

*“...spend a little time communing with your ancestors. They want to be remembered.
You are their ticket to immortality.”*

Christine Rose and Kay Germain Ingalls,
The Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy

Conclusion

Last Revised: January 3, 2013

Our two main family streams, Habicht and Neal, include in their respective ancestries a healthy mix of national groups. My mother's side is close to being half German and half Dutch, which is not news given what we already knew about her family. The real surprise that has come out of the research for this family history narrative is the fact that my father's side has so many different elements in it. Yes, there are some Scotch-Irish and English and Irish and Welsh threads in my father's heritage, as everyone had assumed all along, but there are not so many of these British Isles people as was previously thought. The Dutch component on my father's side is very substantial, indeed, as I suppose the name Vanderpool should have told us. In this context, we should also take note of the key role that the Netherlands – particularly the city of Amsterdam – played as a kind of fulcrum in launching many of the families (and not just the native Dutch ones) on my father's side into the New World. There are, in addition, considerably more Germans and Swiss among the Neal antecedents than any of us realized. The biggest revelation, though, has been the discovery of small portions of French, Belgian,

and Norwegian (perhaps even some Spanish) blood in my father's veins. Our overall ancestry thus is typically "American" in having a rich mixture of national groups, though by today's standards this mixture is actually rather modest: all these groups that are found in our heritage are Northern European except for the Spanish, if that ancestry is in fact present.

Although most of the people in our past whose occupations are known made their living as farmers, there have been some noteworthy exceptions. One of these exceptions is the rich vein of ministers of the gospel that runs through the Neal family over the generations: from William Stark to my own grandfather, religious activism has been a calling.¹ In addition, quite a few of the men seen here were millers of many types. (In this connection it is also interesting that several of the New York Vanderpools were associated with various aspects of woodworking: they sawed the wood, they manufactured gun stocks from wood, and they made cabinets.) Some of the early Dutch residents of New York City and Albany evidently made their living by trading. Otherwise, we find scattered among our ancestors two weavers, a teamster (at least on one census), a physician, a professional soldier, a wheelwright, and perhaps a miner.² Among the Habicht family members we know about, there was a laborer and a train

¹ In fact, most of the ministers described in this history practiced their calling at a time before ministers were paid regular salaries. One suspects that they were also farmers unless they had specific trades we are unaware of.

² See Appendix III for this topic.

conductor. But for the most part, the great majority of our ancestors, on both sides, made their living from the soil.

I also have found it remarkable that so many of the ancestors we have met in this family history were religious nonconformists and dissenters who sometimes suffered outright persecution as a consequence of their beliefs and actions. They were Mennonites and Amish in suspicious Switzerland, Huguenots in hostile France, Lutherans in Dutch Reformed New Netherland, Baptists in Puritan New England, and (possibly) Quakers in Anglican Virginia. These people were constantly at odds with the prevailing religious way of thinking. Freedom of conscience and religious practice was imperative to them – so important, in fact, that they sometimes had to flee for their own safety. There is truth to the American notion that many of our ancestors came to these shores in order to worship and think as they pleased, although of course economic security and advancement were also important factors. In a similar way freethinkers and dissenters were drawn to the ever-advancing American frontier, where they believed they could do and think as they wished without interference.

It is humbling to realize that we owe our existence in this land to those who pulled up stakes and left where they were, comfortable or otherwise, in order to seek sanctuary across the seas or the mountains. We take freedom of conscience and religion for granted

today, but we owe that privilege at least in part to the courage and conviction of our own ancestors who voted for that freedom with their very lives.

Let us also tip our hat, in addition, to all among our ancestors who were among the first peoples to move beyond the Appalachian Mountains into western Pennsylvania, the Ohio River Valley, Kentucky, and then Indiana. Making these moves took imagination, sacrifice, courage, and faith. Many of these literal leaps of faith took place from about the time of the French and Indian War until the end of the 18th century. This period was a critical turning point in our country's history. The Indians were being driven further and further back, often with great bloodshed. (More "civilians" were killed on the American frontier than soldiers during military engagements between 1763 and 1781.) Even after the native Indians were driven westward there continued to be the occasional raid on isolated homesteads. The evolution of the West into new and equal states in the Union and not as a separate territory, as a part of Canada, or as a new western empire possibly affiliated with France or Spain – the very destiny of this vast and important region hung in the balance: there was no certainty that the United States would become a single political entity coast to coast. Many of our ancestors were participants in this period's events, or at least observers of them.

Those who were migrating – whether across the ocean or westward into the wilderness – faced not only a long and difficult (sometimes dangerous) journey but some arduous

challenges once they had arrived. These included never-ending and exhausting toil, uncertain title to their land, a rudimentary government that could not always guarantee basic protection against peril, unimagined and deadly threats to their health, and immense distances from everything familiar – relatives they might never see again, sources of essential goods, and places to market their crops. Some scholars believe that it was this key period at the close of the 18th century that saw the emergence of the first real American: the self-reliant and independent-thinking individual who developed the traits we now consider peculiarly *American*. And many of our ancestors were among those who faced these conditions.

