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Virgil's Great- Grandpa: Unraveling an Obsession

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This work is dedicated to

Howard D'Lee Nygren

My uncle and Virgil A. Lewis' first cousin
two times removed.

He provided me with the seed.



Virgil Anson Lewis [1848-1912]

The founder and first Director of the
State of West Virginia Department of
Archives and History.

Photo: Copy from West Virginia Archives
& History

Introduction

A funny thing happened on the way to discovering my Lewis ancestry. First, I discovered a famous cousin – Virgil Anson Lewis – who was a preeminent historian among other things. His letter to my great-grandpa circa 1910 outlined our Lewis family genealogy. Who could doubt a great historian? He published at least a dozen books; he founded and directed the West Virginia Department of Archives and History until his death; he was also an educator, lawyer and church official. Wow! But he got his genealogy wrong. Wow, again! Now what? He didn't just get it wrong – he privately held to his story in spite of his own family denying his claim. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it." It seemed to rule his life. Why did this very thorough researcher and honored man hold to an erroneous belief about the lineage of his great-grandpa, even to the end of his life?

I spent three years in various West Virginia and Virginia archives, libraries and historical societies proving his [and my] correct lineage. Fortunately, the documentary evidence was found and I escaped retribution from the West Virginians who rightly revered their native son and were hesitant to accept a family history contrary to his beliefs.

It has been over ten years since those inquiries settled Virgil's ancestry. But my curiosity has not abated as to why he got it wrong in the first place. Oh, I found the reason he probably misidentified his great-grandpa, but I am intrigued by the human interest story embodied in Virgil's tenacious holding to his idea of just who his great-grandpa Benjamin Lewis was. For many years I regarded Virgil's error as simply normal genealogical hazards, lack of information and being fooled by the use of a middle name for a person. [Virgil's Benjamin Lewis was actually William Benjamin Lewis as will be discussed later.] What really gnawed at me was his tenacious hold on his beliefs and how they wove a story throughout his life. Virgil's letter to my great-grandpa, written just a few years before Virgil's death, was explicit about his beliefs concerning his ancestry. There was just no doubt about it. He did not use words such as 'probably.' He stated 'facts.'

I have used the word 'obsession' and I am comfortable with it. This man became a hero to me, as did his great-grandpa Benjamin, after I found the right one. There is no disrespect here. If Virgil were here today, he would welcome the facts, would be pleased to have it right, and would be gracious in admitting his error. The work he left behind readily proves this.

So, I must do two things while I am still around – record the details of Virgil's 'obsession' and record the correct and fully documented trail of his [and my] Lewis family.

Introducing Virgil Anson Lewis

If you are a student of Virginia colonial history, if you are a West Virginian, or if you are a descendant of the Lewis family line of Virgil Anson Lewis, you will appreciate this story. But mostly this is a human interest story with historical and genealogical overtones.

Virgil Lewis was born July 6, 1848 on Ten Mile Creek near the village of Columbia, Virginia. The town, located in what is now Mason County, West Virginia – in the Waggener District – is not far from the Ohio River. His mother was Lucy Edwards; his father was George Washington Lewis, Jr. Virgil was the eldest of five children. His siblings came along about every two years just like most of the early families. When Virgil was ten, his daddy died leaving him the 'man of the house.'

Virgil's genius must have been in his genes. He had little schooling. His family was not prominent. Virgil's great-great-grandpa, George Lewis, came to America in the early 1700s, perhaps around 1725, from Northern Ireland to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He was what is known as a 'Scots-Irish;' a Scotsman who migrated to Northern Ireland in the early days. They were Presbyterian, hearty, self-sufficient, proud and industrious people. They built churches and schools as they built their homes. Crown Colonies were strictly Anglican "Church of England," but they turned a blind

eye to the frontiersmen allowing them to have their own churches. There was a practical reason: these people served as a buffer between the Indians and the coastal colonists. They, like all others who pulled up their roots in the Old Country and braved the ocean voyage to America to forge a new life, were obviously endowed with a special spirit. George Lewis bought land on the Cowpasture River, in then Augusta County, now Bath County, Virginia, in about 1746 where he moved his family from Lancaster, Pennsylvania to forge an existence in the wilderness. Cheap land and personal freedom were the reasons. We can account for five children. His wife was not living in 1755 because she was not mentioned in the land deeds when George sold to his sons that year. The inhabitants of the Cowpasture River were in the path of the Native Owners of the territory. Indian raids probably took its toll on the family count. George and at least two sons lived on the Cowpasture for around twenty-five years before moving to what is now Greenbrier County, West Virginia. We know something of the lives of two of those sons: John and Benjamin. Both reared large families. Benjamin was Virgil's great-grandpa. John was the founder of a line which remained in Greenbrier, founding churches, farming and making a presence. Benjamin farmed and operated a ferry on the Greenbrier River, but he picked up roots around 1794 and moved to the area of Old Virginia where Virgil was born. It was then Kanawha County, Virginia, now Mason County, West Virginia. Benjamin's family were 'common folk' laborers according to various census data. Maybe they were coal miners. There was nothing happening in that family that would point to greatness, certainly not to academic and scholarly pursuits.

