

Note: This was originally written in 1995. While the general history and the family stories here are correct, we now know that Samuel never joined any wagon train to Tennessee or Kentucky. He joined the U.S. Army in 1801 and eventually found himself in Louisiana, where he deserted. Return to the “Scratchings” page and read “Sam_LA.pdf” and “Sam_MD.pdf” for more recent research. -Alan Barber, 2005

Samuel Barber’s Ancestry

Little is known of Samuel Barber’s birth or of his family. Two of his granddaughters have written letters that tell us what little is known.^{1,2} He was probably born in Hagerstown, Maryland, but moved with his family to Harpers Ferry, Virginia (today West Virginia). His parents died when he was young and Samuel was raised by an uncle.

Even less is known of Samuel’s parents. His marriage certificate lists them as Samuel Barber and Elizabeth Burroughs³, however, neither name is listed in the 1790 census for Hagerstown. The 1790 census for Virginia has been lost. However, there is another curious story which shows up in many accounts of Samuel’s origins, such as this excerpt from the obituary of Amos Joshua Barber, a grandson:

“Samuel Barber’s mother was Elizabeth Warren of Roxburg, Mass. She was a sister of General Joseph Warren of Bunker Hill Fame.”⁴

Now Joseph Warren was a prominent physician in Boston before the Revolutionary War, a friend of Paul Revere’s, an early agitator for independence,

commander of the Americans at Bunker Hill, and one of the 145 Americans killed there. It's easy to see how anyone would be proud to claim him as ancestor. And there was indeed a large number of Barbers in the Massachusetts and Connecticut area, descendants of Thomas Barber, who arrived there from England in 1635. But, oddly enough, some early Barber descendants say nothing of this Warren connection when logically they should be expected to. Amos Joshua Barber himself wrote an entertaining memoir, but said nothing of Joseph Warren when writing of his grandfather's origins⁵. Lots of people, including me, have tried to find this Warren connection and have failed. The Warren family is well documented^{6, 7, 8}. Joseph Warren had no sister, only three brothers.

Another tale frequently encountered suggests that Samuel's mother (or his wife's mother) was stolen by Indians as a child and later rescued. There is a fascinating account of Joseph Warren's grandmother's brother's family suffering an Indian massacre in Deerfield, Massachusetts, with the mother and two children killed, the rest carried away by Indians and rescued three years later⁹. Was this the source of the Barber family legend? Was there any Barber family connection to the Warrens? No one knows.

Samuel's birth date is variously given as 1780 and 1790. There is no birth certificate available, but there are other hints to help us guess at his birth year. Lucinda Dunman, his granddaughter who was with him at his death in April, 1864 said "... he was some eighty or maybe close to ninety when he died."¹ On the other hand, Samuel appears on the U. S. federal censuses for 1810, 1820, and 1860. The 1810 census gives his age as 16-26, the 1820 census as 26-45, and the 1860 census as seventy years. A birth year of 1789 or 1790 is consistent with all these census figures. This would make him about a year older than his wife and his age twenty four when he married in November, 1813. Lucinda's suggestion of "close to ninety" would make him "close to forty" when he married, and some fifteen years older than his wife; unlikely, I believe. I vote for 1789, give or take two years.

Harpers Ferry

By all accounts Samuel ran away from home as a teenager, Mary Barber says age 14², Lucinda Dunman says 18 or 20¹. According to Mary "an uncle was rearing him and was strict on him he joined a wagon caravan and they never heard from him or he of from them". This would make the date 1803 by Mary's accounting. Lucinda's reckoning could place this date as early as 1794, since she believed he was close to ninety at his death in 1864. I believe the 1803 date is most likely accurate.

Harpers Ferry was a well established small town by 1803. The ferry had been in operation more than a half century and Robert Harper had died some twenty years earlier. George Washington himself had recognized the strategic value of its location in 1751 when he helped survey the townsite as a lad of sixteen. Here, fifty miles above Washington, D.C., the Shenandoah



“Now here is what I know to be true: my grandfather Samuel Barber ran away from Harpers Ferry, West Virginia when he was 14 years old...” Mary Barber Barrow.

River joins the Potomac. A ferry placed here could earn its owner profits from travellers needing to cross either river. And the volume of water flow over the steep limestone river beds made the location ideal for water powered industry. Grist mills operated on both rivers. George Washington had insisted on the location for a federal armory which, now in operation two years, employed twenty five men¹⁰.

