

Sabbatical Report

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February 17, 2005

In the fall of 2002, I was awarded a sabbatical leave for the spring of 2004 to study early American history and literature. I chose this topic out of personal interest, but also to prepare myself to teach my department's early American literature course, an area of study in which I had little previous experience.

My project proposal consisted of two main parts. One was simply to read a selection of historical and literary works that are ordinarily taught in or used as background for that literature course. The other was to pursue original research into a family legend—my family—and then attempt to integrate that research into the broader subject of oral history.

This second part of my proposal turned out to be more interesting and educationally profitable than I had anticipated, inasmuch as I made some unexpected discoveries and ended up solving a mystery. In the process, I learned a great deal about one very small corner of early American history.

The following report is a summary, with pictures, of my research. The first half of the report recounts a trip I made to northern New York state and the research I did there; the second half summarizes some of the history of that region and attempts to explain how that history might have engendered the family legend.

I would not have undertaken any of this work had I not been granted a sabbatical leave to do it; I therefore wish to express my gratitude to Parkland College and the Board of Trustees for giving me this opportunity.

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The final resting place of "Cornfield" John Archer

1776-1864

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(These pages were designed to be viewed in full screen mode. Please set your screen to "full.")

Ananias and "Cornfield" John Archer: A Modest Historical Inquiry, with Illustrations, into the Mysterious Circumstances Surrounding Their Lives and Deaths, Including the Fortuitous Rediscovery of John Archer's Final Resting Place

American literary tradition often mirrors American oral tradition--the stories passed down through the generations but never written down. Everyone knows, for example, this archetypal story of white settlers massacred by Indians: All of the adults are killed, but a child survives, perhaps several, either because they are taken as captives or because they run away and hide. Everyone knows this story because we have all read variations of it or seen variations of it in film and on television. The perilous nature of the settler experience, including the cruelties exacted upon women and children, is part of our national literature.

It is also part of our oral tradition, our family lore. It isn't difficult to find Americans who can tell you about their ancestor who had some deadly encounter with Indians but lived to tell the story. My family has such a story. It begins with Ananias Archer of Johnstown, New York, a soldier in the Revolutionary War. Here is how it is described in an unpublished book by one Dr. E. A. Archer, written in 1930, entitled *An "Inventory" of the Archers and Descendants, of Northern Illinois, Iowa, and All Points West and Southwest*.

Enlisted in Tyrone County Militia. Col. Fisher's 3rd regiment and served in the Revolutionary War. (1776)

Ananias and his wife Elizabeth were killed by Indians, 1782.

His son John and daughter Amy hid in the cornfield until the Indians left and then walked to the nearest neighbor and were later adopted out. John was nicknamed "Cornfield John."

William C. Archer, Nov. 5, 1930

Will tells of a folk story or old family tale, which I too remember hearing, to the effect that one of our paternal grandfathers, likely Steven's father, was tortured by being cut up into small pieces and finally killed by the Iroquois Indians because of some wrong he had done them. Later the Indians admitted they had killed the wrong man. My remembrance of the yarn is that they, being cannibals, finished the job by eating the remains. True, you say, well no one seems to know!

No one seems to know, but I have learned that a great many Archers all across North America have heard the story, or some version of it, even if they have never seen the book quoted above

(few have), and even if they know nothing else of the family history, or nothing of other living descendants not closely related to them. Evidently it's a story that people like to repeat.

I have repeated it quite a few times myself. It's usually well received, and thinking about the story gives me a sense of connection to something larger than myself, though I might wish my ancestor had a more heroic name than "Cornfield John." Yet this sense of connection was always undermined by suspicion--what if none of it is true? This suspicion led me to some preliminary research into the matter. I learned that in addition to Dr. E. A. Archer's efforts (he was a physician based in Washington state--more on his book later), several other Archers have tried to investigate the Cornfield John story, and they have also tried to learn the origins of his father, Ananias. None succeeded. So, in addition to the feelings of connection and suspicion I had about the story, I could add mystery and challenge.

As nearly as I can tell, most of the earlier investigators were all based far from New York, and they all conducted their research through correspondence with other relatives, and with libraries and historical societies in New York. Few if any, apparently, actually went to New York, and, moreover, it doesn't appear that any of the many Archers still living in New York have done any serious research into this matter, other than a high school student who consulted some library records as part of a history class project.

So I decided to visit the place where it all allegedly happened, upstate New York, and see what I could find. What follows is the story of my quest.

My name is Neil Archer.



My wife Sue accompanied me on this venture and was extremely helpful, particularly in supplying me with motivation when my efforts seemed to be leading nowhere.



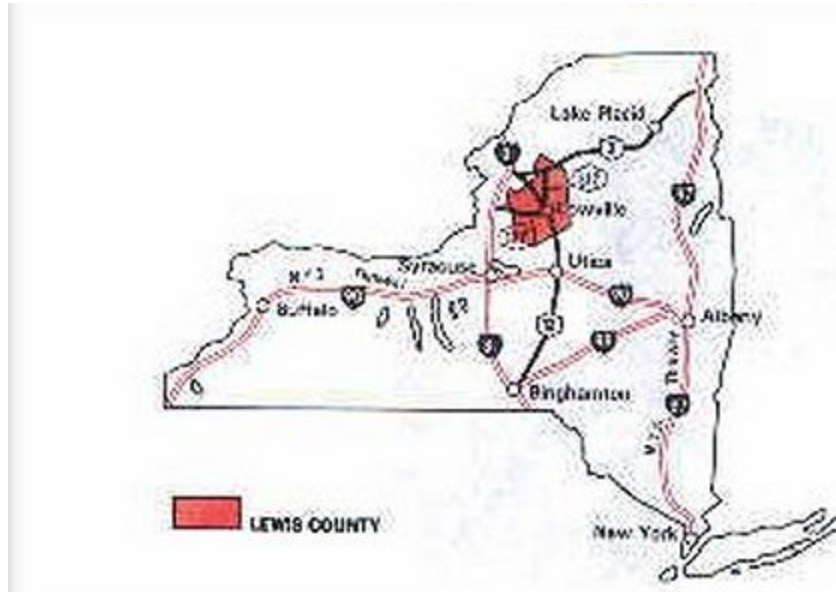
Indeed, it was my wife Sue who made one of the key discoveries of our trip.

I pursued this project out of personal interest, of course, and with the support of my employer, Parkland College, which came in the form of a sabbatical leave to study early American literature in general and this small sample of American folklore in particular.

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Geographical Context

First, some background. If any place is the ancestral home of my line of the Archer family, it is Lewis County, New York, just southeast of Watertown, New York.



On the eastern border of the county are the beginnings of the Adirondack mountains ...



(a stream in the Adirondacks).

At the western foot of the mountains is the Black River, which was the major transportation route into this region during the early days of settlement. The Black River valley is formed on the west

side by the Tug Hill Plateau, which overlooks the Black River valley, and which gets some of the highest snowfall in the continental U.S. This of course is because of the lake effect of Lake Ontario, which was pivotal in the settlement and history of northern New York.



(Lake Ontario)

The lake was the basis for major trade routes along the New York shores, and also between New York and Canada. In addition, it was the major avenue by which British soldiers and colonial Loyalists conducted raids into the U.S. during and after the Revolutionary War, and then again during the War of 1812. In fact, it is likely that if Ananias and his wife were killed by Indians, it is probably not because the Indians thought he cheated them in some deal, but rather because they were incited by British soldiers and colonial Loyalists who conducted punitive raids, often employing Indians as mercenaries, across Lake Ontario and into New York during and even after the Revolutionary War. In fact, for the people of this region of the United States, the Revolutionary War never did quite end, but merely slowed down until it segued into the War of 1812. (It should be noted, in defense of the Indians, that they weren't doing this merely for material reward; in their view, it was the American revolutionaries who were responsible for stealing their lands. They were made to believe that the British were trying to protect them by preventing the westward expansion of the white settlers. To some extent, this was true, though the British had motives for doing this other than protecting the Indians' land.)

The largest town to develop along the shore of the lake was Watertown, which has an unusually nice library ...



where I attempted to do some research. I found nothing there relating to the family legend, but I did learn that there are still a great many Archers in the region. I also learned that this area of New York was a focal point of the Abolitionist movement prior to the Civil War, and that, as a result, it had an unusually high number of its men volunteer for, and die in, that war.

Watertown is also where the Woolworth company got its start.



To the south and east of Watertown is Lewis County. The county seat of Lewis County used to be Martinsburg, the town nearest Cornfield John's settlement ...



(Martinsburg Town Hall, est. 1805)



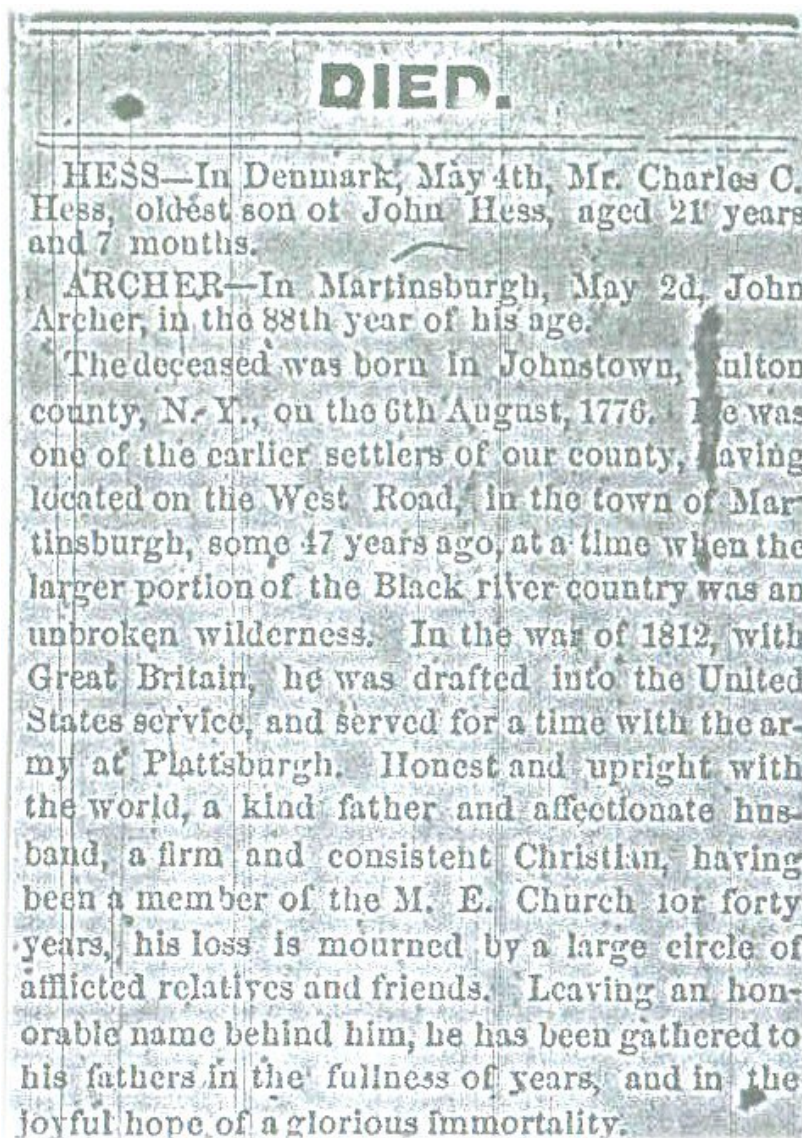
County Clerk's Office, Martinsburg, built 1847

but now Lowville is the county seat (the "Low" is pronounced to rhyme with "now," rather than "so"). Lowville is also the location of the Lewis County Historical Society, where my search began in earnest.

