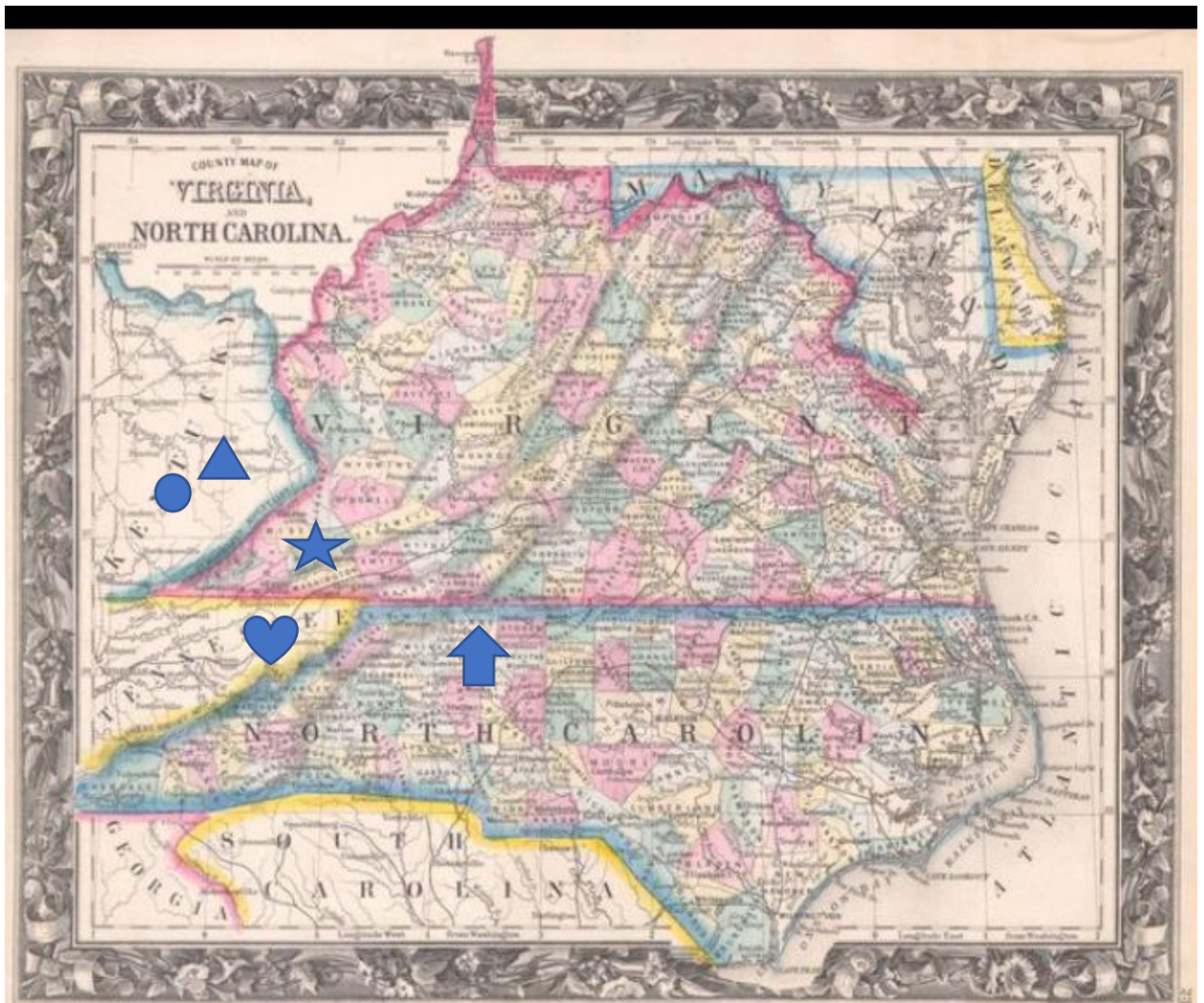
Susan's birth in Tennessee

Susan Whitaker—called Susannah by some family researchers—was born on 24 January 1800 in Jonesborough, Washington County, Tennessee. She owed her very existence to her father's calling, for through it the Reverend Mark Whitaker had met her mother, Martha “Patsy” Harvey (1772-1840) when he was preaching near Martha's home in Jonesborough. When the community was founded in 1779, it was part of North Carolina. One of the 13 original colonies that declared independence from Britain in 1776, North Carolina originally stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River, as is shown in the map above indicating boundaries drawn in the Treaty of 1783 ending the American Revolutionary War.

