

Ohio Records and Pioneer Families

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Lost Legacies: The Story of James Edwards

“If a man needs an elaborate tombstone in order to remain in the memory of his country, it is clear that his living at all was an act of absolute superfluity.” – Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

James Edwards was an extraordinary man. Born into a life of poverty in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, he left that life only to be sold as a bond servant in Virginia. Once freed, he started a family, fought in the French and Indian War, as well as the Revolutionary War, migrated to Kentucky and founded what is now the Village of Aberdeen, Ohio. Unfortunately, history has not been kind to James Edwards' legacy. His contributions to Ohio and Aberdeen, in particular, have been virtually forgotten. The purpose of this narrative is to establish the facts concerning the life and legacy of James Edwards and his contributions to Ohio and America.

James Edwards was baptized on 6 May 1727 as James Edward, son of William Edward and Helen Law^{1,2}. The baptism certificate lists his residence as being Milntown, Corsindae, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. A further search of the Parish Register for Midmar revealed other siblings, Mary Edward (9 Oct 1725), Alexander Edward (25 Nov 1731), and William Edward (17 Nov 1735), baptized in Milntown, Corsindae, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. From this source, we can determine that the family lived in Milntown until 1736 because the youngest child of William Edward and Helen Law was Barzillai Edward (10 Jul 1737) baptized in Caiesmill, Dyce, Aberdeenshire, Scotland^{3,4}.

William Edward was a miller, by trade^{5,6}. The move to Dyce would have come at the end of his ten year lease on the mill at Corsindae. In January of 1739, a hurricane ripped through the North Atlantic devastating Great Britain. Scotland suffered greatly under this storm, as did the family of William Edward. Kirk Session records for Dyce Parish record William Edward receiving the “loan of the Poor’s Money” and the elders considered him to be a “sure hand” at the time although he was currently “low in his circumstances”⁷. These same records indicate that something happened to change the elder’s mind about his ability to repay the loan and he was directed to repay the loan in full by 10 Jun 1739. Unfortunately, the summer of 1739 was exceptionally dry, yielding a poor harvest. This problem was further compounded by a severely harsh winter in 1739-1740⁸.

We know from court records kept by the National Archives of Scotland, that William Edward moved his family to the city of Aberdeen in 1740. His wife, Helen Law, was called to testify in two court proceedings; Williamson vs. Cuthnie (1762)^{9,11} and Williamson vs. Fordyce^{10,12}. From these court proceedings, we learned that “several of the merchants of Aberdeen were in practice to enlist boys to be indentured, to carry over as servants to the Plantations”. She worked for these merchants, providing food and lodging for the boys until they were to be taken to the colonies to work on the plantations. Helen states that the boarders often told her “that they were going to a country to eat sugar and drink wine, and looked upon their engagements as a lucky thing for them because they were going to a much better country than their own”.

It is this enticement which led to James Edwards being enlisted by a merchant named James Abernathy in 1740. He had agreed to travel to the plantations over his parent’s objections. Helen states in her depositions that James was “adamant to go”. She demanded that James Abernathy return her son, which he did, but James Edwards was stubborn and indentured himself a second time^{9,11}.

We know from the testimony of George Johnston, that James Edwards traveled with him aboard the Indian Queen, to the Occoquan Landing in what is now Prince William County, in Fairfax, Virginia.⁹
¹¹ Upon landing in Virginia, James became indentured to a man named James “Parson” Keith, a former native of Aberdeen, Scotland. Parson Keith was a minister of the Hamilton Parish, as well as a minister of the Truro Parish, during the 1740’s, while they were without a minister.¹³

We do not know exactly when James Edwards was released from his contract; however, most contracts lasted 7 years or until the indentured servant reached the age of 20 or 21, which would have been between the years, 1747-1748, respectively.¹⁴ The 1749 tithables list for Fairfax County shows Parson Keith owning a plantation upon which he did not live, but had a single white male managing 4 slaves.¹⁵ This is most likely the land Keith purchased on Sept. 20, 1740 after purchasing James Edwards' contract.^{16,17}

Unfortunately, the Truro Parish records from that time have either been lost or destroyed, including baptism and marriage records, so there is no record of when James Edwards married. However, from numerous letters between his grandchildren¹⁸ and interviews of George Edwards, by Lyman Draper¹⁹, we have been able to determine his wife and children. James married Sarah Jacobs²⁰, not Sarah Songster Everett as has been erroneously deemed as fact for many years²². They married sometime between 1748 and 1755, as their eldest daughter, Eleanor Laws Edwards was born in 1756.²¹ Family tradition lists their marriage as being around 1750.²³

During the years 1754 – 1763, Virginia was heavily involved in the French and Indian War. In October 1753, Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie, an investor in the Ohio Company, stood to lose money if the French held their claim. He called upon Major George Washington, Adjutant-General of the Virginia militia, to take a small party out and warn the French to leave the Ohio Company and Virginia Territory. He arrived at the French camp on 12 December 1753 and over dinner, provided the French Commander, Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, Dinwiddie's letter demanding France's removal from the Ohio Company and Virginia Territory. Saint-Pierre responded, "As to the summons you send me to retire, I do not think myself obliged to obey it." He believed France held a more superior claim to the Ohio region than Virginia, as the French had explored the region a century earlier. Washington returned to Virginia on 16 January 1764 with his report that "the French had swept south". The Virginia Militia gathered all those that were able to help patrol and secure the area against the French and Indians.

