

The Muddle: Unlocking the Mystery of William Henry Bassett's Connection to the Famous Harrison Family of Charles City County, Virginia

By William Bassett Orr

For many decades in my family it has been understood by those that knew anything about it that my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett after losing both his parents at a tender age in a yellow fever epidemic was raised at Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, Virginia, by Elizabeth Bassett, mother of President William Henry Harrison and wife of Benjamin Harrison V, signer of the Declaration of Independence and fifth governor of Virginia. It was also understood that he ran away when still just a boy by stowing away on a ship on the James River after being severely punished by "a cruel drinking uncle" for breaking a bottle of whiskey on Christmas Eve, but a kindly captain took him in and he later made good by becoming the captain of his own ship. He was presumably related to Elizabeth Bassett, but his exact relationship to her was unknown because no one knew who his parents were; his parentage, unlike hers, was an utter mystery.¹ Not all the story when I first heard it made its way into my conscious memory. I had it in my head he was just a homeless Huckleberry Finn no-account that the famous Harrisons took pity on and it was President William Henry Harrison himself that beat him.

Belatedly I decided to investigate the mystery. I began by examining the crux of the family story -- that he was "adopted and reared" by Elizabeth Bassett, mother of President William Henry Harrison and wife of the signer Benjamin Harrison V. What I learned was that he could not have been adopted and reared by Elizabeth Bassett because she died four years before he was born. Now I was completely flummoxed. Was there any truth to the story? It was my sense there had to be a deep elemental truth to it, why else would it have been told? I remembered a curious piece of circumstantial evidence that his granddaughter Ida Bassett mentioned in her handwritten account of the mystery -- that her grandfather "must have been most intimate with all the famous Harrisons" since he named most of his children after them. I decided to test her conclusion by comparing the family names myself. But no sooner did I start in on the comparison, it seemed, than I was sidetracked by a separate discovery -- that it wasn't just the famous Harrison family that the Bassetts married into; they also married into none other than George and Martha Washington's families.

To my amazement, I would discover no fewer than seven marriages blending Bassetts, Dandridges, and Washingtons into one extended family down through the years. The first was between Elizabeth Bassett's only surviving brother, Burwell, and Martha Washington's "greatest favorite" sister, Anna Maria, in 1757. The second was between Burwell and Anna Maria's daughter, Fanny, and George Washington's nephew George Augustine Washington in 1785 (they ran Mount Vernon when George and Martha were away running the country).² The third was between Fanny's brother Burwell Jr., a United States congressman, and Martha Washington's great-niece Philadelphia Ann Claiborne in 1800. The fourth was between Burwell and Anna Maria's grandson George Washington Bassett and George Washington's great-niece Betty Burnett Lewis in 1826. The fifth was between George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnett Lewis' daughter Ella and the great-grandson of George Washington's half brother Augustine, Lewis William Washington, in November 1860. The sixth was between William Henry Bassett's third son, Benjamin Harrison Bassett, and George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnett Lewis' daughter Mary Burnett Bassett in December 1860 (like her sister Ella, Mary had the rare distinction of being biologically related to both George and Martha Washington).³ And the seventh was in 1868 between William Henry Bassett's fourth son, Thomas Jefferson Bassett (my great-great-grandfather), and Martha Josephine Roberson, the sixth great-granddaughter of George Washington's great-grandfather William

¹ So impenetrable was the mystery of William Henry Bassett's ancestry that one branch of his descendants took to calling it "the Muddle."

² Fanny Bassett moved to Mount Vernon not long before her 17th birthday, in late 1784, seven years after the death of her mother, Martha Washington's sister Anna Maria Dandridge. It was just five days after Anna Maria's death that Martha Washington first asked for her "dear Fanny" to move to Mount Vernon: "My dear sister in her life time often mentioned my taking my dear Fanny if she should be taken away before she grew up -- If you will lett her come to live with me, I will with the greatest pleasure take her and be a parent and mother to her as long as I live," Martha wrote Fanny's grieving father, Burwell Bassett, on December 22, 1777. It was on October 15, 1785, less than a year after she moved to Mount Vernon, that Fanny married George Washington's nephew George Augustine Washington. The wedding was at Mount Vernon.

³ Being related by blood to both George and Martha Washington was rare because they produced no offspring together. (All four of Martha's children came from a previous marriage, but two of them died in early childhood and one from an epileptic seizure when she was just a teen-ager.)

Ball. I learned that the Washingtons and the Bassetts weren't just family; they were very dear friends, besides. When traveling to Williamsburg, the capital of colonial Virginia, George and Martha Washington would stay with Burwell and Anna Maria Bassett at Eltham Plantation in New Kent County as a matter of course. It would be to the Bassett family's great ancestral home that Martha Washington's only surviving son, John Parke Custis, would be carried after coming down with camp fever at the battle that secured American independence some 30 miles away, and there he would die with his illustrious stepfather at his side.

Before I uncovered the full complement of marriages blending Bassetts, Dandridges and Washingtons into one extended family, I went back to comparing Harrison family names with the names of William Henry Bassett's children. I made another discovery: I discovered Ida was right, even more than she probably knew.

The names of all seven of William Henry Bassett's children by his first wife, Eleanor O'Neill:⁴

- **Joseph Carter Bassett** (1822-1897)
- **Mary Ann Virginia Bassett** (1825-1909)
- **William Henry Bassett Jr.** (1828-1869)
- **Benjamin Harrison Bassett** (1831-1893)
- **Thomas Jefferson Bassett** (1833-1885)
- **Eleanor Ann Bassett** (1835-1843)
- **Robert Edwin Bassett** (1839-1840)

A list of Harrison family members that William Henry Bassett and his children might have been named after:

- Governor **Benjamin** Harrison V (1726-1791), "the signer"
- **Robert Carter** Harrison (circa 1732-1771 or -1777), brother of the signer
- **William Henry** Harrison (circa 1734-1812), brother of the signer
- **Carter Henry** Harrison (1736-1793), brother of the signer
- **Benjamin** Harrison VI (1755-1799), first son of the signer
- Congressman **Carter** Bassett Harrison (1757-1808), second son of the signer
- President **William Henry** Harrison (1773-1841), third son of the signer
- **Ann** Harrison (1753-1821), second daughter of the signer
- **Ann Carter** (1702-1791), mother of the signer
- **Robert** "King" **Carter** (1663-1732), maternal grandfather of the signer
- Susannah **Virginia** Coupland (1793-1837), daughter of Ann Harrison (1753-1821): A William Henry Bassett contemporary
- **Carter** Coupland (1795-1833), son of Ann Harrison (1753-1821): Another William Henry Bassett contemporary
- **Edwin** Trent (1798-1878), grandson of Ann Harrison (1753-1821), son of Elizabeth Bassett Coupland (1776-1844): Another William Henry Bassett contemporary
- **Mary** Howell Allen (1778-1800), wife of Congressman Carter Bassett Harrison
- **Joseph William** Harrison (1773-1832), nephew of the signer
- **Robert Carter** Harrison (1765-1817), nephew of the signer

I realized the only names that did not overlap were *Thomas Jefferson* and *Eleanor* -- and *Eleanor*, of course, came from the mother of the children. That left just one name unaccounted for. In the Harrison side of the family tree I was building at Ancestry.com I looked again for the name *Thomas Jefferson*. I didn't see it anywhere. What I did see, however, was the name *Randolph* and I knew Jefferson was a Randolph ... through his mother, Jane Randolph (1720-1776). I enlarged the Harrison side of my family tree. I saw more *Randolphs*. I would discover no fewer than six Harrison/Randolph marriages -- that of the signer's brother Carter Henry Harrison and Thomas Jefferson's aunt Susannah Randolph (1738-1806); that of the signer's sister Elizabeth (1725-1783) and Peyton Randolph (1721-1775); that of the signer's sister Ann (1724-1762) and William Randolph III (1720-1761); that of the signer's sister Lucy (1728-1793) and Edward Randolph (1722-1809); that of the signer's daughter Lucy (1755-1809) and another Peyton Randolph (1738-1784); and that of the signer's oldest son, Benjamin Harrison VI, and another Susannah Randolph (1752-1781).

