

Cromartie Expedition 2010 –Duncan Cromartie

from The Cromartie Reunion News, August 14, 2010 newsletter

Duncan was born July 18, 1818 to Alexander and Elizabeth DeVane Cromartie in Bladen County, North Carolina. He was the ninth of ten children and the sixth son to reside in "Cederville," the subject of our program and house tour at our 2008 Reunion. Duncan's siblings were Elizabeth Ann, William, George, Alexander, John Alexander, James, Catherine Caroline, Mary Jane and Miriam Newell.

When he was just four years old, he experienced the terrible tragedy of having his mother and two of his [older] sisters die within two weeks of each other in August 1822. There are two stories associated with this tragedy, one is that the two children were poisoned by a servant and the mother died of a broken heart, and the second is that all three died of one of the prevalent diseases of those times - typhoid fever. His mother was 40 years old and his sisters Catherine Caroline and Mary Jane, were eight and six years old when they died.

Nine months later, Duncan would have a new mom, twenty seven year old Elizabeth Kerr, and within two years, Daniel Washington and Patrick Lafayette, twin brothers, would join the household at Cederville.

Having toured "Cederville" and knowing it only had four rooms at this time, one wonders how all these children were accommodated. From our study of "Cederville" we know their home wasn't expanded until around 1845, about the time Duncan left home to establish his own family.

Alexander, Duncan's father, managed a substantial plantation along the South River, was a slaveholder and undoubtedly had interests in other enterprises as well. A grist mill on his land and a turpentine still at what is now the intersection of US 701 and SR 210 (Hickory Grove) would indicate such. Living in that type of situation molded Duncan into the lifestyle and entrepreneurship that he would display during his adult life. The US Census records tell the story of just how industrious he was.

From 1860 US Census records, Duncan, at 42 years of age, had accumulated considerable wealth and certainly was among the wealthy class of Bladen County, listing his personal estate at \$54,362 and his real estate at \$27,941. That was an increase in real estate value of \$19,000 from the 1850 census. His 1860 personal estate included 59 slaves occupying 14 slave houses.

We have yet to determine all the activities he was involved in or the extent of his and his wife's inherited wealth but undoubtedly the expanding markets for naval stores and cotton, coupled with the invention of an efficient cotton gin, and his management skills were factors in his prosperity.

On December 12, 1843, Duncan, 25, married Mary Ann McKay, 19, and set up their family just outside of Elizabethtown, North Carolina. According to Duncan's daughter,

Mrs. Emmie Cromartie Covington, her father built them a “new” home in 1848-49. In the old Scot tradition of naming such things, he named it “Brompton.” The story behind the name and the materials for this home is quite interesting and has been the subject of at least two newspaper articles noting its North Carolina historical significance.

According to these newspaper accounts, Gabriel Johnson, Royal Governor of North Carolina from 1729 to 1775, intended to build his palace just up river from Elizabethtown near the Cape Fear River. He built a couple of homes there as quarters while his palace was being constructed. Bricks were brought from England, a 90 foot deep well was dug and foundations laid for the grand palace. But it seems the Governor’s wife had other ideas. Spring flooding of the low lying lands produced hordes of mosquitoes and malaria and she convinced the governor that this was no place to build their palace - the plans were abandoned and the property sold. Years later, the land and remaining structures were purchased by Duncan. He built a mill pond and grist mill on the property but he, seeing the wisdom of the Governor’s wife, disassembled the remaining house and restored it back from the River, four miles above Elizabethtown on the Lumberton Highway. He gave it the name intended for the Governor’s palace “Brompton.” In an article by the Rev. Nash A. Odom dated Nov 18, 1971, Odom describes the home as “still standing in a decaying condition near Dublin, N.C.” However, that is no longer the case. Lynn King and his son Lynn Grey took a liking to the old place. With much labor and love, they moved it westward on the Elizabethtown Highway 87 Bypass and restored its former beauty. During their labors they noted the axe hewn timbers were marked with Roman numerals to aid Duncan’s workmen in reassembling the home the first time it was moved and recycled.

The Presbyterian Church was the traditional church of the Cromarties but during the first half of the 19th century Methodism was on the rise in this area of North Carolina because of visits by the famous Methodist preacher Francis Asbury and other prominent itinerant preachers. This led to the founding of the Elizabethtown Methodist Church in 1834 and the purchase of a town lot for a church. A founding trustee of the church was Duncan’s older brother George. The lot was purchased from Louis Sheridan, a free black, who had accumulated considerable property in Elizabethtown and who eventually went to Liberia to live out his life teaching and preaching. The initial structure on the lot was replaced around 1848 with the existing Trinity Methodist Church on East Broad Street. Duncan’s slaves helped with its construction which would seem to have coincided with the re-building of his “Brompton” home. His daughter, Mrs. Emmie Cromartie Covington, would donate the beautiful curved pews for the church around 1916. Mrs. Covington would also become the first elected president of the Cromartie Reunion on August 29, 1929 and a leader in the project to place the William Cromartie Memorial marker at his home site on US 701.

