

## **BIOGRAPHY**

### **Patriot Thomas Cunningham & Phoebe Tucker Cunningham**

by Ian M. Cunningham

Thomas Cunningham was born about 1748 in Dublin, Ireland. After coming to the Colonies, Thomas made improvements on 400 acres of land in 1772, on a right hand fork of Ten Mile Creek in present-day Marion County, WV, in the vicinity of a place now called Lumberport.

In April 1776 at the age of 28, Thomas and Phoebe Tucker, aged 15, traveled from Coon's Fort near the West Fork of the Monongahela River, Marion County, WV, to Prickett's Fort, five miles above Coon's Fort, to be married. Phoebe was born in 1761 in England, and is described as having dark red hair, green/blue eyes and a flawless complexion. It is not known if the wedding was part of a "forting up" time or if the wedding was a special event held at Fort Prickett. We do know that William Haymond, leader of the Prickett's Fort Militia, performed the ceremony.

These reported family scenes took place in what was then called Virginia, in the North-Western part, near Pennsylvania. Harrison County was formed in 1784 from Monongalia County, which was established in 1776. Marion County was formed in 1842 from Harrison and Monongalia Counties. In 1843, Ritchie County was formed from Harrison, Lewis and Wood Counties. Similarly, West Virginia became a state in 1863, following the Wheeling Conventions of 1861, in which 50 north-western counties broke away from Virginia during the Civil War, all of which can make citing geographic locations and terminology problematic. For this present narrative, modern day county names are used, all in what is now West Virginia, unless otherwise noted.

Thomas enlisted in the Virginia Militia on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 1777 at Coon's Fort, which was built in that year by Phillip Coon and son Joseph, under the direction of Captain James Booth. He served for thirteen months as a private in "an expedition against the Indians" on the Western frontier, along the Ohio River. When Captain Booth was killed by Indians near his own house on Booth's Creek on June 16, 1778, the company was led by Lieutenant Edmund Freeman through 1779, then disbanded. In 1781, the company was reactivated, and Thomas spent one additional month at Winchester Barracks, guarding prisoners captured at Yorktown, after Cornwallis' defeat.

By 1784, Thomas had left his lands along Ten Mile Creek and moved north of Shinnston, bordering on the left fork of Bingamon Creek, which eventually bore the family name and became known as Cunningham's Run. It was a branch of the West Fork, south-west of the Monongahela River, where now stands the village of Peora.

Thomas was the first of the Cunningham family involved in an incident related to an Indian attack, which occurred September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1777, when sixteen year old Mauldine Coon was killed and scalped one afternoon by two Wyandot Indians, within sight of her family Coon's Fort, near present-day Fairmont, WV. Thomas shot one, but the other escaped. In February, 1778, near-by Harbert's Fort was attacked by a group of Shawnee Indians. Several adults and many children were killed, and Thomas' brother Edward's 8 year old son Joseph was taken captive and held until age twenty-three.

Phoebe Cunningham survived an Indian Massacre in June, 1785, while Thomas was absent on a trading expedition. Six Wyandot Indians attacked Thomas' cabin while Phoebe and her four children were at dinner. Although Edward, Thomas' brother, shot and wounded one of the Indians from the cover of his near-by cabin, the raiding party made off with her, after killing three of the children in the yard in front of their mother, and a fourth child in arms was killed while the party marched Phoebe 250 miles to a Wyandot Indian village located 20 miles west of present day Columbus, Madison County, Ohio, on Big Darby Creek.

In the fall of 1788, after Phoebe had been held captive in Ohio for more than three years, she met the renegade Simon Girty, during a time of negotiations for a treaty between the whites and the Indians. By a rare act of benevolence, she was taken to an Indian conference near what is now Perrysburg, Ohio, at the confluence of the Maumee. It was through the intercession of Girty that her case was presented to the British Indian agent Alexander McKee, who furnished the ransom trinkets that freed her. Phoebe left the conference traveling toward Kentucky in the company of two Kentucky men who had come in search of their children, who had also been captives.

Upon her return to civilization, she and Thomas established a new home, had eight more children, and in 1807 removed to Ritchie County, on the South Branch of the Hughes River, at Leatherbarke Creek, west of their former lands. The story of the Indian ordeal is contained in "Chronicles of Border Warfare", by Alexander Scott Withers, published in 1831, commencing on page 272.

