

John Counts Junior Biographical Sketch

Source: "SOME DESCENDANTS OF JOHN COUNTS OF GLADE HOLLOW (Southwest Virginia) 1722-1977" by Elihu Jasper Sutherland and Hetty Swindall Sutherland, published 1978. Pages 76-78.

Note: This Biographical Sketch was given by E. J. Sutherland at the unveiling of the John Counts Memorial Bridge in 1953. (See also three photos)

JOHN COUNTS OF CLEVELAND

Sketch by Elihu Jasper Sutherland
COUNTS REUNION 1953

John Counts was born about 1765 and died October 1, 1843, at Cleveland, Russell County, Virginia, where he had lived for more than 55 years. For that reason and because there have been so many John Countses in Russell County, he is known as "John Counts of Cleveland." His parents were John and Mary Magdeline ____? Counts, who moved from Shenandoah County, Virginia in 1789, and settled in Glade Hollow, Russell County, Va. For that reason his father is known among his descendants as "John Counts of Glade Hollow."

The first known record of "John Counts of Cleveland" is found in the personal property tax lists for Shenandoah County for 1787, which reports him as a tithable over 21 years of age in the family of Jacob Raresnake, his brother-in-law. His name does not appear in any subsequent tax list for that county. He moved to Russell County during the same year, and the Russell County tax list shows a John Counts assessed as of 21 June 1787, the owner of one horse, and living in the Upper District. The one tithable listed in his family indicates that he was married and head of a family at that date.

Russell County Entry Book No. 1, at page 23, gives this data: "1787, Nov 20 - John Counts enters 50 acres of land by part of warrant NO. 14803 dated Nov 9, 1787, lying and beginning at the Widow Lard's old place between that and the River, lying on both sides of a branch that runs into the river." This tract is included in the town of Cleveland on the south side of Clinch River. He probably established his first home in Russell County on this tract.

One June 17, 1797, the Grand Jury presented: "A bill found against Obediah Payne for abusing John Counts and Robing said Counts of his papers and forging an order in the name of Frances Hines presented by the oath of John Counts." (L O B 1, p 103) The Grand Jury acted again on 26 June, 1791, with a "Presentment against Patrick Coye and John Counts for fishing and breaking the peace the 26th day of April, 1797."

He was an enthusiastic follower of Nimrod the Hunter and roamed the mountain wilderness near his home year after year in search of game. That he was successful is shown by the County Court records, which reveal that he was allowed the following claims: 23 July 1793 - 12/6 (twelve shillings and 6 pence) for "killing one old wolfe;" and 28 October, 1798 - 25/6 for "killing two old wolves."

Mr. Counts occasionally sat on the county juries, and only one civil case of record shows him as a party. At the June 1774 term of the County Court he was sued by George McCoy. The case was continued and tried 24 September 1794, the jury finding "that the defendant did not assume upon himself as in pleadings he (McCoy) hath alleged," and it was "considered by the court that the plaintiff take nothing by his Bill." McCoy's witnesses were Joseph Kiser, Edward Kelley, Abram Childris (Childress), William Smith, James Roberts, and John Craig. Counts' witnesses were Henry Willard, Joseph or James Hatfield, Luke Kelley, and John Damron.

On 1 October 1790, John Counts entered fifty acres of land "on north side of Clinch River adjoining the land of Cornelius Robt. Dec'd on his east line and on both sides of the path leading from sd. Roberts to Dumps Creek that crosses the low gap." However a marginal notation states "This entry void war'd Ass'd to Rich. Price." On 24 May 1800, "John Counts, Junr." entered "fifty acres of land by Virtue of part of a Land Office Treasury Warrant No. 2438, dated March 14, 1798, lying in Russell Co. on the south side of Clinch River Beginning at a walnut on the line of sd. Counts land and running up the River on the said line till about two poles below the mouth of Joseph McRenals Spring Branch then nearly a south course thence westward then to the Beginning."

In March 1798, he purchased a tract of 165 acres from Richard and Lucy Price on Clinch River. This tract was on the north side of Clinch River, opposite his 50 acre entry in 1787, and is the tract on which he lived the latter part of his life. We are meeting today on this tract of land.

