Pioneer Families

America is full of pioneer families. Every generation has progenitors to thank for coming to this country and helping to tame and settle its great continent.

This inaugural edition of Cummings Chronicles focuses on the early years of the Cumings family that landed on the east coast of America and kept making their way west as far as Kentucky, Texas and Colorado.

Cumings Leave Virginia for the Ohio Valley & Kentucky

The story of the Cumings family in America begins with two Samuels. Samuel Cumings (wife unknown) sired two sons, Anthony and James. Samuel Russel, an immigrant who came from Wales before the American Revolution, and his wife Sarah Moore, had several children, one of whom was a daughter named Rebekah. The two families joined their destinies together in the marriage of Anthony and Rebekah, on 14 September, 1775 in Loundoun County, Virginia. Twenty years earlier, in 1755, the Russels had established a farm south of Harper’s Ferry along the Northwest Fork of Goose Creek.

Within a year of their marriage, the newlyweds left their family’s homesteads for the new frontier opening up in the Ohio Valley. Anthony relied on his experience constructing and operating mills to establish one for a Quaker-inspired community on the Ohio River in Lewis County, Kentucky. Samuel Russel was motivated to send his daughter and son-in-law westward as an appealing alternative to Anthony’s ambition to join the Continental Army for the impending war for independence from Great Britain. As a Quaker, Russel opposed violence and felt that, if he could convince Anthony to go west, he could save him from the war.

Anthony rose to the adventure of moving west and, with an equally adventurous Rebekah, set off on an oftentimes harrowing trek through Indian territory to what was then the western frontier of a quickly waning colonial America. They made hearth and home in the Ohio Valley from 1777 to 1821. During this period Anthony and Rebekah had three sons (James, John and William) and twin daughters (Rebecca and Sarah.)

Austin’s Colony of 300 Beckons

By 1821 the United States was a young nation struggling to find its way in a bold political experiment called democracy. Its spirit was boundless, as were its continental aspirations. As the nation grew, the American western frontier kept expanding. When Moses Austin and his son, Stephen Fuller Austin, successfully negotiated with the Mexican government to bring a colony of 300 Anglo-Celtic settlers to help tame Tejas, James and John eagerly signed on.

So, in 1821, John and James Cumings came to the Mexican territory of Tejas from their family home in Lewis County, Kentucky. Within two years, they were followed by their brother William and his wife, Lucinda, and their mother Rebekah with their twin sisters, Rebecca and Sarah. Anthony had died in Kentucky in 1807 and Rebekah was sixty-four years old at the time they joined Austin’s Colony of 300.

John, the oldest, had negotiated a series of land grants in the Stephen F. Austin Colony for each of the Cumings family members. Each “head of a household” received a square “league” (4,428 acres) and a “labor” (177 acres). For “special skills or abilities” -- in this case, the building and operation of a mill for grinding grain and sawing logs -- they received an additional grant of five leagues known as a “hacienda” (22,140 acres). Altogether, the Cumings Family was granted over 40,000 acres.
acres in tracts near present-day Bellville, and south along the Brazos and San Bernard Rivers. However, because Austin was being held in prison in Mexico, the grants were not formally made until 1824. In the family archives, there are copies of several of these land grants signed by Stephen F. Austin.

Austin’s colony stretched from “10 leagues inland from the coast” (about 50 miles), and 150 miles northwest to the Camino Real (the route between San Antonio and Nacogdoches). The western boundary followed the Lavaca River and the eastern boundary was near the San Jacinto River. Both the Colorado and the Brazos Rivers watered the interior of the colony. The colony averaged about 125 miles in width.

The Cumings Mill Near Bellville

The location of Cumings Mill (the construction and operation of which justified the “hacienda” land grant) was south of Bellville and a few miles north of San Felipe on Palmetto Creek (also known as Mill Creek).

Russell Bennett Cummings, a great-great grandson of William and Lucinda, had a historic map of Texas showing the location of the Cumings Mill (see inset below).

When Russell died in 2008, the map passed to his older brother, Glenn Malcolm Cummings. When Glenn died in 2009, the map and many other family artifacts and letters passed to one of his four sons, Don Cummings, who is processing these materials for his brothers, and sister and their families. Cummings Chronicles is a publication which will seek to share many of these articles of interest with the whole family.

What Became of the Cumings Clan

In chronological order, here is some of what is known about the Cumings who came to help settle Texas with Stephen F. Austin’s Colony of 300.

