

The majority of Robb researchers who have traced their ancestry to the line of John Robb who married Barbara McKnight in LancasterCoPA in 1757, and died in WashingtonCoPA about 1804, believe that John’s father was Joseph Robb who emigrated to Pennsylvania (PA) about 1730 from county Down in northern Ireland. They owe this belief to a pair of articles published 100 years ago in PA biographical compendiums, which I shall refer to hereinafter as Boucher and Jordan.

John Newton Boucher, *A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and her people*, 4 vols ([New York]: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), 4:130

Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania: Genealogical and Personal Memoirs, ed. John W. Jordan, (1911; reprint BaltimoreMD: ClearfieldCo, 1994), [2:972-975](#) (for the first page of the article)

Both articles were based on biographical material furnished by Robert Sturgeon Robb, a great-great-grandson of the immigrant, and they seem to have been further burnished by “having stood the test of time”. Nonetheless, the claim that the immigrant ancestor was Joseph Robb is wholly illusory—based not at all on “family tradition”, as one might charitably suppose, but simply on faulty, and sketchy, genealogical research. I go into detail upon this case, because I believe it to be entirely typical for this class of literature, by which I mean to include the vast majority of family histories concocted by descendants over the last 150 years, with the best of intentions no doubt, but from a state of almost complete ignorance of the craft of scholarly historical research. I hope this case will serve as an illustrative example, and a warning, for modern family historians who aspire to something better than pat, ready-made stories about illusory ancestors.

The “Mug Book” Era

The period 1875-1915 was the first “golden age” of American genealogy (we are in the midst of the second). For whatever reason, Americans of that period began to feel the need to reconnect to their roots. Perhaps it was a time when the average man began to feel like a mere cog in the burgeoning and all-encompassing social and economic machine, and turned back towards his hitherto neglected family traditions in search of a sense of personal distinction, while the more successful sought confirmation that their success was deserved and ordained. Individual surname genealogies were published by the 10s of thousands, though most of the research which went beyond mere information gathering from living relatives was of poor quality. We descendants, though, should be sincerely grateful to the people who labored from that era to this one, at least for their preservation of their contemporary knowledge.

This was the era of the “mug books” and local histories—works like Boucher’s (and Jordan’s is culled from a number of such biographical histories). In just about every settled county of Eastern and Midwestern America, enterprising vanity publishers went around the small town and rural neighborhoods knocking on the doors of upstanding farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers, offering to publish their family stories in exchange for a paid subscription to the compiled volume. These volumes have been dubbed “mug books” because the engraved portraits of obscure and forgotten citizens which studded their pages reminded some wag of the photo books they give crime victims to go through at the police station to try to identify the hooligans who “mugged” them.

What was set down in these (auto)biographical articles is a decidedly mixed bag. On the one hand, the source was speaking out of personal knowledge and memory of his own family, supplemented in most cases by private family records now probably lost. He was also heir to “family tradition”, for

whatever that may be worth (the present article is intended as an oblique commentary on that). On the other hand, the author of the material probably had little or none of the historian’s cultivated abilities to sift fact from fiction, and his statements, even when clear and factual, were subjected to a none-too-careful editorial process. The results probably approximate the accuracy of the typical newspaper obituary, and in my experience, few of these are entirely satisfactory on the score of accuracy.

Here, though, what concerns us chiefly is the portion of these articles (or published books) which extends beyond the living memory of the amateur family historian.

With family tradition, the story is the thing, not the bare facts. Most children get told something about their ancestors while they are impressionable, but not yet interested or sophisticated enough to care about getting the facts quite straight. They remember only the gist of the story, as with a parable. As their understanding of human, and family affairs matures over the course of a lifetime, they tend to fill out the story in their own way, to make it conform to their expectations and desires. There is usually a kernel of truth to such stories, often an essential truth, which deserves to be taken seriously, but the facts themselves are as likely as not to be invented. Yet most of us have learned that the presence of specific facts increases the verisimilitude of a story—which is why liars and storytellers both to invent them in the first place. And the salting of an invented tissue of facts with grains of truth further enhances the story’s credibility. Professional story tellers are well aware of these tricks, and we must beware of them when we are seeking to determine whether, and to what extent, a good story is also a true story.

For the most part, family stories and traditions are fleshed out quite innocently, as the unconscious memory is gradually “enhanced” by one’s life experiences. Allowances can sometimes be made for that natural human process in evaluating such stories. What is truly and perniciously misleading though, is when the retailer of such stories begins to fancy himself a family historian and goes rooting in old documents for “objective” facts to ground his story in truth. Such ambitions are laudable in theory, but when the facts are plucked gleefully out of their documentary context (and worse when they are mistaken), and then mixed inextricably, without attribution, into the developing family story, whatever was innocent and pure of the original tradition becomes irrevocably contaminated by this faulty research. That is what happened to the Robb “mug book” biographies referred to here as Boucher and Jordan.

