

ABOUT “COVENANTERS”

Why certain Patterson families listed on this website are described as “Covenanter” Pattersons

Patterson progenitors listed on this website who are described as “Covenanters” are so-called because they (or their descendants) are listed in *Register of Marriages and Baptisms performed by Rev. John Cuthbertson 1751-1791* edited by Helen S. Fields (originally published 1934 in Washington, D.C.; reprinted by Heritage Books, Bowie Maryland, 2001).

Rev. Cuthbertson (1718-1791) was the first Covenanter minister on American soil, arriving in 1751. In his itinerant ministry he covered over 70,000 miles—mostly in Pennsylvania, but in other states as well. Until Rev. Matthew Linn and Rev. Alexander Dobbin came in 1773 to assist him, Rev. Cuthbertson was the only minister tending to hundreds of Covenanter families.

Nearly all of these Covenanters refused to attend a Presbyterian Church, even if one were conveniently located a few miles from their homes. Instead, they waited for Rev. Cuthbertson to come to their area, and then they married, or had their children baptized. Such was their devotion to their faith.

Covenanters were *not* “Presbyterians.” This cannot be stressed enough.

Some historical background

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, Scotland and England had separate systems of government (separate parliaments and privy councils), and Scotland passed its own laws. Elizabeth was Queen of England, and James VI was King of Scotland.

Scotland even had its own national church—the Church of Scotland—based on the Protestant teachings of John Calvin and John Knox. An excellent essay on-line at www.sorbie.net/covenanters.htm describes Scottish Protestantism as “a hard, unyielding faith. It was deeply suspicious of Christmas, and abominated graven images such as the crucifix. It did not recognize Easter as a celebration.” As of 1560 the Scottish parliament had passed laws that formally separated them from the Roman Church. With the crucial involvement of John Knox, Scots set down their beliefs in the “Confession of Faith,” and had organized their Scottish church (“kirk”) along “Presbyterian” lines. “Presbyterian” here is an adjective, referring to a system of organization. Their “Presbyterian” form of church government had no bishops; each congregation elected particularly worthy members who, together, formed presbyteries. In addition, each congregation selected “elders” who helped the pastor of the church in all aspects of his ministry. Members of the Church of Scotland believed that God, rather than the king or queen, was the absolute sovereign to whom they owed first allegiance. Their abhorrence of all things “Papist” (Catholic) was deep-seated, and was a core element of their religious identity.

Meanwhile, England, also, had broken from Rome. Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth’s father, had established the Church of England as the national church. Henry VIII had declared that he, as king, was the “Supreme Head” of this new Church of England—and this is the crucial difference between Henry VIII’s newly-created Church

of England and the Catholic Church from which Henry had severed ties. The head of the Catholic Church was, of course, the pope—not the king of Catholic Spain or France. The idea that the head of state (in this case, Henry VIII, King of England) also could be the head of the church was also the crucial difference between the non-Catholic Church of England and the non-Catholic Church of Scotland. The Scots, as explained above, considered God to be the head of the church, and their king to be a vassal of God.

This English-inspired idea of a king's "divine right" to rule over both state *and* church was the underlying reason for most of the ensuing political dispute, both within England, and between England and Scotland, over the next century.

The organization of this new Church of England was similar to the Catholic system of governing bishops, but the most important difference between the Catholic Church and the Church of England was that in England it was the *Crown* who appointed the bishops. Thus, in England, the King (or Queen) was the head of the church—not the Pope, nor any other person of purely religious authority. Compare this system with Scottish Protestantism, where representatives from each congregation met in a central "presbytery" where, *together*, they debated and then *voted* on church law and practice. (Sound familiar? Like American-style democracy maybe? But that's a subject for a book, and requires more space than is possible in this introduction.)

During the long reign of Elizabeth I (1533-1603), the Church of England moved even further away from the Church of Rome. Six years after ascending to the throne, in 1559, Elizabeth passed the Act of Uniformity and the Act of Supremacy. The former instituted the Book of Common Prayer in all church services, and the latter required all public officials, including Church of England bishops, to swear on oath that the Queen had absolute final say in church matters. As a result of these laws, over the years, Catholic members of the court greatly diminished, and England during Elizabeth's rule became the world's greatest unified Protestant power.

