

Was Alexander Thomas, Patriarch of the Thomas Family, a German Baptist?

By William B. Thomas

In the August 2003 *Laurel Messenger*, I wrote an article titled "An Alternative View of Alexander Thomas, Patriarch of the Thomas Family". In this article I presented facts that refute the long held consensus that Alexander was of Welsh heritage and a Revolutionary War veteran. At the articles conclusion I noted that Alexander had possible connections to the Frederick Maryland area, which warranted further research. I have completed this Maryland research, which has led to the following conclusion.

Alexander Thomas was part of a migration of German Baptists that emigrated from the Lebanon County area to Frederick County Maryland around 1769, and then immigrated to the Brothersvalley region of Somerset County around 1789.

Frederick Maryland Connection

The key to my conclusion is a series of Frederick County Land transactions. This begins with two deeds dated 1768 & 1769 for the purchase of property in a land grant known as *Hammonds Strife*. These deeds list Alexander Thomas, and his wife Catherine as the buyer. His occupation is listed as a carpenter. Records show the last name of Alexander of Somerset's wife is Beshore, and tradition has her first name as Catherine. Somerset County tax records indicate Alexander was a wagon maker and wheelright, both occupations requiring carpentry skills.

The date and location of the land transactions are significant. The *Hammonds Strife* land grant was located along Beaver Dam and Pipe Creeks. This was the location of the Beaver Dam Congregation that emigrated from the Lancaster County area in 1768, led by John and Martin Garber. John had previously led a migration of German Baptists to the Brothersvalley area of Somerset County in 1762, founding the Stony Creek Congregation. John bounced back and forth between the two congregations.

In 1772 Alexander Thomas sold 20 acres to Leonard Kitzmiller. Also in 1772 Samuel Garber purchased land in this same area from Leonard Kitzmiller. Samuel was a nephew of John Garber.

Alexander would sell his remaining property in 1784, and in 1789 he purchased land in Ellick Township, Somerset County. The 1850 census states that sons Michael Thomas and Alexander Thomas Jr. were born in Maryland. Their birth dates coincide with the time period that Alexander was in Frederick County.

Loyalty Oath Connection

Another important factor relates to the Revolutionary War. Maryland and Pennsylvania required citizens to sign loyalty oaths. This was a problem for Amish-Mennonites and German Baptists, because their religious beliefs were pacifist, and prohibited the taking of oaths. You won't find the name Alexander Thomas in either the 1776 or 1778 Maryland census because it related to loyalty oaths. You also won't find any of the other names known to be part of the Beaver Dam Congregation. However, you do find these names on the 1776 list of "non-enrollers" for Frederick County, including Alexander Thomas, Samuel Garber and Leonard Kitzmiller. Lancaster County also had lists of "non-associators" related to loyalty oaths. Included in these lists were George Beshore, Rudolph Mayer, Jacob Kitzmiller, and Henry Thontz. These are names with connections to Alexander Thomas, and there are others as well. Excessive taxation on a "non-enroller" could have motivated Alexander's move to Somerset County.

Other Family Connections

George Beshore, believed to be the father of Catherine Beshore, was one of the founders of the German Baptist Little Swatara Congregation in Berks County. His property was adjacent the 'Old Merkey Meeting

House'. George lived in Bethel Township, Berks County, near the border with Bethel Township Lancaster County (now Lebanon County), a possible reason he is on the Bethel Township "non-associators" list. Rudolph Mayer (Meyer) was Mennonite; his daughter married Alexander Thomas Jr., and his brother Michael was a famous German Baptist elder.

German Baptist Thomas's

You find the name Thomas associated with early German Baptists. There was a Henry Thomas and wife and a Margaret Thomas who were members of the Great Swatara Congregation near Hershey. Henry lived in Lebanon County, and the Henry Thontz on the "non-associators" list was from Lebanon Township.

There are also five Thomas's found on the *Chronicon Ephratense*, the register of the famous German Baptist sect at Ephrata. This included a Dores Thomas, believed to be Durst Thommen. The register indicates that these Thomas families were from Switzerland. Durst Thommen came to America in 1736 on the ship *Princess Augusta*. The Durst Thommen family lived in what is now Lebanon County.

Four of Alexander's children have documented German Baptist connections. Alexander Jr. was a German Baptist elder associated with the Asher Glade congregation in Maryland. A Samuel Garber would participate in his ordination. Michael also was a German Baptist. Benjamin was German Baptist, and the family of the wife of Jacob was German Baptist.

Conclusions

Alexander of Somerset County and Alexander of Frederick County is the same person, thus Alexander Thomas was German Baptist. Alexander likely emigrated from the present day Lebanon County area to Maryland about 1769. Identifying his parents is speculative and another story for another day.

