

WHEN DID ELIZABETH CUMMINS JACKSON DIE?

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When written records are lacking, family lore can often bridge the gap in the formal documentation, but—much like the children’s game “telephone”—such history has a way of becoming distorted with each retelling. People tend to want to think the best of their ancestors, and that tendency often further skews the recording of past events. When the verifiable truth is finally found, it sometimes therefore differs dramatically from the beloved family traditions that have been passed down through generations. Rather than being a Confederate major who led Pickett’s charge at the Battle of Gettysburg, we learn that great-grandpa was a private assigned to guard duty far removed from the warfront. Aunt Trudy, as it turns out, wasn’t the county’s first female physician but was instead a well-respected midwife. Both family traditions relayed a history that wasn’t quite accurate, and yet, both conveyed some portion of the truth. Our long-held family traditions, even when proven incorrect, do usually have some basis in fact. Such may be the case with one of the oldest bits of lore from our own shared history.

One of the great traditions in our clan is the image of Elizabeth Cummins Jackson as a sturdily built blond Amazonian of imposing stature, possessing great reserves of physical strength. Early historians of our family have pointed to Elizabeth’s longevity as proof of her hardiness. Many biographers have claimed that the matriarch of our clan lived to the advanced age of 105, having been born in London in 1720 and died in Clarksburg, (West) Virginia in 1825. The facts are indelibly etched in stone on Elizabeth’s marker in Clarksburg’s Jackson Cemetery for all to see. But can we, or should we, believe everything we read? As family historians we should always use a critical eye when reviewing information.

The granite stones in Jackson Cemetery marking the graves of John and Elizabeth Cummins Jackson—today protected by a fence paid for in part by the Jackson Brigade—are not the couple’s original 19th-century monuments but were instead purchased and placed by the Grafton, West Virginia chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1966.¹ (The Grafton chapter, founded by Jackson-Cummins descendant Prudence Hinkle in 1921, and named in honor of Elizabeth Cummins Jackson, no longer exists.) Willhide Memorials, of Grafton, engraved and installed the stones.

Whether the DAR markers faithfully transcribed the information that was on John and Elizabeth’s original markers is unknown but seems unlikely. A 1966 *Grafton Sentinel* article notes that at the time the new markers were placed, the couple’s graves had been unmarked, for “the tomstonees [sic], formerly there, had long disintegrated and disappeared altogether” [sic].² Another contemporary newspaper article notes that Elizabeth’s headstone had been heavily damaged:

A portion of it lies in an office in Clarksburg, placed there for safekeeping. Some years ago a visitor at the cemetery found Mrs. Jackson’s headstone smashed to small pieces. He gathered up what he could carry of it and brought the portions to the offices of the late

¹ *Exponent-Telegram*, Clarksburg, WV, February 20, 1966.

² “Elizabeth Cummins Jackson Post Contribute New Grave Markers.” *Grafton Sentinel*, Feb. 23, 1966.

Guy Tetrick. The latter was urged to hold them until such time as the cemetery may be restored and cared for properly.³

The fragments of the monument are said to have later found their way to Clarksburg's Stealey-Goff-Vance House, home of the Harrison County Historical Society. Later efforts to find the pieces at the historical society ended in failure, however.

We have known for sometime that the dates on Elizabeth's 1966 DAR marker are incorrect. By her own reckoning, as relayed by her grandson John George Jackson many years later, Elizabeth was 28 years old the day before she gave birth to her eldest child, son George Jackson, on 9 January 1757.

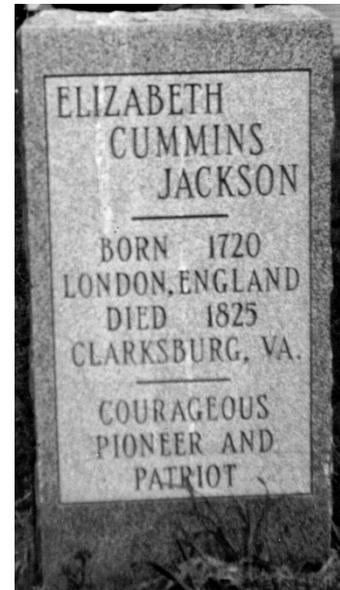
Elizabeth also told John George that she had been 19 or 20 years old when she arrived in America. The earliest of our family's histories state that Elizabeth met her future husband, John Jackson, while sailing to America in 1748. Circumstantial evidence, however, points toward Elizabeth and John having been passengers aboard the *Litchfield*, which arrived in Maryland in May 1749.⁴ Together, these pieces of evidence would suggest that Elizabeth was born in 1729 or 1730. We calculate her birth to have been on 8 January 1729.

If we accept that Elizabeth was born in 1729 rather than 1720, it would seem initially that we must also relinquish our treasured belief that she lived for more than a century. To have lived to age 97 in the harsh conditions that she must sometimes have endured, and at a time and place in which the average life expectancy was around 40 years, would be worthy testimony to Elizabeth's stamina, but somehow it doesn't seem quite as impressive as saying that she lived well beyond 100 years.

However, if the year of birth recorded on Elizabeth's gravestone is incorrect, might the year of death recorded on the marker also be in error? Did Elizabeth Cummins Jackson really die in 1825, as the marker and long-held family tradition suggest?⁵ We do not believe she did.

