

THE PHELPS FAMILY OF EAST TENNESSEE

HISTORY AND TRADITIONS

2014

This much is certain. From official records and recent DNA analysis, our first ancestor to arrive in America was George Fulp who came to Pennsylvania from Germany in the mid-1700s. He was approximately 33 years old and not accompanied by wife or family.

Immigration records show that a man named Georg Volpp arrived from Germany at the port of Philadelphia aboard the ship Phoenix on September 25, 1751. In the German language, the letter “V” is pronounced like the letter “F” in English. On good authority, we strongly believe Georg Volpp became George Fulp. Changing the spelling of one’s name was common for new immigrants trying to adapt to the New World. Later in Tennessee, we know that Fulp became (among other spellings) Felps and then Phelps. Our relatives who remained in North Carolina continued to use the Fulp spelling. Their descendants still do.

George Fulp joined the hundreds of other German immigrants welcomed to Philadelphia in the first half of the 18th century by the liberal-minded Quaker, William Penn. The King of England had granted what we now call Pennsylvania to Penn to pay off debts that the crown owed William’s father, a high ranking Royal Navy officer.

Germantown, Pennsylvania which lay just north of the port city of Philadelphia was more often than not the first stop after landing for new immigrants like George Fulp. It was a place with language and custom that they understood. From there, newly arrived Germans often moved to Berks County before moving westward to Lancaster and other counties where there was modestly priced land for sale to the few who had money and farm work available for those who didn’t.

Many who had left Germany in the early 1700s did so out of desperation. The Reformation in the Christian church begun by Martin Luther and others had caused long-lasting upheaval in the European social structure. And the injustice of the feudal system of landholding promoted long wars, famine, and hopelessness. The daunting prospect of a dangerous two-month sea journey to an unknown land must have seemed small in comparison to enduring the dead-end life of a near-slave called a serf who tilled the soil and fought the wars for the princely class.

Many desperate German immigrants began their journey to America without enough money to pay their passage. They depended on selling themselves to the highest bidder upon arrival. They were called “redemptioners” and their period of indentured servitude normally lasted three to seven years. George Fulp could very well have been among this group.

In 1752, thirty four year-old George Fulp married thirty eight year-old Mary H. Phillips from the town of Exeter in Berks County, Pennsylvania. The union of Mary and George produced five children - three boys and two girls, all born in Pennsylvania. They named the boys Valentine, Michael, and Peter; the girls Mary and Catherine. (It was German custom for individuals to have only one name instead of our contemporary practice of all having a middle name or initial.)

In the mid-1760's, after living for ten years or more in Pennsylvania, George and Mary Fulp moved south with their young family to sparsely inhabited North Carolina, settling in the area just north of present-day Winston-Salem. Their route from Pennsylvania was probably down the well-traveled Great Wagon Road through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Their move was likely influenced by the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 which brought a measure of peace to the frontier. Additionally, in the same period, there were large numbers of their fellow Pennsylvanians of Moravian and Quaker persuasions moving to North Carolina, seeking new environs in which to live out their religious convictions. There is no evidence that George and Mary was Moravian, but there is much to indicate that they were religious and sympathetic with the Moravian belief system and life style. Shortly before his death in 1786, George Fulp requested that a Moravian "brother" conduct his funeral. George's obituary in the Moravian newspaper indicated that Moravian services had been held several times over the years in the Fulp home.

Regarding the children of George and Mary Fulp, there is little doubt that Valentine was the oldest, being born about 1753 and named first in his father's will written in 1786. After receiving an inheritance of "thirty pounds hard cash together with a black hooved horse", there is much to suggest that Valentine moved from North Carolina before 1790 across the mountains to the part of the country that in 1796 would become the state of Tennessee. Later (around 1815) there is little doubt that Valentine (now with a wife and children) moved still farther west to what we now call Illinois.

Second son Michael was born to George and Mary in 1755 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He became a farmer, a Revolutionary War soldier, and father of a large family.

Daughter Mary was born in 1757 and married a man named Taylor but little else is known of her.

Catherine was born in 1759. In 1786 she was unmarried and living in her father's household.

Peter was born in 1761 and grew up in North Carolina to make a name for himself as a land speculator and Revolutionary War hero, being among the American patriots who defeated the British at the legendary battle of King's Mountain in 1780.

Michael, Peter, Mary, and Catherine all lived out their lives in North Carolina near the original family homestead. Many of their descendants still live there.