The need to produce income for his mother and siblings took precedence over formal schooling, though he did attend an "old field school" a little one room school, when he could. While working for the local druggist he became interested in teaching, then in the law. He 'read law' and eventually passed the Bar. He also began teaching and eventually became the County Superintendent of Schools. I am collapsing his early pursuits into an undefined time frame, but it will suffice. Both of these vocations, teaching and lawyering, provided much of his early livelihood. He eventually ran for and was elected State Superintendent of Schools, a job that placed

him in consideration for the office of Governor. One example of his scholarship: in 1893 he wrote the State school manual, "*A Manual and Graded Course of Primary Instruction for the Country and Village Schools of West Virginia.*" He wrote or co-authored at least a dozen books, co-founded historical societies and published an historical magazine. A Methodist, Virgil was also a national official of his church. So, Virgil's life accomplishments encompass the law, education, politics and religion, especially as historian and archivist.

His life work was capped with the founding of the West Virginia Department of Archives and History where he was its first Director, filling that position from 1905 until his death in 1912. This is not a biography, but these comments set the stage for the thesis of this story: "Unraveling an Obsession." This story is about an obsession – Virgil's obsession; who was his great-grandpa and why was it so important to him. This obsession began to speak to me through Virgil's letter written around 1910 to his first cousin "Charlie" Charles Bracewell, my great-grandpa.

Virgil's mind-set obviously included research excellence. His writings attest to that fact. He was obviously an over-achiever. That was what made him great – and interesting. Though it might have been an acceptably innocent comment circa 1910, by today's standards, I must say his opening remarks in his letter to my great-grandpa is a bit pompous: "*My dear CHARLEY: I have delayed a reply to your letter until this time because I am one of the busiest men in the country. I write this hastily this morning before leaving for Washington City.*" At least, it shows the seriousness with which Virgil took his work. It is that intense feeling, coming from his own hand, that I tend to pick up on.



Virgil Lewis Home, Mason City, West Virginia
Listed National Register of Historical Places
Photo – Herb Depke 12 Oct 1990

Virgil's Interests and What Influenced Him

Virgil's life accomplishments paint a picture of a deep passion for his interests. That passion resulted in exemplary works embodied in his published books including his *History of West Virginia*. Published in 1889, this monumental first history of West Virginia remains today an often quoted, often cited book. Current professional historians hold Virgil as a pillar of historical accuracy, a careful researcher.

As a man of letters, Virgil's passion for history was inevitably tied to the history of his surroundings – his locale and his own family's part in its history. The most important historical event in his immediate surroundings was the Battle of Point Pleasant fought 10 October 1774 in the county of his birth. That Battle strongly constituted the basis of his passion – yes his obsession – for believing his great-grandpa fought in that battle.

Virgil claimed his great-grandpa Benjamin Lewis fought and was wounded in the Battle of Point Pleasant. That claim remained 'private' in that he never openly published it. But Livia Poffenbarger expended considerable effort to

disprove it anyway. Her proof, as we shall later see, was as spuriously invalid as Virgil's claim.

Though Virgil never directly published his personal beliefs about his Lewis ancestry – so far as I have been able to find – I know of two occasions when his erroneous ancestry was published in biographical sketches probably penned by him but without byline. And, of course, his letter to my great-grandpa provides direct evidence of what he privately believed. We shall see that his own daughter denied his ancestral beliefs.

If Virgil had only known, he had plenty of legitimate ancestors in that Battle. He had at least one cousin on his great-grandpa's side, Joseph Mayse, listed on the list of Virginians Wounded bronze at the base of the Battle Monument [a son of his Aunt Rebecca Lewis Mayes, daughter of George Lewis] and at least two uncles on his great-grandma's side [the brothers of Susannah Nickell Lewis] who did fight in that Battle.

Virgil's Letter to his Cousin Charlie

My maternal uncle, Howard DeLee Nygren [1906-1970], gave me a copy of a letter from Virgil A. Lewis written to my great-grandfather Charles Bracewell. Grandpa Bracewell was the son of Minerva Lewis Bracewell [1814-1865]. Minerva was Virgil's aunt. Charlie was born in Middleport, Ohio across the Ohio River from Virgil's home in West Virginia. My Grandpa Bracewell was Virgil's first cousin. He and his brothers migrated to Danville, Illinois, the place of my birth. The typewritten copy of the letter was not dated. I place its date circa 1910 because Virgil was Director of the West Virginia Archives from 1905 until his death in 1912. The first two sentences of the letter lead me to believe Virgil was in his office in Charleston, WV at the time of its writing. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the letter. Its content is Virgil's style. My uncle would not have had access to the details in the letter. As we will see, Virgil left similar information in his own hand in his office at the Archives.

Here is the letter. I warn you now – Virgil had it wrong from the point of his great-grandfather’s parentage on back. Please read this letter with caution. That is what this story is all about! Here is *direct* evidence that Virgil personally stated his belief in his ancestry connected to John Lewis, Pioneer, Founder of Staunton, Virginia. I have capitalized names for emphasis and clarity.

My dear CHARLEY:

I have delayed a reply to your letter until this time because I am one of the busiest men in the country. I write this hastily this morning before leaving for Washington City. I am glad that you manifest some interest in your ancestry for it is worth something for a man to know whence he came.

