

WAS EDWARD COFFEY A WILD GOOSE  
OR AN OLD-LINE VIRGINIAN?

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The book Irish Families by Edward MacLysaght (Dublin: Hodges Figgis and Co., 1957) makes frequent mention of "The Wild Geese." A recent article in the magazine Town and Country (March, 1988) tells how the Wild Geese were the thousands of Ireland's nobility who fled overseas as a result of the treaty of Limerick in 1691. Their lands were confiscated by the Crown when William was king. The "Wild Geese" are of interest to Coffey genealogists because it has been speculated that Edward Coffey came to Virginia about 1690 as a result of the "Williamite Confiscation" in Ireland (see James B. Coffey, Volume II by Marvin Coffey, pg. 17). This would be tantamount to calling him a Wild Goose.

Further research shows that the treaty of Limerick had to do with the Catholic religion of the Irish. It granted the Irish Catholics religious freedom and allowed them to live peacefully in Ireland if each would sign an oath of allegiance to Britain. It was known that many staunch Catholic Irishmen would never do this, so the treaty allowed those refusing to sign to be allowed to take passage to France where the State-recognized church was Roman Catholic. As a result of the treaty seven thousand of the

wealthiest Irish Catholics took passage to France and from there many hopped around the world to various other countries. These were the Wild Geese in the classic use of the designation, although we use the term today for anyone who fled Ireland by necessity.

The winners at Limerick were Britain and her King, William of Orange. William had taken to the battlefield in Ireland himself and the French king had sent troops to fight on behalf of the Irish. Catholics were not any more welcome in colonial Virginia in 1690 than they were in Britain; it seems unlikely for a Wild Goose to settle in Virginia following the Treaty of Limerick. Colonial Virginia liked Protestant King William so much that it named King William County for him, as well as Orange County. Not to slight his Queen, it named King and Queen County for the pair as well as the colonial college (William and Mary). That Edward Coffey came to Virginia about 1690 as a result of the Williamite Confiscation seems less likely than other possible scenarios.

Lawrence H. Coffey in his book Thomas Coffey and his Descendents (published 1931) states that he put the best material together to suggest that Edward came to Virginia about 1690 from Liverpool, England, having originated in Ireland. This statement seems to be the original basis for those who claim that Edward immigrated to Virginia from across the ocean rather than having been born in America. However, Lawrence did not even know Edward's name, merely identifying him as the father of John and the other Coffey children of Essex County. Lawrence probably obtained the round date 1690 by extrapolating back to a suspected

year of birth for John's father and then assuming that he immigrated as a young man. Some claim that Edward came in 1690 as an indentured servant. I question that Edward came as a result of the Williamite Confiscation, that he came as an indentured servant, and that he came in 1690.

Indentures to pay for passage were generally for seven years although criminals might serve fourteen years before receiving their freedom. The indenture system in colonial Virginia was complex. It served for the training of apprentices as well as for the care of orphans and only incidentally included indentures for the monetary reason of paying passage for someone who could not afford to have immigrated otherwise. Indentures for immigration grew out of the practice of indenturing orphans and sending them to America to choose a master. Unlike indentures of orphans already in Virginia, the immigrant who was indentured owed a bill for passage to the ship's captain. Since the new master paid the bill he had more of an interest vested in the servant than mere death of the master could erase. Indentures for reason of apprenticeship or orphanship ceased at death of the master, like in marriage, although indentures for monetary reasons could not be so simply relinquished. Of course a young orphan with a deceased master would have his helplessness erased by being re-indentured to someone, just as a widow who lacked financial resources would find it convenient to erase her need by "re-indenturing" herself by means of a new marriage. Since the termination of Edward Coffey's indenture coincided with Edward Moseley's death, an indenture for ship's passage to America seems less likely than for local orphanship or apprenticeship reasons.

The 1690 supposed arrival date in America for Edward Coffey gained acceptance by Coffey scholars because Edward's indenture to Mosely (unknown to Lawrence Coffey) seemed to buttress Lawrence's earlier independent supposition. The 1690 date was likely a guess on Lawrence's part, however, as shown below. The part that came from old family tradition to Lawrence most likely was that the Coffey progenitor came to Virginia from Liverpool, England, but was Irish.

