

Randolph Jefferson's Legacy

By Joanne Yeck

Well over ten years ago, I stumbled upon Randolph Jefferson for the first time. I was tracing my Harris family's acquisition of Snowden, a plantation lying in Buckingham County, directly across from Scottsville at the Horse-shoe Bend of the James River. In the 1820s, a land tax record noted that a significant percentage of the farm had been transferred from the estate of Randolph Jefferson to Capt. John Harris of Albemarle County. Needless to say, the Jefferson name caught my attention, though I had no idea who Randolph Jefferson was. It did not take long to find out, however, it took years to collect the information that turned him from a stereotype into a three-dimensional character.

One result of discovering Randolph Jefferson was writing and publishing his biography, *The Jefferson Brothers* (Slate River Press, 2012), which highlighted his relationship with his brother, President Thomas Jefferson, and traced the development of Snowden from the American Revolution through Randolph's death in 1815. Frustratingly, Randolph Jefferson left little material evidence for historians to work with. Due to the burning of Buckingham County's courthouse in 1869, many of the public documents relating to him and to Snowden during his lifetime were destroyed. The burning of his dwelling house at Snowden in early 1816 took with it whatever personal papers he might have saved. Fortunately, his brother, Thomas, left significant tracks. Other family letters helped define Randolph, as well as a few surviving private and public records which documented, for example, the time he spent in Williamsburg at William and Mary's Grammar School and his service during the American Revolution, riding under Gen. Thomas Nelson, Jr. (later to become Governor of Virginia).

Increasingly, I felt that this absence of documentation fueled an undeserved

myth that had persisted about the low level of Randolph Jefferson's intelligence and questioned his competency to run a 2,000-acre plantation. A primary, and I believed powerful, argument against this myth was the successful lives of the majority of his children and grandchildren. He and his wife, Anne Lewis, had provided them with a solid start in life and *most* of them flourished. A few, however, I discovered led tragic lives. The loss of these Jeffersons as useful citizens was not because their parents had failed to nurture them, but because Nature had failed to provide them with a strong genetic foundation. Randolph and Anne were first cousins and their union risked concentrating undesirable genetic traits in their children. Eventually, the lives of their descendants became the subject of my next Jefferson-related project: *Peter Field Jefferson: Dark Prince of Scottsville & Lost Jeffersons* (Slate River Press, 2018).

Between 1782 and 1796, Randolph and Anne (Lewis) Jefferson had six children together: Anna Scott (Jefferson) Nevil, Thomas Jefferson, Jr., Isham Randolph Jefferson, Robert Lewis Jefferson, Peter Field Jefferson, and James Lilburne Jefferson. They came of age at the dawn of the 19th century, precisely when the culture along the James River in Central Virginia flowered. Over the course of their adulthood, their choices expressed not only their own personalities but also the values of this branch of the Jefferson family and Virginia's gentry class.

Little is known about Randolph Jefferson's children while they lived at Snowden. What is recorded survives in scattered sources. Much is confused, misleading, incorrect, and even fictitious. Many of these "facts" contradict each other.

At various times during their adult-

hood, all of Randolph and Anne Jefferson's children lived at or near Snowden or across the river at Scottsville. Peter Field Jefferson settled in Scottsville, destined to make the most significant impact on the town and its environs. The story of his life parallels the changing cultural landscape of the James River's Horseshoe Bend across seven decades—rising from virtual frontier in the early American Republic to the establishment of the town, through the building of the James River and Kanawha Canal, and culminating in the early months of the Civil War. Just as Scottsville mirrored the maturation of Virginia and the American South, Peter Field Jefferson's turbulent life reflected those growing pains, becoming a personal, American tragedy told in the monograph, *Peter Field Jefferson: Dark Prince of Scottsville*.

Beyond the story of Peter Field Jefferson's personal decline, an even larger tragedy unfolds in this Jefferson clan. A microcosm of multiple generations of cousin intermarriage, his family's story reveals how "undesirable" traits became concentrated in this particular Jefferson line. Hereditary insanity, alcoholism, and idiocy plagued succeeding generations. In the broader society, a steadily mounting number of suffering individuals, acts of criminal insanity, and the increasing social burden of asylums to house Virginia's "degenerates" helped fuel the American Eugenics Movement and, ultimately, in 1924, led to Virginia's Sterilization Act.

By 1880, the federal government was deeply concerned about the growing number of unproductive Americans and created a special, supplemental schedule for the national census—"Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes." By the end of the 19th century, asylums and other

institutions kept statistics on whether or not their patients were the products of first cousin marriages.