James Edwards and his brother-in-law, Thomas Jacobs, served together during this time patrolling the area and receiving 20 pounds in tobacco for patrolling the county borders. Their patrolling activities survive in three different sources: Fairfax County VA Court Records Index (1756-1762)²⁹, Fairfax County Minute Book (1756-1763)³⁰, and Fairfax County Court Order Books and Minute Books (1749-1867)³¹. These sources also contain other information about James Edwards' life prior to 1765.

James leased a 56 acre plantation from James Ingo Dozier on 19 Sept 1758 for a period of 21 years^{24,29}. According to Loudoun County Virginia Tithables, for 1749¹⁵, James appears to have continued working for Parson Keith as a supervisor of his slaves on the Occoquan plantation, mentioned earlier¹⁶, until he could afford to lease his own tobacco plantation.²⁵

On 21 November 1759, James Edwards paid taxes for the first time by way of the Fairfax County Tithables. A few years later on 18 June 1762, there is an entry for a court case of James Edwards vs. The King. It is an indictment stating "*ordered that a capias be issued against the defendant returnable next court*". This was an order to take James Edwards into custody. The charges are unknown. He remained in jail for two months until 17 August 1762 when his case was heard. He pled "not guilty" at his hearing and 7 months later on 17 March 1763, his indictment was dismissed and James Edwards was cleared of all charges²⁹.

A year and a half later, James Edwards' neighbor, George Simpson filed a lawsuit against him on 22 August 1764. This suit lasted until 19 February 1765 with James Edwards successfully defending the suit and George Simpson paying 52 pounds of tobacco in damages³².

According to family legends¹⁸ and The Records of John Glassford and Company²⁵, James returned to Aberdeen, Scotland twice after his indenturing. The first trip occurred early in 1765, when he saw his mother and brother for the first time in 25 years. The Colchester Store records list James Edwards arriving on 04 March 1765 aboard the "*Jamie*"^{25,27}. S.W.D. Stone, great-grandson of James Edwards, wrote¹⁸ to John West, Sr. on 01 Jul 1878 and stated the following:

"While a boy, the stories about my great-grandfather, James Edwards and his brother, the kidnapping of the one, a small boy, bringing him to America, selling him (or as it was called apprenticing) for seven

years, the cruelty as I thought of the sailors and captain picking up a small boy and carrying him off from his mother; the other going away and nothing being heard of him for so long, and then again the story of the two brothers meeting at their mother's after a separation of more than 25 years; both arriving on the same day, without either knowing the other was alive; the one taking sick so soon after meeting and dying, so quickly in the other's arms, all made such an impression on my young mind, that all the family histories and incidents have all along my life been vividly retained in my memory, and are all fresh today as they were when told me while a boy."

The Records of John Glassford and Company don't give any insight into James Edwards' second trip to Aberdeen, Scotland because the Colchester Store records for the 1770's did not survive. However, we do know that James' mother, Helen Law, died prior to the American Revolution and that James returned to Aberdeen, Scotland for his mother's funeral and inheritance. According to John West, Sr.'s reply to S.W.D. Stone¹⁸ on July 10, 1878, he received only a small amount of money from this inheritance. "*Grandfather went back to Scotland, after his mother's death, expecting something from her estate, but received but little.*" We know that the last ship to leave Aberdeen, Scotland for the Virginia/Maryland area was the brigantine "*Chester*", departing for Chestertown, Maryland on 11 November 1772.

Two years after returning to America, James Edwards purchased 208.5 acres of land from William Ellzey for £45 on 21 November 1774. This purchase was most likely made from the little he received from his mother's estate.

According to Revolutionary War Service Records contained within the United States National Archives, James Edwards entered service on 01 March 1777 as a Private in the 1st Virginia State Regiment under Captain Thomas Hamilton, commanded by Colonel George Gibson³³. He served for 3 years, as was customary, and on 20 March 1784, he was awarded 100 acres of land in Virginia, which he sold to Alexander Roan³⁴. James Edwards and his sons are listed as Heads of Families in the Records of the State of Enumeration for 1782 and 1785 for Virginia³⁶.

