

Weakley County's connection to the ill fated Donner Party of 1846-47

The MURPHY family of Weakley County - part of Donner Party
by MaryCarol – summarzied by Natalie Baxter 9/08

History

In 1846 thirteen Murphy family members leave from Weakley County, Tennessee in two wagons, headed to California. The Murphy family included matriarch and widow, Levinah W. JACKSON MURPHY , age 36, her 7 children, 3 grandchildren and 2 sons-in-law.

The Murphy Family joined the ill-fated Donner Party of 1846/47. They were caught in the record high snows of 22 ft at today's Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California for 5 months. 6 of the 13 Murphy family members perished, 7 of the 13 Murphy family members survived.

A Wagon Train of 87 men women and children were trapped in the harsh winter snows of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1846-47. 41 perished, 46 survived. 2/3 of the men perished, 2/3 of the women and children survived. The Donner Party is known for some of the people surviving by getting nourishment from those that had perished. There were heroes and heroines within the party despite their tragic circumstances.

In November of 1846, only 3 miles from the summit of what is now Donner's Pass, the emigrants lost the trail in 5 feet of snow. They turned back but when they retuned the next day the pass was blocked by 10 foot drifts. They kept trying to get over the pass but each time had to turn back. Snows were the heaviest in the High Sierra's that year than any before or since, reaching a record depth of 22 feet. The shacks and lean-tos of the emigrants were buried in snow for over 5 months. Desperate to get help, 15 of the strongest people were selected (10 males and 5 females), calling themselves the "Forlorn Hope" Group. The group left on Dec 16, 1846, swearing to get across the mountains or die trying. Somehow, 7 (2 men - 5 women) of them survived the 33 days of travel which brought them to Johnson's Ranch 35 miles east of Sutter's Fort on Jan 17, 1847. 5 members of the Murphy family were part of the Forlorn Hope group. William had to return to camp within a couple of days because he had no snowshoes but 3 of the remaining 4 members of the Murphy family survived.

The 1st rescue party from Sutter's Fort reached the snow bound emigrants in February, bringing out 27 of Donner's Party including 17 children. Three other rescue parties followed. The last man was brought out on April 21, 1847 with rescuers reporting snow 6 to 8 feet deep. The trail these emigrants were taking as they headed from Nevada into California is todays Hwy 80, a little north of Lake Tahoe. They traveled from todays Reno, NV, along the Truckee River, by todays Donner Lake, over Donner Pass, and into the Scaramento Valley of Capt. John Sutter's Fort. This was in fall 1846 to spring of 1847- 2 years before Gold was discovered on John Sutter's land in 1849.

Murphy Family History

Levinah W. JACKSON, the daughter of a prosperous Union County, South Carolina family, was born 15 Dec 1809. Said to have acted as her Father's secretary. She married Jeremiah Burns Murphy (born 3 March 1805, South Carolina, son of Mark Murphy and Holly Duke) in Union County, S.C in 1824.

Kristin Johnson says, "Documents dating from her lifetime give her name as "Levina" or "Levinah" (pronounced luh-VINE-uh). Her son William spelled the name "Levinah"; Wilford Woodruff's 1836 daybook gives the name as "Levinah W. MURPHY," as does a transcription of a family Bible.

In the early 1830's Jeremiah and Levinah moved with 5 of their children to the Dresden area of Weakley County, TN along with their JACKSON, ALEXANDER, MURPHY and LEE kinfolk. Their

last two children, William Green and Simon Peter Murphy, were born in Weakley County, TN.

Although raised as Baptists in South Carolina, Jeremiah and Levinah joined the Mormon faith about 1836 while living in Weakley County. Jeremiah's brother, Emmanuel Masters Murphy also joined the Mormon Church about the same time and went on to become a prominent leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as they moved to Utah. It was their cousin, Randolph Alexander, who first allowed a Mormon missionary to preach on his land next to the Thompson Creek Baptist Church after he was not allowed to preach in the church. Randolph Alexander was a believer from that day on and must have influenced Jeremiah and Emmanuel.

On Oct 5, 1839, three years later, Jeremiah Murphy died in Weakley County, TN. He was only 34 years old. His brother-in-law, Green T. LEE, was appointed guardian of Jeremiah's minor children in 1839 - remember in those days, even if the Mother was alive, a guardian was appointed for minor children - [1845-1846 page 100-104 Guardian Book A] He also stood surety for a bond when Levinah purchased two town lots in Dresden. Jeremiah left his widow, Levinah, with 7 children to raise. She never remarried.

The families of MURPHY, JACKSON, ALEXANDER, and LEE were intermingled by marriage. Levinah W. JACKSON and husband, Jeremiah Burns MURPHY were 1st cousins, once removed. Their common ancestors were Simon MURPHY II & Sarah DUKE, grandparents of Jeremiah and great grandparents of Levinah.

None of these families are listed on the Weakley County 1830 Census but must have arrived shortly after as according to Georgia Walsh's research, "On the third Saturday in August, 1831, Angus ALEXANDER helped to found the Thompson Creek Baptist Church in his home. The congregation continued to meet there until their building was erected in the small community of Ore Spring, Weakley Co., Tennessee." It was common in those days for extended families to migrate together so we are assuming they traveled by wagon train from Union Co., South Carolina.

Angus Alexander was married 1st to Unity Murphy, kinfolk of Jeremiah Burns Murphy. She died young and Angus married Sarah Jackson, Levinah's Aunt and sister of Levinah's Father, Frederick Jackson. Sarah and Frederick were children of Ralph Jackson Jr. and Delilah Murphy.