In 1815, Elizabeth's oldest son, George Jackson, left his home in Zanesville, Ohio, to return to Virginia so that he could attend to a number of business affairs with his son, John George Jackson. According to Dorothy Davis, biographer of John George Jackson, the father and son concluded their extended discussions by attending to Elizabeth's welfare:

They left until last the business of arranging for the care of George Jackson's mother..., who by laws of primogeniture, was the responsibility of George Jackson, but by her own decree, was the responsibility of any child or grandchild with whom she decided she



³ "Fame Proves Fleeting; Monuments Take Beating." Undated clipping from unidentified newspaper.

⁴ Coldham, Peter Wilson, *Bonded Passengers to America*, Vol: II, Vol: III, Baltimore, MD; Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1983, Vol: II: p. 144, Vol: III, p. 38. For more information refer to "A Distant Situation", New Theories on the English Origins of the John Jackson-Elizabeth Cummins Family," by John M. Jackson, in *Jackson Brigade Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 1998.

⁵ Letter written to Judge Camden from Elizabeth B. Allen, 12 September 1868.

would stay for awhile. Her son, George, who was willing to keep her in his home, knew that if he took her to Zanesville, she would ask within a few days to return to Virginia. John George worked out a plan for his father whereby the eighty-six year-old Elizabeth Cummins Jackson would live with her daughter Elizabeth, the wife of Abraham Brake.⁶

In fact, during his brief trip to Virginia, George pledged to grant Elizabeth a 25-dollar annuity for living expenses, and he made the first of these annual payments to Abraham Brake, husband of George's sister, Elizabeth Jackson Brake. George also entered into a related agreement with Abraham to insure his mother's future well-being:

I will convey to the said Abraham... a tract of seventy-one acres... adjoining Abel Bond's mill, or one hundred and sixty acres out of my 1,000-acre tract above Spa Lick, or my 600-acre tract at the mouth of the Second Big Run... provided my mother will live with him or consent to live with him during her life and he furnishes her with a convenient room and comfortable subsistence. But if she refuses to make this arrangement then the said Brake is to pay over the sum of twenty-five dollars to my Mother and the agreement to convey the land as above to him, is to be void and of no effect... If the said Brake furnishes a room for my Mother and she will not continue to occupy it, he shall nevertheless be intitled [sic] to the land.⁷

Whether Elizabeth initially lived with the Brakes is unknown. An 1817 letter from George to Mary M. Jackson indicates that Elizabeth had been staying in the home of her daughter, Sophia Jackson Davis, but had recently moved to the home of her granddaughter, Elizabeth Reger Dix (daughter of Mary Sarah Jackson Reger), so it seems likely that she divided her remaining years among a number of family members.⁸ Interestingly, the 1820 census, which lists the names of heads of household but only the ages for all other occupants, records two women, aged 45 and older, living in the home of Abraham Brake. Given what we know of George Jackson's offer, it seems quite likely that one of these women would have been Elizabeth.

Regardless of whether she remained in the home of the Brakes from 1815 until her death, the matriarch must have felt indebted in some way to her daughter and son-in-law; on 10 March 1826, Elizabeth Jackson, Sr., executed a deed to Abraham Brake for 200 acres of land. The conveyance from Elizabeth, as noted in the deed, was "*for & in consideration of services rendered to me by said Brake.*"⁹ This parcel of land in Lewis County, (West) Virginia was located near the farm of Elizabeth's daughter, Sophia Jackson Davis. (Also nearby were Elizabeth's granddaughter Elizabeth Reger Dix.) In this deed Elizabeth signed with her "mark," a common practice in that time period among those unable to write. Family legend has long held that Elizabeth Cummins Jackson was an educated woman who taught her children to read and write, so perhaps she was just too feeble by this time to write her name (or perhaps our long-held traditions have again erred). Witnessed by Thomas Haymond, Abner Stout, Abel Borsa, and John Davis, the deed was entered into the record during the May 1826 term of the Harrison County Court.

⁶ Davis, Dorothy. John George Jackson (Parsons, WV: McClain, 1976).

⁷ Qtd. by Davis (p.382) from the Florrie Jackson Needham Papers.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Harrison County Deed Book C: 250.

In another deed, executed in Harrison County on 20 November 1826, Elizabeth Jackson sold to George Westfall a certain tract of land on the right hand fork of the Sugar Camp fork of Turkey Run (a branch of the Buckhannon River). As she had on the earlier deed, Elizabeth signed the conveyance with her mark.¹⁰

Given the dates of these records, we now can definitely place Elizabeth's death as having occurred sometime after 1825—and more specifically, after 20 November 1826. We can further narrow the date of her death through use of the 1830 census. A recent search of that census revealed no women of Elizabeth's age living with any Jackson family members, so we may surmise that she passed away prior to 1 June 1830, the initial date of that year's census.

Family legend tells us that Elizabeth died at the home of John George Jackson, but John George had himself died in Clarksburg on 28 March 1825, a full year before Elizabeth executed the deed to Abraham Brake. It is possible that Elizabeth remained in John George's household after his death, but because Elizabeth's deed to Abraham Brake indicates that he was providing her care, it is more likely that Elizabeth died at his home on Harrison County's Brushy Run. Given this evidence, it seems very possible that though the dates on her headstone may be incorrect, the claim that Elizabeth lived past the century mark may well be correct. Here again we see that while family lore can often err in specifics, it usually contains at least a kernel of truth.

¹⁰ Referenced in Brogie, Becky et al. *Abstracts of Lewis County, West Virginia, Deed Books A, B & C (1817-1827)* (Jane Lew, WV: Hacker's Creek Pioneer Descendants, [199-?]).