Where Robert Robb Went Wrong

The articles in Boucher and Jordan containing the material about the American founder of this Robb line while invaluable in many respects, have misled at least four generations of Robb “researchers” about the identity of their immigrant ancestor—confidently asserted to be Joseph Robb who came from county Down, in northern Ireland. Typically, no evidence has ever been adduced for these assertions, or even any further circumstantial detail.

It is evident from the specific ancestry laid down in these articles, that their author was Robert S[turgeon]⁵ Robb (Ebenezer⁴, Joseph³, John², William¹)—to give his correct ancestry. However, Robert claims the following ancestry: Robert S, Ebenezer, Joseph, John, John, Joseph. As will become evident, Robert has interpolated an additional generation in his ancestry, as well as mistaken his immigrant ancestor.

There is a set of contemporary chronological baptismal records for all but one of John²’s children back in LancasterCoPA, which corresponds exactly (except for one child, David) to the ordered list of sons in John’s 1804 WashingtonCo will. This baptismal record shows a son John baptized 15Apr1759, and a son Joseph baptized 8Apr1777. Moreover, since the father was a ruling elder of the

baptizing minister, the Reverend John Cuthbertson’s, congregation, and lived near him, there is every reason to suppose that these children were born within a few weeks of their baptism.

What Robert S. Robb claims is that he is descended from John², through his son John³ (b.1759), and the latter’s son Joseph⁴ (b.1776). However, since Robert also correctly states that John³, the second son of this very religious family wasn’t married until 1790, he has a lot of explaining to do. If Robert is to be believed, his great-grandfather, John³, not only had a son born out of wedlock in 1776; he also went off campaigning as an ensign with General Washington culminating with the Battle of Trenton at the end of that year—all at the tender age of 17. And we must also believe that both John², the father, and John³ the son had sons named Joseph born within months of each other, yet only Joseph the son of John² was baptized by Cuthbertson, despite the fact that John² was one of Cuthbertson’s ruling elders. And the improbabilities don’t end there. Robert also claims that his grandfather Joseph, born in 1776, lived for 90 years, and died on his WashingtonCo farm, when in fact his grandfather Joseph’s prominent tombstone in Robinson Run Cemetery, near the Robb plantation, gives his dates as 1777-1847 (to be fair to Robert, the tombstone is almost certainly a modern replacement, but it may still be taken as evidence that the vital dates of the patriarch Joseph were common knowledge in this family—a point which will be confirmed by evidence I examine next).

I think it is pretty obvious that Robert has simply adopted his Granduncle John³ as an additional ancestor. Why? Well, one reason might be to buff up his Revolutionary War ancestry. That he was proud of this ancestry is shown by the fact that he appears as a member of the Sons of the Revolution in the 1903 yearbook for the Pennsylvania chapter. There, his *curriculum vitae* reads: “John Robb, Sr. Born 1730; died in Washington County, Pa., in 1804. He with his son, John Robb, Jr., enlisted December 16, 1778, as teamsters or wagonmasters in Capt. Wm. Steel’s Company), 3rd Battalion....” Nothing is said here about the early service of John Jr. as an officer at the Battle of Trenton, and the absence of vital statistics for the son, suggests that Robert probably warped his lineage later to include John Jr.^[1]

I don’t mean to accuse Robert here of deliberate fraud; I think it is merely that his idea of research was to pay attention only to putative facts which seemed to confirm what he wanted to believe, while simply dismissing any inconveniently contradictory evidence as erroneous. How many of us have been guilty of the very same procedure, if only inadvertently, and with the best of intentions?

Fortunately, Robert’s is not the only account by descendants of his line of their ancestry. In fact, his next younger brother, Joseph W. Robb, had his own “mug book” autobiography published in 1893. Even though Joseph and Robert grew up in the same household, headed by their father, Ebenezer Robb (1810-1884), son Joseph W. knew only about his father Ebenezer, and his grandfather Joseph, whom he supposed had been the Robb ancestor who first migrated to WashingtonCo and purchased the Robb plantation, “Omi”—in point of fact, “Omi” was patented by John Robb, Joseph’s father, in 1801. Then there is the 1889 autobiography of Mark Robb (1807-1892), a son of John³ Robb, who knew only of his grandfather, John² Robb, whom he correctly states was himself the purchaser of “Omi”. Here are the citations to these earlier, and thus more contemporary, “mug book” accounts:

¹ *Year Book of the Pennsylvania Society, Sons of the American Revolution*, 1903 (Pittsburgh: SAR, no date), 229. If Robert had included the material about John Jr’s being an officer, it would probably have been disallowed because the officer John has clearly been placed in a different family. But in view of the way the matter is put here, I believe that Robert Sturgeon Robb, it’s source, simply hadn’t gotten around yet to his fanciful, and erroneous, distortions.