Authors Citations and Notes:

- 1) Alexander's Maryland records:
 - a. Frederick County Maryland: Deed book L, pages 502 & 503; Deed book M, pages 612 & 613; Deed book P, pages 135, 135 & 137; Deed book WR-4, pages 373 & 374.
 - b. *Maryland Historical Magazine*, September 1916.
- 2) Sources on Early Brethren History:
 - a. *Merle C Rummel*, Brethren Historian.
 - b. *Brethren Encyclopedia*.
 - c. *The Brethren in Colonial America*, Donald F. Durnbaugh, 1967.
 - d. *Two Centuries of Brothersvalley Church of the Brethren*, by H. Austin Cooper, 1962.
- 3) [Sources on Alexander's Maryland Neighbors:](#)
 - a. *Gerber Garber Garver Progenitors in America*, by Steven R. Garver and Jerry R. Masters.
 - b. *Maryland State Archives*
 - c. *Maryland Historical Magazine*, September 1916.
 - d. *Historical Society of Frederick County*
 - e. *Maryland State USGenWeb Archives*
- 4) Sources on Lancaster/Lebanon/Berks County information:
 - a. *History of the Counties of Dauphin and Lebanon in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, William Henry Egle, 1883.
 - b. *Dwayne Wrightsman*, Brethren Genealogist.
 - c. *Pennsylvania State US Genweb Archives*
 - d. *Brethren Meyer/Myer Families*, Emmert F. Bittinger, Mennonite Family History, January 2000.
 - e. *Four Generations of the Descendents of Michael Schenk and Anna Stauffer*, by Richard W. Davis, Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage, January 1994.
 - f. *Schaeublin and Thommen Emigrants from the Canton of Basel, Switzerland*, by George W. Andrews, 1996.
 - g. *Pennsylvania Vital Statistics*, Vol. I & II
 - h. *Chronican Ephratense*, 1889 translation.
- 5) Sources on Alexander's German Baptist Children:
 - a. Alexander and Michael:
 - i. *Primitive Christian*, Vol. 1, No. 10, March 7, 1876.
 - b. Benjamin:
 - i. *History of Bedford and Somerset County*, by Blackburn & Welfley, 1906.
 - ii. Obituary of Francis Web, 3/11/1912 Johnstown Tribune Democrat
 - c. Jacob:
 - i. Fayette County Deed Book L, page 357. Mary his wife is listed as Polly in this record.
 - ii. Death certificate for Jacob Thomas on p. 42 of "Old Westmoreland" quarterly, Vol. VI, no. 3, Feb. 1986 issue. Daughter Mary is listed as Polly in this record.
 - iii. *History of Westmoreland County, Volume III*, John W. Jordan, 1906.
 - iv. Westmoreland County Deed Book 25, page 199. Jacob sold property in Derry Township to Ludwig Kimmel of Somerset County, PA. Ludwig's family was German Baptist (11/1857 *Gospel Visitor*) and his grandfather Philip was part of the early Stony Creek Congregation.
- 6) Additional information on Alexander's Welsh ancestry since my 2003 article.
 - a. In the *Uniontown Daily News Standard*, September 8, 1908 obituary on Christian Thomas (the source document of the Welsh heritage of Alexander), the headline refers to Judge R. E. Umbel, a relation of Christian and a notable politician from Fayette County. Judge Umbel was related to Alexander Thomas through his paternal grandmother. He also was a descendent of Isaac Umbel. The *Biographical & Portrait Cyclopedia, Fayette Co, PA* has Isaac Umbel born in Wales, while the *History of the Church of the Brethren of the Western District of Pennsylvania* states he emigrated from England. The obituary writer or the Judge may have had the family lines mixed up.
 - b. Jacob Thomas of Unity Township, Westmoreland County is believed by many to be the son of Alexander. His wife is Mary Keckler in the genealogy from the Society's family files. A Jacob Thomas and his wife Polly had a real estate transaction with Peter and Polly Kesler in 1818 in Saltlick Township, Fayette County. The Kesler family moved across the township line to Donegal Township, Westmoreland County and Peter was German Baptist per the *History of Westmoreland County*.
 - c. A Jacob Thomas is in the 1810 Monongalia Township, VA census (now West Virginia). The eldest children of Jacob Thomas of Unity Township were born in Virginia per the 1850 census.
- 7) The Rudolph Mayer on the non-associator list is either Rudolph married to Anna Light/Lichty about age 53, or his son Rudolph married to Barbara Schenk/Shank about age 22. The George Beshore on the non-associator list could either be the father of Catherine, or her brother.