Your mother was MINERVA LEWIS, the date of whose birth and death you doubtless have. Her father was GEORGE LEWIS and her mother MARY WINKLEBLACK; these were of course your grandparents. Your grandfather's father (your great-grandfather) was BENJAMIN LEWIS who was wounded in the battle of Point Pleasant, in 1774, and came to what was afterwards Mason County (Ohio) in 1790, and built his cabin in Yeager's Field within a few hundred yards of where our old uncle CLENDENIN STEVENSON formerly lived. A pile of stone used in his chimney and backwall still mark the site of his cabin. He lived to an old age and is buried on the top of a high hill just back of Locust Grove School House. Your great-great-grandfather was THOMAS LEWIS, who was born in the North of Ireland in 1718, and came with his father to Virginia when thirteen years of age. He married JANE STROTHER, a daughter of WILLIAM STROTHER, January 26, 1749; he was long a member of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, and one of the surveyors for LORD FAIRFAX. He lived and died near what is now Port Republic in Rockingham County, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. His father who was your great-great-great-grandfather, was born in the North of Ireland, of Scotch-Irish ancestry, in 1678; his wife was MARGARET LYNN; they immigrated to Virginia in 1731, and

founded the city of Staunton where he died and was buried.

Your ancestry were long prominent on the Virginia frontier. There is wide relationship, that is of a lateral connection, which it would take a good deal of time to give and which would prove of but little interest to you. However, if there are any details which you desire, I shall be glad to give them to you.

I wish you and the other boys would write me frequently. The first time I run across the State of Illinois, I will stop at Danville, and see you and all the kinship.

With best wishes I remain, sincerely yours,

VIRGIL A. LEWIS

The people mentioned in the letter are identified below. Names not capitalized are added for clarification. Generation numbers are also added. Virgil introduced two generations beyond the actual facts, so I have defined Thomas Lewis’ parents as Generation 0, his mother’s parents 00.

[Generation-5] CHARLEY Charles Francis
Bracewell Wife: Martha Maria
Anderson

Virgil’s first cousin

[Generation-4] MINERVA LEWIS, Virgil’s
aunt Husband: John Bracewell

[Generation-3] GEORGE LEWIS, Minerva’s
dad Wife: MARY [Margaret]
WINKLEBLACK

[Generation-2] BENJAMIN LEWIS, Virgil’s
great-grandpa Wife: Susannah Nickell

Note: Benjamin Lewis has NOT been found to have been in the Battle of Point Pleasant as Virgil stated here.

[Generation-4] CLENDENIN STEVENSON
[uncle by marriage]

Clendenin married two sisters of MINERVA LEWIS: first: Evaline who died, then Angeline.

WARNING: the names below are INVALID as ancestors: They were of the Staunton VA Lewis family.

[Generation-1] THOMAS LEWIS
Son of John Lewis,
Pioneer

[Generation-1] JANE STROTHER
[Thomas Lewis' wife]

[Generation-00] WILLIAM STROTHER, Jane's
father Wife: Margaret Watts

[Generation-0] MARGARET LYNN, Thomas's
mother Husband: John Lewis, Founder of
Staunton, VA, Virgil's Correct Proven Lewis
Lineage

**Referring to Virgil's letter to cousin 'Charlie' -
this is the correct version of Virgil's ancestry:
[Part 2 Documentation provides complete proof
of this genealogy]**

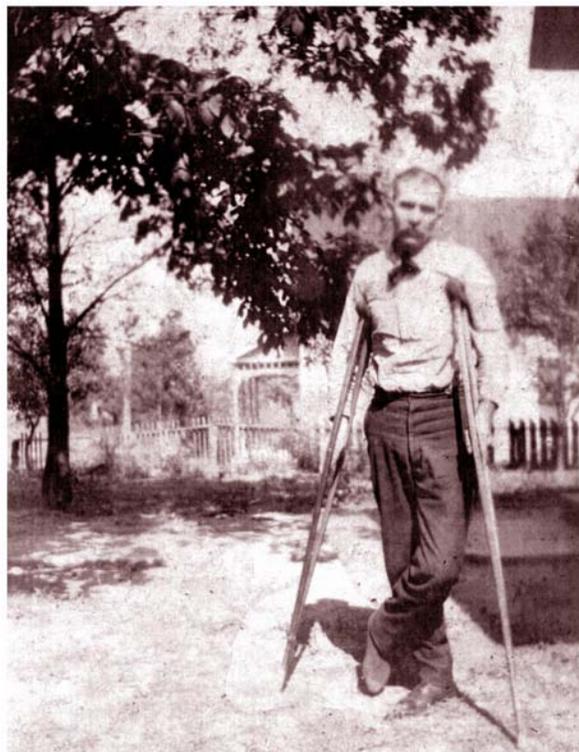
[Generation-5] Virgil Anson Lewis [1848-1912]
Wife: Elizabeth Stone

[Generation-4] Father: George W.
Lewis [1819-1858] Wife: Lucy Edwards

[Generation-3] Grand-father: George W.
Lewis [ca.1780-1855] Wife: Margaret
Winkleblack

[Generation-2] Great-grandfather:
Benjamin Lewis [ca.1728-ca.1817] Wife:
Susannah Nickell

[Generation-1] Great-great-grandfather: George
Lewis [ca.1704-1795] Wife: [probably] Catherine
Crawford



Charles Francis Bracewell [1856-1920]
Danville, Illinois ca. 1915.
He is at his home displaying a broken leg from
a coal mine accident.

Charles, shown here, died from a Vermilion
County, Illinois coal mine accident in 1920 at
the age of 65. West Virginians can sympathize
with that story! In a deep mine, the roof fell in
on him breaking his back. He was loaded onto
a horse-drawn buckboard wagon and hauled
off to the hospital some 10 miles distant where
he died.

