Story of Barbara Decker

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by Reuben B. Herndon

In the Court House for Hampshire County there is a record of a curious and unusual document. The Clerk of the Court told me last fall that during the preceding summer quite

a number of people, strangers to him, came and asked to see this record. It is the record of what is probably the first divorce in the present state of West Virginia.

There is quite a story back of it and I will relate it to you as Dr. G. B. Kuykendall condensed the story from the story back of the “record”, which, he says he accidentally

came across in one of the other record books while turning the leaves over in an idle way. It is unfortunate that Dr. Kuykendall did not copy the story in full, as he found it in 1918, stuck in there probably many years before. One thing I have found out—it was there in 1908, but what

happened to it now is unknown. But here is the story as condensed by Dr. Kuykendall, of Washington State:

In the year 1759 a young man by the name of Jacob Kuykendall came from beyond the "ridge". He was a big, blue-eyed and blond man of some means and education. Some of his kinsmen were in the valley and that is probably why he migrated from New Jersey to the South Branch Valley. He built his home near one of the forts of that region for protection in case of an uprising of the Indians, who for some time had not been giving much trouble.

He had been married to Barbara Decker, who appears to have been baptized October 31, 1743 at Walpeck, New Jersey and was, therefore, probably between sixteen and seventeen years of age when she married. They settled down and began housekeeping. Shortly afterwards the powerful Chief Pontiac of the Michigan and Illinois Indians became the architect of the Pontiac Conspiracy, in which he plotted to band all the Indians together and drive the whites out. One band of the plotters sent out by Pontiac went down the Ohio, crossed that river and went on into Virginia on the Monongahela River. Living there peaceably were remnants of the Delaware and Catawba tribes. The purpose of the mission was to induce them to join the Ottawas in their conspiracy as allies.

The mission accomplished, on their way back they met in Harrison County, now West Virginia, a party of four young traders of the South Branch Valley, among whom was Jacob Kuykendall. They were returning from a trip over into Ohio on the Big Sandusky river, where they had gone to purchase a lot of furs which they intended to take down the Potomac to sell at Alex­andria, Virginia. They had also been looking over lands in Ohio with a view of finding places upon which they could locate persons seeking a home hoping in this way to add

to the profit of the expedition. They had no idea of danger from the Indians, as everything was quiet when they left home; they had been trading with them and, like many others, had no idea of the Pontiac Conspiracy uprising which broke suddenly everywhere.

They camped at the present site of Clarksburg, West Virginia, the same day the emissaries of Pontiac, on their way back, arrived in that vicinity. The young traders had their supper and were sitting about their campfire talking, entirely unsuspicious of trouble, when all at once the warriors from Pontiac made a sudden attack, in which two of the campers were killed at the first onslaught, and the other two were captured and taken away into the northwest regions of Canada. One of the captured was Jacob Kuykendall and having very light hair and blue eyes, the Indiana regarded him with much curiosity—later exhibiting him to other tribes of the north as a curiosity. They treated him fairly well, except, being big and strong, they made a sort of a packhorse out of him in their travels. They hurried on with their two captives and their rich booty of furs, and finally reached the shores of Lake Erie about where the town of Sandusky is now located; then traveling on until they fell in with the main force of Pontiac.

During the years that young Kuykendall was a prisoner of the Indians he had only one idea in mind, to escape and get back to his wife; however, he was watched very closely to prevent his escape. In their travels he was still exhibited as a curiosity to other Indians. Years later, there came a time when these Indians with whom he lived went back down into the Ohio region, and there he resolved to escape, if possible. At an opportune time, he took one of the canoes and stole out in the night and, traveling through the darkness, paddled downstream, hiding during the day. He finally came to the Ohio river, and at the proper point abandoned the canoe and made his way across country to his old home on the South Branch, where he expected to meet his wife whom he had left years before.

Arriving home, he was horrified to learn the real situa­tion. His young bride had waited long in hopes of tidings from him that never came, and she and his friends had given him up for dead. All supposed he had been killed and the affair had faded out of the minds of the public.

