

Travel Tales

A Rotten Fruit in the Family Tree?

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Ten years ago, I was climbing my family tree, as I am wont to do, looking for tasty fruit. Instead I found a piece that seemed rotten and smelly. Later I realized it was a great gift. What am I talking about? Read on.

I was pursuing an ancestral line to one of the most distinguished families in the south, the Laurens of South Carolina. Henry Laurens served as President of the Continental Congress, and was captured by the British and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Later he was exchanged for Lord Cornwallis, and signed the Treaty of Paris ending the war. But the big prize, genealogically speaking, was Henry's son, Col. John Laurens. John was one of the bravest soldiers and heroes of the Revolution. He was a confidant of Washington, and served as the aide-de-camp and spymaster for Major General Nathanael Greene, the amazing Rhode Islander who won the final Southern Campaign against the British.

Since John Laurens was an officer in the Continental Line, served for more than three years, and was killed in battle, he and his descendants qualified for membership in the august Society of the Cincinnati, the oldest and most distinguished military and genealogical society in the US. If I could prove descent or even a relationship to him, I would qualify for membership in the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of South Carolina.

Did I qualify, based on my relations to Henry Laurens and his son John? I thought so, since I had record copies of two applications to the Daughters of the American Revolution from cousins of mine, which clearly stated that they (and thus I) were descended from Henry Laurens through his daughter, a sister to John.

I was very keen to prove this relationship, since I had been searching for a connection to a Cincinnati "propositus" for years. A "propositus" is a person in history who fulfills the membership requirements for a genealogical society, so that a modern descendant who can prove descent from that person qualifies for membership in the society. Thus for example, Charlemagne is the propositus for persons seeking to join the Society of the Crown of Charlemagne, based on their descent from him.

The really tricky thing about Cincinnati propositi is that usually only one male modern descendant at a time can represent the original officer of the Continental Line. While most genealogical societies, like the DAR and the Sons of the American Revolution, allow multiple descendants to join based on descent from one propositus, in most branches of the Cincinnati, only one man can join on that ancestor. I had found several ancestors in my family tree who served as officers in the Continental Line, but each of them were already “taken.” I had considered hiring a hit man to solve my little problem, but found the price rather exorbitant. I kept looking.

John Laurens was particularly attractive as a propositus, because in South Carolina the rules for the Society of the Cincinnati were different. In that state and in New Hampshire, there were so few Continental officers (compared to militia officers) that if the modern state society limited membership to only one descendant, the society could hold its meetings in a phone booth. Hence they admitted multiple members based on one ancestor.

So, all I had to do was to check the work of my DAR cousin, prove my descent from Henry Laurens, claim my connection as seventh grand-nephew of John Laurens, join the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of South Carolina, and achieve one of my life’s goals. Simple.

Ha!

Unfortunately, it turned out my cousins were not such great genealogists. They had applied to the DAR back in the 1940s, when standards were not very strict. They had made the basic and common mistake of thinking that because a woman has some children, they all must be by the same man. In fact, one of the key links in the chain was a woman who had two husbands, and my cousins and I were not the descendants of the Laurens-related husband. We were the descendants of the other chap.

So I had to trace that man’s ancestors. It took a while, but eventually I climbed up this previously unknown branch of my family tree. I got back to the Revolutionary period, and what did I find? Not John or Henry Laurens, David Ramsay the historian, or other distinguished Patriots. No, my guy was Brigadier General Andrew Williamson, the “Benedict Arnold of South Carolina”!

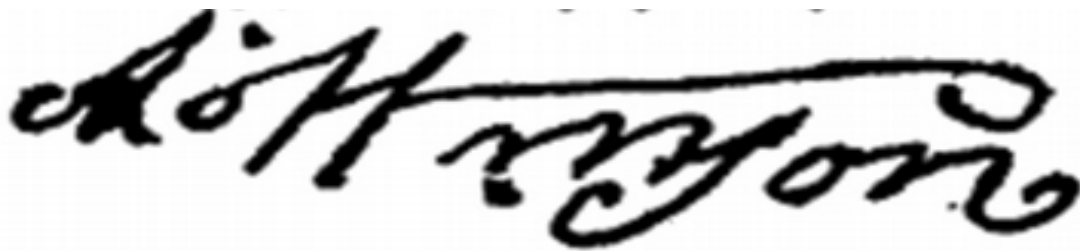
During the Revolution, Williamson was one of the most notorious people in the state, and near the end of the war, all his property – including his large and famous plantation White Hall -- was seized by the state government, because he was officially declared to be such an “obnoxious person”! Williamson had turned traitor to the American cause, took British protection, and stayed in the British camp through the end of the war. He was kidnapped twice by the Americans, who may have been seeking to hang him. But each time he escaped.

What a rotten, smelly ancestor to have! And definitely not material for a propositus for the Society of the Cincinnati, which rigidly requires that their propositi remained loyal to the Patriot cause.

Oh dear. What a mess. No Cincinnati. No Laurens. No fun. Gotta find another guy.

So I searched for another propositi. Eventually I found one up another branch of my family tree, a Lieutenant in the Continental Artillery. I finally made it into the Society of the Cincinnati, after five years of trying, and got that fabulous golden eagle medal and light blue ribbon to wear around my neck. I was a happy man.

Some years passed. I got a bit curious about that rascal Williamson. What made him turn traitor? What was his story? Was he really so bad? How could anyone be officially declared by the state legislature to be an “obnoxious person”? I had never heard that one before. And if he was so obnoxious and hated, why did he not flee abroad, or why wasn’t he exiled? How did he come to die in Charleston, in his own townhouse?

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "George Washington". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent horizontal line across the middle.

Little did I know that the answers to those simple questions would lead me on a quest to learn all I could about General Williamson, to carry the Flag of the Explorers Club on an expedition to South Carolina to find his plantation, to write the first-ever biography of the man, and ultimately to find an ironic connection to my original guy, Col. John Laurens.

Who knows what fruit you might find, what might happen, and where you might go, once you start to climb your family tree?

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, Fairhope, Alabama and Port Vila, Vanuatu, and is an amateur archaeologist, semi-pro genealogist, and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. Next month Lew will describe General Williamson’s bizarre life history, and how Lew went on a search to find his reviled ancestor’s plantation and clear his name.

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Photos: (all credits to Lew Toulmin)

1. Col. John Laurens, a hero of the American Revolution, and unfortunately not an ancestor of the author.
2. Henry Laurens, father of John Laurens, President of the Continental Congress, signer of the Treaty of Paris -- and yet another distinguished Patriot who is not an ancestor of the author.
3. The children's crusade – an expedition of kids and archaeologists led by author Lew Toulmin searched for the plantation of General Andrew Williamson, the “Benedict Arnold of South Carolina.” Williamson, officially certified by the legislature of the state as an “obnoxious person,” is the ancestor of the author through his father.
4. Signature of General Andrew Williamson, who was illiterate and could barely scrawl his own name.

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