On 21 November 1789 North Carolina ceded part of its western territory to the federal government for formation of new states.⁵ When Mark and Martha married there, between 1793 and 1795, Jonesborough and surrounding territory was in this legal limbo, resolved when Tennessee became the sixteenth state on 1 June 1796. After statehood, Jonesborough became known as the oldest town in Tennessee. The modern map below shows the location today of Jonesborough in Washington County in Tennessee. The gray areas are lakes.



This map shows locations important in the lives of Mark, Martha, and Susan Whitaker.



Susan's father Mark had been born in Surry County, North Carolina (at the arrow on the map).⁶ His career as a minister began in about 1780 in Castlewood, Virginia (at the star), where he bought land, and that is where he later lived with his wife and children from 1802 until his death in 1812.⁷ The heart marks Jonesborough in what today is east Tennessee, where Mark met and married Martha and Susan was born. In about 1802, Mark, Martha, Susan, and her two older siblings migrated to Castlewood, Virginia (at the star), where he preached the next 10 years. In about 1820 or 1821 Susan and several siblings migrated to what is today Magoffin County in eastern Kentucky (at the triangle). She met and married Morgan Puckett there in 1822. Martha also migrated to eastern Kentucky in the early 1830s and died there in 1840. In 1843, Susan and Morgan moved to Breathitt County, Kentucky (marked by the circle).

From Tennessee to Virginia

After marrying, Mark and Martha lived several years in Jonesborough, where his ministry continued. Susan was their third child and the last to be born in Tennessee. In about 1802, the family moved to Castlewood in today's Russell County, Virginia. There Mark owned a 100-acre tract on the south side of the Clinch River. Susan's seven younger siblings were born here.



This is a water fall on the Clinch River standing on Mark Whitaker's property

Sadly, Mark Whitaker died in 1812, leaving Martha as a 40-year-old widow with ten children ranging in age from two to 16. At age 12 when Mark died, Susan was probably a big help to her mother. The Whitaker property was near the spot where wagons carrying settlers to Kentucky crossed the Clinch River, at a shallows just downstream of a waterfall (shown in the photo).

Because the Whitaker property was on this migration route, at some point the widowed Martha was able to accommodate a few paying guests for meals and a place to sleep.

About eight years after her father's death, Susan migrated to Kentucky with three brothers, Francis "Frank" (1796-1863), Johnson (1802-1871) and James (1804-1858), and her sister Matilda (1810-1854). They settled in Floyd County, Kentucky (today Magoffin County). The exact date of the Whitaker siblings' move from Virginia to Kentucky is not known. What is known is that they arrived before 1822, because on 24 January 1822, she married Morgan R. Puckett in Floyd County. They wed on Susan's 22nd birthday.

Morgan was a bit younger than Susan, as he was born on 17 May 1801, but he likely was mature beyond his years. He had from a young age borne significant responsibility in assisting his mother, Elizabeth Allen Puckett (1779-1820), with the family home and farm. This we know because, during the War of 1812-1814, his father, Drury Puckett (1779-1815), and elder brother Thomas had both enlisted in the U.S. army. For reasons unknown, his father had deserted the army and, after being caught, was executed in Nashville, Tennessee on 17 February 1815 for the crime of desertion.

