

The Muddle: Unlocking the Mystery of William Henry Bassett's Connection to the Harrison Family of Charles City County, Virginia

By Bill Orr

(Last updated with corrections and new information on August 16, 2018.)

Section 1: The Family Story

For many decades in my family it was understood by those that knew anything about it that my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett after losing both his parents at a tender age in a yellow-fever epidemic was raised at Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, Virginia, by Elizabeth Bassett, mother of President William Henry Harrison, great-grandmother of President Benjamin Harrison, and wife of Benjamin Harrison V, signer of the Declaration of Independence and fifth governor of Virginia. It was also understood that he ran away when still just a boy by stowing away on a ship on the James River after being flogged by a cruel drinking uncle for breaking a bottle of whiskey on Christmas Eve, but a kindly captain took him in and he later made good by becoming the captain of his own ship. He was presumably related to Elizabeth Bassett, but his exact relationship to her was unknown because no one knew who his parents were; his parentage, unlike hers, was an utter mystery. Not all the story when I first heard it made its way into my conscious memory. I had it in my head that he was just a homeless Huckleberry Finn no-account that the famous Harrisons took pity on, that it was President William Henry Harrison himself that beat him, and that it all happened not on the James but on the Mississippi.¹

I would learn many years later so impenetrable was the mystery of his parentage that one branch of his descendants took to calling it "the Muddle."² I would come to think it odd the truth of his parentage did not survive the generation of his children intact, and the main reason I would think so was how could any connection to so prominent a family be so quickly forgotten? I would learn from a set of old family papers that more than a few of William Henry Bassett's great-grandchildren after raising families of their own did their best to resurrect the truth of the story -- partly by sharing what they knew of it with one another, partly by exercising their powers of logic over what few clues they did have, partly by sending off for additional information through the mail. But disinterring the truth would prove exceedingly difficult because many of Virginia's early records had been looted or burned in one war or another or destroyed by fire when the country was not at war.³ One great-grandchild enthralled by the mystery was Peggy Bassett, granddaughter of William Henry Bassett's first son, Joseph Carter Bassett. "The more I look at

¹ To my knowledge, nowhere is there to be found a written account by William Henry Bassett or by any of his children of his life or his ancestry, and there are only two by his grandchildren, and exceedingly abbreviated are both of them. One of the two is by his granddaughter Ida Bassett, first daughter of his fourth son, Thomas Jefferson Bassett. The other is by his granddaughter Virginia Bassett Alleman, fifth daughter of his first son, Joseph Carter Bassett. And because of their importance, I've included both of them verbatim in the appendix to this book.

² As I understood it, it was descendants of William Henry Bassett's third son, Benjamin Harrison Bassett, that first referred to the mystery of his parentage as "the Muddle."

³ Many New Kent County records disappeared when a man named John Posey set fire to the New Kent County Courthouse on July 15, 1787, and many more during the Civil War, first during the Peninsula Campaign, in 1862, and later at the end of the war, on April 3, 1865, in the Confederate capital of Richmond, where they had been taken for safekeeping. Many Charles City County records, including many personal records in Charles City County, were likewise long ago destroyed in one way or another. It was General Benedict Arnold that destroyed many Harrison family records, including family portraits, when his troops in January 1781 punitively removed from the manor house at Berkeley Plantation all manner of possessions and burned them in the yard. In genealogy, counties plagued by the problem of lost records are sometimes referred to as "burned counties" and sometimes also as "lost-records localities."

these papers of early Bassetts," she wrote three Bassett cousins in a letter dated June 28, 1957, "the more I think that the father of Wm. Henry Bassett was a son of [Elizabeth Bassett's brother Burwell]" ... and "[Elizabeth Bassett] was his great-aunt and not his aunt. Perhaps she was just a cousin and not an aunt at all, but here we go again!"

Not until I was in my 50s did I look into the mystery. I began by examining the crux of the family story -- that he was "adopted and reared" by Elizabeth Bassett, mother of President William Henry Harrison and wife of the signer Benjamin Harrison V. What I learned was that he could not have been adopted and reared by Elizabeth Bassett, because she died four years before he was born. Now I was completely flummoxed. Was there any truth to the story? It was my sense there had to be a deep elemental truth to it, why else would it have been told? I remembered a curious piece of circumstantial evidence that his granddaughter Ida Bassett mentioned in her handwritten account of the mystery -- that he must have been most intimate with all the famous Harrisons since he named most of his children after them. I decided to test her conclusion by doing my own methodical comparison of the names. But no sooner did I start in on the comparison, it seemed, than I was sidetracked by a separate discovery -- that it wasn't just the famous Harrison family that the Bassetts married into; they also married into none other than George and Martha Washington's families.

To my amazement, I would discover no fewer than seven marriages blending Bassetts, Dandrighes, and Washingtons into one extended family down through the years. The first was between Elizabeth Bassett's only surviving brother, Burwell, and Martha Washington's "greatest favorite" sister, Anna Maria, in 1757. The second was between Burwell and Anna Maria's daughter Fanny and George Washington's nephew George Augustine Washington in 1785 (they ran Mount Vernon when George and Martha were away running the country). The third was between Burwell and Anna Maria's son Burwell Jr., a United States congressman, and Martha Washington's great-niece Philadelphia Ann Claiborne in 1800. The fourth was between Burwell and Anna Maria's grandson George Washington Bassett and George Washington's great-niece Betty Burnet Lewis in 1826. The fifth was between George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnet Lewis' daughter Ella and the great-grandson of George Washington's half brother Augustine, Lewis William Washington, in November 1860. The sixth was between William Henry Bassett's third son, Benjamin Harrison Bassett, and George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnet Lewis' daughter Mary Burnet Bassett in December 1860⁴ (like her sister Ella, Mary had the rare distinction of being biologically related to both George and Martha Washington).⁵ And the seventh was in 1868 between William Henry Bassett's fourth son, Thomas Jefferson Bassett (my great-great-grandfather), and Martha Josephine Roberson, the sixth great-granddaughter of George Washington's great-grandfather William Ball.

I would later learn from George Washington's diary and old Washington/Bassett family letters that he and Martha and Burwell and Anna Maria weren't just family; they were very dear friends, besides. Many a night would George and Martha and her two children by a previous marriage spend with Burwell and Anna Maria and their children in their brick mansion at Eltham Plantation in New Kent County.⁶ They would sometimes stay for days on end. George and Burwell would go on long rides together, sometimes to check on the Custis property held in trust for Martha's two children.⁷ Together they would fish for sturgeon in the Pamunkey and the York;

⁴ There is conflicting information over whether the middle name that Mary and her mother had in common was spelled with one or two t's. According to Mary's tombstone at Prairie Lea Cemetery in Brenham, Texas, it was spelled with two, but according to a meticulous family register no doubt kept by her mother it was spelled with just one. I'm siding with the family register because of the two sources it is the most primary. For a copy of the family register, see the Betty Burnet Lewis gallery in the Orr Family Tree at Ancestry.com.

⁵ Being related by blood to both George and Martha Washington was rare because they produced no offspring together. (All four of Martha's children came from her marriage to Daniel Parke Custis of New Kent County, Virginia, but two of the four died in early childhood and one from an epileptic seizure when she was just a teen-ager.)

⁶ The manor house at Eltham -- "one of the largest and finest" in Colonial Virginia, according to a historical marker one mile south of it on Highway 33 -- was destroyed by fire on Saturday, May 8, 1875, according to a May 16, 1875, report in the *Virginia Pilot* in Norfolk. It was a three-story mansion with two matching wings, each two stories high, according to a description of it by Dallas H. Oslin Jr. in the book *New Kent County Virginia in 1863*. "[It] stood in ruins until the early 1930s, when bricks were removed from the site by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for reconstruction projects in Williamsburg." According to the historical marker, "the foundation remains."

⁷ By my calculation, the Custis property that was held in trust for Martha Washington's children was about 15 miles from Eltham. It, too, was in New Kent County and it was George Washington that was the administrator of the trust.

they would hunt hares together. George would routinely lay over at Eltham when traveling back and forth on political business between Mount Vernon and Williamsburg, the capital of Colonial Virginia, and each time he went to Williamsburg, it seemed, he dined with Burwell and Elizabeth Bassett's widowed mother, Elizabeth Churchill, at her home two blocks south of the market square.⁸ It would be at Eltham that Martha's greatest favorite sister would die at only 38 years of age on December 17, 1777; it would be at Eltham that her only surviving child would die of camp fever at only 26 years of age with his illustrious stepfather at his bedside in the immediate afterglow of the battle sealing American independence;⁹ and at Eltham would it be that George's ever-faithful nephew George Augustine Washington would die at only 33 years of age on February 5, 1793, from a protracted pulmonary condition brought on by tuberculosis.

Before I uncovered the full complement of marriages blending Bassetts, Dandrighes and Washingtons into one extended family, I went back to comparing Harrison family names with the names of all seven of William Henry Bassett's children by his first wife, my third great-grandmother Eleanor O'Neill. I discovered the only names that did not overlap were *Thomas Jefferson* and *Eleanor* – and *Eleanor* of course came from the mother of the children.¹⁰ That left just one name unaccounted for – and it was almost as famous as George Washington's. Was the author of the Declaration of Independence also related to the Berkeley Plantation Harrisons? It was my hunch he was related to them, by marriage, and the reason was that already in the Harrison side of the family tree I was just then starting at Ancestry.com was the name *Randolph* and I knew Jefferson was a Randolph ... through his mother, Jane Randolph. I enlarged the Harrison side of my family tree. I discovered my hunch was right in multiple ways. To my amazement, I would discover no fewer than four of the signer's siblings, two of his children, and one of his nephews married into the Randolph family, and among the Harrison/Randolph marriages I found to be the most notable of all were his sister Elizabeth's to Jane Randolph's first cousin Peyton Randolph and his brother Carter Henry's to Thomas Jefferson's aunt Susannah Randolph.¹¹

Again I was dumbfounded by the historical significance of the names. The *Randolphs*? Including *Peyton* Randolph? I couldn't believe it. He, too, was a political giant -- speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses, chairman of the Virginia Conventions, first president of the Continental Congress. I would learn some students of history consider him the first president of the American nation. It dawned on me that it wasn't just the Harrisons and the Washingtons that were loosely linked to each other through the Bassetts; also loosely linked to each other through the Bassetts were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. It took me a moment to trace the link. Slowly I muttered it out loud: "The signer's brother Carter Henry was the brother-in-law of

⁸ Elizabeth Churchill's first husband was Colonel William Bassett IV of Eltham Plantation. He died in early 1744. Her second husband was the Reverend William Dawson of Williamsburg, the second president of the College of William & Mary. He died on July 20, 1752, just 10 days after they were married. As "Mrs. Dawson" is how George Washington refers to her in his diary. (For more information on her, see the article "Mrs. Elizabeth Dawson of Williamsburg Block 44" by James R. Bentley, available online.)

⁹ John Parke "Jacky" Custis would die at the Bassett home on November 5, 1781. He had come down with camp fever while serving as a civilian aide-de-camp to George Washington at Yorktown, some 30 miles east of Eltham.

¹⁰ The names of all seven of William Henry Bassett's children by his first wife, Eleanor O'Neill: **Joseph Carter Bassett** (1822-1897); **Mary Ann Virginia Bassett** (1825-1909); **William Henry Bassett Jr.** (1828-1869); **Benjamin Harrison Bassett** (1831-1893); **Thomas Jefferson Bassett** (1833-1885); **Eleanor Ann Bassett** (1835-1843); **Robert Edwin Bassett** (1839-1840). A list of Harrison family members that William Henry Bassett and his children might have been named after: Governor **Benjamin** Harrison V (1726-1791), "the signer"; **Carter Henry** Harrison (circa 1730-1793), brother of the signer; **Henry** Harrison (circa 1732-1772), brother of the signer; **Robert** Harrison (circa 1734-circa 1770), brother of the signer; **Benjamin** Harrison VI (1752-1799), first son of the signer; Congressman **Carter** Bassett Harrison (circa 1756-1808), second son of the signer; President **William Henry** Harrison (1773-1841), third son of the signer; **Ann** Harrison (1753-1821), second daughter of the signer; **Ann Carter** (1704-1745), mother of the signer; **Robert "King" Carter** (1663-1732), maternal grandfather of the signer; Susannah **Virginia** Coupland (1793-1837), daughter of Ann Harrison (1753-1821), a William Henry Bassett contemporary; **Edwin** Trent (1798-1878), grandson of Ann Harrison (1753-1821), son of Elizabeth Bassett Coupland (1776-1844), another William Henry Bassett contemporary; **Mary** Howell Allen (circa 1761-1800), wife of Congressman Carter Bassett Harrison; **Joseph William** Harrison (1773-1832), nephew of the signer. (Admittedly some of the children's names might have come from somewhere else.)

¹¹ The other Harrison/Randolph marriages I discovered were those of the signer's sister Ann and William Randolph III, who was also a first cousin to Thomas Jefferson's mother; the signer's sister Lucy and Edward Randolph, yet another first cousin to Thomas Jefferson's mother; the signer's daughter Lucy and another Peyton Randolph; the signer's oldest son, Benjamin Harrison VI, and another Susannah Randolph; and the signer's nephew Randolph Harrison and Mary Isham Randolph.

Thomas Jefferson's mother while the signer's own brother-in-law Burwell Bassett was himself the brother-in-law of George Washington." I was almost in shock. Was there ever a pair of siblings better connected with the political luminaries of the day than Elizabeth and Burwell Bassett?

Section 2: The Schooner *Mapsico* and President John Tyler Clues

I later came across still yet another name that supported the oral tradition that William Henry Bassett was closely connected to the famous Harrisons. It was the name of a schooner he owned when he was in the maritime trade -- *Mapsico*. How do we know he owned a schooner named *Mapsico*? Because the schooner *Mapsico* is mentioned in House Resolution 251 of the United States Congress on May 4, 1826, authorizing payment to William Henry Bassett for demurrage in Richmond.¹² It was William Henry Bassett's great-great-grandson William Henry "Bill" Bassett Jr. of Houston that very generously shared a copy of HR 251 with me.¹³ The name of the schooner struck me as unusual. I decided to see whether there was a place called *Mapsico* in Charles City County. I learned it was the name of a creek bordering a James River estate called Kittiewan Plantation.¹⁴ I looked Kittiewan up on an electronic map. I found it on the Weyanoke Peninsula, only seven miles or so down the James River from Berkeley Plantation. I posted a question at Ancestry.com asking for more information on Kittiewan and back came a wonderfully researched article by a historian named Patrick O'Neill showing that Kittiewan was the property of one Harrison or another continuously for some 70 years, from the mid-1770s to 1846.¹⁵

The first Harrison to own it -- in conjunction with her first husband, Dr. William Rickman, director and chief physician of all Continental Army hospitals in Virginia during the Revolution -- was the signer and Elizabeth Bassett's oldest daughter, Elizabeth Harrison. Her full name was Elizabeth Bassett Harrison, after her mother. Was this the Elizabeth Bassett in the family that gave the orphaned boy a home? I learned that Elizabeth Harrison and Dr. Rickman had no children of their own. That seemed promising, but only until I learned she also died before William Henry Bassett was born. Who did Elizabeth Harrison bequeath the property to? I learned she bequeathed it to her brothers Carter B. Harrison and the future president, William Henry Harrison, upon the death of her second husband, John Edmondson. According to her May 3, 1790, will, Carter was to receive the home place and William what was called the Brown tract. But before she died eight months later, on January 1, 1791, Carter instead inexplicably bought the home place from her, along with some 800 acres around it. And he would take ownership of the Brown tract as well when his younger brother sold it to him for 25 pounds. Was it Carter B. Harrison and his wife, Mary Howell Allen, that made a home for William Henry Bassett at Kittiewan? Very intriguing seemed that possibility, not just because William Henry Bassett would name his schooner after a creek bordering the plantation but also because he would choose *Carter* for his oldest son's given name and *Mary* for the first part of his oldest daughter's given name. I wanted to know how long Carter B. Harrison owned the property. I learned he owned it until he sold it to his first cousin Collier Harrison on October 13, 1801. I wanted to know how long Collier Harrison owned it. I learned he owned it for the next eight years, from when William Henry Bassett was almost 5 to when he was 13.¹⁶ I was puzzled. Instead of Carter B. Harrison, was it his cousin Collier that made a home for William Henry Bassett at Kittiewan Plantation during the bulk of his boyhood?

¹² According to an online dictionary, *demurrage* is "a charge payable to the owner of a chartered ship in respect of failure to load or discharge it within the time agreed."

¹³ House Resolution 251 is not the only evidence we have that William Henry Bassett owned a schooner named *Mapsico* in the 1820s. I would later find some 35 notices in the *Alexandria Gazette* and the *Washington Gazette* documenting the presence of the *Mapsico* at the Port of Alexandria in the months before he married Eleanor O'Neill in Alexandria on January 22, 1822, some of them announcing, "For Norfolk and Richmond. The Schr. MAPSICO. Bassett master, will take freight low for either of the above places. Apply to the master on board."

¹⁴ In the late 18th century Kittiewan Plantation was known as Millford Plantation.

¹⁵ I first stumbled on Kittiewan some two years before but only vaguely remembered what little I learned about it. It wasn't until I read Patrick O'Neill's very fine article on it that I became acquainted with the full scope of the Harrison family's connection to it.

¹⁶ When Collier Harrison died in November 1809, ownership of Kittiewan in accordance with his will went to his oldest son, Robert Carter Harrison, who in turn would own it for the next 47 years, until 1846.

