

# "GENTLEMAN" JOHN PERKINS

Some Account of the Life and Times of "Gentleman" John Perkins, of Lincoln; and of His Contemporaries, Successors and Descendants; Together With a Glance at the History of the Manners, Customs and Development of What is Now Caldwell County and of the Adjacent Country, During the Latter Part of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries.

By W. W. SCOTT

(Continued from Last Week)

"Pleasant Valley Farm," on John's river, one of the richest and most valuable plantations in Burke county, is in acreage and extent just as it was when John Perkins gave it to his son, Elisha 3rd, something over 126 years ago, and undivided as to its broad acres, is the property in common of four ladies, great-great-granddaughters of John Perkins. Elisha Perkins left a widow and one son, Alfred, of whom Col. Walton says: "Alfred Perkins, a man highly esteemed for his probity, was a leading elder in the Presbyterian Church. His death in the meridian of life was deeply regretted by all who knew him. He, like the older members of the Perkins family, was of the bone and sinew of the land. He married Mary, the youngest daughter of Robert Caldwell, Sr., leaving at his death three children, Elisha Alexander, Robert Caldwell and Elizabeth. Alexander reminds me very much of his father, in character, form and face."

"So near approach we their celestial kind By justice, truth and probity of mind."

Alexander and Robert bought the interest in "Pleasant Valley" of their sister, Elizabeth, who married a Mr. Williams of Mississippi. Robert married first Miss Mary Neal of Hertford county and, second, Miss Emma Susan Gordon of Chowan; he had no children by either wife. Alexander was like his father in being a Presbyterian elder. He was captain of a company of cavalry in the civil war. Somewhat late in life he married a sister of his brother's second wife, Miss Juliana Gordon, who was the mother of the four ladies who now own "Pleasant Valley"—Mrs. Mary Perkins Kent, Mrs. Emma Perkins McConnaughey and Miss Susan Gordon Perkins. These two brothers, from their babyhood to the death of Alexander, lived together and owned everything in common, and, at the death of Alexander, Robert entered into loco parentis to his brother's four daughters, who had never known any difference, in love and affection, between the two. Although Alexander was the older of this pair noble fratrum, as Judge McCorkle justly calls them for the sake of a phony, they were in common parlance always spoken of together as "Bob and Aleck" Perkins. The English rule of primogeniture would assign the headship of the House of Perkins in North Carolina to Mrs. Mary Perkins Kent, a charming and accomplished lady, a graduate of Peace Institute, who was married to Horatio Miller Kent, descended from John Perkins through Parson Miller and his wife, Mary Perkins Miller. The three other sisters, like their father and uncle, reside together in the fine old home at "Pleasant Valley," Mrs. Forney being a widow.

Robert Johnstone and Mary Perkins Miller

According to the records of the office of the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General at Washington, Lower Creek postoffice, Burke county, N. C., was established at Mary's Grove and Robert Johnstone Miller appointed postmaster, May 23, 1826, which position he held until his death in 1834. The postoffice was evidently created as a public convenience and not as a means of personal emolument for Parson Miller, who derived from the office in 1833 an income of \$11.86. Perhaps he derived more benefit from the privilege the office conferred on him of franking his own correspondence, which was large. This was a privilege belonging to all postmasters, and in his case was all the more deserved because, as a Revolutionary veteran, he had consistently declined to apply for a pension, and so did his widow after his death. It is assumed that he availed himself of the franking privilege. Upon Parson Miller's death James Harper, Esq., was appointed postmaster of Lower Creek and moved the office a mile eastward to his large store at Fairfield, located just a mile west of where the court house in Lenoir now stands, and in 1841, when the town of Lenoir was established, the postoffice was removed to that town and James Harper made postmaster. So the present Lenoir postoffice may be said to be the lineal descendant of the Lower Creek postoffice established at Mary's Grove in 1826.