Understanding Virgil's Letter

Virgil's letter to my great-grandpa shows he
understood the family of John Lewis, Founder
of Staunton, Virginia. It is accurate. John
Lewis Peyton's 1882 *History of Augusta
County* may have been his source. However,
the Benjamin he named with father Thomas
Lewis was actually William Benjamin Lewis,
not his correct great-grandpa whose father
was George Lewis. He also accurately defined
Charlie's parents, grand-parents and great-
grandfather. Virgil's genealogical narration in

this letter matches notes in Virgil's own handwriting found among his work after his death at the State Archives in Charleston. (1)

How Virgil Got It Wrong

The book *The Family of John Lewis, Pioneer* is a well documented genealogy and family history.(2) It represents several thousand individuals. In that book there are NO Benjamin Lewis's. None. That was my first clue to begin digging deeper. One must become familiar with this Lewis family in order to sort out the various Lewises who lived in the Valley of Virginia.

A study of Thomas Lewis, one of Pioneer John Lewis's sons, the official Surveyor of Augusta County, the surveyor of the land of Lord Fairfax, provides the answer to Virgil's error. This is the same Thomas Lewis referred to in Virgil's letter to my great-grandpa. Two documents tell the story: first, Thomas Lewis's Will; second his son William Benjamin Lewis's marriage bond. Thomas Lewis's son and youngest child was named William Benjamin Lewis [1778-1825]. In the April 1985 issue of the *Rockingham Recorder*, the official publication of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham [Virginia] Historical Society, a complete copy of Thomas Lewis's Will is presented. The Editor presents annotations and comments about this Will in which he consistently refers to Thomas's son William Benjamin as Benjamin, not William. I collected, but did not save, a copy of this William Benjamin Lewis's Marriage Bond either from the H-R Historical Society or the Augusta Courthouse in Staunton. The Bond was for the marriage of Benjamin Lewis to Margaret Hite. Not William, not William Benjamin, but simply Benjamin.

One of Thomas Lewis's brothers was William Lewis – an uncle of Thomas's son William Benjamin. It is likely that the boy was named after him and was referred to by his middle name Benjamin rather than his first name William in order to distinguish him from his uncle. At any rate, the use of a person's middle name caused the confusion. This is the only possible explanation for Virgil associating a man named Benjamin Lewis with the family of Thomas Lewis. This 'middle name thing' is not an uncommon error among genealogists. I must consider some fault with Virgil's work here

because I feel he should or could have known that the Benjamin he identified as his great-grandpa was not born until after the Battle of Point Pleasant.

There is a second problem in Virgil's letter. He says, "*Your grandfather's father (your great-grandfather) was BENJAMIN LEWIS who was wounded in the battle of Point Pleasant, in 1774. . .*" Benjamin Lewis was, indeed, the correct name for his great-grandfather, but so far as anyone has ever found, there was just no Benjamin Lewis of any lineage in that battle. And that exclusion seems to extend to Virgil himself. Virgil was a member of the Commission to erect the Point Pleasant Battle Monument. Virgil's soldier lists, produced and published in his bi-annual reports to the State of West Virginia, were used to construct the bronze plaques at the base of the Monument. Benjamin Lewis is not among the names on the plaque listing the wounded soldiers. Now here in Virgil's published works or in the published works of other historians can you find the name Benjamin Lewis as a soldier in the Battle of Point Pleasant, wounded or not. This is obviously something Virgil believed in his heart. He declared it in his letter to my great-grandpa. Yet, he did not publish the statement. Doubt must have existed in his mind. We will visit this issue in other sections of the story because this is not the end of it.

Virgil's Own Genealogy Notes

Virgil left four pages of notes written in his own hand found in his desk after his death and retained among his papers at the Archives in Charleston. He titled this work *The Lewis Ancestry*.(3) The handwriting is confirmed by his daughter Virginia Lewis.(4)

The four pages of these notes represent two separate sets of notes of two pages each. They were not dated but since they were found among his papers at the Archives when he died, their dates must be between 1905 and 1912. The first two page set begins with the name Benjamin Lewis who Virgil says is the son of Thomas Lewis and the 'grandson of the Founder.' 'The Founder' is a common title for John Lewis, Founder of Staunton, VA. He

then goes on from there to produce a good and valid genealogy of descendants. In both sets, Virgil places his great-grandpa Benjamin squarely in the family of John Lewis, the Founder of Staunton, VA.

The second two page set also begins with the name Benjamin Lewis but this work is more of a history than a genealogy. He seems to be trying to find a way to portray his great-grandpa in a less specific manner. In this set he ties his great-grandpa Benjamin Lewis to the known locale of Thomas Lewis, whom he does not mention, but refers to Rockingham County, Virginia, the known home of Thomas, but then has him moving on to Greenbrier. Thomas never moved from the home he called Linwood in now Rockingham County, Virginia.

Next, Virgil names a great-grandmother: Martha Patsy Dehison [the name should be Bickerton] and names some of his great-grandpa Benjamin's children. My research shows this lady, Martha Patsy, was actually the wife of the Benjamin Lewis who was the son of Zachary Lewis of Spotsylvania County, Virginia. This Benjamin will be explained when we take up the work of Livia Poffenbarger.

He follows that by listing '*Benjamin which married Susan Nichols in Greenbrier.*' Then he crossed this entry out. Oh, Virgil, you were so close to the truth! Susan Nichols [Susannah Nickell] was his great-grandma!!! This was his great-grandpa Benjamin's wife, not the wife of great-grandpa's son Benjamin. And Susannah's brothers WERE in the Battle of Point Pleasant.