From William Henry Bassett's third great-granddaughter Carol Williams I would learn yet another eye-opening historical fact consistent with the Kittiewan Plantation storyline germinating in my mind -- that President John Tyler nominated him United States marshal for western Louisiana on December 18, 1843. I knew that President Tyler had been President William Henry Harrison's vice president -- despite the fact they hailed not just from the same state but also from the same county. What I did not know was that President Tyler was born and raised in the open country not two miles from Kittiewan, on the other side of Queens Creek, at Greenway Plantation. Did William Henry Bassett know President Tyler outside the scope of President William Henry Harrison's relationship to him? It seemed to me if he grew up at Kittiewan, he most assuredly did, not just because they would have been neighbors but also because they would have been much closer in age. I learned that William Henry Bassett and President Tyler were near contemporaries; just six years was the age gap between them, whereas a whopping 17 years separated President Tyler from President William Henry Harrison. I also learned that President Tyler and William Henry Bassett's connection to each other might have been more than just a function of time and place; there might have been a loose familial bond between them, besides, since President Tyler's great-great-grandfather Robert Armistead and Elizabeth Bassett's maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Armistead, were first cousins.

I took a closer look at the evidence I had pointing to Kittiewan Plantation as William Henry Bassett's primary childhood home. I realized almost all of it was factually verifiable. Was it not a provable fact Kittiewan was a Harrison-family satellite home during all of his growing-up years? Was it not a provable fact the name of the schooner he owned in 1826 was also the name of a creek bordering the plantation? Was it not a provable fact the United States president that would elevate him to the post of U.S. marshal of western Louisiana was himself the product of a neighboring plantation? But there was at least one part of the equation that remained unproven -- the starting assumption that William Henry Bassett and Elizabeth Bassett were themselves in fact related. According to the family story, they were, and, to be sure, consistent with the same was the commonality of their last names. But in my possession, alas, was no actual record proving they were. All I had in the way of a historical record showing they were related, it seemed, was mere hearsay in the form of a colorful family story unfortunately marred by gaping holes and provable factual inaccuracies.

Section 3: Clover Lea

What first awoke my interest in my Bassett ancestors was the name *Burwell Bassett* in a Joe Ellis biography I was reading in the winter of 2012-2013 on George Washington. For a long time I paused over the name and an unadorned modifier identifying its owner as George Washington's brother-in-law. I fairly tripped over them. I wondered whether the Burwell Bassett in the biography I was reading was related to the Elizabeth Bassett in the story I'd been told when I was a boy. I discovered that he was in fact very closely related to her; he was her only surviving brother, just three years and three months her junior. I asked my father, William Henry Bassett's great-great-grandson John Edmund Orr, did he know that Elizabeth Bassett's brother was George Washington's brother-in-law. He said no he didn't, the only connection to Washington that he knew of was through Thomas Jefferson Bassett's second wife, Martha Josephine Roberson, my great-great-grandmother. I sounded my father out on whether I should do some research on William Henry Bassett, maybe his ancestry was richer than we realized. He said that sounded like a good idea, did I want to begin by looking at the old family papers? I said yes I did.

It was in a sheaf of 13 Civil War letters from my great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett of Brenham, Texas, to his older brother Benjamin Harrison Bassett, also of Brenham, that I found what I considered firm evidence that their father, William Henry Bassett, was indeed related to the signer's wife, Elizabeth Bassett.¹⁷ I found the letters in the back of a slowly disintegrating pictorial family register my father and mother laid out for me on the white tulip table in their den. With wonder I read all 13. My breathing slowed when I read in the

¹⁷ It should be noted that the Thomas Jefferson Bassett Civil War letters in my family's possession are not the originals. They are meticulous typed copies by Benjamin Harrison Bassett's granddaughter Katherine McCalla, a priceless gift from her side of the family to mine many years ago.

September 9, 1861, letter that one of the first things Thomas Jefferson Bassett did upon his arrival in Richmond to enlist in the Confederate army was inquire about "the Bassett family." I waited for him to name some of its members. He singled out eight members of the family by identifying them as cousin so-and-so: "Cousin Bettie," "Cousin Nannie," "Cousin Virginia," "Cousin Ella," "Cousin Washington," "Cousins Fanny, Robert and Willie." Who were these Bassett cousins and what degree of cousins were they? I scrutinized the letter for clues. I found one: the name *Clover Lea*. A "Cousin Bettie" and a "Cousin Nannie" had invited him to a place called Clover Lea. Was Clover Lea their home? Hoping to find more clues, I read the rest of the letters. I read every word in every letter. I found only one more clue, in the 10th letter, dated May 13, 1862 -- the name of another Bassett cousin, "Cousin George Bassett."¹⁸

After I finished reading the letters, I enlarged my tree at Ancestry.com until I found in the same nuclear family – that of Burwell Bassett's grandson George Washington Bassett and his wife, Betty Burnet Lewis – all nine of the mysterious cousins I needed to identify. I learned that eight of the nine were George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnet Lewis' biological children. I surmised that the remaining "cousin" was their new son-in-law, Lewis William Washington; he appeared to be a cousin by marriage only. I learned a number of illuminating things about George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnet Lewis' family. I learned that their children had the rare distinction of being biologically related to both George and Martha Washington, that *Clover Lea* indeed was the name of their home, that it was located only 12 miles or so northeast of Richmond, and that Benjamin Harrison Bassett's wife, Mary Burnet Bassett, was also a member of the tribe.¹⁹ (Doubtless she was even more eager than he was to catch up on the news out of Richmond and Clover Lea.) I now knew at least one critical part of the family story I was investigating was almost certainly true: William Henry Bassett really was related to Elizabeth Bassett. He had to be if his children were cousins to George Washington Bassett's children as per Thomas Jefferson Bassett's Civil War letters, and the reason was George Washington Bassett was Elizabeth Bassett's proven great-nephew.

When I said as much to a living relative of mine, she said no not necessarily; like as not, my great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett used the *cousin* moniker as a mere endearment, it did not mean the Bassetts of Clover Lea and the Bassetts of Brenham, Texas, were cousins in the literal sense of the word. Besides, if all this were true, it would mean that Thomas Jefferson Bassett's brother Ben had married a cousin, and wasn't it unusual for someone to marry his cousin? I answered it would have been more unusual for a husband and wife to be born with the same last name and not be cousins, and if there was one thing I was discovering, it was that among old Virginia families like the Bassetts, as shocking as it seemed, cousins were constantly marrying each other. I gave examples. I pointed out that Mary Burnet Bassett's very own parents were themselves first cousins. Plus, not only did Mary marry a cousin, but so did at least two of her siblings, Anna Virginia Bassett and Ella More Bassett, and even Elizabeth Bassett and the signer were cousins owing to the fact their paternal grandmothers, Joanna and Elizabeth Burwell, were sisters.²⁰ I said, yes, it was true that children are sometimes encouraged to use the *aunt* and *uncle* monikers for favored adults not related to them; I was myself encouraged to do so as a child, but never once had I heard of anyone using the *cousin* moniker as an endearment for a non-relation. And, besides, Thomas Jefferson Bassett mentioned many other people in his letters and in not a single instance did he denominate any of them as a cousin; he reserved the *cousin* moniker exclusively for the Clover Lea bunch.

Section 4: The DNA Evidence

It was only after I positively concluded William Henry Bassett was indeed related to Elizabeth Bassett that I was informed of DNA testing that seemingly said no he wasn't: Instead of

¹⁸ The formal names of the Bassett cousins mentioned in Thomas Jefferson Bassett's Civil War letters were Bettie Burwell Bassett, George Washington Bassett Jr., Anna Virginia Bassett, Ella More Bassett, Judith Frances Carter Bassett, Annette Lewis Bassett, Robert Lewis Bassett, and William Augustine Bassett.

¹⁹ When the Civil War began on April 12, 1861, Benjamin Harrison Bassett and Mary Burnet Bassett were still newlyweds, having entered into marriage only just a few months before, on December 20, 1860.

²⁰ Once when I informed my cousin Melissa Grant Dietz of the frequent inbreeding among her Bassett ancestors, her husband, Mark, turned a penetrating eye on her and remarked, "That explains a lot."

that of the known Bassett lines, his DNA I was told matched that of the known Harrison lines. I was told instead of a Bassett he was a Harrison; he was just as much a Harrison as President William Henry Harrison himself. He was *not* a Bassett, even though his last name was Bassett? What about the oral tradition that he was related to Elizabeth Bassett? What about Thomas Jefferson Bassett's explicit characterizations of the Bassetts of Clover Lea as his cousins? Very hard was it for me to accept that he was not a Bassett. For one thing, there was the fact that President William Henry Harrison was himself half Bassett since his mother was Elizabeth Bassett. And further compounding the genetic overlap, it seemed, was the fact Elizabeth Bassett was herself something of a Harrison since she and her husband sprang from the same set of great-grandparents.

In a fascinating telephone conversation with Joseph Carter Bassett's great-grandson Bill Bassett of Houston I learned the ins and outs of what he and other family genealogists were calling "the illegitimacy theory" – that William Henry Bassett was really the son of one of "the James River Harrisons" and the DNA evidence practically said as much. Together we went through some of the paternal possibilities. And then on my own I later went through them again and a few others, besides. It was easy to rule out Elizabeth Bassett's husband, the signer, because he died more than five years before William Henry Bassett was born.²¹ It was not as easy to rule out his three sons. Did the signer's youngest son, President William Henry Harrison, father William Henry Bassett? Given the DNA evidence and the duplication of their given names, it appeared at first glance that maybe he did; the nation's future ninth president was the right age to be his father. What I found on further inquiry was that of the three Harrison brothers the future president was the least likely to be William Henry Bassett's father because after the death of his own father in 1791 he abruptly swapped a medical education in Philadelphia under another signer, Dr. Benjamin Rush, for a chance at a military career fighting Indians in the Northwest Territory. Moreover, since I knew President William Henry Harrison lived deep into his 60s, not dying until April 4, 1841, I knew he could not have left William Henry Bassett an orphan at a tender age in accordance with the family story, and in that part of the story I did put a lot of stock.

It was my sense that President William Henry Harrison's two brothers, Benjamin Harrison VI and Carter B. Harrison, were better candidates, the former because he died August 11, 1799, when William Henry Bassett was 2, the precise age his granddaughter Ida says he was when he was orphaned, and the latter because he owned Kittiewan Plantation and died in 1808, when William Henry Bassett was only 11. About the Harrison brothers' many male Harrison cousins I learned nothing; about their Harrison uncles I ascertained that not a one of them lived long enough to be William Henry Bassett's father.²² I was having a hard time making the DNA evidence fit the family story and understanding the logic of William Henry Bassett's last name. If his father was, say, Benjamin Harrison VI or Carter B. Harrison -- the two best possibilities if indeed he was born at Berkeley Plantation in accordance with the family story -- of all names why pick *Bassett* for his last name when *Bassett* was their mother's maiden name? How would they explain his last name to her side of the family? Also, would not an out-of-wedlock birth diminish his standing in the family? It crossed my mind that maybe his standing was diminished, and that was why he ran away -- because he felt diminished. But if his standing was that diminished because he was born out of wedlock how did his third son, Benjamin Harrison Bassett, get himself hitched to a genealogical blue blood like Mary Burnet Bassett? And how did his fourth son, Thomas Jefferson Bassett, do likewise not once but twice by marrying first into the family of the previous vice president of the United States, John C. Breckinridge, and later into the Ball side of George Washington's family?²³

²¹ The signer died April 24, 1791.

²² For a long time I was under the misapprehension that one of the signer's brothers did live long enough to father William Henry Bassett and that his name was also William Henry. I would later conclude based on Benjamin Harrison IV's will and other reliable sources that there was no such person, notwithstanding the number of Ancestry.com trees that said there was.

²³ Thomas Jefferson Bassett's first wife, Lucy Gilmer Breckinridge, was a second cousin to United States Vice President John C. Breckinridge. She died during their first year of marriage, on June 16, 1865, from typhoid fever. Very prominent was the Breckinridge family. In addition to one vice president of the United States, it produced one presidential candidate (it was Vice President John C. Breckinridge that garnered the second most electoral votes in the watershed four-candidate presidential election of 1860), one attorney general of the United States, two United States senators, two United States representatives, two brigadier generals, and one secretary of war of the Confederate States of America. The

Section 5: A Mysterious Benjamin Bassett/A Mysterious Carter Bassett

It wasn't long after I started my tree at Ancestry.com that I came across a tantalizing speculation in "Tree Hints" that a Benjamin Bassett that died in 1801 and a Martha Davis that died in 1801 were William Henry Bassett's mystery parents. I was stunned. I had been under the impression his parents' names were beyond the event horizon of known things. I looked to see where the hint came from. It came from the Kilgore Family Tree. I soon realized through Tree Hints that the Kilgore Family Tree was uncommonly reliable, but did not know how to contact its owner to ask where the names came from, nor even that contacting its owner through Ancestry.com was permitted.

Despite the Kilgore Family Tree's reliability, I thought in all likelihood the *Benjamin Bassett* and *Martha Davis* names were erroneous, possibly mere guesswork. I was skeptical because I saw no supporting evidence and because I was finding a profusion of erroneous information in Tree Hints. My skepticism lifted, however, when I stumbled on a mysterious Benjamin Bassett listed as the second of four witnesses in the 1793 will of Fanny Bassett's dying husband, George Washington's nephew George Augustine Washington.²⁴ It crossed my mind that I might gain insight into his identity if I identified the other three witnesses. Who were they? I surmised that the first witness, "J Dandridge," and the fourth witness, "M.W. Dandridge," were the children of Martha Washington's brother Bartholomew, their full names being John Dandridge and Martha Washington Dandridge, and that the third witness, "C.P. Lyons," was the daughter of Elizabeth Bassett's sister Judith and her husband, Peter Lyons, chief justice of the Virginia Court of Appeals, what would later become the Supreme Court of Virginia, her full name being Catherine Power "Kitty" Lyons.²⁵ I already knew who Fanny Bassett was; as the daughter of Burwell Bassett and Anna Maria Dandridge, she was a biological niece to both Elizabeth Bassett and Martha Washington. It thus appeared that at least three of the four witnesses had one thing in common relative to Fanny: They were, all three of them, first cousins to her. Was the said Benjamin Bassett also a first cousin to her? Since all three of the others apparently were, it would stand to reason that he, too, probably was, especially given the commonality of their last names. But how could it have been so? Was it not true that Fanny's father was the only son in his family to live to childbearing age and if he had no brothers that produced children of their own how could Fanny have a first cousin with the surname Bassett?

Even more tantalizing were the names of a mysterious Ann Bassett and a mysterious Carter Bassett in the 1780 will of Elizabeth Bassett's husband, the signer Benjamin Harrison V, the very man who owned the celebrated plantation around which the entire William Henry Bassett mystery revolved. Who were Ann and Carter Bassett? I knew not a thing of their existence until

Gilmer side of Lucy's family was also very prominent, particularly her mother's first cousin Thomas Walker Gilmer, who was speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, the 28th governor of Virginia, a United States representative, and the 15th secretary of the United States Navy. Also worth mentioning is the possibility that when Thomas Jefferson Bassett remarried in 1868 he joined the extended family of another former vice president of the United States, John C. Calhoun, the South's main oracle of states' rights. The evidence for this, though, is meager, nothing but two very brief handwritten accounts by an unknown Bassett descendant, most likely William Henry Bassett's granddaughter Ida or her daughter, Emily. According to the two accounts, Thomas Jefferson Bassett's second wife, my great-great-grandmother Martha Josephine Roberson, was loosely linked to John C. Calhoun through her maternal grandmother Martha Overby, wife of George Washington Ball, because Martha Overby's mother "was a twin sister of John Caldwell Calhoun's mother, who was Martha Caldwell, born on Cubcreek, Charlotte County, Virginia - 1750." This would make John C. Calhoun a first cousin to my fourth great-grandmother Martha Overby, which would make him my first cousin six times removed. Whether the claim is true I have no idea since I have been unable to validate it. What I do know to be true is that the name of John C. Calhoun's mother really was Martha Caldwell; that John C. Calhoun was born in Abbeville County, South Carolina; that George Washington Ball and Martha Overby were born next door in Laurens County, South Carolina; and that in 1865 their daughter Jemima Elizabeth Ball Roberson named one of her sons John Calhoun. And though these facts in themselves do not prove anything, taken together they do I think give one extra note of credence to the rumor.

²⁴ What I had actually stumbled on unbeknownst to me was merely a published summary of George Augustine Washington's will. I would not find the actual will until much later, but in it, too, I would find a mysterious Benjamin Bassett listed as one of four witnesses to it. For the published summary of George Augustine Washington's will, see *Abstract of Wills and Inventories, Fairfax County, Virginia 1742-1801* by J. Estelle Stewart King, pages 32-33. And for a photostatic copy of the actual handwritten will used in probate, see Microfilm Reel 28 at the Library of Virginia.

²⁵ Instead of her daughter, I would later learn that Catherine Power "Kitty" Lyons was actually Judith Bassett's stepdaughter, and thus instead of a full first cousin to Fanny Bassett a step first cousin.

Jeffrey Bassett of BassettBranches.org very kindly apprised me of it. In a telephone conversation about the mystery of William Henry Bassett's ancestry Jeffrey Bassett matter-of-factly asked was I aware of a niece Ann Bassett and a nephew Carter Bassett listed as beneficiaries in the signer's 1780 will. My response to the question was anything but matter-of-fact. Suddenly I was on high alert, all ears. I told him no I was not aware of a niece named Ann Bassett and a nephew named Carter Bassett. Did he have a copy of the signer's will? Yes, he did, he said, and more than happy would he be to send it to me.