In 1849, Mary Murphy Covillaud wrote back to her Aunts, Uncles, and cousins in Weakley County, Tennessee "those that we lost was Mr. Pike, my Mother, Landrum, Lemuel, George, and little Catharine They are at peace and a great deal better of [off] than we are but I shall always wish that it had been gods will for me to die with my Mother yet I could give them up more freely if they were laying in Uncle Anguses garden by the side of my own dear Father I think we will all be back there before many years for I want to see all of you again "

Joining the Saints in Nauvoo

In 1841, after Jerimiah's death, Levinah moved to Nauvoo Illinois. However, by fall of 1842 she is returning to Weakley County.

In 1842 she returns to Weakley County. Kristin Johnson writes: " Late that fall of 1842 the family left Nauvoo, Illinois. They boarded a steamship for St. Louis at Warsaw, Illinois, but didn't get very far as the ship became icebound on the opposite shore of the river. On December 29th the two eldest daughters, Sarah and Harriet, were married on board the ship to William M. FOSTER and William M. PIKE by a justice of the peace. [both men were part of the ships crew]. After the ship was freed it continued on to St. Louis, where the PIKES and FOSTERS took up residence. Levinah and her five younger children continued on to Weakley County, Tennessee - back with her kinfolk. After about 1 year, the PIKES

joined Levinah in Weakley County."

In 1845 Levinah is plans to travel to California. It was also about this time frame that the Mormon Church was planning on relocating in California. Some took a ship out of New York to San Fransisco and others were going overland to California. However, since Levinah had already moved back to Weakley County for a few years before the big trip out west, it is not clear if she was still within the Mormon fold.

Joining the Donner Party

In March of 1846 Levinah W. Jackson Murphy, 36, widow of Jeremiah Burns Murphy traveled with her seven children and two Sons-in-law, left Weakley County. Her children included John Landrum, 16, Meriam Marjory "Mary" 14, Lemuel B. 12, William Green 10 and Simon Peter 8. Her two eldest girls were married with children of their own: Daughter, Sarah Ann Charlotte 19, and her husband William McFadden FOSTER, 30, had a son Jeremiah George Foster, 1 . Daughter, Harriet Frances 18, and her husband Willam Montgomery PIKE abt. 32, had two little girls, Naomi Levina Pike 2, and Catherine Pike about 1 year old.

According to William G. Murphy, in a 1896 50th year commemoration speech he gave in Marysville (named after Mary Murphy Covillaud), CA, he said, "In 1845 we heard wonderful stories of a wonderful country in the far West, between the Pacific ocean and the Rocky mountains, a country of sulubrious climate, perrenial spring time indeed, of deep and inexhaustible soil, why, they said that wheat grew wild higher than a man's head, and the Mexican Government that exercised some kind of control over it, would grant land to settlers; So my mother, as a widow, with seven children, two sons-in-law and three grand children, suggested that we emigrate to the far off fairy land. She ordered a suitable wagon to be manufactured, a son-in-law did the same, and early in 1846 [end of May of 1846, three months after leaving Weakley County], we started out with two ox teams from West Tennessee, crossed the State of Kentucky, the Ohio river below Paducah, up through Illinois, to Ballville, opposite St. Louis, crossed the Mississippi there, taking a family of three of ours who lived there [The Fosters], completing our number to thirteen. Across the State of Missouri to Independence, then the great entry port of the overland trade of Northern Mexico and Santa Fe; here we learned that the great overland caravan for Oregon and California had departed. We concluded to overtake them, which we did at the Big Blue [River], in Kansas, where they were water bound. Here we first met the Donners."

After awhile on the trail as part of the big wagon train, part of the group split off, including the Murphy Family. They join the Donner Party led by George Donner, his brother Jacob and James Frazier Reed, all of Springfield, Illinois. This group was looking for a Short Cut...called the Hastings Cut Off...but it turned out to be the Long Cut , as it cost them over 1 month in added travel time. It was late October when they reach todays Reno, NV. Before starting up the East side of Sierras, they take a time out to give their animals food and rest time. It is now into November as they start up the mountains and get caught in the first of many snow storms. Some of the animals run off in the blinding snow, many are never found.

Levinah Murphy Dies

Levinah MURPHY...she took care of the little ones and was remembered affectionately by other wagon train members, according to Georgia Donner. She had insisted her daughters go with the Forlorn Hope group. Levinah became blind for awhile during the winter, was too feeble for the 3rd relief party to take out. As the 3rd relief was getting ready

to go it is reported, "As we were ready to start, Mrs. Murphy walked to her bed, laid down, turned her face toward the wall. One of the men gave her a handful of dried meat.--She seemed to realize that we were leaving her, that her work was finished.." She was not alive when the 4th relief returned in April.

Late in 1849 Harriet and Sarah with their families returned by ship to Weakley County, Tennessee via San Francisco and the Isthmus of Panama to New Orleans and on to Dresden. The purpose of this trip was to return William & Simon MURPHY back to Weakley County to live with relatives.

The following information was gathered from Weakley County Census, Marriage Records and Cemetery Listings, Archives of Weakley Mailing List, Cousin Wylodean Bruff Rogers who shared misc. tidbits, Kristin Johnson who has made the Donner Party a special research project - visit her fabulous detailed Donner Party web site under Donner Party Links - Georgia Walsh who shared background on the Jackson, Murphy, and Alexander families, Sue Bowers for input on the Lee family, cousin Terry Coats for jogging my memory and visiting the TN Archives for copy of the 4th letter sent back to Weakley County in 1849, written by Mary Murphy Covillaud, John Geobel who shared data on Green William Murphy and put me in touch with Charlotte Covillaud of France who let me use the photos of Charles & Mary Murphy Covillaud.

Summary by Natalie Baxter. Original text at:

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/DonnerParty_Murphy.htm