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Cornfield John: A Long and Uneventful (?) Life

The first item of interest I came across in the Lewis County Historical Society archives was John's obituary from the local newspaper, *The Journal and Republican*, which is still operating under that name. The year is 1864.



This was an interesting find for several reasons. First, as you can see, the obituary does not mention the Cornfield John story or anything else about John's parents and childhood. This struck me as unusual, since obituaries usually include the names of the deceased's parents. Obituaries also usually include the highlights of the deceased's life. Certainly having your parents murdered by Indians while you escaped by hiding in a cornfield with your sister, and then becoming known as Cornfield John, would count as a highlight. Finally, a number of John's children were still living in the area at the time of his death and could have given this information to the newspaper. While none of this disproves the Cornfield John story, it certainly does nothing to support it.

The other interesting thing about this obituary is that no previous Archer family researcher that I am aware of, including E. A. Archer, has ever mentioned it. I can only assume that when they were doing their research, the

newspaper's archives were simply drawers or boxes filled with old newspapers. If a researcher did not have the date of John's death, then looking through all those old papers would be quite a chore. If a researcher were not on site to do this in person, he would have had to rely on newspaper staff to do it.

I had the enormous advantage of having all the paper's archives on microfilm, neatly indexed, so it took me all of fifteen minutes to find and copy the obituary. I regarded this as a most propitious beginning to my research; if it were this easy to find previously undisclosed information about Cornfield John, who knew what else I might find.

Much to my disappointment, however, I could not find any other document at the Lewis County Historical Society which mentioned John, except for cemetery records. Yet these cemetery records led me down an unexpected path in my research, one that proved to be something of an adventure.

John, along with his wife Naomi, is buried in what is now referred to as the Strader cemetery, which is west of Lowville. Three other Archers are also buried there: John Junior; John Junior's wife, Mary; and Ellen, their daughter.

(It should be noted here, for the benefit of mid-westerners, that the eastern United States, being the first region settled by Europeans, is graced with old cemeteries to a degree not found anywhere else in the country. In urban areas, many of these cemeteries have been moved, destroyed, covered up ... they simply vanished. In rural regions, however, many of them persist in some condition or other. As a mid-westerner driving the back country roads of upstate New York, I was struck by just how many cemeteries there were, sometimes every couple of miles, one after another. Some of these cemeteries have been kept up very well, some moderately well, and some are largely neglected. Even within city limits there are cemeteries that look as if no one has set foot in them for the last century, or cares at all about the people buried there. Here is a cemetery in Johnstown, New York, just a couple of blocks from the downtown area:



Many of the headstones have toppled; others are leaning against trees. One does not see such things in Champaign, Illinois. But then, Champaign has no cemeteries that are three hundred years old.)

The Strader cemetery, I came to discover, has been totally neglected and abandoned, which is not surprising, since it is truly in the middle of nowhere. There was once a road that led past it, but that road is long gone, leaving the cemetery hidden in a grove of trees in a large meadow. Many of the headstones have fallen over, and some have been buried by time. Some of the inscriptions on the headstones are legible, but in other cases the stones have been worn perfectly smooth. The cemetery is overgrown with bushes and brambles and shaded by a fairly dense canopy of trees, so that it's quite dark in there much of the time.

Before we ever left home, I had found a set of directions to this cemetery on the Internet, on a site devoted to mapping

old cemeteries, but these directions proved to be too vague or simply wrong. But until I realized this, I thought I had a treasure map. So the first thing my wife and I did upon arriving at Lowville was to go out scouting for that cemetery. We foolishly spent several frustrating afternoons driving around on country roads west of Lowville, at first getting out and examining every old cemetery we came to that was anywhere close to the area indicated on our map, looking for the Archer name, then later getting out and looking in every clump of trees to see if there was a cemetery hidden within. Sometimes there was, but it wasn't our cemetery.

Finally we did what we should have done in the first place: we paid our first visit to the Lewis County Historian's Office, where the very helpful historian provided us with a map of local cemeteries; the Strader cemetery was marked with an X.

I assumed this would lead us straight to our target, but even then our subsequent attempts to locate the cemetery failed. (The X indicated that the cemetery is north of Gardner Road; in fact it is south of the road.) When I returned to the historian's office and reported our failure, she produced yet another set of directions, and these proved sufficient. Here is a photocopy of those directions:

11 STRADER - ca 1862; 5 stones. Finding this abandoned cemetery is a challenge. It is not facing any current roadway and some maps don't represent current roadways correctly. Strader Cemetery is located just off Gardner Road near the intersection with Eagle Factory Road on the north (in the Town of Lowville), and Borkowski Road (in the Town of Martinsburg). Borkowski Road is offset about 250 feet to the east of Eagle Factory Road at the intersection.

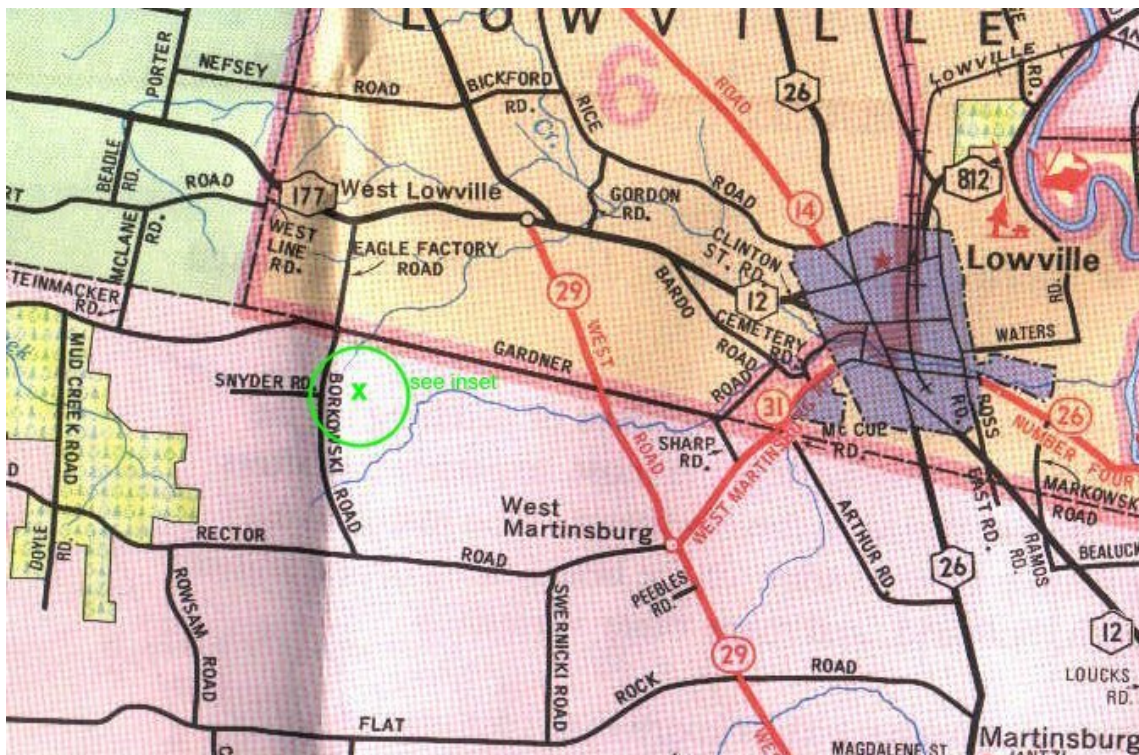
Take NY Rt 177 west out of West Lowville. Eagle Factory Road is a left turn off NY Rt 177 at a point 1.4 miles from the NY Rt 12/NY Rt 177 fork in West Lowville. Follow Eagle Factory Road south 0.85 miles to Gardner Road. Take a jog to the left and continue south on Borkowski Road 0.5 miles further to the intersection with Snyder Road. In times past, Snyder Road truly crossed Borkowski Road, but today it only exists on the west side. To the east is a faint farm lane following an old tree line. A grove of trees is visible off to the east from this point, and therein lies the cemetery. It is a walk from this point - about 1200 feet. It is also approachable from Gardner Road. Follow Gardner Road about 0.25 miles east past Borkowski Road. Again, a farm lane and tree line is visible to the south as is the grove of trees marking the cemetery. Follow the tree line about 2500 feet to find the cemetery.

This is a truly abandoned cemetery, full of large trees, brush, berry bushes, and brambles. It is badly in need of cleanup and repair.

Note the reference to the "5 stones." In fact there are many more than that still standing, and still more that have fallen, and, as we were about to discover, most likely any number of other stones that have fallen and been completely covered. Note also what comes next: "Finding this abandoned cemetery is a challenge. It is not facing any current roadway and some maps don't represent current roadways correctly." That is an understatement, but of course the difficulty of finding this cemetery magnified our sense of discovery when we did find it.

A Short Cartographical Digression

Since my wife and I spent many hours searching for this cemetery, exact directions are something I would have greatly appreciated. The above directions are adequate, but, but for the benefit of future Archer historians, I feel compelled to include here my own can't-miss guide to the Strader cemetery.



Head west from Lowville on Gardner Road. Turn left onto Borkowski. After about one-half mile, Borkowski makes a T intersection with Snyder Road. As explained in the previous directions, this used to be a full intersection, when Snyder extended east past Borkowski; now, however, that road is only a tree line across a meadow. Follow the tree line east for about one-quarter mile, as indicated by the broken blue line on the map below. Pass the old fence line and circle around behind the grove of trees on the left, so that you are approaching it from the east. The grove consists of an outer ring of newer, smaller trees and, inside that, the larger, older trees that shelter the cemetery.



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The Camera Follows the Author into Obscurity

This is what the grove of trees looks like from Borkowski Road. There are many such groves in the countryside west of Lowville. The view is looking eastward and it is obviously a beautiful, sunny day.



Here I am following the treeline--that broken blue line on my map--leading to the grove. This picture was taken on a different day than the one above, a cloudy day.



Here is the end of the treeline, just before crossing the old fence. The fence is down at the crossing point, so you just walk past it, turn left, head north twenty or thirty yards, and then cut into the back of the grove.



