

Background for Researching Michigan Greer & Gillespie Families in Orange & Dutchess Counties, New York, 1800-1830

by Mary Ann Schaefer

October 6, 2012

This article is a narrative summary of the research I have done on **GREER** and **GILLESPIE** families who I believe came to Dutchess and Orange Counties in New York in the mid-1800's and then migrated to Oakland County, Michigan in the early 1830s. Family group sheets are included which include more specific details. I also include accompanying articles about research done on families with these surnames during the time period 1800-1830 but who do not yet show any connection to this branch. It is my hope that this information might be interest to other genealogy researchers with ties to these families, and that they may feel free to contact me to share both ideas and details about them.

Connecting the Gillespie and Greer Families

My main area of research has been with the GILLESPIE surname in Michigan as I am directly descended from Gillespie's on my mother's side. The Michigan Gillespie family had a wonderful family historian in Edith Eileen Gillespie (1896-1986). She self-published "The Gillespie Family Record," last printed in 1966, which is the source for most of what we know of our family. That record outlines the descendants of John Gillespie and his second wife, Sarah Woods. John Gillespie was thought to have been born in Scotland before moving to Armagh, Ireland where he had four children (that we know of) with Sarah Woods: Robert, James, Sarah, and Alexander all of whom emigrated to Quebec between 1837-1847. In 1855, my ggg-grandfather Robert moved his family to Michigan, where my mother's family descends from.

The Gillespie Family Record, however, contains one sentence that begs for more detail, found on page 57:

"By his first marriage John Gillespie had two daughters and a son. The two daughters married brothers of the name **Greer** and emigrated to the United States, the son remaining in Ireland." (emphasis is mine)

Happily, corroboration of this anecdote came independently from a Greer family researcher in Michigan. In a letter from Dorothy Greer dated 24 Apr 1983, she writes:

"The earlier **Gillespies** were doubly related to the family as two brothers married two sisters."

And finally, yet another letter was discovered which links the two families, this one from Alexander Gillespie to his son Alexander Garfield Gillespie, written October 28, 1911 from Gaines, Michigan. There is one run-on sentence in the letter that reads like this:

"Well it will soon be Halloween it was just 56 years ago on that night we came to Oakland County to Uncle Jimmie **Greers** and his 80 acres and the 40 acres your Aunt Elizabeth owned, that is the forty the

share is not paid on. Well the 120 acres has been sold about 3 weeks ago to Detroit parties for \$40,000 for a summer resort."

Before 2010, there was no awareness in my family of Greer connections to the Michigan Gillespie's. Little did I know where my curiosity about these ties would lead in my family history research!

Introducing Elizabeth Gillespie

In 1857, Elizabeth Gillespie died intestate in Bloomfield, Michigan. Elizabeth's sister Nancy Gillespie petitioned the probate court as an heir-at-law, naming two other siblings: Thomas Gillespie and Jane **Greer**, wife of James Greer. Also noted were Elizabeth's three half-siblings: Robert (from whom I am descended), James, and Sarah (the fourth child of John Gillespie's second marriage, Alexander, had died shortly after landing in Quebec). Robert M. **Greer**, a son of James and Jane Greer, was named the executor of Elizabeth's estate.

The subsequent discovery of more Michigan deed records confirmed two things. First, there is now a concrete connection between the children of John Gillespie's first marriage (Thomas, Elizabeth, Nancy, and Jane) who arrived in Michigan by way of New York in the early 1830s, and one son of John Gillespie's second marriage (Robert) who arrived 20 years later by way of Quebec. Second, there is now a concrete connection between the Gillespie and Greer families alluded to in the anecdotal evidence generated by both families.

Tracing Back to New York

But what do we know of the New York origins of these Greer and Gillespie families who settled in Michigan? First, we should consider WHO we are looking for in NY. If I follow the Gillespie Family Record, I am only looking for the surname GREER, two couples, and probably James Greer and Jane Gillespie Greer qualify as one of those couples. We are then also looking for a brother of James Greer and a sister of Jane Gillespie. It seems likely that Jane's sister Nancy is a good candidate, since we have determined that her first husband was a Greer.

However, the Gillespie Family Record made no mention of any other GILLESPIE relations having emigrated to America, but we know for certain that at least one additional daughter, Elizabeth Gillespie, also came over. And then there is the matter Nancy Gillespie's second husband, Thomas Gillespie. Even though this Thomas Gillespie does not appear to be a John Gillespie descendant, he could still be related. Other Gillespie names showed up in Michigan that are worth looking for in NY, as will be mentioned in the conclusion of this article.

