

Sketches of the Kentucky Polk Pioneers

The following paper was read by James Polk at an Old Settlers Reunion at Vincennes, Knox County, Indiana, sometime between 1875 and 1922:

There lived on the banks of the Monongahela and Potomac Rivers in the early part of the 17th century, a large family of Scotch-Irish blood. Some remained true to the Crown of England, but others went into the Colonial Army. But the object of this paper is to detail the life of Charles Polk, Sr., who was born in 1744. He had two brothers and one sister who removed to Kentucky in 1780, or about that time - Edmund Polk, who died at the age of 87; Thomas Polk, at the age of 65; and Sarah Piety, at the age of 96. Their numerous descendants are scattered over the west to California and Oregon. We will now confine ourselves to my grandfather, Charles Polk, Sr., who was born in 1744. When thirty years old he married Delilah Tyler in Virginia, and as stated above, removed to Kentucky, settling about seven miles from Bardstown. The Indians were hostile and the settlers were compelled to live in stockade forts. In 1782, in August, a band of Indians crossed the Ohio near the mouth of the Kentucky, at night, 50 or 60 miles away. A hunter, Bland Ballard, had seen some Indians twenty miles away and hastened to the fort to give warning. All the effective force of the fort sallied forth under command of Captain Charles Polk to surprise the Indians, as it was not known on which stations they would make the attack. They failed. It was afterwards learned that the Indians were already in ambush at the time Ballard arrived. The men being gone, the fort was captured, burnt, and all the inmates either killed or made prisoners. The Indians made prisoners of Grandmother Delilah Polk and four children - William, Elizabeth (Spencer), Sally (Bruce), Nancy (Ruby). William was seven years old, the three girls still younger. The Indians made haste to get back on the west side of the Ohio, the third day after the burning of the fort, afterwards known as Burnt Station. From here they proceeded to Fort Wayne on the Maumee River and down the same to Detroit, which was a British post. Grandmother and the children were saved, and were claimed as the prisoners of their captors respectively. Grandmother was taken to the British garrison, and here on the 20th day of October, two weeks after the capture of his mother, in Kentucky, 300 or 400 miles distant, was born Charles Polk, Jr.

My grandfather made inquiry as to the fate of his family, and after a year heard of their being in Detroit. I heard him tell of coming to old Post Vincent; he then started to Detroit and found them. It being after the War closed, the British officer in command gave him every assistance, and detailed the famous scout, Simon Girty, to pilot him through Ohio to Wellsburgh, Va. The country was a wilderness at that day. After remaining there for some time, he brought his family down the Ohio River to Kentucky again, as poor as church mice. They had eleven

children, five sons and six daughters - William, Charles, Edward, Thomas, Robert, Elizabeth, Sally, Nancy, Christina, Eleanor, and Polly.

My grandmother died in 1798, aged 40. Grandfather never married again and died at his son's in Indian Territory at the age of 79.

The Guthries came from Edinburgh, or near there. During or just before the war of 1715, James Guthrie was brought to Ireland by a "belted knight" and left with the title, deeds to an estate, with an uncle in the town of Cork. He was then a small child. The rebellion failed, the father perished in some way, the estate was confiscated and the boy remained with his uncle. He grew to manhood, married, and had quite a family. They determined to emigrate to America, but left Adam, the only son, with the old uncle who raised James. Adam became so unhappy about his mother that the uncle sent him to America after some months, perhaps a year or more, but information is not definite. The sailing vessel on which James and his family embarked was driven out of her course and did not arrive at Norfolk, Va., for three months. James Guthrie and wife died on the passage. A daughter had her knee-cap broken and dislocated by some piece of furniture striking her during the great storm. (I well remember Aunt Betsey, a very small, feeble old lady, who was very lame and spent much of her time studying the Holy Scriptures. N.M.K.). There were four sisters - Betsey, who never married; Mary married Jacob Bolderbach [Bilderback] of Indiana. She left two sons, one named Adam Guthrie (I have not traced any further). Margaret married Mr. Walker of Virginia, no children; Jennie married a Mr. Jennings, moved to Indiana. A correspondence was kept up with Mrs. Jennings until grandmother Guthrie died in 1842.

The other sister married a Walker and went to Mississippi. Correspondence was almost impossible in those days, so they passed out of our knowledge.