Even in President Thomas Jefferson's generation, "inferior" genes were doubling up, particularly in the Randolph family. Outsiders noted that intelligence seemed unevenly distributed among the children of Peter and Jane (Randolph) Jefferson. Their daughter, Elizabeth (1744–1774) was "feeble-minded" while their daughter Jane (1740–1765) was exceptionally bright. Both died unmarried and childless.

Virginians were experts on breeding, particularly of horses, but turned a blind eye to too much inbreeding in their families. Preservation of wealth and land took precedence. Thomas Jefferson, who observed the sometimes negative consequences of cousin marriage, still allowed his daughter Martha to marry her cousin Thomas Mann Randolph, and encouraged his daughter Maria to marry her cousin John Wayles Eppes.

Because Randolph and Anne Jefferson were first cousins, genetics might account for the alcoholism and unstable personalities which manifested in succeeding generations of their family. Sterility or genetic incompatibility was possibly another misfortune of inbreeding. Randolph's son, Thomas Jefferson, Jr., and his wife, Polly Lewis, were double first cousins. Married over thirty years, they produced no known children.

Some of the grandchildren of Randolph and Anne Jefferson, most the product of further cousin intermarriage, suffered from crippling mental and physical disabilities. Their stories are told in the collection of essays entitled *Lost Jeffersons*. There may be others whose disturbed lives went undocumented or whose deficiencies were manageable enough not to be discovered in public records.

As in the previous generation, these genetic problems were not equally distributed among Randolph Jefferson's children and grandchildren. A bright spot, and an argument against multi-generational cousin marriage, were the descendants of Isham Randolph

Jefferson, particularly his third family. His first two wives were his close cousins, while his third wife, Sarah Ann Mansfield, was not. Despite the fact that two of their sons died at a young age (one of typhoid fever), the couple produced an apparently healthy, intelligent, and successful family, including two attorneys and a physician.

I now believe that some of the uncomplimentary rumors asserting Randolph Jefferson's low intelligence and possible alcoholism were at least partially based in the sad lives of Peter Field Jefferson and his unfortunate sons—one committed to Western Lunatic Asylum, the other labeled "idiotic." Jefferson descendants and citizens of Scottsville long remembered this family and, as the years went by, perhaps, projected their deficiencies back on Randolph Jefferson—a strange case of the "sins" of the children being visited on the father.

For anyone who is interested in the founding and development of Scottsville, Peter Field Jefferson's story includes a fresh look at the years between the laying off of the first town lots and the opening days of the Civil War. Many of his peers—some of them well-documented founding fathers of Scottsville and some lesser known residents whom Jefferson took into his confidence—comment on the man's life in their own words.

Through the use of newspaper articles published across a century, Scottsville comes alive in vivid 19th century prose. Readers will revisit the vicious murder of Thomas Noel at his Scottsville tavern, a possible motive behind the slaying is suggested, and details about the ultimate destiny of his murderer, Robert Lewis, finally concludes a decades old mystery. News articles recounting runaway slaves, devastating fires, and deadly accidents, reveal the perpetual dangers of a frontier river town, which were frequent enough to drive Peter Field Jefferson and his family up the hill to a quieter home at Mount Walla. There, situated above the violence and chaos that filled Scottsville's streets, the Jeffersons enjoyed a breathtaking, peaceful view

of the James River and comparative safety for themselves and their children. As the years progressed, however, what was established as the family's sanctuary became a place of self-imposed isolation.

Over the decades, hundreds upon hundreds of wagons rumbled into Scottsville, delivering goods to be shipped up to Lynchburg or down to Richmond and filling the little boats that ran on the river. Capitalizing on this traffic, both through the town and on the river, Peter Field Jefferson laid the foundation of his fortune. The coming of the canal and how it changed commerce on the James River is seen from a new perspective, creating yet another opportunity for Peter Field Jefferson to increase his wealth. Working at his waterfront store and operating the ferry at Scottsville, his eccentricities were observed (and commented on) daily by the townspeople. As he aged, he became obsessed with money—making it, investing it, hoarding it and, rarely, enjoying it. At the time of his death, Peter Field Jefferson was little loved and, perhaps, little understood by those who had known him all of his life.

Beyond his personal story, *Peter Field Jefferson: Dark Prince of Scottsville* also provides another chapter in the history of Snowden, which was created by purchase and patent by his grandfather, Peter Jefferson; enjoyed for a lifetime by his father, Randolph Jefferson; and, ultimately, lost to Peter Field and his brothers in the 1820s to Capt. John Harris of Viewmont, Albemarle County. Peter Field Jefferson's attempt to compensate for this loss by buying an adjacent farm in Buckingham County proved disastrous to his estate and the carrying out of his last will. Whatever plans he might have had for taking his ease as a planter blew up in his face.