Again I was dumbfounded by the historical significance of the names. The Randolphs? Including the first Peyton Randolph? I couldn't believe it. He, too, was a political giant -- speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses, chairman of the Virginia Conventions, first president of the Continental Congress. I would read somewhere that some historians consider him the first president of the American nation. It dawned on me that it wasn't just the Harrisons and the Washingtons that were loosely linked to

⁴ To a second wife, in 1856 William Henry Bassett bore one more child, a son named Lewis McKissick Bassett, who grew up to be a doctor. *McKissick* was not a Harrison name; it was the maiden name of Lewis McKissick Bassett's maternal grandmother. His other given name, *Lewis*, was an old Virginia surname that intermarried with both the Washingtons and the Bassetts.

each other through the Bassetts; also loosely linked to each other through the Bassetts were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. It took me a moment to trace the link. Slowly I muttered it out loud: "The signer's brother Carter Henry Harrison was the brother-in-law of Thomas Jefferson's mother while the signer's own brother-in-law Burwell Bassett was himself the brother-in-law of George Washington." I was almost in shock. Was there ever a pair of siblings better connected with the political luminaries of the day than Elizabeth and Burwell Bassett?

The Ship *Mapsico* and President John Tyler Clues

I came across yet another name that supported the oral tradition that William Henry Bassett was closely connected to the famous Harrisons -- *Mapsico*.

One of the ships that William Henry Bassett would own when he was in the maritime trade was a schooner called *Mapsico*. How do we know he owned a schooner called *Mapsico*? Because William Henry Bassett and *Mapsico* are mentioned in House Resolution 251 of the United States Congress on May 4, 1826, authorizing payment for demurrage in Richmond. It was Joseph Carter Bassett's great-grandson family genealogist William Henry "Bill" Bassett Jr. of Houston that generously shared a copy of HR 251 with me. The name of the schooner struck me as unusual. I decided to see whether there was a place called *Mapsico* in Charles City County. I learned it's the name of a creek bordering Kittiewan Plantation, only seven miles or so down the James River from the Harrison family's main home at Berkeley Plantation.⁵ I had a vague recollection of the name *Kittiewan*. I checked my notes and was soon reminded of something I had forgotten from two years before -- that Kittiewan Plantation was the home of President William Henry Harrison's oldest sister, Elizabeth Bassett Harrison, and her first husband, Dr. William Rickman, director and chief physician of all Continental Army hospitals in Virginia during the Revolution. An old question came back to me with new vibrancy: Was this the Elizabeth Bassett in the family that gave the orphaned boy a home? I learned from Kittiewan Plantation historian Patrick O'Neill that Dr. Rickman and Elizabeth Harrison had no children of their own. That seemed promising, but only until I re-learned something else I had forgotten -- that she also died before William Henry Bassett was born.

Again I was stumped. I asked to whom did Elizabeth Bassett Harrison Rickman bequeath the property. The answer I got was her brothers Carter Bassett Harrison and William Henry Harrison upon the death of her second husband, John Edmondson. Carter was to receive the home place and William Henry what was called the Brown tract. But in the year Elizabeth died Carter instead bought the home place from her, along with some 800 acres around it. And he would take ownership of the Brown tract as well when his younger brother made an outright gift of it to him. Did Carter Bassett Harrison and his wife, Mary, make a home for William Henry Bassett at Kittiewan Plantation? Very intriguing seemed that possibility, not just because William Henry Bassett would name his schooner after a creek bordering the plantation but also because he would choose *Carter* for his oldest son's given name and *Mary* for the first part of his oldest daughter's given name. I consulted an article written by the Kittiewan Plantation historian to see how long Carter Bassett Harrison owned the property. What I learned was that Carter Bassett Harrison granted the property to his first cousin Collier Harrison on October 13, 1801, 11 days before William Henry Bassett's fifth birthday. I wanted to know how long Collier Harrison owned the property. I learned he owned it until November 13, 1809. I was puzzled. Instead of Carter Bassett Harrison, was it *Collier* Harrison that made a home for William Henry Bassett at Kittiewan Plantation during the great bulk of his boyhood?

From another Bassett family genealogist, Benjamin Harrison Bassett's great-great-granddaughter Carol Williams, I would learn another eye-opening fact consistent with my inkling William Henry Bassett lived at Kittiewan Plantation -- that President John Tyler nominated him United States marshal for the District of West Louisiana on December 18, 1843. I knew that President Tyler had been President William Henry Harrison's vice president -- despite the fact they hailed not just from the same state but also from the same county. What I did not know was that he was born and raised in the open country not two miles from Kittiewan Plantation, on the other side of Queens Creek, at Greenway Plantation. Did William Henry Bassett know President Tyler outside the scope of President William Henry Harrison's relationship to him? It seemed to me if he grew up at Kittiewan, he most assuredly did, not just because they would have been neighbors but also because he was much closer in age to him. I learned that William Henry Bassett and President Tyler were near contemporaries; just six years was the age gap between them, whereas a whopping 17 years separated President Tyler from President William Henry Harrison. I also learned that President Tyler and William Henry Bassett's connection to each other might have been more than a function of time and place; there might have been a loose familial bond between them, besides, since President Tyler's great-great-grandfather Robert Armistead and Elizabeth Bassett's maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Armistead, were first cousins.

Cousin Bettie, Cousin Virginia, Cousin Ella, Cousin Fanny, Cousin Nannie, Cousin Robert, Cousin Willie, Cousin Washington, Cousin George

For me everything hinged on whether William Henry Bassett was related to Elizabeth Bassett in

⁵ Kittiewan Plantation before 1800 or so was also known as Millford Plantation.

accordance with the family story. Was he? It was at the very beginning of my genealogical research that I discovered what I considered important supporting evidence that he was.

What first awoke my interest in my Bassett ancestors was the name *Burwell Bassett* in a Joe Ellis biography I was reading in the winter of 2012-2013 on George Washington. Never before had I heard the name. For a long time I paused over it and an unadorned noun identifying its owner as Washington's brother-in-law. I fairly tripped over them. I wondered whether the Burwell Bassett in the biography I was reading was related to the Elizabeth Bassett in the story I'd been told about my third great-grandfather. I discovered that he was in fact very closely related to her; he was her brother, just three years and three months her junior. I asked my father, William Henry Bassett's great-great-grandson John Edmund Orr, whether he was aware Elizabeth Bassett's brother was George Washington's brother-in-law. He said no he wasn't, the only connection to Washington that he was aware of was through Thomas Jefferson Bassett's second wife, Martha Josephine Roberson, my great-great-grandmother. I told my father I better do some research on William Henry Bassett's ancestry, maybe his ancestry was richer than we realized. He said that sounded like a good idea, did I want to begin by looking at the old family papers? I said yes I did.