The family of Morgan Puckett and Susan Whitaker

Susan and Morgan had 13 children in 26 years. Their ninth child was the wonderfully named Zerilda Manervia Puckett, who was to become our great great grandmother. Their six sons and seven daughters were:

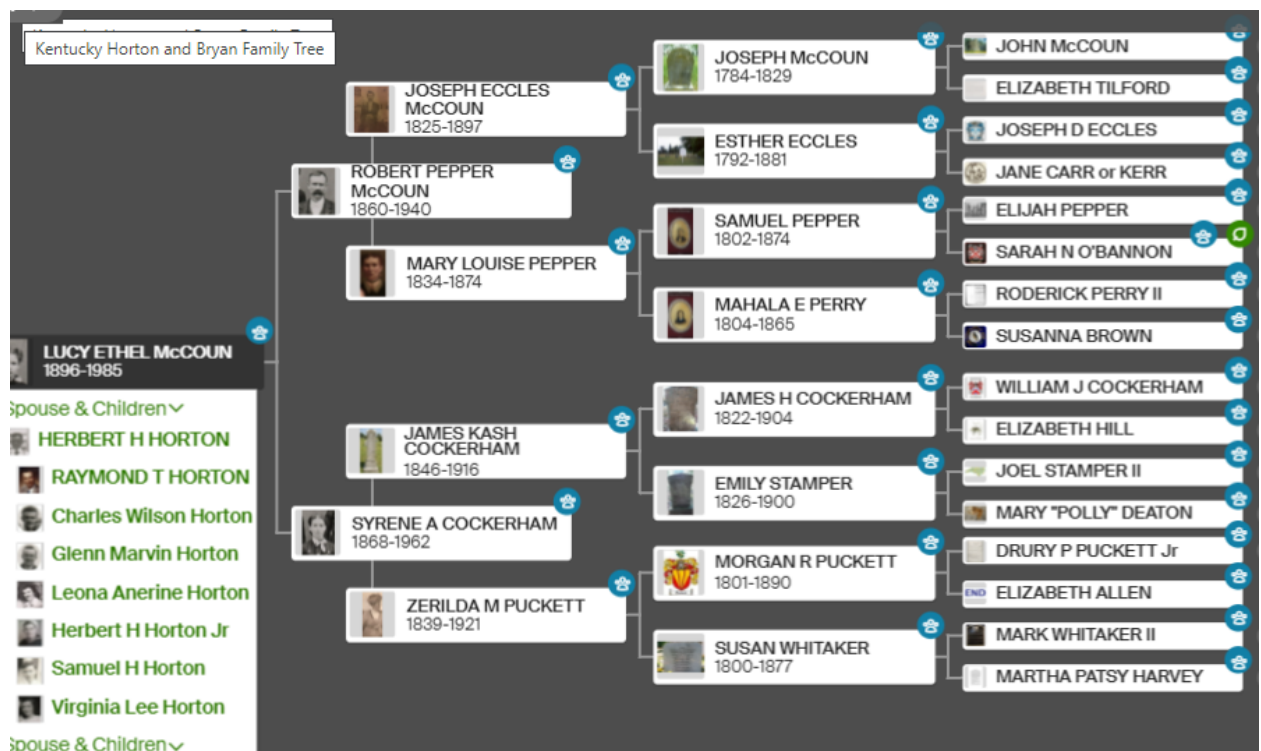
1. Caleb Puckett (1822-1870); married Mary Ann "Polly" Craft; 11 children.
2. Isaac Puckett (1822-1870).
3. Meredith William Puckett (1823-1908); married Elizabeth Maloney; nine children.
4. Martha "Patsy" Puckett (1825-1892); married Reuben Fletcher; 15 children.
5. Elizabeth Puckett (1826-1877); married Greenberry Shackelford; 12 children.
6. Matilda "Tidy" Puckett (1830-1902); married Owen Miller; 14 children.
7. Benjamin Gardner Puckett (1831-1900); married Emmeline Holmes; eight children.
8. Clarinda Puckett (1834-1880).
9. Zerilda Manervia Puckett (1839-1921); married James Kash Cockerham; four children.
10. George Green Puckett (1840-1913); married Mary Ann White; four children.
11. John Martin Puckett (1841-1923); married Caroline Johnson; five children.
12. Polly A. Puckett (1845-1877); married John Cockerham; three children.
13. Eliza Puckett (1848-1942) was widowed three times: married Thomas Whitaker (a first cousin) and with him had four children; married David "Bud" Patton and with him had three children; married Green Patrick and with him had three children.

