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Mystery of Nathaniel Pryor

by Thomas S. Fiske

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Mysteries abound among the families of this relatively new Nation. They are partly due to the unstructured way the Nation developed, the restlessness of its people and the War Between the States. It is difficult for genealogists of the 1990's to try to find records in old courthouses scattered across the continent, and impossible to find records where courthouses were destroyed in acts of war or when the old wooden buildings burned due to carelessness.

Thus it is that many people with familiar names cannot be traced back to their forefathers. Nathaniel Pryor is one of these<sup>1</sup>. Born about 1772<sup>2</sup>, probably in Amherst County, Virginia<sup>3</sup>, he was a sergeant on the Lewis and Clark expedition who helped in many ways to make the trip successful. He was a scout who later became an Indian trader<sup>4</sup>. He married an Osage Indian woman and had several children<sup>5</sup>. His fame was such that Pryor, Oklahoma was named for him<sup>6</sup>, as well as the Pryor River of Oklahoma and Pryor Mountains of Montana.<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel's first cousin, Sergeant Charles Floyd, also went on the Expedition but unfortunately, died on the trip.

Anyone can find from existing records that John Pryor of Amherst County, Virginia was Nathaniel Pryor's father and Nancy Floyd was his mother<sup>8</sup>. But determining the father of John Pryor is another matter entirely.

Part of the solution might flow from three clues: One is that Nathaniel's middle name is Hale, according to researcher Elizabeth Pryor Harper.<sup>9</sup> The second clue is the cluster of names among certain Pryors: John, William and Susannah<sup>10</sup>. The third clue is the centrality of Amherst County, Virginia, to the major players in this mystery.

### The Hale Connection

It is fairly common for parents to give their children middle names that reflect the names of members of their families who would otherwise be forgotten. Nathaniel Pryor had an unusual first name for the Pryor family. It is the name of his mother's brother, Nathaniel Floyd. But what about Hale? There were Hales in the Kanawha Valley of what is now West Virginia<sup>11</sup>. They lived near two Pryors who owned land there: William and John Pryor. William was described in one text as William, I<sup>12</sup>. Thus, he was a senior and reference was later made to William, brother of daughter Susannah<sup>13</sup>. Therefore one can reasonably assume William had at least one son. It is known that he also had a daughter.

Not much is known about the Hale family living in Kanawha. They had to have been risk takers, for the Indians were very hostile and killed settlers on sight. James Hale was killed in October of 1791 during an Indian attack. A creek nearby is still called Hale's branch<sup>14</sup>. But the fact that they lived there is important. It is possible a daughter of the Hales married one of the Pryor family- John.

### Cluster of Names

Philip Pryor, fourth son of Robert Pryor, was born about 1694 to Robert Pryor and Betty Green. Robert and Betty were both of England and were in Virginia by 1689, when documents began to be recorded about them.<sup>15</sup>

Philip was the son among whose children were these names: William, John, and Susannah. It is this combination of names that tends to support the idea that a William, whose brother was named John, and whose daughter was named Susannah, was probably a son of Philip. Such a combination does not prove a relationship, but it does tend to support the idea. Add this information to the fact that there is no other parentage offered for these people, and one can then comfortably look in the direction of their lives for more evidence.

William made mention of an elder brother, John Pryor<sup>16</sup>. There was a John Pryor who also owned property in the Kanawha Valley.<sup>17</sup> William's daughter, Susannah, married one of the settlers, Shadrack Harriman<sup>18</sup>. When he was killed by Indians, she married another settler in the Kanawha Valley. So she lived in the Valley where her father William Pryor lived.<sup>19</sup> William transferred title of land to his daughter Susannah and her husband, and possibly to another son, Nicholas of Amherst County, Virginia. He deeded to them exactly equal amounts of land down to the half acre.<sup>20</sup>

When not in Kanawha Valley<sup>21</sup>, William seems to have returned to Amherst Co., VA. This is near the place where Philip married Ann Hayden, the mother of William and John and Susannah.

It appears that John had a wife and family in 1780, when he was said to have been killed and his family were taken captive by Indians (not killed).<sup>22</sup> It is possible he was born about 1729<sup>23</sup>. In the course on natural events he would have been married by, say, 1750, and started a family soon after. In other words, it is entirely possible for John Pryor to have been the father of John (Jr.), the father of Nathaniel. Admittedly, this is not direct evidence. But it helps to know there is no proof that Nathaniel's father had other parentage, either. As it stands, John, Nathaniel's father, just appeared in various writings as the father of several Pryor children, Nathaniel being one of them.