His first residence on this tract stood near a bold limestone spring near the north end of the present bridge. Later this log house was moved up the hill about one hundred yards, and two rounds of new logs added. It was two stories high and about 18 by 20 feet in dimensions. The floor was made of puncheons, and one of its doors was hewed oak, made of two pieces, the wider one at the door was fastened together with wooden pegs. Tradition has it that this door was made thick and strong to protect from Indians. As late as 1794 the Red Men made murderous raids in Southwest Virginia. On the upper side of the first story a foot-square opening had been cut for use as a port-hole in case of attack by savages. About 1910, his grandson Joshua J Counts tore down the old house, and part of the bricks in the large chimney were used in building a new chimney in the Josh Counts residence now standing. One of the old bricks had the date 1824 painted on it.

Mr Counts became a member of the Reeds Valley Baptist Church prior to 1823 (the date of the earliest existing records) and remained a faithful member until his death. He was one of the messengers from his church to the meeting of the Washington District Baptist Association held at Stony Creek Church in 1822. He was regularly a participant in church and other local activities and contributed financially to their support.

While He was a public-spirited and influential citizen of Russell County, the only office he ever held was that of constable in his district, being appointed to this office on 1 June, 1813, and executing bond for said office in the sum of \$500.00 with George Counts and Jacob Raresnake as sureties.

In addition to his real estate he had considerable personal property for his time. He owned much live-stock. During the latter part of his life he was a slave-holder, owning seven at his death. He built a comfortable residence for his slaves a few feet from his own residence, with a covered entry between the two houses. For years "Nigger Lewis" was his faithful personal servant, nursing him tenderly the last fourteen years of his life, during which time he was afflicted by "drawing rheumatism." In his will he gave this colored man to his son John (Jackie) Counts, and called him "My black man Lewis." On 4 April 1837, he and Simon Dotson were exempted by the County Court from the "payment of County levies and poor rates on account of their age and bodily infirmities."

His youngest son, Ezekiel Counts, to whom he willed his home farm, lived with him and helped care for him in his feeble old age. On pleasant days he would sit in a rocking-chair in the entry between the two houses in order to get the benefit of fresh air and to help supervise his farm work. One day he had just gone into his room when the dogs chased a large antlered buck down the hillside above the house. Being hemmed in by high fences, the excited animal leaped into the yard-paling, dashed madly though the entry (barely vacated by the crippled man) and fled into the deep river for protection from the dogs.

Eight years before his death he prepared his will in the presence of his neighbors, Fleming Burk, Jr., John Smith, and Harvey Gray, as witnesses. The will was probated and recorded in the Clerk's Office of Russell County, Virginia, 5 December 1843. The inventory of his personal property taken in December 1843 by George L Jessee and John Counts, Jr., Administrators, and Harvey Gray, John Dickenson, and Benjamin Shoemaker, and the value of the personal property was fixed at \$3,293.25.

John Counts married Margaret "Peggy" Kelly (birth date unknown; died 6 July 1835). The names of her parents are unknown. She was a sister of Elder Edward Kelly, one of the earliest and best known Baptist ministers in Southwest Virginia. The Kelly's came to Washington (now Russell) County, Virginia, from Shenandoah County, Virginia, where they had been neighbors of the Counts family prior to their removal to Clinch Valley.

Like her husband, Margaret became a faithful member of Reeds Valley Baptist Church prior to 1823. It is said that Peggy Kelly Counts was of Irish extraction, and that she was red-headed. Many of her numerous descendants claim their auburn locks were inherited from her. John Counts was of German ancestry. Both were buried in the Ezekiel Counts Graveyard on their farm on the north side of Clinch River. Native limestone markers, without inscriptions, show their final resting place.

The descendants of John Counts of Cleveland are numerous. While they have been predominately farmers, many of them were ministers, school teachers, college professors, doctors, dentists, lawyers, judges, bankers, soldiers, sailors, marines, and business men and women. Many of them have served as officers in their counties, such as circuit and county court judges, circuit court clerks, sheriffs, commonwealth's attorneys, county treasurers, commissioners of the revenue, supervisors, superintendents of schools, notary publics, and postmasters. At least twelve of his descendants are candidates for public office – two in Dickenson County, Glynn R Phillips and Ben F Sutherland; 1 in Buchanan County, Vernon

Smith; 1 in Wise County, J Lincoln Kiser; and 1 in Albemarle and Green counties, Clair Compton.

The inscription on the plaques on this bridge, which we will now unveil is:

JOHN COUNTS
MEMORIAL BRIDGE
BUILT 1953
Built in Memory of John Counts 1765 – 1843
Pioneer, Land-owner and First Settler at Cleveland
Russell County, Virginia, 1787
He helped bring civilization into the wilderness”