Genealogists have demonstrated repeatedly that Americans descended from old-line colonial Virginia families tend to underestimate the number of generations their families have been in this country. This syndrome, known as fore-shortening, often attributes details to a grandfather or great-grandfather when they actually relate to a more distant generation and may actually confuse facts of one generation with tradition from another. Thus, a family of English origin having a grandfather with two brothers who were of marrying age about 1750, classically is re-told to state that three brothers immigrated together from England to America about 1750 and married. The common pattern is to remember back to some ancestor and then to suppose since nothing is known beyond this generation, then it was this person or the person's parents who immigrated. Although there is no intention to deceive, a date of immigration is arrived at as an estimate. Unfortunately, such a date often gets firmly established in people's worksheets and published genealogies entirely without evidence.

One of the most common indentures in colonial tidewater

Virginia resulted when a child's parents died. Such indentures were less common if the mother was still living because she usually remarried very soon to have a means of support. The new mate husbanded the wife and her possessions which were placed in his name in trust for her dower interests, the latter passing to her descendants rather than his. He was expected to serve as master of her minor children by previous marriages in trust for her interests, the trusteeship ending with her death, although at her death the relationship of master was often perpetuated by an indenture of the child. Scholars of colonial social customs in Virginia point out that multiple marriages were the rule rather than the exception prior to about 1740 because sudden death from epidemic or Indian attack was so common during reproductive years then. The bane of the colonial Virginia genealogist is that records passing down in a given family often ignore these other marriages, so that books of collective genealogies often do not give the whole picture, listing only one marriage.

Many instances can be cited where a child was indentured to a woman's second or third husband after the woman died. Such indentures, in fact, can be a clue to such second or third marriages. Custom required that a child orphaned by death of a mother who had re-married be indentured since the widower had no legal obligations to the child and no means of control or discipline unless the child were bound by an indenture. Death of the wife had erased the husband's mastery of the child as trustee of the wife. Generally a fully orphaned child was allowed to choose the person to whom it would be bound (from among any bidding, although often a mother's second husband or a person of

some family connection), but once bound, the relationship was that of indentured servant. Actually during this period in history marriage itself was looked on as similar to an indenture, the wife essentially binding herself to the husband and promising to serve and obey him until death.

There is evidence that Edward Coffey was overseeing "Moseley's Quarter" at the time of Edward Moseley's death. This evidence is the use by Coffey of what the present author thinks must have been the plantation mark for Moseley's Quarter, as will be shown below. In any event, Moseley left Coffey a 2-year old heifer in his will. Coffey was undoubtedly living at Moseley's Quarter at the time (from other evidence) and Moseley obviously expected him to have a place to raise such livestock in the future. Moseley specifically referred to him as his "servant Ed. Coffe" in the will. Was this to specifically remind everyone that Edward was a servant rather than a step-son so that he could not claim a greater inheritance on the theory that he should have inherited his mother's dower? Edward Moseley clearly felt affection for Edward Coffey and envisioned him raising cattle, as a heifer is the means by which young cattle are born. But by the same token he wanted to look out for the interests of his own blood descendents. Perhaps Edward Coffey was living happily and productively on land owned by Edward Moseley, only thinking of him in the sense of a father-figure when suddenly Moseley died and the status of both Edward Coffey and the land came into question with Moseley's heirs. In any event, Edward Coffey quickly received a judgement for his freedom, corn and clothes,

indicating that the indenture was terminated. This would have been the time for a mere servant to have moved on to obtain a start of his own. It is obvious, however, that Edward Coffey's roots were already set down. Edward Coffey's heirs were eventually to have ownership recorded for "Moseley's Quarter," the 200-acre plantation of the deceased Edward Moseley, as a result of a complicated deed which suggests that Edward Coffey was living on this land at the time of his death but had either not yet obtained full ownership or that the full ownership and its consideration had not previously been recorded.