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, King James VI of Scotland, reared in the Protestant faith as Elizabeth had been, succeeded her. (His mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, had reigned only briefly in Scotland; she abdicated the Scottish throne to her one-year-old son, James, in 1557). Thus, in 1603, James VI of Scotland became James I of England, Scotland and Ireland. James I was the first to proclaim himself King of "Great Britain" (though the three countries were not united formally as Great Britain until 1707, after the passage of the Acts of Union in that year).

At any rate, one might imagine that a Protestant monarch on the throne, and a Scottish one, at that, would have boded well for the Scots and their ardent desire to worship "their" way. Not so. King James had ideas concerning his "divine" role in the church that were more in line with English ideas than with Scottish ideas. The same essay cited above has this to say about King James I: "James insisted that his divine authority came before the Kirk's civil jurisdiction. This conflict between two uncompromising factions was to strongly influence the whole period of Scottish history. James, despite his Scots ancestry, left London to visit his native country only once in the years he held the 'two crowns' between 1603 and 1625."

One particular action of this first "King of Great Britain" deserves a mention, since it so directly affected the "Scotch-Irish" whose descendants emigrated to America, and whose descendants became such staunch supporters of the Revolution. In 1607, the Catholic Earls had left Northern Ireland after years of unsuccessful battles with the

Protestant royal troops. King James I then decreed that Scottish and English families could settle on the abandoned lands of these earls in Northern Ireland, and the terms of settlement were extremely favorable. The idea, of course, was to entrench Protestantism in an area that had been so troublingly Catholic for so long. This, incidentally, is the reason there is still strife in Ulster (Northern Ireland); basically, the native Irish, who could not afford to flee with the earls back in 1607, were “screwed,” and the Irish appear to have a long memory.

Under the plan which King James I devised for the new Ulster plantations, the British and Scottish “planters” were each granted 3,000 acres as long as they could prove that they had settled 48 adult, English-speaking, Protestant males and as long as in their plantation population there existed at least twenty families. These planters were prohibited from employing Irish tenant farmers, and they were also forbidden to sell any of their land to an Irishman. Existing Irish landowners were to own no more than a quarter of Ulster land, and the Irish peasant class was relocated so that they were distributed close to Protestant settlements. (This insured that there was not too large a “pocket” of angry Catholic landholders or peasantry too far from the eye of their Protestant overlords.) Additionally, under the plan for the Ulster Plantations, all lands and buildings previously owned by the Catholic Church reverted to the Protestant Church of Ireland.

Thus the north of Ireland became predominantly Protestant, and settlements soon formed there which were comprised almost entirely of Scots from the Lowlands of Scotland. Throughout the next hundred years, before emigration to the American colonies began, there was very little intermingling of the Scots and the native Irish. Therefore, “Scotch-Irish” emigrants to America, even after having lived in Ireland for about a century, most decidedly considered themselves to be Scottish—not at all Irish. This is important to remember.

Charles I succeeded his father, James I, in 1625. From the same essay previously cited: “He was an opponent of Presbyterianism and thought it would be simpler if all his subjects would adopt Episcopacy (government of the church by crown appointed Bishops). He therefore planned the introduction of the ‘Book of Common Prayer’ into the Scottish church service [in 1637].” This caused an uproar through Scotland—as well as among the “Scotch-Irish” population of the Ulster plantations—since this liturgy had a distinctly Papist flavor in the minds of most Scots. The “divine right of kings” philosophy to which Charles adhered pitted him squarely against the Scottish Protestants who believed that they owed their loyalties first to God, then only secondly to their ruler, whom they did *not* believe had been granted divine authority to rule over their church.

The Scots lodged formal protest in February **1638**, and drew up a “**National Covenant**” which was signed by 60,000 who protested the royal edict that they begin using the Common Book of Prayer in their services. This Covenant of 1638 was a document that denied the King’s authority to proscribe ways of worship. The beliefs expressed in this document were in direct violation of English law.

