

Reading Between the Lines: Capt. John Blakeney and the Case for Limerick

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It was by pure accident that I stumbled onto my connection to the Blakeney family in late 2007. Frustrated in my efforts to find additional information on my paternal grandmother's family, the Ainsworth family of Mississippi, I decided to spend a little time looking into some of the lesser-known branches of my father's side of the family. I knew basically nothing about these long-neglected branches, and, based on past experience, I didn't expect to find a whole lot of information out there. At best, I might find a fact or two before heading back to the "important" branches of the family.

Flipping through my copy of "Our Ainsworth Heritage" by Lucille Dickinson Ainsworth, I came across a photograph I had recognized from many years ago. It showed my great-great grandparents, William Patterson Ainsworth and Terry Blakeney, sitting on their porch at their home in rural Mississippi. I remember my great uncle Lavelle Ainsworth (who provided the photo and much information for the book), my grandmother's younger brother, showing me this same photo during a visit down south when I was about 14 or 15. I hadn't remembered their names, or much else Uncle Lavelle told me about them, other than the fact that they were his grandparents. He had known them both, and he was in his 20's when they died; William, known as Pat, died in 1928, and Terry died in 1930. The name "Blakeney" was new to me – I wasn't even aware it was in the family until seeing Terry Blakeney's name in the book – so I thought it might be a nice little diversion in my research.

It didn't take long to discover, after a few searches on the internet and the help of a distant cousin to finalize the connection, that Terry Blakeney was the great-great granddaughter of Captain John Blakeney, Revolutionary War soldier and a wealthy plantation owner with landholdings totaling thousands of acres in what is now Chesterfield County, South Carolina. He was born in Ireland, and came to the colonies as a young man. A very prominent figure in Chesterfield County in the later part of the 18th and early 19th centuries, he has been the subject of exhaustive research by legions of descendants going back generations. I had struck gold.

John Blakeney's personal history, passed down through generations, does provide a good deal of information concerning his origins. He was born at Mt. Blakeney in County Limerick, Ireland, around the year 1732. It is believed, and has been for generations, that he is probably a nephew of Lord William Blakeney, the hero of Sterling Castle and Minorca (though now largely forgotten), and member of a very prominent family in the county. The roots of that family can be traced back to Norfolk, England, and they appear to have settled in County Limerick in the 17th century. Lord William was the oldest of nine children. His father was another William Blakeney. This William, like his son and namesake, was a Member of Parliament for the borough of Kilmallock. Lord William's mother was Elizabeth Bowerman, whose ancestors can be traced back to English Royalty.

Another branch of the Blakeney family, also descended from the Norfolk Blakeney and close cousins of the Mt. Blakeney branch, resided at Castle Blakeney in County Galway. Family tradition, however, is very specific as to which branch of the family Capt. John belonged. Mt. Blakeney, it is said, was his home.

Capt. John Blakeney and his family figure prominently in the 1867 book "History of the Old Cheraws" by Bishop Alexander Gregg, chronicling the founding of the Cheraws district of South Carolina and its early settlers. He is the centerpiece of John Oscar Blakeney's privately-published 1928 book "The Blakeney in America and Some Collaterals." His name has appeared in countless family histories published over the years.

A large granite monument at John Blakeney's gravesite, located in a family cemetery that lies on part of his original plantation near Pageland, SC, lists his many accomplishments – member of the South Carolina Congress, Overseer of the Poor and Vestryman for St. David's Parish; but his greatest claim to

fame was his service in the Revolutionary War. In 1775, at about the age of 43, he received a Captain's commission to raise a regiment of volunteers to fight the British. His company served under General Francis Marion, the legendary "Swamp Fox", and he is recognized by the Daughters of the American Revolution as a Patriot. By any estimation, he led an extraordinary life.

Still, we have no contemporary records stating the names of his parents or the exact location of his birth. Time, war, and fires have destroyed many records that may have provided easier access to this information on both sides of the Atlantic. This includes the 1922 explosion at the Public Records Office in Dublin, which wiped out centuries of Irish history. As much as family tradition tells us, there is no piece of paper, no will, no deed, no church record that we can point to as definitive proof of his origins.

In the absence of any actual documentation linking Capt. John to the family at Mt. Blakeney, I have been trying to sort out what information passed down through tradition goes back to his time, or shortly thereafter, as opposed to information that was simply guessed by later descendants and researchers and added onto family history. Part of this involves narrowing down who knew who - what information may have come from people who directly knew Capt. John Blakeney and, by default, from John Blakeney himself.