Entering the grove from the back (the east side):



Who would guess there is anything unusual hidden within this little forest. But if you crouch down

and enter the grove from the east side, shown above, the following picture shows what you will see. [Next](#)



We more or less stumbled onto the above scene, which we both found strangely compelling, perhaps more so than the above photo, awkwardly shot into the sun, might suggest. Neither of the stones visible in that photo is an Archer. The stone leaning against the tree on the right no longer has an inscription. The large rectangular stone near the center marks the Forsythe plot, which includes four graves. Here is a closer shot of that plot:



And here is the front of that stone:



Since there aren't that many stones still standing, it didn't take us long to find the one that said John Archer. "So, Grandpa," I said, but when I read the rest of the inscription, I saw it was not Cornfield John but his son, John Junior, a great great ,, uncle to me.



The unusual color of the preceding image is not the actual color of the stone. It's a distortion caused by first wetting the stone and then using a flash, in an (only moderately successful) attempt to make the inscription stand out. The inscription tells us that John Archer died August 23, 1881, at the age of 66. His wife, Mary, died December 16, 1879, at the age of 63. Their daughter, Ellen Crary, died August 11, 1872, at the age of 22 years and 10 months. There is a smaller, separate stone for Ellen:



Further searching did not turn up John Senior's headstone, although we saw some interesting stones:



We left the cemetery that day disappointed that we didn't find Cornfield John's headstone, though this was balanced out somewhat by finding John Junior's and by the strangely peaceful atmosphere of the place. Here is how John Junior's stone looked when we left it.



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A Plethora of Dead Archers

One of the unanticipated benefits of doing this research project was coming into contact with a number of Archers from around the nation. Some are fairly closely related, even first cousins, but nonetheless people I had never met; others are distant relatives, so distant it would not be possible for me to apply a term to our relationship. It was after our first visit to the Strader cemetery that the Lewis County Historian put us in touch with Robert Archer, who lives in Lowville. (It was his daughter who had done the high school history class report on Cornfield John.) Robert is a descendant of Cornfield John's son John Junior, whereas I am descended from Cornfield John's son Steven. So our family lines separated many generations ago. Mine moved west--Ohio, Illinois, eventually South Dakota, where I am from. Robert's family has obviously stayed within just a few miles of where our common ancestor settled about two hundred years ago.



Although Robert had never seen E.A. Archer's book, he had heard about it, and of course he had heard the Cornfield John story all of his life. His version, however, has a dramatic element not found in the doctor's book. In the book, John and his sister Amy hid in the cornfield during the massacre, and were later adopted out. The way Robert had heard it, only John escaped detection. Amy was discovered by the Indians--possibly because she let herself be found, to decoy the Indians away from John--and taken prisoner. One can only imagine--and I'm sure many of Robert's relatives have--what would have happened to her. (There is no further record of any kind regarding Amy. I have seen her baptism as a child noted in a church log, so I can be reasonably certain she existed, but after the alleged killing of her parents, she disappears entirely from the historical record.)

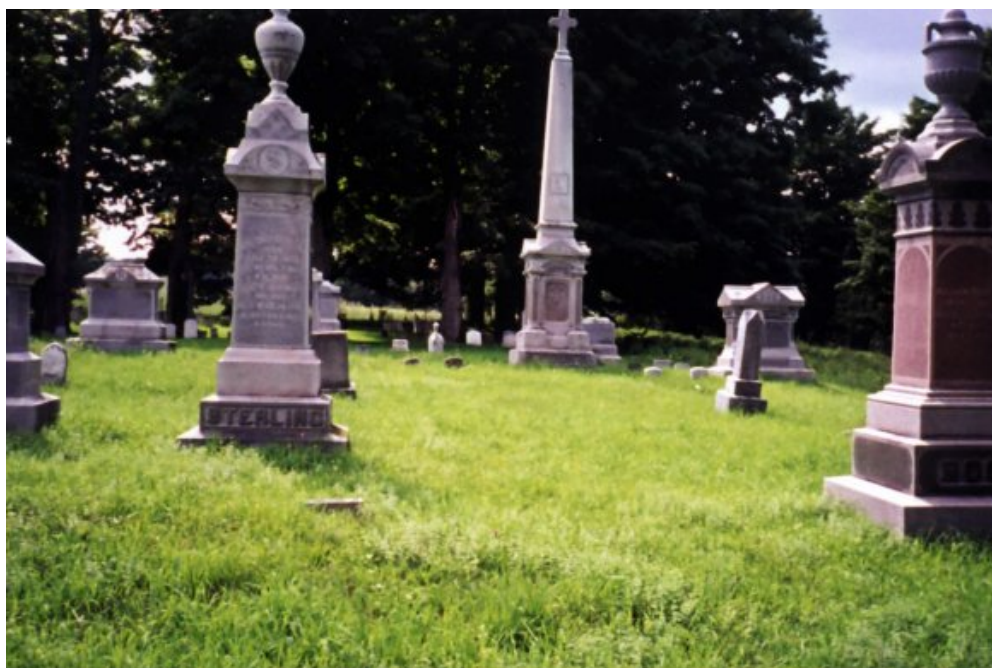
I told Robert about our difficulty finding the cemetery, and then our failure to find Cornfield John's headstone. Of course, Robert, who was in his early 70's, had visited the Strader cemetery a number of times over the years, and was well acquainted with John Junior's headstone. Yet he did not recall having ever seen John Senior's headstone. He believed it was long gone, either destroyed somehow or, more likely, carted off as a souvenir.

Robert also told us that the Strader cemetery was on land owned by a person who did not appreciate trespassers. (We had seen that the property was posted with faded "No Hunting" signs, but we had not seen a "No Trespassing" sign. I asked Robert if he thought we should attempt to contact the owner before trespassing again, but he thought the man might be hard to find, and if we did find him, he would refuse to grant us access. He thought we were fairly

safe if we wanted to visit the cemetery again, that the worst that was likely to happen was that the owner, or the authorities, would order us to leave.) Robert told us that there was once a move, organized by descendants of other families buried at that cemetery, to rescue and restore it, but that the owner of the property would not permit it. Robert hinted that there were dark rumors as to why this was so.

Many people I talked to during this trip expressed regret that so many of the old cemeteries were being allowed to disappear into the bush, as the Strader cemetery is in the process of doing. Apparently there was once some kind of bill passed in the New York state legislature that mandated the rescue of these historical sites, but the necessary funds were never appropriated and the project faded away.

Robert told us that there are a great many Archers living in northern New York (which by then we already knew), and he graciously took us on a tour of several of the more modern cemeteries where Archers are buried.





Since my branch of the Archer family is so scattered, and since so few of us made it to South Dakota, I was not accustomed to seeing so many monuments to deceased Archers. Robert also showed us where, according to his father, Cornfield John might have had his farm. It was where the old Strader farm is now, which is on Gardner Road, not far from the Strader cemetery. (There is a long relationship between the Straders and the Archers, some of them inter-marrying, many of them buried within a few feet of each other.) Here is the old Strader farmhouse.



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Grave Digging Out of Season

Seeing the farm and hearing Robert's take on the Cornfield John story inspired us to try one more time to find John's headstone before leaving the area and moving on. At this point, we had been to the cemetery several times during the afternoon, spending a couple of hours there each time, searching. We decided to make our last attempt a serious archeological expedition, so we stopped by the hardware store and purchased some serious archeological equipment--a garden trowel and a steel rod. (I would have preferred to buy a full size shovel, but I already was beginning to feel uncomfortable about trespassing on some stranger's property. I didn't want to compound my unease by being seen carrying a shovel to an abandoned graveyard.) I also had, in the toolbox in my truck, several other implements I planned to take along, including a little keyhole saw, just in case.

We left for the cemetery early the next morning. My plan was to use the steel rod to probe the ground in widening circles around John Junior's grave until I hit something solid. My theory was that John Senior's headstone couldn't be too far from John Junior's. But this turned out to be unnecessary. Shortly after we entered the cemetery, my wife walked over a patch of ground (that I thought I had covered thoroughly on previous visits) and saw a small corner of carved stone sticking up above the surface. The reason she saw it when we had both missed it before was that we had always been there in the relative gloom of the afternoon. This time, we were there in the morning, and a ray of morning light just happened to penetrate the canopy overhead and fall on the stone.

(When I told this story to a friend of mine, he said it sounded suspiciously like something out of an Indiana Jones movie. However, while he wouldn't put it past me to embellish the facts of a story, he trusts my wife to stick to the exact truth, and she confirmed my account.)

If this was John Senior's--Cornfield John's--headstone, it was obvious why it had disappeared for so long: a tree had fallen on the grave, knocking over the headstone and burying it beneath branches which then filled in with dirt. It was necessary to cut away some substantial tree limbs (at least they seemed substantial, given my little keyhole saw) before I could begin digging out the stone. It was immediately apparent that this was indeed the prize. I was looking at Cornfield John Archer's headstone, my great-great-great-great-grandfather. As nearly as I knew, no one had seen this stone for a good fifty years, perhaps longer.

The following pictures aren't great photographic quality, especially those of the stone itself, but they document what was for me an exciting discovery.













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Does Death Excuse Bad Poetry?

Here is what it says on the stone:

JOHN ARCHER

DIED

May 2, 1864.

Aged 88, Yrs.

NAOMI

HIS WIFE

Died Aug. 1st, 1864

AE. 81 Yrs.

Their toils are o'er. Their work is done

And they are truly blest;

They fought the fight, the victory won,

And entered into rest.

Note that John was born in 1776, just after the start of the Revolutionary War, and died in 1864, at nearly the end of the Civil War. Note also that Naomi died just a few months after her husband did and that she was, according to the stone, 81 years old. This contradicts the information in Dr. A. E. Archer's book, which has Naomi born in 1774 and dying on August 8, 1864, which would have made her 90. Apparently A. E. Archer was never in contact with anyone who had seen and recorded what was inscribed on the headstone. I mention this because it is one of the many examples I encountered during my research of how often people have the facts wrong, how a piece of information does not begin to approach the level of fact until it's been verified several times over.

In that regard, the reader might recall from John's obituary that he served in the War of 1812. But I was able to find no document supporting this claim, even though I did find what appeared to be fairly complete records of all military personnel from that area during that war. E. A. Archer's book touches upon this anomaly, explaining that while John was a soldier in that war, his records were lost, and as a result he was denied a military pension.

That might be the case, but I must mention, as an aside, that the conflict between the British loyalists and what were now the Americans was ongoing and fierce, and often conducted surreptitiously, and that one's patriotic neighbors tended to view one with suspicion if one did not seem to be enthusiastically supporting the American cause. It's possible that my illustrious ancestor declined to participate in military ventures, but then later found it prudent to say he had.

Before leaving the cemetery for the final time, my wife and I discussed what we might do to improve the site or at least preserve John's headstone. The obvious move would be to set the stone back up into its base. The base appeared to be intact; all we would need to do is clean out the slot in the base which the stone fits into. However, I was concerned that there might be cracks in the headstone which, though they weren't visible, would cause it to fall apart if I tried to pick it up. I also had to consider the possibility that there were invisible cracks in the base, which would cause it to fall apart if I tried to set the stone back in. And even if I managed to get the stone back into the base, how long would it stay there? When might another tree branch fall on it, knocking it over again and perhaps, this time, breaking it? Finally, we had to consider that, while many stones above ground in the cemetery had been worn smooth by time and weather, so that the inscriptions were no longer visible, John's stone, which was buried, was still very legible.