Fortunately for the Church of Scotland, Charles I didn’t last long; he was beheaded in 1649 during the Civil War that saw Oliver Cromwell installed as “Lord Protector.” Cromwell’s position on Presbyterianism was that it would be the national religion of both Scotland *and* England. This pleased the Scots, and there was a time of stable relations between the two countries. In **1649** Cromwell signed the “**Solemn**

League and Covenant,” which acknowledged Christ and only Christ as the head of their church, which guaranteed the Scots the right to worship as they always had, and which contained the national pledges of Scotland, England and Ireland to unite in a common defense against Papacy.

Unfortunately, this peaceful period did not last long—just about a decade. Two years after Cromwell died in 1658, Charles II (son of Charles I) returned from banishment and ascended the throne. In 1661 Charles II declared the National Covenant null and void. The essay previously cited says, “He soon passed an act which enforced the people to recognize him as the supreme authority in matters both Civil and Ecclesiastical. The Church of Scotland rejected this and was thrown into the furnace of persecution for twenty-eight long years, until 1688.”

By 1670 the Scots, denied the right to worship as they wished in their “kirks,” were meeting in secret, in vast numbers—in open fields. These assemblages are referred to as “**coventicles**” (groups of people still adhering to the principles set forth in the Solemn League and Covenant). The soldiers of Charles II sought them out and killed thousands upon thousands of “Covenanters”—those who refused to recognize the King’s authority in religious matters. Non-conforming Scots were stripped of their land and money—which, of course, reverted to the Crown and to the king’s loyal (informer) subjects. Still, despite the horrible persecutions, the vast majority of Scots refused to knuckle under, and continued to worship their way.

Charles II became increasingly frustrated by his failure to subdue the Scots. In 1678 he assembled a troop of 9,000 Highland Scots whom he felt sure would be happy to march south and wreak havoc on the nonconformist Lowlanders. In this Charles was correct; Highlanders were predominantly Catholic, and there was no love lost between them and the Protestant Lowlanders who so outnumbered them. These highlanders fell upon the Covenanters and committed atrocity upon atrocity: murder of women and babies and the defenseless elderly; rape; plundering of livestock and possessions.

In 1679 the Lowland Scots rose up in armed resistance and defeated the King’s men at the battle of Drumclog. Shortly thereafter, however, they were roundly trounced by troops led by the Duke of Monmouth, at the decisive Battle of Bothwell Bridge. In 1680 began the terrible period in Scottish history known as “the killing times.” The excellent essay so often quoted here says, “These were the most horrific and atrocious times ever inflicted on the people of Scotland. The Covenanters were flushed out and hunted down as never before and the common soldier was empowered to take life at will of any suspect without trial of law. Usually it was done without any evidence and often as the result of the suspicions of an over-zealous town official or Minister. Brutality in these days defied the imagination and the persecution had no mercy on man, woman or child, irrespective of circumstances. Any class of Covenanter once caught by the King’s troops was shot or murdered on the spot.”

W. Melancthon Glasgow writes in his *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, (Baltimore: Hill & Harvey Publishers, 1888), p. 37: “No less than twenty thousand Presbyterian and Covenanting witnesses suffered martyrdom in various ways, and many were banished to America and Jamaica; and upwards of two thousand godly ministers were banished from their congregations in one day.”

In 1685, James II—a Catholic!—came to the British throne. His order, in 1688, which decreed “indulgence” for all Catholics in the realm, caused him to lose the support

of most Englishmen, who then invited William of Orange, protestant King of the Netherlands (who was James II's son-in-law!) to invade their country and liberate them from the Catholic rule of James II.

While William of Orange was amassing his troops and ships, and while the troops of King James continued to hunt down the non-conformers, the famous Siege of Londonderry was taking place in Northern Ireland. By 1688 Londonderry was the last garrison not having submitted and not having sworn allegiance to King James II. The walled city of Londonderry was, in fact, filled with families having Scottish Covenanter loyalties, and the king had sent the Earl of Antrim to subdue it once and for all. Londonderry's mayor, however, proclaimed a "no surrender" policy, and on 7 December 1688, the city's gates were locked and the 105-day-long siege began. The people within suffered assault from cannonball, disease and starvation, but did not submit. It's estimated that half of the city's population died during this siege, which did not end until 28 July 1689, when the armies of William of Orange were victorious.