Here then is a summary of evidence that I have considered that relates my branch of Greer-Gillespie families back to New York. I present the information in time-line order, starting with the earliest.

- According to US census data, the apparent oldest child of James and Jane Greer, John M. Greer, was born around 1806 in Ireland. The next oldest child we know about of James and Jane is Mary Greer who was apparently born around 1812 in New York. Based on this information, I estimate that James and Jane Greer came to America with at least one child some time **between 1806 and 1812**. If we consider that Jane's sister Nancy also came to America at or around the same time – though there is no supporting documentation for Nancy's arrival – Nancy's daughter Mary was born around **1810** in Ireland. So either both sisters came to America between 1810-1812, or Jane arrived between 1806-1812 and Nancy arrived some time, and

possibly many years after 1810.

Although there were Gillespie families in Orange County prior to 1800, most notably the line of Samuel Gillespie and Esther Rainey, there has so far been no link found between those families and the Greer-Gillespie branch described here. More about this is mentioned in my accompanying article called *Case Studies of Gillespie Families, Dutchess & Orange Counties, New York 1800-1830*.

- Baptismal records from Pleasant Valley Presbyterian Church, which was incorporated in 1785 in Dutchess County, NY, were found for the following children of James and Jane Grier (note that early spelling of GREER seems to have been GRIER): James-**1815**, Joseph-**1817**, and Robert M.-**1822**. We can also take note there was a baptism of a child named Jane born in **1812**, the daughter of Robert and Nancy Grier. Since this is the right time frame and same place where James and Jane were having children, this record might be a potential clue to the name of of Nancy Gillespie's first husband.
- In *History of Oakland County, Michigan : a narrative account of its historical progress, its people, and its principal interests*, by Thaddeus De Witt Seeley, published in 1912, page 873, in reference to Margaret Jane Greer Cummings, “Her grandparents, James and Jane Greer, came from the north of Ireland to the United States at an early day, first settling in **Matteawan, Dutchess County, New York** state, where her father, Robert M. Greer, was born in 1822.” It can be noted that Matteawan was a former village in the town of Fishkill, incorporated into the city of Beacon in 1913.
- The following census records are those I believe belong to my family groups. Other individuals with the same or similar names are discussed in the Case Studies article.
- The 1820 federal census in New York:
 - Fishkill¹, Dutchess, NY: James Grier
- The 1825 census of NY includes the following names:
 - Montgomery, Orange, NY: Joseph Greer, James & John Beaty
- The 1830 federal census includes the following names in New York:
 - Newburgh, Orange, NY: James Gillespie, Thomas Gillespie
 - Montgomery, Orange, NY: John Greer, James Grier
- A Michigan land deed apparently written 18 Jun 1831 and recorded 1 May 1834, conveys 78.45 acres from Elizabeth Gillespie of **Orange County, New York** to James Greer of **Orange County, New York** for the sum of \$50. The document was proved to the justice of the peace on

1 In talking to Dutchess County historians and genealogists, they all said that it seems very unlikely that the Greer's would “commute” from Fishkill up to Pleasant Valley to have their children baptized. But here an understanding of geographical boundaries is important because the village of Fishkill is not the same as the town of Fishkill. The major patents in Dutchess County became Precincts in the mid-1700s, and the precincts were divided into towns (what I would call a township meaning a larger area comprised of several villages) in 1788. The village of Pleasant Valley, which had been part of the Crum Elbow precinct, became part of the town of Clinton in 1788. At the same time, the town of Fishkill replaced the Rombout precinct, and it included the current-day towns of Fishkill, East Fishkill, Wappinger, and the west half of La Grange. The northern border of the town of La Grange is just over a mile from the current-day village of Pleasant Valley. So theoretically, the Greer's could easily have been located in the northern part of the town of Fishkill and still been close to the Pleasant Valley Presbyterian Church.

the oath of Joseph Greer, who I believe may have been a brother of James Greer.