Joseph W: *Commemorative Biographical Record of Washington County, Pennsylvania, Containing sketches of prominent and representative citizens, and of many of the early settled families* (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co, 1893), 558.

Mark: *A Genealogical and Biographical History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania*, ed. Thomas Cushing (1889; reprint GPC: 1975), 504

Where, then, did Robert get this stuff about Joseph as the father of John²?

When in 2003 I visited the area of WashingtonCoPA about 8 miles west of Pittsburgh where the Robb plantation, “Omi”, lies, I found one Margaret (Douglass) Hughey, a descendant of the Joseph³ line, living on a portion of the original Robb land. Margaret was good enough to let me photocopy a 23-page typescript compendium of Robb research, authored, she believed, by her aunt, Laura Ellen Robb (1889-1977). This paper, titled “A History of the Robb Family in Pennsylvania”, is undated, and does not identify its author, but it stands out from the usual sort of thing which passes for a “researched” family history (meaning culled from dubious secondary sources) by including transcriptions, references, and citations, to original documents, and there is even a “photograph” of a receipt for at least part of the purchase price of “Omi”, a record which was passed down in the family.

This paper also includes a brief discussion of the 1804 WashingtonCo will of John² Robb. John’s will provides for the calling in of a debt owed testator on a bond of his brother Joseph, who, it can be shown, was still living back east in ChesterCoPA in 1804. However, in Laura Robb’s account the language is rendered “father Joseph”. Bingo!

If this misreading was the work of Robert himself, he evidently didn’t bother to try reading the rest of the will, because he claims in his family narrative that John divided his plantation into thirds for three of his sons, whereas the will itself stipulates that John’s land was to be sold after the death of his wife, and the proceeds divided equally between his eight sons. I do not doubt that the plantation did, in fact, go in chunks to just three of the sons, but it must have been by agreement between all the sons, after John’s death.

Whoever misread this will, though, evidently made a complete transcript of it, because the research paper says “A copy of the above [*abstracted*] will is herewith reproduced” (though no such reproduction accompanied the paper I photocopied). And the transcriber was almost certainly working from the original will at the courthouse, because the will book copy is clearly written “brother”, while in the original, the writing requires a little study in order to make a definite pronouncement on this language. The writing in the original is somewhat faded, and also quite small and somewhat perfunctory. In particular, the first “r” of “brother” is greatly foreshortened and can only be detected by careful study in light of the writer’s style. However, the first letter can be read as an “f” only if one ignores the fact that it has no descender, while every one of the many first letter “f”s on the same page has a clearly visible descender. Likewise, there are plentiful examples of the rendering of first letter “b”s which can be matched up with the correct reading, “brother”.

I think this faulty transcription was probably made by one of the descendants of the Joseph Robb line, sometime during the late 1890s, or the early 1900s, between the time of publication of those earlier family biographies, showing no knowledge of the immigrant ancestor, and the version with the fanciful ancestry offered by Robert for publication by 1908. And I think it was this transcription, which was still floating around the family decades later which unfortunately misled the author of “A History of the Robb Family in Pennsylvania”, who unusually, and ironically, had an appreciation for the importance of consulting the original records.

The Evidential Context, and Final Thoughts

Even if one could make a credible argument that the will reads “father Joseph”, I would still disbelieve it, and write it off as a slip of the pen. The circumstantial evidence suggests that John² was about 75 when he made his will, and what sense would there be in calling in a bond on an ancient father, who if still living would have been at least 95 and probably much older, at least without making some other provision for him in the will?

Moreover, speaking as one who has gone through every page of the extant PA records for Chester and Lancaster Counties before 1750, and for most record series, for decades beyond that, I am here to say that there is no trace of a Joseph Robb to be found in the early colonial PA records. There is also, to my knowledge, no scintilla of evidence bearing on the Old World origins for any of the Robb families who came to Pennsylvania before the James Robb who brought his family to Philadelphia in 1773. On the other hand, there is abundant circumstantial evidence, that John², and his several brothers who were married, and had all their children baptized by Cuthbertson, were the sons of William Rab of Drumore Township, LancasterCoPA. In fact, a convincing case for this can be made on the onomastic evidence alone. But this is not the place to get into the details of the positive evidence respecting John²'s ancestry.

The intent of this paper has been to illustrate the ease with which amateurish family histories published (formally or informally) by well-meaning ancient relatives who lived only a few generations removed from the events they spoke of, can create artifacts capable of misleading generations of descendants.

Of course the truly enlightened family historian knows that every genealogical claim needs to be questioned, and grounded, if at all possible, in records more or less contemporary to the events they concern. It is all the better for such documents if they are exposed to the scrutiny of contemporaries other than the recorder, and they should be subjected to the same sort of mental inquiry undertaken by a conscientious juror considering the testimony of a witness in court. The mere opinions of others, even if they are authoritative others, should be set aside, although the opinions and the special understanding of credible experts, should certainly be factored into the equation.