John Oscar Blakeney and "The Blakeney's in America"

I decided to begin by examining John Oscar Blakeney's 1928 book "The Blakeney's in America and Some Collaterals", not just the information in the book, but where that information may have initially come from. Despite occasional errors and omissions, this book is still considered by many to be one of the cornerstones of Blakeney research and contains much valuable information, including many of the family legends that are accepted as fact by Capt. John's descendants.

The link between Lord William Blakeney and Capt. John is specifically mentioned in the book. On page 17, Blakeney states "It is believed that John Blakeney, who came to America about 1750, was his (Lord William Blakeney's) nephew." As evidence of this connection, John Oscar Blakeney quotes a letter written on April 25, 1874 by Stephen Jackson, who was a great grandson of Capt. John Blakeney. In addition to information about Capt. John's eight children, he mentions his great grandfather's origins in Ireland, "Your grandfather's (John G. Blakeney) grandfather (Capt. John Blakeney) came from Ireland immediately after the Irish rebellion and settled in this county (Chesterfield), married and raised a large family of children..." While Jackson doesn't name the exact location, though it's possible he did in another part of the letter which John Oscar didn't include with this quote, he does continue with some specific information; "Now as to the estate in Ireland, I know nothing of my own knowledge. I know there is an estate there, as our progenitor was the only child when he left and his mother was the only one of the family."

This letter was written in 1874, more than 40 years after Capt. John Blakeney's death. The book was published in 1928, more than half a century after the letter was written and nearly a century after Capt. John's death. Where does Jackson's information come from? By putting the information in context, the source may become clearer.

Stephen Jackson was born in 1808 in Chesterfield County, where he spent his entire life. He was the son of Henry A. Jackson and Mary Blakeney, the daughter of James Blakeney, the son of Capt. John Blakeney. James Blakeney was a prominent figure in his own right. He served three terms in the South Carolina Legislature during the 1790's. Stephen Jackson also made a name for himself in the Chesterfield community, and was one of the leaders of the secessionist movement in South Carolina in 1860. After the Civil War, he was a member of the State Legislature for ten years, as well as holding several county offices¹. It may be safely assumed that he was well versed in history, including the history of his own family.

Capt. John Blakeney died in 1832 in Chesterfield County, at or around the age of 100. This means that Stephen Jackson would have had direct contact with his great-grandfather for a period of 24 years, more than sufficient time to hear stories about his ancestral homeland from the man himself. There can be little

doubt that Jackson was well aware of his great grandfather's origins. Judging by the statement "I know there is an estate there, as our progenitor was the only child when he left and his mother was the only one of the family," he appears to be familiar with some specific details of John Blakeney's life in Ireland. The fact that Capt. John was the "only child when he left" and his mother was "the only one of the family", if accurate, could only have come from Capt. John himself, the only one who was there to witness events.

It may be a safe assumption that Jackson's knowledge of the existence of a family estate in Ireland was a fact known to him long before he composed his letter in 1874. Since this was only 42 years after the death of his great grandfather, it is certainly reasonable to think that this knowledge extended back to Capt. John's lifetime.

John Oscar Blakeney, however, does not tell us to whom the 1874 letter was addressed. Since it was published nearly 50 years later, my first assumption was that it was an old family heirloom that he had access to while writing his book. On closer scrutiny, however, I am now of the opinion that the letter was written to John Oscar himself. Let's examine the phrase "Your grandfather's (John G. Blakeney) grandfather (Capt. John Blakeney)." The names in parentheses appear to have been added by Blakeney for the book and were not part of the original letter. While it's obvious that the grandfather's grandfather mentioned was Capt. John Blakeney, the reference to the recipient's grandfather would seem to be a bit more obscure, since Capt. John had many grandsons. Blakeney obviously knew who Jackson was referring to even without mentioning him by name. John Goodloe Blakeney was, of course, the grandfather of John Oscar Blakeney.

Although the full contents of the letter are not known (it's not known if the letter has survived), there is one more area where we may be able to read between the lines. When Jackson says "Now as to the estate in Ireland", he seems to be responding to a question posed to him about the estate. This would certainly indicate that the person who asked the question had prior knowledge about the existence of an estate there. This would mean that by the 1870's, knowledge about the estate was already known throughout various branches of the Blakeney family.