This last reflection caused my wife to wonder if we shouldn't cover it with plastic and bury it again, but I was afraid that doing so would make it harder, if not impossible, for other people to find in the future. So, in the end, we left it as it was, except for the small trench I dug around it to drain off rainwater. By now, at the time of this writing, that trench has no doubt filled in, and the stone is no doubt disappearing beneath new layers of earth.

Here is the scene you see as you exit the cemetery grove to the east, the direction in which the headstones are or were facing, when they were standing.



The view is across the Black River valley, into the foothills of the Adirondacks, which are only faintly visible in this photograph. Presumably, if John's farm was indeed where the old Strader farm is now, then he quite possibly worked this very field and saw this view for many days of his life. As would have his children.

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Martinsburg: Where No One Ever Died (Prior to 1800)

There was one last resource I had to check out before leaving Lewis County. I had been told that while the much smaller town of Martinsburg had nothing equivalent to Lowville's historical society, the public library there did keep a few old records and documents. So I went there to see if I could find anything else about the early Archers. I read through a number of journals and diaries from the early 1800's, and some were quite fascinating, but I found nothing relating to any Archers. I did, however, come across the name of the town historian, so I gave her a call and explained what I was doing.

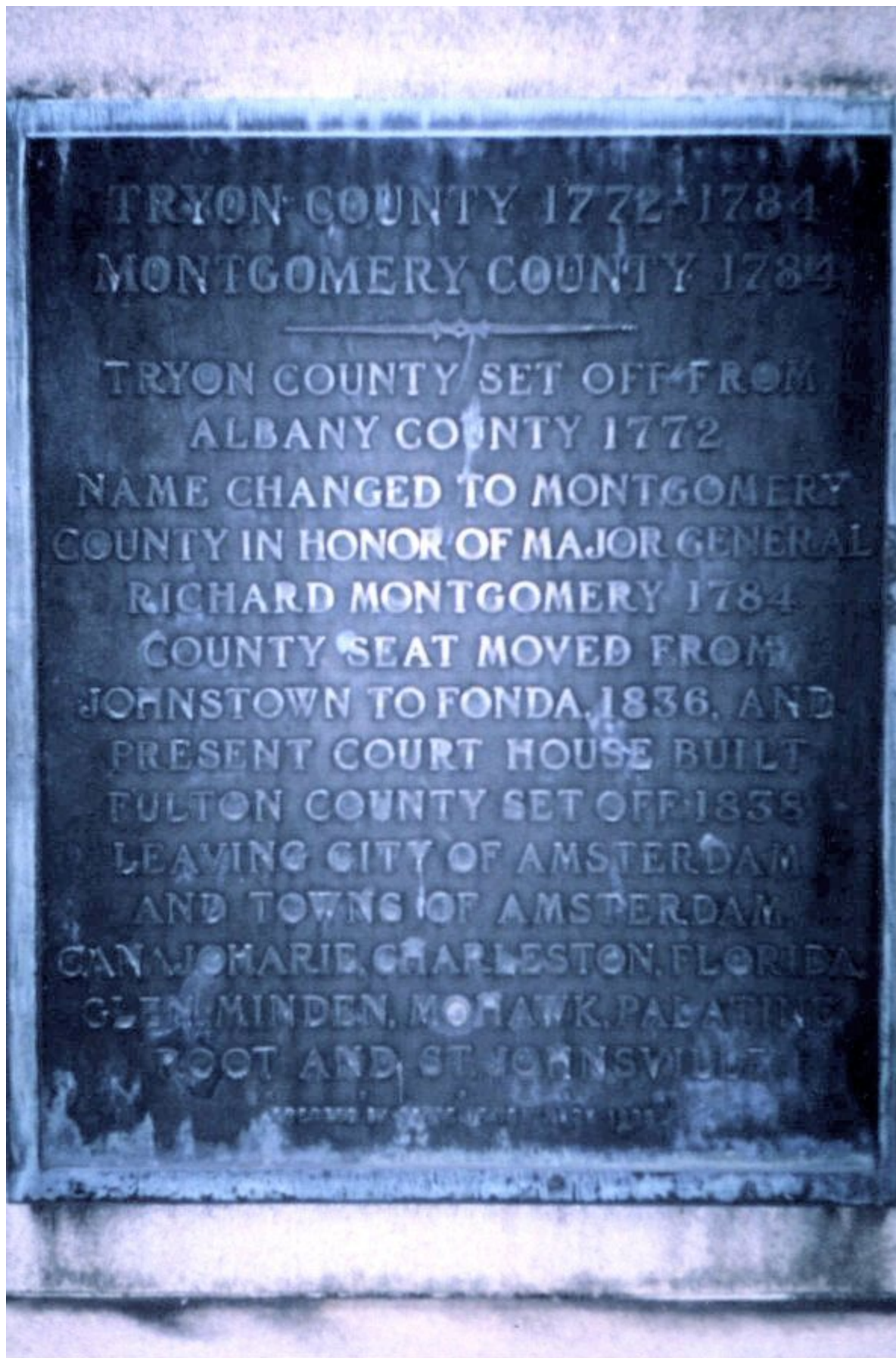
In E. A. Archer's book, there is at least one reference to Ananias and his wife being killed near Martinsburg, though there are other suggestions that it happened somewhere near Johnstown. Elsewhere in the book, it's noted that the Martinsburg area wasn't even settled until after 1800. That is correct, to the best of my knowledge, and the Martinsburg town historian concurs; if Ananias was killed in 1782, or anywhere near that date, it is highly unlikely it happened near Martinsburg, which was not just unsettled, but totally unpopulated wilderness at the time. She said that when white settlers did move into the area, there were very few--perhaps no--violent clashes with Indians, simply because even the Indians had always avoided that area. The winters were too harsh. So it is apparent that the version of the Cornfield John story that had it occurring near Martinsburg is not a plausible story.

The Mystery Solved, Perhaps Only Partially, but with Astonishing Ease, Considering It Had Been a Mystery for over One Hundred Years

As I have mentioned, there is no known document supporting the claim that Ananias and his wife were killed at their cabin by Indians while the children hid in a field; it is just a story that a lot of Archers seem to know and which was recorded as hearsay in an unpublished book. The facts I can verify are these: Ananias Archer married Elizabeth Jecoeks on December 14, 1772 in Fonda, Montgomery County, New York. I verified this by going to Fonda, New York and visiting the Archives and Historical Documents section of the Old Court House in Fonda. It is an elegant structure, at least on the outside.



A plaque on the courthouse lawn explains that Tryon County was set off from Albany county in 1772 and, in 1784, renamed to Montgomery County. Tryon had been a governor, appointed by the British. Montgomery was a general in the Continental Army.



In the archives of the Old Court House, I found the original church marriage registry which listed the marriage of Ananias and Elizabeth in 1772. The registry is in fragile condition, so I was not allowed to photocopy it.

I have also established as a fact that Ananias began renting land in the Johnstown area--from Sir John Johnson, the son of the famous Indian agent Sir William Johnson--on March 25, 1775.

Tracer, Kansas Genealogical Society Quarterly, Vol 30, no 4 (Winter) 1988, p. 147

Sir John Johnson's rent toll of the Kingsborough Patent, by Duncan Frasier, a reprint from Ontario History, Vol 52, 1916, no 3 (Sept), Quarterly of the Ontario Canada Historical Society. The original manuscript is in Public Record Office, London - AC 13/114

Land in Tryon Co. NY (renamed Montgomery Co., NY in 1784)

The Kingsborough Patent was four miles north of the Mohawk river covering most of the township of Johnstown and Fulton county, bounded on south by Butlerbury, the 4000 acre estate of Col. John Butler and by other tracts including a part of Stone Arabia Patent. On the west it was bounded by Royal Grant or Kingsland, 20,000 acres, granted to Sir William Johnson by the Crown for services in the French War, bounded on the North by Mayfield Patent controlled by the Johnsons, and on the east by the Sacandag and Kayaderosseras Patents all owned by the Johnsons. The document was found because on 15 Aug 1785, Col Guy Johnson who with James Watts, Sir John's brother in law, served as Sir John's attorneys in submitting his loyalist claim and appeared before the commissioners at London and produced a paper being "Kingsborough Patent by which it appears that the first part was deeded June 23, 1754 to Rent Stevens and others and continued 20,000 acres with allowance, the other to James Stewart and others dated May 27, 1755 containing 24,000 acres..." an extract of the surveys of the Kingsboroughs Patent.

Ananias Archer, commencement of rent on 25 Mar 1775 for 100 acres, rent per annum 6.3 (6L 3s?)

A couple of notable points arise in this document. The first is that Ananias began renting from the Johnsons, who were staunchly loyalist, in March of 1775. This is an interesting time to begin renting land from a Loyalist, inasmuch as the War for Independence had already started, more or less. (Paul Revere took his famous ride in April of that year.) The second is that the land was in the Mohawk river valley, the region where Indians, encouraged and employed by Sir John Johnson, massacred a number of settlers in 1781. The Mohawk River Valley and the Cherry River Valley massacres are well known and well documented. Finally, we see that as late as 1785, Johnson was trying to claim compensation through a London court for what was formerly his

family's land in America.

It is also a fact that Ananias was a soldier in the Revolutionary War. At first I couldn't verify this. Dr. Archer's book cites *New York Men in the Revolution*, page 179, as listing one Ananias Archer in the Tryon County Militia, Col. Frederick Fisher's Third Regiment. I couldn't find that book, but I did find *The Bloodied Mohawk*, by "Fort Plank Historian Ken Johnson." That book includes a section entitled "Memorandum Book of Col. Frederick Fisher 1779-80," which in turn includes a list of the members of the Third Regiment, but the name Ananias Archer is not listed; however, I assumed this list reflects the membership of the regiment at a given moment in time, rather than over the entire life of the regiment, so the absence of Ananias's name didn't necessarily prove anything.

These facts have led at least one previous researcher to come to the same conjecture I was coming to, namely, that Ananias and Elizabeth were killed during the Mohawk Valley Massacres of 1781. The only thing the family legend had wrong was the date, which was given as 1782. Here is how Dr. Archer's book refers to that researcher, some ancestor of mine, who is not specifically named.

She found, in "Historical Collections of N.Y. page 170, that "Colonel Johnson, who settled Johnstown and the Mohawk Valley, induced the Scotch Highlanders, his tenants, all tories, to fortify to assure peace to Tyron County. When the Colonials or Yankees organized the Tyron County Militia Col. Johnson fled to Canada following which the Colonials confiscated all his properties in Mohawk and Cherry Valleys. As a revenge in 1781 Johnson and his friend, Walter Butler, swooped down from Canada with Indians and whites dressed as Indians, burning and scalping all the settlers in their way". Then she asks "Now doesn't this sound more like the family tradition?" And since the date is about right and Louis C. Archer tells us family tradition has it that our earliest known ancestors came from Mohawk, as told elsewhere, we must answer that it does seem reasonable-but how shall we prove it? No one we have employed thus far has been able to establish where or when the massacre took place, but someone may sometime!

