

Speer Family Number 1

In 1852 Rev. William Speer presented a family bible to his parents (James Ramsey Speer and Hettie Guthrie Morrow of Pittsburgh, PA), which included a written summary of his research into the family history of his father and mother. As it pertains to the paternal side, an early Speer family researcher transcribed the following from the family bible:

James Speer, the paternal grandfather of James R. Speer, M.D., was born about 1720, at or near Ballymena, County Antrim, or else at Maghera [Maghera Parish?], County Derry, Ireland. He was of Scotch Presbyterian ancestry. He emigrated to America about 1759, leaving a father aged near 80, who afterwards lived to the age of 100, with his son John at Ballymena. One of the sons of this John [a Thomas] was subsequently a leader in the Pennsylvania "Whiskey Insurrection" [of 1794]. Near the same time with James, his brother Robert and another named Thomas or Alexander also emigrated. The first named Robert settled in Adams Co., Pa., near to James, and was the father of one daughter and six sons, one of whom lived and died near to Canonsburgh, Pa; the rest of the family removed to Ohio. The second brother, named Alexander, resided on the shore of the Susquehanna. Some of his descendants removed to the banks of the Allegheny River.

James Speer and his wife (originally Mary Patterson) settled first on a farm ten miles from Lancaster, near Christiana, and afterwards at the foot of the South mountain between Chambersburgh and Gettysburgh. In 1779, he left the Covenanted Church on account of difficulties with Mr. Dobbins, his pastor, and was admitted to full communion in the Presbyterian congregation under the care of Rev. Dr. John McKnight, Lower Marsh Creek Church.

Three sons of James and Mary Speer, Nathaniel, Alexander and James, fought in the War of the Revolution. Nathaniel was one of the "Flying Camp", and died at Fort Lee after the retreat from Fort Washington November, 1776, at the age of 20. Another son, James, was at the surrender of Cornwallis. He was one of a guard that conveyed a thousand of the British prisoners to York, Penna. A third son, Alexander, made two campaigns in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. John, a fourth son, was under arms to march when the Revolutionary war was terminated. The father, James, was in the neighborhood of Brandywine, upon business, sufficiently near to hear the firing of the cannon during the battle of September 11, 1777, which bears that name. He died of a fever in 1782.

The four sons mentioned in this account were born in Northern Ireland. Two more children were born while the family was in Lancaster County, William in 1764 and Elizabeth in 1767. Elizabeth was the mother of President James

Buchanan, Jr. William was the father of the above James Ramsey Speer. From Orphan's Court records pertaining to James' death intestate in October 1784, we learned that Alexander was the eldest son and that John was likely the next oldest. From a headstone in Pittsburgh, we believe son James was born in 1756. From the above account, Nathaniel was born about the same time as James. The Court awarded legal guardianship for the two minor children, William and Elizabeth, to Robert Speer, James' brother. In my earlier correspondence to you, I listed these children with Nathaniel first as given in early family histories. However, the above clarifies for us that Nathaniel was not the firstborn.

Robert [Robin] Speer was born about 1735. It is said he emigrated about 1760 as a single man to South Carolina, but returned to marry [Mary] Jane Stuart. After the marriage, they emigrated to Hamiltonbann Township, York County [now Adams County], Pennsylvania. Their first son, Alexander, was born there in 1764. The other children, in order of birth, were Agnes, John, Robert, James, William, Thomas and Stuart. Robert and Jane died in 1813.

About the other brother to emigrate, Alexander, little is known. Property tax and marriage records suggest he settled in Upper Paxtang township of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and that probably among his children were an Alexander, who married in 1771, a John and a James.

One interpretation of the phrase "at or near Ballymena or else Maghera" is that this Speer family first lived in Maghera parish, Londonderry, and later moved to near Ballymena, Antrim. In your letter to me dated 27 July 2010, you cited from the 1740 Protestant Households Census a Nathaniel Speer of Ahoghill parish, which is near Ballymena, as a possible reference to this Speer family because of the practice of naming the eldest son after the paternal grandfather.

Looking at the James Speer and Robert Speer families, Alexander was the eldest son and John was the next in both. An Alexander Speer of Maghera parish appeared in the same 1740 census. In this same census, seven Patterson families appeared in Maghera and two appeared in Ahoghill. For the Stuart family, seven appeared in Maghera and one (a John) appeared in Ahoghill.

In the 1930's a researcher tied this Speer to the family of County Tyrone that appeared in O'Hart's Irish Pedigrees and gave Thomas as the probable father. Your predecessor organization, the Ulster-Scot Historical Society, did a study (reference G.348) for my father in 1959 to confirm this tie, but none was established. This relationship is in doubt for two principal reasons: first, Ballymena is in County Antrim; second, Thomas was not the eldest son for the two brothers.

This Speer family must have been quite well-to-do, but not landed gentry. All three brothers, James, Robert and Alexander, purchased property upon their arrival in Pennsylvania.

If I were to make conjectures about this Speer family, I would say the father was Alexander and he was born around 1680 probably in County Londonderry. The grandfather was likely named John, born about 1650. At first, I thought this John might be the son of O'Hart's John Speer (1623-1705), but the augmented pedigree for him found at <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=malise&id=11058> dashed this idea.