We have no document that places second generation Valentine Fulp/Felps/Phelps in either Tennessee or Illinois, but the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming. It is documented that Blount County third generation Henry Phelps was born in Tennessee in 1799. He is first seen in the public record in the 1830 census in Claiborne County, Tennessee. Phelps family members now living in Illinois trace their ancestry

back to the early 1800s to a third generation Michael Phelps who was born in Tennessee in 1797 and lived in Illinois all his adult life. DNA analysis proves that Blount County ancestor Henry Phelps and Illinois ancestor Michael Phelps are descended from original immigrant George Fulp. Documentary evidence from Illinois court records indicates that Michael and Henry are brothers. And documentary evidence shows that Henry Phelps was in Illinois before returning to Tennessee at age twenty-eight or so. The possibility that Henry is descended from second generation Michael or Peter Fulp is eliminated by sworn affidavits by their widows which list their children but do not include Henry. Thus it is concluded that the father of third generation Henry Phelps (father of Daniel Richard and our direct ancestor) was second generation Valentine Fulp.

Since several third generation Fulps from North Carolina migrated to Claiborne County, Tennessee, it is reasonable and likely that second generation Valentine preceded them there. Regrettably, early records in Claiborne County were destroyed in two court house fires. All land, marriage, voting, court, death records, or such which could have enlightened researchers about the life of Valentine not available.

We do not know the name of Valentine's wife and mother of their six children. Nor do we know the date or place of either of their deaths. But a court record of litigation involving the sale of a tract of land in Illinois in 1855 states the names of the children as George, Michael, Peter, Henry, Catherine and Elizabeth.

Two credible documents indicate that Henry Phelps was living in Illinois in the 1820s when he decided to return to Tennessee. He and Rhoda Lebo (Lebow), daughter of Daniel Lebo of Claiborne County, Tennessee were married in 1828. Rhoda was born in Illinois in 1815. In 1830 they lived in Claiborne County. Prior to 1840 they moved to Blount County, Tennessee. By 1850 they lived in the Middlesettlements Community on a farm which included what later was called Lovingood Spring.

Henry and Rhoda had eleven children beginning with Mary Jane in 1828. Then followed William Thompson, James Jefferson, Sarah Selina, Martha Malvina, Daniel Richard, John Michael, George Henry, Hiram Thomas, Frances Eliza, and Henry. Mary Jane's daughter Rhoda lived in the household at one time. Henry (the father) died about 1859 leaving Rhoda with seven children still at home.

Four of Rhoda's sons fought for the Union in the Civil War. William Thompson and John Michael served in Company A, Third Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry. William was known in his unit as "Dad", probably because he was older (34). An officer in his regiment described him as "as excellent soldier, kind-hearted, and brave as a lion". George Henry served in Company L, Second Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry. Daniel Richard served in Company D, Sixth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry and fought in the battle of Atlanta and other major engagements under General William T. Sherman. James Jefferson was shot and left for dead near his home by Confederate recruiters for refusing to join the Confederate army. He recovered from his wounds, had a family, and later moved west to settle in Oklahoma.

Most of the Third Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry, including John Michael and William Thompson, were captured by Confederate forces under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest near Athens, Alabama in September, 1864. They were imprisoned at Cahaba, Alabama. When the war ended in spring, 1865 they were put aboard the steamboat Sultana for a journey to Ohio where they were to be

mustered out of the army. The Sultana vastly overloaded and in poor repair, exploded and sank near Memphis, Tennessee about midnight on April 27, 1865. William Thompson was killed. John Michael survived. Daniel Richard, George Henry, and James Jefferson survived the war. Youngest son Henry died before reaching adulthood.

In 1867 Rhoda, a widow who had suffered through the Civil War with a house full of children and no men to work the farm, somehow managed to scrape together \$1450 to buy the 166 acre farm where the family lived. In 1870, Daniel Richard, George, Hiram, and Eliza still lived in Rhoda's household.

Hiram and Eliza were both married to members of the Gideon family but neither marriage produced children. Hiram's marriage was brief.

Rhoda Phelps died in 1880. She willed the farm to the children still living there – Daniel Richard, Hiram, Martha, and Eliza.

In 1882 Daniel Richard Phelps married Sarah Jane Lebow. They lived on the 166-acre Phelps family farm and raised a family of six children – Rhoda Ethel, William Esco, Richard Earl, Vola Beatrice, Vivan Blaine, and Henry Verlan. All lived and raised families in Blount County except Vola who married Rol Talbott and moved to Colorado where they raised a family.