The first child born after Phoebe's return from captivity was William, from whom your humble correspondent descends. William Cunningham was born February 7, 1789, and became a noted Methodist Minister. In 1812 he transferred to Cadiz, Ohio, serving the West Wheeling Charge (Methodist) in 1818. He married Rebecca Johnson in 1821, of Ritchie County, Virginia, and died in 1840 in Homer, Ohio, at the age of 50. William's first son, Wilson Benjamin C. was born in Ohio in 1822, became a teacher, and in his mature years he also became a Methodist Minister, returning to Marion County, Virginia, to establish the Pleasant Valley Church soon after the Civil War. Wilson Benjamin's son, John Cartwright C. gave a lot on the NE corner of the farm on Leatherbarke Creek for the relocated Pleasant Valley Church in 1900.

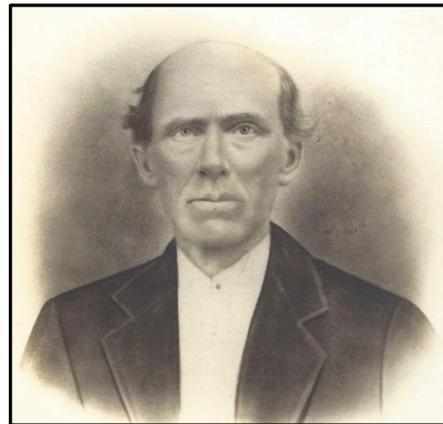
Thomas and Phoebe moved to Ritchie County in 1807, and Thomas established the first religious class in his home in the Hughes River valley, just below the mouth of Grass Run on the south bank of the South Branch of Hughes River, near Leatherbarke Creek. In 1817, Thomas and his first son William were both ordained deacons at the Annual Methodist Episcopal Conference held at Zanesville, Ohio. Thomas became the first licensed preacher of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in Ritchie County.

Thomas died in Ritchie County, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1826, and is buried in the Cunningham Cemetery north of Rt 47 on County Rd 47/11, beside the Joe Frederick Cemetery at the Frederick Mill community, in the Fonzo Post Office District, Ritchie County. While the location of his grave is not exactly known, a monument was erected on the farm in his memory.

In 1839 at age 79, Phoebe applied for a yearly pension of \$46.66 based on Thomas' service. Phoebe died in 1845 in Freed, Calhoun County, WV, age 84, where she had been living with her daughter and son-in-law, Rachel and Isaac Collins. She is buried in the Shimer (Gainer) Cemetery on Freed Rd, SW Calhoun County, beside the grave of Isaac Collins (grandson of Phoebe) and Isaac and Rachel Collins. A stone bearing a bronze D.A.R. plaque commemorating the events of the Indian raid was erected by descendants of Thomas and Phoebe on Cunningham's Run, one mile from Peora and 6 miles from Shinnston, WV.

Correspondence of August 2, 1928, states that Thomas and Phoebe were both listed in the D.A.R. Patriot Index at that time. However, Phoebe is no longer in that index. During the 1990's there was a "*Phoebe Cunningham DAR Chapter*" that was active in Grantsville, Calhoun County, WV, but it no longer exists, the few remaining elderly members having been transferred to other DAR Chapters.

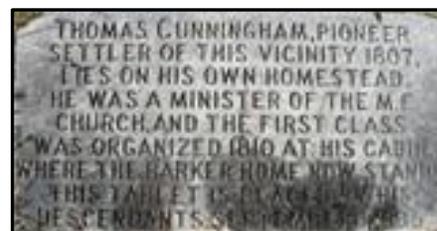
The cabin shown below was built in 1860 by William's son, Wilson Benjamin Cunningham (1822-1887), near Cadiz, Ohio. His son was John Cartwright C., (1862-1927), whose son was your correspondent's father (1898-1988), who spent some childhood years in this cabin.



Wilson Benjamin Cunningham, son of Rev. William Cunningham



John Cartwright Cunningham, Grandson of Rev. William C.



Monument to Phoebe erected in 1914



It was said to have been built of hewn logs daubed with clay, then weather-boarded with un-painted poplar boards. The inside was sealed with very wide poplar boards, nailed on in an up-right position.