This seemed to me a plausible theory, but then I made a discovery, while rooting around in the Old Court House at Fonda, that was almost hard evidence that the Cornfield John story could not have happened, at least as told. It was in James F. Morrison's 1991 *Third Regiment Tryon County Militia*, a locally published monograph. This was perhaps the most intriguing thing I came across during my trip back East, other than uncovering John's stone. Below is a photocopy; the yellow highlighting is mine.

On the morning of Thurs., Sept. 6, 1781, Lieutenant Solomon Woodworth of Colonel Marimus Willett's Regiment assembled his company of 46 men and six Oneida Indians at Fort Rensselaer. Woodworth with his company marched to Fort Dayton and reached there at dusk of the same day.

On the following morning, Fri., Sept. 7, Woodworth gathered his men and left the fort to scout along the West Canada Creek for the ever present enemy. About two miles from the fort they came across the trail of the enemy which had been freshly made. Some of the men thought that a runner should be sent back to the fort and bring back Captain Garret Putman and his company to reinforce their scouting party. Woodworth said that by the time Captain Putman returned with his company the enemy would be gone. He also said that if they did encounter them they would be able to deal with them. The scouts now started to follow the trail but unknown to them a British Indian had been observing them. On seeing them follow the trail he headed back to the main encampment to report. Lieutenant Jacob Clement with his 80 Indians and Tories set a trap for Woodworth and his men on the trail.

On reaching the point of ambush one of Woodworth's men in advance spotted an Indian and fired. The scouts were well in the trap and the surrounding woods became alive. About ten of Woodworth's command fell dead or lay dying. Moses Yockum, one of the Oneida warriors was wounded in the hip and the other five Oneidas picked him up and carried him back to the safety of Fort Dayton's walls.

After Woodworth had fired a few shots he received a ball in the chest and died by Jacob Shew. Now the enemy charged the scouts and those that could, fled, and the rest were either dead or captured.

Lieutenant Solomon Woodworth, Orderly Sergeant John Dunham, Privates Annieas Archey, Daniel Dodge Giles Parker and 14 more of the company were killed, Lieutenant Richard Randolph Wilson, Corporal David Putman, Private Henry Covell, a volunteer from Captain Samuel Clarke's Company, Colonel Barnabas Sears Regiment of Massachusetts Levies were taken prisoners.

Major Aaron Rowley who was in charge of this detachment from Massachusetts was put under the command of Col. Marimus Willett. John Moyer, Joel Savage, John L. Schermerhorn and Stephen Valentine were captured and were taken to Canada. Corporal Jacob Shew, Privates Jacob Burke, David Cady, Jr., (who had been wounded in the left arm), David Moyer, Rynier Van Sickler, John Servis and nine other men who escaped. Clements and an Indian chief by the name of Troquanda had only two Indians wounded.

On Saturday, Sept. 8, Captain Putman with his company and the survivors of Woodworth's Company returned to the site of the ambush to perform the grim task of burying the dead. The site of the ambush was in a deep ravine three miles north of Herkimer on the east side of the West Canada Creek.

So there it was, but the name wasn't quite right. Could there have been an "Annieas Archey" and an "Ananias Archer" in the same regiment? Having looked through many lists of names of that

era, I was convinced that, even then, "Ananias," however it's spelled, was not a common name. As for the name "Archey," it's a rare one. A quick check of the White Pages on the Internet showed that in all of New York state, there were only 7 listings for "Archey." There were 3764 entries for "Archer," although some were duplicates.

Moreover, these Revolutionary War records all come from handwritten documents, of course, and the handwriting is often barely legible and sometimes barely literate. That there could be, in one regiment, an "Annieas Archey" and an "Ananias Archer" would have been quite the coincidence, though of course it was possible. I was frustrated that there was this cloud around what would otherwise have been definitive proof. For if this was in fact my man, killed in battle in 1781, then obviously he wasn't killed with his wife on their farm in 1782 while the kids hid out in the cornfield, and the entire Cornfield John legend, which we Archers have been telling ourselves for generations, disappears in a puff of musket smoke.

Research and Technology Overtake Myth and Legend

Doing this research project has made me aware of how many amateur and semi-professional historians there are who are continually looking into these remote corners of American history that most professionals would probably never bother with. Before I left Illinois for New York, I did what research I could in local libraries and on the Internet, but I found very little, other than a brief reference or two to the Cornfield John story on the Internet. But just recently I was surfing the Net again for Archer lore, and I saw that things had changed. There is now a web site devoted to the Tryon County Militia, at

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~nyherkim/militia/tryon3.html>

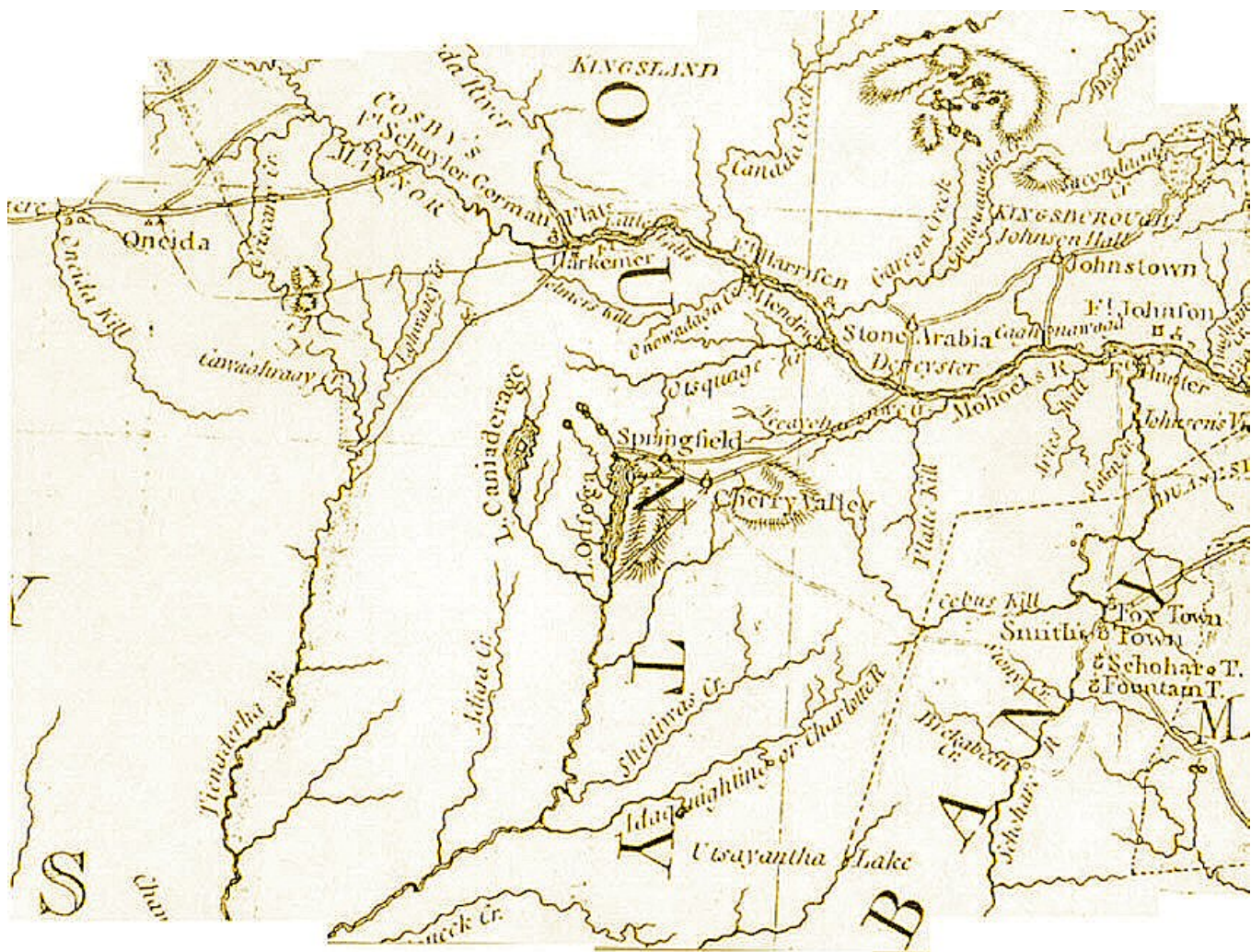
There is what appears to be a complete listing of all men in all three regiments. And there, under "Enlisted Men" in the third regiment, is the name "Ananias Archer," spelled correctly. There is no listing for "Annieas Archey." That would seem to settle the matter.

There is some irony in the fact that any number of Archers have tried to research the Cornfield John story over the last century, and failed, and that I had to travel to New York and dig around in old archives, only to come to a tentative resolution of the matter; but now all anyone has to do is search the Web for an hour or so to determine that the old family legend cannot be right, at least as it is ordinarily told. I suppose this is evidence that research and technology continue to overtake myth and legend.

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A Second Brief Cartographical Digression