On the other hand, the process of leaving behind a settled community and establishing a new one helped to produce many of the very values that we so admire today: self-sufficiency, independence, and individualism. These people survived through their own skills and actions. As one scholar has pointed out, those who were satisfied with their lives, or had the prospect of being satisfied where they were, were left behind by those who viewed a new start in a new land – what we call the frontier – as the way to achieve their goals of material success along with freedom. In a sense, the frontier attracted and cultivated exactly the kinds of aptitude – and persons – it required of those who could survive there.

We can take pride, then, that so many of our ancestors were among the intrepid people who did leave the old behind and who tested themselves against the strenuous and unrelenting challenge of creating a new life in a wilderness. Surely one byproduct for them was a powerful sense of individualism and self-actualization (to use a modern phrase) that affected many aspects of their lives, from their religion to their attitudes about authority. Did this sense of individualism and self-actualization become ingrained, get passed along to later generations, become second nature? Who can say that a predisposition for a similar viewpoint has not come down through the generations to us?

I have also been struck by the fact that on my father's side every single one of his "upstream" families had arrived in America no later than the American Revolution began in 1775 – often well before then, in fact. On my mother's side, both of her parents' families arrived virtually at the same time during the 1880s – well before the massive "new immigration" that would follow over the next four decades. Thus two quite disparate types of American families created their own new family in 1927: one was deeply rooted in this land and the other represented those who were also attracted to America but after the United States had reached maturity.

Another striking thing about my father's families is that, as if attracted by some mysterious force that made them restless in other areas, they seemed drawn inexorably to Indiana – almost all of them by way of Kentucky, almost all of them within a decade or

two of one another – but then never moved on from that state, at least into the 20th century when mobility became common everywhere. (The only small exception to this generalization, the Rickabaughs, evidently arrived in Indiana from Ohio – and remained in Indiana for perhaps two decades before heading off to Iowa and beyond.) There is no telling how many short, rapid physical relocations these people had made before reaching Indiana, and in some cases continued to make even after they had arrived in the Hoosier State. But with some minor deviations (Starks and Chastains seem to have strayed into Illinois for a year or two, and Samuel Green Vanderpool made a half-hearted attempt to move to Kansas) they stopped migrating and stayed where they were once they had reached Indiana, one of the most homogeneous and “middle American” of all the states.

(As an indication that Indiana was about as American as one could get, consider the fact that it was for decades – from 1890 through at least 1940 – the geographic center of population of the United States. In 1930 that point was just over two miles from Linton, where my grandfather and father had lived earlier in the 20th century. In 1940, when I was born, the geographic center of population had moved to a point in Sullivan County close to where so many of our ancestors are buried in the Neal-Paxton Cemetery. In a sense, then, our Neal and Neal-related families in Indiana were “middle American” not only in geography and values but statistically as well.)

Although Indiana was their common destination, my father's ancestors had come from or lived in a number of different states or future states before they reached – and planted themselves so deeply – in Indiana. Of the ones we know about, we can cite Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia (including the portion that became West Virginia), North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio as places they lived or are thought to have lived. Others would later leave Indiana for Michigan, Illinois, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Maine, and possibly Washington. (My sister and I, together with our own children, have now added to the list of states our family has resided in California, Texas, Utah, Florida, and Oregon.) The total of states we all have inhabited is more than half of the present number in the Union. Of our ancestors, only Aaron Stark and Daniel Blevins can clearly be regarded as originally New Englanders; the progenitors of all the other families, so far as we know, came from or through the Mid-Atlantic states or those of the Upper South. In fact, nearly all of our ancestors passed at some time through Virginia (as more than half of all those who ever migrated west during those years did).

The study of my own connections with our past generations has given me a healthy sense of continuity and tradition. I think ahead to future generations who, I also hope, will feel similarly connected with us, the bridge between our ancestors and our descendants. At

least we will be able to turn over to them some sense of where they, too, came from and how they link up with all these past generations. This makes my efforts worthwhile.

Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed my sentiments well when he said (I paraphrase) that each of us is a bus in which all of our ancestors are riding. I have built and modified and operated this family history bus, stopping every now and then to pick up – sometimes to discharge – passengers and regularly hauling the vehicle into the shop for inspections, repairs and repainting. As I have done so, I have become pleasantly acquainted (albeit at long distance) with many members of these past generations. Many of them, without doubt, would have been fascinating persons to have known. (And think of the questions we would have for them!) The process of figuring out how they all fit together and trying to unravel the puzzles has been fun. I hope you have enjoyed it too, and I hope our family bus never stops running.

“A few hundred years from now, no one will know that most of us were here. At the most, our names may appear on a line in a genealogical chart one of our weird descendants will be obsessed with keeping.”

Julius Lester, “Re-imagining the Possibilities,”
The Horn Book Magazine, May/June, 2000

Copyright © 2014

Donn C. Neal

Last Revised: October 21, 2014