The Cape Fear River and its tributaries played an important role in the settling and economic development of this region. Early on, the waterways were used to float rafts of logs and manpowered barges loaded with commodities to the markets in Wilmington that accessed the world. The coming of shallow draft steamboats in the mid 1800s saw

a marked increase in the ease and volume of river traffic and business opportunities. Landings along the river became post offices and spawned small communities. Some plantations on the river would have their own landings and six miles above Elizabethtown was Cromarties Landing in the vicinity of Duncan's mill pond and grist mill. In 1852, Duncan joined with his brother, George and six other partners to form the Bladen Steamboat Company. Steamboats were fast and relatively comfortable but were notorious for catching on fire. In February 1886, the Company's boat, the Bladen, became the ignition source of the Great Fire of Wilmington that destroyed much of the town. The fire started in the Bladen's cotton cargo near the boiler, spread to the naval stores and fed by near gale force winds quickly set fire to nearby boats, wharves and structures along shore. Though the damage was great, no lives were lost aboard or on shore. Seven passengers on the Bladen were rescued by other boats coming to their aid. The extent of Duncan and George's involvement in the company at that time is not known.

The War of Northern Aggression was certainly the defining event in the lives of Duncan and his family. Like many Confederate families, Duncan saw his oldest son, Junius off to war. During actions around Fort Fisher, Junius was captured while performing courier duty and sent to the Union POW camp at Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River. He died there on April 29, 1865, three days after Confederate Gen. Joseph Johnston surrendered to Gen. Sherman at the Bennett's farm house near Durham, effectively ending the War. He was buried in what is now the Finn's Point National Cemetery in New Jersey in a mass grave of 2,436 Confederate soldiers who died at this POW camp. A memorial marker was erected to him in his family's plot in the Trinity Methodist Church Cemetery and has been mistakenly identified as his final resting place by at least one newspaper article about his home, "Brompton." Volume 2 of the Bladen County Cemetery listings indicates Duncan served in the CSA Senior Reserves – units composed of older men between the ages of 45 and 60. However, we have not been able to find his official service records.

For the South, the conclusion of the War brought about the most horrendous reordering of the social, political and economic conditions ever experienced in this country. It is difficult to imagine what those times were like. One indication of conditions is found in the 1870 US Census where Duncan reported his real estate value as \$2,500 and his personal estate at \$1,000 compared to the 1860 report of \$27,941 and \$54,362 respectively. Reconstruction policies of the federal government disenfranchised all men who had supported the Confederacy, and scalawags and carpet baggers ruled. Knowing the States and Federal government were in the hands of the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, it is instructive to observe that both Duncan and brother George reported identical values to their census takers –hmmm, that's an interesting coincidence.

Duncan would live out his life at "Brompton" and die Feb. 1, 1895 at the age of 76. Mary Ann McKay, his wife of 51 years would join him in death on Feb. 4, 1901 – they were both born on July 18th, lived 76 years and died in the first week of February. They were laid to rest at their beloved Trinity Methodist Church, leaving behind a legacy we are proud to celebrate.

Expedition Photo Album



“Little Brompton” the home of Lynn Grey and Shannon King. Beautifully restored by Lynn Grey and his father and moved to its present location of Highway 87 Bypass around Elizabethtown. It remains essentially the same design as when it was the home of Duncan Cromartie except for chimneys that were removed in the restoration. The wing to the left was the kitchen and servant quarters. It has a central hall with eight rooms, four up, four down and two deep.



The historic Trinity Methodist Church where Duncan, his slaves and his brother George labored to leave us a beautiful legacy. His family plot is to the left in this photograph and contains the memorial stone for his son Junius who died as a prisoner of war in Fort Delaware.



The beautiful curved pews in the old church were donated by Duncan's daughter Emmie Cromartie Covington around 1916. She was a leader in the establishment of our Cromartie Reunion and the placement of the William Cromartie Memorial stone at his home site on US 701.



The William Cromartie Memorial reads “HOME SITE OF WILLIAM CROMARTIE 1731-1807, PIONEER FROM SCOTLAND, GRAVE HALF MILE EAST, ERECTED 1932” It is located on US 701, just north of its intersection with SR 210.



Cromartis, Junis P.
Co. H, 36 NC Regt.
Finn's Point
National Cemetery
plaque marking the
mass grave of 2,436
Confederate
prisoners whose
graves could not be
individually
identified.



“Cederville”
moved,
painted and
full of
workers.
Looks great!