In 1786, James Edwards moved his entire family from Fairfax, Virginia to Kenton's Station, outside Washington, Kentucky. At that time, it was called the Limestone Settlement. By this time, James and Sarah had been blessed with 10 children^{18,35}. They had 7 boys and 3 girls named Eleanor, William, Jacob, Robert, Alexander, Nancy, James, Jane, George and John. On 03 August 1878, Orange Edwards, grandson of James Edwards, wrote to his cousin, John West Sr., regarding his grandfather's travel to Kentucky. "*Grandfather came to Virginia and settled near Alexandria and in 1786 moved to Maysville, Ky., and in 1795, moved opposite Maysville, Ky. in Ohio.*"¹⁸

On 19 September 1787, the Limestone dwellers signed a petition to form their own county, to be carved out of the existing county, Bourbon County. James Edwards, along with many others, signed the first of many petitions. Mason County was finally formed in May 1788 and named for George Mason. James Edwards signed a marriage consent, on 22 October 1787, for his daughter, Jane Edwards, to marry William Rains. This record is kept in the Mason Country Clerk's Office in Maysville, Ky.

The First Census of Kentucky was prepared in 1790 and contained a list of taxpayers for the state of Kentucky. The census shows James Edwards paying his taxes on 21 August 1790 in Mason County. In 1795, James Edwards and his wife, Sarah, sold their property in Washington, Kentucky to William Clarke. James Kay originally sold this property to James Edwards upon his arrival to the Limestone Settlement in 1786.³⁶

Once he received payment for this property, James Edwards used that money to purchase land across the Ohio River from Maysville, Ky. This land was comprised of 1,000 acres of land granted to Phillip Slaughter of the Commonwealth of Virginia by patent on 10 February 1789. Slaughter then hired an attorney named Robert Coleman to sell this property for him. Robert Coleman sold that property to James Edwards on 06 August 1796.³⁹

From other records, we find that James Edwards must have acquired the rights to settle this land in 1795 and he immediately named this area "*Aberdeen*" after his native homeland, Aberdeen, Scotland.

On 24 April 1795, James Edwards entered into an agreement with John Ludwick, selling him one half acre of land and then promising to deliver another 5 acres of land on 01 May 1796. The deed states that the area of land being purchased was already called Aberdeen by this time⁴⁰.

Article of an agreement made and concluded upon this twenty-fourth day of April Anno Domini one thousand and seven hundred and ninety-five between James Edwards of the county of Mason and Commonwealth of Kentucky of the one part and John Ludwick of the county and Commonwealth aforesaid of the other part witnesseth that for and in consideration hereafter mentioned and to be paid by the said John Ludwick heirs executors or administrators to the said James Edwards his heirs executors or administrators he, the said James Edwards, hath granted bargained and sold to the said John Ludwick his heirs executors and administrators or assigns a certain lot or parcel of land situate lying and being in the Northwest Territory opposite to the town of Maysville adjoining to lott number in said town to contain one full half acre to be laid off in the form of said lotts in said Aberdeen...

Another record, which shows that James Edwards and his family were living in Aberdeen prior to the formal purchase of the land from Phillip Slaughter's attorney, Robert Coleman, on 06 August 1796, is the Northwest Territorial Papers, provided free of charge on the Ohio Genealogical Society Website⁴¹.

Page 372 - *“June the 16th. 1796 Licenses for keeping Ferries this Day granted to George Edwards of the Town of Aberdeen and Hamilton County - and Heath of Clarksville in Knox County from the Landings opposite the houses where they now reside across the Ohio river to the shore of Kentucky and opposite their respective Landings -- to continue in Effect one Year.”*

Pages 408-409 - *“November the 15th, 1796 – Governour St. Clair absent, a License for keeping a Ferry over the Ohio River was granted to Nathan Ellis for the Term of one Year -- from the Landing nearly opposite the house where he now resides in Hamilton County to the mouth of Lime Stone Creek upon the Shores of Kentucky, By the Secretary.”*

Page 422 - *“June the 16th, 1797 – George Edwards of Aberdeen in Hamilton County was authorized to keep a Ferry across the Ohio River from the Landing against the house of his residence to the Shores of Kentucky and opposite the same for the Term of one Year from the Date.”*

Page 528 - *“October the 1st, 1799. – License to Keep a ferry for one year from the date hereof was granted to James Edwards from the mouth of a Gut nearly opposite Limestone to the opposite Kentucky Shore.”*

As shown in the above 4 references pulled from *The Executive Journal of the Northwest Territory*, James Edwards and his family not only lived across from Maysville prior to the purchase of the land from Phillip Slaughter, but they were establishing business and had already named the location, Aberdeen, as shown in the ferry license granted to George Edwards. The ferry license for James Edwards, on page 528, can also be found in the Adams County Deed Book⁴².

