

The Johnson-Alford Connection

This article was written by James William "JJ" Johnson, AAFA #1189, who is introduced in the New Members article in this issue.

Mr. Johnson is the great-great-grandson of Robert F. Alford. He first published this article in the West Line Outlook, a newsletter for the descendants of James William Johnson, aka Patrick "Paddy" Alford. He has given us express permission to reprint the article in AAFA ACTION.

Sometimes, family history isn't just hidden; sometimes, it is in hiding.

In early 1992, I began looking for my father, James Howard JOHNSON, who had been absent from my immediate family since 1949, when I was five years old. All that I knew at the time was his full name and that he came from a town in Arkansas called De Queen.

In time, I located his birth place and birth record in Sevier County, Arkansas and, in so doing, learned that his father was Charles Parks JOHNSON and his mother was Myrtle Lee CASSIL. Knowing little or nothing about research, I located a genealogist in Sevier County and employed her for the purpose of locating more information on this family. Unfortunately, after several months of research, she could add little to what I already knew. (I later learned that my father's family moved from Arkansas to Wichita in Sedgwick County, Kansas soon after he was born.)

Meanwhile, I located my grandmother's family in a small community called Jamestown of Moniteau County, Missouri in the latter part of 1992. Over a period of six years, I found many cousins situated all over the United States, tracing some of our family lines back to France, Germany and England and, in the process, I learned a great deal about research and about genealogy.

In 1998, a friend of mine from Oklahoma, who is a genealogist, contacted me to tell me that she had found a cemetery in Sevier County, Arkansas that had a tombstone marked "Chas P. Johnson." She wondered if this could be my grandfather, Charles Parks

JOHNSON? The possibility intrigued me.

So, in June of that year, my wife and I drove to Arkansas and located the West Line Cemetery. Not only was the "Chas P. Johnson" the burial marker for my grandfather but I also located several others of my JOHNSON family that were buried there, including my great grandfather, James William JOHNSON. (Coincidentally, or maybe not, my name is James William JOHNSON also.)

Down the gravel road from the Cemetery, I learned, lived one of my first cousins. Holly and I visited him and began to put together the story of the JOHNSON family from West Line, Arkansas.

Over the next year, I located and interviewed scores of descendents of James William JOHNSON. They lived throughout the United States from California to New Jersey. Some were even in England. Here is a brief synopsis of my great grandfather's life:

The earliest account that I have of James William JOHNSON came from the family Bible (which I now possess). In it is written the date of his marriage to my great grandmother, Sarah Jane _____ on 10 Sep 1885, location unknown. I next found him in Sevier Co., AR in 1892 when my grandfather, Charles Parks was born. James William's brother, Richard Joseph, settled there at the same time, raised a family and was eventually buried there.

My great grandfather married three times, being

widowed by his first two wives. In all, he had eleven children, one dying as an infant. When he settled there, at a place called Ultima Thule (means end of the world), Sevier County was on the edge of the wilderness and the Oklahoma Indian Territory. Men always kept weapons close by and there are many stories about dangerous and violent episodes in the lives of my kin during those early years.

One story that continued to surface regarding James William JOHNSON had to do with his early life. According to dozens of accounts by the living family, he and his brother got into trouble with the law, changed their names and settled in Arkansas. Depending upon which version of the story you heard, the "trouble" was of all varieties including horse stealing, accidental murder and ties to Jesse and Frank JAMES.

Although I listened to these stories with tongue in cheek, I realized that there had to be some truth hidden in them because I knew nothing about this family before the early 1890s.

James William JOHNSON died on 24 May 1934 in Sevier County, Arkansas. On his death certificate, funeral records and obituary, his place of birth was given as Kingston, Tennessee in Roane County. [Actually, he was born in Macoupin County, Illinois (Palmyra Township) on 20 Jul 1860.] His mother's name was not given on any of these records, but his father's name was Robert JOHNSON. Holly and I journeyed to Kingston, Tennessee for research purposes but found absolutely nothing connecting the JOHNSON clan from West Line to anyone in Roane County.

Early in 2000, I located the death record of my great uncle and brother to James William JOHNSON. His name was Richard Joseph JOHNSON and he had died in Atlanta, Georgia in 1948. Subsequently, his body was returned to Sevier County, Arkansas for burial. (In time, I located many of his descendants.) Unfortunately on Richard's death certificate, neither his mother's nor his father's names were remembered. Nor did anyone in the family know anything about the past of Richard Joseph JOHNSON or his family.