It was in a sheaf of Civil War letters from my great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson "Jeff" Bassett of Brenham, Texas, to his older brother Benjamin Harrison "Ben" Bassett, also of Brenham, that I found what I considered important supporting evidence that William Henry Bassett was related to Elizabeth Bassett. I found the letters in the back of a slowly disintegrating pictorial family register my father and mother laid out for me on the white tulip table in their den. With wonder I read all 13 -- the first dated August 14, 1861, the last dated March 18, 1863.⁶ My breathing slowed when I read in the September 9, 1861, letter that one of the first things Jeff did upon his arrival in Richmond to enlist in the Confederate army was inquire about "the Bassett family." I waited for him to name some of its members. He singled out eight members of the family by identifying them as cousin so-and-so: "Cousin Bettie," "Cousin Nannie," "Cousin Virginia," "Cousin Ella," "Cousin Washington," "Cousins Fanny, Robert and Willie." Who were these Bassett cousins? Exactly how were they related to him? I scrutinized the letter for clues. I found one: the name *Clover Lea*. A "Cousin Bettie" and a "Cousin Nannie" had invited him to a place called Clover Lea. Was Clover Lea their home? Hoping to find more clues, I read the rest of the letters. I read every word in every letter. I found only one more clue, in the 10th letter, dated May 13, 1862 -- the name of another Bassett cousin, "Cousin George Bassett."⁷

When I finished reading the letters, I had a total of nine mysterious cousins I needed to identify in the family tree I had only then just begun at Ancestry.com. Moving outward from Burwell and Elizabeth Bassett, I enlarged my family tree until I found all nine in the same nuclear family, that of Burwell Bassett's grandson George Washington Bassett and his wife, Betty Burnett Lewis. I learned that eight of the nine were George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnett Lewis' children. I surmised that the remaining "cousin" was their new son-in-law, Lewis William Washington; he appeared to be a cousin by marriage only. I confirmed that Benjamin Harrison Bassett's wife, Mary Burnett Bassett, also belonged to George Washington Bassett and Betty Burnett Lewis; that she and her eight siblings had the rare distinction of being biologically related to both George and Martha Washington; that Clover Lea was the name of their plantation; and that it was located some eighteen miles northeast of Richmond. Were they related to Elizabeth Bassett as well? They were since their father was a proven grandson to her only surviving brother, Burwell; their father was her great-nephew. I now knew at least one critical part of the family story was almost certainly true: William Henry Bassett really was related to Elizabeth Bassett.

When I said as much to a living relative of mine, she said no not necessarily; like as not, Jeff Bassett used the *cousin* moniker as a mere endearment, it did not mean the Bassetts of Clover Lea and the Bassetts of Brenham, Texas, were cousins in the literal sense of the word. Besides, if all this were true, it would mean that Jeff's brother Ben had married a cousin, and wasn't it unusual for someone to marry his cousin? I answered it would have been more unusual for a husband and wife to have the same last names and not be cousins, and if there was one thing I was discovering, it was that among old Virginia families like the Bassetts, as shocking as it seemed, cousins were constantly marrying each other. I gave examples. I pointed out that Mary Burnett Bassett's very own parents were themselves first cousins. Plus, not only did Mary marry a cousin, but so did at least two of her siblings, Anna Virginia Bassett and Ella Moore Bassett, and even Elizabeth Bassett and the signer were cousins owing to the fact their paternal grandmothers, Joanna and Elizabeth Burwell, were sisters.⁸ I said, yes, it was true that children are sometimes encouraged to use the *aunt* and *uncle* monikers for favored adults not related to them; I was myself encouraged to do so as a child, but never once had I heard of anyone using the *cousin* moniker as an endearment for a non-relation. And, besides, Jeff Bassett mentioned many other people in his letters and in not a single instance did he denominate any of them as a cousin; he reserved the *cousin* moniker exclusively for the Clover Lea bunch.

⁶ It should be noted that the Thomas Jefferson Bassett Civil War letters in my family's possession are not the originals. They are typed copies by Benjamin Harrison Bassett's granddaughter Katherine McCalla, a priceless gift from her and her side of the family to mine.

⁷ The formal names of the Bassett cousins mentioned in Thomas Jefferson Bassett's Civil War letters were Bettie Burwell Bassett, George Washington Bassett Jr., Anna Virginia Bassett, Ella More Bassett, Judith Frances Carter Bassett, Annette Lewis Bassett, Robert Lewis Bassett, and William Augustine Bassett.

⁸ Once when I informed my cousin Melissa Dietz of the frequent inbreeding among her Bassett ancestors, her husband, Mark, turned to her, eyed her like a psychoanalyst, and said, "That explains a lot."

The DNA Evidence

It was only after I positively concluded William Henry Bassett was related to Elizabeth Bassett that I was informed of DNA testing that seemingly said no he wasn't. Instead of that of the known Bassett lines, the Y-DNA of William Henry Bassett's descendants matched that of the known Harrison lines. I was told instead of a Bassett he was a Harrison; he and President William Henry Harrison had the same Y-DNA. It was Joseph Carter Bassett's great-grandson family genealogist Bill Bassett of Houston, Joseph Carter Bassett's great-great-granddaughter family genealogist Bren Bassett of Dripping Springs, and Benjamin Harrison Bassett's great-great-granddaughter family genealogist Carol Williams of Fort Worth that kindly informed me of the DNA evidence.⁹ Their kindness was mental torment. He was *not* a Bassett, even though his last name was Bassett? What about the family story that he was related to Elizabeth Bassett? What about Jeff Bassett's explicit characterizations of the Bassetts of Clover Lea as his cousins? I felt if William Henry Bassett was a Harrison he had to be a Bassett, given how thoroughly mixed were the Bassett/Harrison lines by the time of his birth. For one thing, there was the fact that President William Henry Harrison was himself half Bassett since his mother was Elizabeth Bassett. And further compounding the genetic overlap, it seemed, was the fact Elizabeth Bassett was herself something of a Harrison since she and her husband sprang from the same set of great-grandparents.

In a fascinating telephone conversation with Bill Bassett, I learned the ins and outs of what he called "the illegitimacy theory" – that William Henry Bassett was really the son of one of the James River Harrisons, that the DNA evidence practically said as much. We went through some of the paternal possibilities together. And then on my own I later went through them again – and a few others, besides. It was easy to rule out Elizabeth Bassett's husband, the signer, because he also died before William Henry Bassett was born. It was not as easy to rule out his three sons. Did the signer's youngest son, President William Henry Harrison, father William Henry Bassett? Given the DNA evidence and the duplication of their given names, it appeared at first glance that maybe he did; the nation's future ninth president was the right age to be his father. What I found on further inquiry was that of the three Harrison brothers the future president was the least likely to be William Henry Bassett's father because after the death of his own father in 1791 he abruptly swapped a medical education in Philadelphia under another signer, Dr. Benjamin Rush, for a chance at a military career fighting Indians in the Northwest Territory, which meant he was not geographically well placed to be William Henry Bassett's father. Moreover, since I knew President William Henry Harrison lived deep into his 60s, not dying until April 4, 1841, I knew he could not have left William Henry Bassett an orphan at a tender age in accordance with the family story.

It was my sense that President William Henry Harrison's two brothers, Carter Bassett Harrison and Benjamin Harrison VI, were better candidates, the former because he owned Kittiewan Plantation and died in 1808, when William Henry Bassett was 11, and the latter because he died August 11, 1799, when William Henry Bassett was 2, the precise age his granddaughter Ida Bassett says he was when he was orphaned. About the Harrison brothers' many male Harrison cousins I learned nothing; about their uncles I learned all but one had died. Who was he? He was the original William Henry Harrison. I learned he didn't die until 1812. At first I thought the original William Henry Harrison a highly unlikely candidate owing to his advanced age -- he would have been 61 or 62 when William Henry Bassett was born on October 24, 1796. But I soon softened my bias against him after remembering that William Henry Bassett would himself be in his 60th year when he fathered his last child.