The provision in question practically jumped out of the will when I read it:

"... I give to my Niece Ann Bassett to her and her heirs forever at the death of her Aunt Stith her choice of the negro children which the woman now has that I lent her; and I give to my nephew Carter Bassett the next choice of the said children. ..."

"Benjamin Harrison ... January the eighth, 1780"

I could not believe I was looking at a typed transcription of a will written by the signer in his own hand proving the existence of a hitherto unknown niece and nephew named Ann and Carter Bassett. I now found myself wondering if the said Carter Bassett was William Henry Bassett's father. I felt there was much to recommend that he was, which would mean the oral tradition was true in every important way but one: It wasn't William Henry Bassett that was adopted and reared by Elizabeth Bassett at Berkeley Plantation; it was his father, and she was his aunt. Was she his biological aunt? The common surnames suggested she was. Was there a separate clue she was his biological aunt? There was. It was the *Aunt Stith* reference. Who was Aunt Stith? Though I had learned it more than two years before, I had forgotten that Elizabeth Bassett's sister Joanna was married to a man named Anderson Stith.²⁶ I soon re-learned it. I realized only the very slimmest of chances was there Ann and Carter Bassett's Aunt Stith was not Elizabeth Bassett's sister Joanna. Was it possible to be 100 percent sure she was? It was possible and the reason was a separate provision in the will described her as Carter B. Harrison's Aunt Stith as well, and there was no doubt whatever over who Aunt Stith was relative to him.²⁷

I scoured the rest of the signer's will. I realized Ann and Carter Bassett were the only niece and nephew in it, even though the signer had a passel of nieces or nephews. I wanted to know why were they the only niece and nephew in it. The most plausible reason that I could fathom was they no longer had parents of their own. Were the signer and Elizabeth Bassett the rough equivalent of their adoptive parents? It appeared to me they were and very likely the two Bassett children were living at Berkeley with them. And there was one more thing I realized – that it wasn't just their biological heritage that William Henry Bassett and his father had in common. What they also apparently had in common was the trauma of losing both of their parents at a tender age.

Sharply dragging down the excitement I felt over the signer's will was my understanding of the DNA evidence – that it proved William Henry Bassett was not a Bassett, but a Harrison. If William Henry Bassett was not a Bassett, then neither could have been his father – but it was a near certainty the signer's avowed nephew Carter Bassett was a Bassett, given the fact Elizabeth Bassett's sister Joanna was his avowed aunt. I steadied myself against the maddening irreconcilable facts I was up against. I threw them mentally up into the air. I let them fall in an untidy mess around me. It was humbling how obtuse I was. What I was missing was that William Henry Bassett's father was both a Harrison *and* a Bassett; for all the variables to add up, he had to be. He was a Harrison by his father and a Bassett by his mother, and no other combination of bloodlines would answer.²⁸

²⁶ Because I now knew the Bassetts routinely married into prominent families, it crossed my mind that Joanna Bassett might have done likewise. She did. I discovered that her lawyer husband, Anderson Stith (1730-1766), was yet another descendant of the Randolph family. He was a second cousin to Thomas Jefferson.

²⁷ Among other things, the signer in his 1780 will left his middle son, Carter, the mother of the two slave children that were to go to the niece Ann Bassett and the nephew Carter Bassett.

²⁸ When it finally dawned on me that William Henry Bassett's father's mother was a Bassett, I did not remember that family genealogist Bren Bassett of Drippings Springs had practically told me as much in an Ancestry.com message posted May 11, 2015, and that was why he had the last name *Bassett*. Though Bren was one generation off, a growing pile of new

But was it possible for his mother to be a Bassett without contradicting the DNA evidence? I learned, yes, it was possible, and one place I found the answer was in a forgotten or overlooked electronic message from the William Henry Bassett descendant responsible for the landmark DNA discovery, William Henry Bassett's third great-granddaughter Bren Bassett of Drippings Springs, Texas. What I had not understood was, one, that the DNA test was a Y-DNA test and, two, what a Y-DNA test was. What I learned was that a Y-DNA test is used to explore a man's patrilineal ancestry only, and for it to work it requires an unbroken line of male descendants because what it tracks is a certain chromosome present only in males – the Y chromosome, which passes down from father to son virtually unchanged. To me, it seemed sheer luck that in William Henry Bassett's lineage was at least one unbroken line of male descendants stretching down to the present, and how fitting it was that at the very end of that line was a female descendant with the presence of mind to tap into their DNA for an infinitely better vantage point on the obscurities surrounding their genealogical roots. I learned that Bren Bassett had submitted, in all, three DNA samples for genealogical testing, including one from her father, William Carter Bassett, and one from a Bassett cousin in New York, and all three came back with the same surprising result – a strong match with an unbroken line of proven male descendants of the Harrison family of Berkeley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia.²⁹

Section 6: The Larger Mystery

I now realized the DNA evidence instead of contradicting the circumstantial evidence was actually complementing it. The circumstantial evidence, for example, was likewise indicating that Elizabeth and Joanna Bassett's only surviving brother, Burwell, was not the father of their niece Ann Bassett and their nephew Carter Bassett even though anybody at first blush would understandably think he was. For one thing, he would not die until January 4, 1793, almost a full 13 years after the signer wrote his will. Was he incapacitated? Could he not afford to raise two more children? No, he was neither incapacitated nor impoverished. He alone owned the Bassett family's great ancestral home and all its many slaves in neighboring New Kent County. For another thing, no, Elizabeth and Joanna did not have another brother that could have fathered the two Bassett children. The historical record showed there was just one other brother, William, and he died much too young to father any children. I realized it wasn't just the DNA evidence that showed no Bassetts in Ann and Carter Bassett's paternal line; what also showed it were the near-poles-apart life spans of Elizabeth and Joanna Bassett's only two brothers -- that Burwell Bassett lived too long to be the father of two fatherless children in 1780 and William not nearly long enough.

That the DNA test showed a strong match between William Henry Bassett and the Berkeley Plantation Harrisons did not necessarily mean, however, that one of them was his direct ancestor. It meant only that he shared a common male ancestor with them; he might also be a descendant of one of their many cousins with the common ancestor as far back as, say, Benjamin Harrison I, Benjamin Harrison II or Benjamin Harrison III. I decided William Henry Bassett's presumed father, Carter Bassett, was almost certainly a Berkeley Plantation Harrison, and one reason was his and his sister's given names. It was true that *Ann* by itself was not distinctive, but very distinctive did it become in combination with *Carter* since Ann Carter -- daughter of the richest man in Colonial Virginia, Robert "King" Carter -- was the signer's mother and the original matriarch of Berkeley Plantation.

Another reason was William Henry Bassett's given name. The only other William Henry that I had reliably identified in late 18th-century Tidewater Virginia was the signer's youngest son, the future president, and did not the duplication of his name too imply a certain closeness to the Berkeley Plantation clan, especially given the fact it occurred before he was famous? Also, was it

circumstantial evidence would show her intuitive leap was spot-on. For all I knew, other family genealogists might have been thinking along similar lines as well. I wasn't. In all likelihood I did read what Bren had written me but later did not remember it. It would not be the first thing I would not remember. Indeed, because of the sheer volume of information in my expanding tree, it sometimes seemed as though my memory was always discarding some of it without consulting me, no matter how important it would later turn out to be.

²⁹ For more on the DNA evidence, go to BassettBranches.org, click on "DNA Project" and search for "William H. Bassett of LA."

not true that when the signer in his will identified Ann and Carter Bassett as his niece and nephew, he might have meant just that? I would learn that the signer's older sister, Elizabeth, in her 1780 will expressly differentiates nieces and nephews by blood from nieces and nephews by marriage. In her will a niece or nephew by blood is consistently identified as "my niece so-and-so" or as "my nephew so-and-so," while a particular nephew by marriage, the future governor of Virginia Edmund Randolph, is identified as "nephew of my dear departed husband." Elizabeth Harrison and the signer were the two oldest children in their family, close in age. Was it not likely they grew up using language in a similarly precise manner, particularly in legal documents?

I realized if I took at face value all the evidence I had, limited though it was, it was all bending in a single direction, telling me the same thing – that William Henry Bassett's father was the signer's nephew Carter Bassett and that Carter Bassett's father was one of the signer's brothers. But which brother? He had five that lived to childbearing age – Henry, Carter Henry, Robert, Charles, and Nathaniel. To rule out as many as I could, I decided to stick with my running assumption that Ann and Carter Bassett were orphans when the signer wrote his will and that's why they were the only niece and nephew in it – because they were without parents of their own and living at his home with him. And if this was right, then all I needed to know next was which of the signer's brothers died before January 8, 1780. The question was not as simple to answer as it was to ask. After numerous missteps, I would learn of two brothers that reached childbearing age that died before January 8, 1780 -- Robert of Charles City County, who died in or around 1770, and Henry of Hunting Quarter in Sussex County, who died January 28, 1772. And of the two I would settle on Robert as the most likely option, and I would do so for five reasons: one, because he remained in Charles City County and Henry did not; two, because his oldest son, Collier, would own Kittiewan Plantation from 1801 to 1809 (I realized if the signer's brother Robert was William Henry Bassett's paternal grandfather, there would have been no adult male more closely related to William Henry Bassett after his parents died than Collier Harrison; Collier Harrison would have been his uncle, or rather half uncle -- a prime candidate for taking him into his home); three, because I had firm evidence Robert fell into serious debt in the years before his death,³⁰ indicating a possible irresponsible streak; four, because I had evidence it was Henry that sought to clear Robert of his debt by selling 1,400 acres of his own land, indicating he might have had a very responsible streak; and five, because William Henry Bassett would name his fifth son *Robert*.³¹

It was only an educated guess; the evidence on which it was based was loose and disjointed, but I felt that since the logic behind it was apparently holding I should stick with it, especially since I had found no evidence to the contrary.

Who, then, was Ann and Carter Bassett's mother? Because I knew from the signer's will that their surname was Bassett and that both Elizabeth Bassett and her sister Joanna were their aunts, it seemed to me there were only two possibilities if their father was a Harrison. It had to be one of Elizabeth and Joanna Bassett's two sisters, either Judith or Priscilla. But which one of the two was it? I once again ended up having to deduce the answer by ascertaining which one died before the signer wrote his will. I sensed the answer was Priscilla because in more than a few trees at Ancestry.com she was listed as having died in March 1775, almost five years before he wrote his will. But in none of the trees did I find an actual record confirming the March 1775 date, and I had no good inkling whatever on when Judith died. It was in various newspapers from the period that I found the information I was looking for. From three obituary notices – including one in the March 9, 1803, edition of the *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser* and another in the March 9, 1803, *Virginia Argus* -- I would learn that Judith died at her Hanover County home on March 3, 1803, more than 23 years after the signer wrote his will, and from three obituary notices

³⁰ So acute were Robert Harrison's debt problems in March 1767 that even "the land whereon [he] now lives in Charles City County" was advertised for sale by local authorities to help satisfy various judgments against him. For more on his indebtedness, see Page 3 of the July 18, 1766, edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, Page 4 of the August 15, 1766, edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, Page 4 of the March 26, 1767, edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, and Page 4 of the April 7, 1768, edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, and also the court case "Harrison against Harrison and Others" in *Reports of Cases Argued and Adjudged in the Court of Appeals of Virginia, Volume I*, compiled by Daniel Call, available online.

³¹ William Henry Bassett and Eleanor O'Neil's fifth son, Robert Edwin Bassett, would die in infancy.

in Rind's *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg I would confirm Priscilla did indeed die in March 1775.³² I realized the answer was Priscilla; it was Priscilla Bassett that must have given birth to William Henry Bassett's presumed father, Carter Bassett, and his sister, Ann.

But who was Priscilla Bassett? Apart from being Elizabeth, Judith, and Joanna's sister, Priscilla Bassett was the wife of the Rev. Thomas Dawson, the fourth president of William & Mary College, who died in 1761. Though I learned much about him, I was able to learn precious little about her. One head-spinning fact I learned about her was that her husband was the younger brother of her mother's second husband, the Rev. William Dawson, the second president of William & Mary College. I would learn of many convoluted intra-family marriage arrangements and romantic mergers among the planter aristocracy in early Virginia, but none more convoluted than Priscilla's. In the one case a mother and daughter married two brothers, so that the mother and daughter were also sisters-in-law. In the other case two sisters procreated with two brothers, producing a rare set of double first cousins, and it just so happened that the daughter in the first case and one of the sisters in the second was the self-same person – my newly discovered presumptive fifth great-grandmother Priscilla Bassett.

Section 7: The Sarah Harrison Surprise

I thought of another way to reconcile the irreconcilable -- by postulating that the mysterious Carter Bassett in the signer's 1780 will and the mysterious Benjamin Bassett in George Augustine Washington's 1793 will were the same person. Maybe his full name was Benjamin Carter Bassett or Carter Benjamin Bassett. Most people had a first and middle name. Why not him? It seemed to me since Fanny Bassett had no Bassett uncles that lived long enough to father a child, the two had to be one and the same because there was no one else that could have been a male first cousin to her with the surname *Bassett*. And what also seemed telling was how neatly the two names went together for any scion of the Harrison family. *Benjamin* and *Carter* were not Bassett family names; they were Harrison family names – and *Benjamin* was the most quintessential Harrison family name of all.

It also crossed my mind that the nephew Carter Bassett and his sister, Ann, might have grown up as surrogate siblings to William Henry Harrison and his sister Sarah because by 1780 the other five Harrison children were already grown, some of them already starting families of their own. I checked my memory that William and Sarah did not grow up contemporaneously with their five older siblings. My memory was right: Whereas William and Sarah were born just four years apart, the former in 1773 and the latter in 1769, their five older siblings were born much earlier, in the 1750s, which meant by 1780 there was likely plenty of room in both the main house and the guest house for two orphaned double first cousins.

I wanted to know more about President William Henry Harrison's sister Sarah since she, too, might have grown up as a surrogate sibling to Carter and Ann Bassett. I expanded my family tree to include her husband and children. When I did, I discovered something that would have meant nothing to me had I not been aware of the signer's 1780 will and George Augustine Washington's 1793 will. I discovered she named her fourth son none other than *Benjamin Carter*, and this, too -- that he was born August 20, 1801.³³ I vaguely remembered that Joseph Carter Bassett's daughter Virginia Bassett Alleman claimed that her grandfather William Henry Bassett "became an orphan before the age of five." I confirmed my memory by carefully rereading her account of what she knew of her father's lineage. How very, very interesting, I thought when I realized the year Sarah Harrison gave birth to a son she named Benjamin Carter was exactly the same year William Henry Bassett lost his parents according to one of only two ancient accounts in my family's possession. And also very interesting was my next discovery – that it was none other than Sarah Harrison and her husband, John Minge, that lived right next door to Kittiewan. A light bulb went off. William Henry Bassett's father's full name was Benjamin Carter Bassett, and

³² The third obituary notice I found on Judith Bassett is on Page 3 of the March 15, 1803, Mercantile Advertiser in New York.

³³ There is disagreement over the exact day Benjamin Carter Minge was born. A tombstone erected to his memory many decades after his death says he was born August 10, 1801. The Minge Family Bible says, no, he was born 10 days later, on August 20, 1801. I'm siding with the Family Bible because of the two sources I consider it the most primary.

President William Henry Harrison and his sister Sarah *had* been very close to him familially -- so close, in fact, that shortly after he died, in 1801, she named her fourth child after him.

Section 8: A Single Unified Theory

Though I could not prove it was true, nor even claim definitively that all the evidence behind it was sound, I realized I now had a single unified theory to explain everything in the Muddle but the ancestry of William Henry Bassett's mother, including why his descendants mistakenly believed he was adopted and reared at Berkeley Plantation by Elizabeth Bassett, wife of the signer (*because his father was*); why the two Bassett children listed as beneficiaries in the signer's 1780 will were named Ann and Carter (*because their paternal grandmother was Ann Carter, the original matriarch of Berkeley Plantation*); why their surname was Bassett instead of Harrison (*one, because their mother was a Bassett, two, because they were born out of wedlock, and, three, because it was customary for children born out of wedlock to keep their mother's name*); why there's a Benjamin Bassett listed as a witness in the 1793 will of Fanny Bassett's dying husband (*because like the other three witnesses in the will he was her first cousin, he and the signer's nephew Carter Bassett being one and the same, his full name being Benjamin Carter Bassett*); why the Y-DNA of three living William Henry Bassett descendants in 2008 and 2009 strongly matched that of known descendants of the Harrison family of Berkeley Plantation instead of that of known descendants of the Bassett family of Eltham Plantation (*because his father, Benjamin Carter Bassett, was actually, paternally, a Harrison, despite his last name*); why William Henry Bassett named his first son Carter (*because that was the name his father commonly went by*); why William Henry Bassett was named William Henry (*because his father and William Henry Harrison grew up together at Berkeley Plantation as double first cousins and surrogate brothers*); why William Henry Bassett named his fifth son Robert (*because he knew the signer's brother Robert was his grandfather*); why William Henry Harrison's sister Sarah named her fourth son Benjamin Carter in August 1801 (*because he was born not long after her double first cousin and surrogate brother Benjamin Carter Bassett died in a yellow-fever epidemic*); why William Henry Bassett named his first schooner Mapsico (*because when he was young he lived in a Harrison-family satellite home on the Weyanoke Peninsula bordered by a narrow waterway called Mapsico Creek*); why William Henry Bassett shoehorned into both of his daughters' given names the name Ann (*because after both of his parents died in the same yellow-fever epidemic he grew especially close to his paternal aunt, Ann Bassett*);³⁴ why President John Tyler nominated William Henry Bassett U.S. marshal of western Louisiana (*one, because President Tyler had been President William Henry Harrison's vice president, and, two, because President Tyler and William Henry Bassett when they were boys knew each other outside their mutual connection to William Henry Harrison, their homes being less than two miles apart in the open country*); why the mystery became so difficult to crack (*because William Henry Bassett when he was grown had only a very limited memory of his parents, having lost them when he was only 4, and because his father was born out of wedlock*).³⁵

I contacted Jeffrey Bassett, the architect of BassettBranches.org, to test my theory against his comprehensive understanding of all things Bassett. He said it sounded good, but one drawback was the unlikelihood of two births out of wedlock to the same mother, especially to a mother of Priscilla Bassett's social standing. (She was the signer's sister-in-law, she was a member of one of the first families of Virginia, she was the widow of the president of William & Mary College.) I said yes, but on the other hand after her husband's death she lived for a

³⁴ It is interesting to note that Benjamin Harrison IV and his wife, Ann Carter, also gave more than one of their children the same name. It was the name *Henry*. The first Henry apparently died in infancy. But his memory was kept alive by his parents' decision to name his next two brothers Henry and Carter Henry. But it wasn't just the duplication of his name that pointed to a deep grief over his death. Also pointing to it is the opening directive in his father's will many years later -- that his body "be buried near my dear son Henry's grave."