Note: Looking down a generation at the children of James and Robert, the naming convention for the firstborn son after the grandfather seems to hold.

The next sections in this narrative give brief family histories for two other Speer families with ties to the Ballymena area in the 1750's. I have no specific information to connect either family to this one.

Speer Family Number 2

When he was 84 years old, William Speer, Jr., of South Carolina, wrote a manuscript about his family history. A portion transcribed from the faded original appears below taken from the 1998 Speer family history compiled by Wade Edward Speer:

On the third day of September 1772 one hundred and two years ago, this day the third of September 1874, my father landed at Christian Bridge in the River Delaware. He was a native of Ireland, born in the year 1747 in the County Antrim near the town of Strebaul. His mothers name was Margaret Houston. She died at his birth. His grandfather, William Houston raised him. His father married again [to Elinor Carlton], had four sons: John, Joseph, James, and Alexander [plus a daughter Rebecca]. John came to America in the year 1786, raised a large family, scattered through Georgia and Alabama. My father removed (?) in Pennsylvania in 1773. In 1774 he came to Charleston. In 1775 the Revolutionary War began. He remained in Charleston till after Sir Peter Parker's attach on Charleston in June 1776. He then came to what was called the Long Cane Settlement in Abbeville.

Wade and other researchers for this family could not identify Strebaul (or Stawbul or Strebault as interpreted from the manuscript). They often chose Strabane as the birthplace for William Speer, Sr., but it is in County Tyrone. Their research said William, Sr. spent his first year in Pennsylvania with relatives, but did not identify the family.

This same family was chronicled by Rollo C. Speer in the 1942 report: An Account of the Family of William Speer and Margaret, His Wife, County Antrim to America in 1772. Wade matched this report with others and drew the tentative conclusion that this family's Ulster origin was with Rev. William Speer (1652-?) born in Ayrshire, Scotland, who had one child, John Speer (1693-1764). This John was the father of John (or William) (1723 – 1771), who was the father of the above William Speer, Sr.

Wade identified the father of Rev. William to be John Speir (b. ca 1625 in Scotland) who married Marion Summeir (or Slumen, Slumend, Slowan, Slowane) in Glasgow High Kirk Parish on January 14, 1646/47. Besides Rev. William, their children included Janet (ca 1647), George (ca 1651), Marion (ca 1653), John (ca 1655), Andrew (ca 1657), Agnes (ca 1659).

It is interesting that a William Houston appeared in the 1740 Protestant Households Census for Ahoghill parish, County Antrim along with a Robert and Nathaniel Speer.

Speer Family Number 3

In 1919 a biography for Robert W. Speer, the recently deceased mayor of Denver, Colorado, was published by Edgar C. McMechen. The section on his earliest family history reads as follows:

The first trace of Mayor Speer's family is found in the Seventeenth Century at the time of the Claverhouse persecutions in Scotland. Among the refugees who fled to the north of Ireland was a Covenanter preacher, who bore the name of Speer. The direct line of descent became clear with Robert Speer [b 1744], known to have been a descendant of this preacher, and Jean Quate Speer [b 1750]. The latter was born in Broughshane, Ballymena, Ireland, and died March 30, 1833. Robert Speer had six children, one of whom, John Speer, became a farmer at Ballyrobert, Ireland, and leased his farm, for which he paid one hundred pounds per year rent, from the Marquis of Donegal. John Speer died March 5, 1834. His widow, Agnes Martin Speer, came to America in June, 1841, and died at Fairfield, Iowa, January 20, 1861.

John Speer had nine children, of whom Robert Speer, the grandfather of Denver's great mayor, was one. Robert Speer was born February 27, 1803, married Agnes Cowan at Belfast, Ireland, January 17, 1822, and, a few months later, sailed with his bride for the United States.

Several other members of the Speer family had preceded the young emigrants to America, and it was to the hometown of one of these, Gordon Speer, an uncle, that they came. They settled in Shade Gap, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania, later moving to Cassville, Pennsylvania, in 1826, and to Fairfield, Iowa, in 1861. Robert Speer died there the following year, his wife having passed away before the family left Cassville.

Rollo C. Speer identified the above unnamed Covenanter preacher as Rev. Robert Speer in his 1942 report: The Family of Dr. Robert E. Speer, D.D. This report also stated that Rev. Robert moved his flock by ship from Ayrshire to County Antrim.

Rollo Clayton Speer was a semi-professional family researcher in the 1930-1950's who spent his life tabulating any and all tidbits as related to him about Speer families in all the spelling variations. His family sheets were always a work in progress. As he obtained additional information, he revised the sheets and often separated or combined individual families. My father corresponded with Rollo on our family history. Rollo willed his records to the Kansas State Historical Museum Library and I copied their microfilm files. As a note of caution, the Rollo Speer references for this and the prior family should not be viewed as proven facts.

George Dan Speer is a modern-day Rollo. He actively maintains his research for all Speer spelling variations on the RootsWeb's WorldConnect Project. Often, he provides good notes for his sources, but, as in my case, his information may be slightly inaccurate. My citation about John Speer at the end of the first section comes from his web page: <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=malise&id>. He may be contacted at genealogy@speer.org.