William Cumings, (a Corporal in the Kentucky Mounted Volunteer Militia,) suffered a serious hip injury during the war of 1812 and was reinjured years later in Texas. His war injury became infected and he died of gangrene in September 1824. Cumings Chronicles will focus mainly on the descendants of William.

James Cumings died shortly after William in 1825 of tuberculosis. The same year he had a daughter named Sara who was noted at the time of her birth to be the first Anglo white child born in Texas. She became further distinguished at the age of eleven for dressing a battlefield wound suffered by Sam Houston at the Battle of San Jacinto. Houston and her father had been friends.

Sarah, one of Anthony and Rebekah’s twins, married George Bennett in 1830 in San Felipe, and died in childbirth along with her child in the spring of 1832. Rebekah, died at the age of seventy-two the same day Sarah, and her grandchild were buried.

Sarah’s twin sister, Rebecca, seems to garner most of the historic attention to the family. In the spring of 1833, an advertisement in the San Felipe newspaper noted that Cumings Inn on Mill Creek was open to “provide meals and lodging to travelers between San Felipe and Washington-on-the-Brazos.” The still single Rebecca Cumings, age 34, served as manager of the inn. In that capacity she met a traveler from Anahuac, Texas named William Barrett Travis. He was a lawyer (about 25 years old) with a head of curly hair, even redder than Rebecca’s.
Travis, an immigrant from Alabama, opened a law office in San Felipe with Robert “three-legged Willie” Williamson, (for whom Williamson County was named). Travis became engaged to Rebecca before he learned that he still had a wife and two children in Alabama. Travis and his wife were negotiating a divorce which required action by the Alabama State legislature, but by the time their bill of divorcement was voted on, he was already embroiled in the run up to the battle at the Alamo and he and Rebecca never married.

The Alamo museum has on display the cat’s eye ring that Rebecca gave to Travis upon their engagement. It used to be identified as such until about 2008. Then it was relabeled as the ring that Col. Travis gave to Angelina Dickinson, the daughter of Capt. Almeron Dickinson, one of the defenders of the Alamo. Angelina and her mother, Mrs. Dickinson, were the only Anglo survivors of the seige of the Alamo. Angelina had a hard life, drifting at times into prostitution in order to survive.

After her death the ring passed through several hands, ultimately becoming the property of an attorney in Houston named MacGregor, whose family donated it to the Alamo museum in 1970.

After Texas won independence in 1836, Rebecca, now in her 40th year, was still running the inn at Bellville, raising stock and accumulating in her own name the extensive Cumings holdings.

John Cumings, the last surviving sibling of those who came to Texas, died suddenly of natural causes in the spring of 1839.

In 1842, another red-headed southern lawyer rode into San Felipe and established a law office. Although 14 years her junior, David Young Portis, by now a member of congress in the republic of Texas, courted and married Rebecca in December 1843.

The 1860 US Census listed David Young Portis of Austin County, Texas, as owning 17 slaves, property in excess of 35,000 acres valued at $100,000 plus personal property worth $20,000. A two-story white frame house still stands in San Felipe where Rebecca Cumings and her husband David lived.

Rebecca Cumings Portis died at age 77 in 1875 and is buried in San Antonio in a cemetery a few blocks from the Alamo.

The Family Crypt in Bellville

In Bellville today, appropriately on East Hacienda Street (at Tesch Road), there is a public park surrounding the Cumings family vault where some fifteen members of this pioneer family are buried. There are benches, trees and a large map showing the location of the Cumings “hacienda” in relation to this site. Unfortunately, the map has not weathered well, but it still gives a sense as to the scope of the Cumings land holdings, though the map represents only about half of the total acreage the family possessed.

There is also a Texas State Historical marker which marks the significance of the site with these words:
Cumings Family Vault

Rebecca Cumings and her three brothers, James, John, and William, migrated to Texas from Virginia in 1821. As members of Stephen F. Austin's "Old 300" colony, they were given 20,000 acres here in return for the construction and operation of a mill on a nearby creek. Two years after the 1885 deaths of William's son and grandson, Samuel Cumings and Samuel, Jr., this family vault was built for their reinterment. Constructed of stuccoed brick, it was designed by Samuel's son George. Fifteen members of the Cumings family are buried here. (1981)

From Then to Now

Here is the progression of generations since the death of William and Lucinda. They had one son named Samuel Anthony. It is not known whom he married, but he had a son named Samuel Anthony Cumings, Jr.

