

# Walter Stewart Clan 100th Anniversary Reunion

## History of the Clan

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38213 Carl E. Kramer, Ph.D.

Landmark anniversaries are often a time when organizations and institutions take the opportunity to pause and reflect on who they are, how they grew and developed, and what the future holds. For the Walter Stewart, Sr. Clan, this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its first reunion in 1907 offers such an occasion for reflection—to refresh the memories of those who have heard the stories many times before and to pass them on to the new generations who will lead the family in the century come.

The Walter Stewart clan of South Carolina has a proud tradition that is rooted in ancient Scottish history. According to tradition, the Stewart lineage is traced to Walter, a Norman who came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066. His son, Walter, moved on to Scotland and entered the service of King David I, who eventually elevated him to Lord High Steward. The office became hereditary and the title was modified to Stewart as a surname in 1246.

Over the centuries that followed, the Stewarts proved a prolific and venturesome clan. During the late fifteenth century, many joined English efforts to establish communities in Ireland, and during the early seventeenth century some of their descendants received land grants in Ulster from King James I of England to increase the Protestant population in Catholic Northern Ireland. During the 1620s members of the Stewart clan joined the migration to North America, beginning with a James Stewart, who came to Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621.

The period of greatest migration began in 1718 when landlords in Northeastern Ireland doubled or trebled rents, forcing many tenants to leave for America. This coincided with

enforcement of a Parliamentary Test Act which barred these staunch Presbyterians from holding public office unless they swore allegiance to the Church of England. By the beginning of the American Revolution, Stewarts and other Scotch-Irish Presbyterians could be found in every English colony in North America, and they exercised both religious and political influence disproportionate to their numbers.

As the Scotch-Irish population grew, many sent back messages to their kinsmen in Ireland, extolling the opportunities they found in America. Among those who apparently received such messages were Walter Stewart and his wife Mary Ross, who lived in County Antrim. We know very little about their lives in Ireland, but tradition suggests that Walter was a weaver, and articles in their possession after their arrival in America suggest that they were far from paupers. Nevertheless, Walter, Mary, and their first two sons, eight-year-old Samuel and the infant John, left Belfast in late 1787 or early 1788, and arrived at Charleston.

Soon after reaching America, the Stewarts moved into the upper part of South Carolina, where other Stewarts had already settled, and in November 1795 Walter paid twenty pounds sterling for 185 acres on the Enoree River in rapidly-growing Bethany Community of Laurens County. Meanwhile, the family experienced rapid growth of its own, as Mary gave birth to sons Robert in 1790, James in 1795, and Walter, Jr. in 1799. For a southern farm family who owned no slaves, sons were an economic asset. The Stewart family remained active members of the community for nearly three decades. Walter was an elder in the Duncan Creek Presbyterian Church, the oldest Presbyterian Church in upper South Carolina. In 1808 Walter assured his political equality when he and his sons Samuel and John were naturalized.

Although the Stewarts were reasonably prosperous farmers, they were not immune to the trials of southern pioneer life. Mary Ross Stewart died during the first decade of the nineteenth

century, leaving Walter to work the farm and rear their five sons. Like many others in his situation, Walter soon remarried, to Isabella Bobo, a daughter of Spencer Bobo, who had moved into the neighborhood about 1810. In 1813 she bore Walter's sixth son, Clark Berry, and David Bobo Stewart followed in 1818. Meanwhile, the family farm began to deteriorate, mainly because of cultivation methods that quickly exhausted the soil. In 1824, like many of their neighbors, Walter and Isabella, their sons Clark Berry and David Bobo, and Walter's son James and his wife Lida Bobo, Isabella's sister, joined the growing westward movement, settling in Gwinnett County, Georgia.

Precisely where they settled is not recorded, but tradition suggests that it was on the Chattahoochee River near the present town of Duluth, about ten miles northeast of Atlanta. But Walter did not have long to enjoy the land; he died in 1825 at the age of about 63, just a year after moving to the new farm, and was buried at his own request on his new farm. Sometime between 1830 and 1833, Isabella married Henry S. Turner, and they resided at his home in Gwinnett County until her death about 1843.

As a group, Walter Stewart's son's and their wives were a prolific lot, and despite the premature deaths of many children, they originated a clan whose descendants now number in the thousands.

As the eldest son, Samuel no doubt was his father's chief assistant in the tasks of clearing the land, planting crops, and hunting game for the family table during their early years in America. In 1807 Samuel married Anna Gilliland in 1807, and they settled on Walter's land in the Bethany community, where they lived out their lives. Samuel and Anna had eleven children—six daughters and five sons. Anna died in 1833, the year Bethany Presbyterian Church

was founded. Samuel and several of the children became active members, and he was buried there, along with daughters Nancy and Martha and son Samuel T. Stewart.

John Stewart, Walter and Mary's second son, grew up on the family place about a mile from the present site of Bethany Church. In 1815, at age 28, he married 19-year-old Adeline (Linny) Pitts, whose family lived nearby. According to family tradition, John made some of the furniture the couple used in their first home, including a chest, a drop-leaf table, and four dining chairs that the family used for many years. John and Linny reared their family of six daughter and five sons in the Sandy Springs community, about four miles east of Bethany Presbyterian Church. The family immediately joined Bethany Church, where John was a deacon, and he also served as a local justice of the peace.

During the early 1850s, in a search for fresh farmland, the family moved to the Fountain Inn area, where they became active members of New Harmony Presbyterian Church. In 1851 John joined his half-brother, Clark Berry, in purchasing a 300-acre tract on Big Durbin Creek, and John took 25 acres on the creek as sawmill site. A flood destroyed the mill in August 1852, but with the assistance of his sons and neighbors, John rebuilt the mill. But on October 7, as he was putting it back into operation, he collapsed and died from unknown causes. The following day, he was buried in New Harmony Church. Linny died five years later and was buried next to him.