The Lewis researcher Alice Gordon, who also descended from Virgil's great-grandpa Benjamin, sent copies of these pages to Virgil's daughter Virginia Lewis in 1984. Her reply provides considerable insight into Virgil's beliefs and his family's disagreement with them. (5)

Briefly, she writes:

"As to the hand-written sheets. It is indeed our father's handwriting! But why was he writing it? We've known since we were kids that we were not descended from the John who founded Staunton in Augusta Co., Virginia."

Virgil's Vanity Biography

Several biographical sketches of Virgil have been published in books. One is found in Wood, *Representative Authors of West Virginia*. One is Atkinson's *Prominent Men of West Virginia*. One is in Marquis, *Who Was Who in America, Vol. 1.*, the source of Virgil's portrait photograph used herein. I have not been able to locate a copy of this book. My copy of the photograph comes from his files at the Archives in Charleston.

The biography that is of specific interest to us regarding Virgil's ancestry claims is found in Biographical Publishing Co., *Men of West Virginia, Volume I*, Chicago, 1903, pages 31-35. I have not seen this book but I have a copy of Virgil's biographical pages courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago. I can tell from the title page that this book is what is known as a "Vanity Biography" or "Vanity History." These biographical books were popular in the 1800s and early 1900s. The subject of the biography supplied the copy and paid for the space. It is reasonable to assume that Virgil wrote this biography himself. It is similar to his writing style.

The first paragraph, beginning under the photograph of Virgil introduces the subject, *Virgil Anson Lewis*. The second paragraph provides the only *published* evidence I have found where Virgil claimed descendancy from John Lewis, Founder of Staunton, Virginia. Here are the first three sentences from the paragraph [emphasis added]:

"His paternal ancestors were among the first settlers of the Shenandoah Valley, where they were the founders of the city of Staunton, Virginia. They were active frontiersmen and participants in the Revolutionary and Indian Wars. His great-grandfather, Benjamin Lewis, was wounded in the Battle of Point Pleasant and after the wars were over, in 1792, settled in what is now Mason County, West Virginia, and is buried in Waggener district near the spot where he thus found a home."

With the exception of the two statements emphasized above, the biography is doubtless accurate and also quite informative. As in his letter to my great-grandpa, Virgil claimed ancestry to John Lewis, Founder of Staunton, and claimed his great-grandfather was wounded in the Battle of Point Pleasant. The first statement, as we have already seen, was denied by his daughter Virginia; the second we have previously discussed pointing out that Virgil himself seems to have denied it by withholding that information from the plaque on the Point Pleasant Battle Monument as well as his other published writings.

Virgil's Cemetery Monument

Virgil's cemetery plot is stark proof of the importance with which he held the Battle of Point Pleasant. Virgil is buried, with some of his family, in the Lone Oak Cemetery in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. It is a large plot, about 15 or 20 feet square as best I remember, outlined with granite 'planks.' What strikes you most is the obelisk in the center, about 20 feet high, again as best I remember. There is no doubt about its significance. It is a replica of the Point Pleasant Battle Monument. Virgil was instrumental in creating that monument and that battle was of deep personal interest to him.



Photos: Herb Depke, 12 Oct 1990

Virgil Lewis was a member of the State Commission for the building of the Monument commemorating the Battle of Point Pleasant fought 10 October 1774.



The base of the Point Pleasant Battle Monument Tu-Endi-Wei State Park, Point Pleasant, West Virginia
My daughter Sheri LaWall with grand-daughter Paige.



Plaque at the base [opposite side] commemorating the wounded.

Quoted from the book *History of the Battle of Point Pleasant*, by Virgil A. Lewis, page 82:
“The bronze panels and bas-relief were cast by Albert Russell & Sons Company, of Newburyport,

Massachusetts, the historical data thereon having been compiled by Virgil A. Lewis, in compliance with an order of the trustees.”

Virgil’s great-grandfather Benjamin Lewis is NOT listed, but Benjamin’s cousin, Joseph Mayes is listed, second line from bottom under ‘Privates.’ Rebecca Lewis Mayes, Benjamin’s sister, was his mother. Virgil did not know of him.

Photos – Herb Depke 12 Oct 1990

Livia Nye Simpson Poffenbarger

In June of 1901 Livia Nye Simpson Poffenbarger successfully established the Charles Lewis Chapter of the Daughter of the American Revolution in Point Pleasant based on the Battle of Point Pleasant being the first battle of the Revolutionary War. Virgil, probably inadvertently, nearly burst Livia’s DAR bubble by concluding there was no validity in the Lord Dunmore treachery theory.

Livia Nye Simpson, born in Mason County, WV in 1861, married George Poffenbarger in 1894. George was the son of Clifton and Sarah Lewis Poffenbarger, also a Mason County native. George’s mother was Sarah Lewis a great-granddaughter of Virgil’s great-grandpa Benjamin Lewis. Virgil and George were 2nd cousins once removed. George, a lawyer, became a Justice of the State Supreme Court. Livia was the owner and operator of the Point Pleasant Newspaper, *The State Gazette*.

Livia and Virgil’s lives intersected at several significant points:

- Both were life-long natives of Mason County, [West] Virginia.
- Both were members of the Point Pleasant Battle Monument Commission.
- Both were members of the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society.
- Both were authors, historians and genealogists.
- Both were active in politics – Livia a Republican, Virgil a Democrat.
- Both published histories of the Battle of Point Pleasant – simultaneously in 1909.