If John, the father of Nathaniel, were to have lived with Indians he might have instilled in his son Nathaniel an admiration for these people. It appears from Nathaniel's later life, he left the society of white men and lived with Indians.<sup>24</sup> Why is Nathaniel not the son of William, the younger Pryor brother? He could have been. William was in the Valley. William's wife is unknown. But no evidence points to such an event, and John is not mentioned as William and Susannah were<sup>25</sup>, in the Kanawha Valley, associated with the immediate family.

Why is not John Pryor, the father of Nathaniel, the John Pryor who is the son of Philip Pryor? Why search for an intermediate John to fill the role as father? He would have been around 42 at the time of the birth of Nathaniel, so it was possible. However, it appears that the father of Nathaniel was alive long after 1780 when the elder John was reported killed. Harper shows that John, the father of Nathaniel, died after 1800, possibly in Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky.<sup>26</sup> This is the city where Nathaniel married Miss Margaret Patton.

### Summary

Evidence is very slim that John Pryor, father of Nathaniel, is the son of John Pryor, son of Philip. But evidence for other ancestry is even slimmer. Here is a summary of what has been suggested:

- 1) No other parentage for these men is found.
- 2) There is a similarity in first names between Philip's children and those Pryors who lived in the Kanawha Valley.
- 3) William and John Pryor appear to have been sons of Philip Pryor and appear to have been living in the Kanawha Valley.
- 4) Hales lived near William and John Pryor in the Kanawha Valley. Nathaniel Pryor's middle name appears to have been Hale, suggesting a marriage between the Hales and the father of John Pryor, Nathaniel's father.
- 5) John Pryor's family is unknown, leaving room for one of the them to have been named John, in the style of the day.

6) John, Sr., William Sr., John, Jr. and Nathaniel all appear to have been born in the same county.

Where does one look to find the ancestry of Nathaniel Pryor? The information above suggests that one should look in Amherst County, Virginia, and In the Kanawha Valley of what is now West Virginia, among the several men named John Pryor. One need look only a very few generations back. It cannot be a long search. Among the persons named John Pryor one might look at possible descendants of Philip Pryor.

Just as with the scientific method, it is useful to set up a thesis and then disprove it. Then one can go to the next thesis. If one cannot disprove a certain thesis one can rest with it comfortably until another one comes along that is more difficult to disprove.

Finally, if no other purpose is served by this analysis, it may lead to removal of these Pryors from consideration and allow a more accurate conclusion.

One possibility is worth five scholarly, "I don't know."

#### End Notes

1 First suggested to the author by Arthur Rainville, whose mother was a Pryor. Art is a careful researcher who disagrees with the author, but who supplied much of the Pryor Kanawha Valley information.

2 George H. Yater, "Nine Young Men from Kentucky," *We Proceed On Publications* #11, p. 6

3 Raymond W. Settle, "Nathaniel Pryor," in *Mountain Men*, p. 277

4 *Ibid*, p. 277

5 Yater, p. 7

6 Ibid, p.277

7 Yater, p. 7

8 Elizabeth Pryor Harper, Pryor, p. 151

9 Ibid, p. 141.

10 J. Gatewood Pryor, A Pryor Family Narrative, p.18

11 Ruth Ward Dayton, Pioneers and Their Homes on Upper Kanawha, 76.

12 Ibid, p. 76

13 Julius A. de Gruyter, The Kanawha Spectator as reported by researcher Jim Wood of Beckley, W.Va., in a 25 February, 1987 in a letter to Arthur Rainville

14 Dayton, p. 76

15 J. Gatewood Pryor, p. 7

16 William Pryor, "Pension Application of William Pryor of Amherst County, Virginia" as found in Harper, P. 157

17 Dayton, P. 213

18 Dayton, p. 75

19 Harper, p. 155. She cited a military pension declaration: "William Pryor of Amherst moved to Great Kanawha in 1775?. Was at Pt. Pleasant later in various commands."

20 Kanawha County Deed Books A, p. 60, A. p. 83, C, p. 253 and C, p. 254.

21 Author Unknown, Amherst County, Virginia, in the Revolution, p. 160

22 Harper, p. 151

23 Harper, p. 158, says that Philip Pryor and Ann Haden were married "c. 1732." Other sources differ. The LDS, in its official IGI file, p. 12037 (as of 1988), , says William was born in 1727. Since John was his elder, he would have to have been born before that date. There are errors both in Harper's work and in the IGI. J. Gatewood Pryor did not offer a year for the marriage.

24 Yater, p. 7

25 Dayton, p. 76

26 Harper, p. 164

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