The Mary's Grove plantation, which was given by John Perkins to his daughter Mary when she married Parson Miller, was not a part of any grants made to him by Earl Granville, but was bought, either during or after the Revolutionary war, from Isaac Baldwin, a Tory, who deemed it expedient to leave the country. There was a "sprinkling" of Tories in the western section and one quite prominent lived but a few miles southwest of Mary's Grove, Col. Vezey Husband, a brother of Herman Husband, for whom was named Husband's creek in Caldwell, which runs through lands once owned by him. Lower Creek runs through Caldwell, past Lenoir, to the Catawba river, into which Lower creek, a Caldwell stream, Middle creek (John's river) running along the line between Caldwell and Burke, and Upper creek, in Burke—all three in Burke in those days—empty almost together near the line between the two counties. Parson Miller resided on the plantation from the date of his marriage in 1787 until 1792, during which period three of his children were born, moving back to Lincoln in 1792. In 1806 he returned to Mary's Grove, where he built the "hospitable mansion," where he lived until his death. The grove in which the house was situated was a magnificent collection of giant oaks and hickories; fifty years ago it covered a space of at least ten acres, and though diminished in size now, is still a beautiful grove. During the first ten or fifteen years of his residence at Mary's Grove Parson Miller was away a great deal on missionary tours in North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina and Virginia, and his excellent wife was the head of the house and the manager of affairs.

In appearance Parson Miller is described as straight, dignified, above the average height, being a little under six feet tall, and of a benevolent but serious cast of countenance. He never gave up wearing "short-clothes"—knee pants and stockings—and his silver knee buckles and shoe buckles are in possession of a descendant now, in a very peculiar shape—that of silver spoons! The spoons are valued highly as relics, it is true, but they lack the personal sentiment that would attach to the buckles.

These were their children:

(A) John Wesley.

He was born at Mary's Grove, Dec. 23, 1787. There are no data at hand touching his history.

(B) George Osman.

Born July 8, 1789, at Mary's Grove; died March 18, 1805, in Lincoln county.

(C) Catherine Lowrance.

Born Nov. 15, 1790, at Mary's Grove. Married Rev. Godfrey Dreher, a Lutheran minister in South Carolina, in which State they have numerous descendants of respectability.

(D) Margaret Bothier.

Born Aug. 5, 1792, at Poplar Hill, near Island Ford, Lincoln county. Married John Sudderth, a wealthy farmer on John's river. Their children were:

(1) Anne, who married Robert McCombs in Cherokee county, where numerous descendants reside, enjoying the respect of their neighbors.

(2) Sydney, who married a Miss Bristol of Burke, where their family still lives.

(3) John, who married a Miss Shuford of Catawba. A daughter married John S. Haigler, a great-grandson of Parson Miller.

(4) Margaret Bothier, who married Rev. John B. Powell, a much esteemed Baptist minister in Caldwell, who belonged to the family founded by an officer in Ferguson's army that was defeated by the colonists at King's Mountain. In spite of their having been on the royalist side in the Revolutionary war the Powells established themselves as a leading family in this section, and one of them, in this instance, married the daughter of a rebel veteran. Their children were:

(1) John M., who married Addie Dula; his history is set forth under the head of Joseph Perkins. Besides Ward and Frank, the sons, there are two daughters, Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Throneburg.

(2) Horace, who married Miss Hartley. The husband is dead and the widow lives with her family in Virginia.

(E) Sarah Amelia.

Born July 23, 1784, at Poplar Hill, near Island Ford, and married, first, Col. Sumpter of South Carolina, a relative of Gen. Sumpter; married, second, Rev. Joseph Puett, a Methodist minister. The children were:

(1) Robert Sumpter, who went to Virginia at an early age; no data at hand.

(2) Caroline Sumpter, who married Albert E. Haigler of Lenoir. Their sons, Elisha P. and John S. Haigler, were gallant Confederate soldiers, who moved to Texas soon after the civil war and have become prosperous and prominent citizens. John S. Haigler married Miss Sudderth, a great-granddaughter of Parson Miller. Elisha married a Texas lady. Both have sons and daughters: Sarah, who married Capt. Stowe of Gaston county. They were married soon after Capt. Stowe came out of the civil war and moved to Kansas. Mrs. Stowe was a graduate of St. Mary's, Raleigh, and was one of the most accomplished women ever sent out from that great school. She left one daughter, Caroline Sumpter, who inherited her mother's beauty and talents and also went to St. Mary's. Her well-trained and beautiful voice and her unusual gifts in the arts of drawing and painting early placed her among the foremost of the galaxy of remarkably gifted and talented women which the passing generation has given to Lenoir. She is married to Carter Beverly Harrison of Williamsburg, Va., a civil and railroad constructing engineer who later went into business and is one of the leading business men of Lenoir. They have a family of six interesting daughters. Mary, who married Samuel Hartley, one of the old-time business standbys of Lenoir. Both are dead, childless. Caroline and Amanda, twins. The

former married, first, John L. Powell of Catawba, and second, Col. Gard of Florida. She is living in Lenoir, widowed and childless. Her twin sister, Amanda, married Lewis Brown of Salisbury, who later moved to Asheville, where they now live. Mrs. Gard and Mrs. Brown both graduated at St. Mary's, Raleigh.