Marvin Coffey (see James Coffey Volume II, pg. 18) has pointed out that the two hundred acres, although willed by Edward Coffey to his sons Edward, Jr., and John, was deeded to these sons by the heir of Edward Moseley upon the death of Edward Coffey, Sr. This would make it appear that Edward Coffey, Sr., never had a land deed during his lifetime, even though he bequeathed what he considered his own land to his sons in his will. This must have been the land where Edward Moseley expected Edward Coffey to raise the heifer [and her increase] mentioned in Moseley's will. Indeed, the land is proven to have been no other than "Moseley's Quarter" itself by various deeds in the title chain. Edward Coffey, Sr., must have been either a trusting soul or had such an unquestioned degree of authority that it never occurred to him that his land should be made over to him by some paper which could be used to sell or transfer it. This may be because he was himself the authority figure for the Moseley plantation. He clearly had been operating the old Mosely plantation as his own without benefit of deed. In genealogy it is necessary to

understand precipitating factors. Legal documents can be correctly interpreted only when the precipitating factors are understood. For example, a person might believe that a land entry recorded in Burke County, North Carolina in 1778 to 1782 might indicate that the person entering the land moved there that year. In reality that person may have lived on the land for many years, the registration being precipitated by the Revolution and opening of the Burke County land entry office by the Whig government in 1778 and its closing in 1782.

Records left concerning Edward Coffey, Sr., seem to have been in two flurries, one from 1699-1700, the other in 1716. During the first flurry, Edward Moseley died mentioning Edward Coffey in his will, then Coffey married and his indenture was certified by the Moseley estate to be terminated. It is important to note here that the Moseley will itself was not the instrument precipitating termination of the indenture, but rather it was the death of Moseley which precipitated it. There is an important distinction which will become apparent later. During the second flurry, Edward Coffey died and the Moseley heir deeded the estate "Moseley's Quarter" to Coffey's heirs.

Now enters a very revealing piece of evidence. Edward Coffey, Sr., apparently had the custom of signing the Moseley plantation mark as early as 1700. Here a little explanation is needed. The colonial plantation mark or seal has been likened to the brand used for marking cattle in the American west. Although it was undoubtedly used for marking cattle belonging to the plantation, it was much more than a brand. It can be compared with the seal



of ancient times used as a "signature" by an authority figure. In colonial Virginia, tobacco was used as currency. The plantation seal, burnt like a brand into the tobacco cask, was like the signature on today's bank notes. It guaranteed the legitimacy of the cask's contents as conforming to the standard of quality and purity that allowed its use as money. The device for making the mark was well guarded by the plantation owner to prevent what would have been practically the same as counterfeiting.

All persons, whether knowing how to read or not, knew the marks of local plantations and identified the marks with the owners. The marks were used in various tobacco warehousing documents and in receipts. The marks were not limited to livestock branding or tobacco warehousing, however, particularly if the present theory of Edward Coffey's use of the Moseley plantation mark is correct. Slaves when trusted on errands or allowed to be out on their own were required to have a pass with "master's mark" and it was necessary for anyone challenging them, whether literate or not, to readily recognize the mark. Anyone making the plantation mark was either 1) the owner, 2) an overseer having what amounted to today's "power of attorney," or 3) a forger.

The mark which Edward Coffey made to legal documents was a stiff capital M with a straight top, long dangling straight but somewhat angled legs, and something of an uphill bent. It has the characteristic look of a livestock brand of today and although I have only read about the plantation marks burnt onto tobacco casks, it looks exactly like what would be expected.

Typewritten copies of papers with Edward's mark usually merely show it as an X which we have grown accustomed to recognizing as

the universal mark of the illiterate. To oversee a plantation a person had to understand numbers and to be able to read and write a mark somewhat more distinctive than an X, a mark which represented the plantation.