I was having a hard time making the DNA evidence fit the family story and understanding the logic of William Henry Bassett's last name. If his father was, say, Carter Bassett Harrison or Benjamin Harrison VI, of all names why pick *Bassett* for his last name when *Bassett* was their mother's maiden name? How would they explain his last name to her side of the family? Also, wouldn't being born out of wedlock diminish his standing in the family? It crossed my mind that maybe his standing was diminished, and that was why he ran away -- because he felt diminished. But if his standing was that diminished because he was born out of wedlock how did his third son, Benjamin Harrison Bassett, get himself hitched to a genealogical blue blood like Mary Burnett Bassett? And how did his fourth son, Jeff, do likewise not once but twice by marrying first into the family of the previous vice president of the United States, John C. Breckinridge, and later into the Ball side of George Washington's family?¹⁰

⁹ It was Bren Bassett of Dripping Springs that made the truth of William Henry Bassett's ancestry possible to know by submitting a sample of her father's DNA for genealogical testing. Her father – William Carter Bassett, also of Dripping Springs – was the great-grandson of William Henry Bassett's oldest son, Joseph Carter Bassett. And from him to William Henry Bassett was a straight unbroken line of male Bassetts, exactly what was needed for the genetic test. And confirming the results of her father's test were two additional DNA samples sent in by two of Bren's Bassett cousins, including one distant cousin from New York. For more on the DNA evidence, go to BassettBranches.org, click on "DNA Project," and do a search for "William H. Bassett of LA."

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson Bassett's first wife, Lucy Gilmer Breckinridge, was a second cousin to John C. Breckinridge. She died during their first year of marriage, on June 16, 1865, from typhoid fever. Very prominent was the Breckinridge family. In addition to one vice president of the United States, it produced one presidential candidate (it was John C. Breckinridge that garnered the second most electoral votes in the watershed four-candidate presidential election of 1860), one attorney general of the United States, two United States senators, two United States representatives, two brigadier generals, and one secretary of war of the Confederate States of America. The Gilmer side of Lucy's family was also prominent, particularly her mother's first cousin Thomas Walker Gilmer, who had the distinction of serving as speaker of

The 1793 Will of George Augustine Washington and the 1780 Will of the Signer Benjamin Harrison V

At Ancestry.com when I was still new to it I came across a tantalizing speculation in "Tree Hints" that a Benjamin Bassett dying in 1801 and a Martha Davis dying in 1801 were William Henry Bassett's mystery parents. I was stunned. I thought the names of his parents well beyond the event horizon of known things. I looked to see where the hint came from. It came from the Kilgore Family Tree. I soon realized through Tree Hints that the Kilgore Family Tree was uncommonly reliable, but did not know how to contact its owner, nor even that contacting its owner was permitted. I did not know that its owner, a Texas resident named Carol Williams, was a fourth cousin of mine. Nor did I know I was perfectly free to browse the entire Kilgore Family Tree without any permission whatever since its owner had generously made it available to every member of Ancestry.com. I was a real novice. I was laboring away in relative darkness, with only limited glimpses into the wider Ancestry.com world through Tree Hints.

Despite the Kilgore Family Tree's reliability, I thought in all likelihood the *Benjamin Bassett* and *Martha Davis* names were erroneous, possibly mere guesswork. I was skeptical because I saw no supporting evidence and because I was finding a profusion of erroneous information in Tree Hints. My skepticism lifted, however, when on my own I stumbled on the name *Benjamin Bassett* in the 1793 will of Fanny Bassett's dying husband, George Washington's nephew George Augustine Washington. I found the name at the very end of the will: "Exrs: uncle George Washington, wife Frances. Wit: John Dandridge, Benjamin Bassett, C.P. Lyons, M.W. Dandridge." How tantalizing was this! Was not Fanny Bassett Elizabeth Bassett's niece? It crossed my mind that I might gain insight into Benjamin Bassett's identity if I identified the other three witnesses. Who were they? I learned that M.W. Dandridge was Martha Washington Dandridge, that John Dandridge was her older brother, that they sprang from Martha Washington's brother Bartholomew. I surmised who C.P. Lyons was: She was the daughter of Elizabeth Bassett's sister Judith and her husband, Judge Peter Lyons. Thus it appeared that at least three of the four had one thing important in common: They were, all three of them, first cousins of Fanny Bassett Washington. Was Benjamin Bassett also a first cousin? Was he also family? Since all the others apparently were, it would stand to reason that he, too, probably was, especially given the commonality of his last name.

Even more tantalizing than the existence of a mysterious Benjamin Bassett in late 18th-century Tidewater Virginia as per the 1793 will of Fanny Bassett's dying husband was that of a mysterious Carter Bassett and a mysterious Ann Bassett as per the 1780 will of Elizabeth Bassett's husband, the signer Benjamin Harrison V, the very man who owned the celebrated plantation around which the entire William Henry Bassett mystery revolved. Who were Carter Bassett and Ann Bassett? I knew not a thing of their existence until Jeffrey Bassett of BassettBranches.org kindly apprised me of it by asking did I know about a nephew Carter Bassett and a niece Ann Bassett listed as beneficiaries in the signer's 1780 will. No, I did not know. I asked Jeffrey Bassett if he had a copy of the signer's 1780 will. He said yes he did. I asked him if he would email me a copy of it. He said he would. He told me I would find the two Bassett names near the end of the will. I read the provision instrumental to my investigation multiple times:

"... I give to my Niece Ann Bassett to her and her heirs forever at the death of her Aunt Stith her choice of the negro children which the woman now has that I lent her; and I give to my nephew Carter Bassett the next choice of the said children. ..."

"Benjamin Harrison ... January the eighth, 1780"

Was William Henry Bassett's father the signer's nephew Carter Bassett? I felt there was much to suggest that he was. I was betting the oral tradition was true in every important way but one: It wasn't William Henry Bassett that was "adopted and reared" by Elizabeth Bassett at Berkeley Plantation; it was his father, and she was his aunt. Was she his biological aunt? The common surnames suggested she was. Was there a separate clue she was his biological aunt? There was. It was the Aunt Stith reference. Who

the Virginia House of Delegates, as the 28th governor of Virginia, as a United States representative, and as the 15th secretary of the United States Navy. It's also possible that when Thomas Jefferson Bassett remarried in 1868, he joined the extended family of another former vice president of the United States, John C. Calhoun, the South's main oracle of states' rights. The evidence for this, though, is meager, nothing but two very brief handwritten accounts by an unknown Bassett descendant, most likely William Henry Bassett's granddaughter Ida or her daughter, Emily. According to the two accounts, Thomas Jefferson Bassett's second wife, my great-great-grandmother Martha Josephine Roberson, was loosely linked to John C. Calhoun through her maternal grandmother Martha Overby, wife of George Washington Ball, because Martha Overby's mother "was a twin sister of John Caldwell Calhoun's mother, who was Martha Caldwell, born on Cubcreek, Charlotte County, Virginia - 1750." This would make John C. Calhoun a first cousin to my fourth great-grandmother Martha Overby, which would make him my first cousin six times removed. Whether the claim is true I have no idea since I have been unable to validate it. What I do know to be true is that the name of John C. Calhoun's mother really was Martha Caldwell; that John C. Calhoun was born in Abbeville County, South Carolina; that George Washington Ball and Martha Overby were born next door in Laurens County, South Carolina; and that in 1865 their daughter Jemima Elizabeth Ball Roberson named one of her sons John Calhoun. And though these facts in themselves do not prove anything, taken together they do I think give one extra note of credence to the rumor, but only one.

was Aunt Stith? Though I had learned it more than two years before, I had forgotten that Elizabeth Bassett's baby sister Joanna (1739-1817) was married to a man named Anderson Stith (1730-1768). I soon re-learned it. Because I now knew that the Bassetts routinely married into prominent families, it crossed my mind that Joanna Bassett might have done likewise. She did. I discovered that her lawyer husband was yet another cousin to Thomas Jefferson, that he, too, was a descendant of the Randolph family.¹¹

I scoured the signer's will in vain for other nieces and nephews. I felt I was onto something. Of all the nieces and nephews he had, why did the signer include in his 1780 will only his niece Ann Bassett and his nephew Carter Bassett? One reason would be they no longer had parents of their own. It appeared that William Henry Bassett and his father had something in common besides their Y-chromosomes: In an era when epidemics sometimes killed off thousands in a single summer, it appeared that they were both orphaned at an early age.

