

A Letter to Grand Mother Hannah Hyatt (1759-1837)

September 1, 2007

Dear Grand Mother Hannah,

I'm your grandson, Robert Perry Hyatt. I have come down from your son Elisha and your grandson Robert Abel Lafayette through Samuel Leonidas, John Lafayette and my father Samuel Perry Hyatt. Although it's been about 170 years since you passed away, I do feel like I know you a little but not as much as I would like.

The reason I am writing is to let you know that some of us who are your descendants are placing a beautiful granite stone at the head of your grave in the cemetery on top of the hill at Maple Grove Church where you were buried by your son, Abel, back in 1837. We're placing this stone to honor your memory passed down to us through these several generations. This letter is to you from all of us to let you know we haven't forgotten you.

At the same time as Great Uncle Shadrick, your first child, was born in 1776, a whole new nation was coming to life. And you and Great Grandfather Edward were part of that! Those must have been exciting times back there with General Washington, John Adams and Tom Jefferson declaring independence and prying us loose from old King George. I figure you were about 21 years old then and Edward must have been 36. While Edward was away fighting the Redcoats, I imagine you were taking care of baby Shadrick at your farm south of the Catawba River just past Morganton. We're grateful for the wonderful start you gave us during those Revolutionary times.

Just a few days ago I learned that your Leatherwood ancestors came to America from England in the 1600s as did Edward's family. Both families came to Maryland. Eventually you and Edward and your brother Ned and his wife Elizabeth made your way into North Carolina near the Catawba River. I understand that in 1780 you and Edward moved from your farm at Morganton to Burke (now Haywood) county near Waynesville. Many times I have wondered why you and Edward decided to pull up roots down by the Catawba and move way up here to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Was it what you learned about this land from some of the soldiers who lived near you

when they returned from General Rutherford's war against the Cherokees in 1776? After they crossed the Pigeon River, following an old Indian path on their way to Balsam Mountain, Rutherford and his army came very close to where we are now. Back then that was over 150 miles from where you lived. I guess you traveled by wagon. That was a rough trip. In some places it was steep and treacherous, especially climbing up the Blue Ridge toward Swannanoa gap. With little Shadrick on your lap you and Edward didn't stop until you crossed over the Pigeon River into Indian Territory. I've been told that you were the first permanent white settlers to live west of the Pigeon.

In November 1781, your son Elisha was born. What a year that must have been: Settling beyond the law in Indian Territory, building a new house, clearing land, birthing Elisha, taking care of five year old Shadrick, cooking, washing, and planting a garden. Truly, you were a pioneer on the frontier of our new Nation. That took a lot of courage. I imagine this was the first time in your life that you had lived far away from the Leatherwoods. I wonder if you were ever scared or lonely.

A year later, in 1782, Alcy was born. A year after that, in October 1783, Nathan was born. Three children in three years! Great Grandfather Edward wasn't spending all his time clearing land! And you were doing the work of a mountain farmer's wife! Whew!! I hope you had some help! In Edward's will he mentions having several slaves including a "negro woman" who had a daughter named Celi. I've wondered whether Edward owned slaves when you were first married. Did his female slaves help take care of your children?

In 1792 your second daughter, Great Aunt Airy (zona) was born. You called her Airy. Wherever did you get that name, Arizona? Your last child, Great Uncle Abel, was born in 1795, when Shadrick was nineteen and you were 40. Sometime during those years your brother, Ned, and his wife Elizabeth, moved from the Catawba to live near you and Edward. I know you must have been excited and pleased to have them close by once again.

Speaking of your sister-in-law, Elizabeth, I know that her mother was a full blooded Cherokee. I have often wondered what you thought of the Indians, especially since Elizabeth was half Cherokee. There are stories about how you and Edward treated the Cherokees well, that you were not afraid, but welcomed them, when they came to your house. The land you settled was

officially recognized by the Federal government as Cherokee tribal land. You must have been in constant contact with the Indians. There were hostilities between settlers and the Cherokees at least until 1792 when a treaty was signed. Yet, even though you had lived on Indian land for 12 years before that, I have never heard of any harm coming to you and Edward or your children.