Placing Susan Whitaker on the family tree

Susan Whitaker was the author's great great great (three times great) grandmother. She is in the McCoun quartile of our family tree, the other three quartiles being Horton, Bryan, and Sprowl. As a way of making such a distant ancestor less abstract, Susan was the grandmother of our great grandmother, Syrene Cockerham McCoun (1868-1962), who was nine years old when Susan

passed away. Granddaughter and grandmother lived less than 20 miles apart, so Syrene's parents may have taken her to visit Susan a few times during her last years.

Even today, roads in this part of the country are few in number, and mostly poor in quality, but I believe that Manervia Puckett Cockerham would have taken her children to see their grandmother, about once a year, possibly on a traditional day for honoring ancestors known as Decoration Day. Celebrated in eastern Kentucky as well as much of the American south, on the last Monday in May, it was a precursor to today's Memorial Day.⁸ On Decoration Day, families gathered at the gravesites of their ancestors to clean and decorate the cemeteries. We know from a 1943 letter that Syrene's daughter, Ethel, sent to her enlisted son, Raymond, that this part of our family observed Decoration Day. In the letter, Ethel expressed disappointment that one of her other sons would not drive her from Louisville to Campton for Decoration Day.



What the U.S. census reports tell us

Until the U.S. census of 1850, only the names of heads of household were recorded with other family members counted by tally marks in columns indicating gender and age range. The 1830 census for Floyd County recorded Morgan as a man in his 20s along with a woman in her 20s who must be Susan, living with three boys and three girls (who would be Caleb, Isaac, Meredith, Martha, Elizabeth, and Matilda). A second woman in her 20s was living with the family, perhaps a sister of Susan Whitaker Puckett. With six young children, and a farm to run, Susan and Morgan might have been happy if their household had another pair of adult hands.

[illegible]

With the 1850 census, the U. S. government began recording the names of all family members, not simply the heads of household, along with information about age, gender, occupation, real estate value, and birthplace. As shown on the next page for the Morgan Puckett family, recorded in Breathitt County on 7 August 1850, we have Morgan, 49, a farmer with real estate worth \$400. His wife Susan was 50. Both were listed as born in Virginia, although he was born in Kentucky and she in Tennessee. They may have considered their forebears as *from* Virginia. The seven children still at home, all born in Kentucky, were Elizabeth, 22; Gardner, 18, a farmer; Clarinda, 16; Minerva, 11; John, 11; Green, 8; and Polly, 5. The value of his real estate was reported as \$400, which is equivalent to \$14,253 in 2022 dollars.

38	38	Morgan N. Puckett	49	m		Fanner	400	W
		Susan	50	F				W
		Elizabeth	22	F				Hy.
		Gardner	18	m		Fanner		"
		Clairinda	16	F				"

1912 94.3

Mina	11	5	
John	10	10	
Green	8	5	
Polly	5	5	

(note the fancy “F” in Farmer) with real property worth \$1000, or \$33,487 in 2022 dollars. The

five children still at home were M.W. [Meredith William], age 36, a farmer; Zerilda M., 20, a farmer; John M, 19, a farm laborer; Green F, 17, a farm laborer; and Polly A, 15. Zerilda, John, Green, and Polly all had attended school. No one was marked as unable to read and write.

