

The Parentage of Matthias Steelman

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Who were the parents of Matthias Steelman? This is a question that has plagued Steelman family researchers for many years. This essay will examine the presently known information concerning Matthias Steelman and the early members of the Steelman family in America. It will also examine any existing theories on this issue to see whether they are supported by known information.

Part One: Matthias Steelman

The best place to start this inquiry is with established facts about Matthias Steelman, and conclusions that can be drawn from those facts. Any theory about his parentage must be measured against these known facts.

The earliest record of Matthias Steelman is a land warrant dated November 26, 1747. It was issued by the Proprietaries of the Colony of Pennsylvania for there to be surveyed 100 acres between Benjamin and Hourglass Marshes in Kent County (Delaware). The warrant states that Matthias Steelman was of Kent County, Delaware, indicating that he was already living in Kent County. On November 30, 1748 a survey was returned for 253 ½ acres of land for Matthias Steelman in the "forest of Murtherkill" in Kent County. There is a recitation that this was pursuant to a warrant dated November 26, 1747.

From 1751 through 1768, Matthias Steelman appears each year in the Assessment Levy List for Kent County, Delaware, Murtherkill Hundred. During this period of time, there are several land transactions, the last of which was in 1770. From these records we know that Matthias Steelman resided in Kent County, Delaware for a period of approximately 23 years. Murtherkill Hundred is located in the southern part of Kent County, Delaware.

On August 16, 1770, Matthias and Ruth Steelman sold their lands in Kent County, Delaware (Liber S-I, pp. 350-351), and apparently headed south for North Carolina. It is interesting to note that this deed was certified by Cesar Rodney, who would 6 years later be Delaware's signatory to the Declaration of Independence. Rodney was selected to be the symbol of Delaware on the First State's quarter-dollar coin, which was issued earlier this year.

The next reference to Matthias Steelman is in the 1774 tax list for Surry County, North Carolina, where he is shown to have 2 taxables. However, Matthias may well have been in North Carolina earlier than 1774. His eldest son William is shown in a tax list for Rowan County (which then adjoined Surry) in 1772. There are several possible explanations as to what happened to the family between 1770 and 1774. The family may have settled briefly at another location on the way to North Carolina. If there truly is a four year gap, then this is a possibility. William may have preceded the family to North Carolina to assess the situation, and the family followed later. It is my belief that the family proceeded directly from Delaware to North Carolina, and simply was not recorded in the frontier records until 1774.

Matthias appears regularly in the records of Surry County, North Carolina, through November of 1793 when his will was admitted to probate. The will mentions his wife, Ruth Steelman, along with the following children:

Sealah Cain - born ca 1747, died September 8, 1827
William Steelman - born May, 1750, died March 7, 1836
Elizabeth Speer - born ca 1753, died ca 1853
John Steelman - born ca 1754, died after 1800
Charles Steelman - born ca 1755, died ca 1845
George Steelman - born ca 1755, died 1800
Ruth Speer -
Rachel Creason - born ca 1760, died ca 1813
James Steelman - born ca 1765

Not mentioned was another child, Matthias Steelman, Jr. who died in 1782. Matthias Steelman was the administrator of this estate.

Based upon the affidavit given by Matthias Steelman in 1755, we now know that he was born in 1728, a date that is five years later than originally estimated. Thus, he was only 19 when he had lands surveyed in Kent County, Delaware. 1747 was also the year in which his eldest child, Sealah was born. This would indicate that he had not been married for a long period of time. The age span between the youngest and the oldest child of 18 years is consistent with a marriage to one woman, who would have borne children from her late teens or early twenties until her late thirties or early forties. Matthias would have been about 65 years of age at the time of his death, and about 42 at the time he sold the lands in Delaware, and moved to North Carolina.

We actually know a good deal about Matthias Steelman, especially once he moved to North Carolina. The size of his land transactions, in both Delaware and North Carolina indicate that he was a farmer. In 1753 and 1755 deeds, Matthias is referred to as a yeoman of Murtherkill Hundred in Kent County. In the account ledger of the Hunt Store, in 1792 Matthias purchased a sickle, and paid for his account by hauling loads of tobacco to Fayetteville, and hauling grain to Salem. Based upon the areas where he lived (Delaware and the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina), Matthias was a farmer, and his primary crops were tobacco and grains.

In looking for the parents of Matthias Steelman, the above information allows us to set some criteria that individuals would have to meet, as follows:

1. If Matthias was born in 1728, his father would most likely be between 20 and 45 years of age. This would mean the father would have been born between 1683 and 1708. While certainly his father could have older than 45, if this was the case, then Matthias would probably have been the product of a second marriage, rather than a first marriage.
2. As we will see below, this means that Matthias would have either been a son of one of Hans Mansson's younger children, or a grandson of one of the older children.
3. For nearly 45 years, Matthias was engaged in agriculture for his livelihood. This would seem to indicate that he was raised on a farm. It seems unlikely that he would have come from a city or tradesman background, and then have gone into farming. We should look for a farming background in possible candidates for Matthias' parents.
4. Matthias was a resident of Kent County, Delaware in 1747. It seems logical to look for his parents first in Kent County, and in New Castle County, Delaware, the county lying north of Kent County. However, since we know that the Steelmans at this time were also in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and in New Jersey, those areas should also be examined. It is a possibility that Matthias migrated to Delaware from one of those areas.