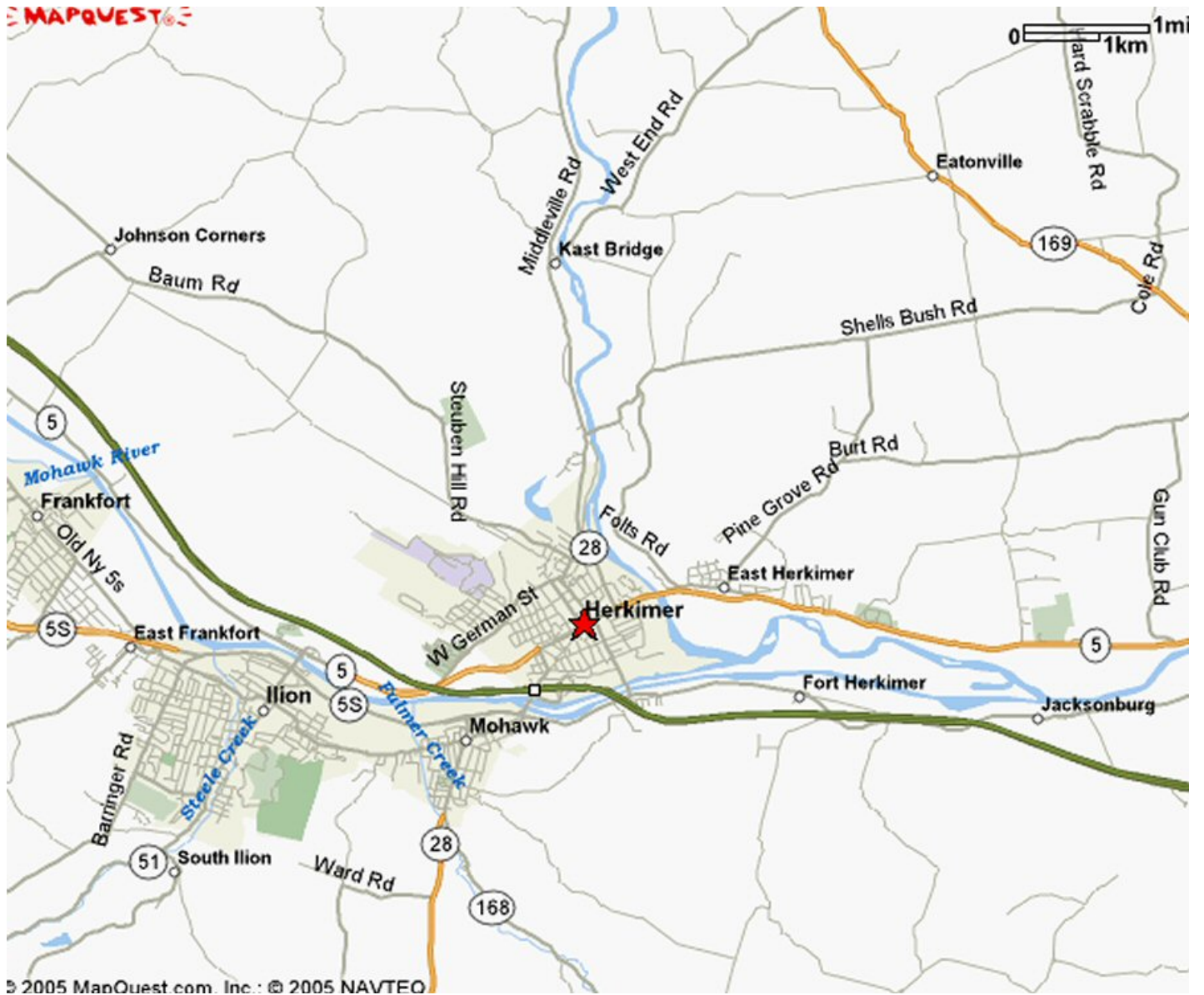
From the description in Morrison's book, we know that the site of the ambush was in a deep ravine three miles north of Herkimer, on the east side of West Canada Creek. Here is a map from that era showing "Harkemer" (near center top).



Below is a map of the same area from the Mapquest web site. It doesn't show the Mohawk River ("Mohoch" in the map above), but it does show Interstate 90, which, between Johnstown and Herkimer, follows the Mohawk River. A comparison of the two maps suggests the skill possessed by the cartographer who drew the old map.



Morrison tells us that Ananias and his fallen comrades were buried on the site of the ambush. That would be about where the town of Kast Bridge is on the following map, though on the opposite side of the creek.



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Family History: Like “Official” History, a Few Facts and a Lot of Imagination, and Probably Better for It

If it was known at the time that Ananias Archer was killed in a battle with Indians and British troops, then how did the Cornfield John story ever get started? One possibility is that his wife, Elizabeth, widowed after her husband died in battle, was indeed killed in an Indian raid while the children hid in a cornfield. However, Morrison's book lists many of the names of settlers killed during the raids on the Mohawk and Cherry valleys--there are even crudely drawn maps of the settlers' locations--and Archer is not among those names. That doesn't rule out the possibility of Elizabeth being killed in a raid, since Morrison doesn't claim that the lists are exhaustive, but it certainly does nothing to support the Cornfield John story.

Assuming, then, that the Cornfield John story was not based on any facts whatsoever, then how might it have gotten started? Who would have invented it, and why?

One can only speculate and theorize, but to do that, it is helpful to consider the history of the region. That history begins with the story of the William Johnson family in the Mohawk valley.

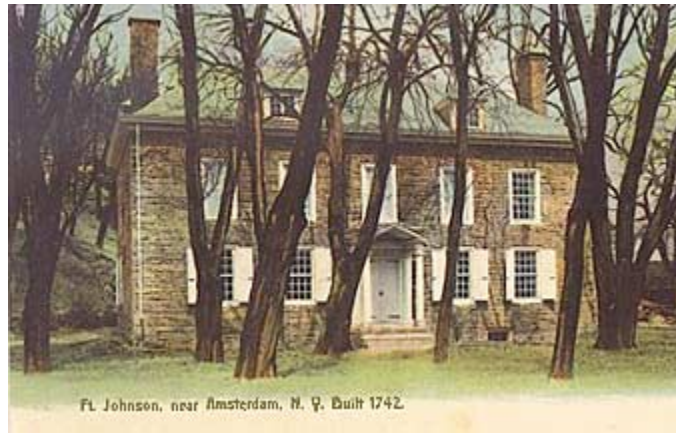
From the Old Fort Johnson web site, at www.oldfortjohnson.org:

The story of Fort Johnson and Sir William Johnson began with his arrival in the Mohawk Valley as a young man to manage his uncle's estate, but he soon acquired land of his own. In 1749, he built a fieldstone house he called Fort Johnson, his residence for 14 years and the site of numerous Indian conferences. Johnson conferred regularly with the Iroquois, and he also met the representatives of tribes from New England and the Midwest. His negotiations with the Iroquois nations kept them on the side of the British during the French and Indian War, and the alliance continued during the War for Independence. The residence became home to son John Johnson from 1763-1774.

This passage understates William Johnson's role as the highly successful Indian agent, appointed by the Crown, who so organized many of the Indians that they fought for Britain throughout the Revolutionary War and even afterwards. He acquired a great deal of land through purchase, and then later was granted a great deal more by the Crown in return for his service in the French and Indian War. It was a small parcel of this land that his son, John, rented to Ananias Archer.

Fort Johnson, by the way, is nothing more than a moderately sized house on the edge of Johnstown, New York. It was our first stop after we left Lewis County and headed south for the Johnstown and Fonda area. Here is the front of a Fort

Johnson postcard:



Of more immediate interest is the story of William's son, Sir John Johnson. Following are a couple of excerpts, the first from a book entitled *Our Country*, by Benson J. Lossing, published in 1877.

The exertions of Continental Army General Schuyler to reinforce and supply the army in Canada in 1776 were untiring, and the amount of labor to accomplish that end, which he performed while tortured with bodily suffering, was prodigious. At the same time he was defeating, by vigilance, wisdom and energy, the efforts of Sir John Johnson to bring upon the rear of the Northern Army the Tories west of Albany, and the Six Nations of Indians. Early in January (1776) he was told that Sir John had fortified his manor-house at Johnstown, and that his retainers, mostly Scotch Highlanders, seven hundred in number, were in arms. The general called for volunteers to enable him to disarm this formidable conspiracy. The response was marvelous. They came in such numbers, that, when he was within a few miles of Johnson Hall, he was at the head of almost three thousand men, including nine hundred of the Tryon County militia. He had met Sir John on the way, and made friends of the Mohawks; and he compelled the baronet and his followers to surrender all the arms and military stores which they had collected. He also took Johnson's parole of honor that he would not take up arms against the republicans, nor tamper with the Indians. Sir John deceived Schuyler with false promises. He violated his parole; and when Schuyler sent an armed force to arrest him in May, he fled, with his followers, through the great wilderness between Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains to the St. Lawrence, and joined the British army in Canada. He was commissioned a colonel in that army, and raised two battalions--a total of a thousand men, composed of his retainers and other Tories. These were the formidable corps known in the border warfare of that period as The Royal Greens, because of their green uniform. Lady Johnson, who was a daughter of John Watts, one of the king's counselors of the province, was sent to Albany on

horseback in that pleasant spring-time, attended by a military escort, where she was kept in durance several months, as a hostage for the restraint of her husband.

We see that the Patriots had more than political affiliations motivating them; they were the tenant farmers, the Johnsons were the lordly landowners. What happened, then, was not just a political revolt; it was a peasant uprising, with 3000 peasants marching on the Lord's manor. I like to think that Ananias was among that horde of peasants, and it is likely enough that he was, given the sheer number of them.

The Patriot peasants must have thought they were being quite generous, in that they did nothing more than confiscate Johnson's military supplies and make him promise not to work against the Revolutionary cause. This was a promise that, according to some accounts, Johnson soon broke, with disastrous consequences for the people of the Mohawk and Cherry valleys.

A second excerpt is from www.johnstown.com. This provides greater detail and some account of Sir John's activities throughout the war. The yellow highlighting is mine.

Sir John Johnson, Tory and Loyalist

With Sir John at the helm, conflict with the revolutionary colonial party became sharp. Personal loyalty and affection for Sir William quickly gave way to resentment against a medieval manorial system that bound free men to the soil as tenants. Sir John stood staunchly for the King and drew with him some hundreds of followers among his tenants, mostly Highland Scotch Catholics and Palatines. When war broke out, his "Royal Greens" joined with John and Walther Butler's Rangers in arousing the Indians and directing forays against the frontiersmen.

For a while the Tories were able to keep Tryon County from joining officially in revolutionary activities, but on January 26, 1776, General Schuyler with a large armed force came to Johnstown and seized Sir John's military stores. Though Johnson Hall was fortified, Sir John did not put up a useless resistance, and he was paroled instead of imprisoned. But he soon broke his parole and fled to Canada. Lady Johnson, held as a hostage at Kingston, escaped to join her husband. Joseph Brant, the young Mohawk Chief, trusted friend of Sir William, and brother of his "Brown Lady Johnson," accompanied Sir John to Canada.

Before they fled, Brant left on the stair rail at Johnson Hall the marks of his hatchet as a sign to the Indians that the house was to be spared. The hatchet marks are still deeply cut in the mahogany banister rail, and though the town was burned, Johnson Hall was spared.

In his flight Sir John, then provincial grand master of Masons for New York State, took with him the set of silver jewels belonging to St. Patrick's Lodge, founded by his father in 1766. The jewels were later returned to the Grand Lodge of New York State and are now in the possession of St. Patrick's Lodge in the Masonic Temple at Johnstown.

Sir John also took two small cannon that stood in front of Johnson Hall. Traveling with 300 whites and as many Indians over an Indian trail, his was the first party of white men known to have made their way through the heart of the Adirondack Mountains. The hardships of that winter journey to the St. Lawrence, accomplished in nineteen days, forced them to abandon the cannon, later found, one at the outlet of Long Lake and the other two miles south of Big Tupper Lake, near the boundary of Hamilton and St. Lawrence Counties. Except for the barrel, little remained but rust and mold when the latter was found in 1900. Within the circle of the tire of one wheel as it lay on the ground, had grown a massive beech tree at least a century old. In 1937 arrangements were made by J. Yates Van Antwerp for the return of the two cannon to Johnson Hall.

Legend has it that the first shot fired in the American Revolution, west of the Hudson, was aimed from the window of Tice's Tavern by the Tory sheriff, Alexander White, at Sampson Sammons. His aim was poor, however, and Sammons and his brother Jacob became the first occupants of Johnson Hall after it was sold as confiscated Tory property. There they entertained Lafayette, who made his headquarters at Tice's Tavern in 1778.

Only three weeks after the Battle of Lexington in May 1775, Jacob Sammons led a force of Patriots who routed Sir John Johnson and his "Friends of the King" at Fonda to make the first

capture of a British fortress.