The Beginning of a Conflict

We must briefly survey the history of the Battle of Point Pleasant and its controversial cause. In the summer of 1774 Lord Dunmore, Governor of the Colony of Virginia, issued orders to Andrew Lewis, the County-Lieutenant of Botetourt County, to form an Army of about 1000 colonial militia to meet him at the confluence of the Kanawha and Ohio Rivers [the location of Point Pleasant] to engage and defeat a band of Indians. He, Dunmore, promised to lead another army down the Ohio from what is now Pittsburgh to meet them there. When Lewis's army reached Point Pleasant on 10 October 1774, Dunmore's army was nowhere to be found but a band of about 1000 Indians immediately attacked Lewis's army nearly overpowering them. Lewis was successful in winning the Battle but the situation caused the Virginia Frontiersman to suspect Dunmore of treachery – of leading the Militia to their slaughter by the Indians and thereby removing them from contention in the ensuing conflict between Britain and her Colonies.

The Dunmore treachery theory gained credence and was the generally accepted story in Virginia's colonial history. Some still hold to it today. Later, the historian Lyman Draper traveled throughout the countryside collecting documents from trunks and attics of kin of the soldiers who fought in the Battle. Those documents were eventually housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison. The historian Ruben Gold Thwaites published a book based on Draper's collection in 1905 titled *Documentary History of Dunmore's War 1774*. Dunmore's War is another name for the Battle of Point Pleasant. That book caused Virgil Lewis to doubt the Dunmore treachery theory and he began to doubt that version of the Battle. Among Virgil's papers at the West Virginia Archives, Charleston, there is a formal invitation from Thwaites to Virgil to visit him in Milwaukee. The treachery story was central to Livia's claim for the Battle of Point Pleasant being a direct part of the Revolutionary War, calling it "The First Battle of the Revolution," and thus facilitating her founding of the Point Pleasant DAR Chapter based on that Battle. She won the day by having the authors of Senate Bill No. 160, February 17, 1908, which appropriated funds for the Battle of

Point Pleasant Monument, add the words "The First Battle of the Revolution" to the appropriation. She then "took Virgil to the Wood Pile" in her 1909 book "Battle of Point Pleasant" by devoting two pages to refuting Virgil Lewis's claim to his ancestry and his identification of Benjamin Lewis.

Livia's Battle Story and Benjamin Lewis

Livia's book: *Battle of Point Pleasant October 10, 1774, First Battle of the Revolution* by Livia Nye Simpson-Poffenbarger, The State Gazette, Point Pleasant, West Virginia, 1909: Refer to pages 108-110 of the 1998 reprint copy. Beginning on page 62 is her section titled "Biographical" in which she begins with a 2-1/2 page biography titled "*General Andrew Lewis*," who was the leader of the Battle. Beginning on page 108 she titles a biography "*Benjamin Lewis*" which consumes over two pages. She extracts the name Benjamin Lewis from page 31 of the 1903 book discussed above titled *Men of West Virginia* in a biography of Virgil Anson Lewis, correctly quoting that source. Virgil's biography in this book included everything Livia says about Benjamin Lewis, Virgil's supposed great-grandfather. As previously discussed, Virgil probably wrote the story himself just as it appears, but his byline is not a part of the article. Livia also quoted a Lewis family genealogist [Virgil's Lewis family] who refutes the connection of her family to John Lewis, Founder of Staunton. She goes on to report on her correspondence with a general at the War Department in Washington, DC who advised her of the Revolutionary Soldier Benjamin Lewis, Sergeant, 10th Virginia, and gave further information about his service. Livia implies either this was, in fact, Virgil's ancestor or that Virgil had NO ancestor named Benjamin Lewis in the Battle. The book *Spotsylvania County Records*, William A. Crosier, 1905, [reprint 1990, Genealogical Publ. Co, Baltimore] contains a full and complete record of this Sergeant Benjamin Lewis and his family proving there is no relationship to Virgil's family. The full force of Livia's comments directly attacked Virgil's

reputation as a historian and archivist. She was trying to discredit Virgil.

Virgil's Battle Story

Virgil's book: *History of the Battle of Point Pleasant*, by Virgil A. Lewis, Charleston WV, 1909: Virgil gives a more thorough, and professional discussion of the Battle including the question of Dunmore's actions and the opinions of other historians. He never mentioned Livia. And NOWHERE does he include a man named Benjamin Lewis. I submit that when Virgil was obliged to give a "factual" statement of his knowledge, he always EXCLUDED his great-grandpa Benjamin. There is no doubt that in his heart he thought his great-grandpa Benjamin was in that Battle. He wrote that as a fact to Charlie, his cousin, my great-grandpa. But he could not come to publishing it.

The Thomas Lewis Journal of 1746

Virgil erroneously wrote his cousin Charlie that his great-grandpa Benjamin Lewis's father was Thomas Lewis. According to Virgil's belief, that was his great-great-grandpa. Thomas Lewis, oldest son of John Lewis, Founder of Staunton, VA, was the official Surveyor of Augusta County, Virginia and later the same for Rockingham County when it was cut from Augusta. He was also engaged by Lord Fairfax to survey his property line as defined in his King's Patent. In 1746 Thomas embarked on the lengthy survey of Lord Fairfax's "southwest line." The King's Patent stated Fairfax's land be bounded on the south by a line from the headwaters of the Rappahannock River [south-eastern terminus] to the headwaters of the Potomac River [south-western terminus]. The headwaters of the Rappahannock were well known. The headwaters of the Potomac were not known.

