

My Search for the Identity of Elizabeth Fults Thompson

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I took a sudden interest in family history in 1977 that I have maintained since then. I was fortunate that my dad's mother had been interested in genealogy for years so unlike many people I had a head start on my research. I was also fortunate that I lived in Salt Lake City at the time. The LDS Family History Library, the world's largest genealogical library, was located a few blocks from where I lived. Despite my advantages, some problems proved very hard.

One of the toughest concerned the family of my grandfather's grandmother, Philadelphia, who married Simeon Savage. My grandparents knew that she was a Thompson, that she had brothers Jesse and Albert, and my grandmother had obtained an old Bible record giving her date of birth. Besides knowing a handful of cousins and that the family was associated with Grundy County, Tennessee, that was about it.

Progress was rapid at first. My grandmother and I made a trip to the local library where we discovered that the 1850 census of Tennessee was in print. Philadelphia would have been seven at this time. It was a simple matter to go through the listings where we soon found Philadelphia listed as apparently the oldest child of Thomas and Elizabeth Thompson along with some younger siblings in Warren County, Tennessee. Before long I had examined census records from later years showing that the family had moved into Grundy County by 1860 and had obtained a list of eleven children that included Jesse and Albert that my grandparents had remembered. I was able to locate death certificates for three of Philadelphia's siblings which all agreed that the parents were Thomas Thompson and Elizabeth Fults. Further progress beyond this point proved difficult. The rest of this note will be concerned with my search for the parents of Elizabeth.

After moving back to Tennessee in 1982 my grandmother and I made several trips to visit with people who might be able to share information with us about various branches of the family. Late in that year we had a visit with Glenn Bonner, a former superintendent of schools and also a great-grandchild of Thomas and Elizabeth. From Glenn we obtained some very important information. When I told him that I had learned that his great-grandmother was a Fults, something that he had not known, he told me that that explained something to him. Glenn said that many years ago when in Tracy City with his grandmother, Mary Thompson McCarver, they happened to pass by the office of the lawyer Jefferson Davis Fults. Mary told him that Jeff Fults was her first cousin.

I jumped to the natural conclusion – that the grandparents of Jeff Fults were also the grandparents of Mary McCarver. And Jeff Fults, being a prominent person, was easy to trace. His father was Smith Fults and his grandparents were Daniel and Philadelphia Fults. So I concluded that Elizabeth was the daughter of Daniel and Philadelphia. The natural conclusion I suppose – but as later research would prove – it was the wrong conclusion.

Unfortunately, I shared my mistaken conclusion with some correspondents. Although I later corrected it, the incorrect information was out there. I strongly suspect that my mistake is the reason one finds today many online family trees claiming that Elizabeth was a daughter of Daniel Fults and Philadelphia. Apparently, mistakes can persist for decades!

A close examination of the census records soon cast doubt on my conclusion. The census records for 1850 through 1880 were consistent in claiming that Elizabeth was born from 1821 to 1823. But the 1830 and 1840 censuses, while giving Daniel and Philadelphia a daughter born before 1820 and one born after 1825, didn't list any daughter born in the early 1820s.

My discomfort with my conclusion turned to a conviction that it was wrong when I found two biographies of Jefferson Davis Fults. Both gave the information that his grandparents were Daniel Fults and Philadelphia Thompson. The information that his grandmother was a Thompson made it seem likely that I had misinterpreted what Glenn had told me. Both biographies agreed that Daniel and Philadelphia had three children and the second of the biographies that I found, one in *Tennessee Democracy*, even listed their children. They were Feriba who died when 17, Lydia who married Wilson Purdom, and Smith Fults. Later I found county court records that gave the only heirs of Daniel and Philadelphia as Smith Fults and Lydia Purdom. Clearly, there was no daughter Elizabeth. It was back to the drawing board.

Although I had been mistaken in interpreting what Glenn Bonner had told me, I should point out here that Glenn was not mistaken. It eventually became clear that the correct relationship was that Philadelphia Thompson, the wife of Daniel Fults, was a sister of Thomas Thompson. In fact, in recent years Jack Thompson, a resident of Tracy City and great-grandson of Thomas and Elizabeth, confirmed this and what Glenn had told me long ago when he told me that his father and Jeff Fults were second cousins – exactly the relationship I now expected. This was an important lead for excellent progress on the Thompson family, but that is another story.

Examining the census records, there were only two Fults families in the area that became Grundy County who had a female child the age of Elizabeth in the 1830 and 1840 censuses. The big favorite was that she was the oldest child of Adam Fults and his wife Jane. This Fults family had lived near various Thompson families along with several Nunley families in Nunley's Cove for many years. The other Fults family that fit the census data was some distance away. Also, the naming pattern for the children of Thomas and Elizabeth supported this conclusion. It was fairly common in this time period for the first two daughters to be named for the two grandmothers. I knew that the first two daughters of Thomas and Elizabeth were named Philadelphia and Jane. I had learned in my Thompson research that the mother of Thomas was named Philadelphia. So, if Adam and Jane were the parents of Elizabeth it would fit this common pattern.

So the matter stood for a number of years with strong circumstantial evidence that Elizabeth was the daughter of Adam and Jane but no absolute proof. Many people had worked on this family but no listing of the family identified the oldest daughter – perhaps an indication that I was right. Then DNA testing came

along. I was able to test a number of descendants of Thomas and Elizabeth including four great-grandchildren. I also tested four great-grandchildren of Hiram Fults, a known child of Adam and Jane. At last I had my proof – the strength of the matches was conclusive. For example, the great-grandchildren of Thomas and Elizabeth matched the great-grandchildren of Hiram at the predicted third cousin level. Elizabeth was finally shown to be a daughter of Adam and Jane.

There is though a postscript to this story. Thomas Jefferson Barnes, the noted postman, historian, and genealogist of Warren County compiled extensive records on the families of Warren and Grundy Counties until his death in 1956. When he was doing his work, grandchildren of Adam and Jane were still living so he had access to memories that have been lost over the years. I had read his records of the Thompson and Fults families several times and even though he had listings of the family of Adam and Jane, just like everyone else, he didn't identify the oldest daughter. Just this year I read through his records of the Smartt family. I hadn't read them before because, as far as I know, I don't have a Smartt line. But, as the wife of Hiram Fults was a Smartt it was now important for me to know something about the family. I needed to understand better the DNA matches for descendants of Hiram that I had tested. Also, I was finding surprisingly close matches to descendants of Reuben Smartt among Thompson descendants that are still unexplained. On one typewritten page he had listed the family of John Smartt and Rachel Nunley. Then in longhand he had made some additions. He notes that Rachel was a sister of Ellis, Manuel, and Jerry Nunley. Then slanted across the bottom of the page there was a listing that he identifies as the children of Adam Fults and Janie Nunley. Perhaps he put the listing here because of Jane's relationship to the other Nunleys, or perhaps it is here simply because he had blank space on the bottom of the page. Anyway, in the list he writes "Bettie (oldest) Tommy Thompson." The work of forty years was complete.