*Break* My 85-year old father likes to tell a story concerning the mark of our ancestor Fielden Coffey (his great-grandfather) and how it related to a run-in with Pardee Butler along the Missouri River in the vicinity of the present Atchison, Kansas, where I was later born. The Atchison area was over-run by Missourians who were descendents of old-line Virginians. These Missourians, including my Fielden (who had been born in Kentucky), adhered to old mid-southern rules and customs, including occupying land by pre-emption which was technically not open to settlement. Fielden had placed his distinctive mark on a certain tree, intending to sometime cut it and make it into lumber. He was in no particular hurry to cut it, as everyone knew his mark and respected his claim on any trees so marked. Atchison had the first newspaper in the state, aptly named the Squatter Sovereign, one issue of which tells of the tarring and feathering of Pardee Butler, a northern free-soiler who was tied to a raft in his feathered state and sent on an ethereal flight down the Missouri River. My Fielden's encounter with Mr. Butler came when someone came rushing to Fielden's house with the disconcerting news that Butler was cutting down a tree with Fielden's mark on it! My father's interpretation of Fielden's response, although more visually demonstrated than by words, leaves little doubt that Fielden's adrenalin surged. Although short of stature and of generally

agreeable disposition, on this occasion, when his distinctive mark was ignored, he was as if challenged in battle, and this proved to be one of the few occasions which he settled with assistance of a gun. I am assured by my father that he did not kill anyone, but that is all that he would say.

Although we see the strange M-like mark on Edward Coffey, Sr.'s personal papers, it takes little imagination to see that this would have been the mark by which he signed chits and notes for the plantation Moseley's Quarter. Today certificates representing enormous wealth in corporate stock are still "signed" by means of a cryptic mark made by the pen of the transfer agent in some financial backroom. At the time Edward Coffey signed the M-like mark to his will, he had a vested interest in the plantation "Moseley's Quarter" to say the least. To what extent his interest was so vested 16 years earlier, when he witnessed a document by signing the same M-like mark, is still a matter of conjecture. To make a different mark for his personal affairs than the mark he made for the plantation would have not only been confusing to all concerned but probably to himself as well. He obviously was known by his mark, which for historical reasons was associated with Moseley's Quarter, regardless of whether at any specific time he may have been overseer or owner.

Descendants of Joel Coffey and Martha Stapp have noted that the names "Woodson Coffey" or "Joel Woodson Coffey" appear in the lines of at least two of Joel's children, although no Woodson ancestor is readily apparent in published genealogies. If only one of Joel's children had named a son Woodson, we might shrug it off, saying that the child must have been named for a highly

respected neighbor or godfather of no blood relation. But even in parallel cases in other families, such neighbors or godparents, upon further research, often prove to be blood relations. Woodsons proliferated from Virginia through the South and West and were sometimes Coffey neighbors although no blood relationships have been previously suggested. Let us examine the family of Joel and Martha, as there is evidence that their children may be triple Coffeys in the sense of being descended from Edward Coffey, Sr. in three lines: 1) Edward Coffey, Jr., and a wife who may have been a daughter of a Chesley Martin, 2) Martha Coffey and Joshua Stapp, through their grand-daughter Martha Stapp; and 3) Elizabeth Coffey and John Cleveland through their daughter Jane Cleveland. I am reserving details of these genealogical interpretations for another discussion. [I am myself a descendent of this triple Coffey line through Celia, the daughter of Joel and Martha, but my line is further complicated by descent through Celia's marriage to Fielding, son of Isaac Nebuzaraden Coffey, of yet uncertain ancestry, but undoubtedly going back again to Edward Coffey, Sr.] The tripling in the Joel-Martha line, for one thing, would magnify the likelihood that any Woodson connection would be in a Coffey line merely because there are fewer non-Coffey lines to contend with. We need to analyze the heritage of Joel's family. Joel has all the appearances of having inherited his parents' wealth under the British primogeniture system. His 14 slaves appearing in the 1787 Wilkes County, North Carolina, census are ten times the average for Wilkes County families of the period. Nebuzaraden had only