Daniel Richard Phelps died in 1912 without making a will which necessitated the selling of the farm to meet requirements of law pertaining to the settlement of such estates. The farm was sold at auction on the steps of the Blount County Courthouse on the 13th day of December, 1913 for \$3502. The buyer was W. B. Lovingood.

Sarah Jane Phelps died in 1927. Daniel Richard and Sarah Jane are buried in the cemetery at Middlesettlements United Methodist Church in Blount County.

The Phelps family name is carried on in Blount County by the descendants of Daniel Richard and George Henry Phelps. A family reunion is held each year on the 3rd Sunday in July. The reunion was most recently held at the Mentor Community Center in Blount County.

Epilogue

Until 2010, the Phelps family of Blount County, Tennessee knew from family tradition only that they were of German descent and came to Tennessee from North Carolina. From official census records and family documents, they knew they were descended from Henry Phelps who was born in Tennessee in 1799 and Rhoda Lebow Phelps who was born in Illinois in 1815. They knew that Henry and Rhoda were married in Claiborne County in 1828 and moved to Blount County before 1850. And they knew that Rhoda's father was Daniel Lebow of Claiborne County. But **Henry's parents were not known** which presented a "stone wall" blocking further research.

In early 2010 a Phelps family member solicited information on the internet regarding early Phelps family history. A retired geneticist and amateur genealogist living in Ashville, North Carolina responded with information about the Fulp family in North Carolina, posing the possibility that the Phelps of Tennessee and the Fulps of North Carolina were descended from the same ancestor, therefore the same family. DNA tests quickly confirm that to be true. It was immediately known that the George and Mary Fulp who were married in Pennsylvania in 1752 were our ancestors and that we were descended from one of their three sons – Valentine, Michael, or Peter. The question of **which son** remained.

In 2010 a Phelps family member sponsored a Fulp/Phelps website on the internet and in 2013 the website was discovered by a Dennis Phelps living in St. Clair County, Illinois who claimed that his ancestor Michael was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1797 and lived his adult life in Illinois. Subsequent DNA tests proved that Dennis was descended from first generation George Fulp through one of his sons – Valentine, Michael, or Peter.

In November of 2010 the record of an 1855 law suit involving a dispute over sale of Phelps-owned land in St. Clair County, Illinois was discovered. The critically important part of the document was a listing of the children of second generation Valentine. The children were George, Michael, Peter, Henry, Catherine, and Elizabeth. There is little doubt now that the Henry is the Henry who moved to Tennessee and the Michael is the ancestor of Dennis Phelps of St. Claire County, Illinois. The Peter listed is likely the Peter who is shown in the 1860 Claiborne County, Tennessee census as 60 years old, impoverished and mentally ill.

By deductive reasoning, since second generation Michael and Peter lived all their lives in North Carolina, it is very unlikely that they ever came to Tennessee, much less Illinois. And while second generation Michael and Peter both had sons that were named Michael, both lived and died in North Carolina. Thus, neither of them were the ancestor of Dennis Phelps in Illinois. That leaves only Valentine.

With many indicators now pointing to second generation Valentine as our ancestor, a new look at all collected family historical papers seemed appropriate. The new effort turned up two documents that had been available all along but had been discounted due to what was believed to be erroneous statements.

The first discounted document was a brief history of the family written by fourth generation Verlan Phelps (grandson of Henry and son of Daniel Richard) in which he states that, "Valentine Phelps came from Germany to Illinois. One of his sons Henry left home (in Illinois) and came to Tenn and married Rhoda Lebow...". Verlan's statement had been discounted because it seemed implausible that a German immigrant would come directly from Germany and settle in Illinois in the 18th century. At that time we did not know that the family had landed in Pennsylvania around 1750 and moved to North Carolina around 1765 before some members headed west in the 1790 – 1820 period.

The second discounted document was the write-up of an interview of a Phelps family member by noted Blount County amateur historian Will E. Parham which contained essentially the same information as the Verlan Phelps document. It is believed that the source of this valuable and correct information was Sarah Jane Phelps, widow of Daniel Richard Phelps who was a son of Henry Phelps.

To date there is no documentary evidence placing second generation Valentine in Tennessee or Illinois. Two courthouse fires in Claiborne County destroyed early land and court records there, wiping out any paper trail Valentine may have left. Illinois was not admitted as a state until 1818 which suggests that early record keeping there may have been minimal. Additional research in the archives of libraries and other repositories in southern Illinois are ongoing.

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Note: This document and other Phelps family information is available at www.phelpsancestry.com and at www.phelpfulpsancestry.com