

William Jeffrey

A biography prepared by Jim Jeffrey and Ward Skinner, Nov 2019

William Jeffrey was born in the 1770s in Berwickshire, probably in the village of Chirnside. His actual birth date and birth place is unknown, because there is no record of a baptism recorded in the Scottish Old Parish Registers. His birth date is assumed to be in the 1770s because his name is recorded at the baptisms of his first two children, Andrew and Isabella, which occurred in 1800 and 1801 in Foulden parish, Berwickshire. It is assumed that he would've been between 21 and 29 when he first became a father. The witnesses at the baptism of his first son, Andrew, were Andrew Jeffrey and Peter Jeffrey. It is assumed that the first witness, Andrew Jeffrey, would've been William's father, because in the traditional Scottish naming pattern the firstborn son is named after his paternal grandfather (his father's father).

Tax records have survived for many of the Scottish parishes from the 18th century. In the Assessed Tax rolls from July 1798 for the village of Foulden (1 year 7 months before the birth of Andrew Jeffrey), a "William Jeffrey, smith Foulden" is listed. In the same Assessed Tax rolls from August 1798 for Chirnside (a village 4 miles west of Foulden), an "Andrew Jeffrey, smith Chirnside" and "Peter Jeffrey, smith Chirnside" are listed. These three men are believed to be the 'Jeffreys' listed on the baptism record of William's first son, Andrew. The Jeffreys of Berwickshire have traditionally been known to have dominated the profession of blacksmiths in the area.

"Andrew Jeffrey, elder" is listed among the 115 names on a document, dated 29 February 1782, calling John Reid to be the pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Chirnside. Assuming that an elder would have a significant history with a congregation before assuming the office of elder, Andrew would've been active in this church for at least a large part of the 1770s. This is why William is assumed to have been born in Chirnside.

The first record of William is in an account written by a "reader" of the Berwick Journal in 1888. The Berwick Journal was a weekly newspaper, and widely circulated in Northumberland, England and Berwickshire, Scotland. In a letter to the editor, dated 11 January 1888, this "reader" stated the following:

"In the end of the last, or the beginning of the present century, toll-bars were first placed on Berwickshire roads. Popular feeling against the tolls ran so high that a number of them were burned down. My father's uncle, William Jeffrey [who, earlier in this account, was described as a son of Andrew Jeffrey of Chirnside], was one of those who took part in the burning of the tolls. The country was scoured by military in search of the depredators, and a number of apprehensions took place. William Jeffrey was, however, able to escape. He lay for a considerable time in Whitehall plantation, concealed by its dense foliage, and was supplied with food under cover of night. How long he hid there I do not know, but in the end he fled to America."

The facts of this account have not been verified. There were documented "toll riots" in 1792 in Dunse, Greenlaw, Chirnside, and Paxton. But since this "reader" is writing > 95 years after the riots, the details

might have been “embellished” a bit. If this account is true, William would’ve been in his late teens or early 20s at the time of the riots.

William’s name next occurs in the financial records of the Chirnside United Secession Church (the Reformed Presbyterian Church mentioned above) from 1798-1802. This dissenting church kept records of individuals/families in the congregation who gave funds to the church, whether offerings, tithes, renting a pew, etc. William’s name is recorded as giving offerings in 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, and 1802. His father, Andrew Jeffrey, was an elder in this church in Chirnside, and his name shows up prominently in these records. William’s connection with this Chirnside church begs the question: Why were his first two children baptized in the Foulden Parish Kirk, and not in the Chirnside Kirk? No answer has been found to this question.

It was around this time (1798 or 1799) that William Jeffrey married Mary Edna Lyall, and worked as a blacksmith in the village of Foulden. The date of their marriage is uncertain because there are no records of the marriage in the Scottish OPRs. Their marriage was official, however, because at the baptism of their first son, Andrew in 1800, he is described as a “lawfull son” to William and Mary. As previously mentioned, they had a son born in 1800 (Andrew), a daughter in 1801 (Isabella), and then another daughter, Jean, born in 1803. There is no record of her baptism in Scotland.

William next appears in the official recording of a ‘tack’ (rental agreement) to possess the land and mill at Swinewood in Berwickshire, Scotland, commencing 26 May 1804. He is described as “William Jeffrey, smith in Foulden.” Swinewood is 5 ½ miles away from Foulden. The tack agreement was for William Jeffrey and his family to reside at Swinewood for 19 years. Swinewood Mill functioned as a corn mill on the Eye Water, a river that flows from the Lammermuir Hills east to the North Sea. This agreement meant that, for at least part of every year, William’s occupation would be a ‘miller.’ During the rest of the year, he could also function as a blacksmith, and there is evidence that a ‘smithy’ was located on the premises at this time. In the previous account of William, published in the ‘Berwick Journal,’ after the writer’s account of the Toll Riots and William traveling to America, he said, “He [William’] was a miller to trade, and was highly successful in America.”

After William and his family moved to Swinewood, they had two more children, a daughter, Catherine, born in 1806, and another daughter, Mary, born in 1809. There are no records of births or baptisms of these two children. Mary is buried in Woodstock, Oxford, Ontario, Canada, and her gravestone simply states she was born in “Berwick, Scotland.”

At this point in time, William’s story becomes a matter of conjecture. Two ‘Jeffrey’ historians describe his journey as follows:

- William M. Campbell, in his "The Family History of The Jeffrey-Masson Family" (November 1990), says, "Family tradition has it that [William] came out to Canada, probably in 1819, to help rebuild the St. Louis Gate at Quebec City. Again, according to family tradition, Mary (his wife) and their children came out to join William somewhat later."
- John A. Graham, in his Jeffrey research, states it this way, "Family tradition has it that [William] came to Canada alone, to help rebuild the St. Louis Gate in Quebec City. This would probably be in the period 1801-1802, or possibly up to 1819. Again, family tradition claims that Mary and her family followed William to Canada."

- William M. Campbell also, in a correspondence letter in 1991, stated the following: *"One of Andrew Jeffrey's grand-daughters, Ethelwyn Hutchison, had a scrapbook which contained some information in a somewhat disorganized fashion, and she claimed that William Jeffrey came to Canada first to rebuild the St. Louis gate in Quebec City. This is a general family tradition, so I am sure it is correct. His wife, Mary, and the rest of the family are supposed to have come out later and they settled on a farm at Keene, Ontario - near Peterborough. I have tried to confirm this through land records but without success, since the records at that time are not very good. Another dead end is where William was buried. According to Ethel Hutchison, he was buried in Keene Cemetery, but my wife and I searched it last June (1990) without success. He was supposed to be in the plot of his son-in-law, George Gillespie, but we did not find George's plot there, either. But George and Isabella Jeffrey were married in an Anglican church and their children were also baptised in this denomination, so I suspect that the Gillespie plot may be wherever the Anglicans buried, and that William Jeffrey may be buried there."*

It is known that Mary Lyall Jeffrey came to Canada with her children in 1820, and eventually settled in Cobourg. But the whereabouts of her husband, William, have not been discovered. At Mary's burial, in the Little Lake Cemetery in Peterborough in May 1857, the cemetery records show that her next of kin was her husband, W. Jeffrey. This most certainly would mean that William was still living, and in the area. No other information has been uncovered about William Jeffrey.