Part Two: The Theory of Dr. Arthur Adams

All Steelman researchers owe a great debt to Dr. Arthur Adams and Ross Cook for their pioneer work on the Steelman family during the first part of this century. Through diligent research and deductive reasoning, they were able to connect the Steelman family to Swedish settler and soldier, Hans Mansson.

In his article entitled "The Steelman Family", published in the journal of the Atlantic County Historical Society, Vol. 3, No. 1 (October, 1956), Dr. Adams asserts that Matthias Steelman of Surry County, North Carolina, was the son of George Steelman, son of Peter Steelman, son of Hans Steelman. Specifically Dr. Adams stated:

"Matthias(4), George (3), Peter (2), Capt. Hans(1) Steelman. He removed to the Surry-Rowan counties of North Carolina. His first land grant is dated 4-4-1788. His will was dated in Surry County 16 Feb 1789 and was proved in 1793. He mentions his wife Ruth, son James, the principal legatee. He mentions, without specifying relationship, doubtless children, William Steelman, Sealah Cain, John Steelman, Ruth Speer, Rachel Creson, Charles Steelman, Elizabeth Speer. The executors are William and James Steelman." Adams, supra. p. 62.

Adams says the following about George Steelman, who he asserts was the father of Matthias:

"Again, we have no documentary proof of his parentage, but there can be no doubt of his place in the family. He married, by license dated 12 Dec. 1737, Phebe, daughter of Jonathan and Barbara Adams, sister of Sarah, wife of his brother Matthias – brothers married sisters." Adams, supra. pp. 53-54

Adams goes on to state that the only known children of George were Matthias and George Steelman, both of whom settled in North Carolina.

On page 53 of the article, the children of Peter Steelman of Great Egg Harbor, New Jersey are listed as follows:

1. Charles Steelman, who married Margaret Scull on 5 January 1731.
2. Matthias Steelman, who married Sarah Adams on 14 September 1730.
3. George Steelman, who married Phebe Adams on 12 December 1737.
4. Gatar Steelman, who married Daniel Lake on 14 September 1730.
5. Mary Steelman, who married Elias Champion on 15 December 1735.
6. Maria Steelman.
7. Peter Steelman.

Can Matthias Steelman be the son of George Steelman and Phebe Adams? If George and Phebe married in 1737, then it would be impossible for Matthias to have owned land in Kent County, Delaware in 1747, and for him to have fathered children in the late 1740's and early 1750's. Adams' assertion simply does not fit with known data on Matthias.

If we examine Adams article further, there are several errors and omissions as to Matthias Steelman of Surry County, North Carolina. In discussing other members of the Steelman family, Adams is careful to discuss where they lived, and lands owned. Note that with respect to Matthias Steelman, there is no mention of him having lived in Kent County, Delaware. The only mention by Adams is of him living in Surry County, North Carolina. Adams was unaware that Matthias Steelman lived in the State of Delaware.

Adams then asserts that Matthias' first land grant in North Carolina was dated April 4, 1788. This is simply incorrect. Matthias' first land entry in Surry County was on July 28, 1778. His first recorded land grant was dated September 20, 1779 for 400 acres on Deep Creek, and the Mulberry Fields Road. There are several land grants to Matthias Steelman, dated April 3, 1780, which may be the ones referenced by Adams. There are no grants to Matthias Steelman dated April 4, 1788.

The next problem is that Adams asserts that George Steelman was the brother of Matthias. In fact George was the son of Matthias, and is specifically identified as such in Matthias Steelman's will. How did Adams reach such an incorrect conclusion? He obviously had either copies or abstracts of the wills of Matthias and George Steelman because he correctly lists their children. The will of Matthias was probated in 1793 and the will of George was probated in 1800. Adams must have assumed that since there were only seven years between the two wills that the men must have been brothers. The Court records of Surry County clearly

state that, with the exception of the oldest child, Mary, all of George's children were minors at the time of his death, and a guardian was appointed for them. The minor children clearly show that George and Matthias were of different generations, and were father and son.

Why did Adams assign Matthias Steelman of Surry County as a child of George Steelman, son of Peter. It appears that the basis was simply the names of the people involved. He saw the names Matthias and George in the North Carolina Steelmans, which were names that he had seen before, in the family of Peter Steelman of southern New Jersey. Surely, these people must be a part of that family. Of Peter's children, both Charles and Matthias left wills, and Peter died in 1720. This left George Steelman, as the only possible person in the Peter Steelman family that could have been the father of Matthias Steelman.

It should be noted that Dr. Adams never held himself out to be an expert on the Steelman family of North Carolina. His primary focus was upon the Steelmans that settled in southern New Jersey. His assignment of Matthias Steelman to the Peter Steelman family was made in good faith based upon the limited amount of information that he had available to him at the time. We need to remember that genealogy is not an exact science. The body of knowledge continues to grow daily, and assumptions made in the past based upon available information may be disproved by later discoveries. For this reason, researchers should always state clearly the basis of assumptions that are not based upon documented facts, so not to discourage later researchers from scrutinizing those assumptions.

Does this analysis mean that Matthias Steelman could not be a descendant of Peter Steelman of southern New Jersey? Absolutely not. It simply means that Matthias could not have been the product of the marriage of George Steelman and Phebe Adams, who married in 1737. If this was a second marriage for George, then he cannot at this time be excluded as a possible father of Matthias Steelman.

<http://www.steelmangenealogy.com/matthias-steelman.html>