(3) Mary Sumpter, who married Nelson A. Powell, a prominent manufacturer and farmer of Lenoir, and a brother of Rev. John B. Powell, above spoken of. Their children were George Sumpter Powell, one of the most prominent business men and financiers in the State, with headquarters at Asheville; and Lucy, who married her cousin, Tate Powell, of Catawba, and went to live in Mississippi and Florida.

(4) Elisha Perkins Puett, a Confederate soldier who died childless.

(5) Joseph Pinkney Puett, also a good Confederate soldier who survived the war many years. He married Miss Sally Haigler of Caldwell, and raised a family of worthy sons and daughters. He was widely known and respected in the county as one of its most sterling citizens: John, Joseph, Stella and Caroline.

(F) ELISHA PERKINS AND SIDNEY CALDWELL MILLER

Elisha Perkins Miller was born July 21, 1796, at Willow Hill, near Whitehaven church, Lincoln county. His wife, Sidney Caldwell, daughter of Robert Caldwell of Burke, was born at Londonderry, Ireland, in 1801, came to this country with her parents when she was six years old and died in 1875. She was educated at Salem Female Academy. Her sister Mary married Alfred Perkins and she was the aunt of Alexander and Robert Perkins, of former Gov. Tod R. Caldwell and of Robert Caldwell Pearson, at one time president of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, all of Burke. An older brother, Robert Caldwell 2nd, was a wealthy merchant in Petersburg, Va., who, dying unmarried in 1818, left his fortune to his brother John and to his sisters. The considerable bequest left to Mrs. Miller by her brother's will enabled her to assist Major Miller to acquire the whole of the Mary's Grove property at the death of Parson Miller. Under the proprietorship of Major and Mrs. Miller Mary's Grove became and continued to be one of the notable seats of hospitality in Burke and Caldwell for many years. Major Miller represented Burke county in the biennial Legislatures of 1836, 1838 and 1840. The Legislature of 1840 created the county of Caldwell from portions of Burke and Wilkes counties and the county was founded in 1841. In 1842 Major Miller was elected the first Clerk of the Superior Court for the county. He did not exercise the functions of his office except by deputy, which was not a popular thing to do, and in 1844 he was defeated by a rising young physician, Dr. J. C. Newland. In 1842 and 1844 the county was represented in the lower house of the Legislature by William Dickson, a Whig friend of Major Miller. In 1846 and in 1848 Major Miller represented Caldwell in the lower house of the General Assembly. In 1850 his nephew, Tod R. Caldwell of Burke, was a candidate for the State Senate for the 46th district, and Major Miller supported his old friend, John Hayes of Caldwell, for the lower house, who was elected. In 1852 he was again elected to the lower house. In 1854 he was defeated for the Legislature by a margin of six votes by Gen. Cornelius Clarke, a Democrat. In 1856 he was again defeated by a small majority by Gen. S. F. Patterson, I believe. In 1858 he was elected to the State Senate for the 46th district. In 1860 his failing health took him out of politics and early in 1861 he died. For 25 years he was a man of great popularity in Burke and Caldwell counties and exerted a wide influence upon Whig politics in the western section of the State. Judge McCorkle calls him the "father of Caldwell county," a title which he perhaps deserves, for it is probable that, but for his exertions, the creation of the county would have been delayed several years. Elisha P. Miller had six sons and one daughter living at the beginning of the war; all the sons were in the Confederate army and were good soldiers:

(1) Robert Caldwell Miller was born in 1821 and died in 1873. As a very young man, in 1841-2-3, he was Deputy Clerk of the Superior Court of Caldwell county under his father, who was the first clerk. He was a fine business man and at one time was engaged in the manufacture of tobacco with Richard V. Michaux of Burke. When the collapse of the Episcopal school at Valle Crucis, in Watauga county (it was then Ashe county) came, Mr. Miller bought the property of the school, something like 2,000 acres, and turned it into a stock farm. He married Lucy Kendrick Abernethy, a ward and kinswoman of Bartlett Shipp of Lincoln, and had one son, Robert Caldwell. Both mother and son died within a few years. He was a member of Company F, 41st Regiment (cavalry) N. C. State troops, Capt. Perkins' company. Susan Fenimore Cooper, daughter of James Fenimore Cooper, in her "Memoir of William West Skiles; a Sketch of Missionary Life at Valle Crucis" (New York: James Pott & Co., publishers, 1890), which describes the missionary work of the Episcopal Church in Ashe county, after the failure of Valle Crucis as a school and mission station, makes the following reference to Mr. Miller:

"The property, heavily encumbered with debt, was sold, both land and stock, by the representatives of Dr. Ives to Mr. Robert Miller, the grandson of a Church clergyman of the olden time, who now worked the former mission ground as a farm. He was very kind to Mr. Skiles. The little office, or library, became the home of the missionary, who slept there, taking his meals, without charge, at Mr. Miller's. From the herd which had been so long his care the good Deacon reserved a favorite horse for missionary work, and several pet cows; and for these Mr. Miller also provided liberally. The missionary took all the care of the horse on himself. Henry, a fine, spirited roan, was already a sort of brother missionary, carrying his master faithfully, by night and day, over many a rugged path on errands of duty, or charity. The cows were reserved for the benefit of poor parishioners. . . . In the summer of 1853 a fellow-laborer in the good work came to assist Mr. Skiles, Mr. George N. Evans, a layman from Lenoir. He was received very kindly by Mr. Miller, who gave him two rooms in his own house, a front room with a fireplace and a bedroom adjoining, both comfortably furnished. A particular horse was placed at his disposal. For these conveniences and three bountiful meals daily the charge was three dollars a month! . . . Across the valley from the farmstead in the meadows beyond the little stream, labourers might be seen saving hay for a herd of fifty cattle. Near the buildings in the home field some twelve or fifteen sleek, straight-backed, small-tailed calves were seen gambolling and feeding. Night and morning a procession of twelve or fifteen sleek, glossy Durham cows came home to be milked. Of the milk and butter from this fine herd no account was taken; what was not eaten at table, or used for cooking, was left freely to the negroes. On the mountain was a large herd of fine Durhams, grazing at will. Every Saturday Mr. Miller went up to the Alpine pasture to salt the herd; occasionally, for a holiday, Mr. Skiles and Mr. Evans went with him. After reaching the wild open pasture the usual call would be given, and in a moment the great creatures would come running, jumping, leaping, in their uncouth way, surrounding the visitors, their kindly faces and large dark eyes all turned towards their friend, the farmer. . . . It was a regular habit with Mr. Miller to take gun and hounds with him to the "salting." A deer was almost invariably roused on returning, and the crack of the rifle, with the baying of the hounds, was often heard from the pastures where the herd was feeding. The cattle heeded these sounds very little and were seldom alarmed by them, being familiar with the hounds. In one year, at this date, about 1854, seven deer were killed within the limits of Valle Crucis. . . . There were great fishermen, as well as hunters, in the valley. A brother of Mr. Miller was a very skillful angler. The finest of brook trout were on table almost every day during the season. Occasionally he would go to particular points on the mountain streams, familiar to him, equipped with rod and flies, and return in the evening with perhaps fifty or sixty trout, some of them nearly a foot long. Mr. Miller was something of a naturalist; rather too much so for the comfort of his friends. Among his pets was a live rattlesnake, a near neighbor of the missionary. He kept it in a cage on the porch. On one occasion when Mr. Skiles and Mr. Evans were passing through the porch after supper they heard Mr. Miller callin' gout in surprise: "Why, what are you doing here?" It was the rattlesnake with whom he was conversing. The creature was crawling about at leisure, having crept through the slats of his cage, flattening himself to an incredible degree to accomplish the feat. Mr. Miller, not at all discomposed, took the snake by the neck with a pair of tongs, and with the other hand held the tail, rattles and all, and coolly replaced it in the cage. On another occasion he was seen riding past the office with a bag of trout at his side, and over one shoulder a pole, with a live rattlesnake attached to it. He had seen the snake, caught it, tied it with a strip of bark to a tree until he had caught trout enough, and then fastened it to a pole, neck, body and tail, and, carrying the pole over one shoulder, rode quietly home with the deadly reptile at his back."

(To be Continued Next Week.)

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