Assuming this mysterious Carter Bassett was William Henry Bassett's father, who, then, would his father have been? The most obvious answer based on his last name, his designation as the signer's nephew, the Aunt Stith reference and the family story would be Elizabeth and Joanna Bassett's brother Burwell. But in 1780 Burwell Bassett was still alive; he would not die until 1793. Was he incapacitated? Could he not afford to raise two more children? No, he was neither incapacitated nor impoverished. He alone owned the Bassett family's great ancestral home and all its many slaves in neighboring New Kent County. Did Elizabeth and Joanna have another brother that lived long enough to father two children? The historical record showed there was just one other brother, William, and he died much too young to father a child. I realized it wasn't just the DNA evidence that showed no Bassetts in William Henry Bassett's paternal line; what also showed it were the near-poles-apart life spans of Elizabeth and Joanna Bassett's two brothers -- that Burwell Bassett lived too long to be the father of two fatherless children in 1780 and William not nearly long enough.

I steadied myself against the maddening irreconcilable facts I was up against. I threw them mentally up into the air, let them fall in an untidy mess around me, then brooded on them some more. It was humbling how slowly I realized what I was missing, especially considering how simple it was. What I was missing was that William Henry Bassett's father was *maternally* a Bassett. I realized for all the variables to add up he had to be both a Harrison and a Bassett; he had to be a Harrison by his father and a Bassett by his mother, and no other combination of bloodlines would answer.¹² But was it possible for his mother to be a Bassett without contradicting the DNA evidence? I would learn it was possible and the reason was that the DNA testing delineated the male line only. I paused over what the evidence was indicating -- that William Henry Bassett's father and President William Henry Harrison weren't just ordinary cousins; they were rare double first cousins. Their mothers were sisters, their fathers were brothers, and the result was that they had twice the degree of consanguinity of ordinary first cousins.

I thought of another way to further reconcile the irreconcilable -- by postulating the signer's nephew Carter Bassett and the mysterious Benjamin Bassett in George Augustine Washington's 1793 will were the same person. Maybe his full name was Benjamin Carter Bassett or Carter Benjamin Bassett. Most people had a first and middle name. Why not him? It seemed to me since Fanny Bassett had no Bassett uncles that lived long enough to father a child, the two had to be one and the same because there was no one else that could have been a first cousin to her with the surname *Bassett*. What also seemed telling was how neatly the two names went together for any scion of the Harrison family. Were not both *Benjamin* and *Carter* Harrison names? Were they not in fact quintessentially Harrison, *Benjamin* being the name of the family patriarch, Benjamin Harrison IV, and *Carter* being the maiden name of the family matriarch, Ann Carter? And would not this also indicate the boy's paternity was by a Harrison?

The Sarah Collier Harrison Surprise

It also crossed my mind that the nephew Carter Bassett and his sister, Ann, might have grown up not just as double first cousins to President William Henry Harrison but also as his surrogate siblings since he and his sister Sarah Collier Harrison did not grow up contemporaneously with their five older siblings. I checked my memory that President William Henry Harrison and his sister Sarah Collier Harrison did not grow up contemporaneously with their five older siblings. My memory was right: Whereas the future president and his sister Sarah were born just three years apart in the early 1770s, their five older siblings were born much earlier, in the 1750s. It was almost as if Benjamin Harrison V and Elizabeth Bassett had raised two separate families. Would there have been room in the Harrison home for two orphaned double first cousins in the late 1770s? With the five older Harrison children fully grown, many of them married with children of their own, there very likely would have been.

I wanted to know more about President William Henry Harrison's sister Sarah Collier Harrison

¹¹ Anderson Stith was Thomas Jefferson's second cousin.

¹² When it finally dawned on me that William Henry Bassett's father's mother was a Bassett, I did not remember that family genealogist Bren Bassett of Drippings Springs had told me in an Ancestry.com message posted May 11, 2015, that she thought maybe William Henry Bassett's mother was a Bassett, and that was why he had the last name *Bassett*. Though Bren was one generation off, a growing pile of new evidence would show her intuitive leap was spot on. For all I know, other family researchers were thinking along similar lines as well. I wasn't. In all likelihood I did read what Bren had written me, but later did not remember it. It would not be the first thing I would not remember.

since she, too, might have grown up as a surrogate sibling to Carter and Ann Bassett. I expanded my family tree to include her husband and children. When I did, I discovered something that would have meant nothing to me had I not been aware of the signer's 1780 will and George Augustine Washington's 1793 will. I discovered she named her fourth child none other than *Benjamin Carter*; and this, too -- that he was born August 10, 1801. I vaguely remembered that Joseph Carter Bassett's daughter Virginia Bassett Alleman wrote in her account of the family story that her grandfather William Henry Bassett "became an orphan before the age of five." I carefully reread her account to confirm my memory. I did a simple calculation. I realized the year Sarah Collier Harrison gave birth to a son she named Benjamin Carter was exactly the same year William Henry Bassett lost his parents according to one of only two ancient accounts in my family's possession. I also learned that Sarah Collier Harrison married a doctor named John Minge. That, too, seemed potentially important because I remembered from a map I had seen that it was the Minge family that owned a property adjoining Kittiewan Plantation, where William Henry Bassett likely spent the bulk of his boyhood. A light bulb went off. William Henry Bassett's father's name was Benjamin Carter Bassett, and President William Henry Harrison and his sister Sarah Collier Harrison *had* been very close to him familiarly -- so close, in fact, that shortly after he died, in 1801, she named her fourth child after him.

The Larger Mystery

Again and again because of the DNA evidence, I searched the Harrison side of my family tree for a possible father of William Henry Bassett's presumed father, Benjamin Carter Bassett, aka Carter Bassett for short. Because of Carter Bassett's presumed orphanhood in 1780, my eyes kept going back to the signer's one brother that reportedly died before 1780 -- Robert Carter Harrison. According to most accounts, Robert Carter Harrison died in 1771 or 1777. Also pointing to Robert Carter Harrison was his connection to the owner of Kittiewan Plantation from 1801 to 1809, Collier Harrison. Robert Carter Harrison was Collier Harrison's father. I realized if Robert Carter Harrison was also Carter Bassett's father, there would have been no adult male more closely related to William Henry Bassett after his parents died in 1801 than Collier Harrison; Collier Harrison would have been his uncle (or rather half uncle) -- a prime candidate for taking him into his home.

Who, then, would have been Carter Bassett's mother? Because I knew from the signer's will that both Elizabeth Bassett and her sister Joanna were his aunts and that his surname was Bassett, it seemed to me there were only two possibilities if his father was a Harrison. It had to be one of their two sisters, either Judith or Priscilla. And as with Robert Carter Harrison, because of the boy's presumed orphanhood, my eyes kept going back to the one sister that reportedly died before the signer's 1780 will was written -- Priscilla. Who was Priscilla Bassett? Apart from being Elizabeth and Joanna's sister, Priscilla Bassett was the wife of the Rev. Thomas Dawson, the fourth president of William & Mary College. He died in 1761. She died many years later, in March 1775 as per most Ancestry.com references or in 1779 as per an article in the January 1908 edition of *The William & Mary Quarterly*.¹³ I was able to learn precious little about her. One fact I learned about her that epitomized how convoluted family relations could be among Virginia's planter aristocracy was that her husband was the younger brother of her mother's second husband, the Rev. William Dawson, the second president of William & Mary College. I was encouraged by the head-spinning effect the Bassett/Dawson marriages had on me. It seemed to me that if Priscilla Bassett and her mother could mate with two brothers, it was no stretch at all to think so could Priscilla Bassett and one of her sisters.