³⁵ The extent to which out-of-wedlock births were customarily maligned in early Virginia is everywhere apparent in the church records and wills of the time. A typical Episcopalian parish, for example, would record an out-of-wedlock birth by describing the newborn as "the bastard son" or "the bastard daughter" of so-and-so mother. It was likewise common practice for a testator in a will to explicitly restrict an inheritance to only "lawfully begotten heirs," meaning descendants born out of wedlock would be excluded.

prolonged period without remarrying, and out-of-wedlock births did happen even among prominent families, especially in an age with no dependable contraception. Also, what about the possibility the niece Ann Bassett and the nephew Carter Bassett were twins? In that event, there would have been only one out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Jeffrey Bassett said that would indeed explain the one major drawback he could see to the theory, did I know of any twins in Elizabeth Bassett and Benjamin Harrison V's extended family? I looked. I discovered evidence of twins on both sides of the family, including a set of boy twins belonging to Benjamin Harrison IV and Ann Carter, a set of boy-and-girl twins belonging to Elizabeth and Priscilla Bassett's maternal grandparents, and a set of boy-and-girl twins belonging to Elizabeth Bassett's daughter Sarah and her husband, John Minge.³⁶

Section 9: The Eureka Moment

I began to worry my imagination was getting ahead of the facts. After all, I had no firm evidence William Henry Bassett's father was the signer's nephew Carter Bassett ... or even that his name was Carter. And much weaker still was my evidence proving the identity of his paternal grandparents. Nor did I have firm evidence his father lived at Berkeley and died in a yellow-fever epidemic in August 1801. I had no firm evidence there even was a yellow-fever epidemic in 1801. In my imagination it had seemed almost crystal clear William Henry Bassett's father was a double first cousin and surrogate brother of President William Henry Harrison and his sister Sarah and his full name was Benjamin Carter Bassett and not long after he died in a yellow-fever epidemic in August 1801, Sarah named her fourth son Benjamin Carter in loving memory of him. But *Benjamin* and *Carter* were also the names of her two older brothers and very natural would it have been for her to name her fourth son after them instead.³⁷ Was I seeing in the side of a rocky cliff nothing but imaginary faces? I decided, no, I did have evidence; granted, it was only circumstantial evidence, and, yes, circumstantial evidence could be very misleading, but it was more than nothing and until I found better evidence there was nothing wrong with using my imagination to make the most of what I did have.

Not knowing where else to turn, I took another one of my many prolonged hiatuses from Ancestry.com and began the task of committing to paper the story of my attempt to unlock the mystery of William Henry Bassett's ancestry with the aim of sending it to known and unknown cousins in hopes of obtaining from them additional family records. Instead of migrating to Texas like my great-great-grandfather and his brother Ben, some of William Henry Bassett's children stayed with him in Louisiana. Maybe neatly packed away in a half-forgotten box back in Louisiana or somewhere else were additional family records, maybe even a detailed family history written in William Henry Bassett's own hand. Maybe my story would jar loose the answer. Of particular interest to me were the descendants of William Henry Bassett's daughter Mary Ann Virginia Bassett since she was his only daughter to survive to adulthood and it was my experience many a Southern daughter was very good at preserving their genealogical heritage, particularly where it intersected with the Civil War and the Revolution. It would later cross my mind the main cache of family records might have passed down instead through William Henry Bassett's daughter-in-law Caroline Hudson, wife of his second son, William Henry Bassett Jr., and the reason was by late November 1869 both Caroline and her father-in-law were widowed and the 1870 census, taken just two years before his own death, shows him living in her home instead of his daughter's.

It was in June 2016 while on a long road trip to Estes Park, Colorado, that I tried my story out on my brother Tom, his 10-year-old daughter, Harper, and his 15-year-old son, Henry. When I finished reading, I looked up to find Henry sound asleep, his head nested in a pillow lodged against the passenger door, and Tom and Harper somehow still awake, but doubtless only just barely. I told them if I had it right, through their presumed sixth great-grandmother Ann Carter, they were the direct lineal descendants of King Edward I of England, William the Conqueror, and

³⁶ According to the Minge Family Bible, the boy-and-girl twins belonging to Sarah Harrison and John Minge were George William Hunt Minge and Anna Mercer Minge, born November 10, 1805.

³⁷ Sarah Harrison was not the only Berkeley Plantation Harrison to name a son Benjamin Carter. So did her brother Carter in 1780.

King Robert I of France.³⁸ They wanted to know could I conclusively prove they were. No, the claim was mere guesswork, based on nothing but circumstantial evidence, I answered; it all hinged on whether the signer's avowed nephew Carter Bassett was William Henry Bassett's father. "Oh," they both seemed to say with the same no-nonsense nod of their heads, "you *can't* prove it." I felt terrible I couldn't prove it. I felt like a fraud, and in the heavy silence that followed I sheepishly put my story away and abstractedly went back to staring out the window at the idle wind turbines populating both sides of Interstate 70 as far as the eye could see.

Oddly enough, it was just three days later that the additional evidence I needed finally did surface. It did not surface on its own; it came to light only through the patient, painstaking genealogical prospecting of our enterprising fourth cousin Carol Williams.

What Carol discovered while I was away, in one fell swoop, were the names of both of William Henry Bassett's parents. She informed me of the discovery when my brother and I were eating at a very mediocre Mexican restaurant somewhere south of Rocky Mountain National Park two days after dropping Henry and Harper off at camp. She had discovered their names at a popular genealogical website called Findagrave.com, in not just one entry but in two -- one for her great-great-grandfather and one for mine. Were the names mere conjecture? No, they weren't. What made the two Findagrave.com entries so important was a citation showing the information in them was rooted in Benjamin Harrison Bassett and Thomas Jefferson Bassett's actual baptismal records.

The names Carol found were Carter Bassett and Martha Davis. The *Martha Davis* name I remembered straightway. I had seen it three years before in the colossal 2,500-person Kilgore Family Tree. Carol herself, though, did not at first remember the *Martha Davis* name, even though the Kilgore Family Tree was hers. She had come across the *Martha Davis* name many years before in someone else's tree, but because she could find no corroborating evidence to support it, and because many of the trees at Ancestry.com were clogged with mistaken names and mistaken dates and other inaccurate information, she had demoted it to a seldom-used backup tree for unconfirmed data, and there over the years it remained unseen slowly seeping from her memory. It was amazing to me that we both had been in possession of William Henry Bassett's mother's name all along -- me from her, and her from someone else -- but because of no supporting evidence didn't know it.

From the signer's 1780 will the *Carter Bassett* name we both avidly remembered. It was my feeling Carol's discovery was as illuminating in its own way as Galileo's discovery of the phases of Venus and the orbits of Jupiter's moons, and the reason was it definitively proved William Henry Bassett's father's name was exactly what we projected it to be. A gazillion other names it could have been, but it wasn't. To both Carol and me, that the signer's avowed nephew Carter Bassett was indeed William Henry Bassett's father was now something like a 99.99 percent certainty. Who else could he have been? Based on the mounting evidence in our possession -- from the family story to the signer's will to the DNA evidence to Benjamin Harrison Bassett and Thomas Jefferson Bassett's baptismal records to the extensive family trees we had both meticulously built at Ancestry.com -- we both realized there was no one else he could have been.

After returning home, I contacted special collections librarian Alec Bourgeois at East Baton Rouge Public Library in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to confirm the information Carol found at Findagrave.com. She had told me the source for the two names was a massive compendium of Catholic Church records from the 19th century called *Southwest Louisiana Records* by the Rev. Donald J. Hebert.³⁹ When I asked Alec if he had a copy of *Southwest Louisiana Records*, he said yes he did. When I asked if he could send me an electronic copy of the information I was seeking,

³⁸ Through the Carter family, all of William Henry Bassett's descendants would also be distantly related to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and many other political demigods, according to FamousKin.com.

³⁹ Though his extended family back in Virginia remained solidly Episcopalian, William Henry Bassett converted to Catholicism after marrying his first wife, Eleanor O'Neill, and together they raised their children as Catholics, sending them to Catholic schools. The oldest daughter, Mary Ann Virginia Bassett, attended the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, La., while their four sons, Joseph Carter Bassett, William Henry Bassett Jr., Benjamin Harrison Bassett, and Thomas Jefferson Bassett, attended St. Charles College, Jesuit School, also in Grand Coteau.

he said yes he could and probably it wouldn't take very long. It didn't. In less than 20 minutes I received an electronic scanned copy of the page in question (page 800), the cover page, the title page, an abbreviations and definitions page, and one page explaining that grandparents were included in many Louisiana baptismal records. I realized the information Carol had turned up at Findagrave.com was indeed accurate: The names of William Henry Bassett's parents really were Carter Bassett and Martha Davis.

Section 10: Again the Name Benjamin Bassett

Since I was convinced the full name of William Henry Bassett's father was *Benjamin Carter Bassett*, I felt there was more than a good chance the *Benjamin Bassett* name would also again turn up one day. It turned up sooner than I expected, again compliments of my enterprising fourth cousin Carol Williams. I had phoned the Library of Virginia in Richmond to see if they had a single multivolume collection of late 18th-century and early 19th-century Virginia church records comparable to Donald J. Hebert's exhaustive compendium of southwest Louisiana church records. They told me no they didn't, there was no such resource in Virginia. After I informed Carol of my phone call, she remembered through the very same library many years before she had come across an obscure, hard-to-read handwritten sketch by a 19th-century lawyer and editor named S. Bassett French identifying William Henry Bassett's father as one *Benjamin Bassett*. I would later learn that the William Henry Bassett sketch she found was one of thousands S. Bassett French was planning to include in an ambitious biographical dictionary he was compiling on prominent Virginians of the 19th century. Carol dug through her records for her copy of the sketch, found it, and kindly sent me a copy. After I opened what she sent me, I found myself reading, with amazement:

"154 Bassett Wm H., a planter, son of Benjamin b. at 'Berkeley' in Charles City County in the year 1796. A planter in Charles City Co. neighbor and personal friend of Pres Tyler, by whom he was appointed Marshall for the Western District of La. to which state he had emigrated in 1828 and became a planter; after the completion of his term of service he retired to his plantation and died at Grand Coteau, La. at the age of 76 years."

Though it was only a thumbnail sketch, I knew by the particulars in it there was no mistaking the identity of the person in question. The person in question was our third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett. The main detail my eyes greedily locked onto was his father's name, but no stunning discrepancy was it for me that it was *Benjamin* instead of *Carter*. On the contrary, I was very much at peace with the discrepancy because it now seemed more probable than ever that the Benjamin Bassett in George Augustine Washington's 1793 will and the Carter Bassett in the signer's 1780 will actually were the same person.

In my opinion, that William Henry Bassett's father might have been called *Benjamin* in some cases and *Carter* in others was easy to explain. I felt it could happen to anybody that went by their middle name. I knew it repeatedly happened to my older brother, Dr. John David Orr; even though he commonly went by his middle name, what he often encountered in formal documents and on the front of his mail was his first. I likewise knew that our great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett in each of his Civil War letters signs himself as Jeff, but in her diary his Civil War sweetheart, Lucy Breckinridge, habitually calls him her Tommy. It was also possible that William Henry Bassett's father himself alternated between his two given names; he might have preferred *Benjamin* for legal documents or when he was older even though in his youth he went by *Carter*. I knew that was the case for President Thomas Woodrow Wilson -- he went by *Tommy* when he was a boy and *Woodrow* only after becoming an adult. No, the discrepancy between the two names was very easy to explain. What was hard to explain because Fanny Bassett had no Bassett uncles to father a male Bassett cousin was the possibility the Benjamin Bassett in her husband's 1793 will and the Carter Bassett in her uncle's 1780 will were not the same person.

Neither did it escape me that the 19th-century sketch of William Henry Bassett confirmed another particular in my theory -- that he and President Tyler during their youth had been neighbors and personal friends. It was true S. Bassett French did not say where in Charles City

County William Henry Bassett grew up, but that he delineated him and President Tyler as neighbors meant it probably wasn't Berkeley since Berkeley was almost 8 miles away. That's how I figured it anyway for a region in which I was finding many plantations close to 1 square mile in size. He may have been born at Berkeley in accordance with the family story, but he later lived somewhere closer to John Tyler's home near Charles City. And this it seemed was in high agreement with yet another particular in my theory – that he spent at least part of his growing-up years in a Harrison home close to Mapsico Creek.

Section 11: The Two Robert Harrisons

Less compelling in my view was the evidence I had indicating William Henry Bassett's paternal grandfather was the signer's brother Robert, and greatly complicating it was a wearisome and seemingly unsolvable disagreement at Ancestry.com over which one of two contemporaneous Robert Harrisons was his brother. Many parties to the disagreement believed the answer was the Robert Harrison that in 1760 paid the signer "three hundred and twenty-two pounds in current money of Virginia" for a 600-acre James River estate across from Berkeley called Bicars.⁴⁰ According to his own boosters, this Robert Harrison was married to a woman named Elizabeth Cureton, had five children, including two sons named Robert Harrison II and John "Duke" Harrison, and died in 1788, and the reason for the confusion was that the Harrison family many years before had split into two distinct branches with many of the same names passing down through both. One branch settled on the York River, the other on the James River. I was made to understand my Robert Harrison was a York River Harrison, a distant cousin with no immediate connection to the signer; he was, in other words, an impostor. The real Robert Harrison was their Robert Harrison, formally known as Robert Harrison I of Bicars, and thoroughly substantiating their claim was a detailed and consistent oral tradition carefully handed down through their families over many years.

Though their claim to the signer sounded very authoritative, I would stumble on two records that together would categorically disprove it. The first of the two was a long-running court case from the late 18th century called "Harrison against Harrison and Others" as set down in a three-volume collection of Virginia case law titled *Reports of Cases Argued and Adjudged in the Court of Appeals of Virginia*.⁴¹ I considered the court case sufficient proof all by itself because the names of all the parties to it fit absolutely perfectly into the orbit of the Berkeley Plantation Harrison family as understood through the lens of Benjamin Harrison IV's 1743 will and other dependable family records and because nowhere in it did Robert Harrison I of Bicars fit. For one thing, the Robert Harrison at the heart of the case is explicitly identified in the report as Robert Harrison of Charles City County. (Robert Harrison I of Bicars was not of Charles City County; Bicars was in Prince George County.) For another thing, though the exact date is not agreed on, it's abundantly clear both sides in the case do agree the Robert Harrison at the heart of it died many years before it was filed -- indeed a full generation before. (Robert Harrison I of Bicars died only a short time before.) And what is also made abundantly clear in the report are the names of the said Robert Harrison's sons; their names were Collier Harrison and Braxton Harrison -- not Robert Harrison II and John "Duke" Harrison. Did my Robert Harrison have two sons named Collier and Braxton? Yes, in point of fact he did, and, no, he did not live on the York River as claimed, after all. Instead, he, too, lived on the James, in Charles City County itself no less -- and this according to many dependable records, including "a relinquishment of dower" executed by his wife on April 6, 1769.⁴²

⁴⁰ The original Bicars deed of sale is in a manila folder in the Library of Virginia archives titled "Robert Harrison, Deed, 19 November 1760."

⁴¹ To learn more about the court case "Harrison against Harrison and Others," see *Reports of Cases Argued and Adjudged in the Court of Appeals of Virginia, Volume I*, compiled by Daniel Call, available online. (Here I would like to say a special thank you to whoever it was online that originally pointed to the case as proof that Robert Harrison I of Bicars was not the signer's brother.)

⁴² A copy of the relinquishment of dower can be found in the Robert Harrison gallery of the Orr Family Tree at Ancestry.com. And also in his gallery are various newspaper clippings and one military record also establishing his Charles City County residence.