On October 25, 1781, a few days after the surrender of Lord Cornwallis, Colonel Ross and Walter Butler and 600 British Regulars Loyalists, and Indians raided Warren's Bush, where they burned 20 houses, and destroyed much grain. Hurrying from Fort Rensselaer with 400 Militiamen to aid the Patriots, Colonel Willett followed the raiders from Fort Hunter to Johnstown, where a bloody engagement took place just north of the village. The enemy led, hotly pursued by the Patriots and 60 friendly Indians. A few days later Walter Butler, the ruthless raider, was killed at Jerseyfields.

In the raids and counter raids that swept through the valley of the Mohawk, soaking the land with blood and reddening the skies with burning crops and villages, Johnstown did not escape. But though it was burned on May 22, 1780, a few buildings were spared in addition to Johnson Hall.

In 1772 Johnstown became the seat of Tryon County, which, named for the last royal governor of New York, embraced a territory now comprising many counties. The name was changed to Montgomery in 1784, and 12 years later the county seat was moved to Fonda. In 1838 Fulton County was carved out of Montgomery, with Johnstown as the county seat, an honor it still holds. The county was named for Robert Fulton at the suggestion of Judge Daniel Cady.

Johnson Hall was confiscated in 1779 by the State of New York as Loyalist property and sold at auction

Here is Ken Johnson's introduction to the Col. Fisher section. Note especially the third paragraph.

MEMORANDUM BOOK OF COL. FREDERICK FISHER 1779-80

Despite having been charged with cowardice in the Battle of Oriskany, Col. Frederick Fisher was never tried. In the fall of 1779 he was named the Colonel Commandant of the Tryon County Militia in the place of Colonel Jacob Klock, the senior colonel. His orders and outgoing correspondence during the period, 1779-1780, he was in command were recorded in a single booklet; it is this booklet which is transcribed verbatim here. The original booklet is now housed in the vault of the Rome, New York Historical Society and is in a markedly fragile condition. Many of Colonel Fisher's personal papers are also housed there.

This memorandum book contains the handwriting of at least five different individuals, each having his own sense of spelling and grammar. It is assumed by the editor that the handwriting is probably of various orderly sergeants from within his regiment.

Colonel Fisher's command of the Tryon County Brigade ended abruptly on May 22, 1780, when the enemy under the command of Sir John Johnson destroyed the Caughnawaga Settlements. In the raid, the colonel was scalped and his brother Captain John Fisher was killed. After he was wounded, the Col. Fisher was taken to Albany, where he recovered but was never again noted to be active in military matters.

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A Theory of Oral Tradition Whose Plausibility, One Hopes, Somewhat Atones for its Lack of Originality

Summarizing the previous sources: the Johnson's owned a large chunk of western New York, much of it given to them by London, and so their loyalty was to Britain; his tenants and most of the other commoners were both revolutionaries and land reformers; they overthrew their master, but they let him live, exacting from him a promise not to seek revenge; he broke that promise, and, with the aid of Indians, led a series of bloody raids against the settlers who had once been his tenants; the British and their Indian allies scalped and killed people, non-combatants, indiscriminately, and burned everything in their path.

Which Ananias Archer more fully captures the mood of the situation? The one who simply died in battle, a soldier fighting other soldiers? Or the one who fought heroically in the war and survived it, became a peaceful farmer, but was then brutally murdered, along with his wife, and cut up into little pieces, and eaten--eaten!--while the poor children, now orphans, hid in a cornfield? The legendary version not only captures the horror of what was certainly a horrible period, it also provides justification for having taken Johnson's land in the first place, since he was a lying murderer, and for continuing to take the Indians' land and disposing of the Indians, who were obviously savages, whenever they got in the way. If someone knew about the Mohawk Valley massacre and also knew that Ananias died an early, violent death, it would not be hard to put those facts together and come up with the Cornfield John story. It not only answers to political needs, but it fleshes out the family honor. Young John must have been a brave boy, and very resilient, to survive that and become an upstanding citizen. His sister, Amy, in allowing herself to be captured by the Indians in order to distract them from her brother, made the ultimate sacrifice. We Archers can be proud. We have courage in our blood. Except that it didn't happen.

Heroes and Villains, Patriots and Loyalists: It's All Just Point of View, Isn't It? (And We Think the Canadians Are Our Friends)

Not only did the Ananias/Cornfield John story almost certainly not happen, but what about the rest of it? Was Sir John Johnson really such a bad guy? For starters, perhaps he did not break his promise not to retaliate against the peasant rabble who stole his property. A quick look at his name on

www.famousamericans.net/

lets him off the hook on at least that charge:

**In the spring of 1776, learning that General Philip
Schuyler was about to seize his person, he fled with about**

300 of his Scotch Tory tenants through the woods into Canada, reaching Montreal only after the severest hardships. He did not, however, as has been charged, violate his parole by this flight, as a letter from General Schuyler to himself, in Peter Force's "Archives," discharging him from his parole proves conclusively. On arriving in Canada he was commissioned colonel, raised two battalions known as the "Queen's royal greens," and in August, 1777, at their head, under command of Colonel Barry St. Leger. took part in the latter's investment of Fort Stanwix, now Rome, New York A detachment of his corps took part in the battle of Oriskany, on 6 August, 1777, a few miles east of that fort, with General Nicholas Herkimer (q. v.), who was approaching with the design of raising that siege. The siege was afterward resumed, but on the approach of Arnold to the relief of the fort, on 22 August, St. Leger and Johnson fled in haste and confusion to Canada, and their Indian allies, fearing to meet Arnold, deserted them. In May, 1780, he desolated Cherry valley with fire and tomahawk, and in October of the same year, with Brant and Cornplanter, he made a raid into the Mohawk valley.

Moreover, was it really so bad to remain loyal to the government that had managed the country more or less successfully for over a hundred years, that your father had spent his entire life serving, that had rewarded your family by taking care of you very well? It doesn't seem so if you read this blurb from the National Parks of Canada web site:

In 1776, Sir John Johnson (1742 - 1830) was a wealthy landowner in the Mohawk Valley in what is now New York State. The son of Sir William Johnson who had promoted the settlement of the area and founded the community of Johnstown, he remained true to his allegiance to Britain, at the cost of his fine home in Johnstown and his extensive properties in the Mohawk Valley.

Johnson and his family were arrested very early in the conflict, but he managed to escape, leading a large body of his estate tenants and loyal allies of the Six Nations Confederacy northwards to Montreal. They became the core of the regiment that the British military command authorised Johnson to recruit. Known as the King's Regiment of New York, it saw considerable action under his command during the course of the revolution, and Johnson became a highly respected and decorated military leader for the British, being raised to the rank of brigadier-general in 1782. By that time, however, it was clear that the British cause was lost. Within a year the

Treaty of Paris had been negotiated, recognising the independence of the Thirteen Colonies and leaving Johnson and the thousands of loyalists who had fled to Canada in permanent exile from their homeland.

Johnson "remained true to his allegiance to Britain, at the cost of his fine home in Johnstown and his extensive properties" What a loyal citizen, and what a sacrifice. So what if in 1785, as we saw in the excerpt showing Ananias's deed, Johnson petitioned the British government for compensation for that property, in addition to the two houses and tens of thousands of acres that government gave him in Canada for his services?

Johnson was "arrested very early in the conflict, but he managed to escape" But didn't the generous patriots just let him go on a promise? As for those bloodthirsty Indians he sent marauding through his former property, they were "loyal allies of the Six Nations Confederacy." And the regiment Johnson was given to command--it saw "considerable action." As in, murdering women and children? And the result of all this revolution? Johnson and thousands of loyalists were left "in permanent exile from their homeland." That's really sad.

If official historians, but historians with different political priorities, can take the well known facts of a well known person such as Sir John Johnson and write widely divergent official histories showing what kind of man he was, then is it any wonder that some ordinary people named Archer can take a few sketchy, largely unsubstantiated facts about the complete nobody who was their ancestor and come up with a tale that seems like it should be true, even if it isn't, because it explains so much?

It isn't to me. Moreover, I'm glad they did and I'm not at all disappointed to learn that the story is made up. In fact, I like it better that way. It shows that we Archers have been energetic and creative participants in the process of story-telling which we all participate in, all the time, because it explains the meaning of our lives so much better than mere facts ever can.

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A Typical Story

As I mentioned earlier, it isn't difficult to find families who have a family story involving fatal encounters with Indians. For that matter, it isn't too difficult to find people who have investigated their family stories and found, as I did, that the story is probably more myth than fact. One such example is the Hoppes family story, found at

<http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~hoppes/indianattackstory.html>

A version of this story was written by a family member and printed in a newspaper. That makes it a fact, doesn't it? Here are quoted highlights from that article:

FAMILY OF SOLDIERS

The tribe of Hoppes has a record

of which it can be proud.

They are fighters from way back.

The first American Ancestor Was

Killed by the Indians, But Two

Sons Saved the Mother and Sisters

One served Under Washington.

It's an inspiring record of service and sacrifice; however, one Harry Hoppes investigated the story and found it to be the result of mistaken identity and wishful thinking. Their first American ancestor died peacefully of old age.

The Legends Continue, and Probably Always Will

As also mentioned previously, one of the unexpected consequences of this research project was meeting, or at least hearing from, a number of distantly related Archers from around the country. Several have contacted me as a result of having seen an early, abbreviated version of this web site, which I put on the Internet a while ago. Two distant relatives, people I have never heard of, emailed me:

Hi Neil

I hope this email address is still active. My name is Jerry (Gerald) Archer. I live in York, Pa but I'm from Lowville, New York. In '73 I moved to Syracuse & in '76 move to York.

My line is

Ananias...Cornfield

John...Ananias...Zephaniah...Amby...Louis...Charles...myself.

Have you found Ananias' parents? What is your line?

I thoroughly enjoyed your website on the Archer search in New York State. I spent a rainy afternoon in 2002 searching for the Strayer Cemetery before I finally found it. It is indeed a very eerie place! I did not find Cornfield John's grave though. I'm glad you were able to find it. I have many photos of the cemetery as well.

I found online an 1870 D.G. Beers map of Martinsburg.

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~nylewis/martinbg.jpg> You'll notice the 3 Archers which I believe are John Jr,Zephaniah & George W Archer. The cemetery is also there but it was on the corner of the road before the road was straightened. I found a foundation and well in the area of John's house. Attached is a photo. Across the road only the milk house of Zephaniah still stands.

please let me know if you receive this. Thanks for your time.

Jerry Archer

Neil,

I just read your webpages about Cornfield John Archer. My name is Greg Heather and my great grandparents were Henry T Archer and Cora May Radspinner. From some posts on the Rootsweb message boards by Sue Moreno and from some records on George Archer's ArcherCousins website, I think that Henry was one of John Archer's sons

An interesting fact that I can share about my Archers is that there were three marriages with the Radspinner family. As I said, Henry was married to Cora Radspinner. Henry's brother Ernest Jaston Archer was married to Cora's sister Laura and Henry's sister Carrie Jeanette was married to Cora and Laura's brother, Charles Henry Radspinner, Jr.