Meanwhile, I had learned of a sister of James and Richard. Her name was Belle NEWTON, having married at a young age and being the mother of one child, she had lived in Dallas, Texas until her death in 1957. From the records that surfaced during my

research, James and Richard went to the Dallas area for extended trips sometimes as often as once a month.

It took me a year to locate her burial site and obtain her death record because her name at death was Susan Isabelle NEWTON, a name completely foreign to all of the JOHNSON clan; everyone knew her as Belle JOHNSON or Belle NEWTON. I also located the death record on Belle's daughter, Elsa Allean NEWTON. On Elsa's death certificate, to my utter surprise, her mother's maiden name was listed, not as Belle JOHNSON, but as "Belle ALFORD." That was my first contact with the ALFORD name.

When I eventually received the death certificate on Susan Isabelle NEWTON, her mother's name was not given, but her father was listed as "Unknown ALFORD."

On the death certificate of Elsa Allean NEWTON, Belle's daughter, the informant was Marie McFADIN. I had heard that name connected with Belle and Allean many times in interviews and conversations with other JOHNSON descendants. I'll relate that story quickly here:

In November of 1898, my great grandmother, Sarah Jane _____, was delivered of her fourth child, a girl named Elsie Jane. Unfortunately, the birth was difficult and Sarah Jane died, leaving James William with three small children, including an infant.

Immediately, he took the baby and went to Arlington, Texas. There, it was told, a woman named McFADIN nursed the infant, Elsie Jane, with her own child, Harry Gordon McFADIN.

I always thought this was an uncommonly Christian act and thought that the JOHNSON clan had to be related somehow to this McFADIN family. (It turned out, as I would find out later, that the lady who nursed Elsie Jane, was Rachel Rebecca ALFORD-McFADIN, married sister to my great grandfather, James William JOHNSON.)

While examining the death certificate of Elsa Allean NEWTON, I noticed what I thought was an unusual spelling of the McFADIN name and I wondered if there could be any of that family still living in Arlington, Texas. After a few calls, I located Margaret Elizabeth McFADIN-STAPLES, the daughter of Harry Gordon McFADIN and granddaughter of Rachel Rebecca ALFORD. In subsequent interviews and exchanges with

her and her family, I came into possession of several manuscripts and personal papers that came down to her from her grandmother, Rachel Rebecca ALFORD. One of those records was the newspaper article entitled, "Judge Lynch's Vengeance," which described the murder of R. ALFORD in Texas. Although few individuals, who were descended from Rachel Rebecca, knew about this event, those that did know, believed that the victim, "R. Alford," was the father of Rachel Rebecca, Robert F. ALFORD.

Meanwhile, I received copies of some manuscripts and personal papers belonging to Susan Isabelle ALFORD. All of these materials confirmed that my great grandfather was an ALFORD, the fourth child of Robert F. ALFORD and Alsa EVANS. His name was Patrick "Paddy" ALFORD.

By the way, one story that I had heard years earlier from the JOHNSON family, regarding my great grandfather, was that his little sister, Belle, always called him Paddy; but no one knew why.

Of interest now is the reason he changed his name and when he settled in Sevier Co., Arkansas in the community of West Line.

In my possession is a copy of a letter that was sent to my great grandmother, Sarah Jane, from her sister, Susie. It is dated 08 Dec 1890 and, in it, my great grandfather is referred to as "Jim." Clearly, by this time, he had changed his name to James William JOHNSON and the events leading to his use of an alternate identity had passed.

We know from census records that his father and mother, Robert and Alsa, were in Arlington, Texas with many of their children in June of 1880. The oldest child, living at home, was Susan Isabelle ALFORD, a petite fifteen year old girl and the sister to my great grandfather, James William.

However, it is clear that by 1881, much of the family had returned to their origins in Roane Co., TN. In September of that year, Minnie Louella ALFORD, younger sister of Belle, died and was buried there. In 1883, another sister, Ida May, also died and was buried there. We know that Robert Henry, Alsa Eveline and Robert F. ALFORD'S wife, Alsa EVANS-ALFORD, were there also.

Why did they return to Roane County? If my ancestor,

Robert F. ALFORD, was murdered in 1887 (The death date given on personal papers of Rachel Rebecca ALFORD-McFADIN give his death date as 24 Dec 1887 and all the newspaper articles, describing his death, support this date.), why was his family in Tennessee as early as 1881?

Beyond the families unexpected return to Roane County, we have found nothing to place the death of Robert F. ALFORD at any time other than the 1887 time frame. All evidence so far located places his death in Burleson Co., TX, near its county seat, Caldwell.

