

# Davis Family In The Carolinas

## By James P. Davis

Draft: 4/19/91

7:59 PM

### Davis Family in the Carolinas

James P. Davis

This is the start of a chronicle of one family's story in America--one small grain of sand picked from the beach of humanity--but a story that is of personal interest. It is said that *who we are* is the sum total of those who came before us--both in terms of genetics and environment--and can be seen in the appearance, mannerisms, and behavior of each individual. To know and to understand a person, you must know who his/her family is, and what is the sum total of their collective experience.

This family experience can certainly be handed down from father to son, mother to daughter, through the stories and object lessons that form the fiber of family bonds of communication. However, who we are can be handed down non-verbally, without any direct contact with our progenitors. The mechanism (probably not genetic in nature) may not be understood, but its impact--once realized by studying who our ancestors were--can clearly be felt. Personally, when hearing stories about family members living in an earlier time, it is easy to see some of one's self (or other family members) in those individuals.

The story that will be told here, about one family whose scope of existence has been derived from the land and bounty of the Carolinas (both North and South) for the past 220 years, is based on this premise--that who we are is a collective experience, an aggregation, of who our ancestors were. Who they were, what was the sum of their lifetimes of thought and experience, reaches across the years to touch us in ways that we can't begin to imagine. They are here among us, still living--inside each of us.

The hope is that this story, and the revelations that have been and will be uncovered during its telling, will help each of us to understand just a little bit more about ourselves by understanding who our ancestors were. It is hoped that the telling will clearly illuminate this for us, recognizing the debt we owe to them.

### Part One - Coming to America

The first part of this story concerns two brothers, Robert and William Davis, and their journey from Wales to North Carolina sometime between 1745 and 1770. Robert Davis is considered here as the progenitor of the Davis family of interest in this writing (William, at this point, disappears from the written record, perhaps to be uncovered later). It is the extended family that has emerged from Robert's initial labor that is of interest, considering also its intertwining with many other families--with names such as Shields, Stuts, Phillips, Bell, Seawell, Parks, Walters, Underwood, McManus, Huey, Nelson, Jenkins, Abels, Chaudron, Highsmith, and many others too numerous to list here.

In order to understand the specifics of why the Davis brothers, Robert and William, came to America (without having any written account of their life or journey), much can be learned from looking at the context of historical events of which they were a part.

To the Reader:  
This stuff is very  
preliminary (& subject to  
error).  
If you  
know  
something  
I don't,  
please let  
me know.  
Thanks.  
J. DAVIS

PO Box 1127  
COLUMBIA  
SC 292  
(803) 781-2

### Their journey in historical context

The 1700s in Britain (as well in most of Europe) were a time of shrinking opportunity for its average citizens. Patterns of fluid movement among the population were well founded, with people of some means or little means moving about to find work or just to find a better life. Generally, the larger cities (such as London or Bristol) became the magnets that would draw both the young and the dispossessed from the countryside. But there was little opportunity in these cities for the masses of British folk that were to come.

Meanwhile, in the British colonies of America, several forces were in motion that would change the destinies of countless individuals and their families. During the 1600s, the tenor of life in the New England colonies had been set by the movement of various religious groups intent on finding the freedom of worship. However, in the other colonies (such as the Carolinas), much of the population influx consisted of those who could provide brute labor (such as working the fields on the plantations established along the coastal areas), or were convicts banished to a destitute life in the colonies.

However, during the 1700s, a different catalyst was to emerge, drawing new waves of immigrants from the British Isles looking for a better life. The factors influencing the great emerging movement of people across the Atlantic to America, of which the Davis brothers were a part, were as follows:

1. an increased demand for skilled labor (artisans, builders, craftsmen, engineers) as the economies of the colonies prospered, creating a demand for more refined goods and services; and,
2. an increased demand for "tenants" and buyers for land acquired as a result of land "speculation".