The deal was this: the farther west of the Rappahannock and the farther south the Potomac headwaters were located the more acreage would accrue to Fairfax. It was worth the effort. Thomas Lewis and a more senior cartographer and surveyor, Colonel Peter Jefferson, began their survey. Peter Jefferson, by the way, was the father of Thomas Jefferson.

Thomas Lewis kept a journal as was his custom. His journal began on September 10, 1746 and ended on February 24, 1747. The original journal, incidentally, was used in the United States Supreme Court in the early 1900s to finally settle the State Border dispute between Maryland and West Virginia.

Virgil Fails to Procure the Thomas Lewis Journal for the West Virginia Archives

Reference: *The Fairfax Line A Historic Landmark*, by John W. Wayland, The Henkle Press, New Market VA, 1925, Reprint 1990 Commercial Press, Stephen City VA, 1990. This book includes historical notes and the full text of the Journal. I call your attention to "Special Note" page 86, near bottom, beginning:

"Following is a copy of a letter written June 24, 1910, by Geo. E. Price - - - The original of this letter is preserved (1925) by Mr. Thomas Dilworth (whose wife is a descendant of Thomas Lewis) along with Thomas Lewis's Journal: [comments in brackets added]

Dear Sir: - [he says he is sending the original copy of the Journal, etc. and finally in the last half of the final paragraph]:

. . . I was very much in hopes that our Department of Archives [Charleston, WV] would purchase the book from you [Thomas Lewis's Journal] but the Superintendent, Virgil A. Lewis, did not feel authorized to do so. I think it ought to be preserved among the public archives of either Virginia or West Virginia.

I am

*Yours truly,
(Signed) Geo. E. Price*

Virgil A. Lewis specifically stated in his letter to my great-grandpa that his great-great-grandfather was this very Thomas Lewis. Why did he fail to purchase this, the original

copy, of Thomas Lewis's Journal? This journal was of great historical significance, a fact Virgil surely knew. I believe the State of West Virginia was in the throes of fiscal problems during that time, but I cannot accept that as an excuse. This is probably the biggest mystery in this whole story!

Speculation on Benjamin's Father, George Lewis

George Lewis [ca. 1704-1795], father of Benjamin Lewis, the correct great-grandfather of Virgil A. Lewis, has no positively identified ancestors. Correspondence from Dr. John F. Montgomery, Ph.D. [now deceased] of Lewisburg WV, retired County Supt. of Schools, past president of Greenbrier County [WV] Historical Society, and an ancestor of George Lewis through Benjamin's brother John, sent me a copy of a letter dated 31 October 1993 from Marilyn F. Schuelzky of Fort Wayne, Indiana sent to her cousin Edwin Coffman of Florida, formerly of Greenbrier County WV and the donor of the Conestoga Wagon on display at the Greenbrier Historical Society. The letter says in part:

" According to my Lewis Correspondent, John Lewis's father was George Lewis, who had a wife named Catherine. This George, born 1705, is believed to have been a son of Pioneer John Lewis from his first marriage (before he married Margaret Lynn when he -- John -- was 38). George's name is associated in a few records with Andrew Lewis, son of Pioneer John; and, in 1772, George's son John sold 215 acres on the Cowpasture (which had been deeded to him by his father, George, in 1755) to Col. Charles Lewis (of Pioneer John)."

" My Lewis correspondent, Juliana Cole, is a descendant of Catherine Lewis, who married Michael Keeney. . . . "

Do not get confused here! Yes, Virgil privately thought John Lewis, the Founder of Staunton, VA was his ancestor. But Virgil did not know of the existence of the George Lewis referred to above. The George Lewis mentioned above was the father of Virgil's correctly identified great-

grandpa Benjamin Lewis, the relationships now proven beyond doubt. It is, however, pure coincidence in terms of Virgil that this George Lewis might have been the son of John Lewis, the Founder of Staunton.

The question of George Lewis' ancestry is of little more than intellectual curiosity because there seems to be no documentation available. At least, I have never found any and I have not found a Lewis researcher with solid evidence one way or another. However, Michael Keeney, the ancestor of the above writer was contemporary with Benjamin Lewis, Virgil's great-grandfather. He married in 1781 Catherine Lewis, daughter of Benjamin's brother John. This gives reason to consider this story.

Fortunately, an excellent work is available on the genealogy of the family of John Lewis, Founder of Staunton: Frazier, Cowell, Fisher, *The Family of John Lewis, Pioneer*, 1985, San Antonio TX, Fisher Publications. Using that book as my source, I will outline the possibility [NOT the probability!] that Virgil's George Lewis could have been John Lewis, Founder of Staunton's son. I emphasize: this analysis proves only that this relationship was possible:

Information about John Lewis, Founder of Staunton, from the above cited book:

John Lewis was born in Donegal County, Ireland in 1678.

He died [Staunton VA] 1 February 1762.

His wife, the mother of the famous Lewis brothers of the Valley of Virginia, was Margaret Lynn.

No information survives as to her age or to the date of their marriage.

A son, Samuel, is speculated by some with a birth date of 1716 but is not proven.

The eldest proven son of this marriage was Thomas Lewis, born in Ireland 27 April 1718.

