

DISCOVERING JOHN COLTER

New Research on His Family and His Death

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As a scout and a hunter for Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, John Colter's adventures were well documented. But before and after the expedition Colter seemed to have a knack for slipping into, and just as quickly out of, the limelight. Gradually some of the facets of his life are emerging from the dust of two centuries.

An exhaustive and ongoing search for the parentage of John Colter has resulted in endless bottlenecks and dead ends. There may be a very good reason for that: Colter researchers quite possibly have been barking up the wrong genealogical tree.

Recent yDNA testing and data results, conducted from 2009 to 2013, reveal a very strong connection on John Colter's paternal side to the Cannon family of Virginia. Earliest known ancestors are Simcock and Jeremiah Cannon, both born in or near Henrico County, Virginia, circa 1725-1730.¹ Subjects involved in the testing were: 1) Timothy F. Coulter, descended from John Colter's grandson, Joseph Colter (1840-1891); 2) Dennis Coulter, descended from John Colter's grandson, Nathan Colter (1842-1926). Testing the yDNA (male line only) was performed by Family Tree DNA. Subjects were tested on the Haplogroup Paternal tree, 67 STR markers. So what does this mean? To begin with, DNA testing is always more meaningful when combined with genealogical paperwork. Both subjects are tested at the yDNA 67 marker levels and both are grouped in the haplogroup E1b1b1. The test for both subjects resulted in high percentages at the 7th and 8th generational level,² suggesting a high probability that either John Colter (referred to as "JC" in the following paragraph) or his father was fathered by a Cannon, but raised as a Colter. If this is the case, Colter's direct



John Colter in his mountain man days, as painted by John Bruce, Mariposa, California.

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descendants are still DNA-blood descended from him, since the said tributary occurred upstream from him. Ongoing testing continues, with the goal of determining when the Colter-Cannon DNA connection began.

For a number of reasons JC could have been a grandson of, or associated with, the John and Isabella Coalter family of Stuarts Draft, Augusta County, Virginia. His parents are frequently said to be Joseph (son of John and Isabella) and Ellen Shields Coalter. Most

Colter researchers, including Shirley Winkelhoch, the late Ruth Colter Frick, and the author, agree that this is not true, since their son John lived until 1842, whereas JC was born about 1774 and died on May 7, 1812. However, two of John and Isabella's sons, a James or a John and their wives, may have raised JC. There is reason to believe that the first son, John, and his wife may have migrated to Fayette County, Kentucky, and could have raised JC. James, the other son of John and Isabella, migrated to Madison County, Kentucky, in 1795. Since it is believed that JC had already been living in Kentucky when he signed up with Lewis and Clark on October 15, 1803, it is plausible to surmise that he moved with one of these couples to Kentucky. Madison County is where JC's future daughter-in-law, Margaret Davis, was born in 1808, a daughter of John and Rachael West Davis. Margaret would later marry JC's son Hiram in Franklin County, Missouri, in 1826.

It is interesting to note the large contingent of Madison County, Kentucky, families that moved to Franklin County, Missouri, and literally next door to where Colter settled after he returned from his days of exploring and trapping on the upper Missouri watershed and Rocky Mountains. Based on information from tax records, land grants, deeds, and New Haven, Missouri, historian, educator, and community leader David M. Menke, some of these families were the John Davis family, the Maupins, the Philip Miller family, the Heatherlys, the Greenstreets, and the Richardsons.³ Living just down the river was Daniel Boone and his family, and as Dr. Lowell M. Schake points out, the Hancock family, including Forrest Hancock who joined Colter in 1806 for a return trip to the west, who may have known each other years before⁴ while living in close proximity in Madison County, Kentucky, and possibly at Fort Boonesboro, the Grand Central Station of its day. In a related historical coincidence, it was recently discovered that William Hancock (brother to Forrest Hancock, who along with Joseph Dixon, were the first to return with Colter to the West) is actually buried in the same small Presbyterian Cemetery in Franklin County, Washington, Missouri, where the author's father, Forrest Coulter, is also buried along with his parents, and several other immediate Coulter family members.