I. Babe	42 m		Farmer	1000	500	Virginia		
Morgan Puckett	59 m							
Susan Puckett	60 f		"					
Zerilda M	20 f		"			Floyd Co Ky		
John M	19 m		{ Laborer			" " "		
Green F	17 m		"			" " "		
Polly A	15 f		"			B. Co. " "		
M. W. Puckett	36 m		Farmer	1000	700	F. Co. " "		

The Civil War and postwar lives of Morgan and Susan

The U.S. Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865. Kentucky remained part of the Union and never joined the Confederacy. However, several key battles took place in Kentucky, notably in 1862 when the Confederacy sought to wrest the strategically located border state from the Union. Battles took place less than a day's ride on horseback from the Puckett home.¹⁰

Susan and Morgan may have been relieved when, in 1866, Manervia married James Kash Cockerham (1846-1916) at Puckett's Bend. At 27, she was older than the average bride. James was 20. As great great grandparents, Manervia and James sound like distant ancestors, but some of us knew their eldest child, Syrene (1868-1962), who was to become our great grandmother.

By the 1870 census, all the children of Morgan and Susan had left home. The census recorded Morgan, age 69, and Susan, age 70, living in their Breathitt County home with a 12-year-old child named Eliza, who was attending school. She probably was a grandchild.

Susan's death and Morgan's last years

Susan Whitaker Puckett died on 27 July 1877 at age 77 and was buried in the Puckett family cemetery in Mary, Campton, Wolfe County, Kentucky.

The last census report that included Morgan was enumerated on 12 June 1880. He was 77 and living with his son, Green, daughter-in-law Mary Ann, and four grandchildren on a farm in Breathitt County. The farm was near a place called Frozen Creek. This creek became notably treacherous during the winter months. Morgan R. Puckett died in Wolfe County, Kentucky on 22 January 1890 at the age of 88. He was buried beside Susan in the Puckett family cemetery.

What we can discern about Susan from available sources

No family stories have come down to us about what Susan was like. Instead, we must work with the clues we have from records. At the beginning of this biography, we imagined her as an infant napping during the hymn singing that was part of her father's Methodist meetings. Given what we know of her father's vocation, and frontier Methodism, that scenario was not far-fetched.

We also may reasonably infer that Susan had an adventurous spirit when, as a very young adult, she bid farewell to her mother and friends in Castlewood, Virginia and set off with four siblings on the treacherous journey to eastern Kentucky when it was a wild frontier. Such adventurousness may have come naturally given moves that her parents had made. Two decades into their marriage, she and Morgan Puckett moved from the mountains of Floyd County to the foothills of Breathitt County, where they bought better farmland on the banks of a creek.

Susan's life may appear traditional—she married, was a farmer's wife, and had a large family, a common life trajectory—but the relevant census reports tell us that she could read and write, and that her children all could read and write. These achievements may seem quite ordinary today but are to Susan's credit—and to the credit of her parents—in an era in which many people, and especially women, were illiterate. Susan's mother, Martha, may have taught her own children to read and may even have formed reading classes for children of her husband's parishioners in Tennessee and Virginia. Martha was a teacher of children in her later years on Puncheon Creek in Magoffin County, Kentucky.

We might likewise look at Susan's children for insights about their mother. The one child of Susan about whom we have substantial information—our ancestor Manervia Puckett Cockerham—had a markedly entrepreneurial spirit and a willingness to try new things. She and her husband James Kash Cockerham first ran a farm, then a boarding house for lumberjacks, and finally a livery stable in the county seat. Part of this can-do attitude must go back to Susan.

The Barack Obama connection

Through Susan, we are cousins of former President Barack Obama. Of all the things my grandsons Craig Swink and Ryan Horton have heard about family history, the fact that they are 10th cousins of a U.S. president whom they remember and admire is without doubt one of the most interesting things they have learned.

In the lineage below, the names appearing in all-capital letters are our ancestors:

**Barack Obama Jr., President 1961-
*the author's 8th cousin 2x removed***

[Stanley Ann Dunham 1942-1995](#)
Mother of Barack Obama Jr.