Since locating the first newspaper article on the death of R. ALFORD, we have obtained two others that essentially tell the same story. One clear point in all of them was that R. ALFORD appears to be alone. No one was there to raise an alarm and no one else was murdered with him. Actually, he was "found" sometime after the murder; we suspect several days.

As I said above, I located the JOHNSON clan in 1998. Since then, I have returned to Sevier Co., AR periodically, once in 1999 for three weeks of intensive research. Then, again, in June of 2000, when we had a family reunion there and I met dozens of my cousins and many friends of the West Line family.

In June of this year, the Descendants of James William and Richard Joseph JOHNSON are having another reunion in Sevier County. It is at this reunion, that I will share our findings regarding our patriarch ancestor, James William JOHNSON, aka Patrick "Paddy" ALFORD.

For those wondering, I have not yet located my father or his younger brother, Charles Parks JOHNSON, Junior.

[Ed. The following newspaper articles lend some credence as to why James William Johnson was, in fact Patrick Alford.]

Texas By Mail

Items and Incidents Culled From the Latest State Papers

R. Alford, living near Caldwell, was found dead on Tuesday, with an ax sticking in his head. Several parties were arrested on suspicion.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE, from the Austin Daily Statesman, located in Travis Co., TX (Austin), in issue 10 Jan 1888, on page 2, column 5 under the heading "Texas By Mail" and the subheading, "Items and Incidents Culled From the Latest State Papers" Archived in the Austin Statesman, Jan-Jun 1888, Microfilm Number 32 at the Dallas Public Library, located in Dallas Co., TX (Dallas). Photocopy of microfilm version in possession.)

Judge Lynch's Vengeance

Two Mexicans Summarily Dealt With

Outraged Citizens Take The Law in Their Own Hand and Mete Out Punishment on Short Notice

Caldwell, Jan 16 - The parties who killed R. Alford, as heretofore reported, have been uncovered, it is said. The deed was committed by four Mexicans, it is believed. Three of them have been under arrest for several days and the matter has been under investigation by the officers. Saturday one of them revealed to one of the officers, it is alleged, full particulars of the killing. They had been in Alford's employ cutting wood, and for some cause not revealed entered into a conspiracy to kill him, it is claimed. Two of them went into Alford's house at bed time and laid down on pallets, as if to spend the night. The other two remained outside on watch. When Alford became soundly asleep, the two on the inside rose noiselessly from their pallets and one of them struck him across the upper part of the neck with an ax which almost severed his head from the body, it is believed. The other one took the ax and sank it into the head above the ear, where he left it sticking, it is reported.

When the facts became known and there was no longer any doubt as to who were the guilty parties, the sheriff, knowing the felling that existed in the community against the murderers, whoever they might prove to be, placed guards at the jail for its protection but by some means a body of men gained entrance thru the back part of the jail into the room where the cages were situated, but were unable to open the cage where the prisoners were confined. A Negro confined in the same cage with the Mexicans

was ordered by the crowd to push the Mexicans from the cell into the corridor. The Negro succeeded in shoving them out. When through the bars they were immediately shot, one dead, the other mortally wounded. The Negro was unable to handle the third man, and while scuffling with him in the cell, the guards and other citizens, alarmed by the shooting, put in an appearance, and the crowd dispersed without getting the 3rd man. The one that was killed was he that had made the conspiracy and who struck the first blow with the ax that killed Alford. The wounded man and the one unhurt were they who stood guard when the deed was done. The 4th man, who also used the ax, is still at large.

(NEWSPAPER ARTICLE, handwritten copy of article contained in issue [] on 16 Jan [] entitled [], under Section [], subtitled, "Judge Lynch's Vengeance," on page [], in column []. Archived at [], located in []. Faxed reproduction in possession.)

Family history, from the descendents of Rachel Rebecca ALFORD and from the personal papers of Susan Isabelle ALFORD, purports that William Thomas ALFORD (aka Richard Joseph JOHNSON), George ALFORD, and Patrick ALFORD (aka James William JOHNSON) committed the killings of the jailed Mexicans. This, it is said, is one of the reasons my ancestors assumed new identities and settled in the wilderness, then known as West Line, Arkansas.

It is possible that another murder, of a peace officer, occurred sometime later in Tarrant County, Texas.

According to oral history, the ALFORD clan and others related to them, who gathered for the burial of Robert F. ALFORD, swore an oath to keep the dark story of the murders a secret; to tell it only after the death of William Thomas, George and Patrick. There is some evidence that this story was eventually told to some of James William JOHNSON'S children but it never was recounted to any of the known grandchildren.

The ALFORDS kept their oath and the story remained hidden for over one hundred years.