

The Family Story of John R. McInnis - A Tale of the Carolina Pine Barrens

John McInnis first appears on the tax rolls of Cumberland County, North Carolina in 1778 living on Anderson's Creek. From ensuing census records and wills, it is reliably accepted that he was the immigrant head of our line. He was born in 1744, probably on the Isle of Jura. His Grandfather was Gilbert McInnis of whom we know very little and before whom we know nothing. Gilbert had at least one son, Angus who, in turn, had at least two sons, one of whom was our John. The name of the other son is unknown. From these two sons of Angus arose two extensive families closely tied to this day. The tie is both by acquaintance and genetics.

Cumberland County was carved from Bladen County in 1754. At one time, Bladen County was the largest in the State and fifty five present-day counties have been born from it in whole or part. Highland Scots were lured there by the promise of cheap land they could farm year-round augmented by plentiful game. They were driven from their homeland by high rents, meager income, exhausted farms, and later by the "Clearances". What they found in North Carolina was the "Pine Barrens" – vast, marshy forests of long leaf pine considered by earlier settlers too difficult to farm. But, in time, these newcomers tamed it.

The Waccamaw, Coharie and Cheraw/Lumbee tribes had lived thereabouts for centuries. Bison once roamed the area. On their migratory pathways, Indian trade roads, and later, highways were built. The Pine Barrens is drained by small streams of potable water often stained brown by tannins in the pine needles that drop over land and stream to slowly decompose. The area is believed to have once had over 1,000 small lakes. Most of the streams fed the Cape Fear River which became the route many immigrants used to reach the Cumberland. Anderson's Creek was one of them - situated perhaps 20 miles north of Cross Creek (later Fayetteville). It is not known whether the actual waterway has survived.

John the Immigrant had four sons, Gilbert, Duncan, Malcolm, Thomas, and a daughter, Mary. It is presumed the he, like so many others, survived by farming and possibly harvesting pine trees for timber and naval stores (turpentine, pitch, tar, etc.). Some of the old trade roads were planked with pine boards to haul goods toward Cross Creek and then down the Cape Fear to Wilmington. It appears from existing records that John may have also worked on these roads.

Late in life, John moved a few miles to the Barbeque District in the same county and there ended his days. Barbeque is in present-day Harnett County near Sanford. John the Immigrant died in 1821 and is buried in the Barbeque Presbyterian Church cemetery. This church, active still, was the Mother Church to most of the Presbyterian congregations in the area. In his will, it is revealed that at his death, John owned three slaves – July, Amy and Charles. He left these slaves, 260 acres of land, money and livestock to his heirs.

John's 2nd son, Duncan, was born in 1775. Duncan lived in Cumberland County and wed Sarah Campbell who bore him five sons - Malcolm, Daniel, John, Gilbert and Daniel - and four daughters whose names are not known. As adults, the sons were members of the Mineral Springs Presbyterian Church. This church, now the Jackson Springs Presbyterian Church, thrives to this day. Jackson Springs is on the western border of present-day Moore County and was once a popular resort. Two of the sons eventually moved further west to Richmond County. Duncan died in about 1828 and is buried at Barbeque Church. His will indicated that he owned a grist mill and about 162 acres of land.

Duncan's 5th child was John, born in 1813. He was a Confederate soldier and was killed in action November 24, 1864 near Petersburg, VA. John is buried there where he died from his wounds. He was a member of Bensalem Church near Eagle Springs in Moore County. This county was carved from Cumberland County in 1784. This John married Ann "Nancy" McDonald and lived in the "Curriesville" community. Descendants of a Currie family remain there today. Duncan and Nancy had five children. The oldest was Neil McDonald McInnis, born in 1854.

Neil married Mary Catharine Dunlap in 1877. A son, James Dalton McInnis came in 1878. In May 1880, twins were born; Alexander May and John Robert McInnis. Within days, John Robert and Mary Catharine were dead. James and Alex were given to the care of an uncle, Neil M. Dunlap in the Bensalem Township. The Dunlap home was later inherited by Dalton and Alex. It was the lifelong home of James Dalton and his wife, Florence Elizabeth Blue, and was the birthplace of their children – John Robert, James Thermon, Neil Woodrow, Donald Overton, Sarah Catherine and Dalton Blue McInnis. The house stands to this day on Dowd Road outside the town of Seven Lakes. Two giant magnolia trees planted by Florence early in her marriage frame the front of the house. Today, the Dunlap-McInnis home is owned by a Grandson of James Dalton and Florence who both died in 1949 and buried in the West End Presbyterian Church Cemetery.

Florence Blue was the Great-Great Granddaughter of another immigrant from Jura, Duncan Blue (1734-1814). Several Blue families established themselves in the area to the north of the Cross Creek town and became prominent citizens, as have many of their descendants. Following Duncan Blue, other Scots names entered the McInnis heritage – McMillan, McSween, McKeithan, McLean and Ray.

It is surmised that it was Florence who demanded educational achievement from her children. James Dalton and Florence were farmers, but in a break from their agrarian past, all six children were University bound - three became physicians, one a Presbyterian Minister, one a math educator and one a County official. The daughter married John Henry McCaskill and raised her family in the old Dunlap house. Of the others, only Woodrow remained in Moore County where two of his children remain, one of which owns the old Dunlap-McInnis home and is the only one of his generation remaining in agriculture.

The first child of James and Florence was John Robert McInnis, born July 15, 1908. He was named for his deceased infant Uncle. As the oldest, his task was to help raise his siblings and with the farm chores. As a youth, he had walked the several miles each day to school in the town of West End, sometimes leading a mule to carry the younger children. As an adult later, he was to serve on the West End School Board.

John Robert graduated from Davidson College and worked for a time at a handkerchief factory in West End. On December 26, 1941, he married Esther Alice Hurley (b. 9/9/1915) of Jackson Springs. The Hurleys were Irish by origin and her maternal ancestors (Thomas) were English. The Hurleys were well-known in the Moore-Richmond County area and through many generations had very large families. John entered the Army and served as an officer through World War II stationed in San Francisco. In 1945, he returned to West End and took work as a bookkeeper in the Sandhills Furniture factory.

John Robert became a US Army Colonel, became a Physician and was a life-long Presbyterian and an Elder in his Church. After his parents' deaths, he carried out his Mother's wish that he follow two brothers into Medicine. He had few resources to pursue this education and was supported in some measure by his Uncle Alexander who had become a Presbyterian Minister and "missionary" to rural Oklahoma churches. Uncle Alex is buried at Bensalem Church in Moore County. In 1953 at the age of 45, John was accepted into the University of Tennessee School Of Medicine in Memphis, TN. In 1956, he joined brothers Thermon and Dalton in their practice in Oklahoma City.

John Robert and Esther had four children: John II in 1944, Charles in 1947, Marilyn in 1951 and Nancy in 1954. Then followed nine grandchildren. John Robert died in Oklahoma City on March 31, 1993. Esther died on January 23, 1997. They are buried in Oklahoma City having lived a long and prosperous life. They were my parents.

I married Kathryn Kendall in 1968 and have two sons, Michael Geoffrey (1974) and David Kendall McInnis (1976). Michael has three sons: Andrew James (2004), Matthew Thomas (2007), and Nathan John (2010).

John Robert McInnis II – Arlington TX. May 2013