In his absence the young widow had been wooed and wed to another man, and now on his return home, he found her the mother of three children who called another man father. This all came as a dreadful blow to Kuykendall. His feelings were indescribable. At first, he thought he would bring suit against her for bigamy and the recovery of his land and property. It appeared to him that everyone had forgotten and betrayed him. We can only imagine what Barbara’s feelings were. Being a reasonable fellow he thought the matter over more calmly and realized that he could not blame her for what she had done, and that to break up the family could bring happiness to no one, but only grief and misery. It was hard to give up the girl he loved—once was his wife and now a mother with a family. His feelings were a whirlwind of anger, love, pity, jealousy and anguish, but he resolved to quit forever his home and friends and go back to the Indians and the wilds where he had lived in captivity.

His decision being made, after a bitter farewell he went to an attorney and had drawn up a relinquishment and divorce from his wife and gave it to her and it was placed upon the records of Hampshire County and there it is today in Deed Book number 3, page 161, as it was written 181 years ago. The following is a copy:

*To whom These Presents May Come or Concern:*

*Whereas my wife Barbara, formerly Barbara Decker, hath sometime left me, and hath intermarried with James Colvin, I do hereby certify that I do freely acquit and discharge the said James and Barbara from all trouble or damage by means of their intermarriage and do consent that they may dwell and cohabit together as husband and wife, for the future, without any interruption from me.*

*Given under my hand and seal, this 19th day of February 1773.*

*s/g Jacob Kuykendall*

*TEST: Sam Dew - James Sullivan*

*At a court held for Hampshire County, August 10th, 1773, this instrument of writing from Jacob Kuykendall to James Colvin and Barbara his wife was proved by the oath of James Sullivan, one of the witnesses thereto, and ordered to be recorded.*

*s/g Gabriel Jones, Clerk Court.*

This is probably the first record of a divorce in West Virginia.

But this is not all of the story—Jacob tramped back through the wilderness and rejoined his once Indian captors, who were so delighted with his voluntary return that they made a great feast and gave a dance in honor of his return and made him a chief of one of the tribes.

This blond, blue-eyed Virginian married Pontiac’s daughter and became chief of one of the principal Pontiac tribes. He was given the name Wah-Ke-Gan, which translated into English is "The Chief of the Faithful" - and don’t forget there is a good-sized town named Wakegan.

As a survivor of this family, we find the great Simon Pokagon, one of the most intellectual Indians ever born on the North American Continent.

He spent a large part of his life in fruitless endeavors to secure pay from the government for the land on which the city of Chicago stands. His pleadings were powerful and eloquent.

Jackson Blackbird, another descendant, was a student of the old Twinsburg College and I think graduated there. They were all very brainy men. He had as a fellow student a son of the Indian Chief Kilbuck. This latter one graduated from the Princeton Theological Seminary and became a Presbyterian minister.

Jacob Kuykendall, in his old age, is said to have returned to his old home to spend his last days. There is no positive proof whether this was his South Branch Valley home or his old home at Walpeck, New Jersey, where he was born and baptized.

Jane Colvin, one of the issue of Barbara and James Colvin I am told, married Isaac Kuykendall, son of Nathaniel, the first. She died in 1853 and Isaac in 1845. One of their sons Nathaniel, the second, and of the fourth generation was the superintendent of the Eastern Division of the North­western Turnpike and had much to do with the construction of that great highway. He built the first bridge over the South Branch of the Potomac and was one of the most prominent men of the early stage-coach days.

There is another story - it is said that Jacob Kuykendall was very close-mouthed. The Indian descendants of the big, blue-eyed, blond white Virginian, chief of the Ottawas, never knew his English name, and few if any of his kinsmen knew all of his Indian history. I have made no exterior tests to authenticate the story related—but I wonder why so many strangers have journeyed to Romney to look over the record in Deed Book number three? Maybe this story will help them.

Mention of the same story can be found in Frontier Forts Along the Potomac and Its Tributaries by William H. Ansel, 1984, available at Fort Pearsall Press, <http://www.fortpearsallpress.com> or local book and gift shops in the area.