- A Michigan land patent was issued to Joseph Greer of **Orange County, New York** on 1 Jan 1831. Joseph Greer was married to Elizabeth Beattie, and they had 10 children, the first four of whom were born in New York between 1821 and 1831, the rest born in Michigan. A Joseph Grier as well as several Beatty families were enumerated in the 1825 census of Montgomery, Orange, NY, and by 1830 Joseph was enumerated in Oakland County in the Michigan Territory. Even though I cannot confirm the relationship between Joseph Greer and James Greer, the deed previously mentioned does at least tie Joseph as an acquaintance if not relation to Elizabeth Gillespie.
- A Michigan land patent for 78.45 acres in Oakland County, dated 10 Feb. 1832 was issued to Elizabeth Gillespie of **Orange County, New York**. There is some confusion here as the land description of this patent is slightly different from the land description in the previously described deed from Elizabeth to James Greer. Research on this point continues, but the key point is that both the patent and deed refer back to Orange County, New York.

It should be noted that James Greer did not obtain his own Michigan land patent until 1837, at which point the patent says he is "of Oakland County, Michigan".

- On 13 Jun 1833, John M. Greer, oldest son of James and Jane Greer married Isabella E. Gillespie in Detroit, Michigan. Together, John and Isabella acquired over 200 acres in Michigan land patents. But who was Isabella Gillespie? Isabella was born 25 Oct 1813 and all of the census' where she is found state she was born in Ireland, but then most of the death certificates that have been located for her 15 (!!) children all state that Isabella was **born in New York** (one certificate states Isabella was born in Newark, NJ). Isabella died 3 April 1891 and she is buried in Michigan (apparently) although no death record has been found for her death even checking in other states where her children lived.
- In 1838, Henry P. Sloat married Mary Ann Gillespie in Oakland County, Michigan. Henry was the son of James Sloat and Phebe Upright, and the grandson of Cornelius Sloat and Elinner McKinney (the McKinney's are another **Orange County, NY** family who married into both the Greer and Gillespie families). Mary Ann Gillespie is another mystery since we do not know who she traveled to Michigan with before marrying Henry Sloat. It is, however, significant to note that Henry Sloat was named the guardian for Thomas Gillespie when he was declared incompetent in Michigan in 1855. So my feeling is that whoever Mary Ann Gillespie Sloat was, she likely had some familial ties to either or both Thomas and Nancy Gillespie. [To reiterate, this Thomas Gillespie was the second husband of Nancy Gillespie, and we still don't know how he is connected to this Gillespie branch if he is.]
- Finally, in the 1850 census of Bloomfield, Oakland, Michigan, living in the vicinity of other Gillespie-Greer pioneers, was James Gillespie who had one 11-year-old female named Margaret, born in Michigan in his household. This James Gillespie was born about 1772 in Ireland, making him of the right generation to be a father of Isabella Gillespie and/or a brother of Thomas Gillespie. I have so far not been able to account for who this person is, but I always look for him in New York with the idea that like the other Michigan pioneers, he lived first in NY. If he died in Michigan, no record or gravestone has yet been located for him. There are two other clues that tie this James Gillespie to this branch. First is a Michigan deed record dated 1845 which transfers 38 acres from James and Jane Greer to their son Robert M. Greer. A witness to this document was James Gillespie. Second, there was a younger Thomas Gillespie

who was not a son of the Thomas Gillespie and who was married to Nancy. This younger Thomas referred to by me and in some documentation as Thomas Gillespie Jr. Thomas Jr. was born in NY around 1816, married Ellen McClung, and died in Michigan in 1899. His death certificate says mother Unknown, but his father was listed as James Gillespie.

Religious Ties

The Gillespie's who landed in Quebec (those from John Gillespie's second marriage) were known to be practicing Presbyterians. So far, no church records have been found in NY which absolutely tie to a member of this Gillespie branch.

The Greer's, however, seem to have had more definite Covenanter connections. In Michigan in 1834, the Southfield Reformed Presbyterian Church was organized as a congregation, and David Stewart – who came from White Lake, Orange, NY where he had emigrated from Ireland in 1800 – and Alexander McClung were elected the first ruling elders. Here is how the those families connect to my branch:

David Stewart + Ann Porter
Margaret Stewart + John Parks
David John Parks + Mary Greer
(dau of John Greer Sr. + Isabella Gillespie)

Alexander McClung + Sarah McWilliams
Ellen McClung + Thomas Gillespie Jr.

According to several sources about the history of the Southfield church, other families connected to the congregation were: Beattie, Sloat, Grier, and McKinney, among others. The Beattie and Sloat names have already been mentioned in relation to Greer and Gillespie. James McKinney who also made the Ireland-to-NY-to-MI trip, had two children who married into my family group: a son named William J. McKinney who married Sarah E. Gillespie in Michigan, the daughter of Thomas Gillespie Jr. and Ellen McClung, and a daughter named Lucy McKinney who married John Greer Jr., a son of James and Jane Gillespie.