Nathan Ellis arrived in Aberdeen shortly after it was founded, but he did arrive *after* it was founded. The Ellis ferry license, mentioned on pages 408-409 of *The Executive Journal of the Northwest Territory*, is the first mention of Nathan Ellis in the journal. On 16 December 1797, 13 months after establishing a ferry service, Nathan Ellis purchased 227.75 acres of land from James Edwards, nearly a quarter of the land James Edwards originally purchased from Phillip Slaughter⁴³.

James Edwards continued to remain active in Aberdeen, selling more and more land to new people as they arrived. On 19 February 1800, James and his wife, Sarah, sold another 206 acres of land to a man named Charles Osler⁴⁴. On 24 January 1803, James Edwards sold another 105 acres of land to a man named William Patterson⁴⁵.

Two weeks later, James Edwards became ill and felt the need to write his last will and testament. This will was written on 09 February 1803. It lists the businesses that James operated, those being a ferry

service and a mill. It also gave the land he owned to his son George, and in this will he named the area Aberdeen⁴⁶.

In the Name of God, Amen. I, James Edwards of Adams County in the State of Ohio, being in a weakly state of body tho of sound mind, memory & understanding and calling to mind the uncertainty of this transitory life do make and publish and declare this my last Will and Testament in the manner and form following vis: first of all I give and bequeath into my beloved son, Geo. Edwards ten acres of ground on the lower side of Fishing Gut to include house running up gut with Rains until it – line crossed the same. I give and bequeath also to him ten acres of ground around the mill on same gut, to begin at the lower corner of Scotts garden and run up the hill so as to take in ten acres to him his heirs and assigns forever. Also I give and bequeath to my said son Geo. Edwards the whole of the land and premises together with appurtenances that is now in my hand (commonly called Aberdeen) being part of a survey made in the name of Philip Slaughter binding on G. River Ohio...

There are many interesting things about this will. First, it is interesting to note that he names the area they are living as “commonly called Aberdeen” because it had not been incorporated yet. Nathan Ellis incorporated Aberdeen in 1816; however, an incorporation date is not the same as a founding date. Ohio did not even become a state until 01 March 1803, well after the founding of Aberdeen, and shortly after James Edwards wrote his last will and testament.

Second, another interesting item is the mentioning of the “gut” both in this will and also in the ferry license granted to James Edwards in 1799. James Edwards' will goes into more detail about it, calling it Fishing Gut. There is a mill along it and the ferry operating at the mouth of the gut. This can only be Fishing Gut Creek, which runs alongside what is now the Aberdeen Community Park. The naming of this creek had to have been done by James Edwards when he first settled the area, as only someone from Scotland would have called a narrow stream a “gut”.

According to the *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the American Revolution buried in the State of Ohio*, James Edwards died in 1804 and was buried in the Old Aberdeen Cemetery. This book also lists him as the founder of Aberdeen, Ohio, naming it after his birthplace. “EDWARDS, JAMES, (Brown Co.) - Pvt Capt Thomas Hamilton Company, 1st Va Regt commanded by Col George Gibson. Br Aberdeen, Scotland. Parents: Robert Edwards and Eleanor Laws. Mar Sarah Everett, after 1750 in NY. Children : William Everett, James, Alexander, Jacob, George, Eleanor, Jane, Nancy. D 1804 Aberdeen, Brown Co, O. Bur Old Cemetery, Aberdeen, O. Came to Ohio early; bought 1000 acres and laid out town of Aberdeen, O named it for his birth place, Aberdeen, Scotland.”⁴⁷

From escaping a life of famine and poverty, to being sold as a bond servant, fighting in 2 wars and founding a town in the frontier territory of Ohio, I don't believe there can be any doubt about the extraordinary life James Edwards lived or the contributions he made to Ohio and America. His legacy is one which should be honored and remembered, not discarded and forgotten. Unfortunately, the flooding of the Ohio River in 1937 washed away the graves in the Old Aberdeen Cemetery, but his memory lives on in the legacies he left.

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6. Helen Hinchliff. (1994, November). *William Edward: The Fortunes of an Eighteenth-Century Aberdeenshire Miller, Part 2.* Aberdeen & North East Scotland Family History Society (ANESFHS), Journal 53 (pp: 05-10)
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16. Prince William Deed Book E. (1740-1741). *Deed for purchase of 1025 acres of land along Woolf Run branch of Occoquan, Fairfax County, between John Lee and Rev. James Keith for £170.* (20 Sep 1740. pg. 136)
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44. Ibid. *James Edwards and his wife, Sarah, sold 206 acres of land to Charles Osler on 19 February 1800, which came from the original 1000 acres of land previously purchased from Phillip Slaughter.* (1800) pp. 126-127
45. Ibid. *James Edwards sold 105 acres of land to William Patterson on 24 January 1803, which came from the original 1000 acres of land previously purchased from Phillip Slaughter.* (1803) pp. 301-302
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