[Madelyn Lee Payne 1922-2008](#)
Mother of Stanley Ann Dunham

[Leona McCurry 1897-1930](#)
Mother of Madelyn Lee Payne

[Thomas Creekmore McCurry 1850-1939](#)
Father of Leona McCurry

[Harbin Wilburn McCurry 1823-1899](#)
Father of Thomas Creekmore McCurry

[Christina Wilson 1798-1834](#)
Mother of Harbin Wilburn McCurry

[Ruth Welborn 1774-1840](#)
Mother of Christina Wilson

[Isabelle Teague 1734-1792](#)
Mother of Ruth Welborn

[Moses Teague --Obama ancestor 1718-1799](#)
Father of Isabelle Teague

[William Abel Teague --Obama ancestor 1695-1762](#)
Father of Moses Teague

[EDWARD TEAGUE 1659-1697 and SUSANNAH WELCH \(1660-1741\)](#)
Most Recent Common Ancestors of Barack Obama and our family

[CATHERINE TEAGUE 1690-1717](#)
Daughter of EDWARD TEAGUE and SUSANNAH WELCH

[THOMAS WHITAKER 1712-1787](#)
Son of CATHERINE TEAGUE

[MARK WHITAKER II 1760-1812](#)
Son of THOMAS WHITAKER

[SUSAN WHITAKER 1800-1877](#)
Daughter of MARK WHITAKER II

[ZERILDA MANERVIA PUCKETT 1839-1921](#)
Daughter of SUSAN WHITAKER

[SYRENE A COCKERHAM 1868-1962](#)
Daughter of ZERILDA MANERVIA PUCKETT

[LUCY ETHEL McCOUN 1896-1985](#)
Daughter of SYRENE A COCKERHAM

[RAYMOND THOMAS HORTON 1914-1987](#)
Son of LUCY ETHEL McCOUN

Linda Rae Horton

Daughter of RAYMOND THOMAS HORTON

The Most Recent Common Ancestors of Barack Obama, and of our family, were Edward Teague (1659-1697) and Susannah Welch (1660-1741), as shown above. This couple had a son named William Able Teague (1695-1762), who was Barack Obama's ancestor, and a daughter named Catherine (1690-1717), who was our ancestor. Catherine married our immigrant Whitaker ancestor, Mark Whitaker (1677-1729), for whom Susan's father Mark, was named.

The biography of Susan's father, the Reverend Mark Whitaker (1755-1812), includes information about the earlier generations of Whitakers including the immigrant ancestor, the earlier Mark. The biography of Susan's mother, Martha "Patsy" Harvey (1772-1840), provides more information about this branch of the family tree.

I hope you enjoy reading these family history stories as much as I enjoy writing them.

Linda R. Horton, Rockville, Maryland lrhorton@comcast.net

¹ Jacques Gérard Milbert (1766-1840), artist, and M. Dubourg, engraver, engraving: *Methodist camp meeting*, 1819, Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98508274/>

² <https://www.umc.org/en/content/fishing-with-a-large-net-united-methodist-camp-meetings>

³ Charles Wesley, 1747. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Divine,_All_Loves_Excelling

⁴ Lining out, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lining_out

⁵ <https://amerisurv.com/2020/03/03/unsung-hero-tennessee-north-carolina-line/>

⁶ Mitchell, S. Augustus, County Map of Virginia and North Carolina, published S.A. Mitchell c. 1860. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/glva01.lva00076/>

⁷ The year 1812 as the date of death for Mark Whitaker is given by family historian Robert "Bob" Whittaker in a letter to the editor of the Jessee Family Newsletter, Issue 40 Winter 2012 Vol. XXI No. 1 at 5. Bob descends from two of Mark Whitaker's children, his son James O. and his daughter Susan who married Morgan Whitaker. Id at 7. Consequently, Robert Whittaker is our fourth cousin. The newsletter is posted at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5af9e7da9772aec3b054d1aa/t/5afef26c352f5344a4612983/1526657676058/Jessee+Newsletter+40.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.npr.org/2011/05/28/136742729/decoration-day-the-southern-way-to-honor-the-dead>

⁹ Jillson, Willard Rouse. The Kentucky Land Grants. Louisville, KY, USA: Filson Club Publications, 1925. Original data: Jillson, Willard Rouse. The Kentucky Land Grants. Book 18.

¹⁰ Key events in the Civil War are included in the biography of Manervia Puckett Cockerham's father-in-law, James Henry Cockerham (1822-1904).