Samuel Anthony, Jr. married Nancy Ellen Souter and among their nine children was Frank Pleasant Cumings. In a strange coincidence to Rebekah's death on the day of the burial of her daughter, Sarah and her granddaughter who had both died at childbirth, both Samuel Sr. and Samuel Jr. died on the same day.

Frank Pleasant Cumings married a girl from another of Bellville's founding families. As children, the two had played in a ravine separating their houses. Lucy Glenn cast her lot with Frank in marriage on November 4, 1886. Their marriage certificate is in the family archives. As witness to the prominence of both families in Bellville, the Bellville hospital has two locations: one is on E. Glenn Street, the other is on N. Cumings St.

Eventually Frank and Lucy moved to Houston. There is in the family archive one of Frank's business cards from that period indicating that he was a fine watch repairman in the Travis Theater Building at 614 Travis Street. The westward journey of the Cumings family was not yet done, but the next leg of their migration will await another edition of Cummings Chronicles.

Frank and Lucy had five children:

- Ethel Samuel
- Frankie Portia
- Glenn Souter
- Neil Elroy
- Lucian Alexander

Glenn Souter married Vera Bennett and they had two sons: Glenn Malcolm and Russell Bennett Cumings.

Glenn Malcolm’s Brood

Glenn Malcolm married his high school sweetheart, Madlyn Elizabeth Newsome. They had four sons and two daughters:

- James Scott
- Don Carroll
- Paul Quillian
- Lucy Linda
- Suzanne Elizabeth (died moments after birth)
- Timothy Christopher

This generation of the Cumings clan have children and some have grandchildren of their own by this time. Lucy Ann Glenn Cumings (called Momma Lucy) was still living when Scott, Don and Paul were born. Their lives were touched by one whose husband, Frank, was born in 1861, the year of Abraham Lincoln's inauguration as President of the United States. Great great grandsons of former slave owners, Scott, Don and Paul have lived to see the election of America's first African American president. Though the link through Momma Lucy is faint, from Lincoln to Obama represents a journey of breathtaking scope.

Glenn Malcolm Cummings and Russell Bennett Cummings lived into the beginning of the 21st Century. Until their own departures from this mortal coil, they were the oldest surviving direct descendants of William Cumings. This entitled them to be buried in one of the few remaining places in the family crypt in Bellville. Neither chose to be buried there.
Their achievements will be the focus of future editions of Cummings Chronicles. In the mean time, notice must be given to a step Glenn Malcolm took that has affected all the Cummings after him. As a young man, in 1941, he legally restored the second “m” to Cummings. Family lore has it that the original spelling contained two “m”s, but one of our ancestors who served as a judge tired of signing his name to so many documents that he dropped out one “m” to make his task lighter. There is considerable debate about this among the family historians, but that’s our story and we’re stickin’ to it!

Reported, written and published 01/20 by Don Cummings on behalf of his siblings and all their families. with thanks to T. Austin Cumings for some details in this edition gleaned from his book “A Splendid Country.” Other details came from a history mounted on the back of Russells map.

Photo Gallery

Unless otherwise indicated, all items pictured are held in the family archives by Don Cummings either in Brecksville, OH or Shawnee, CO

Retrospective article about Sara Anne Cumings

This Day... In Texas

The wall of a new-born child of American parentage was heard for the first time in Texas on this morning in 1825. She was promptly christened Sara Anne Cummings by her father, James Cumings, one of the earlier settlers in Stephen F. Austin's colony.

The first "Miss Texas" was to appear in the annals of history. As an 11-year-old she was called upon to display the skill and gentleness of her sex in bandaging the wounded leg of one of her father's friends, Sam Houston.

No entry was made of Miss Cummings' birth by the Catholic Church until two years later, when the first priest came to Austin's colony.

Cumings had received a grant of land from Commissioner Baron De Zavala on July 7, 1824.

Curtis Bishop.

Obituary

Mrs. Nancy Ellen Cumings, mother of E. W. Cumings and aunt of L. W. Cumings, both of this city, died at the home of her son, F. P. Cumings in Sealy, Friday morning. She had been living at the home of her daughter, Mrs. S. M. Hood, there, and was in fairly good health, but Sunday went over to her son's home for a visit of a few days and was stricken ill there and died very suddenly at the ripe old age of eighty-four.

Mrs. Cumings was a pioneer of Texas having come here in an early day and settled at Bellville, Austin County. The husband and father died there in 1885 and since then she has lived among the children. She was the mother of eight boys and one daughter, who survive her to mourn her loss.