one and many Coffeys none at all. Only Jane (Graves) Coffey, the widow of John Coffey, comes close with 7. Her wealth was preserved by her failure to re-marry. Colonial custom was to leave the estate to the wife only until she re-married or died. Thus, Edward, Jr., and John Coffey (rather than their mother who re-married) inherited Moseley's Quarter. Upon the death of their mother Ann, she willed her possessions to her sons by her last husband (Dooley) and to her daughter or daughter-in-law Annister, rather than to her earlier sons by Edward Coffey, Sr. Joel's wealth is further confirmed by the lands appearing in his name on tax lists of the period. Joel was likely the prime heir of his father, Chesley Coffey, Sr., who may have died young but was probably the eldest son and prime heir of Edward Coffey, Jr., thought by Coffey genealogists to have been the twin brother of John Coffey, the twins being the inheriting sons of the original Edward Coffey, Sr. That Joel Coffey's full name may have been perpetuated by his grandson Joel Woodson Coffey is suggestive, although only that. Under the British primogeniture system (which was repudiated with the success of the American Revolution), the elder branch of a family was the depository for tradition. A father passed not only his wealth to his oldest son, but a responsibility to be head of the entire group of related families descending from the father. This family headship was in a sense that we can barely comprehend today. It was the senior son who not only inherited the vast proportion of the estate, but who also had an obligation to help junior families out if they fell on hard times. We believe that Irish families adhered to primogeniture, as well. This is all in way of explaining how we

would expect Joel to have been trained in family history, as it would be his responsibility to carry the family and its traditions forward. It would not be unusual, therefore, for him to have known the name of his great grandfather Edward's mother, particularly if Edward was his great grandfather on both his father's and mother's side, as well as the great grandfather of his wife, Martha Stapp. Did anyone in the lineages between the original Edward's mother and Joel or Martha have Woodson as a middle name? Or did they have a Bible record of a Woodson ancestor? Remember, Joel's grandson was named Joel Woodson Coffey and two other grandchildren had Woodson incorporated into their names in some way. Was there a Woodson in Joel's ancestry? If such a Woodson ancestry were in colonial Virginia rather than on the other side of the Atlantic, it would have had to have been in the very early generations of the Virginia Woodson family. The patriarch of the Virginia Woodsons settled in the Jamestown colony in 1619 and was killed by Opechanchanough's brutal massacre of 1644, but Mrs. Woodson protected two sons by hiding them, one in a tub, the other in a potato pit. Genealogists have married off the descendants of these two sons to account for the Woodsons living in America between 1619 and the present, although little attention was given to the female lines. We should look for a Woodson daughter of an extremely early generation who may have had an early marriage but was remembered by genealogists only for a second marriage to a person with property. Sarah Woodson, daughter of Robert Woodson and Sarah Ferris, is the likely candidate, particularly since the Ferris family was

intermarried with the Washingtons and one of Joel's grandsons was named Meredith Washington Coffey. Is this sheer speculation? Not at all! Although genealogies commonly state that this Sarah Woodson married Edward Mosby, Henry Morton Woodson in his book Historical Genealogy of the Woodsons and Their Connections states that this was Edward Moseley and that the line is untraced. Sarah's father was Robert, one of the little Woodson boys saved from the Indians by being hidden by his mother. Sarah's brother John is known to have been a carpenter. There is evidence that many Coffeys and connecting families were carpentering families who followed building booms at the edge of settlement, but this topic is reserved for another discussion. Such booms spread from the Jamestown colony eventually to Henrico County, up to old Rappahanock (Essex), to Spotsylvania, to Orange, to Albemarle, and eventually into the back country of the Carolinas and from there south and west.

If Edward Coffey was not a Wild Goose in the sense of the 1691 exodus, what was he? It is commonly said that "birds of a feather flock together." Graves women who married Coffeys in two widely separated lines both seem to be descended from Captain Thomas Graves of the Jamestown colony. It is significant that a Thomas Graves signed as security for Edward Coffey, Sr.'s widow when she administered Edward's estate. Was he descended from the Captain Thomas Graves mentioned above? If there is a Woodson connection, the progenitor again would be an old-line Jamestown colony Virginian. Could our Coffey ancestors go back this far as well?