The name Rainey is another Covenanter name associated with Orange County, NY. James Rainey arrived in the Walkill area from Philadelphia around 1745. He had a daughter, Esther Rainey, who married Samuel Gillespie whose family is said to have come from Armagh, Ireland – the same place as my branch of Gillespie. I have studied this Gillespie-Rainey branch at length, and have so far not been able to establish a single connection to my branch, which of course does not mean such a connection does not exist. And while there were also several Rainey families that did also migrate to the same area of Michigan, I don't find their name at the Southfield church. The only other Rainey connections to my family are a possible marriage between Samuel Greer and Mary J. Rainey around 1870 in Michigan, and an Agnes Rainey who was a witness at the marriage of James H. Gillespie and Belle Greer in Michigan.

Conclusion

I do not discount that relations of either the GREER or GILLESPIE families could have arrived in America, and specifically the New York Hudson Valley region before 1800. But here's what I do know about the Greer-Gillespie pioneers who migrated to Michigan from NY in the 1830s: they were all born in the 1770-1790 time frame in Ireland. It's possible the older ones, James Gillespie born in 1772

in particular, came to America earlier, but the evidence points to marriages in Ireland where some children were born as late as 1810. I thus conclude their arrival in America was after 1800.

Maybe these Gillespie-Greer's had familial ties in America already, and that's what drew them. Or maybe they were drawn by the religious freedoms being established by Covenanters who also came to the region during this time. There's no way to know based on the evidence to date, almost all of which was generated in Michigan. But based on NY census' and church records, here is my speculation about these particular families.

James and Jane Grier, and very likely at least one other family thought to include Nancy Gillespie and a Grier husband, resided in the town of Fishkill in 1820. They attended the Pleasant Valley Presbyterian Church and had several children baptized there between 1815-1822. By 1825, Joseph Grier – who surely has some connection to this Greer-Gillespie branch – resided in Montgomery, Orange, NY – the same place where John and James Grier could be found in 1830. My conclusion is that the Dutchess Grier's had moved across the river by that time, and together were planning their move to Michigan (where Joseph Grier was already enumerated in the 1830 census).

Meanwhile, where were the Gillespie's? Since we don't find Elizabeth Gillespie in any census, what about the other males who would later appear in Michigan, specifically Thomas and James? These two names can be found in Newburgh, Orange, NY in 1830, and in both cases the age range is close, although not as close as I wish it were. Because these names do not appear in earlier census', I speculate that they might have arrived in America later than the Grier's. Neither Thomas nor James appear to be direct descendants of the John Gillespie branch (at this point), but given their close ties with my branch, one must consider they might be descended from a close relation of John Gillespie.

All this leaves me with three other Gillespie names in Michigan whose origins in NY I cannot currently account for. These are:

1. Isabella Gillespie, b. 1813 Ireland or NY, d. 1891 unk but buried in Michigan. Isabella was the wife of John M. Greer (son of James and Jane Greer) and the mother of 15 children, one of whom was Belle Greer who married James H. Gillespie.
2. Thomas Gillespie, Jr., b. 1816 NY, husband of Ellen McClung, d. 1899 Michigan. His death certificate said his father was James Gillespie, possibly the man born in 1772 in Ireland?
3. Mary Ann Gillespie, b. 1816 Ireland or NY, d. unk. This person was the wife of Henry P. Sloat, who had neighboring property to our Michigan pioneers, and who was to become the guardian of Thomas Gillespie, Sr. when he was declared incompetent.

Because the probate records of Thomas Gillespie, Sr. say that he had only a niece and nephew alive as heirs at the time he was declared incompetent, I suspect that Isabella and Thomas Jr. might be siblings, and indeed children of the pioneer James Gillespie – even though, again, there is no direct evidence. Mary Ann Gillespie I might suspect to be a descendant of the Pine Bush Gillespie branch, mostly because the Sloat family could be found in the same area as that branch of Gillespie's. Again, however, evidence is lacking.

Please contact Mary Ann Schaefer at genealojist@gmail.com with comments or questions. My family tree with source documentation is available on ancestry.com and soon to be on rootsweb. Updated research information can be found at my website www.yesteryours.net/gillidx.html, which also provides a link to my research blog.