Built 1860 by Wilson Benj. Cunningham

A recent book has been published, written by Robert Thompson about Phoebe Tucker Cunningham, titled "A Woman of Courage on the West Virginia Frontier". It gives the account of her early immigration, marriage to Thomas Cunningham, death of her four children, kidnapping by the Wyandot Indians, and her release from captivity and return to Thomas.

At the time of Phoebe's application for pension in 1839, details concerning the Indian capture ordeal were included in the proceedings. That story is quoted in its entirety in the following pages, as it was made part of the Pension Application record. The original is hand written, of course, and some of it is hard to read, but here following is the complete typed version of the Indian capture experience, for a full appreciation of those frontier circumstances, and the extent of the tragic event.

### **REVOLUTIONARY WAR PENSION APPLICATION of PHEBE (WIDOW OF THOMAS) CUNNINGHAM.**

"Revolutionary War Pension & Bounty Land Warrant Application File, 1800-1900;"  
National Archives Microfilm; Call No. M804; Roll No. 713. Virginia

Phebe Cunningham widow of Thomas Cunningham Decd. who died on the 2d day of June 1826, of Lewis Co in the State of Virginia who was a private in the company commanded by Captain James Booth in the Virginia Militia time for 14 months.

Inscribed on the Roll of Wheeling at the rate of 46 Dollars 66 cents per annum to commence on the 4th day of March, 1831.

Certificate of Pension issued the 22d day of April 1840

--- Hon. Jos. Johnson, House of Representatives.

Revolutionary Claim Act July 4, 1836

Section the 3d D. McCurdy Clerk

Book A, Vol. 2, Page 191.

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Virginia

Lewis County ss

In the County of Lewis Count at the Term thereof begun & held on the 13th day of November 1839.

On this 13 day of November in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty nine personally appeared in open court Phebe Cunningham a resident of the County aforesaid aged about 79 years, who being duly sworn, according to law, doth, on her oath, make the following declaration, in order to obtain the benefit of the provision made by the act of Congress, passed the fourth day of July 1836 entitled "An act granting half pay to widows or orphans, where their husband and Fathers had died of wounds received in the military service of the United States in certain cases, and for other purposes."

That she is the widow of Thomas Cunningham deceased who was a private in the army during the revolutionary war, and served thirteen months, under Captain James Booth, in an expedition against the Indians, as will appear by reference to an Act of the Legislature of Virginia passed March 13, 1834 a copy of which is hereunto annexed.

She further declares that she was married to the said Thomas Cunningham on the (blank) day of April in the year seventeen hundred and Seventy six or seven that her said husband the aforesaid Thomas Cunningham died on the Second day of June one thousand eight hundred & Twenty Six that subsequent to her marriage viz: in the year seventeen hundred & eighty five, after she had given birth to four children, she the said Phebe Cunningham was taken prisoner by the Indians and carried into captivity, and her children murdered as will more fully appear by reference to a narrative contained in the "Chronicles of Border Warfare", commencing on page 272, a copy of which is also hereunto annexed.

Phebe (her X mark) Cunningham

Copy of Narrative contained in the "Chronicles of Border Warfare" commencing on page 272.

In 1785, six Indians came to Bingamon creek, (a branch of the West Fork) and made their appearance upon a farm occupied by Thomas and Edward Cunningham. At this time the two brothers were dwelling with their families in separate houses, but nearly adjoining, though not in a direct line with each other. Thomas was then on a trading visit east of the mountain, and his wife and four children were collected in their room for the purpose of eating dinner, as was Edward with his family, in their house. Suddenly a lusty savage entered where were Mrs. Thomas Cunningham and her children, but seeing that he would be exposed to a fire from the other house, and apprehending no danger from the woman and children, he closed the door and seemed for a time only intent on the means of escaping.

Edward Cunningham had seen the savage enter his brother's house, and fastened his own door, seized his gun and stepping to a small aperture in the wall next the house in which was the Indian, and which served as well for a port hole as for the admission of light, was ready to fire whenever the savage should make his appearance. But in the other house was a like aperture, and through it the Indian fired at Edward, and shouted the yell of victory. It was answered by Edward. He had seen the aim of the savage only in time to avoid it, -- the bark from the log close to his head, was knocked off by the ball and flew into his face. The Indian seeing that he had missed his object, and observing an adze in the room, deliberately commenced cutting an aperture in the back wall through which he might pass out without being exposed to a shot from the other building. Another of the Indians came into the yard just after the firing of his companion, but observing Edward's gun pointing through the port hole, he endeavored to retreat out of its range. He failed of his purpose. Just as he was about to spring over the fence, the gun was fired and he fell forward. The ball however only fractured his thigh bone, and he was yet able to hobble over the fence and take shelter behind a coverlet suspended on it, before Edward could again load his gun.