A Single Unified Theory

Though I could not prove it was true, nor even claim definitively that all the evidence behind it was sound, I realized I now had a single unified theory to explain everything but the identity of William Henry Bassett's mother, including why his descendants mistakenly believed he was adopted and reared at Berkeley Plantation by Elizabeth Bassett, wife of the signer (*because his father was*); why the two Bassett children listed as beneficiaries in the signer's 1780 will were named Ann and Carter (*because their father was a Harrison and because Ann and Carter were Harrison names, Ann Carter being the name of their paternal grandmother*); why their surname was Bassett instead of Harrison (*one, because their mother was a Bassett, two, because they were born out of wedlock, and, three, because it was customary for children born out of wedlock to keep their mother's name*); why there's a Benjamin Bassett listed as a witness in the 1793 will of Fanny Bassett's dying husband (*because like the other three witnesses in the will he was her first cousin, he and the signer's nephew Carter Bassett being one and the same, his full name being Benjamin Carter Bassett*); why William Henry Bassett had the same Y-DNA as President William Henry Harrison (*because his father, Benjamin Carter Bassett, was paternally a Harrison despite his last name*); why William Henry Bassett named his first son Carter (*because that was his father's name*); why William Henry Bassett was named William Henry (*because his father, Benjamin Carter Bassett, and President William Henry Harrison grew up together as double first cousins and surrogate brothers*); why President William Henry Harrison's sister Sarah Collier Harrison named her fourth child

¹³ For more on Priscilla Bassett, see *The William & Mary Quarterly*, Volume 16, No. 3, Page 178.

Benjamin Carter in August 1801 (*because he was born the year her double first cousin and surrogate brother Benjamin Carter Bassett died in an epidemic*); why William Henry Bassett named one of his ships Mapsico (*because after his parents died, he lived with his uncle Collier Harrison, his father's half brother, at a nearby plantation bordered by a narrow waterway called Mapsico Creek*); why President John Tyler nominated William Henry Bassett U.S. marshal of the District of West Louisiana (*one, because President Tyler had been President William Henry Harrison's vice president, two, because President William Henry Harrison and William Henry Bassett's father had been like brothers in their youth, and, three, because President Tyler and William Henry Bassett when they were boys knew each other outside their connection to President William Henry Harrison, their homes being less than two miles apart in the open country*); why the mystery became so difficult to crack (*because William Henry Bassett when he was grown had only a very limited memory of his parents, having lost them when he was only 4, and because his father was born out of wedlock*).

I contacted Jeffrey Bassett, the architect of BassettBranches.org, to test my theory against his comprehensive understanding of all things Bassett. He said it sounded good, but one drawback was the unlikelihood of two births out of wedlock to the same mother, especially considering who Priscilla Bassett was. (She was the signer's sister-in-law, she was a member of one of the first families of Virginia, she was the widow of the president of William & Mary College.) I said yes, but on the other hand after her husband's death she lived a long time without remarrying, and out-of-wedlock births did happen even among prominent families, especially in an age with no dependable contraception. Also, what about the possibility the niece Ann Bassett and the nephew Carter Bassett were twins? In that event, there would have been only one out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Jeffrey Bassett said that would indeed explain the one major drawback he could see to the theory, did I know of any twins in Elizabeth Bassett and Benjamin Harrison V's extended family? I looked. I discovered evidence of twins on both sides of the family, including a set of boy twins belonging to Benjamin Harrison IV and Ann Carter, a set of boy-and-girl twins belonging to Elizabeth and Priscilla Bassett's maternal grandparents, William Churchill and Elizabeth Armistead, and a set of boy-and-girl twins belonging to Elizabeth Bassett's daughter Sarah Collier Harrison and her husband, Dr. John Minge.

The Eureka Moment

Time passed. Not knowing where else to look online for the definitive evidence I needed, I took another one of my many prolonged hiatuses from Ancestry.com. I got the idea in my head that I should turn into a readable story my attempt to track down William Henry Bassett's ancestry and send it to known and unknown cousins in hopes of obtaining additional family records from them. Instead of migrating to Texas like my great-great-grandfather and his brother Ben, some of William Henry Bassett's children stayed in Louisiana. Maybe I had distant cousins in Louisiana right now; maybe from one of them I would glean important additional clues. Maybe my story would jar loose the answer. I fleshed my story out. I took a long road trip to Estes Park, Colorado, with my brother Tom and his two children, Henry and Harper. I read my story to them. I looked up when I finished reading to find Henry sound asleep, his head nested in a pillow lodged against the passenger door.

I had no idea that by the time I would be on my way back home I would finally know the definitive nominal answer to the mystery of William Henry Bassett's parentage. It was my enterprising fourth cousin Carol Williams that discovered the answer. She notified me of her discovery when my brother and I were eating at a not-so-good Mexican restaurant somewhere south of Rocky Mountain National Park two days after dropping Henry and Harper off at camp. Like Bill Bassett of Houston and Bren Bassett of Dripping Springs, Carol again and again had helped me in my genealogical research on the Bassett family by generously sharing important information with me. Now she was sharing the ultimate piece of information -- the much-sought-after names of William Henry Bassett's parents. She had stumbled on their names at a popular genealogical website called findagrave.com, in not just one entry but in two -- one for her great-great-grandfather and one for mine. Were the names mere conjecture? No, they weren't. What made the two findagrave.com entries so important was a citation showing the information in them was rooted in Thomas Jefferson Bassett and Benjamin Harrison Bassett's actual baptismal records.

The names Carol found were Martha Davis and Carter Bassett. The *Martha Davis* name I remembered straightway. I had seen it three years before in the massive and highly reliable Kilgore Family Tree. Carol herself, though, did not at first remember the *Martha Davis* name, even though the Kilgore Family Tree was hers. She had come across the *Martha Davis* name many years before in someone else's tree, but because she could find no corroborating evidence to support it, and because many of the trees at Ancestry.com were marred with mistaken names and mistaken dates and other inaccurate information, she had demoted it to a seldom-used backup tree for unconfirmed data and there it remained over the years unseen slowly seeping from her memory. It was amazing to me that we both had been in possession of William Henry Bassett's mother's name all along -- me from her, and her from someone else -- but because of no supporting evidence didn't know it.

From the signer's 1780 will the *Carter Bassett* name we both avidly remembered. I was thrilled. To me it now seemed very nearly absolutely conclusive that William Henry Bassett's father was the signer's nephew Carter Bassett. Now we had more than just a theory that made sense; now we had hard

evidence that his name really was Carter.

After returning home, I contacted special collections librarian Alec Bourgeois at East Baton Rouge Public Library in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to confirm the information Carol found at findagrave.com. She had told me the source for the two names was a massive compendium of Catholic Church records from the 19th century called *Southwest Louisiana Records* by the Rev. Donald J. Hebert.¹⁴ When I asked Alec if he had a copy of *Southwest Louisiana Records*, he said yes he did. I asked him if he could send me an electronic copy of the information I was seeking. He said yes he could and probably it wouldn't take very long. It didn't. In less than 20 minutes I received an electronic scanned copy of the page in question (page 800), the cover page, the title page, an abbreviations and definitions page, and one page explaining that grandparents were included in many Louisiana baptismal records. I realized the information Carol had turned up at findagrave.com was indeed accurate: The names of William Henry Bassett's parents really were Martha Davis and Carter Bassett.

Additional Evidence for William Henry Bassett's father's full name: Again the name *Benjamin Bassett*

Since I was convinced the full name of William Henry Bassett's father was *Benjamin Carter Bassett*, I felt there was more than a good chance the *Benjamin Bassett* name would also again turn up one day. It turned up sooner than I expected, again compliments of my enterprising fourth cousin Carol Williams. I had phoned the Library of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia, to see if they had a single multivolume collection of late 18th-century and early 19th-century Virginia church records comparable to Donald J. Hebert's exhaustive compendium of southwest Louisiana church records. They told me no they didn't, there was no such resource in Virginia. When I informed Carol of my phone call, she remembered many years before through the Library of Virginia she had come across an obscure handwritten sketch by a 19th-century lawyer and editor named S. Bassett French identifying William Henry Bassett's father as one *Benjamin Bassett*. She dug through her records for her copy of the sketch, found it, and kindly sent me an electronic copy. After I opened what she sent me, I found myself reading, with amazement:

"154 Bassett Wm H., a planter, son of Benjamin b. at 'Berkeley' in Charles City County in the year 1796. A planter in Charles City Co. neighbor and personal friend of Pres Tyler, by whom he was appointed Marshall for the Western District of La. to which state he had emigrated in 1828 and became a planter; after the completion of his term of service he retired to his plantation and died at Grand Coteau, La. at the age of 76 years."

Though it was only a thumbnail sketch, I knew by the particulars in it there was no mistaking the identity of the person in question. The person in question was my third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett. What my eyes greedily locked onto was his father's name, but no stunning discrepancy was it for me that it was *Benjamin* instead of *Carter*. On the contrary, I was very much at peace with the discrepancy because it now seemed more probable than ever that the Benjamin Bassett in George Augustine Washington's 1793 will and the Carter Bassett in the signer's 1780 will were the same person.

In my opinion, that William Henry Bassett's father might have been called *Benjamin* in some cases and *Carter* in others was easy to explain because it could happen to anybody that went by their middle name. I knew it happened to my older brother, Dr. John David Orr: Even though he went by his middle name, in written correspondence the uninformed often addressed him by his first. It could be that William Henry Bassett's father preferred *Benjamin* for formal occasions and *Carter* for informal ones, or that he preferred *Benjamin* when he was older even though when he was younger his relatives called him *Carter*. I knew that was the case for President Thomas Woodrow Wilson -- he went by *Tommy* in his youth and *Woodrow* only after becoming an adult. I knew that Thomas Jefferson Bassett's two given names were sometimes interchanged as well, that he signed each of his Civil War letters "Jeff" even though his Civil War sweetheart, Lucy Breckinridge, habitually referred to him as her "Tommy." No, the discrepancy between the two names was very easy to explain. What was hard to explain because Fanny Bassett had no Bassett uncles to father a male Bassett cousin was the possibility the Benjamin Bassett in her husband's 1793 will and the Carter Bassett in her uncle's 1780 will were not the same person.

The Ancestry of William Henry Bassett's Mother, Martha Davis

After working out my theory on the parentage of William Henry Bassett's father, I turned my attention to his mother. Who were her parents? Did she, too, come from a prominent political family? My instinct was she did not come from a prominent political family and one reason was her name seemed hopelessly pedestrian. She was not a Washington or a Jefferson or a Harrison or a Breckinridge or an

¹⁴ Though his extended family back in Virginia remained solidly, even staunchly Episcopalian, William Henry Bassett converted to Catholicism after marrying his first wife, Eleanor O'Neill, and together they raised their children as Catholics, sending them to Catholic schools. The oldest daughter, Mary Ann Virginia Bassett, attended the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, La., while their four sons, Joseph Carter Bassett, William Henry Bassett Jr., Benjamin Harrison Bassett, and Thomas Jefferson Bassett, attended St. Charles College, Jesuit School, also in Grand Coteau.

Armistead or a Lee or a Carter or a Randolph or a Tyler or a Byrd. Try as I might, I could not think of a single prominent Southerner named Davis -- despite my love of American history. And then suddenly I did think of a certain chiseled-face Davis of high political standing. Ensnared firmly in the very highest reaches of Southern politics was this Davis. I was stunned. I was almost mortified. Was it possible my fourth great-grandfather Benjamin Carter Bassett married into the family of Confederate President Jefferson Davis?

It did not seem likely to me, not even remotely likely. After all, Jefferson Davis was not from Virginia, nor anywhere nearby; he was, instead, from faraway Mississippi. But then I foggily remembered a half-forgotten government document in my family tree showing a certain "William Bassett" also lived in Mississippi, in 1813, at Bayou Sara, in Wilkinson County. It was my strong suspicion that this William Bassett was none other than Martha Davis and Benjamin Carter Bassett's son, my seafaring, westward-moving third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett. I wanted to know where in Mississippi was Wilkinson County. I looked it up. I found it hugging the Mississippi River itself, in the far southwest corner of the state on the Louisiana border. I wanted to know in what Mississippi county did Jefferson Davis make his home. The answer I found was *Wilkinson County*. I felt myself growing more watchful, more engrossed. I wondered whether Jefferson Davis' time in Wilkinson County overlapped with William Henry Bassett's. I learned that it did. According to the free encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, Jefferson Davis' family moved to Wilkinson County, Mississippi, from St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, exactly one year before, in 1812, and from then on Wilkinson was the Davis family's permanent home county. Of all the counties in the state of Mississippi and of all the states in the nation, what an intriguing quirk of fate that they both should live at the same time in the same county of the same state!

What was also intriguing was that they both lived in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, as well, and that when William Henry Bassett lived in Avolleyes Parish, Louisiana, in 1850, 1860, and 1870 (and presumably all the years in between), he was practically just across the river from Wilkinson County, Mississippi. I chewed on the two or three facts I had pointing to a possible connection between William Henry Bassett's mother, Martha Davis, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis. I realized in the event his mother *was* related to Jefferson Davis, William Henry Bassett would not have been bereft of all family when he went west, as commonly believed; at least one branch of his mother's family would have been there, too. I decided no in all likelihood his mother was not related to Confederate President Jefferson Davis; given the trauma of the Civil War, no connection of any kind to the Confederate president could have been forgotten -- and in the set of old family papers in my family's possession I had found not a whiff of a Jefferson Davis/William Henry Bassett connection.

I narrowed my search for Martha Davis' parents to mid 18th-century Virginia. I found several Davises in mid 18th-century Virginia, including the Rev. William Davis, the Rev. Thomas Davis, and the printer Augustine Davis. I was unable to learn anything substantial about the Rev. William Davis, except that on October 1, 1760, he was listed as chaplain in the Virginia Regiment. About the Rev. Thomas Davis I learned much more -- that he, too, was a native of Charles City County; that he was born before 1750; that in 1768 he was an usher at the College of William and Mary; that he was Episcopalian; that from 1792 to 1806 he was the rector at Christ Church in Alexandria; that George Washington attended his church; that he attended George Washington's final birthday celebration; that he presided over some of the most important events at Mount Vernon, including George Washington's funeral and the wedding of George Washington's nephew Lawrence Lewis and Martha Washington's granddaughter Nelly Parke Custis. I considered the Rev. Thomas Davis a very good candidate, mostly because of his roots in Charles City County, his church credentials, and his connection to Washington. I had learned that the Bassetts living in 18th-century Virginia were very strong boosters of the Episcopalian church; plus, the Rev. Thomas Davis had multiple brothers, any one of which might also be Martha Davis' father. The third Davis I came across was a prominent Williamsburg printer born in 1752 or 1753 in Yorktown, some 30 miles east of the Bassett family home at Eltham Plantation. One fact about Augustine Davis that snagged my attention was that his wife's name was also Martha. She was Martha Davenport, the niece of another prominent Williamsburg printer, Alexander Purdie. Another fact that snagged my attention was that they had four sons and three daughters, but of the three daughters I learned only one of their names -- Maria.

On top of the Rev. William Davis, the Rev. Thomas Davis, and the printer Augustine Davis, I remembered there was at least one more Davis to consider as a possible Martha Davis relation, a woman that I had identified a long time before but had forgotten: Worlenda Davis, wife of the original William Henry Harrison, President William Henry Harrison's long-lived uncle. I did not remember Worlenda Davis until after I exhausted my mental faculties on the other Davises. And yet she seemed a very good candidate for being a relative of Martha Davis because as wife of one of the signer's brothers she was already a member of the Harrison family.

The Riches of Family Ancestry

It was hard not to notice how many notable people William Henry Bassett's presumed father, Benjamin Carter Bassett, was apparently related to. How many was it? I ascertained dozens, including the fifth governor of Virginia, the signer Benjamin Harrison V, who would have been his uncle by both blood and marriage; the last speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses and the first president of the Continental Congress, Peyton Randolph, who would have been his uncle by marriage; Martha Washington's "greatest favorite" sister, Anna Maria Dandridge, who would have been his aunt by marriage; Thomas Jefferson's aunt Susannah Randolph, who would have been another aunt by marriage; the director and chief physician of all Continental Army hospitals in Virginia during the Revolution, Dr. William Rickman, who would have been another uncle by marriage; Brigadier General Charles Harrison, who would have been another biological uncle; the author of "the first explicit instructions in favor of independence adopted by a public meeting in any of the colonies," Virginia state delegate Carter Henry Harrison, who would have been yet another biological uncle; President William Henry Harrison and Congressman Carter Bassett Harrison, who would have been his double first cousins; Martha Washington's live-in niece and surrogate daughter Fanny Bassett, who would have been a standard first cousin; Martha Washington's nephew Congressman Burwell Bassett Jr., who would have been another standard first cousin; General Robert E. Lee, who would have been both his second and third cousin once removed; President John Tyler, who would have been his fourth cousin once removed; President Benjamin Harrison, who would have been his double first cousin two times removed; Congressman John Scott Harrison, who would have been a double first cousin once removed; and the wealthiest Virginian of his day, Robert "King" Carter, who would have been his great-grandfather. Many of his famous relatives he likely would have seen on a regular basis – during family visits, at weddings and funerals, at Thanksgiving and Christmas. And with so many of his uncles playing such important roles in the Revolution, what a remarkable constellation of other political notables he would have seen regularly coming in and out his front door as well! It was in late 1784, shortly before Benjamin Harrison V's last day as governor, that George Washington, the hero of the Revolution, made one of his occasional visits to Berkeley, and there to greet him no doubt, along with many others, would have been my fourth great-grandfather, a young and gangly Benjamin Carter Bassett.¹⁵

Had it not been for William Henry Bassett's granddaughters Virginia Bassett Alleman and Ida Bassett, both of whom had the good sense to put down in writing what little they knew of his genealogy, I don't know that it would have not been entirely lost to history. They became two of the most important keepers of the family story. In time there would be many, including among William Henry Bassett's great-grandchildren "Cousin Emily," "Cousin Carol," "Cousin Edward," "Cousin Fanny," "Cousin Gladys," "Cousin Katherine," and "Cousin Peggy." My father, John Edmund Orr, became one of the keepers of the wider family story ... by sifting through it with his generation of cousins; by passing it to his portion of the next generation of William Henry Bassett descendants; by preserving old family papers; by lovingly naming his own sailboat after his great-great-grandmother Eleanor O'Neill; by driving to Grand Coteau, Louisiana, and Brenham, Texas, to visit the graves of various Bassett family members, including William Henry Bassett's. He first told me the story when I was 11 or 12. He told it again many years later on a chartered sailboat on the Gulf of Mexico, this time not just to me but also to my older brother, David, and my cousins Mark Dietz and John and Richard Grant. Through our third great-grandfather William Henry Bassett we were somehow connected to the famous Harrison family of Charles City County, Virginia, and through our great-great-grandmother Martha Josephine Roberson, who was a Ball, we were distantly related to George Washington as well. Our third great-grandfather was a seafaring man; he once survived a hurricane at sea. He married an Irish-American girl named Eleanor O'Neill, our third great-grandmother, and between them they produced numerous children, including our great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett, who lived a fascinating life of his own as a Confederate soldier and as lawyer and banker in partnership with his beloved older brother Benjamin Harrison Bassett in Brenham, Texas.¹⁶

It would be almost another three decades before I became a keeper of the family story in my own right. When I did, my father handed me a *Parade Magazine* article on the psychological benefits of getting to know your ancestors. He told me I would enjoy it. I did enjoy it. The main idea I gleaned from the article was that it's healthy to learn about your ancestors because it anchors you better against the vagaries of the world by strengthening your "intergenerational self." By connecting yourself to your ancestors, you realize you belong to something larger than yourself; by familiarizing yourself with the highs and lows they went through, you can better manage the highs and lows of your own life.

I had learned that the sprawling Bassett family stretching over many generations from Virginia to Louisiana to Texas had experienced its share of highs and lows. One low was the suicide of my great-great-grandfather Thomas Jefferson Bassett on the morning of May 25, 1885, after a prolonged battle

¹⁵ George Washington's visit to Berkeley Plantation in late 1784 is cited in Governor Benjamin Harrison V's *Wikipedia* entry.

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson Bassett and Benjamin Harrison Bassett lived parallel lives. They were both born and raised in Louisiana; they both graduated from Yale Law School (they graduated the same year despite their two-year difference in age); they both moved to Brenham, Texas; they practiced law together; they both served in the Civil War on the side of the South; for some 20 years after the war they owned and operated a bank together called Bassett & Bassett Banking House.

with insomnia. According to a poignant news story the following day in the *Brenham Daily Banner*, Jeff Bassett's death by suicide was a tragedy for the entire Brenham community because he had been one of its "most prominent and popular citizens." Everyone knew him. In addition to a banker and a lawyer, he had been a member of the City Council, the school board, the literary club, the American Legion of Honor, the Knights of Pythias, the Knights of Honor. The *Daily Banner* remembered him as "a man of great enterprise and of liberal spirit" who "freely devoted his time to the public service," who "liberally responded whenever money was called for," who "was in the lead in all public enterprises," who "deservedly stood very high in [his] community"; it reported that his funeral cortege was one of the largest the town had ever known. Another low occurred three years later when William Henry Bassett's youngest son, Dr. Lewis McKissick Bassett, was convicted of murdering a Dr. G.W. Affette in Hearne, Texas. And there had no doubt been a very painful succession of lows during the torment of the Civil War -- and during its aftermath when almost everywhere across the South was destitution and loss.

It occurred to me that among other lows the Bassett family probably knew were painful schisms within itself ... because what families did not suffer painful schisms within themselves? And some of the schisms might have been made worse by the strain of war, by the strain of financial crisis, by the strain of tragedy and illness. But there is evidence that the Bassetts also were there for each other - even during times of strain. According to a news special from Franklin, Texas, published in the *Fort Worth Daily Gazette* on January 26, 1889, when during a retrial the murder conviction of William Henry Bassett's youngest was overturned, "universal rejoicing prevailed throughout the courtroom, and the distinguished Maj. [Benjamin Harrison] Bassett, his brother, who [had been in town] several days, like many others, could not restrain his tears."

(This story was last modified January 31, 2017. If you've received an earlier version, I would be eternally grateful if you would kindly replace it with this one, as this one should contain fewer errors and cause less dizziness. If you have any questions about the story, or any corrections or additional information, please feel free to email me at billorr7@gmail.com.)