At this point, it is not known for which reason the Davis brothers came--to find a better life through using their skills, or to partake of this early vision of the "American Dream" through the purchase and cultivation of their own land--or whether for both reasons.

### The magnet of good jobs and a better life

Given the many hardships of life in the British Isles at the time, and the fluid movement of a large portion of the population in search of work or a better life, it is only natural that such a movement would extend to the British colonies. As industries became established in America, there arose a great demand for laborers that could not be met with the existing population. Thus, the call went out, through advertisements in the newspapers and tales in letters to those left behind from those who were already there, about the employment opportunities that existed in the colonies.

Many people who decided to go to America could not afford the cost of passage on a ship. Thus, arrangements would be made to travel as an "indentured" worker--to work

some period of time (such as 4-6 years) to pay back the debt of passage once having arrived in America. Generally, the people involved in this aspect of the migration to America were young unmarried men who had some skills, but for whom there was little opportunity in Britain.

However, not all of these people responding to the call for employment were indentured. Many others were free workers who had not made such commitments. These had the financial means to pay for passage, and to establish themselves in America as craftsmen, laborers, or farmhands.

It may have been possible that the Davis brothers, having some metalworking skills (Robert is reported to have been a gunsmith and silversmith), might have been attracted to America for this reason--the promise of greater opportunity through hard work. It is assumed that they did not enter into an indentured arrangement with an employer who would have paid passage for them to come, but that they had sufficient money to pay for the journey themselves. It is not known how they would have had the financial resources to pay for this journey, but perhaps they had accumulated or inherited some means (a farmhouse, cattle, crops, trade tools, metal works, a stake in a mine, etc.) to finance it.

#### The magnet of open land and a better life

Through a series of events (the ending of the French-Indian War with the Treaty of 1763), more than 10 million acres of former Indian land stretching the length of the colonies was opened up for exploitation. The result was a wild frenzy of land speculation--the acquisition of land for the sole purpose of selling it for a profit in a rising market. Speculation logically followed from 2 basic facts:

1. there was a low ratio of people to good arable land in America (unlike the situation in Britain, where most land was owned by the "landed gentry" landlords); and,
2. it was very likely that this would change quickly as the population grew (with thousands of people looking for a better life and fulfilling their desire for land and independence from the landowning practices of Britain--this would be assured).

In order for speculators to get their profit, they had to get people to settle on their land, having them either renting or purchasing it. Over the period from about 1730 onward, a network of associations between American (and British) land speculators working with British and other European agents and shippers, would seek to draw the disenchanted to the colonies with enticement of independence, freedom from the oppressive rental system of the landed gentry (i.e., paying rent and working for a landlord), and visions of a better life. Thus, there was an open and aggressive drive to recruit settlers to occupy this open and available land, thus securing the profit for the speculators and middlemen.

The *siren call* of land and opportunity fell on anxious ears hearing the call from all over the British Isles (and Europe as well). The early to mid 1700s in Britain was a period

of spiraling rents, social upheavals (such as a result of destruction of the clan system in Scotland after the quelling of the Jacobite rebellion in 1745), and general discontent among the common people. The call to go to the new world was heeded in great numbers to escape these factors.

The majority of those who were motivated by this force were family groups, usually with a middle-aged head of family. These people would sell their possessions and their stakes in the land (rented from the landowners on great tracts of land all over Britain) in order to pay for passage of their families to America, and for the rental or purchase of land once they arrived.

Once in America, if they had rented land, they might stay on for a few years until they had amassed enough wealth to acquire land of their own (perhaps the speculating land owner might sell at this time). But, since new lands to the west were always opening up, it was likely that they might move on after a few seasons.

This basic pattern was to change somewhat (with the realization of the British government that the British Isles were being depopulated at an alarming rate), with passage of a policy by the Privy Council (a governing board overseeing certain aspects of administration of affairs in the colonies) in February 1774. This policy stated that the governors were no longer allowed to make land grants in unlimited quantities for speculation (presumably because they were making a profit themselves); all future land transactions were to be based on sale (not by grant), based on officially surveyed plots, at public auctions and at published prices, with all transaction fees specified by the Crown.