Since I've just started researching this part of my family, I would be interested in any information that you'd like to share.

Thanks for the great story,

Greg Heather

Like everyone who contacted me, they had heard some version of the Cornfield John story; some of them had bits of information or simply legend they wanted to share. For the most part, though, they just wanted more--more of this dramatic family "history," more, in effect, about themselves. And there is more.

Cornfield John and his wife Naomi had ten children. Steven, their first born and my direct ancestor, left New York and headed west (as nearly as I can tell, the only one to leave New York), eventually ending up in Illinois. He is buried near St. Charles. His first son, John, did several interesting things. In 1859, at the age of twenty-eight, he and some friends made a trip by ox cart to Pikes Peak in Colorado, looking for gold. He left a brief diary of his trip, a copy of which I have. They found no gold--in fact, on the way out to Colorado, they met people coming back from there who told them there was no gold to be found, but they kept going anyway--but had an interesting trip and were astounded to see the Colorado Rockies.

Shortly after that trip, John enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. After the war, he moved to South Dakota, where he homesteaded. He was married twice, having six children with his first wife, and ten more with his second wife. The first of those sixteen was Ernest J. Archer, my great-grandfather. Here's where the story begins to pick up.

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A Man in Full

Ernest did well for himself, at least by local standards, and even made it into a history book. The following is from *History of Dakota Territory, Vol. V*, by George W. Kingsbury, (1915). (I already had a copy of this excerpt, but just a minute ago I did some quick Googling and was surprised to find it is now on the Web. Research just keeps getting easier.)

Ernest J. Archer, whose demise occurred at Sioux Falls on the 16th of January, 1906, was for a number of years actively and successfully identified with agricultural interests in Minnehaha County, owning four hundred and eighty acres of valuable land in Buffalo township at the time of his death, and enjoyed an enviable reputation as one of the highly esteemed and representative citizens of his community. His birth occurred in Illinois on the 15th of February, 1859, his father being John Archer, who removed from the Prairie state to South Dakota in 1881, when our subject was a young man of twenty-two years. The parents homesteaded on hundred and sixty acres of land in Buffalo township, Minnehaha County, but for about eighteen years prior to his death John Archer resided in Sioux Falls. He was an honored veteran of the Civil War and gained an extensive and favorable acquaintance in his home community.

Ernest J. Archer attended the common schools of his native state in the acquirement of an education and in 1881 came with his parents to Minnehaha County, South Dakota, taking up a homestead in section 24, Buffalo township, on which he resided until within two and a half years of his demise. At that time he took up his abode in Sioux Falls, where he died of heart disease, from which he had long suffered. He met with well merited success in the conduct of his agricultural interests and had extended the boundaries of his farm until at the time of his death it embraced four hundred and eighty acres of rich and productive land.

On the 27th of January, 1887, Mr. Archer was united in marriage to Miss Laura Radspinner of Grand Meadow township, Minnehaha county, her father being Charles H. Radspinner, who came to South Dakota from Clayton county, Iowa, in 1879, and homesteaded in Grand Meadow township. His death occurred in Sioux Falls. To Mr. and Mrs. Archer were born four children, as follows: Rosa May, who is the wife of Pete Sorenson, of Sioux Falls; and Fay Elton, Walter Allen and Henry Ernest, all of whom are engaged in the operation of the home farm. Mr. Archer was identified fraternally with the Modern Woodmen. His demise was the occasion of deep and widespread regret, for he had won many friends during the twenty five years of his residence in Minnehaha county. Mrs. Archer is widely and

favorably known throughout the community as a woman of many excellent traits of heart and mind.

The Archers were definitely coming up in the world, but of course it couldn't last, and if it had, this part of the story would hardly be worth telling. Ernest had one daughter and three sons; the youngest son, Henry, was my grandfather, and since I knew him I can say with certainty that he was a pathetic figure. But he apparently didn't start out that way. Ernest died when Henry was only eight, but his older brothers held the family farm and fortune together, and Henry grew up as the privileged and perhaps somewhat pampered little brother. I gather he became something of a man-about-town for awhile; in any case, he was considered a good catch as a husband, and in that capacity he married, in 1918, my grandmother, Jessie Mae Newell, who was quite the beauty. But why take my word for it? Here is the dashing couple:



Although, as I mentioned, I knew my grandfather, I never met Grandma. For that matter, my father hardly knew her. She disappeared.

Evil Once Again Visits the Archer Clan, but This Time the Loyalist Landlords are Bankers

Things went well for my grandparents for the first ten years of their marriage; by 1929 they had had five children, the last being my father, Vincent. But it was not a propitious year to be born, since that was the start of the Great Depression. The family didn't fare well during the Depression. There was no market for the crops; my father tells me they burned corn in the house furnace because the price they could get for it was less than the cost of coal. The family slid into debt, and that is when unscrupulous bankers convinced my grandfather that land would never again be worth anything; the thing to have was cash. So he sold the farm to those bankers for pennies on the dollar, and from there the family descended into stark and utter poverty. My father remembers eating cornstarch because it expands in the stomach and makes one feel full.

Henry and Jessie had three more children, for a total of eight, but their marriage disintegrated under the strain. My grandfather became abusive. My grandmother, my father believes, began seeing another man on the side, a man who owned an automotive repair shop. My father remembers Jessie taking him there and making him wait while she went upstairs with the man. He believes the man paid her, and that she used the money to buy food for her children.

One night, when my father was eight years old, Henry came home drunk and threatened everyone with a shotgun. Then he passed out. My father remembers his mother coming into the children's room with a suitcase and telling them that she was sorry, but she just couldn't take any more, so she was leaving. She hugged them, left the house, and for all practical purposes was never seen again. Eventually the older children moved out and took care of themselves; the younger children, including my father, were sent to an orphanage.

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The Author Concludes, Finally, on a Somber Note

It's easy to be light and amusing about an Indian massacre of my ancestors that happened two hundred years ago, especially since it didn't actually happen. My father's tragedy, however, is a good deal closer to me, because I saw the effect it had on him and his siblings. And there are some truly heartbreaking details. For instance, my father recalls that as a young teenager, he was walking down the streets of Sioux City, Iowa (where he had lived as a child and where I was born) with some of his brothers and sisters, and they suddenly saw their mother ahead of them. They shouted at her and began running towards her; my father swears she looked right at them. And then she ran away. She ducked around a corner, and by the time the children got to that corner, she had disappeared.

In another instance, one of my father's older brothers had joined the army and was about to be shipped overseas. He received a brief letter from someone who said that she had always loved him, that she missed him, and that she hoped he was well. The letter was unsigned.

In the 1950's, my father made an attempt to track down his mother, but with no success. He did, however, find a retired police detective in Sioux City who had handled the case of her disappearance. He hinted that he knew what happened to her, that she was all right, but that he was sworn to never reveal her whereabouts. This would have been about twenty years after she disappeared.

One of my cousins, the same one who compiled the most recent genealogy of our family, recently made a serious effort to learn what became of Jessie, but, while she came across some tantalizing clues, she too came up empty.

When I was a child, my father would make us go see his dad about twice a year. Henry lived alone in a pathetic, dirty little shack in the slums of South Sioux City. Most of his children wanted nothing to do with him. He was obese, he drank, and he cried often. We never spent more than an hour at a time with him, which was more than enough for me.

In 1969, I was a senior in high school. I came home late one night after an evening of teen-aged carousing, only to find my father sitting at the kitchen table, hours after his usual bedtime. He had gotten a call from the Sioux City police; it seemed that his father, Henry, had shot himself in the mouth with a shotgun.

The funeral was in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, about a week later, which gave the deceased's far-flung children time to get there, back to the ancestral homeland. Many of these children, brothers and sisters, had not seen each other for most of their adult lives and were essentially strangers to each other, so it was a strange reunion. But the strangest aspect of it--and the reason I am including this tale in this discussion of folklore--is that some unexpected visitors showed up, and they had their own interpretation of the events of thirty years earlier.

For years, some of the members of my family suspected that members of Jessie's family--her sisters--knew where she had disappeared to but weren't telling. But Jessie's family had their own dark suspicions--namely, that my grandfather had murdered Jessie and disposed of the body somewhere. So when Jessie's ancient sisters turned up at the funeral, we were more than surprised. And everyone was expecting ... what? Something dramatic. That Jessie herself would show up? That someone in my family would confess that Henry had in fact killed his wife? That Jessie's sisters would confess that they did know where she went and what happened to her?

But no one confessed anything because, I suspect, no one knew anything. They were all just hoping for some kind of end to the story.

I was too. But I see now that in one sense the story had ended long ago, not when Jessie disappeared,

but after her children had grown up and passed the story of their childhood down to their children, and when Jessie's sisters passed their version of the story to their children. Because for all of us it became the story which defined our family's past. It explained why our parents were the way they were; it explained why our family was poor; it explained the Great Depression from our family's point of view, and connected us to it, in the same way that the Cornfield John story explained the Revolutionary War from our point of view and placed us in the context of American history. True or not, we need these stories to know who we are and how we fit in. They also become cautionary tales: don't trust rich, powerful people; marry wisely; bounce back from adversity, because there is always another chance.

In another sense, such stories never end, and they never stop being re-invented to suit the needs of the people who are telling them. I would like to think that my research into Cornfield John has cleared things up a bit regarding that legend, and perhaps it has, but only for the few who will see this web site. What about the hundreds, or thousands, of Archers who will never see it? What about Archer descendents a hundred years from now? What will they do with the Cornfield John story, or the Henry and Jessie story? It's quite possible that a few will undertake to research these legends, as I have, and quite likely they will learn more than I have, as new historical facts keep coming to light. Someone might find out what happened to Ananias's wife Elizabeth, and someone might find out what happened to Jessie. But the majority of Archers will almost certainly never hear these corrected stories and will have no choice but to continue passing down the myths. And, even if they don't know it, that is how they will prefer it.

I Never Really Cared Much for the Archers

After all this--this sabbatical project--a reader might think I am slightly obsessed with the Archer family history. In fact, for most of my life I have never cared much for these Archers. Henry was hardly a role model, and I grew up knowing very few of my Archer relatives. Instead, I grew up with my mother's side of the family. For several years during my childhood, I was raised by my maternal grandparents. My mother's dad was like a father to me. Here is a picture of the two of us:



The facts are these: I was nine years old; we lived on the Yankton Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota; we were fur trappers, a dying profession if there ever was one. My grandfather was born in the 1890's, a time when white people and Indians, out there in South Dakota, still shot at each other on occasion. My grandfather was in World War One. My family has the 1870's lever-action shotgun that was passed down to my grandfather from his father.

I have no children, but I do have several nephews; if that little boy in the picture were your great, great, great uncle, and you had only the above facts to go on, and the shotgun, and that picture, what story would you "remember" to more completely explain the picture? What parts of that story would your children remember and pass on to their children? The exciting parts, I would imagine. And I believe I would prefer it that way.

The Author Avoids Concluding on a Somber Note after All.

No trip to New York State is complete without a trip to Niagara Falls. Here is the final image on this web site:

