

A Note about the Van Meter Families of Clark and Champaign Counties Ohio

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Introduction

One of the sources of "Van Meter information" that has been passed down for several generations in my family is a newspaper article that appeared in the *Urbana (Ohio) Daily Citizen* nearly 45 years ago. Although I have an original copy of the article, several photocopied versions have been passed down too, telling me that a number of my relatives have used it to learn about the first Van Meter families in Clark and Champaign Counties.

Because there are relatively few sources of information available about these early families, this article is significant. However, I have long known that there were some errors in it. The purpose of this short note is to analyze the details of the article.

Our County Recorder Sez ... (by Warren Everhart, *Urbana Daily Citizen*, January 26, 1957, reprinted with permission)

THE HITT AND VAN METER FAMILY

One of the more interesting pioneer families, with whose descendants it has been my good fortune to become acquainted, is the Van Meter family, who located first in Clark county and about 1830 settled permanently near Catawba Station in Champaign county.

The Van Meter family came originally from Virginia and Maryland before 1800 and located in Kentucky where a family of seven children was born - Henry, Jacob, Solomon, Isaac, Ann, Rebecca and Sallie.

The father of this family passed away while they still lived in Kentucky. One day while leafing through one of our old deed volumes I came across a copy of this father's will.

It was unique in that a clause in his will gave their freedom to eighteen colored people. Each one was left a goodly sum of money, ranging between three and four hundred dollars. The will had been probated in Kentucky and much later a member of the family had a copy of it recorded in Champaign county deed records. I failed to make a note of it at the time I read it and since that time I have been unable to locate it again.

After the father's death the widow and her seven children migrated to Champaign county and settled in Union township on a farm of 340 acres.

The farm is located on south side of Route 54, east of Catawba Station, recently owned by M. L. Gaver and now owned by Tom Swisher and Don Channel.

Many things point to the fact that this pioneer family was comfortably situated financially. They soon became the owners of another large farm which adjoined the original one. They built both houses on each side of Route 54 at the foot of what is known as Van Meter hill, one a brick and the other a frame.

Coming from Virginia and Kentucky, the members of the family were a typical southern family noted for their refinement and their genial hospitality. Friend or stranger, any one who ever called at their home was greeted with courtesy and immediately made to feel welcome. One instantly knew that he was in the presence of a refined and genteel family.

This same characteristic has been passed on through each generation.

Of the seven children mentioned, Jacob and Henry Van Meter were best known in Champaign county. Both lived and owned large farms in Union township. Jacob's sons Joseph and William are mentioned in Beers history. William lived on the home farm on the southwest side of Route 54, and Joseph on

the northeast side of same route. Jacob Van Meter married a sister of Ab and Ed Jennings, both pioneers who lived near Urbana. Ab lived on Nutwood Farm where Errett Lewis now lives, and Ed living at Norwood on the northwest edge of Urbana.

Julia Van Meter, who was a daughter of Jacob, became the wife of George Hitt, one of the members of the Hitt family who were leading dry goods merchants in Urbana for more than a century.

George Hitt, who was the father of our Joe Hitt, is well remembered by the older residents of the city as the operator of the Hitt store at the southeast corner of the Square.

This Hitt family deserves more than passing notice. About the year 1814, two brothers, Martin and Samuel Hitt, both Methodist ministers, came from Virginia and purchased a portion of land which they divided between them. Most of this land now lies within the city limits. These two men were two of four brothers who were all ministers of Christ's gospel. Martin and Samuel Hitt served many pastorates in Champaign and neighboring counties.

Samuel, the minister, had a son named Samuel W. who was born in 1817. At the age of fifteen, he entered the store of John Reynolds which was located at the Hitt corner. With integrity and remarkable business talent he passed through apprentice and clerk and in 1852 became a partner in the firm.

In 1866 he became the sole owner of the dry goods store which had been established by Mr. Reynolds in 1806. From 1852 for the greater part of a century the store was operated by members of the Hitt family as the leading mercantile store of Urbana.

The members of the three families mentioned in this article have been among the prominent and influential citizens of our county.

The following incident of the early pioneers may be of interest in connection with the Van Meters.

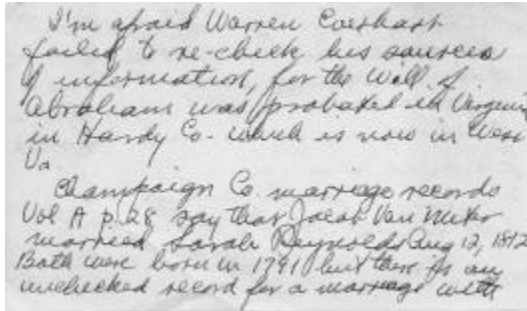
My great-grandparents were pioneers in Clark county in 1803 and settled some two or three miles from the Van Meters who were then in Clark county.

The early pioneers knew nothing of matches. They had not then been invented. Therefore, a fire once started was kept continually burning as much as possible.

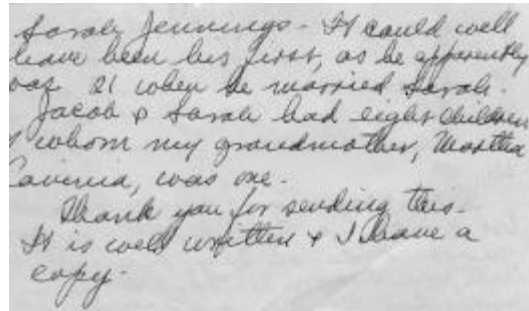
Great grandpappy let his fire go out, and rather than start it with flint and steel, he walked the entire distance to the Van Meter home and borrowed a kettle of live coals. Carrying the kettle back home, he rekindled his fire and I suspect he banked the fire in the big fire place with more care after that experience.

An initial analysis of the newspaper article

Along with the newspaper clipping, the following note about the article was passed down to me. Although I don't know who wrote this note, the writer's grandmother was Martha Lavinia Van Meter.¹



I'm afraid Warren Corbush failed to re-check his sources of information, for the well known Abraham was probated in Virginia in Hardy Co. which is now in Cass Va.
Champaign Co. marriage records Vol A p. 28 say that Jacob Van Meter married Sarah Reynolds Aug 13, 1812. Both were born in 1741 but there is an unchecked record for a marriage with



Sarah Jennings - It could well have been his first, as he apparently was 21 when he married Sarah. Jacob & Sarah had eight children of whom my grandmother, Martha Lavinia, was one.
Thank you for sending this. It is well written & I have a copy.

A deeper analysis of the newspaper article

I want to go, paragraph by paragraph, through the newspaper article, and analyze it based upon what we know, or suspect. (I will be careful to distinguish between the two.)

- In paragraph 1, we are told that the Van Meter family first settled in (what would later become) Clark County – later we will read that it was by 1803 – but had relocated to Catawba Station in Champaign County before 1820.
 - I believe that this is generally accurate, although I don't think the distance involved in the second movement was large – they were probably always near the Clark/Champaign border.
 - Catawba Station is in southeastern Champaign County, in Union Township. Union Township is adjacent to Pleasant Township, which is in northeastern Clark County. (Both of these townships will enter the analysis shortly.)
- Paragraph 2 says that the Van Meters came originally from Virginia (true) and Maryland (perhaps), but had gone to Kentucky (untrue) where the seven children of the initial Ohio family were born. It also gives the names of the children.
 - Although the article does not identify the parents of the family, it identifies the children, which provides enough information to allow us to deduce the parents from other genealogical information. The father was Jacob Van Meter (1750 – 1808) and the mother was Mary (Polly) Johnson.²

¹ I know of seven (not eight) children of Jacob Van Meter and Sarah Reynolds, one of whom was my great-great-grandfather, Joseph Reynolds Van Meter (b. 1817); Martha Lavinia (b. 1830) was his sister. I believe that she went by her middle name.

² Besides my personal notes, genealogical information for these Van Meters may be found in:
(1) C. Van Henkle, *Van Meter / Hite Family*, Hardy County Public Library, (929 VA (folder)).
(2) Ronald Lee Secord, *A Genealogy of the Blanchan, ..., Van Meter, ... Families*, 28 November 1989, Library of Congress (CS71.H666).
(3) R.B. Woodworth, *Notes by R.B. Woodworth*, Hardy County Public Library (929 GJ Vol 13).

- Based upon other genealogical information, the seven children mentioned in the article were born at Old Fields, Virginia (now Hardy County, West Virginia). Their dates of birth were Henry (b. 1780), Isaac (b. ca 1782), Rebecca (b. 1784), Ann (b. 1786), Sarah (perhaps also known as Sallie, b. 1788), Jacob (b. ca 1791),³ and Solomon (b. 1795).
- The father, Jacob, was born at Old Fields, Virginia (now Hardy County, West Virginia), and in fact is buried there although I believe that he actually died in Ohio, and his remains were returned to Old Fields for burial. His headstone is still clearly readable today.
- I know almost nothing about the mother, Mary (Polly), and she may have hailed from Maryland, although it seems more likely that she, too, was from Virginia.
- Although a number of Van Meters, including some named Jacob, had migrated from Virginia to Kentucky (especially Hardin County, Kentucky), this family did not as nearly as I can tell. Based upon the 1808 burial of the father in Virginia, I find it implausible that they ever established roots in Kentucky.
- It seems likely that the Ohio land, located on the western edge of the Virginia Military District in Ohio, was compensation for service in the Revolutionary War.
- Paragraph 3 says that the father had died before the family moved to Ohio, and that he had an interesting will.
 - I believe that the father died in Ohio, after the family had moved there. In the first place, I have always found it strange that a widow and seven children would pack up and move to the edge of the frontier. Also, based upon later evidence in the newspaper article, the family was in Ohio by 1803, and the father, Jacob, did not die until April 1808.⁴ Finally, I found a note saying that Rev. Saul Henkle (the husband of Ann, this Jacob's daughter) "had been to Fort Pleasant [synonymous with Old Fields] to bury his father in law, Jacob Van Meter".⁵
 - I have never found a will for the father, although I'm confident that I have found the will mentioned in the article – it just wasn't written by the father. This is discussed next.

³ This Jacob was my direct ancestor, and the one who married Sarah Reynolds, as mentioned in the handwritten note. (Champaign County Marriage Records, Vol. A, p. 28) The ceremony was performed by Rev. Saul Hinkle.

⁴ The dates of birth and death are clearly readable from the headstone of Jacob Van Meter, buried at Old Fields Cemetery.

⁵ C. Van Henkle, *op cit.* Rev. Saul Henkle was the husband of Ann (b. 1786), one of the seven children. As noted already, he performed the 1812 marriage ceremony of Jacob and Sarah.

- Paragraph 4 talks about the will, and how it gave freedom to 18 slaves. It says that the will was probated in Kentucky, but much later recorded in Champaign County, Ohio.
 - The handwritten note, shown earlier, takes issue with the assertion about Kentucky, although that note might be interpreted as saying that the father's name was Abraham, whereas I maintain that his name was Jacob.
 - I had always found it doubtful that a will probated elsewhere (Kentucky or Virginia) would later be recorded in Champaign County. On this point, however, I stand corrected. Through the efforts of the Champaign County Library (Gloria Malone) and the Champaign County Genealogical Society (Pat Stickley), I now have what is almost certainly the will that was being described.⁶ Indeed, it was written by an Abraham (as suggested by the handwritten note), and it was probated in Hardy County, Virginia (not in Kentucky), and it emancipated 19 (not 18) slaves. However, the will was written in 1820, and probated in 1823 (and recorded in Champaign County in 1850), so it was not the will of the father, but of another Van Meter, who died in or around 1823.⁷
- Paragraph 5 says that after the father died, the widow and her children migrated to Union Township, (southern) Champaign County.
 - I think this is likely correct, but only that they moved across the border from Clark County to Champaign County, not Kentucky or Virginia.
- This is a good time to talk about the Federal Census data for these Van Meters.
 - The 1820 Census for Pleasant Township, (northern) Clark County lists Jacob Van Meter, and provides enough data to confidently correlate this Jacob with the earlier-mentioned son (Jacob, b. ca 1791). This Jacob and his wife, Sarah Reynolds, were married in Champaign County in 1812. The Census enumerates three children under the age of 10 by 1820.
 - The 1820 Census for Union Township, (southern) Champaign County lists Henry Van Meter. I don't know enough details about Henry (b. 1780) to correlate the information found in the Census, but it seems likely that it is the same Henry.
 - Also listed in Union Township in the 1820 Census is a household headed by a woman named Mary – her age was listed as being over 45. I assume that this is Mary (Polly), the widow of Jacob. There were two other residents of that household, a male aged 16 – 25 (probably her youngest son, Solomon, who would have been 25 in 1820), and a female aged 10 – 15 (probably a domestic servant).

⁶ Champaign County Deed Book V, pp 512 – 514.

⁷ I'm reasonably certain that the will was written by Abraham (1752-1823), a brother of the father Jacob (1750-1808) whom we are discussing.

- Returning to the newspaper article, paragraph 6 describes the location of the family farm.
 - I have no reason to doubt this, and accept this as fact. The farm remained in the family for a number of years.
- Paragraph 7 indicates that the family was financially secure.
 - I would have guessed this, even if it wasn't written, as most of the Van Meters who hailed from Virginia were successful and secure.
- Paragraphs 8 and 9 speaks of the family's refinement and hospitality.
 - As a descendent of the family, I am naturally inclined to accept this as complete and unvarnished truth.
- Paragraph 10 talks specifically about two of the seven children, Henry (b. 1780) and Jacob (b. ca 1791), and mentions Jacob's sons in the context of a book, *History of Champaign County*, published by W.H. Beers. It also says that Jacob married a sister of Ab and Ed Jennings.
 - I am familiar with the Beers history, and my analysis here is consistent with that account.
 - I am confident that "my" Jacob (b. ca 1791) did not marry Ms. Jennings. Rather, there was another Jacob Van Meter who married Sarah C. Jennings on December 12, 1838.⁸ There is a record of the death of Sarah C. Van Meter on February 21, 1895 "at the age of 77".⁹ Thus, this Sarah C. Van Meter would have been born in 1818, whereas my Jacob and his wife had three children by the 1820 Census. Yet it is consistent with the age of a woman who would have been 20 years old in 1838 – a common age for marriage. In short, the newspaper article confused "my" Jacob and Sarah with a different Jacob and Sarah. My Jacob and Sarah were united in marriage until Jacob's death separated them in 1857; Sarah died two years later in 1859.
- Paragraph 11 – 15 talk about Julia Van Meter Hitt and the Hitt family.
 - Julia was a daughter of the "other" Jacob and Sarah.¹⁰
 - Other than that, I have not analyzed these paragraphs.
- The remainder of the article gives insight into pioneer life in the early 1800s.
 - I take this at face value. Also, this is where the specific date of 1803 arises.

⁸ Champaign County Marriage Records, Vol. C, p. 346. Consistent with my explanation, two Jacobs are found in the 1840 Census for Union Township, Champaign County. Although they were different individuals, they were probably cousins. In the end, all Van Meters are related.

⁹ Champaign County Death Records, Vol. 2, p. 563.

¹⁰ Julia J. Hitt is mentioned in the will of the "other" Sarah C. Van Meter. That will was probated on March 13, 1895. (Will Abstracts of Champaign County, Vol. II, Books G – L).

Appendix: Van Meter ancestors of the author

g ⁹ f	Jan Joosten Van Meter	Abt 1625	1706
g ⁸ f	Joost Jansen (John) Van Meter	1656	1706/1714
g ⁷ f	Isaac Van Meter	1692	Dec 1757
g ⁶ f	Henry Van Meter	1719 (?)	May 1778
g ⁵ f	Jacob (Sr.) Van Meter	09 Jun 1750	29 Apr 1808
g ⁴ f	Jacob (Jr.) Van Meter	Abt 1791	22 Feb 1857
g ³ f	Joseph Reynolds Van Meter	31 Jul 1817	05 Aug 1902
g ² f	Lee Henry (Harry) Van Meter	07 Mar 1852	Apr 1932
gf	Edgar Smith Van Meter	07 Aug 1887	23 Nov 1960
m	Elizabeth Ann Van Meter	19 Sep 1924	(living)
	Gregory V. Cox	20 Apr 1951	(living)