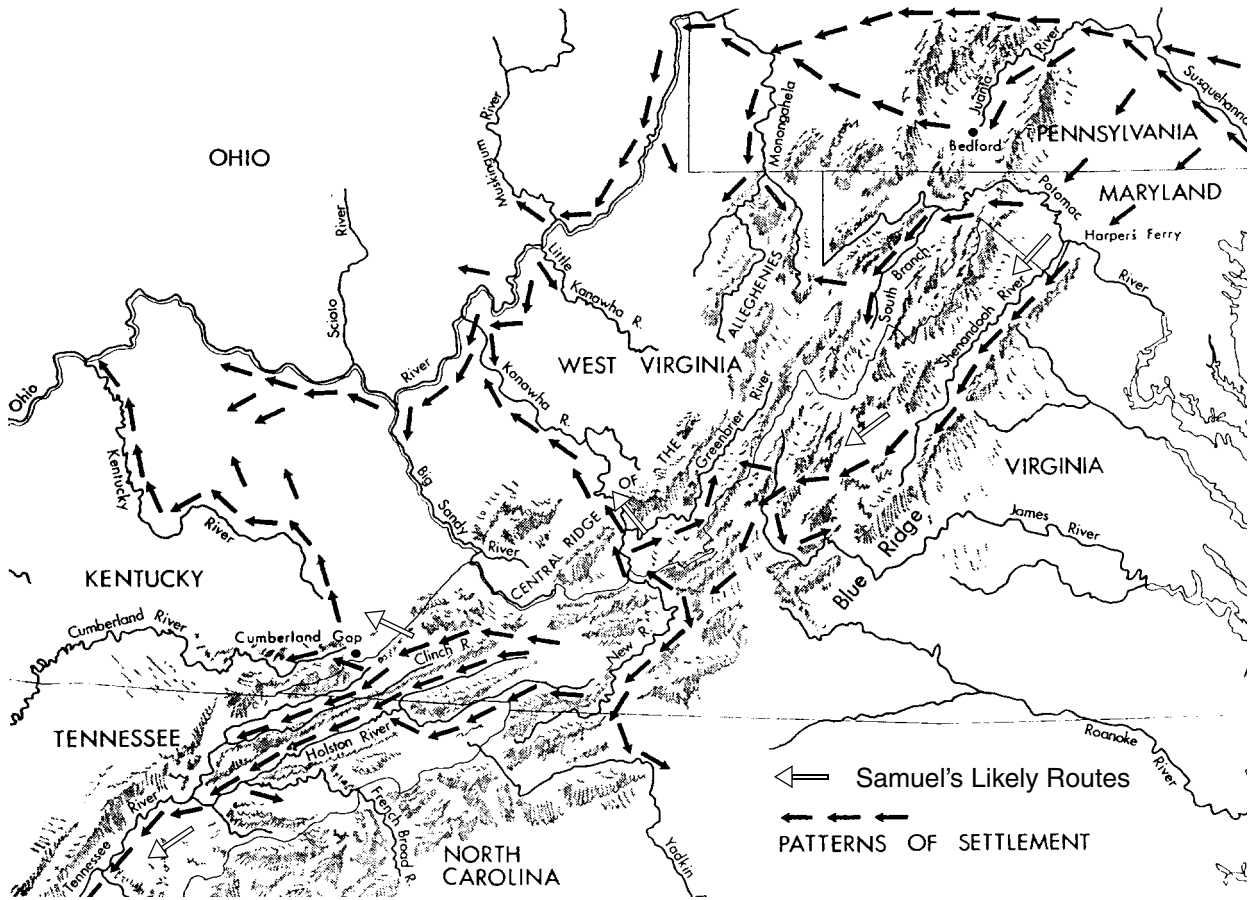
But it is unlikely that Samuel lived in town. He, and his sons after him, were farmers and stockmen all their lives, and it's probable that Samuel grew up the same way in Harpers Ferry. The limestone soils of both the Potomac and Shenandoah valleys above Harpers Ferry supported both small plantations and livestock.¹¹ There, no doubt, is

where Samuel learned the way of life he took to Louisiana and Texas.

When Samuel decided to leave home around 1803 he didn't have to go far to catch a ride. Harpers Ferry was a major crossing point for emigrants to the Shenandoah Valley through the last half of the 18th century. By the early nineteenth century the best land in the valley had been taken but the settlers continued to flow through. Most continued up the Shenandoah to its head and followed the Watauga, Holston, Clinch, or French Broad rivers to good farming lands along the Tennessee River. Others turned east by way of the Staunton River Gap to the Carolinas or pressed onward through the Cumberland Gap to the Cumberland River valley or the Kentucky Bluegrass country¹¹.