Peter Field Jefferson's legacy was likely not what he had imagined. His somewhat unexpected torch bearer was the grandson he never met—Peter Valentine Foland, who lived at

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Mount Walla and operated the ferry until it closed. Foland, who sadly did not bear the Jefferson name, also served as the Mayor of Scottsville.

The essays included in *Lost Jeffersons* feature the stories of Peter Field Jefferson's siblings. Thomas Jefferson, Jr., who lived in Scottsville with his second wife, enjoyed the Jefferson longevity, out-lasting two wives and living to the ripe age of ninety-three. Isham Randolph Jefferson, called Randolph, Jr. by the family, bore a striking resemblance to his famous uncle, as did his descendants. James Lilburne Jefferson, who was still a minor when his father died, never found his footing, dying unmarried and childless. After an ill-fated engagement to her first cousin, Charles Lewis, the Randolph Jeffersons' only daughter, Anna Scott, made an exceptionally good marriage when she wed Zachariah Nevil of Nelson County, enjoying a

comfortable home, a successful husband, and four children.

Peter Field Jefferson remained close to his brother, Robert Lewis, whose only son, Elbridge Gerry, provided Peter Field with a much needed, competent surrogate son. E. G. Jefferson served his often difficult uncle well and, at Peter Field's death, purchased the family Bible. Conversely, the life and death of Peter Field's tortured father-in-law and first cousin, Lilburne Lewis, cast a dark shadow reaching from far western Kentucky to the streets of Scottsville, disturbing the potential happiness of his daughter, Jane Woodson (Lewis) Jefferson. Lastly, in "Jefferson Myths," long-repeated Jefferson oral history (some of it cherished local lore) is held up to cold, hard facts.

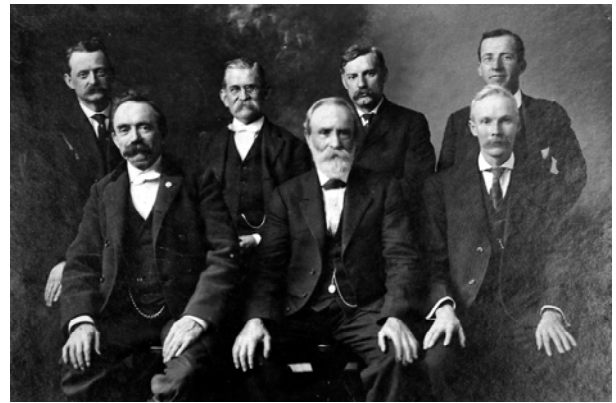
While more than one family skeleton is rattled in *Lost Jeffersons*, these essays are not meant as an exposé.

Rather I ask the reader to approach them with understanding and compassion for the values and behaviors of the Virginia gentry that sometimes "went wrong."

Joanne Yeck is the author of two volumes entitled "*At a Place Called Buckingham*" (Slate River Press, 2011 & 2015), as well as *The Jefferson Brothers* (Slate River Press, 2012). She writes a monthly column for the *Buckingham Beacon*, and her blog, *Slate River Ramblings*, has been informing and entertaining readers since late 2012. You can follow the bi-weekly post online at: slateriverramblings.com. Learn more about Joanne's publications, including her writings about Classic Hollywood, at: joannelyeck.com.



Mount Walla, 1937, VA Historic Inventory. On Oct. 8, 1836, Peter Field Jefferson paid \$2,800 for this house and land that would be his Scottsville home until his death in 1861.



Scottsville Town Council ca. 1900, Burgess Collection, Scottsville Museum. Peter Valentine Foland, seated in middle of first row, was a minor when he inherited from his grandfather, Peter Field Jefferson. His assets include a ferry and grocery store as well as Jefferson's Mt Walla home. When this photo was taken, Foland was Mayor of Scottsville.



Jefferson Mills, ca. 1930's. Randolph Moulton Collection, Scottsville Museum. In 1856, Peter Field Jefferson purchased the well-established Albemarle Mills, just outside of Scottsville, Virginia. Soon these mills were known as Jefferson Mills and would provide income for Peter Field Jefferson, Jr. and his family. In May 1919, William Thomas Moulton purchased Jefferson Mills (shown at left) and operated it with his son, John Adkins Moulton. Jefferson Mills was a working mill until 1945 when the last miller, William Williams, retired.