Descendants of colonial Virginia Coffeys have tried to trace their ancestry by looking at dates when people with names similar

to those of their ancestors were supposedly imported to America. Recent research indicates that landgrants given by Virginia for importing settlers often were fraudulently issued, the supposed importees merely being ship's crews who returned to England. It is axiomatic that Coffeys supposedly imported seem to have left no descendants. Paradoxically, Coffeys tracing back to colonial Virginia can find no ancestor who unquestionably was the one who immigrated. Do the Edward Coffey and Peter Coffee lines trace back to a common ancestor as some long-deceased Coffeys once claimed? Descendants of Peter Coffee now have evidence that he was not the Peter Coffee of importation records. Carpentering tendencies in the Peter Coffee line led to John Coffee's boatbuilding which led to a water-freighting partnership with Andrew Jackson, then to the Coffee-Jackson victory in the Battle of New Orleans, and finally to the election of a President. The carpentering connection between the Edward and Peter lines may be partly because of carpentering being a Graves characteristic. This would not explain carpentering in the line of Edward Coffey, Jr., however. Perhaps the Graves met the Coffeys through carpentering, however, which would explain much. My discussion of carpentering in relation to Coffeys and their connections, which is found in another discussion, also explains why these carpenters excelled in the military.

Although our Coffey immigrant ancestor may not have been a Wild Goose in the restricted meaning of the 1691 sense, today the term is used for practically any ancestor who fled from Ireland at any date, as shown by the recent article in Town and Country



magazine. These Wild Geese intended to fly home to Ireland when conditions permitted. That our ancestor was a Wild Goose in the broad sense of having fled from Ireland is taken for granted from the very Irishness of the name Coffey, for what true Irishman would have willingly left the Emerald Isle unless forced by circumstance to do so? Coffey is a true old Irish name, not a "Scotch-Irish" name, and not an Irish name of English origin.

In reviewing the document whereby Ann, the widow of Edward Coffey, Sr., was granted administration of Edward's estate, the very Irishness of the names of all involved simply flows out from the paper. Here was Ann Powell who had become a Coffey, with a Thomas Graves signing as security together with a John Hart. The Irish family of Powell is distinct from the English one. Irish Powells adopted Powell as an alias for MacGuilafoil, a Gaelic name freely translated as a "devotee of St. Paul," the Paul part of the name inspiring use of the name "Powell." Hart is exactly equivalent to the family of O'Hart to which belonged the author of the book which takes the Coffey pedigree back to Adam. Graves was a family in the 1659 census of Counties Dublin, Meath and Louth. The Graves family was noted for certain prominent clergymen, one the Anglican Bishop of Limerick. John Graves was sheriff of Limerick. Arthur Graves wrote the ever popular song "Father O'Flynn."

Historians are intensely interested in early Irish settlers in Virginia prior to the coming of the Scotch-Irish to the Great Valley of Virginia. Of interest is whether the very early Irish existed as isolated families who lost their Irishness amid the predominant English, or whether they associated together with

some social binding so as to make an ethnic group. If they did make a group, however so small, historians would like to know if they had any effect on development of the country. If Coffeys can ever sort out and document their family history, there may prove to have been significant influence by descendents of early Irish who settled in the Tidewater region of Virginia long before coming of the Scotch-Irish.

My interest in my ancestor Fielden Coffey being a travelling merchant led me to research travelling merchants in colonial Virginia. There was great interest by historians in a diary of a travelling merchant written shortly after 1800 which revealed that he belonged to a secret society or brotherhood of Irishmen in Virginia which met something like the Masons. Unfortunately no one has discovered who wrote the diary or anything about the society other than that no one had suspected that the Irish had such social connections in Virginia at such an early date. The merchant's route closely corresponded to some of the territory where Coffeys lived. In the Tye River area of old Albemarle County (now Nelson County), with its Coffey connections, he mentioned coming to Crosthwait's as if it were an old stopping point or way-station, which it probably was. Descendents of colonial Virginia Crosthwait/Crosswhites have never discovered whether they are of the English or Irish branch of the family, only that their ancestor came down from Pennsylvania to Spotsylvania County about 1732, possibly descending from the Charles Crosthwayte who settled near Boston in the previous century. Charles had descendents in West Jersey prior to 1700 who

were living on the opposite side of the river from the point where the new town of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was being built. If the Crosthwaits were of the Irish branch, they would, like the Coffeys, be very early examples of Irish immigrants. A Thomas Crosthwaite once served as Governor of the Bank of Ireland and High Sheriff of Dublin. This is mentioned because a Coffey presently is Minister of Finance of Ireland and has served as Governor of the Bank of Ireland, an interesting parallel. I am reserving an analysis of the fiduciary or "treasurer" meaning behind the surname Coffey for another discussion.