When my grandfather, Adam Guthrie, arrived in Norfolk, he was twelve years old. He found he was an orphan, but his sister Margaret (Mrs. Walker) took him in. She was very unkind to him, but the brother-in-law did all he could for him, and when he was almost grown advised him to run away to what was the west. There on the way, he met and married Joanna Polk. Edmund Polk and family were on their way to settle on a tract of land given him by the government for services rendered during the war. Edmund Polk was remarkable for his integrity and piety, as well as for his handsome person. He had five daughters and five sons - Joanna (called Hannah), Sally, Kitty, Mary and Nancy, James, Charles, Edmund and Thomas. Joanna married Adam Guthrie. Kitty married Mr. Fowler; Sally, Mr. Abel. Nancy and Mary (Aunt Polly) died unmarried at Major Spence Minor's, at Bloomfield, Kentucky, at very advanced ages in the nineties. Edmund Polk married Margaret Brown of Shelby County. Charles Polk was a Baptist minister, lived on the Ohio River, 80 or 90 miles below Louisville, and was very much respected.

Adam Guthrie and Joanna his wife had children: Elizabeth, very brilliant, died at 19. Edmund, a distinguished lawyer, died of yellow fever, unmarried. Nancy Guthrie, married Daniel Stephens, died in Breckenridge Co, Kentucky, in the first year of her marriage. Mary Guthrie, married Spence Minor, of Bloomfield; left children. Sally Guthrie, married Thomas Q. Wilson, a lawyer of Louisville, no children. John Guthrie, married Lucy Force, left no children. James Guthrie, married Eliza Prather of ,Hardin County.

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The following extract is from the "Memoirs of the Bruce 'Family", written in 1851 by Maj. William Bruce. The author, William Bruce, the son of William Bruce and Polly Lucas, was born 6 Aug. 1776 Yohogania County, Va., died 23 April 1854 Knox County, Ind., married 1st Sarah Polk 23 Oct. 1798 Shelby County, Ky. and 2nd Hetty Ritchie Holmes 2 Feb. 1819. In 1785 his family settled on Coxes Creek in Nelson County, Ky., about 1805 he moved to Knox County, Ind., where he was the founder of Bruceville, Ind.

As I before observed I was born at a time that tried man's soul. None but a man that had no fear of .. Indians but their prudence would venture to risk his family where the prowling wolf, and subtile savage roamed. Then the Whig and Tory often lived in one fort, but it happened that my grandfather and father was true American Whigs. I fortunately partook of the same spirit and have retained it to this day. When I was about nine years old my father sold his plantation on the Monongahela and moved to Kentucky - I think it was in the fall 1784. We landed at the mouth of Bear Grass. Louisville was then a small village and there was a garrison with some United States troops kept there. We lived there that winter and in the Spring of 1785 moved on the waters of Coxes Creek named after my uncle David Cox, that had settled there a few years previous (now Nelson County). My father bought two hundred acres of land and commenced making a farm. The first settlers had just ventured from their forts. I recollect having to stand and watch while my father was at work with his rifle well braced standing against a tree close at hand. About this time Colonel Isaac Cox was killed by the Indians while out surveying on a branch called Powelsbern Waters of the East fork of Coxes Creek, and about four miles from where my father lived. This made quite a stir in the neighborhood and men was stationed at different places along the frontier settlements. That was the last murder that was committed by the Indians, between Salt River and Bardstown. From that time on until the close of the Indian war, after General Anthony Wayne gave them such a scourging, times gradually became more safe and settlements was pushed on to the Ohio river. At the age of 22 I was married to the third daughter of Captain Charles Polke of Shelby County, and the youngest of the four children of his that was taken prisoners by the Indians. When they took and burnt his fort he had been called away with his company of militia from Simpson's Creek, where his fort stood, to succor the forts on Bear Grass, as it was believed that the enemy in a large body was about making a descent on the forts in that quarter from the sign that had been discovered, but the wily savages after they found that the principal part of the men had been called away, changed their course and near 100 of them attacked Polke's station, killed several and took the rest prisoners after burning the fort. Among the prisoners was my mother-in-law and the four children above mentioned, to-wit: William Polke, who has been a very conspicuous character from the early settling of Knox County, Indiana, until his death about eight years ago, having filled various important trusts. He was one that helped frame the first Constitution for Indiana in 1816, commissioner of the Michigan road for a number of years, frequently served in the legislator of the State and was register of the land

Office at Fort Wayne at the time of his death. The eldest daughter, Elizabeth married Captain Spier Spencer, who fell in the battle of Tippecanoe of the Indian fighting notoriety, whose death was much lamented. The second daughter, Nancy, married Peter Ruby. Some of her children is still living in Knox County. The, third, Sally, became my wife October 23rd, 1798.