Here we take a pause from the recounting of historical events to discuss the Siege of Londonderry in terms of Patterson genealogy. This writer has found no fewer than three Patterson family histories stating that one of their Patterson ancestors was in Londonderry during the Siege. Two of these histories name the ancestor: one John Patterson, "born about 1640." As will be seen, given the facts stated in these family histories, it would be impossible for these families to be closely related. Clearly, information about the earliest generations in some—if not all—of these histories is flawed.

In 1847 William E. DuBois published *A Record of the families of Robert Patterson (the elder), emigrant from Ireland to America, 1774...* (Philadelphia: Press of J.C. Clark, 1847).¹ On pages 8-10:

"Among the refugees [from Scotland to Ireland, just prior to the Siege of Londonderry in 1688/89] of this era, was our ancestor, John Patterson...he was born not far from the year 1640, and took with him at least two sons. Whether he settled at Londonderry is also uncertain; we only know that there he and his sons were found, on a memorable occasion, as will shortly be related..." [Now describing the privations suffered by John and his family during the Siege:] "...their stores exhausted, and supplies withheld, they were forced to feed on loathsome vermin, and to seek sustenance from the very grass; and John Patterson must have realized how little he had gained by flight from his native land, when, in addition to his own sufferings, he found the lifeless body of a son, whose mouth filled with weeds, gave proof of his having undergone the most terrible of deaths....To arrest the hungry clamours of the children, when starvation was at its height, Mrs. Patterson would mix a few peas with a large quantity of ashes.... The father, and another son (we are not informed as to any others), survived this siege and famine. But the vivid impressions of youth were carried down to the grave; in the course of a long life after, Robert Patterson was nervously timid of the least waste of food; and when an old man, would take his

¹ This Patterson family is discussed in "Robert Patterson of Philadelphia, mathematics professor," a paper posted on this website.

grandchild, a namesake, on his knee and instamp upon his boyish memory the dreadful details of the Siege of Derry.”

DuBois continues with the family history, stating that the son of John who survived the Siege was named Robert. This Robert had a son also named Robert, “born as near as we can judge, about 1705.” DuBois describes how this Robert Jr. was required by law to perform the duties of churchwarden in the Episcopal church, though Robert himself was a “Seceder.” DuBois also states that this Robert Jr. (born about 1705) “settled on a leasehold farm near Hillsborough, in county Down...and raised a family of ten children.” Six of these children came to America, and four stayed behind in Ireland. In his old age, about 1774, Robert Jr. (born 1705) came to America to live with one of his sons who had earlier settled in Philadelphia. (This would be his son—another Robert--the mathematics professor.)

Over fifty years after this account by DuBois was published, the very wealthy John Henry Patterson of Dayton, Ohio (founder of the National Cash Register Company) commissioned Charlotte Reeve Conover to write a book about his family history. The result was *Concerning the Forefathers* by Charlotte Reeve Conover (New York: Winthrop Press, 1902).² Given the information presented by Conover on the earliest known generations of the Pattersons discussed in her book, it is difficult to see how these Pattersons could be related to the Patterson family of Philadelphia, as outlined by DuBois. Here are some excerpts from Conover’s *Concerning the Forefathers* (pp. 116-119):

“ John Patterson, the probable ancestor of all the Pennsylvania Pattersons, was born in 1640. Giving up his home in Scotland, he went to Londonderry and took with him his wife and two sons...John Patterson and his family suffered cruelly [during the Siege]...Provisions ran so low that a mere handful of dried peas remained to the whole family. Mrs. Patterson apportioned them: ten peas to each of the children and five apiece to herself and husband. Afterwards they ate grass and putrid meat...One boy, the son of a neighbor, was found dead with his mouth full of grass. John Patterson in his old age used to gather his grandchildren around him and tell them never to forget to be thankful when they sat down to a table with plenty to eat.... John Patterson had a son, Robert, who was a half-grown boy at the time of the siege, and of this Robert we have a story which is characteristic of certain family traits.”