The span of time between the writing of the letter and publication of the book can be deceptive at first glance, skewing our perspective. It is important to note, however, that John Oscar Blakeney published his book late in his life, at the age of 76. He was born in 1852. In 1874, when the letter was written, he would have been 22 years old. It is still common practice for those beginning their genealogical research to ask questions of family members who may have a good deal of information about the family's past. It is possible that John Oscar was beginning his research into the history of the Blakeney family and was trying to get as much information as he could from those who would have been in a position to get it directly from the source, Capt. John Blakeney.

John Goodloe Blakeney

One likely source of John Oscar's information would have been his own grandfather, John Goodloe Blakeney. As mentioned previously, John Goodloe was the grandson of Capt. John and son of James. Born in Chesterfield County in 1791, John Goodloe would have been another of John Oscar Blakeney's sources who would have had direct and extended contact with Capt. John over a period of several decades.

By the 1820's, John Goodloe Blakeney and his wife, Isabella McLendon, had left Chesterfield County, SC for Mississippi and Alabama. Their son Benjamin, the father of John Oscar, was born in Clark County, Mississippi in 1826. If John Oscar's knowledge of an Irish estate as Capt. John's birthplace was first told to him by his father and grandfather, then that knowledge would almost certainly have left Chesterfield County with this branch of the family in the 1820's. This was still within the lifetime of Capt. John Blakeney.

Late in his life, following the Civil War, John Goodloe moved in with his son Benjamin and his family, who were by this time living in Des Arc, Arkansas. This would put young John Oscar, by then a teenager, in the same house with his grandfather, John Goodloe. It is difficult to imagine that the life of Capt. John

Blakeney, the heroic and accomplished grandfather of the eldest Blakeney of the household, would not have been discussed.

It is interesting to note that Stephen Jackson's letter was written in 1874, the year after the death of John Oscar's father, Benjamin, and four years after the death of his grandfather, John Goodloe. It's possible that young John Oscar, still in his early 20's and eager for information about his family's history, now had to turn to other family members with his questions.

Whiteford Smith Blakeney

Whiteford Smith Blakeney was another great grandson of Capt. John. He was born in Chesterfield County in 1865, the twentieth and last child of John "Jack" Blakeney, III.

Like his distant cousin John Oscar, Whiteford Smith Blakeney had access to people who would have personally known Capt. John, beginning with his own father, who was born in Chesterfield County in 1793. As with other Blakeney's of his generation, his grandfather, Capt. John Blakeney, would have been a very prominent person in Jack Blakeney's life.

Although Whiteford is not known to have written about the history of the Blakeney family, a short biographical sketch of him in the 1908 edition of "Men of Mark in South Carolina" provides a brief, but possibly very telling piece of information. Following some general information about his father and "grandfather" (actually his great grandfather), Capt. John, is the sentence "He numbers among his ancestors an admiral in the English navy; others have been planters and soldiers."

It is not clear who the "admiral" in question is, but could this be a slightly incorrect reference to *General* (Lord) William Blakeney? It is known that General William Blakeney (his elevation to the peerage came later) sailed to the American colonies on more than one occasion, so could this be simply a confusion of titles based on his command of forces sailing to the colonies? He was, of course, a member of the British Army, since Ireland was not yet an independent nation. As far as I am aware, there are no admirals on either side of Whiteford Smith Blakeney's family, so the most likely candidate is Lord William Blakeney, who would probably have been known to family members of Jack Blakeney's generation, who would have passed that information down to their children.

When I first read John Oscar Blakeney's book, I had considered the possibility that Lord William Blakeney being a closely-related member of Capt. John's family may have originated with the book and later spread throughout Capt. John's descendants, eager to add a historical figure to their family tree. If this reference to an "admiral in the English navy" is actually a mention of Lord William Blakeney, this would precede John Oscar's book by twenty years. If so, it would appear that the connection to the Mt. Blakeney branch of the family does not begin with John Oscar Blakeney's book at all. He was merely stating an existing family tradition.

W. Burnette Burch

Another publication that precedes "The Blakeney's in America" is W. Burnette Burch's "Burch Family" originally published in 1920. Unlike John Oscar Blakeney's book, this one does not focus primarily on the Blakeney family, but does provide some important evidence concerning family tradition surrounding Capt. John's origins.