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Richard Collins in his History of Kentucky (Vol.II, 1874, p.724) under the chapter of Spencer County, Ky. gives the following account of the capture of Mrs. Polk and her children at Kincheloe's Station in 1782:

There had been no alarm at Kincheloe's during the absence of the men, and upon reaching home late in the evening, greatly fatigued and without apprehension of danger, they retired to rest. At the dead hour of the night, when the inmates of the station were wrapped in most profound sleep, the Indians made a simultaneous attack upon the cabins of the Station, and, breaking open the doors, commenced an indiscriminate, massacre of men, women and children. The unconscious sleepers were awakened but to be cut down, or to behold their friends fall by their side. A few only, availing themselves of the darkness of the night, escaped the tomahawk or captivity... Several women and children were cruelly put to death after they were made prisoners, on the route to the Indian towns... The situation of Mrs. Polk, another prisoner, with four children, was almost as pitiable as that of Mrs. Bland. She was far advanced in a state of pregnancy and compelled to walk until she became almost incapable of motion. She was then threatened with death, and the tomahawk brandished over her head by one Indian, when another, who saw it, begged her life, took her under his care, mounted her on a horse with two of the children, and conducted her safely to Detroit. Here she was purchased by a British trader, well treated, and enabled to write her husband, who was absent at the time of her capture. On the receipt of her letter, the husband immediately repaired to Detroit, obtained his wife and five children and returned with them safely to Kentucky. After the peace of the succeeding year, the remainder of the prisoners were also liberated and returned home.

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Sketch of the Polk Family by Jerry Long, Owensboro, Ky. 42303:

The Polk family of America traces their ancestry to John Pollock, a gentleman of landed property, near Glasgow, Scotland. In the early 1600's he was one of a colony of settlers who moved to the north of Ireland (Notable Southern Families, Vol.I, Zella Armstrong, 1918, republished Genealogical Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1974, p.173). His son, Robert Pollock was in Oliver Cromwell's Army and married Mrs. Magdalen (Tasker) Porter. In the second half of the 17th century he sailed away from Ireland to the new country. He settled in Somerset County, Md., where he died 1699-1704 and his wife 1726. After arriving in America he changed the spelling of his name, to "Polk"; among their descendants a final "e" was frequently added. Several genealogies state that Robert's son, William (c1664-1740), married Nancy (Knox) Owen(s) and they were the great-great-grandparents of James Knox Polk (1795-1849), the 11th president of the U.S. (William, Jr.-Ezekiel-Samuel-James Knox).

William & Nancy Knox Polk were also the grandparents of the first Kentucky Polk pioneers. Their son, Charles, born 1700-1710, was known as the "Indian trader of the Potomac". About 1735 he married Christian, the widow of Ralph Matson. He settled in Frederick County, Md. and died about 1753. The children of Charles & Christian Polk included: Sarah, Edmund, Charles, Thomas and William. The first four settled in Kentucky (Nelson County) in the 1780's.

Sarah Polk, daughter of Charles & Christian, was born about 1735. She married Austin Piety. They resided in Pennsylvania before coming to Kentucky about 1780. She lived on Cox's Creek in Nelson County for several years, in the 1792 Nelson County tax list she appeared as a widow. She died in 1835 and was reported to have been 99 years old. Among her children were: Nancy, Sarah and Thomas. Nancy Piety married Joshua Massey 18 Aug. 1790 in Nelson County, Ky. Sarah Piety, born by 1769, married Benjamin Cox about 1782. The son of Isaac Cox & Susannah Tomlinson, he was born about 1757 and was one of the founders of Cox's Station in Nelson County. By 1795 they settled in Shelby County, Ky., where he died 1829 and his wife 1840, they were buried on their home place about five miles west of Shelbyville, Ky. Benjamin & Sarah Piety Cox were the parents of eleven children:

1. Elizabeth, married Joseph Simpson 8 Aug. 1798 Shelby County, Ky., he died 1807 in Shelby County in a dual with his cousin Acquilla Whitaker. She married 2nd Samuel Miller 20 Sept. 1816 Shelby County, Ky.; and died 1838 Nelson County, Ky.
2. Sarah Piety, died unmarried in Clay County, Mo.
3. Susanna, born 27 Sept. 1785, died 21 July 1858, married James Ballard 2 Aug. 1803 Shelby County, Ky. Among their descendants are grandsons, Samuel Thruston Ballard, Lieutenant Governor of Ky. 1919-1923, and Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston, president of the Filson Club 1923-1946; and great-great-grandsons, Thruston Ballard Morton (1907-1982), U.S. Congressman from Ky., and Rogers Clark Ballard, Morton (1914-1979), Secretary of the Interior under Pres. Nixon.
4. Gabriel S., married Nancy Gaston 5 Feb. 1816 Shelby County, Ky.
5. Isaac, died unmarried.
6. Joseph, died unmarried.
7. Jonathan P., married Rachel Lemon Tigert 6 March 1817 Shelby County, Ky.
8. Austin Piety, married Rebecca Phillips, he was Secretary of State of Ky. in 1836.
9. John Calhoun, m. Eliza B. Garrett.
10. Benjamin F., married Elizabeth Shepherd.
11. Finetta A., married Elbridge Arnold.

Thomas Piety, son of Austin & Sarah Polk Piety, was born in the 1760's' at a British Fort in Pa.; he was said to have been the first white child born west of the Alleghany Mountains (History of Knox and Daviess Counties, Indiana, Goodspeed, 1886, p.438). He participated in many of the Indian campaigns. In Nelson County, Ky. on 6 Aug. 1792 he married Mary Duncan. Shortly afterwards he made his home in Breckinridge County, Ky. In 1814 he removed to Sullivan County, Ind. and the following year went to Knox County, Ind., where he died at the age of 65. He had, fourteen children, three of his seven sons were: Austin (married Polly Miller), James (married Eleanor Harned) and William D. (married Sally A. Threlkeld).

Thomas Polk, son of Charles & Christian, was born about 1740's. He settled in Nelson' County, Ky. about 1785. In Nelson County he married Mrs. Lucy Abell on 30 Oct. 1787. She had several children by her first marriage, one of whom was Nancy Abell, who married Thomas Polk's nephew, James Polk (son of Edmund), in Nelson County in 1804. Thomas Polk on their marriage record was surety and was identified as the bride's stepfather. Shortly after 1804 Thomas Polk died at about the age of 65.

Edmund Polk, son of Charles & Christian, was born 1740 in Maryland (7 Prince George County). In 1765 near Fort Pitt, Washington County, Pa. he married Mary Fultz. During the Revolution he was a Major of Rangers in the Pa. militia. On 21 May 1787 he sold 300, acres on Gross Creek, Cumberland Township, Washington County, Pa. Between 1780-1785 he settled in Nelson County, Ky., he appeared on the 1785 Nelson County tax list along with his brother, Charles, and future son-in-law, Adam Guthrie. Edmund Polk died in 1825 in Nelson County, Ky. He and his wife had nine children:

1. Hannah "Joanna", born 25 Dec. 1765 Pa., married 11 Nov. 1788 Adam Guthrie in Nelson County, Ky. She died 17 March 1842 Nelson County, Ky. Their children were: Elizabeth (9 Oct. 1789 - 27 Mar. 1809, never married); Edmond (28 Jan. 1791 - 27 Aug. 1826, never married); James (5 Dec. 1792 - 13 Mar. 1868, married Eliza C. Prather 13 May 1821, a lawyer, he was Sec. U.S. Treasury 1853-57, U.S. Senator 1865-68, founded University of Louisville); John (23 Apr. 1794 - 11 Jan. .1833, married Lucy Fore 26 May 1825); Mary (22 July 1796 - 6 Sept. 1834, married Spence Minor 1 Sept. 1816); Sally (18 Mar. 1798, married Thomas Q. Wilson 1 Oct. 1829); Nancy (11 Jan. 1800 - 18 Aug. 1824?, married Daniel Stephens); Hannah (20 Sept. 1801 - 19 Aug. 1869, married Daniel King 18 May 1823).
2. Christina "Kitty", born ca 1766 Pa., married Ignatius Abell 22 Feb.(or Dec.) 1794 Nelson County, Ky.
3. Thomas, born Ca 1768 Pa. married Catherine Leonard 2 Nov. 1796 Nelson County, Ky. He was living Nelson County in 1800, shortly afterwards moved to Breckinridge County, Ky. About 1813 moved across the Ohio River into Perry County, Ind., where he died at Tobinsport 7 Oct. 1843. Among his children were: Sarah, Charles, Edmund and Nancy.
4. Charles, born 26 Sept. 1770 Pa., married Wilhemina Dever 3 Aug. 1790 Nelson County, Ky. He was a Baptist minister. In 1800 was living in Nelson County by 1803 had moved to Breckinridge County, Ky. He represented the latter county in the state legislature in 1806-07. In 1807 he purchased a tract of land near Tobinsport, Perry County, Ind., the area became known as "Polk Bottoms". In 1812-13 he was living in Knox County, Ind., he shortly returned to his farm in Perry County, Ind. In 1816 he was a delegate to the Indiana Congressional Convention. He died 25 July 1836. He had ten children, of whom were: Greenville, born ca 1798 Ky., married Matilda Simms 3 Dec. 1827 Perry County, Ind., a Colonel in the Indiana militia; and James, born ca 1806 Ky., married Mary Charlotte Humphrey 21 June 1838 Perry County, Ind, died 23 June 1873 Perry County, Ind.
5. Edmond, born Sept. 1776 Pa., married Margaret Brown 22 Oct. 1799 Nelson County, Ky. Died in Cook County, Ill. 16 March 1859.
6. Sarah, born ca 1778 Pa., married Zachariah Fowler and died 1825 Nelson Co. Ky.