Conover then recounts the story about Robert---son of a John Patterson, not of a Robert Patterson, as in DuBois’ account—being forced into the duties of church warden for the Church of England. Conover then gives these following facts about Robert, son of John who was in Londonderry during the Siege:

“Robert, son of the John Patterson of the siege of Londonderry...had ten children, six of whom early emigrated to America. Of the four who remained, John Patterson (great-grandfather of Robert Patterson, of Lexington and Dayton) [grandfather of John Henry Patterson who commissioned Conover to write the book] returned to Scotland during one of those tides of emigration from shore to

² This Patterson family is discussed in “Robert Patterson of Sweet Arrow Farm,” posted on this website.

shore, and from there joined the artillery and went back to Ireland in defense of Protestantism.”

Conover states that John Patterson was the “emigrant” ancestor of the Dayton Pattersons, and concerning this John she writes:

“He had a considerable tract of grazing land on Donegal Bay, together with milling interests...In 1723 his holdings had been disposed of and preparations to start were all made, when Mary, his wife, died, and this delayed matters some years longer. In the meantime several of John’s children, with their families, had sailed for New England, leaving behind the father with an unmarried daughter, his son Robert and wife Margaret, with their six children. At last this remnant of the family also left the shores of Ireland behind them and landed on the Connecticut coast near New London in the spring of 1728.”

According to Conover, old John died about 1730, at the age of 73. His son, Robert, settled in Pennsylvania, on land known as “Sweet Arrow Farm.”

The third family history alluding to a Patterson ancestor who was in Londonderry during the Siege of 1688/89 is the wonderfully documented *Descendants of William Patterson who settled on South River in Augusta Co., VA about 1740*” by John L. Patterson (Hampton, VA: privately published, 1989).³ This manuscript states the father of the William who settled about 1740 in Augusta Co., VA is not known with certainty, but that “family traditions say that William’s father was named Robert.” (p. 3) One of the many helpful footnotes in this manuscript makes it clear that much of the information about earliest generations came from a previous family history: *Patterson Family Genealogy* by Rev. B. Craig Patterson (1946), found by the author in “the microfilmed *Records of the (Presbyterian) Synod of Virginia* at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA.”

James G. Patterson (1820-1902) was the nephew of Rev. B. Craig Patterson who wrote the earlier history, and John L. Patterson writes of this James: “James G. Patterson said that William I told stories about how his family suffered during the siege of Londonderry.” Nothing further is included in John L. Patterson’s history about these siege of Londonderry stories, so there are no accounts of the mother counting out peas to her children, or of a young boy (son? neighbor’s son?) found dead with a mouthful of grass. Still, it is intriguing to find yet another Patterson family with a tradition of an ancestor being present at the Siege of Londonderry.

Now...back to Scotland under William of Orange: In 1691 Presbyterianism once again became Scotland’s established national church. However, the legislation re-instating Presbyterian (the “Revolution Settlement”) did not specifically acknowledge Christ as the absolute sovereign, and this did not settle well with many of those who had signed the 1649 Solemn League and Covenant. **So a number of Dissenters turned their backs on the**

³ A paper concerning these Pattersons is posted on this website—but not in the “Patterson” section! On the home page, click “Other,” then “Craig.” Pattersons and Craigs settled early on adjoining land in Augusta Co., VA. Correspondence with a Craig researcher revealed a 65/67 DNA match between Janice’s *Patterson* DNA (see the paper on “William Patterson” born about 1784) and the researcher’s *Craig* DNA. Hence Janice’s interest in the Craig family, though the Pattersons living near these Craigs cannot be shown to relate closely, if at all, to Janice’s Pattersons.

Church of Scotland, and became known as “Covenanters” (some of whom were also known as Cameronians—but I’m not going to get into that one now).

After the “Revolution Settlement” in 1690, which reinstated the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland, there was not a single minister in Scotland still pledging to uphold the Solemn League and Covenant. The formerly faithful were all dead, or had capitulated and had joined the national Church, or--during the “killing times”—they had fled from Scotland to Ulster. The Scottish Covenanters had no minister for sixteen years, from 1690 until 1706, when Rev. John McMillan of the Established Church had second thoughts, and became the sole minister for the scattered Dissenter societies. Soon after he was joined by a licentiate of the Established Church, John McNeil. McNeil, however was never ordained, and Rev. McMillan was the sole minister of the Covenanters for upwards of thirty years.