Born in Anson County, NC, in 1894, Burch was not only a great-great-great-great grandson of Capt. John Blakeney, but also a great grandson of Col. Stephen Jackson, author of the 1874 letter. This relationship could help us tie the various pieces of information together and pinpoint the origin of the Limerick "tradition".

While Burch's information on Capt. John's early life is sparse, he does state "tradition that he came from Limeric[k] Ireland." The mention of Limerick is especially significant here. While Burch did not personally know Stephen Jackson, the last page of his book singles out several people who provided much of the information he began collection as a boy in 1907, and which was included in his book. The very first

name on that list is his grandmother, Mrs. Henrietta F. Burch. Henrietta Francis (Jackson) Burch was the daughter of Col. Stephen Jackson, the man who wrote the 1874 letter with details of the estate in Ireland, and a man who personally knew Capt. John Blakeney.

It seems most likely that Burch's knowledge of the Blakeney connection to Limerick may have been handed down to him from his grandmother Henrietta. Chances are she would have been given this information from her father, Stephen Jackson, the man who provided other specific details about Capt. John Blakeney's home and family in Ireland. Jackson, as I previously noted, may have received his information directly from his great grandfather, Capt. John Blakeney, the only man in America who would have had firsthand knowledge of the details later written down by Jackson. All things considered, the evidence seems pretty convincing that Capt. John Blakeney was born in County Limerick, placing him in the family of William Blakeney and Elizabeth Bowerman.

Researchers of the family today have access to much information that would have been very difficult for someone living in the Carolinas in the 19th or early 20th centuries to find. It is unlikely that copies of "Burke's Peerage" or other such publications would have been sitting on the shelves of local libraries telling Burch that County Limerick was one of the most likely places where one could find the name Blakeney in Ireland in the 1700's. Yet Burch had information that pinpointed Limerick as the location of his ancestor's home.

It does appear that W. Burnette Burch and John Oscar Blakeney were familiar with each other. Burch even references a 1921 transcription made by John Oscar of a family record written by James Blakeney himself, Capt. John's son and direct ancestor of both men (indicating Burch's book may have been republished a couple of years after the original publication date).

It is interesting to note that both W. Burnette Burch and John Oscar Blakeney mention deeds written near the end of Capt. John's life, in addition to James Blakeney's family record, the current locations of which are not known. This shows that not only was there more concrete information available about Capt. John to previous generations, but also information about him had not vanished after his death only to be uncovered again years later. It continued to be passed down from one generation to the next.

Who was Capt. John Blakeney's father?

This is the question which has been frustrating Blakeney researchers for generations. Let us assume that he was a direct descendant of the Mt. Blakeney branch of the family, as tradition tells us. Can we narrow down which of the five sons of William Blakeney and Elizabeth Bowerman may have been his father? I believe we can.

As for Lord William Blakeney, the oldest of the sons, he is known to have died without ever fathering any children. That leaves George, John, Charles and Robert.

One published theory² speculates that John Blakeney, brother of Lord William Blakeney, may have been his father. There is one problem with this. This particular John Blakeney is known to have died in 1720, and Capt. John Blakeney is believed to have been born around 1732. Even if we are flexible with the year of his birth, the fact that he died in 1832 can only allow us to realistically add on a few additional years. All things considered, it is not very plausible to think this John Blakeney could have fathered our Capt. John.

Chronologically, Robert Blakeney would certainly be a likely choice. He may be the youngest of the brothers, although his exact birth date is not known. We do know, however, that he married Deborah Smyth on January 27, 1729. The couple was known to have had children throughout the 1730's, the same period of Capt. John's birth. The fact that Robert Blakeney's family is well documented, and Capt. John is not mentioned as part of that family, would seem to be pretty convincing evidence that Robert Blakeney and Deborah Smyth are not his parents. This leaves George and Charles, but very little is

known about these brothers, and Burke's does not give us any information about possible marriages or children of these brothers.

Apart from Lord William, the birth dates of the other Blakeney siblings are not known. We do know that Lord William was born in 1672. That would make him about 60 years old at the approximate time of Capt. John's birth. While it is certainly not out of the question that a brother close in age to Lord William could have fathered a child in 1732, it might be more realistic to suggest that a younger brother would be a more likely candidate. Since there were nine Blakeney siblings, the age range between the oldest and youngest could have been considerable.

We do know some information about each of the brothers that might help us. "Burke's Irish Family Records" (1976 Edition) does provide the dates of their military commissions. While there is no specific age at which a soldier would achieve a specific rank, it may at least give us a very general guide on a possible order of birth.

According to Burke's, William, the oldest, gained the rank of Ensign in 1702. George gained the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel on May 22, 1703 in the service of the Villiers' Regiment of Marines. John gained the rank of Lieutenant on April 13, 1709 in the service of Colonel Churchill's Regiment of Marines. Charles gained the rank of Lieutenant on February 18, 1712 in the service of the Royal Scots. Finally, Robert gained the rank of Captain on May 15, 1716 in the service of the Huntington Regiment of Foot.

While this should certainly not be considered the final word on birth order of the Blakeney brothers, it would appear at first glance that George, one of two possible contenders for Capt. John's father, is closer in age to William, the oldest. Charles, the other likely candidate, appears to be closer in age to Robert, probably the youngest of the brothers. Again, we know that Robert's children were born in the 1730's, so if Charles was close in age to Robert, it is certainly plausible that he may have fathered children around the same time.

One final piece of evidence may give the edge to Charles. The internet, despite a great deal of useless and inaccurate information about virtually any subject, does occasionally yield a gem. During a search of Google Books in late 2008, I uncovered a piece of information that, to my knowledge, had been lost for generations. Tucked away in the December, 1741 edition of "The Scots Magazine" (digitized by Google Books on June 12, 2008) was a very brief mention of the death of "Capt. Charles Blakeney, brother to Brig. Blakeney." "Brig. Blakeney" refers to Brigadier-General William Blakeney, the rank then held by the man who would later become Lord William Blakeney (Burke's states he achieved the rank of Brigadier-General in 1743, but other sources state he was a Brigadier-General during the Cartagena Expedition in 1741, the year of Charles' death).

How does this mention of Charles Blakeney's death help us figure out who was the father of Capt. John? Let's go back to Stephen Jackson's 1874 letter in which he described the circumstances of John Blakeney's departure from his home in Ireland for the American colonies. In Jackson's words, "our progenitor was the only child when he left and his mother was the only one of the family." The obvious interpretation of this statement would suggest that by the time John Blakeney left his home, the "estate", in Ireland around 1750, his father was already dead. In late 1741, when Charles Blakeney died, John would have been approximately nine or ten years old. I have already shown how Charles, out of the five Blakeney brothers, would have been a very good candidate to be the father of Capt. John. If Stephen Jackson's information is correct, and John Blakeney's father did not live to see his son leave his homeland, this could provide us with a significant piece of the puzzle.

We may never know with one hundred percent certainty the names of Capt. John Blakeney's parents, or where he was born. We may never find that piece of paper, written in his time, which gives us the final answers to these questions. Without that, there is always the temptation – and responsibility - to question tradition; information handed down from one generation to the next through word of mouth, though not committed to paper until years later, if ever.

When researching other branches of my family, I have run into similar situations. Information about family members has been handed down from parents and grandparents, without a signed document to confirm the details. In many cases, however, I have later been able to verify much of what I was told. Sure, there may be some discrepancies here and there, but the substance of the information is often surprisingly accurate. In cases where those who gave me the information had direct contact with those they were speaking about, more often than not, they got it right.

The granite monument to Captain John Blakeney in the Blakeney Cemetery near Pageland, South Carolina was dedicated on June 8, 1960 by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Visitors to the small family cemetery can still read these words carved in stone:

Captain John Blakeney, Esq.
1732-1832
Pioneer – Patriot – Churchman – Statesman
Colonial and Revolutionary Soldier
Born at Mt. Blakeney, County Limerick, Ireland

The evidence I've presented here is circumstantial and certainly open to debate. Perhaps one day, an old book or document will turn up that has escaped the fate that most have. In a library somewhere in the world may lay a dusty old family history, forgotten for generations, that provides the answers we are looking for. Until then, I think the conclusions I have drawn, using evidence that has been known and new evidence I have been able to uncover, provide a pretty convincing argument as to the origins of Capt. John Blakeney. From everything I have seen, all roads appear to lead to Mt. Blakeney in County Limerick.

1. http://www.pigggenealogy.com/colonel_stephen_jackson.htm
2. "The Blakeney's: An Etymological & Ethnological Study", by Lochlainn Seabrook, 2000