It might seem that the shortest route to Louisiana from Harpers Ferry would be directly to the Ohio River then down the Ohio and Mississippi. However, the same high mountains that kept West Virginia isolated and backward until the twentieth century also directed emigrant traffic to the south. There simply were no good routes through the mountains to the upper Ohio from the upper Potomac as there were from Pennsylvania. And very little traffic through Harpers Ferry was bound for Louisiana. Wagon caravans held farmers in search of good cheap land; and to Virginians in the early nineteenth century that meant Tennessee and Kentucky. So I believe that the first vagabonding act of Samuel's life was to hook up with a wagon car-

avan passing through Harpers Ferry. On it were farmers seeking a new life in Kentucky and Tennessee.



*With no direct routes to the Ohio River from Harpers Ferry, it's likely that Samuel followed one of these routes to Kentucky or Tennessee on his way to Louisiana. (Map from *The Allegheny Frontier*)*

The earliest date that Samuel is known to be in Louisiana is 1807¹², near Baton Rouge. Of the four or so years since leaving Harpers Ferry it's likely he spent one or more in Tennessee or Kentucky. There is no reason to believe that Louisiana was his intended destination, since he simply bounced around when he got there, never connecting with family or acquaintances from Virginia. If the destination of his travelling companions was Tennessee or Kentucky, he could easily have spent a couple of years with them, farming and raising cattle, as he did the rest of his life.

Another reason to suspect Samuel spent time in Tennessee or Kentucky is that there was plenty of traffic between there and Louisiana. As the earliest settlers who arrived in the late 1700's became established, their farms pro-

duced a surplus. The nearest markets may have been in Virginia and the Carolinas, but the easiest, by far, was New Orleans. Upriver and uphill travel with freight was very difficult; the greater distance downstream was far more popular. And the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had eliminated the political and military difficulties of freighting through French or Spanish territory. New Orleans was a thriving seaport; goods from Tennessee and Kentucky could be marketed worldwide.¹³

In fact, many legends have grown around this brief period at the turn of the century on the rivers between Louisiana and Kentucky. Who hasn't heard of "Mike Fink, King of the River"? Each year literally thousands of farmers turned boatmen would build flatboats, load them with their year's surplus produce or home industry products, and charge down the rivers to New Orleans before prices dropped with the arrival of more flatboats. Then these "Kaintucks" (as they were called regardless of their origin) would sell their boat for lumber and return on foot over the Natchez Trace to Nashville and home, if they survived the highwaymen on the Trace. During this first decade of the nineteenth century the traffic on the Natchez Trace was almost exclusively northbound.¹⁴

Most likely Samuel hopped aboard one of these New Orleans bound flatboats, around 1806, and floated his way down the Kentucky, Cumberland, or Tennessee River to the Ohio, the Mississippi, and to Louisiana, where he would live twenty three years, marry, build a family, and fight in two wars before the vagabonding urge pulled him to his next destination.

Notes

1. Lucinda Winfree Dunman, letter to Mrs. Lucille Tait, April 12, 1933, Coleman, Texas; from Flavia Fleischman, *Old River Country, A History of West Chambers County*. Lucinda was the daughter of Eliza, Samuel's youngest daughter.
2. Mary Barrow, letter to Mrs. Jack Silva, August 28, 1956, Beeville, Texas; from Barber file, Wallisville Heritage Park collection. Mary was the daughter of Benjamin, Samuel's fourth son.
3. Clara Vaughan Hatcher O'Brien, *Deep Roots and Strong Branches*, 1972; supplement, 1959, page 59.
4. The Bee-Picayune, Beeville, Texas, approximately June 3, 1941, Page Two.
5. Amos Joshua Barber, "The Memoirs of Amos Joshua Barber", reprinted in *Texas Illustrated*, August 26 and September 2, 1987. Amos Joshua was the son of Amos, Samuel's oldest son.
6. John Cary, *Joseph Warren, Physician, Politician, Patriot*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1961.

7. Richard Frothingham, *Life and Times of Joseph Warren*, Little, Brown, & Co., Boston, 1865
8. Rhoda Truax, *The Doctors Warren of Boston, First Family of Surgery*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1968.
9. Stephen W. Williams, editor, John Williams, *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, Hopkins, Bridgman, and Company, Northampton, 1853.
10. Dave Gilbert, *Where Industry Failed, Water-Powered Mills at Harpers Ferry West Virginia*, Pictorial Histories Publishing, 1984.
11. Otis K. Rice, *The Allegheny Frontier, West Virginia Beginnings, 1730-1830*, University Press of Kentucky, 1970.
12. Robert Jones vs Samuel Barber, *Spanish West Florida Papers*, p. 255.
13. Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier*, Oxford University Press, 1978.
14. James A. Crutchfield, *The Natchez Trace, A Pictorial History*, Rutledge Hill Press, 1985.