7. Mary, born ca 1780, never married, died 12 May 1868 Bloomfield, Nelson County, Ky.
8. Nancy, born ca 1782, never married, died 19 March 1875 Bloomfield, Nelson County, Ky.
9. James, born ca 1784, married Nancy Abell 20 Oct. 1804 Nelson County, Ky., died 1850 Nelson County, Ky.

Charles Polk, son of Charles & Christian, was born 2 Feb. 1745 Frederick County, Md. In Feb. 1774 he married Delilah. Tyler at Cross Creek, Va. (now Wheeling, W. Va.). The daughter of Edward Tyler and Nancy Langley, she was born 10 Feb. 1760 Frederick County, Va. (now Berkeley County, W. Va.). During the Revolution Charles Polk was a Captain in the Va. militia. About 1780 moved to Nelson County, Ky. His wife and their first four children were captured by the Indians in Aug. 1782 and held in captivity for about a year. Between 1792-1797 moved to Shelby County, Ky., where his wife died 7 June 1797. About 1808 he moved to Knox County, Ind., he died there 15 Oct. 1823. To them were born eleven children:

1. William, born 19 Sept. 1775 Cross Creek, Va., married 1st Sally Ashby and 2nd Sarah Coffey Cooper 23 Dec. 1797 Nelson County, Ky. He died 26 April 1843 Knox County, Ind.
2. Elizabeth, born 9 Sept. 1777 Cross Creek, Va., married 1st Spier Spencer 1793 Nelson County, Ky. and 2nd William Boone 17 March 1816 Harrison County, Ind.; died 25 Nov. 1847 Corydon, Harrison County, Ind.
3. Sarah, born 22 Sept. 1780 Nelson County, Ky., married William Bruce 23 Oct. 1798 Shelby County, Ky., 1805 moved to Knox County, Ind., where She died 2 Sept. 1818, two days after the birth of her 15th child. Their children were: Charles Polk, son died infancy, William Doctor, Delilah Tyler, Spier Spencer, Polly Lucas, son died infancy, Betsey, Lucinda, Henry Harrison, Kitty Ann, Isaac Dunn, Sally Harris, Nancy and James Madison.
4. Nancy, born 1781 Nelson County, Ky., married Peter Ruby, III, 12 June 1801 Shelby County, Ky. Moved to Knox County, Ind. She died in 1823 and her husband in 1848. Their children were: Delilah, Jane, Benjamin Franklin, Spear Spencer, Charles, John Ochiltree, Sarah and Robert.
5. Charles, born 27 Oct. 1782 Detroit, Mich., while his mother was a captive of the Indians, married Margaret McQuaid 13 Jan. 1803 Shelby County, Ky., in 1806 moved to Knox County, Ind., he died there 11 Oct. 1845.
6. Christiana, born 12 Nov. 1784, married Rev. Isaac McCoy, died 1850 Jackson County, Mo.
7. Edward, born 1786 Nelson County, Ky., married Achsah Van Mater (?Vanceleave) 5 Oct. 1803 Shelby County, Ky., died 1814.
8. Eleanor, born 1788 Ky., married John H. Hollingsworth, died 1859.
9. Mary, born 1790 Ky., married Phillip Bell.
10. Thomas, born 2 Feb. 1792 Ky., married Sarah Ann Sloan 3 Nov. 1816 Gibson County, Ind., died 7 Feb, 1872 Gonzales, Tx.
11. Robert Tyler, born 7 June 1797 Ky., married Elizabeth Widener 1816, died 1842 Kansas.

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