Also helpful in proving the said Robert Harrison's identity was his wife's since it would be from her maiden name that their eldest son's given name would be derived. Who was she? According to my tree, she was one Elizabeth Collier, whose sister, Rebecca, was married to another important figure in the case, one John Minge, who was himself the father of still yet another figure in it, one David Minge. It's true the report does not identify the John Minge in the case as Robert Harrison's brother-in-law or the David Minge in it as Collier and Braxton Harrison's first cousin. But I knew who they were even without the identifiers, and what I also knew was that the two families grew still closer when John Minge's namesake grandson married the signer's youngest daughter, Sarah, on June 6, 1795.⁴³

As it turned out, there were quite a few names in the case illuminative of the said Robert Harrison's identity, and among the others were those of two Henry Harrisons and one Benjamin Harrison. One of the Henry Harrisons is explicitly identified in the report as the said Robert Harrison's brother and as "Henry Harrison deceased," meaning by the time the case had been filed he, too, had already died. The other is explicitly identified as his eldest son and as the filer of the case. Did the Robert Harrison that grew up at Berkeley Plantation as the son of Benjamin Harrison IV and Ann Carter have a brother named Henry that died before the case was filed? Yes, he most assuredly did have a brother named Henry that died before the case was filed; he died well before, on January 28, 1772. And who did he become? He became Henry Harrison of Hunting Quarter on the Nottoway River in Sussex County via the inheritance left him by their father in his 1743 will. And was the eldest son of this Henry Harrison of Hunting Quarter also named Henry? Yes, he was.

Regarding the one Benjamin Harrison in the case, it was true the report also fails to explicitly identify him. But I knew who he was as well. He was the said Robert Harrison's oldest brother, Benjamin Harrison V, signer of the Declaration of Independence and governor of Virginia. The first time I read the report I found it very difficult to comprehend, not least because of its want of identifiers, and it was only after re-reading it that I realized it contains implicit as well as explicit information, and among the implicit information I gleaned from it was that the said Benjamin Harrison was indeed Robert's brother, too, and the way I knew the report is implicitly saying as much is that he's introduced immediately after "Henry Harrison deceased" and with the same last name and with the same responsibility – as surety for a large debt the said Robert in the 1760s owed a man named John Syme.

John Syme was one of the few names in the case that did not fit into the orbit of the Berkeley Plantation Harrison family as I understood it. Who was he? I would later learn he was Colonel John Syme -- a major Hanover County merchant and second-tier leader in the American Revolution and half-brother of Patrick Henry. How Robert fell into debt to John Syme the report does not say, but what the report does make clear is the amount of the debt on October 29, 1770 – "637 pounds with interest from the 27th of January 1764." And what the report also makes clear is how a full generation later the recriminations over the dispensation of that debt were still tearing the Harrison family apart.

The second record I found probative of my position – and this one was the clincher – was a for-sale notice on Page 4 of the April 7, 1768, *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg: "To be sold altogether or in lots, on the 20th of May next, at the lower quarter of the Hunting Quarter tract, fourteen hundred acres of very good tobacco land lying on Nottoway River in Sussex County ... to discharge a debt due from my brother Robert to Col. John Syme of Hanover," signed "Henry Harrison." As soon as I read the for-sale notice, I realized it contains just enough additional information to settle the Robert Harrison question for good. What the for-sale notice makes explicitly clear – and the report on the court case does not -- is that the Robert Harrison that was in debt to John Syme in April 1768 was the brother of Henry Harrison of Hunting Quarter in Sussex County -- and there was only one Henry Harrison that owned a plantation called Hunting Quarter in Sussex County in April 1768. It was the Henry Harrison that grew up at Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, son of Benjamin Harrison IV and Ann Carter and brother of the signer Benjamin Harrison V.

⁴³ For the date of John Minge and Sarah Harrison's marriage, see the transcribed copy of certain birth, death, and marriage records from the Minge Family Bible in the John Minge and Sarah Harrison galleries of the Orr Family Tree at Ancestry.com.

Section 12: The Ancestry of William Henry Bassett's Mother

After fleshing out my theory on William Henry Bassett's father's ancestry, I turned my attention to his mother's. Who were her parents? Did she, too, come from a prominent political family? My instinct was no she did not come from a prominent political family; her name seemed hopelessly pedestrian. She was not a Washington or a Harrison or a Randolph or a Breckinridge or an Armistead or a Lee or a Carter or a Tyler or a Hill or a Byrd. Try as I might, I could not think of a single prominent Southerner named Davis -- despite my love of American history -- and then very suddenly I did. Ensnared firmly in the very highest reaches of Southern politics was this Davis. I was stunned. I was almost mortified. Was it possible my fourth great-grandfather Carter Bassett married into the extended family of Confederate President Jefferson Davis?

It did not seem likely to me, not even remotely likely. After all, Jefferson Davis was not from Charles City County, Virginia, nor anywhere nearby; he was, instead, from faraway Mississippi. But then I foggily remembered a half-forgotten government record in my family tree documenting the presence of a certain "William Bassett" in 1813 at a Mississippi River trading post called Bayou Sara in what was then Wilkinson County, Mississippi Territory.⁴⁴ It was my strong suspicion that this William Bassett was none other than Martha Davis and Carter Bassett's son, my seafaring, westward-moving, river-shipping third great-grandfather Captain William Henry Bassett of Charles City County, Virginia. I wanted to know where in Mississippi was Wilkinson County. I looked it up. I found it in the far southwest corner of the state on the Louisiana border. I wanted to know in what Mississippi county did the family of Jefferson Davis make its home. The answer I found was *Wilkinson County*. I felt myself growing more watchful, more engrossed. I wondered whether Jefferson Davis' residency in Wilkinson County overlapped with William Henry Bassett's. I learned that it did. According to *Wikipedia*, Jefferson Davis' family moved to Wilkinson County, Mississippi, exactly one year before, in 1812, when he was a young child. I brooded on the probability the overlap of their lives in Wilkinson County was just a geographical coincidence. I was amazed. Of all the counties in the state of Mississippi and of all the states in the nation, what an intriguing quirk of fate that they both should live at the same time in the same county of the same state!⁴⁵

What was also intriguing was that William Henry Bassett and Jefferson Davis both lived in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, as well, and that when William Henry Bassett lived in Avolleyes Parish, Louisiana, in 1850, 1860, and 1870 (and presumably all the years in between), he was practically just across the river from Wilkinson County, Mississippi. I realized in the event Martha Davis was related to Jefferson Davis, her son would not have been bereft of all family when he went west, as commonly believed; at least one branch of her family would have been there, too. I decided, no, in all likelihood William Henry Bassett's mother was not related to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, because, given the trauma of the Civil War, no connection of any kind to him could have been easily forgotten -- and in the set of old family papers in my possession I had found not a whiff of a Jefferson Davis/William Henry Bassett connection, however distant.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ According to *Wikipedia*, Bayou Sara "was at one time the largest antebellum Mississippi River port between New Orleans and Memphis," but it no longer exists, having been destroyed by floods and fires. It was located in the river bottoms below the bluff on which the town of St. Francisville now exists.

⁴⁵ Jefferson Davis would later make his primary residence farther up the Mississippi in Warren County on a plantation owned by his much older brother Joseph. And it was there, at Brierfield, while tending roses in his garden with his second wife, Varina Howell, that he learned of his election as president of the Confederacy. It's also interesting to note that Jefferson Davis and his first wife, Sarah Knox Taylor, daughter of President Zachary Taylor, also came down with yellow fever or malaria at the same time, and though Jefferson Davis would himself survive, Sarah Knox Taylor wouldn't. She died in their first year of marriage, on September 15, 1835. But that would not be the last time yellow fever or the like would take a very close relative from Jefferson Davis. Many years later, on October 16, 1878, his son Jefferson Davis Jr. would also die in a yellow fever epidemic, this one killing some 20,000 people along the Mississippi.

⁴⁶ It was a long time afterward that I first noticed to my amazement that two communities just north of the Bayou Sara area are named Weyanoke and Wakefield. I knew both names to be deeply associated with the Harrison family of the James River valley of Virginia. Had not the first Benjamin Harrison, the second Benjamin Harrison, and the third Benjamin Harrison all lived at Wakefield Plantation in Surry County, Virginia, on the south shore of the James? And had not Elizabeth Harrison and Sarah Harrison and their brothers Carter B. Harrison and William Henry Harrison and their first cousin Collier Harrison and his oldest son, Robert Carter Harrison, all owned property just 12 miles or so to the west, on

I narrowed my search for Martha Davis' parents to 18th-century Tidewater Virginia and there I found numerous Davises, including a Martha Davis in various Surry County tax lists from the 1780s and 1790s and a Martha and a William Davis in a 1767 New Kent County church record documenting the birth of their son John.⁴⁷ Of the two Martha Davises I found, it was the Surry County Martha Davis that captured my imagination the most, partly because Surry County was just across the James River from the lower east end of Charles City County and I knew it was rivers that bound many communities together back then.⁴⁸

I learned that the Surry County Martha Davis was a widow of a man named Thomas Davis and a longtime property owner in at least two Surry County districts, including the Cabin Point District.⁴⁹ I found the unincorporated community of Cabin Point on an electronic map. It appeared to be only 10 miles or so by water from Kittiewan Plantation and only 17 or so by water from Berkeley Plantation and only six or so from Kittiewan if you took a direct route over both land and water. I dimly remembered a provision in the signer's 1780 will involving property at Cabin Point. I re-read the will to refresh my memory. My memory was right: The signer did indeed own property at Cabin Point, a place called Mill Farm. It consisted of a tract of land, a mill, and a miller named Oscar.⁵⁰ And all three were left to his son Carter, and Elizabeth Bassett was to assist him in any manner she thought fit in building or buying a house there.

I now saw an unmistakable connection between Kittiewan Plantation in Charles City County and Mill Farm in Surry County owing to the fact that Carter B. Harrison in the 1790s owned both.⁵¹ I wondered whether Carter B. Harrison's wife, Mary Howell Allen, was from Surry County. I learned that she was. Who was she? From a local historian, I would learn she was the daughter of one of Surry County's wealthiest citizens, Colonel William Allen. And where in Surry County did the family of Colonel William Allen make its home? I asked. In the Claremont area, near Cabin Point, was the historian's answer. In a thick drawl the local historian explained to me that Cabin Point, even though it was inland, was Surry County's second most important commercial port; tobacco traders plying the James could easily reach it by sailing up the Upper Chippokes Creek.

Was William Henry Bassett's mother the namesake daughter of the Martha Davis I had found in the Surry County tax lists? The more I learned, the more it seemed to me there was a good chance she was, mostly owing to the concentration of Harrison, Allen, and Davis family properties in the Claremont/Cabin Point area. Perhaps the family of Colonel William Allen and the family of the Martha Davis I found in the Surry County tax lists were close; the location of their properties would make it readily possible for them to be close. It seemed to me that Carter B. Harrison and Mary Howell Allen together might have made an excellent bridge between a young Carter Bassett and a young Martha Davis living on opposite sides of the James River, and adding still more credence to the possibility William Henry Bassett's mother was the daughter of the Martha Davis I found in the Surry County tax lists was something else I had learned – that the Harrison family over multiple generations had owned multiple properties in Surry County, including most notably a James River plantation dating all the way back to the 1640s called

the Weyanoke Peninsula? The Weyanoke Peninsula was where I suspected William Henry Bassett himself lived for a prolonged period, and possibly also his father and mother. It was my understanding the Weyanoke Indians habitually migrated back and forth between Virginia and North Carolina, not back and forth between Virginia and Mississippi. Given how unique they were, especially in combination with each other, it seemed to me it was either William Henry Bassett himself that was responsible for the names or he wasn't the only Harrison family descendant in the early 19th century to make it all the way to Bayou Sara.

⁴⁷ For the church record documenting the birth of a son named John to parents Martha and William Davis of New Kent County on December 13, 1767, see Page 153 of *The Parish Register of St. Peter's New Kent County, Virginia, 1680-1787*, available online. And with respect to the possibility William Henry Bassett's mother hailed from New Kent County, it's also interesting to note that the name of the big pond very close to where the Bassett family lived at Eltham Plantation is none other than *Davis Pond*.

⁴⁸ In the 18th century it was rivers and not roads that were Virginia's main arteries of commercial traffic over long distances.

⁴⁹ The Martha Davis in the 18th-century Surry County tax list also owned property in Surry County's District 4, also known as the William Browne District. Also, that she was listed as a property owner in 1782 meant she was probably a property owner in the years before as well since 1782 was the first year of the tax list.

⁵⁰ It was from a for-sale notice on Page 4 of the October 25, 1808, *Petersburg Intelligencer* that I learned the Cabin Point property was called Mill Farm.

⁵¹ Carter Bassett Harrison inherited the Cabin Point property from his father, the signer, who died on April 24, 1791. And the records I have point to his taking ownership of Kittiewan less than a year before, in the second half of 1790.

Wakefield, owned first by the first Benjamin Harrison, then by the second Benjamin Harrison, then by the third.⁵²

I wanted to know whether Carter B. Harrison ever actually lived at Kittiewan or Mill Farm. Try as I might, I found no evidence that he lived at Kittiewan, only that he owned it. And though neither did I find evidence he lived at Mill Farm, I did find evidence he lived in Surry County; the formal legal agreement he entered into for taking ownership of Kittiewan said he did.⁵³ I also knew he must have since he served for a time as Surry County justice of the peace and from 1784 to 1786 represented Surry County in the Virginia House of Delegates.⁵⁴ But it appeared he spent most of the 1790s in neither Surry nor Charles City County but in the nation's temporary capital of Philadelphia as the elected representative from Virginia's 10th Congressional District. Maybe he enlisted his presumed double first cousin and surrogate little brother Carter Bassett to look after Kittiewan and Mill Farm in his absence. I knew that Carter B. Harrison's biological little brother wasn't available to look after the two properties in the 1790s; in the year of their father's death, in 1791, the future president was still in school, in Philadelphia, and then from there, later that very year, into the army he went, never to return to Charles City County except to visit. I remembered reading that Jefferson Davis' oldest brother, Joseph, who was some 23 years his senior, set him up in business by semi-giving him one of his plantations near the Mississippi River. He did not deed the property over to him; but he did let him work it and live on it as if he owned it. Maybe Carter B. Harrison did something similarly supportive of his presumed surrogate little brother to help him meet his need for a home of his own. I knew if it had been me – if I had been the one severed from my properties for prolonged periods while serving in the United States Congress -- I might very well have done the same. I would be helping him and he would be helping me and the more we helped each other, the better off we both would be.

It was not hard for me to imagine my orphaned fourth great-grandfather Carter Bassett living a quiet and self-effacing life looking after someone else's property. Was I not in my own life doing the very same, even though I was not an orphan? Nor was it hard for me to imagine the numerous happy trips he might have taken down the James in the vigor of his youth to see his future wife. I now suspected that of my direct ancestors it wasn't just my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett that lived at Kittiewan; so, too, may have my fourth great-grandfather Carter Bassett.⁵⁵

Section 13: The 1801 Yellow Fever Epidemic and a Mysterious Miss Bassett

⁵² Wakefield was located on the south shore of the James River almost directly across from what would later be Charles City County's eastern boundary at the Chickahominy River.

⁵³ In the formal legal agreement, known as an Indenture, Carter Bassett Harrison is described as "Carter Bassett Harrison of the County of Surry."

⁵⁴ It's interesting to note that when the signer Benjamin Harrison V was still governor in 1784 he had both a son (Carter Bassett Harrison) and a brother (Carter Henry Harrison) in the state legislature.

⁵⁵ Among the other Davises I found in 18th-century Tidewater Virginia was a certain William Davis identified as a Charles City resident in the July 25, 1766, and the March 31, 1768, editions of the *Virginia Gazette* (on Page 4 and 3, respectively). I found him to be an intriguing option mostly because of his proximity to Kittiewan; his home likely would have been less than 2 miles away. And what was also intriguing about him was that the 1768 newspaper notice was for a young runaway slave described as "the property of Col. William Allen," almost certainly the Colonel William Allen I had found in Surry County, father of Carter B. Harrison's future wife, Mary Howell Allen. And very likely, too, was it that this William Davis was the same William Davis of Charles City County that I found listed as a chaplain in the Virginia Regiment on October 1, 1760, and as a witness in the 1770 will of William Byrd of Westover Plantation along with a "William Rickman," almost certainly Elizabeth Harrison's future doctor husband. Two other very fascinating Davises I found were a Charles City County native named Thomas Davis that served as rector at Christ Church in Alexandria from 1792 to 1806 and presided over some of the most important events at Mount Vernon, including the wedding of George Washington's nephew Lawrence Lewis and Martha Washington's granddaughter Nelly Parke Custis and George Washington's funeral, and a prominent Williamsburg printer during the American Revolution named Augustine Davis, born in 1752 or 1753 in Yorktown. He was for many years the printer of the *Virginia Gazette*, and when the state government moved from Williamsburg to Richmond during the Revolution, so, too, did he and his paper. One fact about him that snagged my attention was that his wife's name was also Martha. She was Martha Davenport, and very possibly the niece of the preceding printer of *The Virginia Gazette*, Alexander Purdie. Another fact that snagged my attention was that Augustine Davis and his wife, Martha, apparently had four sons and three daughters, but of the three daughters I learned only one of their names -- Maria.

It was in early July 2017 that I stumbled on a tantalizing posting at Findagrave.com by an unknown Bassett/Harrison cousin named Mike Carnes about a “lost cemetery” at North Bend Plantation, the old Minge property next door to Kittiewan. Though I was aware of a family cemetery at Kittiewan, I did not know about a cemetery at North Bend, much less a lost one. What I did know was that it was President William Henry Harrison’s sister Sarah and her husband, John Minge, and their children that lived at North Bend. In response to his posting I informed Mike Carnes of the project I was working on, the lost ancestry of my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett. I told him the gist of the family story, briefed him on the most recent developments, explained which graves I was looking for, and asked his advice on where to look. Immediately Mike Carnes wrote back how interesting that William Henry Bassett’s father, Benjamin Carter Bassett, died in 1801, was I aware that Sarah Harrison in August 1801 named her fourth son Benjamin Carter? He also said that if Benjamin Carter Bassett and his sister, Ann, did indeed live at Berkeley he imagined they would have been close to Sarah Harrison, and I might be interested to know that in addition to a lost cemetery at North Bend there were unknown burials at Kittiewan.