While the Indian was engaged in cutting a hole in the wall, Mrs. Cunningham made no attempt to get out. She was well aware that it would draw down upon her head the fury of the savage; and that if she escaped this, she would most probably be killed by some of those who were watching around, before the other door could be opened for her admission. -- She knew too, that it was impossible for her to take the children with her, and could not brook the idea of leaving them in the hands of the savage monster. She even trusted to the hope that he would withdraw, as soon as he could, without molesting any of them. A few minutes served to convince her of the fallacy of this expectation. When the opening had been made sufficiently large, he raised his tomahawk, sunk it deep into the brains of one of the children, and throwing the scarcely lifeless body into the back yard, ordered the mother to follow after. There was no alternative but death, and she obeyed his order, stepping over the dead body of one of her children, with an infant in her arms and two others screaming from horror at the sight, and clinging to her. When all were out he scalped the murdered boy, and setting fire to the house, retired to an eminence in the field, where two of the savages were, with their wounded companion. -- leaving the other two to watch the opening of Edward Cunningham's door, when the burning of the house should force the family from their shelter. They were disappointed in their expectation of that event by the exertions of Cunningham and his son. When the flame from the one house communicated to the roof of the other, they ascended to the loft, threw off the loose boards which covered it, and extinguished the fire; -- the savages shooting at them all the while, and their balls frequently striking close by.

Despairing of accomplishing farther havoc, and fearful of detection and pursuit, the Indians collected together and prepared to retreat. Mrs. Cunningham's eldest son was first tomahawked and scalped; the fatal hatchet sunk into the head of her little daughter, whom they then took by the arms and legs, and slinging it repeatedly against a tree, ended its sufferings with its life. Mrs. Cunningham stood motionless with grief, and in momentary expectation of having the same dealt to her and her innocent infant. But no! She was doomed to captivity; and with her helpless babe in her arms, was led off from this scene of horror and of woe. The wounded savage was carried on a rough litter, and they all departed, crossing the ridge to Bingamon creek, near which they found a cave that afforded them shelter and concealment. After night, they returned to Edward Cunningham's, and finding no one, plundered and fired the house. When the savages withdrew in the evening, Cunningham went with his family into the woods, where they remained all night, there being no settlement nearer than eight or ten miles. In the morning, proceeding to the nearest house, they gave the alarm and a company of men was soon collected to go in pursuit of the Indians. When they came to Cunningham's and found both houses heaps of ashes, they buried the bones which remained of the boy who was murdered in the house, with the bodies of his brother and little sister, who were killed in the field; but so cautiously had the savages conducted their retreat that no traces of them could be discovered, and the men returned to their homes.

Some days after, circumstances induced the belief that the Indians were yet in the neighborhood, and men were again assembled for the purpose of tracing them. They were now enabled to distinguish the trail, and pursued it near to the cave, where from the number of rocks on the ground and the care which had been taken by the Indians to leave no vestige, they could no longer discover it. They however examined for it in every direction until night forced them to desist. In thinking over the incidents of the day; the cave occurred to the mind of Major Robinson, who was well acquainted with the woods, and he concluded that the savages must be concealed in it. It was examined early next morning, but they had left it the preceding night and departed for their towns. After her return from captivity, Mrs. Cunningham stated, that in time of the search on the day before, the Indians were in the cave, and that several times the whites approached so near, that she could distinctly hear their voices; the savages standing with their guns ready to fire, in the event of their being discovered, and forcing her to keep the infant to her breast, lest its crying might point to the place of their concealment.

In consequence of their stay at this place on account of their wounded companion, it was some time before they arrived in their own country; and Mrs. Cunningham's sufferings, of body as well as mind were truly great. Fatigue and hunger oppressed her sorely, -- the infant in her arms, wanting the nourishment derived from the due sustenance of the mother, plied at the breast for milk, in vain -- blood came in stead; and the Indians perceiving this, put a period to its sufferings, with the tomahawk, even while clinging to its mother's bosom. It was cast a little distance from the path, and left without a leaf or bush to hide it from beasts of prey.