The funeral will be held in Bellville at the home of the son, G. S. Cummings, Saturday morning and the remains will be laid to rest in the family vault.

Nancy Ellen Cumings was mother of Frank Pleasant & grandmother of Glenn Souter Cumings

Early Family Business Cards

Samuel A. Cumings, Attorney and Counselor at Law.
BELLVILLE, AUSTIN COUNTY.
TEXAS.

F. P. CUMINGS
FINE WATCH REPAIRING

Samuel's card is held by Lucinda Cummings Kilmer - San Antonio

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Geneology of the Cumings Family in Momma Lucy’s Own Hand

Frank and Lucy Cummings Marriage Certificate

According to a letter Glenn Malcolm wrote to his brother Russell on January 2, 2001 (Glenn’s birthday,) the Family Bible was bought in 1842 for three dollars at a store in Columbia, Texas. Glenn further noted that the hospital on N. Cumings St. in Bellville sits on the site of the old Cumings two story white house “where the kids played and grew up with the kids of the Glenn family. The ravine between the adjoining properties is all that remains today.”
Lucy Ann Glenn Cumings at Frankie & Trevor’s cabin on Turkshead. Frankie was one of Lucy’s daughters.

Momma Lucy with Pal, her son Glenn Souter Cumings’ dog, probably at Glenn & Ethel’s S. Windemere home in Littleton, Colorado.

Portrait of Lucy Ann Glenn Cumings

Lucy Ann Cumings at Littleton Colo.) Independent November 17, 1950

LUCY ANN CUMINGS
DIES IN 88TH YEAR

The long and active life of a gracious Southern woman came to a close at 7 p.m., Sunday, with the passing of Lucy Ann Glenn Cumings, 88, at St. Joseph’s Hospital. Although she was hospitalized five weeks, she was active till October. This fall she moved to Oklahoma with her son, Glenn.

Mrs. Cumings was born on Jan. 19, 1882, at Bellville, Texas, and was married in that city to Frank P. Cumings on Nov. 4, 1898. She had five children but lost one of her sons in 1929.

Mrs. Cumings’ father, Alexander Glenn, was one of the founders of the Republic of Texas, and so she naturally became a member of the organization, Daughters of the Republic of Texas. Her husband’s family was also a Texas pioneer family, as the first white child born there was a Cumings.

After moving to Littleton in 1941, Mrs. Cumings continued to direct her home. She was a wonderful cook and spent much of her time sewing and quilting until her eyesight grew dim. She then sat out in the yard by the house and played the piano by the hour.

Surviving Mrs. Cumings are a son and daughter, Glenn and Ethel Cumings of S. Windermere Ave., daughter, Mrs. Trevor Currie, 110 Grant St., Denver; and another son, Neil Cumings, Houston, Texas. There are three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Services were conducted at 3 p.m. Tuesday at the Nichol Hill Chapel by the Rev. Ernest Smith of the First Baptist Church of Denver, and burial was at Littleton. The pallbearers were C. E. Taturn, Duke Simon, Wesley Corder, Harold Abbott, Bert Kuyk, and Leo Grout.
The seven grandchildren mentioned above were Glenn Malcolm’s children Scott, Don, Paul, Lucy, and Tim; and Russell’s children David and Karen. The three great grandchildren were Scott and Ellen’s daughters Terry and Alice, and Don and Bonnie’s daughter Sally.

At the time of his death, Grampa was in Denver visiting Aunt Frankie, shortly after the death of their brother Neil in Houston. Grampa had spent the last several weeks tending to Neil in his latter stages of cancer. Frankie stepped across the hall to borrow something from a neighbor. When she returned she found that Grampa had slipped away quietly with a heart attack in the chair where she had left him. I always felt Grampa had laid down his life for his brother, caring for Neil until he had drained his own reserves of strength. The timing of Grampa’s death was especially poignant for Bonnie and me because he was passing through Denver on the way to Ogden where we all anticipated with joy his first meeting with Sally who was about 15 months old. It was not to be. I flew to Denver for his funeral and Bonnie and Sally met me in Ogden the following week. On the plane to Denver I listened to the onboard classical music channel which was playing Vaughn Williams “Fantasia on Greensleeves,” a tune I had first heard as a child sitting in the hallway of Thatcher Elementary School. It was sung by our music teacher (“What Child Is This”) as part of our Christmas program. Once back in Ohio, I bought the vinal recording and later upgraded to a digital version. I still listen to the music that blessed me on the way to Grampa’s funeral.