I was very interested to know about unknown burials at Kittiewan. I was also very interested to know something else I soon learned from Mike Carnes – that there really was a yellow-fever epidemic in Virginia in 1801. It was almost immediately after our initial correspondence that Mike Carnes very generously sent me electronic copies of two published records confirming the actuality of a yellow-fever epidemic in August, September, and October 1801 at the mouth of the James River, at Norfolk.⁵⁶ I stared at a 60- or 70-mile stretch of the James between Norfolk and Kittiewan on an electronic map. I imagined the infected mosquitoes multiplying uncontrollably in the heat of late summer, the disease spreading ever more inland across vast swaths of stagnant marshland. In my mind’s eye I saw images of the sick and the dying on both sides of the river and of overworked doctors and loved ones nursing the sick and the dying and of the public’s generalized distress in not knowing how the disease was spread but knowing it could kill in just a matter of days.

That was just one of two material gifts Mike Carnes gave me crucial to my investigation. The other was a published typed transcription of a census-like document showing a “Miss Bassett, age 18,” living in the household of Benjamin Harrison V and Elizabeth Bassett during his first year as governor in Richmond. I stared at the document in disbelief because I knew how hard such records were to come by, especially in the former Confederate capital, which had been very heavily bombarded during the Civil War. It appeared to be a partial list of inhabitants and taxable property in Richmond’s Wardship 4 in 1782 as published in an appendix to a book on the first census in America.⁵⁷ Was I actually looking at a historical record documenting the presence of the signer’s niece Ann Bassett in his Richmond household in 1782? It appeared that I was. What other Miss Bassett could it have been? There was only one other possibility – Fanny Bassett, daughter of Elizabeth Bassett’s brother Burwell, the only other known niece to live beyond the 1770s with the surname *Bassett*. And of the two possibilities I thought Ann the most likely. One reason was that Fanny in 1782 was only 14, not 18.⁵⁸ Another reason was that of all his many nieces it was only Ann Bassett that had been included in the signer’s will from two years before. And there was yet still one more reason: that Martha Washington immediately after the death of her sister Anna Maria on December 17, 1777, had entreated her grieving brother-in-law to let Fanny come live with her at Mount Vernon, but it wasn’t until early 1785 when Fanny was 17 that Martha finally got her wish, and why would Burwell Bassett three years earlier let his daughter live

⁵⁶ On my own I would later find many other published reports confirming the actuality of the 1801 yellow-fever epidemic. I found one newspaper notice indicating the outbreak in Norfolk did indeed begin before August 20, 1801, and possibly well before. It ran on Page 3 of the August 10, 1801, edition of the *Hartford Courant* in Hartford, Connecticut: “*The Republican*, a Petersburg paper, says, private accounts from Norfolk state, that from ten to fifteen persons die there daily of the Yellow Fever. We hope this is not true.” Exactly when the *Petersburg Republican* story ran I did not know, but it would have been at least four or five days earlier, given how slow long-distance communication was before the invention of the telegraph. And, of course, still more time would have elapsed between the first round of deaths and the publication of the report in the Petersburg paper.

⁵⁷ The first national census would not be taken until 1790. Each of the Richmond population lists of the early 1780s was a purely local construct.

⁵⁸ Fanny Bassett was born December 19, 1767. See the Bassett Family Bible at the Swem Library at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA.

in the Richmond home of the governor and first lady of Virginia but not in the Potomac River home of the future president and first lady of the United States? Was not Martha Washington every bit as closely related to Fanny Bassett as was Elizabeth Bassett?

The first person listed as living in the Richmond household of the Harrison family in 1782 was “Benjamin Harrison, age 54; occupation, governor; time of residence, 1 year.” The second person was Sady Harrison, spelled S-a-d-y, age 52; time of residence, 1 year. (This was doubtless the governor’s wife, Elizabeth Bassett, who would turn 52 on December 13.) The third person was a Miss Bassett, age 18; time of residence, 1 year. The fourth person was another Sattley Harrison, age 13, this one spelled S-a-t-t-e-y. (Doubtless she was Governor Harrison and Elizabeth Bassett’s youngest daughter, Sarah Harrison, born in 1769.) The fourth and last family member listed was Governor Harrison and Elizabeth Bassett’s oldest son, Benjamin Harrison Jr., “age 30; occupation, merchant; time of residence, 4 months.” Why Elizabeth Bassett and Sarah Harrison’s given names were listed, respectively, as *Sady*, S-a-d-y, and *Sattley*, S-a-t-t-e-y, I had no idea. Though it was true that *Sadie*, S-a-d-i-e, was a nickname for the name *Sarah*, I had never seen it used for Sarah Harrison, by any variant spelling. The only nickname I had seen used for her was *Sally*.⁵⁹ But maybe she went by *Sadie* as well and I just didn’t know. But that could not explain the apparent mix-up in her mother’s name, and why would the two names sound the same but be spelled differently, besides? I was mystified. Had the names been botched in the initial report or in transcription? I remembered that Benjamin Harrison Bassett’s name in the published account of his Louisiana baptismal record had been botched; instead of Benjamin Harrison Bassett he was erroneously listed as Benjamin *Hudson* Bassett.⁶⁰ Another question that puzzled me was why Miss Bassett was the only person listed without a first name. Also, why was the rest of the Harrison tribe not included, particularly young William Henry Harrison, the future president, who would have been only 8? And, most important of all, if Miss Bassett was indeed Ann Bassett, why was she included and not her brother, Carter?

Section 14: A Second Trip to Virginia

So crucial did I consider the published transcription of the 1782 Richmond population list that it inspired me to make a second trip to Virginia. My first had been with my wife, Susannah, in March 2013 when my investigation of the Muddle was still in its infancy. On my second I would travel alone, without Susannah, so that I might do as much additional research as possible without distraction. The first thing I learned after my arrival at Richmond International Airport was how hopelessly ineffective I was without Susannah. It had not crossed my mind that the Library of Virginia in downtown Richmond and the Swem Library at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg might have changed their hours of operation without saying so on their websites. I had to learn it the hard way – by racing from Richmond to Williamsburg in hazardously congested traffic, only to learn too late that I should have stayed in Richmond.

It was my bad luck to arrive at multiple destinations when they were closed. When I arrived at Kittiewan Plantation, the main historic site I wanted to see, it was utterly desolate, as if occupied by only ghosts. That the sign at the entrance did not tell me to stay out made me think I was welcome to go in. Slowly I drove up a long unpaved road flanked by fields stuffed to the edges with towering stalks of yellowing corn. I turned sharply to the left, then sharply back to the right, and then found myself prowling the edge of a small jungle. I stopped in front of another sign, this one directing me up an overgrown two-rut path to the plantation cemetery. I followed the path until it ended at a low brick wall built in the shape of a square large enough to hold a small house. Vaguely I thought back to the final provision in Elizabeth Harrison’s 1790 will – that it was her desire “to be buried by Mr. Rickman and that the place be enclosed with a brick wall.”

I turned my rental car off and from the driver’s seat scanned the cemetery for grave markers. Inside the cemetery I saw not a one; all I saw from one wall to another was a thick

⁵⁹ One historical record that confirms Sarah Harrison’s nickname was Sally is her brother Benjamin’s November 15, 1787, will, wherein he directs his “brothers Carter and William to provide for our sister Sally if she is not well married.” See Benjamin Harrison Jr.’s will in the Benjamin Harrison Jr. gallery of the Orr Family Tree at Ancestry.com.

⁶⁰ The mistake in the published transcription of Benjamin Harrison Bassett’s baptismal record was particularly easy to make since the man identified in it as his “sponsor” was a Benjamin Hudson. (*Sponsor* was another word for godfather.)

blanket of rowdy plant life, some it so unrestrained it was shooting straight up out of the tops of the walls themselves. Outside the cemetery I saw only two, and both of them were for Dr. Rickman alone. One was taller and thicker and much more elaborate than the other; it also looked much newer. "FORTITUDO IN ADVERSITATE," read the epitaph on it. What a very fine epitaph to any life, I would later think. *Fortitude in adversity*.

I stepped out of the car and up to the edge of the wall. I felt the loneliness of the cemetery. Were the remains of my fourth great-grandparents Carter Bassett and Martha Davis in the ground somewhere around me? I looked back in the direction of Mapsico Creek. Maybe they were buried on an embankment overlooking the creek, and that's why their son named his schooner after the creek. I wanted to obliterate the overgrowth concealing the graves in the cemetery. I wanted to see dark moss-splotched headstones slowly sinking at a drunken tilt into the Earth, all of them engraved with names and dates slowly fading with time. But no sooner did I emerge from my car, it seemed, than I heard the menacing buzz of an aggressive mosquito and then that of a growing swarm. I thought of the mosquito-born disease that killed my fourth great-grandparents. I swatted futilely at the mosquitoes as I threw myself back into my car. (I was not the picture of fortitude in adversity.) It was August, the same time of year the 1801 yellow-fever epidemic first appeared in Norfolk. It now seemed viscerally clear to me how quickly the mosquitoes carrying the disease might have multiplied in the stagnant river marshes along the James.

Inwardly I debated whether I should dig through the foliage in search of my fourth great-grandparents' graves despite the mosquitoes. It was a very one-sided debate, and one reason was I had not a single tool for obliterating the foliage and what I needed was nothing less than a heavy-duty brush mower, if not a bulldozer. Nor did I have a can of mosquito spray, and how was I to know yellow fever no longer was endemic to the lower James? I didn't want to die of yellow fever, despite the convenience of my location. Nor did I want to get snake-bit or come down with a severe case of poison ivy or chiggers or be jailed on a charge of tampering with a grave. It seemed to me if I got back out of the car I'd be stung by so many mosquitoes I might die on the spot just from sheer loss of blood. Besides, was it not true I could come back another day and the cemetery would likely be just the same with the same people still in it?

My rationalization complete, I restarted the car and wheeled it around without nicking a tree or a wall, and almost three-quarters of a mile later I found myself stopping right in front of the manor house at the very end of the unpaved road. I put the car in park, turned off the ignition, and stared at the house in amazement. It was a modest white frame house with three brick chimneys and numerous dormer windows peering like bug eyes out of a steeply canted roof; it floated just above the ground. Around it was nothing but yard -- no driveway, no walkway, paved or unpaved. It stood about 50 yards from the road, and almost directly across from it, like a gunslinger in a tense, empty street, was another building -- the headquarters of the Virginia Archeological Society, which was also closed for the day.

I climbed out of my car and stood for a long time on the edge of the yard just staring at the house, mostly envisioning the past. Now inexplicably the mosquitoes did not vex me. I envisioned from one end of the peninsula to the other an entire constellation of plantations -- each one brought to life by the labor of slaves and anchored by a similar house.⁶¹ I envisioned a web of two-rut roads; and where the main roads met, a flourmill and a country store and a tidy Episcopalian church made of brick; and in the fields beyond the houses, great stands of tobacco and wheat; and grazing in lush pastures, a multitude of cows and horses and mules and goats and sheep and other farm animals; and beyond the trees walling off the James, an expansive landing for trading scows and ferry boats.⁶² I envisioned a young William Henry Bassett on a hot

⁶¹ I would learn that Elizabeth Harrison herself in 1785 owned 23 slaves, 11 of them 16 years of age or older and 12 of them under age 16. Source: Library of Virginia, Miscellaneous Microfilm Reel 1263: "Lists of Inhabitants Living in 39 Counties and One City in 1782, 1783, 1784 and 1785."

⁶² I would later learn that one of the other families that made their home on the Weyanoke Peninsula during William Henry Bassett's childhood was that of Fielding Lewis Jr., cousin of the great explorer of the American West, Meriwether Lewis, and nephew and namesake of another George Washington brother-in-law, his sister Betty's husband. I had always wondered why William Henry Bassett named his youngest son Lewis. It had been my vague suspicion that his name had come from the Lewis family that George Washington's sister Betty married into, but I had no idea how. Now I did have an idea how.

summer day crossing the side yard in front of me with John Tyler and one or two of the Minge boys to swim in a refreshing pool of water just out of eyeshot at the confluence of Mapsico Creek and Kittiewan Creek just north of the James.⁶³

If it wasn't with his presumed half uncle Collier Harrison at Kittiewan where William Henry Bassett lived after the death of his parents, I felt sure, it had to be somewhere very close to it. Might he instead have lived next door with his father's presumed double first cousin and surrogate sister Sarah Harrison and her husband, John Minge, and their children at North Bend? According to her obituary in the *Virginia Patriot* in Richmond, Sarah Harrison died unexpectedly on February 27, 1812, when William Henry Bassett would have been 15, and "a purer spirit never left the earth." She was so thoroughly without guile, according to the obituary, "even her failings leaned to virtue's side." Was it *her* death that upset the tranquility of William Henry Bassett's childhood, leading to his abrupt departure from home? Another possibility was that he lived with his paternal aunt, Ann Bassett, in yet another Harrison/Bassett family satellite home in the immediate vicinity. But I had no firm evidence she even survived his parents, and the only clue I had suggesting she did was that he gave the name *Ann* to not just one but to both of his daughters.

When the past dissolved back into the present, I looked back in the direction where I understood the manor house at North Bend to be. Though it was my understanding from a map I had seen that it was only some 600 yards away by the crow flies, I couldn't see it for a patch of trees. I had read somewhere that North Bend, unlike Kittiewan, was still a living home, a working bed and breakfast, and no less than one of Sarah Harrison's direct descendants owned it. I realized how late it was and if I wanted to see her home too it was time for me to leave. Maybe my luck would change at North Bend. On my way over I tried to think what questions I should ask the Harrison descendant owner. Did he have any old family letters or diaries in which my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett or my fourth great-grandfather Carter Bassett or his sister, Ann, might be mentioned? Did he know where I might find a lost cemetery on his property? Would he mind if I came back later to dig up a few of the graves?

My luck did not change at North Bend.

On arriving, I saw no car in a garage, no dog in a fenced yard, no cat in a window, no Sarah Harrison descendant sitting on a porch, conveniently roaming through old family papers. Hers was a sprawling two-story white frame house with matching jungle-green window shutters; there was a fresh wholesome quality about it, despite its age. As I approached the steep front steps, I noticed at the far end of a sprawling side yard a dark trail meandering through a patch of woods in what appeared to be the direction of the cemetery at Kittiewan. It seemed to me based on my circumnavigation of the two properties the cemetery was actually closer to the manor house at North Bend than it was the manor house at Kittiewan, and on an electronic satellite map I would later confirm it was. I rang a bell, waited, rang it again, waited some more, squinted through a set of gossamer curtains at the interior of the house, absently stared at the mouth of the trail again, and then, finally conceding no one was home, dispiritedly descended the steps, climbed back into my car, and blundered my way back to the John Tyler Memorial Highway, feeling very disappointed.

I knew it wasn't Kittiewan or North Bend I was disappointed in. What I was disappointed in was myself -- that I had been as wastefully extravagant of time as General McClellan during his time on the Virginia Peninsula. I felt it was all because of my haste that I had proven so ineffective at making the most of my first day. Almost frantically had I raced up and down the Virginia Peninsula in search of I didn't know what. Did I think floating in the James I would find a message in a bottle from my fourth great-grandfather telling me who his parents were and where they were buried and what happened to his sister and how relieved he was that someone in the distant future had at long last resurrected his memory? Again and again on my way back to Richmond I reproached myself for so heavily relying on random luck on my first day. I knew how foolish it was to rely on random luck. In this world you must make your own luck.

⁶³ For unknown reasons, Google Maps does not accurately show the location of the confluence of Mapsico Creek and Kittiewan Creek. The real confluence of the two creeks is some 250 yards north of the James River and some 500 yards southeast of the Kittiewan Plantation manor house, as evidenced by several original records in Patrick O'Neill's article on the history of the plantation, including much earlier maps and a very early topographical reference to the area by the Virginia Company, the London-based establishment overseeing the settlement of Virginia.

It was five days later that finally my luck did change in an appreciable way. What happened was that I found not just the original 1782 Richmond population list but also the original 1783 Richmond population list. I found them in the Library of Virginia in Richmond. I very nearly missed finding them, and would not have found them had not a very kind and astute librarian's assistant insisted I check every frame on a certain reel of microfilm thought to possibly contain them. It was Microfilm Reel 99, and since it was not indexed, I had no idea where on the reel the lists might be, and for the longest time I wasn't finding anything remotely like them. After I reached the end of the reel, I dejectedly returned it to the librarian's assistant, telling her I found nothing of consequence on it. But instead of automatically parking the reel on a wooden cart to be returned to a metal filing cabinet sometime later, as almost anyone else would do, this particular librarian's assistant thoughtfully asked me did I check *every* frame. "Well, no, not every frame," I replied. "Once I realized there was nothing on it, I went through the rest of it pretty fast." She gave me a quizzical look as if what I had said made no sense at all, and I soon found myself back at the microfilm reader, slightly chagrined, making my way through the fat reel all over again, this time much more slowly, much more meticulously, checking every individual frame, as directed.