The next 20 years seem to have been happy and prosperous: In 1798 the Cherokee lands on which you and others had settled were officially ceded to the State of North Carolina. You were once again living under State and Federal law. I've been told that during that time you and Edward built a "meeting house" down from this cemetery where the Maple Grove Methodist Church now stands. Where once there was wilderness, you built a community! During that time you and Edward expanded your land holdings by many acres. Did Edward receive a land grant for his service in the Continental Army? That could have been 640 acres. On October 5, 1803 the first of your 52 grandchildren was born to Shadrick and his wife Rhoda Wikle, a boy named for his uncle, Nathan. Near this time, Tom Jefferson, who was now President of our new Nation, acquired all of the Louisiana Territory from the Mississippi to the Rockies for just 15 million dollars. What a bargain he made with old Talleyrand and the French. I bet Edward was pleased when he heard about that deal! Now America could really expand. By then so many people had moved west of the Pigeon River that in 1808 a new county was formed. They called it Haywood.

Sometime before 1817 your son, Nathan, his wife Ruth Sherrill and their son Ute, who was born in 1814, moved west across Balsam Mountain and settled near Quallatown, on Cherokee land. Nathan sounds a lot like his father, Edward: always eager to move west to new land and new prospects. Were you anxious about them moving? Edward must have been worried because in his will he said that "... if Nathan be put off the Indian land where he is now settled... he is to have a reasonable lease on that part of my tract of land... above the old storehouse until he can settle himself elsewhere." Only a few days after he wrote his Last Will and Testament in early February of 1817, Edward went across the mountain to visit Nathan. The weather was icy cold and wet. Edward became ill. Very quickly his condition grew worse. On February 16, 1817 he died at Nathan's home. The weather was so terrible that his body couldn't be carried back across the mountain. He was buried in what is now the Hyatt cemetery at Quallatown. It makes me sad to know that after he left home

that fateful day in February you never saw him again. You must have been stunned to hear of his death. As a soldier and pioneer he had lived a full, sometimes risky and dangerous life. Except for the war years you had hardly ever been apart. Yet, you were not even allowed to say goodbye to him.

In his will Edward was careful to see that you had what you needed to live comfortably. He assigned your youngest son, 22 year old Abel, not yet married, the task of taking care of you the rest of your life. In turn Edward would inherit yours and Edward's house and farm. And Edward made it clear that his "negro woman" and any children the woman might have in the future would attend to your needs as long as you lived.

In 1821 Abel married Eliza Dobson. Now you had a daughter-in-law to share your household. Very soon your home rang out again with the sound of children: In June 1822, Nancie Tabitha was born, then, in 1825 your namesake, Hannah. And then the twins, Harriet and John born March, 26, 1829. How excited you were! There had never been twins in the family. But, there were more children to come. Joseph was born in 1831, Abel Washington in 1834, and Nathan Fernand in 1836. You were one busy grandmother during those 14 years! And you watched as hundreds more settlers moved into Haywood and beyond. "Old Hickory", Andy Jackson, from the new state of Tennessee, became President and began to move the Cherokees to Oklahoma. What stories Nathan must have told you about those difficult times and how Will Thomas bought up land for several hundred Cherokees so they could stay at Qualla.

I know you wonder whatever happened to your children after you died in 1837: Well, Shadrick moved further into the mountains settling in a beautiful valley called Cades Cove where he lived for several years and then moved back along the Tuckaseegee River in the new county of Jackson. Nathan continued to live at Quall. Alcy and Elisha stayed here in Haywood. Airy went west past Jackson to Macon county. And, can you believe it, Abel your youngest, went the furthest. He sold the farm to the Turpins, went to Macon county for a while and then in 1844 made his way across the Mississippi taking Joseph, Abel Washington and Nathan Fernand with him to the new state of Missouri. Tragically his second wife and a baby died in childbirth on the way. On the 13th of July, 1879, at age 84, Abel died in Newton County, Missouri. You and Edward would have been amazed and proud of him.

Great Grandmother, I must close. Before I do I have a little poem for you written by a woman named Emily Dickinson. She was just seven years old when you died, almost the same age as your grandchildren, Harriet and Joseph. I hope you like it. It expresses some of the great respect and affection we feel for you as we look back and remember your life and times:

A Coffin-is a small Domain,
Yet able to contain
A Citizen of Paradise
In its diminished Plane-

A Grave-is a restricted Breadth-
Yet ampler than the Sun-
And all the Seas He populates-
And land he looks upon.

To Him who on it's small Repose
Bestows a single Friend-
Circumference without Relief-
Or Estimate-or End-

And so, Hannah, Great Mother Hyatt, upon your tiny sepulchral ship we bestow a granite flag to herald your odyssey throughout the Hyatt generations.

With respect,

Robert P. Hyatt and Your Great Grandsons and Granddaughters