In 1743 Rev. McMillan was joined by the Rev. Thomas Nairn, and together these two men formed the Associate Presbytery—what became known as the “Covenanter” church. Rev. Cuthbertson (1718-1791) studied under McMillan and in 1751 was sent to America to be the first Covenanter minister in the colonies.

Covenanters, it should now be clear, were not Presbyterians any more than Lutherans were Baptists. Covenanters formed themselves into a church body that was *presbyterially organized*, but they were not “Presbyterians.” Covenanters were a denomination separate and apart from the Presbyterian Church.

Many hard-line Covenanters softened their views after being in America for a generation or two, and many eventually joined mainstream Presbyterian churches. They generally chose Presbyterian churches because, on the whole, the organization of the Presbyterian Church was the most familiar to them (synods, elders, etc.). There weren’t that many true Covenanter churches, and so if a Presbyterian church were located in their neighborhood, many formerly Covenanter families became Presbyterians, as a matter of convenience..

Some Covenanters, however, chose to remain true to the beliefs and manner of worship of their 17th-century forefathers. This old style of worship forbade instrumental music of any kind during worship services. Also, the Covenanter liturgy allowed only for the Psalms to be sung, (actually “chant” might be a more appropriate word, as very few musical notes were involved)—just as in the old days. They believed that the divinely-inspired words from the Psalms were the only words suitable for praising and giving thanks to God.

This description of an old Pennsylvania Covenanter, found at www.upmj.co.uk/chap5.htm, never fails to bring a smile to my face:

“Often have I seen a man riding along the ridge above our farm on the Sabbath morning on his way to a little gathering of Old-Side Covenanters, at least twelve miles from his home. Late in the evening he might be seen wending his way homeward, silent, saturnine, solemn, having done his duty as he saw it, and given his testimony. On his way he passed within easy reach of several Presbyterian churches, some of them very closely allied to his own, yet he would have gone to the stake without a moment’s hesitation for the difference between them and him.”

In the 1780's, as a result of agreements and mergers too complicated to go into here, the Rev. Cuthbertson helped form a church body known as the "Associate Reformed" church. Most of the Patterson families listed as "Covenanters" became members of Associate Reformed churches and so—strictly speaking—were no longer "Covenanters."

By the mid 1850's, most Associate Reformed churches had dwindling memberships, and most merged with neighborhood Presbyterian churches, creating the "U.P." or "United Presbyterian" church. Though there are still some Associate Reformed churches in existence today, their numbers are very few.

There are also a few true "Covenanter" churches still in existence in this country. These are known as "Reformed Presbyterian" churches. For reasons too complicated to go into here, Reformed Presbyterians did not support the Associate Reformed church organized by Cuthbertson. One true "Covenanter" church active today is in Belle Center, Ohio. On the website of the Belle Center, Ohio Reformed Presbyterian Church (www.bcrpchurch.org) is a statement of their beliefs, which would be comfortingly familiar to the Patterson Covenanters of colonial Pennsylvania. Their beliefs include: "We believe each nation, each country, must give allegiance to Jesus, Who even now reigns over all things...Two basic covenants we're still bound by are the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant." And are musical instruments allowed in the church? No! "We sing only the Psalms of the Bible without any musical instruments...We believe the Bible teaches that worship is to center on God and His glory, not man's uplifted feelings...We have no command to make hymns, so we don't."

A final note about Covenanters: Their distrust of government (born in the religious persecutions of the 17th and 18th century, as described above) did NOT prevent them from being among the most ardent of patriots during the Revolutionary War. To a man, Covenanters were faithful to the patriot cause. This is understandable; they were more than happy to unite against a king (George III) who had proclaimed himself as both the civil head and the ecclesiastical head of England, and whose Church had retained so many "Popish" ways. Covenanters, remember, believed that no king could be the "head" of the church--but only God.

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