I felt my breath catch when the 1782 list finally did appear before my eyes. There it was right in front of me – an exact microfilm copy of the original 1782 Richmond population list. I found the entry for the Harrison household and immediately realized Elizabeth Bassett and Sarah Harrison's names had indeed been botched in transcription. In the one case an uppercase "L" had been misconstrued as an uppercase "S," and in the other case, two lowercase "l's" as two lowercase "t's," so that instead of "Sady Harrison," spelled S-a-d-y, Elizabeth Bassett's name in the published transcription should have read "*Lady* Harrison," spelled L-a-d-y, while her daughter's name should have read "*Salley* Harrison," spelled S-a-l-l-e-y, instead of "Sattley Harrison," spelled S-a-t-t-e-y. What was the same in the handwritten original was Miss Bassett's name. I had been hoping in the handwritten original I would find her given name too. I didn't. Nor did I find her brother's name. But, then, nor did I find the names of Governor Harrison and Elizabeth Bassett's three oldest daughters and two youngest sons – including that of the future president.

I completely stopped breathing when I happened on the 1783 Richmond population list.⁶⁴ Again I found the entry for the Harrison household in Wardship 4, and suddenly staring straight back at me was the name "Anne Bassett." Not "*Miss* Bassett," but "*Anne* Bassett." This was exactly what I had traveled all the way to Virginia to find – rock-solid confirmation that the "Miss Bassett" in the 1782 list was indeed Ann and not Fanny Bassett. According to the document, it was her second year in the same residence with "His Excellency Benj. Harrison, governor, and Lady Harrison," and she was still 18, but probably only just. Also, instead of being in the third position directly below the governor and Elizabeth Bassett, as was the case in the 1782 list, in the 1783 list she was in the fourth position, just below Sarah Harrison, who again was listed as "Salley," but now instead of 13 she was 14. Another difference was the inclusion of the future president, William Henry Harrison, listed simply as "William Harrison" in accord with how he, too, was commonly known, and though no age was given for him, the document did show that it was his second year in the residence as well, which, if true, meant *he* had been inadvertently omitted from the '82 list. I found his name just below Ann's, and immediately below the future president was his older brother Benjamin Harrison, now listed as 31 instead of 30, and immediately below him was a mysterious John Harrison, age 23, who was the newest addition to the household, having arrived only three months before. Who was John Harrison? I would later surmise he was another orphaned nephew, the son of the signer's brother Nathaniel, who had only just died that previous Christmas Eve.

Though on neither list did I find Ann's brother, Carter, I was thrilled. I was thrilled because the two lists together absolutely confirmed that my fourth great-grandfather's sister, Ann, had indeed been incorporated into Governor Harrison and Elizabeth Bassett's nuclear family by clearly showing she was living with them at their Richmond residence during his first two years in office. Also, that her name was smack-dab right between the future president and his sister Sarah's seemed strikingly emblematic of how close to them I had imagined her to be. Before

⁶⁴ Unfortunately I did not find the 1784 and 1785 partial Richmond population lists that reportedly also had been compiled.

learning of the 1782 and 1783 Richmond population lists, I knew of only one document recording Ann Bassett's existence in the world – Governor Harrison's 1780 will -- and, relatively speaking, only very recently had I learned of it. She had very nearly been completely lost to time. But we now had two more records confirming her existence, and it was my own feeling that whatever confirmed her place in the Harrison family went a long way to confirm her brother's.

Section 15: **Back in Texas**

The first thing I did after returning home was transcribe into type for easier reading the most important handwritten documents I found in Virginia. A few of them were very hard to read. When I encountered words I could not decipher, I would enlist the help of my enterprising fourth cousin Carol Williams via email and invariably she would magically decipher them for me. Most of what I brought home I found in the Surry County Circuit Court's pleasant and tidy records room, the book-crammed office of the Charles City County Historical Society, the Swem Library at the College of William & Mary, and the magnificent Library of Virginia in Richmond, and from Charles City County historian Judy Ledbetter I would learn of the existence of two digitized newspaper repositories -- Newspapers.com and Genealogybank.com -- that would add still many more pieces to the puzzle.

It was my bad luck that in not one of the many wills I brought home did I find my fourth great-grandfather Carter Bassett or his sister, Ann.⁶⁵ They were absent even from their Aunt Stith's will even though the signer in his will had expressly directed her to leave them their choice of the slave children he loaned her.⁶⁶ They were absent even from the will of the signer's older sister, their presumed aunt Elizabeth Harrison Randolph, even though she had no children of her own and left her property to no one but various nieces and nephews. They were absent from the will of the signer's oldest daughter, Elizabeth Harrison Rickman Edmondson, their presumed double first cousin and surrogate sister, even though she, too, had no descendants. And absent from Collier Harrison's will a generation later was my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett even though he was his presumed nephew and also without parents of his own. When Susannah noticed my mystification over Ann and Carter Bassett's exclusion from certain wills, including most especially their Aunt Stith's, she advised me not to make too much out of it -- how many wills was I in? I felt Susannah was right: Doubtless I was not in many wills either. And adding still more credence to her point was my knowledge that the signer's sister Elizabeth inexplicably omitted from her will not just Ann and Carter Bassett but also a number of other nieces and nephews, including her nephew Robert Carter Harrison, son of her brother Carter Henry.

Numerous records that I had not had time to examine at the Library of Virginia I mined through Inter-Library Loan at the Weatherford Public Library some 10 miles from my home. The Library of Virginia would send up to 10 reels of microfilm at a time, five on my library card and five

⁶⁵ Among the wills I found while in Virginia were those of Ann and Carter Bassett's aunt Joanna Bassett Stith (Aunt Stith); their presumed half brother Collier Harrison, oldest son of the signer's brother Robert and owner of Kittiewan Plantation from 1801 to 1809; their presumed aunt Elizabeth Harrison, the signer's older sister, wife of Peyton Randolph; their presumed double first cousins Elizabeth Harrison, the signer's oldest daughter and matriarch of Kittiewan Plantation from around 1776 to 1790, and Ann "Nancy" Harrison, the signer's second daughter; and their presumed double first cousin Benjamin Harrison Jr., the signer's oldest son. Among the must-have wills I did not find were those of their presumed mother, Priscilla Bassett of James City County; their presumed father, Robert Harrison of Charles City County; their presumed maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Churchill of James City County; their aunts Elizabeth and Judith Bassett; their uncle Burwell Bassett of New Kent County; their presumed double first cousin Carter B. Harrison, the signer's second son and owner of Kittiewan Plantation from 1790 to 1801; their presumed double first cousin Sarah "Sally" Harrison, matriarch of North Bend Plantation next door to Kittiewan; and their own. And neither did I find the will of Carter Bassett's wife, Martha Davis, or those of any of her possible relations or those of any of the signer's other siblings. (From the court case "Harrison against Harrison and Others" I learned I would never find Robert Harrison's will because he died intestate, without a will; and from a very good online article on their presumed grandmother Elizabeth Churchill by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Project I learned neither would I ever find her will, as it was among the many James City County records destroyed during the Civil War.)

⁶⁶ It's possible Joanna Bassett Stith left the slave children to Ann and Carter Bassett before she signed her will on October 29, 1785, perhaps when they came of age. It's also possible the slave children themselves never came of age, but died prematurely. It's also possible Aunt Stith simply ignored her brother-in-law's directive, perhaps because she was strapped with her own financial burdens being a widow responsible for three children, including a blind daughter.

on Susannah's. Some of the reels had indexes, making my job fast and easy. Others didn't, and when they didn't, I again became as directionless as a boat with no rudder. On one reel I found a handwritten list showing Burwell Bassett owned 133 slaves in New Kent County in 1782 and a handwritten list showing his brother-in-law the signer Benjamin Harrison V owned 97 slaves in Charles City County in 1785.⁶⁷ On another reel I found the handwritten will of Fanny Bassett's husband, George Augustine Washington. I had been hoping to find it because I wanted to make sure my fourth great-grandfather's middle name had not been inadvertently omitted from the published typed transcription. What I found was, yes, there were indeed many differences between the handwritten will and the published transcription, but the omission of his middle name was not one of them.

Dramatically did my pace pick up when I finally mined the two digitized newspaper repositories recommended by Charles City County historian Judy Ledbetter. I would type a name into a search bar and up on my computer screen would instantly appear a smorgasbord of newspaper clippings from different papers containing the name. As impressive as it was, I knew the information was incomplete in two ways: One, it came from only one institution responsible for recording the events of any given time or place – the newspaper industry. And, two, it did not come from all newspapers, but only some, and the reason was only some had been digitized. But so lightning-fast was it that it was like magic. The only slow part was that I had to spell almost every name in multiple ways if I wanted my search to be as thorough as possible. The name *William*, for example, might be written out the regular way – W-i-l-l-i-a-m – or abbreviated Wm or just W or misspelled or shortened into a diminutive like *Bill* or *Billy* or *Will* or *Willy*. And especially troublesome in some instances were “s’s” since in 18th-century copy they often appeared as “f’s,” but not always. For the name *Bassett*, for example, in some cases it was both “s’s” that had to be changed to “f’s,” and in other cases just the first or neither. My main trouble was remembering if I spelled each name every which way.

Among the many illuminating records I found through Newspapers.com and Genealogybank.com were the six obituary notices that would prove so instrumental in isolating Priscilla from Judith Bassett as Ann and Carter Bassett's presumed mother. And from one of her obituary notices I would learn Priscilla died not at her home in Williamsburg -- or in Y, Somme, Picardie, France, as much of the Ancestry.com world erroneously believed -- but at the home of a man named William Daingerfield near Fredericksburg.⁶⁸ I wanted to know who William Daingerfield was; his name I had never before seen or heard. Was he another secret lover related to her by marriage? I entered his name in the search bar and up on my screen appeared the fourth installment of a fascinating four-part series in the *Baltimore Sun* in the summer of 1907 on the history of the New Kent County, Virginia, Bassett family from which she had descended. I read the article. Among many other things, I learned William Daingerfield was Priscilla Bassett's first cousin, the only son of her father's sister Mary and her husband, New Kent County resident Edwin Daingerfield. In an *Annapolis Gazette* article I learned still more – that he was a colonel in the American Revolution and that his regiment was commended for great bravery against Lord Dunmore's forces at Williamsburg shortly before receiving word of the Declaration of Independence.⁶⁹ But very disconcerting was something I later learned about him from a different source, the Henley Marriage/Obituary Online Index at the Library of Virginia – that he died by his own hand in the woods near his home on January 15, 1783.

It was in the *Virginia Gazette* that I learned it wasn't just Priscilla Bassett and her twice widowed mother that lived in Williamsburg when Ann and Carter Bassett were small children. Also living there was Priscilla's sister Judith before her December 1773 marriage to Peter

⁶⁷ For the number of slaves owned by Burwell Bassett and the signer Benjamin Harrison V, see Miscellaneous Microfilm Reel 1263 at the Library of Virginia: “Lists of Inhabitants living in 39 counties and one city in 1782, 1783, 1784, 1785.”

⁶⁸ For the location of Priscilla Bassett's death, see Page 3 of the March 24, 1775, edition of Rind's *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg. Among the many other things I found at the two digitized newspaper repositories was a notice in the *Charleston Courier* describing how William Henry Bassett's second schooner, the *Nonplus*, during a hurricane at Bayou Salle, Louisiana, on the night of November 25, 1829, was “driven so high on land she [could] never be got off.” For it, see Page 2 of the December 31, 1829, edition of the *Charleston (South Carolina) Courier*.

⁶⁹ For information on the military action in which Colonel Daingerfield's regiment was cited for great bravery, see the July 25, 1776, edition of the *Annapolis (Maryland) Gazette*.

Lyons.⁷⁰ Did Priscilla's sister Judith and their widowed mother, Elizabeth Churchill, help her raise Ann and Carter Bassett in Williamsburg in the late 1760s and early 1770s? I felt there was more than a good chance they did. For one thing, Elizabeth Churchill was Ann and Carter Bassett's only presumed grandparent whose life overlapped with theirs; she wouldn't die until April 1779, when they would have been 14 or 15.⁷¹ For another thing, she had been a widow and a Williamsburg resident since long before they were born, and Judith, for her part, apparently didn't marry until she was in her 30s, when Priscilla was already in the 12th or 13th year of her own widowhood.

What I most wanted to find through Newspapers.com and Genealogybank.com, however, I did not find. What I most wanted to find was a record explicitly confirming Ann and Carter Bassett's parents were Elizabeth Bassett's sister Priscilla and the signer's brother Robert. Nor did I find a record explicitly confirming the signer's nephew Carter Bassett was William Henry Bassett's father. But I did find the next best thing – an unknown record that both confirmed Carter Bassett's existence and revealed something important about his life.

Shortly before finding the new Carter Bassett record, I was on Genealogybank.com tediously following his son onboard the schooner *Nonplus* in the winter, spring, and summer of 1829 as he sailed up and down the eastern seaboard and to the Port of New Orleans. To break up the tedium, I decided on an impulse to look for a newspaper announcement of Captain William Henry Bassett's marriage to my third great-grandmother Eleanor O'Neill. In my files was contradictory information on exactly when and where they got married. It was my understanding they got married in either Washington, D.C., or across the Potomac in Alexandria on either January 22, 1822, or February 5, 1822.⁷² I typed my third great-grandmother's name in the search bar, leaving off the second "l" for thoroughness, and up on my screen appeared a notice on Page 3 of the January 25, 1822, edition of the *Alexandria Gazette* announcing "the Rev. Mr. Fairclough" married them on January 22, 1822, in Alexandria.

I studied the words in the marriage announcement. I noticed my third great-grandfather was listed as "Capt Wm H Basset," with *William* shortened to *W-M* with no period and *Bassett* spelled with just one "t." I stared at the misspelling of his last name and tried to recall if I had entered *Bassett* with just one "t" when I did a universal search at the same site for my fourth great-grandfather for the years when he would have been alive. It seemed like I had but then again maybe it had been only at the other site that I had done so. I decided I better make sure. After downloading the *Alexandria Gazette* marriage announcement into my computer, into the search bars I entered the time period 1760 to 1810 and the name *Carter Basset* with just one "t." I clicked on the "search" button and up on my screen appeared a solitary newspaper clipping from the *Federal Intelligencer* in Baltimore. I could see only a portion of it. To see the rest, I would need to click on the image. I saw enough to know it looked eerily promising. I slammed my eyes shut to avoid being disappointed. I rose from my chair, maundered into the kitchen, and grabbed a handful of lightly salted peanuts while studying a snapshot glimpse of the image still alive in my mind. I was pretty sure I had seen the name *Carter Basset* with just one "t" and also part of the name Norfolk and maybe part of the name Richmond. I went back to my computer, importuning the genealogy gods to be generous for once. I sat down and without really looking at the image again I clicked on it to open it to full size and up on my screen appeared a newspaper notice with an ink drawing of a big sloop running with the wind across a body of water and the words:

**"For NORFOLK and RICHMOND,
The Sloop HARRISON,
CARTER BASSET, master;
Lying at Bowly's wharf; to sail on Satur-
day next. For freight or passage apply to
the master, on board, or to Mr. Archibald
Moncrieff.**

⁷⁰ For confirmation Judith Bassett lived in Williamsburg, see her marriage announcement on Page 2 of the December 30, 1773, edition of the *Virginia Gazette*.

⁷¹ For Elizabeth Churchill Bassett Dawson's date of death, see her obituary notice on Page 2 of the April 16, 1779, edition of the *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg.

⁷² I would later learn that Alexandria, Virginia, in 1822 was part of the District of Columbia.

Baltimore, November 12, 1794.”

I read it again, this time savoring every word, particularly the words “For Norfolk and Richmond/The Sloop Harrison/Carter Basset, master/Baltimore, November 12, 1794.” And then up out of my chair I popped to do the Highland fling.

Very little doubt was there in my mind as to the identity of the captain in the notice, and the reason was every detail in it — the name of the sloop, the *Harrison*; the name of the captain, “Carter Basset”; the James River location of his route, “for Norfolk and Richmond”; the date, “November 12, 1794”; his occupation, ship’s captain — it all agreed absolutely perfectly with the family story and all the other evidence I had accumulated. I now felt that I should have guessed that he, too, was a ship’s captain, because one of the things they did at Harrison’s Landing was build ships and because “like father like son.” I had been betting his main occupation was helping out on one or more of the Harrison family’s many plantations while the signer and his sons were absorbed in public affairs. It’s possible he did both. But at a minimum I now knew at least one of his occupations for certain — he was the captain of a freight-and-passenger sloop called the *Harrison* serving the ports of Richmond and Norfolk and Baltimore and probably others.

On the one hand, I somehow found it very reassuring that Carter Bassett, too, was a James River/Chesapeake Bay ship’s captain, but, on the other, so much larger now was the geographical region from whence his wife might have originated that I felt we might never discover who she was. If I had it right, in 1794 he would have been 30 or very close to it, and instead of marrying a Martha Davis on the Weyanoke Peninsula or just across the river at Cabin Point in accordance with my imaginings, I now had to acknowledge an increased probability he may very well have married a Martha Davis from a much more distant location, owing to how mobile he was. One obvious possible location would be Baltimore since that’s where I actually found him. And how fitting if Baltimore the answer turned out to be! After all, his only known Charles City County, Virginia, son would marry a Baltimore girl during his time as a James River/Chesapeake Bay ship’s captain. Another thing I realized was how neatly Carter Bassett’s newly discovered occupation fit into the yellow-fever part of the family story. It was Norfolk where the yellow fever climaxed in Virginia in 1801, and Norfolk, too, was it that Carter Bassett advertised as one of his ports of call. Also, because of its location at the mouth of the James, it was hard not to see that Norfolk would likely have been his most frequent port of call, and thus it was that I now believed he and his wife likely contracted yellow fever not in the mosquito-infested river marshes around Kittiewan but while passing through the worst of the epidemic at Norfolk.