Their son Andrew, was born in Ireland, 9 October 1720.

Their son William was born in Ireland, 17 November 1724.

Their son Charles was born in America, 11 March 1736.

Conclusion: John Lewis born 1678 and his first known child was born 1718. [1718 minus 1678 = 40] John Lewis was about 40 years old at the time of his son Thomas' birth, or 38 if the son Samuel is valid. John Lewis, Founder of Staunton, was old enough when his first known child was born of the marriage with Margaret Lynn that a prior marriage was possible. The Frazier book does not include any information of a prior marriage.

If George Lewis, father of Virgil's great-grandfather, Benjamin, was the son of John Lewis, Founder of Staunton VA, Virgil's ancestry, as he thought of it, would be partly true. Virgil's great-grandpa's father George could have been a half brother to Thomas Lewis.

Notes of Warning – Some Bad Genealogy

This section is for the genealogist. As with all genealogies, errors are expected, but two errors have severely impacted the genealogical fabric of Virgil's Lewis family. They are explained below.

Zachwok Lewis – the Progenitor Who Did Not Exist

A genealogy created by a most careful and thorough family was impacted by an unfortunate error which caused them to name their progenitor "Zachwok Lewis." The late Dr. John F. Montgomery of Lewisburg, West Virginia [educator, historian and author] and his sister compiled an extensive Lewis genealogy. They descended from John Lewis, the brother of Virgil's great-grandpa Benjamin. And they did not know who their John Lewis's father was but knew he had a brother Benjamin. I no longer have a copy but it is available at the Greenbrier Historical Society, Lewisburg in its original form and as a computerized version done by me. I spent a number of weekends at the home of Dr. Montgomery and also took him on trips to Fort Lewis and the Cowpasture River land of our ancestors and to Botetourt County courthouse.

Here is what happened according to Dr. Montgomery: A school teacher friend of the Montgomery family planned a trip to the West

Virginia Archives in Charleston and offered to see what she could also find on their Lewis family. While there, she found a page of Virgil Lewis's handwritten notes. (6) This page of notes, I discovered, were notes taken directly from the book commonly known as Hayden's Virginia Genealogies, pages 380-383. On these pages this book dealt with a man named Zachary Lewis, but in his notes Virgil wrote it as Zachariah. He wrote that name three times, the first time clearly 'Zachariah.' The second time he wrote it, his writing created what looks like 'Zachwok.' The lady unfortunately picked up on that and reported to the Montgomery family that no less of an authority than Virgil Lewis himself said their progenitor was Zachwok Lewis!

When I showed Dr. Montgomery a copy of Virgil's notes he readily admitted the facts were as I suggested. He was dumbfounded as to how their friend had made the mistake as 'she was a careful researcher.'

The Wrong George Lewis

The most egregious error perpetrated on the history of Virgil's Lewis family was to associate them with a man named William Doddridge/Doddrill and his wife Rebecca Lewis. Several genealogies are found on the internet today which perpetuate this error.

The error emanates from the book by Charles Tunis DODRILL titled *Heritage of a pioneer, being the story of William (English Bill Doddridge) Dodrill and his wife, Rebecca (Lewis) Daugherty, their family, the times in which they lived, and a genealogy of the families of their sons*, Huntington WV: 1967.

The first part of this book contains narrative chapters of the families; the last part is a genealogy. The chapter about the author's ancestor and his marriage into the George Lewis family of the Cowpasture River [Virgil's family] is completely erroneous and is easily proven to be so. I will not go into the details found in the book but will tell you how the error was made.

This author obviously took his information from the three volume works commonly

known as 'Chalkley-Chronicles of the Scots-Irish.' In that work you will find all of the people this author claims. But he took people of the same names and erroneously melded them into single individuals. Most unfortunately, he took a George Lewis who was not the George Lewis of the Cowpasture River and transposed him and his family onto Virgil's family. (7)

NOTES

(1) Virgil A. Lewis Papers, West Virginia Department of Archives and History, Charleston, WV., hereafter cited as VAL papers.

(2) Irwin Frazier, *et al*, *The Family of John Lewis, Pioneer* (San Antonio: Fisher Publications, 1985)

(3) VAL papers.

(4) Letter, Virginia Lewis to Alice Gordon, November 19, 1984, hereafter cited as Lewis letter.

(5) Lewis letter.

(6) VAL papers

(7) Augusta County Court House, Staunton, VA, Will Book #9, p. 274.

Lemen Graveyard Restoration

WVHS member Elizabeth Snyder Lowe reports that the Lemen Graveyard in Kearneysville, WV has been restored.

The graveyard is located on the original Lemen farm, known as White Rocks Farm. Originally, there were markers for Nicholas Lemen III, Robert Lemen IV and Nicholas Lemen, grandson of Nicholas III. There were also two D. A. R. markers found in the cemetery. These markers were placed by the Pack Horse Ford Chapter of the D. A. R. on Shepherdstown in 1939. Also in the cemetery are 12 field stones in a row, supposedly marking the graves of slaves or infant children.

Vivian Park Snyder and Elizabeth Snyder Lowe, descendants of the Lemen family, have restored and marked the graves. Funding for the project came from the sale of the genealogy on the Lemen family, "The Lemen Family Tree," by these two ladies, showing that genealogy and historical research can yield benefits for continued preservation. Congratulations to Vivian Snyder and Elizabeth Lowe for their work on the Lemen graveyard.