The anguish of this woman during the journey to the towns, can only be properly estimated by a parent; her bodily sufferings may be inferred from the fact, that for ten days her only sustenance consisted of the head of a wild turkey and three papaws, and from the circumstance that the skin and nails of her feet, scalded by frequent wading of the water, came with her stockings, when upon their arrival at a village of the Delaware's, she was permitted to draw them off. Yet was she forced to continue on with them the next day. -- One of the Indians belonging to the village where they were, by an application of some sanative herbs, very much relieved the pain which she endured.

When she came to the town of those by whom she had been made prisoner, although receiving no barbarous or cruel usage, yet everything indicated to her, that she was reserved for some painful torture. The wounded Indian had been left behind, and she was delivered to his father. Her clothes were not changed, as is the case when a prisoner is adopted by them; but she was compelled to wear them, dirty as they were, -- a bad omen for a captive. She was however, not long in apprehension of a wretched fate. A conference was soon to take place between the Indians and whites, preparatory to a treaty of peace; and witnessing an uncommon excitement in the village one evening, upon inquiring, learned that the Great captain Simon Girty had arrived. She determined to prevail with him, if she could, to intercede for her liberation, and seeing him next day passing near on horseback, she laid hold on his stirrup, and implored his interference. For a while he made light of her petition, -- telling her that she would be as well there as in her own country, and that if he were disposed to do her a kindness he could not as his saddle bags were too small to conceal her; but her importunity at length prevailed, and he whose heart had been so long steeled against every kindly feeling, every sympathetic impression, was at length induced to perform an act of generous, disinterested benevolence. He paid her ransom, had her conveyed to the commissioners for negotiating with the Indians, and by them she was taken to a station on the south side of the Ohio. Here she met with two gentlemen (Long and Denton) who had been at the treaty to obtain intelligence of their children taken captive some time before, but not being able to gain any information respecting them, they were then returning to the interior of Kentucky and kindly furnished her a horse.

In consequence of the great danger attending a journey through the wilderness which lay between the settlements in Kentucky and those on the Holstein (*River, Virginia*), persons scarcely ever performed it but at particular periods of the year, and in caravans, the better to defend themselves against attacks of savages. Notice of the time and place of the assembling of one of these parties being given, Mrs. Cunningham prepared to accompany it; but before that time arrived, they were deterred from the undertaking by the report that a company of travelers, stronger than theirs would be, had been encountered by the Indians, and all either killed or made prisoners. Soon after another party resolved on a visit to Virginia, and Mrs. Cunningham was furnished a horse belonging to a gentleman on Holstein (which had escaped from him while on a buffalo hunt in Kentucky and was found after his return,) to carry her that far on her way home. Experiencing the many unpleasant circumstances incident to such a jaunt, she reached Holstein (*River*), and from thence, after a repose of a few days, keeping up the Valley of Virginia, she proceeded by the way of Shenandoah,

to the county of Harrison. Here she was sadly disappointed in not meeting with her husband. Having understood that she had been ransomed and taken to Kentucky, he had, some time before, gone on in quest of her. Anxiety for his fate, alone and on a journey which she well knew to be fraught with many dangers, she could not cheerily partake of the general joy excited by her return. In a few days however, he came back. He had heard on Holstein of her having passed there and he retraced his steps. Arriving at his brother Edward's, he again enjoyed the satisfaction of being with all that was then dear to him on earth. It was a delightful satisfaction, but presently damped by the recollection of [277] the fate of his luckless children -- Time assuaged the bitterness of the recollection and blessed him with other and more fortunate children."

Lewis County Court, November Term 1839

Phebe Cunningham personally appeared in open court and made a Declaration in order to obtain the benefit of the Act of congress of the 7th July 1838 entitles. "An Act granting half pay and Pensions to certain widows" And the Court are of opinion the said Phebe Cunningham is the widow of the late Thomas Cunningham deceased.

A Copy Teste

J. Talbott Clk

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State of Virginia

Lewis County

I John Talbott, Clerk of the County Court of Lewis County aforesaid, do hereby certify that the foregoing contains the original proceedings of the said Court in the matter of the application of Phebe Cunningham for a Pension.

In Testimony whereof I have hereunto subscribed my name and affixed my seal of Office at Weston the 22d day of November 1839.

J. Talbott, Clk.

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