To be extra thorough I then did an exact-name search for the words *Sloop* and *Harrison* for the same time period and this time on my screen appeared a total of 13 clippings, including the same one in the same paper but on a different day. I opened it first and compared it against its twin. I noticed they were exactly the same except for one thing -- whereas the “r” in *Moncrieff* in the November 12, 1794, notice was missing, in the November 14, 1794, notice it wasn’t.⁷³ I found among the other 12 clippings only two germane to my investigation, one in the March 23, 1793, edition of *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser* and the other in the April 8, 1794, edition of the *South Carolina State Gazette*, both apparently advertising the services of the same sloop but under the command of a different master, a Captain Canby, no first name given. I noticed the similarities between the two Captain Canby notices and the two Carter Bassett notices -- the name of the ship; the fact it was a sloop, not a brig or a schooner; the time period; the destinations, Norfolk and Richmond; the services rendered, to carry passengers and freight both. I realized it was almost certainly the same sloop. I also realized Carter Bassett and Captain Canby might very well have known each other, and possibly very well, and the reason was I had them on the same sloop on the same river in the same year, or so it seemed.

It immediately crossed my mind that the kindly captain that took William Henry Bassett in when he ran away from home might have been the Captain Canby in the two additional notices I had found and a strong sign he was would be if his given name were Joseph. Even though the signer had a nephew named Joseph according to many family trees at Ancestry.com I never felt

⁷³ I would later find the same Carter Bassett notice on Page 4 of the November 13, 1794, *Federal Intelligencer*, bringing my total to three. Why I did not find the November 13, 1794, notice through one of the other two searches I did not understand. The only way I found it was by shifting from a universal search to a search of the *Federal Intelligencer* only.

confident William Henry Bassett named his first son partly after him. I sensed the *Joseph* part of Joseph Carter Bassett's name came from somewhere else, possibly the Bible, and the *Mary* part of his sister's name as well. I searched Genealogybank.com to see if Captain Canby's first name was Joseph, and, sure enough, on my computer screen appeared several newspaper notices showing it was Joseph. I tried to guesstimate the probability his name would be Joseph through sheer coincidence, and what I arrived at was a probability of less than 1 percent, given the countless other names it could have been. I wanted to know how long Joseph Canby worked as a ship's captain. I learned he was still skippering ships at least as late as November 24, 1810, when William Henry Bassett would have been 14, the perfect age to be a ship's apprentice.⁷⁴ I wanted to know where Captain Joseph Canby lived when he wasn't on the water and when and where he died. I learned he died in the first week of May 1815 and Norfolk was where he both lived and died.⁷⁵

Section 16: The Riches of Family Ancestry

In my attempt to unlock the mystery of my third great-grandfather's connection to the famous Harrison family of Charles City County, Virginia, I had relied heavily on the largesse of others, particularly Bren Bassett, Carol Williams, Bill Bassett Jr., Mike Carnes, and Jeffrey Bassett. From Carol Williams alone I would receive more genealogical gems than I could even begin to remember, including two I never thought I would see -- a priceless letter written by Captain William Henry Bassett himself and even a photograph of him, one apparently taken toward the end of his life. Whether additional discoveries shedding still more light on the mystery would be made I had no idea, but it seemed to me there was reason to be hopeful, given how many had been made in only the very recent past. One thing I knew beyond a doubt was that William Henry Bassett's connection to the signer's family was made much more concrete when all the evidence each of us had was combined into a single whole. And what also did not escape me was the irony that only from a much more distant vantage point than Peggy Bassett's could an infinitely better bead on the mystery be had because it was only through the magic of digital technology that almost all the breakthrough discoveries had been made.⁷⁶

Despite the pangs of conscience I felt over Negro slavery, when I ruminated on the life of my newly discovered fourth great-grandfather Carter Bassett, particularly his coming of age at Berkeley Plantation during the American Revolution, I could not help marveling at the number of prominent people he was apparently related to. How many was it? I ascertained dozens, including the fifth governor of Virginia, the signer Benjamin Harrison V, who would have been his uncle by both blood and marriage; the last speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses and the first president of the Continental Congress, Peyton Randolph, who would have been another uncle by marriage; Martha Washington's "greatest favorite" sister, Anna Maria Dandridge, who would have been his aunt by marriage; Thomas Jefferson's aunt Susannah Randolph, who would have been another aunt by marriage; the chief justice of Virginia, Peter Lyons, who would have been yet another uncle by marriage; the director and chief physician of all Continental Army hospitals in Virginia during the Revolution, Dr. William Rickman, who would have been a double first cousin by marriage; Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who would have been both his second and his third cousin once removed; the second president of the College of William & Mary, the Reverend William Dawson, who would have been his step-grandfather; the fourth president of the College of William & Mary, the Reverend Thomas Dawson, who would have been his stepfather; President William Henry Harrison, who would have been his double first cousin and surrogate brother; President Benjamin Harrison, who would have been a double first cousin

⁷⁴ The last ship I found Captain Joseph Canby on was a sloop named the *Prosperity*. See Page 2 of the November 24, 1810, edition of the *Philadelphia Gazette*.

⁷⁵ For information on where and when Captain Joseph Canby died, see his obituary notice on Page 2 of the May 15, 1815, edition of the *New York Gazette*. I would also find information showing he was buried on May 7, 1815, at Norfolk's Christ P.E. Church cemetery with the Rev. Robert S. Symes presiding. See *Abstracts from Norfolk City Marriage Bonds, 1797-1850: And Other Genealogical Data* by David Tucker and George Holbert Tucker.

⁷⁶ It was true that the 1783 Richmond population list had been discovered the old-fashioned way, by going through a reel of microfilm frame by frame, but the discovery occurred only because of a digitized record brought to my attention by Mike Carnes.

two times removed; President John Tyler, who would have been his fourth cousin once removed; Brigadier General Charles Harrison, who would have been another uncle; the author of “the first explicit instructions in favor of independence adopted by a public meeting in any of the colonies,” Virginia delegate Carter Henry Harrison, who would have been yet another uncle; Congressman Carter Bassett Harrison, who would have been another double first cousin and surrogate brother; Congressman Burwell Bassett Jr., who would have been a standard first cousin; Martha Washington’s live-in niece Fanny Bassett, who would have been another standard first cousin; and the wealthiest Virginian of his day, Robert "King" Carter, who would have been his great-grandfather. Some of his prominent relatives he likely would have seen on a regular basis – during family visits, at weddings and funerals, at Thanksgiving and Christmas. And what a remarkable constellation of prominent non-relations he no doubt also would have seen from time to time at Berkeley. It was in late 1784, shortly before the signer’s last day as governor, that George Washington made one of his occasional visits to Berkeley, and very likely there to greet him along with many others would have been my fourth great-grandfather, a young Carter Bassett, and his sister, Ann.⁷⁷

Had it not been for William Henry Bassett's granddaughters Virginia Bassett Alleman and Ida Bassett, both of whom had the good sense to put down in writing what little they knew of it, I don't know that his genealogy would have not been entirely lost to history. They became two of the most important keepers of the family story. In time there would be many, including among William Henry Bassett's great-grandchildren "Cousin Emily," "Cousin Carol," "Cousin Edward," "Cousin Fanny," "Cousin Gladys," "Cousin Katherine," and "Cousin Peggy." My father, John Edmund Orr, became one of the keepers of the wider family story ... by sifting through it with his generation of cousins; by passing it to his portion of the next generation of William Henry Bassett descendants; by preserving old family papers; by lovingly naming his own sloop the *Eleanor O'Neill*; by driving to Grand Coteau, Louisiana, and Brenham, Texas, to visit the graves of various Bassett family members, including William Henry Bassett's. He first told me the story when I was 11 or 12. He told it again many years later on a chartered sailboat on the Gulf of Mexico, this time not just to me but also to my older brother, David, and my cousins Mark Dietz and John and Richard Grant. Through our third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett we were somehow connected to the famous Harrison family of Charles City County, Virginia, and through our great-great-grandmother Martha Josephine Roberson, who was a Ball, we were distantly related to George Washington as well. Our third great-grandfather was a seafaring man; he was once shipwrecked in a hurricane at sea. When still a young man, he married an Irish-American girl named Eleanor O'Neill, and between them they produced numerous children, including our great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett, who became a lawyer and a banker in Brenham, Texas, in partnership with his older brother Benjamin Harrison Bassett after they graduated together from Yale law school.⁷⁸

It would be almost another three decades before I became a keeper of the family story in my own right. When I did, my father handed me a *Parade Magazine* article on the psychological benefits of getting to know your ancestors. He told me I would enjoy it. I did enjoy it. The main idea I gleaned from the article was that it's healthy to learn about your ancestors because it anchors you better against the vagaries of life by strengthening your "intergenerational self." By connecting yourself to your ancestors, you realize you belong to something larger than yourself; by familiarizing yourself with the highs and lows they went through, you can better manage the highs and lows of your own life.

I had learned that the sprawling Bassett family stretching over many generations from Virginia to Louisiana to Texas had experienced its share of highs and lows. One of the worst lows was the suicide of my great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett on the morning of May

⁷⁷ George Washington's visit to Berkeley Plantation in late 1784 is cited in Governor Benjamin Harrison V's *Wikipedia* entry.

⁷⁸ In many ways Thomas Jefferson Bassett and Benjamin Harrison Bassett lived parallel lives. They were both born and raised in Louisiana; they were baptized on the same day and in the same church; they both attended St. Charles College, Jesuit School, in Grand Coteau, Louisiana; they both attended Yale Law School, graduating in the same year; they both moved to Brenham, Texas; they practiced law together; they both served in the Civil War on the side of the South; and for some 20 years after the war they owned and operated a bank together called Bassett & Bassett Banking House, which still stands today.

25, 1885, after a prolonged battle with insomnia. According to a poignant news story the following day in the *Brenham Daily Banner*, Jeff Bassett's death by suicide was a tragedy for the entire Brenham community because he had been one of its "most prominent and popular citizens." Everyone knew him. In addition to being a lawyer and a banker, he had been a member of almost every council and club -- the City Council, the school board, the literary club, the American Legion of Honor, the Knights of Pythias, the Knights of Honor. The *Daily Banner* remembered him as "a man of great enterprise and of liberal spirit" who "freely devoted his time to the public service," who "liberally responded whenever money was called for," who "was in the lead in all public enterprises," who "deservedly stood very high in [his] community"; it reported that his funeral cortege was one of the largest the town had ever known. Another low occurred three years later when William Henry Bassett's youngest son, Dr. Lewis McKissick Bassett, was convicted of murdering a Dr. G.W. Affette in Hearne, Texas, only 60 miles north of Brenham. And there had no doubt been a very painful succession of lows during the torment of the Civil War -- and during its long grim aftermath.

It occurred to me that among other lows the Bassett family probably knew were painful schisms within itself, because what families did not suffer painful schisms within themselves? And some of the schisms might have been made worse by the strain of war, by the strain of financial crisis, by the strain of tragedy and illness. But there is evidence that the Bassetts were also there for each other, even during times of strain. According to a news special from Franklin, Texas, published in the *Fort Worth Daily Gazette* on January 26, 1889, when the murder conviction of William Henry Bassett's youngest was overturned during a retrial, "universal rejoicing prevailed throughout the courtroom, and the distinguished Maj. [Benjamin Harrison] Bassett, his brother, ... like many others, could not restrain his tears."

(If you've received an earlier version of this story, I would be eternally grateful if you would kindly replace it with this one, as this one should contain fewer errors and cause much less dizziness. I would also be eternally grateful for any corrections or additional information you might be able to contribute to the story. I can be reached by email at billorr7@gmail.com or by phone at 817-879-4722.)

Appendix

Here's Ida Bassett's account of the family story as she wrote it down in the back of a pictorial family register handed down to my father, John Edmund Orr. Ida Bassett was the first daughter of William Henry Bassett's fourth son, Thomas Jefferson Bassett. (The corrections are mine.)

I'm writing a few things down about Papa and his father that may be of interest to his descendants. He and Benjamin H. Bassett were boys about the age of President Benjamin Harrison [1833-1901], the grandson of the signer of the Declaration of Independence [correction: great-grandson], and they were personal friends of these Harrisons and were often entertained in their home. Grandpa Bassett named several children after the members of the Harrison family. He was cared for in the home of Benjamin Harrison, the signer, when a small boy, as I've heard. He was left an orphan at two years and lived awhile with a cruel, drinking uncle who was most unkind to him. He was sent Xmas eve, at the age of seven, to get some whiskey, and fell and broke the bottle. He was punished so severely by his uncle that he left home with a little bundle of clothes, leaving a note for his aunt saying he would not return until he was 21 years old. He made friends with the captain of a boat who was good to him and he finally got to be a captain himself and had three boats of his own which went up and down the Mississippi River. Later he sold out and went into the lumber business in Louisiana. He was twice married. He had only one son by his second marriage, named Lewis Bassett.

He was born in 1776 [correction: 1796] and died in 1872. He was born in Berkeley, Charles City County, VA. His name was William Henry Bassett and judging from loyalty he showed in naming most of his children for members of that family, he must have been most intimate with all the famous Harrisons.

Here's Virginia Bassett Alleman's account of the family story as transcribed into type by her niece Peggy Bassett. Virginia Bassett Alleman was the fifth daughter of William Henry Bassett's first son, Joseph Carter Bassett.

Foreword

I am putting in writing by request, what I know of my father's family (Joseph Carter Bassett, but commonly called Carter Bassett).

Virginia Bassett Alleman, 1956

The name "Basset" is found on the Battle Abbey Roll, known to have been compiled in the 14th century, and is meant to imply only to surnames of those who accompanied William the Conqueror to England in 1066 and fought Harold, the last of the Anglo-Saxons kings.

However, the tradition is that William the Conqueror's grand falconer, who was with the Conqueror at the time of the conquest of England, was named Thorstine de Basset. Some say that he was French. (Others say that was Basque.)

Be it as it may, the name Basset became affiliated with England from the time of the conquest onward. The extra "T" being added in the 15th century. Why? Possibly to give the name Bassett an English twist. England and France, in that far off day, were bitter enemies.

The best that I know and understand of the Bassetts of my father's immediate family is that they came directly from England to the colony of Virginia; they came sometime after the execution of Charles I; they were XX Cavaliers.

Colonel William Bassett of Virginia was a close relation to my great-grandfather Bassett. I have no reason to believe that he was a brother, but possibly a nephew or first cousin. My great-grandfather Bassett (first name unknown to me) was born in Charles City County, Virginia. My grandfather, William Henry Bassett, was also born in Charles City County, Virginia. He was born Oct. 24, 1796. He became an orphan before the age of five; both his parents having died in an epidemic. At that tender age he was adopted and reared by the mother of Wm. Henry Harrison, who later became pres. of the U.S. This relative of my grandfather's (exact relation unknown) was Elizabeth Bassett, wife of Benj. Harrison, signer of the Declaration of Independence. She was the daughter of Col. Wm. Bassett of "Eltham" in Va.

When still in his teens my grandfather, Wm. Henry Bassett, went to sea. Not many years later, I was told, he owned a coastwise ship that plied between Norfolk, Va., and New York City.

On January 22, 1822, he married Eleanor O'Neill of Baltimore, Maryland. Some family papers state that they were married in Washington, D.C.; other papers say Alexandria, D.C. At any rate, their first child (my father, Joseph Carter Bassett) was born in Washington, D.C., on December 31, 1822.

Their second child, Mary Virginia, was born in Alexandria, Va., and their third, William Henry, Jr., came into this world in New York City.

In the early 1830s my grandfather with his family and in his own ship came to Louisiana. He visited New Orleans; he also visited the coast of Cuba and Central America, then came up the Atchafalaya River to a small fishing village, now called Morgan City, La. From there, he proceeded up the Teche River and came to Centerville, La., which at that time was a thriving village, or so I was told by my father who was then a child of ten or older.

My grandfather, Wm. Henry Bassett, must have remained at Centerville quite a few years as 2 sons were born there, Benjamin Harrison and Thomas Jefferson. From Centerville my grandfather moved on to Vermillionville, Louisiana. (The Vermillionville of those days is the Lafayette, La., of today.) A daughter was born at Vermillion named Eleanor Ann. She died at the age of eight. From Vermillion, he went to Washington, La., and a son was born there. He, also, died while still young.

Part Two

Eleanor O'Neill, who married my grandfather (William Henry Bassett) in 1822, was the daughter of O'Neill (first name unknown to me) and Eleanor O'Brien. They were from Antrim, Ireland. They were married in Ireland and came to the United States and settled in Baltimore, Maryland. Of this union there were two children, a son named Bernard and my grandmother, Eleanor, who married William Henry Bassett. Bernard died in an expedition to the West. He was not married. Eleanor (my grandmother) died at Bayou des Claise in Avoyelles Parish, La., Oct. 9, 1867 [correction Oct. 9, 1851]. She is buried in Grand Coteau, Louisiana.

My grandfather (William Henry Bassett) married a second time; his wife was Caroline ---- of Memphis, Tenn. A son was born to them. He was named Lewis. He became a doctor and settled in Texas. The two sons born in Centerville, La., Benjamin Harrison and Thomas Jefferson, also settled in Texas and reared their families there. Mary Virginia Bassett (Aunt Sis, we called her ----) was born in Alexandria, Virginia. She married C. McPherson. She lived all her life in the vicinity of Grand Coteau, La. She is buried there. My grandfather William Henry Bassett died Oct. 29, 1872, [correction: Oct. 31, 1872] at Grand Coteau, La., and is buried there.