The maiden name of John Colter's wife in Missouri has long been a source of much speculation. His wife's first name has been written as Lucy, found on an estate paper, and as Sally, on a voucher form. Sally, of course, is often a nickname for Sarah. The author has found substantial evidence to believe that the name of John Colter's wife in Missouri was Sarah Lucy Davis. In the Franklin County section of a recent book by Marsha Hoffman Rising is found the following, dated March 7, 1833: "All heirs at law of John Davis, late of Franklin County, deceased intestate, sold to John Miller all their undivided eleventh parts to described land in Franklin County." It goes on to list all the heirs and their spouses. Significant, is the listing of, "Hiram Colter by his INTERMARRIAGE to Margaret Davis."⁵ Margaret Davis's mother, Rachael West Davis, did not have any sisters, only brothers. So in order for this to have been an intermarriage, John Colter would have had to marry Margaret Davis's aunt or first cousin (or in other words, John Davis's sister or niece). More likely, Colter married a sister of John Davis, which would have made Hiram and Margaret first cousins, and would be considered an intermarriage as recorded in John Davis's deed. Therefore, John Colter's wife's maiden name would have been Davis. It is also very possible that Colter fathered Hiram through a first wife in Kentucky. A Mary Ann Brown has been identified as a first wife of Colter in 1797, an assertion currently in the process of verification. The late Ruth Colter Frick noted that Hiram and Margaret's older children told the census record keeper that *both* of their parents were born in Kentucky.⁶ It is not likely that Hiram was married at age fifteen, so the probability that Kentucky was his place of birth is rather high. Margaret Davis Colter was born in Madison County, Kentucky, in 1808. John Colter and Sarah Lucy Davis Colter also had a daughter, named Evelina, born between late 1809 and 1812.

Most historical accounts record John Colter's place of death as Dundee, Missouri, just a few miles east of where he lived. Colter mustered with Nathan Boone's Rangers for a three month stint, March 1812 to June 1812. But his service was cut short. Shirley Winkelhoch, a Colter direct descendant and a long-time researcher, uncovered documentation that proved he was discharged from Nathan Boone's rangers on May 6, 1812,



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

A view of the Missouri River near present-day New Haven, Missouri. This is the land where Colter settled and where his son, Hiram, and possibly John himself are buried. The view is one that Colter would have seen in 1809-1812, minus a number of trees. The view is to the east (down river) toward where La Charette would have been.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

A view of the Missouri looking west (up river) from the land on which Colter settled.

and died the very next day—May 7th, 1812.⁷ This was significant, because previously all historical accounts recorded his death as occurring in November 1813.

After personally researching the construction of Missouri forts and blockhouses used for protection against Indian raids and the defenses against the British, the author discovered that Nathan Boone's group of rangers were in the business of constructing and overseeing Fort Mason in April/June⁸ near present day, Saverton, Missouri, in Ralls County—about 125 miles north of Colter's home, near the Salt and Mississippi Rivers north of St. Louis and south of present day Hannibal, Missouri.⁹ It is a very long way from John Colter's home; a very long way from Dundee, indeed. In the

Lyman Draper interviews with Nathan Boone, Boone states, "Shortly after I raised a company, we marched up the Mississippi accompanied by General Benjamin Howard and established FORT MASON, located about 15 miles above the mouth of the Salt River on the west bank of the Mississippi."¹⁰ Fort Mason was completed sometime in mid- to late-May 1812. So we knew that John Colter died on May 7, and now we know where and what he had been doing—patrolling and protecting the frontier in that district and constructing Fort Mason, one of the many skills at which he undoubtedly became quite accomplished in his life. Ron Leake of the Ralls County Historical Society and a historian specializing in the construction of Forts and the War of 1812, related emphatically to the author that John Colter was at Fort Mason in April/May of 1812.

John Colter probably succumbed from a very acute bile/liver duct blockage, or yellow fever/malaria, causing the reported jaundice color of his skin at the time of his death. Jaundice is just one of the visible symptoms of such a blockage, of yellow fever, or malaria. Knowing now where John Colter was when he died creates a cloud of doubt regarding where was he buried. Factoring in the distance from his home, and the condition of his jaundiced body, in the author's opinion, slightly tips the scale for a burial on site near Fort Mason, or somewhere en route down the Mississippi. If true, this might account for the never adequately explained eighteen-month gap between the time Colter died, and the time his personal estate was opened. There may have been Territory of Missouri by-laws governing a waiting period before opening up an estate, if a physical body was not produced. That being said, if ever there was a man who would have done his very best to return home the body of his trusted and respected friend, that man would have been Nathan Boone. And as a final tribute to his comrade-in-arms, Nathan named one of his sons John Colter Boone. Thus, this story ends for now, and the research continues, with new discoveries yet to be uncovered. 🌿

Tim Coulter's interest in John Colter, his fourth great grandfather, began with many conversations he had with his aunt, Ruth Coulter Frick, and his father, Forrest Coulter. Soon after both his aunt and father passed away in 1999, Tim was inspired to pick up the baton and begin his own research into the genealogy

of John Colter. Tim and his wife of thirty years, Julia, live in Evansville, Indiana. They have two sons, Samuel and Alexander. Tim is a retired occupational therapist.

NOTES:

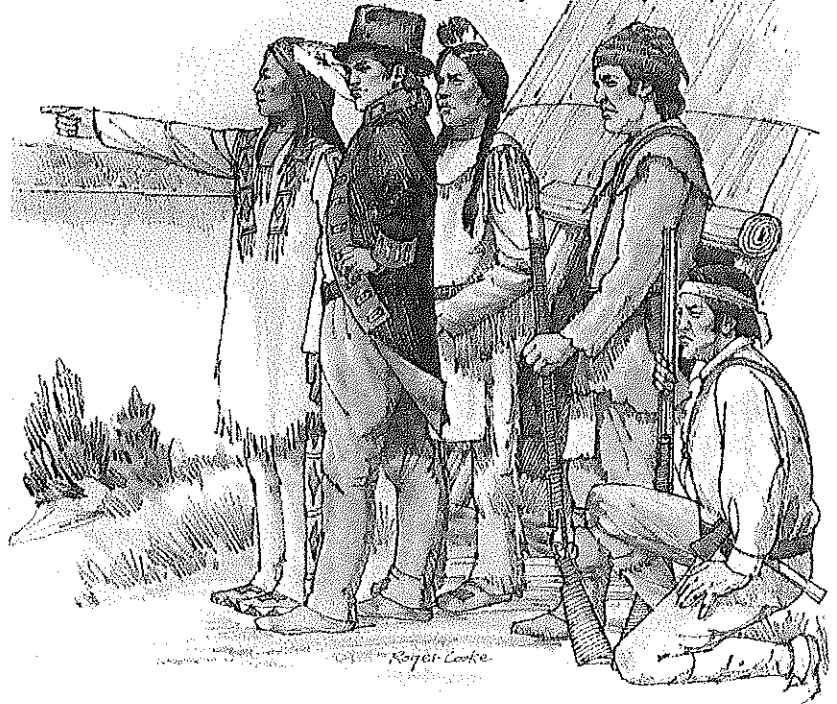
1. Cannon family genealogy contribution by Cecilie Gaziano, a Cannon descendant.
2. "Cannon Surname DNA Project Website –Y-DNA Classic Chart," Family Tree DNA – Gene by Gene, Ltd., accessed October 15, 2009. <http://www.familytreedna.com/public/Cannon/default.asp?section=yresults,Kit#165163and#309094>.
3. David M. Menke, *New Haven Its Past and People* (New Haven, Missouri: Leader Publishing, 2002), 25-32.
4. Lowell M. Schake, PhD, *La Charrette* (Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse, 2005), 132.

5. Marsha Hoffman Rising, CG, FASG, *Genealogical Gems From Early Missouri Deeds 1815-1850* (Westminster, Maryland: Heritage Books, 2004), 118.
6. Ruth Colter-Frick, *Courageous Colter and Companions* (Washington, Missouri: self-published, 1997), 196.
7. Ibid, 135.
8. Neal O. Hammon, ed., *My Father, Daniel Boone: The Draper Interviews with Nathan Boone* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 129.
9. Michael D. Harris, *History of Missouri and Illinois Territory 1808-1815*, <http://usregular0.tripod.com/warof1812/id3.html>, accessed 2008.
10. Hammon, *My Father, Daniel Boone*, 129.

DON'T MISS THESE HIGHLIGHTS:

- Pre-and post-meeting tours
- Golf tournament
- Pacific Northwest Living Historian's Encampment
- Dutch-Oven Cooking Class
- Young Explorers Program
- Entertaining Speakers

46TH ANNUAL MEETING
LEWIS AND CLARK TRAIL HERITAGE FOUNDATION
"THE GREAT COLUMBIA RIVER"
AUGUST 3-6, 2014, RICHLAND, WASHINGTON
"the natives showed me the entrance of a large Westery fork which they Call Tâpetâtt..."



In this image by Northwest artist Roger Cooke, two Sahaptian-speaking men show Captain William Clark and his two-man party the confluence of the Columbia and Yakima rivers. Clark called the Yakima River both the Tâpetâtt and the Tâpetal; the name (tâpetal) comes from a Yakama village further up the river. Painting on board in watercolor, ink, and pencil by Roger Cooke, 2003. Courtesy, Washington State Historical Society.

The 46th annual meeting will be in Richland, at the mouth of Clark's Tâpetâtt River.