

CORNELIUS COOLEY, "THE SOLDIER"

Genealogy is loaded with words such as "circa," "perhaps," "MNU" (maiden name unknown), "about," "probably," and "if." Without the certainty of facts, a genealogical narrative can be difficult—almost painful—to read. Cornelius Cooley is a case in point.

Pat Walker stated on his family group sheet for John Cooley of Stokes County, North Carolina that Cornelius was born in North Carolina in 1781. He noted that Cornelius was also known as Benjamin. It's not clear why he believed that other than the fact that a Benjamin Cooley is listed on the 1820 census for Stokes County. We now know, however, that Benjamin was not of the Stokes County Cooleys. In 2012, one of Benjamin's patrilineal descendants had his Y chromosome tested. The results not only mismatch the Stokes Cooleys, they suggest that Benjamin Coley (as he is most often listed) might have been related to the John Cooley clan of Halifax County, North Carolina.¹

John Cooley moved his family from North Carolina to Lincoln County, Kentucky in 1805 or '06. Cornelius is first found in the public record on the 1808 tax list for Casey County.² The household consisted of one white male over 21 having one horse. He appears again on the 1810 tax list with four horses. Nothing more is known of him in Kentucky, but a Cornelius Cooley is mentioned in several Stewart County, Tennessee records beginning in 1812. An entry for him on the tax list for that year is followed by Richard Cooley—William Matthews Cooley's son—and William himself.³ An 1814 deed between William Wallace and his son Etheldred E. Wallace

¹ FTDNA kit #251228, Cooley group CF09,
<http://www.familytreedna.com/public/Cooley/default.aspx?section=yresults>.

² Casey County split from Lincoln County in 1807.

³ "1812 Stewart Co. Tax List," TSLA Early TN Tax Lists, Roll 8 (Rutherford - Sumner), Capt. Pearce's Company, by David Hogan, <http://www.tngenweb.org/stewart/1812tax.htm>.

makes reference to "where Cornelius Cooley lives,"⁴ and Cornelius is listed that same year as an ensign in Captain James Gray's company.⁵

Gray's company was part of General Andrew Jackson's river flotilla to New Orleans where they engaged the British in the legendary battle. Infectious disease swept over the army and Cornelius died from illness on February 16, 1815. Two and half months later, Lucinda Cooley (presumed by researchers to have been Cornelius's wife), William Cherry, James Blanks, and Henry Gibson were named administrators for his estate.⁶ On May 5, 1818, the Stewart County court appointed guardianship of Cornelius's daughter, "Burnetta Methews Cooley," to William Cherry.⁷ Cornelius's estate was finally settled in 1821.⁸ Five years later, William Cherry's died, his estate sold, and John K. Colson, James Scarborough, and John James acquired a guardianship bond for Barnett [sic] Cooley. The last record we find relating to Cornelius's family is an 1828 "guardian's return by John K. Colson, guardian for Barnet [sic] Cooley."⁹

That's the extent of the record. No record is known that proves Cornelius's parentage, age, birthplace, or marriage. All that is certain is that he lived in Stewart County, that he died at New Orleans in 1815, and that he had a daughter named Burnetta. The inference that he was the same Cornelius Cooley of Casey County is strong. Given that, we know he was born by 1789 (per the 1808 tax list) and, if Pat was right, he may have been born as early as 1781. But in regards to his

⁴ "Misc. Stewart County Tennessee Deed Book Extracts, Stewart County Deed Book E (5), Nov 1813 - Jul 1818," page 260, <http://www.tngenweb.org/stewart/deed/stewdeed.htm>.

⁵ "Stewart Countians and the War of 1812," <http://www.tngenweb.org/stewart/1812wa.htm>.

⁶ "Stewart County Bonds and Settlements, Book 3," page 57, 1 May, 1815, <http://www.tngenweb.org/stewart/will/WillBook3.htm>.

⁷ "Stewart County Court Minutes: 1817-1819," page 268, 5 May 1818, <http://www.tngenweb.org/stewart/minutes1818.htm>.

⁸ "Stewart County Court Minutes, Aug. 1821 - May 1824," page 10, 7 August 1821, <http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnstewar/minutes1821.htm>.

⁹ "Stewart County Settlements and Bonds, Volume B (Nov. 1824 - Feb. 1829)," page 108, 16 June 1826. Although the will of William Cherry (page 110) references his wife and children, it names only one person, his daughter Nica Hickson; page 105, 7 August 1826; page 249, Feb. term 1828;

father, we have only Pat Walker's word.

If Cornelius was born in North Carolina to John in 1781 he would have been about five years old when William last left Stokes County for Kentucky. William appears to have moved on to Tennessee by the time John and most of the remainder of his family left Stokes County for Kentucky in 1805/06. We don't have anything resembling an exact date for either of these moves but the paths of John and William could well have crossed for a time in Kentucky. Otherwise, Cornelius would have been about twenty years old and barely acquainted with William when he moved to Tennessee five or six years later. Guesses can only be made about what inspired him to go to Tennessee rather than to Missouri with Joseph, Perrin, and James, or to Indiana to join Edward.

However, if we do not accept Pat's account, the theory that Cornelius was William's son makes a lot of sense: he stayed in Casey County to manage William's interests or simply to remain near his grandfather, and reunited with his father after John's death. If that is true, we would expect references to Cornelius's heirs in the settlement of William's estate, as happened with Joel's heirs. That none are listed would simply mean Cornelius had no living heirs—and that appears to have been the case.

Whatever the facts of Cornelius's paternity are, we do have the one reliable record of a blood relationship—to his daughter, Burnetta Mathews Cooley. Apart from the identity of her guardians, with whom she likely lived, we know next to nothing about her. She was still a minor in 1828, which would place her birth anytime after 1807. Even if she was posthumously born, she could not have been born after 1815. Burnetta, then, would have reached majority age anytime between 1828 and 1836.

That Burnetta was placed under the guardianship of William Cherry in 1818 suggests that

her mother had died. I have seen no trace of Burnetta, Bernita, etc. after 1828, and the record reveals nothing more about Lucinda after 1815. A now-defunct website stated that Lucinda was William Cherry's daughter, but I have found no other such reference.¹⁰ A Lucy Coley (58, NC) is listed on the 1850 census for Sumner County, Tennessee along with her presumed daughter Martha (36, NC).¹¹ William Coley, born in North Carolina about 1810, and his wife Rosa are living next door.¹² Although the family is worth noting—including William Coley's marriage to Rosey Perry in Sumner County on June 2, 1828—nothing more has been found regarding Lucy's family.¹³

In all likelihood, Cornelius has no living descendants. Unless we find his grave—possibly in the ground under a Louisiana strip mall—and are given unlikely permission to exhume the body, there is little chance of gathering DNA evidence. Until a more revealing record is found, we are left to speculate about his parentage and the apparent sad fate of his daughter, Burnetta.

¹⁰ The website was once at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~eazier1/Cherry/CHERRY-SE.htm>.

¹¹ James L. McKoin; p. 196 [handwritten], line 26, Enumeration District 15, Sumner County, Tennessee Census of Population; *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850* (National Archives Microfilm Publications M432, roll 897); Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29.

¹² McKoin, line 29.

¹³ *Marriages of Sumner County, Tennessee 1787-1838* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1981), 70.