Thus, it is possible that the Davis brothers, through securing some means to take the voyage to America, had the means also to purchase land. It is reported that land was purchased by the brothers from then-governor Richard Dodd Speight as part of a land grant. It is not known if arrangements were made for this purchase before coming to America. They may have purchased it directly on arrival to North Carolina through the port of New Bern. Or, it may be that they initially rented land from a speculating landowner, later to purchase their own tract of land once having achieved the means (also after the Privy Council resolution of 1773).

#### The Davis brothers in America

It is likely that the brothers worked for some time, amassing some measure of wealth, renting property or living in a semi-indentured arrangement, until such time as other opportunities arose. It is known that a sizable portion of property was purchased (from High Falls, NC, along the Deep River). It is also known that brother William did not stay in North Carolina, but went westward. Many opportunities were opening up in the lands of Kentucky (then known as Transylvania, the result of a land speculation partnership headed by Mr. James Hogg, a founder of University of North Carolina, also a recent immigrant). It is possible that William went there, lured by promise of more fertile land.

The Uwharrie foothills are ancient mountains that have been weathered by the passage of time, long before the Cherokee, Catawba, or Tuscarora Indians made this

region of North Carolina their hunting grounds. The land under and east of the Uwharrie, east of High Falls, NC, was where the Davis brothers set up their new life (it may only have been Robert Davis who was involved in the purchase). It is not known why this tract of land was selected. It doesn't appear to have been the best location for farming. However, it was a region that was known for its metals--particularly gold (this region of North Carolina was apparently a major gold producer in the Americas long before the discovery of the gold fields in California almost a century later).

If the Davis brothers came to farm, it might explain why William left his brother Robert and went further west, into the more fertile lands of western North Carolina and Kentucky. If they came to practice their metalworking trade (as Robert seems to have done), then perhaps they found what they were looking for--at least Robert may have. At any rate, this is where Robert set up his new life, and the lives of his family and descendants--many of whom lived out their lives, and continue to live, on or near the land that he opened up with his muscle and determination.

We know that Robert set up a gun factory near what is now Robbins, NC, and manufactured guns during the Revolutionary War. We also know that he was a silversmith by trade, but it is not known to what extent he practiced this upon reaching North Carolina (however, his son, William Coleman Davis, is known to have practiced it, having fashioned a wedding ring--either for his wife or daughter--that has been handed down through the generations through one of the family lines).

This is the context for their immigration, drawn from various accounts--namely the British Register of Emigration, compiled between 1773-1776, by the Board of Customs Commissioners to determine the magnitude and scope of the movement of taxpaying Britons to the Americas.

#### Open questions

At this point, there are many questions to be answered about the brothers. Much of this information may be recorded in a book written by distant kin, W. Harold Broughton, titled *The Tysors of Old Tudor*, which records the Tysor family history and its links with the Davis family. An attempt is being made at this writing to find a copy of this book.

1. What is the date of their arrival in America? It is known that they landed at New Bern, on the Neuse River. Perhaps shipping documents still exist, since passenger manifests were kept for these voyages (they may be archived in North Carolina, and should be followed up).

2. From where did they sail in England? If they are from Wales, they may have come from the ports of Cardiff, Swansea, Barry, or Newport, which were coming into prominence as shipping ports during this time. However, it is also likely that they might have migrated to a larger population center from the Welsh backcountry as a precursor to the great migration across the Atlantic--leaving on a ship from the ports of Bristol or Liverpool, which were more established ports. If they left from a British

port (not specifically a Welsh port) between 1773 and 1776, their journey would have been recorded in the British Register of Emigration (as mentioned earlier).

3. Why did they come to America? It is known that there was mineral mining, including gold, in the southwest and west of Wales at that time. However, the gold (having been mined since Roman times) might have been played out, prompting a movement to a major city or to America. In addition, there was coal and iron. Major coalfields were located in East Glamorgan (north of Cardiff) and West Monmouthshire, and iron mining was being done in the south (such as the town of Merthyr Tudfil). It may have been that, if they were metal smiths (rather than being miners), they might have been looking for better opportunities to practice this trade in the colonies. They might have had sufficient metal works (gold, perhaps?) to sell in order to finance their passage. It would be interesting to know how they heard about the opportunities in the colonies (which would not have been difficult, given the great push for labor and settlers).

It is known that emigration from Wales occurred for similar reasons to that of the rest of Britain (reflected in the Register of Emigration). Additional frustrations for the Welsh were that:

1. Anglicanism (Episcopalian in the US) was compulsory, and Welsh non-conformists left in order to practice religious freedom.
2. The Welsh language could not be used in official business (thus, non-English speakers would have been treated as second class citizens).
3. Much Welsh farming property was owned by absentee landlords (as was the case over much of Britain, discussed earlier), and rent increases probably were being felt in Wales at the time as the rest of Britain.
4. As mentioned earlier, skilled mining and metalworking labor was in demand in the colonies, particularly Pennsylvania (the iron works in Pittsburgh and other areas were drawing many of the miners and iron workers from the south of Wales). The fact that the Davis brothers didn't go to Pennsylvania means that perhaps they weren't involved in the iron trade at all.

5. Why did they choose to come to North Carolina? If they were metal smiths (or goldsmiths), perhaps they heard about the gold in North Carolina. But, according to accounts, this fact was not well known in Britain, and had little influence on populating North Carolina. In fact, most of the immigration to North Carolina from 1760 to 1776 was from Scotland. This was due to the policies of Governor Gabriel Johnson (1734-1752), himself a Scot, to encourage the settlement of North Carolina by Scots fleeing the disruption of their way of life after the destruction of the clan system in the Highlands. There was some population of Welsh immigrants in North Carolina (having settled mostly northwest of the stretch of land between New Bern and Wilmington), but it is not known what would have drawn them specifically to North Carolina (since many of their Welsh brethren were immigrating to the northern colonies, such as Pennsylvania, for the iron work). No written account of this population movement has

been identified yet (the British Register, detailing the emigration from Britain and Scotland from 1773-1776 did not record emigration from Wales).

4. Where did they come from in Wales? *Davis* (also spelled *Davies*) is a common family name in Wales. It is derived from Welsh *Dewi-s* (Davy's son) or *mab Dafydd* (pronounced 'Dav-ith' where 'th' as in "the"; Anglicized, *son [of] Davies* = David's son); however, the spelling wasn't standardized in Britain and America until probably the late 1700s and early 1800s. It is reported that there are many Davis families (Davies) located in much of rural southeast Wales, particularly in the Usk Valley (Usk, Raglan, Abergavenny). Determining their home would be dependent on establishing what was their specific trade (farmers, miners, or metalworkers), which should at least identify the region in Wales. Perhaps additional records exist in Wales that would provide more information. These are being investigated.

#### References:

1. Bailyn, Bernard. *The Peopling of British North America - An Introduction*. Vintage Books. New York, 1986.
2. Bailyn, Bernard. *Voyagers to the West - A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution*. Vintage Books. New York, 1988.
3. Correspondence with J.R. (Russ) Evans, British Geological Survey, Edinburgh, Scotland (himself a Welshman, his wife is a Davies, from Builth, in county Powys, Wales).
4. Correspondence with Greg Bulloch (also of Welsh descent, family from Mold, county Clywyd), Cupertino, California.
5. Correspondence with Geraint Edwards, University of Wales, College of Cardiff, Cardiff, Wales.
6. Correspondence with John Evans (Ieuan = John), Department of Computing Maths, University of Wales, College of Cardiff, Cardiff, Wales.
7. Conversations with Mr. Sam B. Seawell (great-grandson of Mr. Eli T. Davis, himself a grandson of Robert Davis) of Glendon, NC.