Robert Stewart, Walter and Mary Ross Stewart's third son and the first born in America, was 31 years old in 1821, when he bought 96 acres of land next to his father's farm in the Bethany community. There he built a house and settled two years later with his bride, Rachel Gilliland, the younger sister of Samuel's wife Anna. Robert and Rachel proved the most prolific

of Walter Stewart's children, producing thirteen offspring between 1825 and 1844, including the clan's first set of twins, Joseph Warren and Benjamin Franklin, born in 1841.

Robert and Rachel lived for 20 years in the Bethany community, where they were members of Bethany Presbyterian Church and their children attended Bethany School, often under the tutelage of their young uncle, Clark Berry Stewart. Eldest sons William and Robert became local craftsmen, the former as a miller and the latter as a carpenter. In 1844 Robert and Rachel took their family to fresh land in the New Harmony community, where they became charter members of the recently organized New Harmony Presbyterian Church. Like his father and older brothers, Robert died soon after relocating to a new community, succumbing in March 1845 at the age of 54. He was the first person buried in the New Harmony Presbyterian Church cemetery. Rachel reared her thirteen children in the New Harmony community, where they built a second, larger home from portions of their original log house and later built a two-story frame house that still stands. All of the children eventually settled in or near Fountain Inn.

James R. Stewart, Walter and Mary Stewart's fourth son, was reared in the Bethany community. But in 1824, when he was 29 years old, he migrated to Gwinnett County, Georgia, with his father, step-mother, and two step-brothers and several other families. About the same time, he married Scynthia Bobo, his step-mother's niece, and in 1827 she gave birth to the first of their thirteen children, at least four of whom died in childhood. Two supposedly died from influenza and were buried in the same grave.

Among Walter and Mary Ross Stewart's sons and their families, James's is the one for whom we have the least information. The 1850 census indicates that they probably lived in Forsyth County, Georgia, just north of Gwinnett County. They appear to have moved some time later to Cass County, later Bartow County, and after James's death in 1853, Scynthia may have

moved with the surviving children to old Campbell County (now Douglas County), where she had a brother.

Walter Stewart, Jr., the last of Walter and Mary Stewart's sons, grew up in the Bethany community and remained there after his father and step-mother moved on to Georgia in 1824. Two years later, he married Sarah (Sallie) Templeton, the daughter of Captain David Templeton, a prominent local landowner, and in 1825 they settled on a 163-acre farm that young Walter purchased at auction from the estate of a Samuel Leeke.

Walter and Sallie had eight children, seven who lived to maturity. Like their cousins by Walter's brother Robert, several attended Bethany School under the tutelage of their uncle, David Bobo Stewart. The family was also very active in Bethany Presbyterian Church, where Walter was elected an elder soon after turning 40. But his tenure proved tragically brief. Walter and Sallie's sixth child, David, died on February 1, 1842, shortly before his seventh birthday, and Sallie succumbed three days later. Walter himself died in May, and a notation in family records attributes their deaths to "slow fever-tuberculosis," a common malady in the nineteenth century. All three were buried at Bethany Presbyterian Church. Walter's in-laws assumed responsibility for rearing the surviving children since his older brothers, with nearly a dozen children each, could not take on the responsibility for seven more.

Clark Berry Stewart, Walter Sr.'s sixth child and first by Isabella Bobo, was born in the Bethany community but moved with his parents to Georgia when he was eleven. Little is known of his childhood, but calculations in an arithmetic book from his teenage years suggest that he had a knack for mathematics. After his father died and his mother remarried, Clark returned to South Carolina and taught for several years at Bethany and Sandy Springs, where his students

included several of his nieces and nephews. In 1836 he volunteered for three-months of military duty in the war against the Seminoles in Florida, and then resumed his teaching duties.

In mid-1837 Clark entered a period of introspection, during which he alternated between teaching and studying law in Georgia. In late 1838 he returned to Bethany and began attending Bethany Presbyterian Church. The following spring, after undergoing a conversion experience, he began preparing for the ministry. He entered Columbia Theological Seminary in 1841 and was ordained in April 1844. In 1843, meanwhile, he married Katherine Hitch, his former pupil, and they became the parents of eight children, two of whom died in childhood. In 1855, after serving mission churches in Lauren, Greenville, and Spartanburg counties, he was called as pastor of Fairview Presbyterian Church near Fountain Inn, where he served until declining health forced his resignation in 1883. Clark also maintained a lively interest in farming and agricultural reform, often writing for journals such as the *Southern Cultivator*. He died in April 1890 and is buried at Fairview Church.

David Bobo Stewart, the last of Walter's sons and his second by Isabella Bobo, was about six when he moved with his parents to Georgia. When he was in his late teens, he joined the gold rush to Cherokee country, settling near Cassville, the Cass County seat. In 1837 he married Virginia Phillips and they had nine children. Five months after Virginia's death in June 1861, David married Nancy Jones, a widow, and they had two more children. All but one of his eleven children lived to adulthood.

Aside from the names of his wives and children, we know very little else about David Bobo. The 1840 Cass County census lists a David B. Stewart as the head of a household with two males, two females, and three slaves. While slave ownership would indicate considerable affluence for a young man, there is no certainty that this entry refers to David Bobo Stewart,

even though family history accepts it as such. Sketchy evidence suggests that he lived near Gadsden, Alabama, when he married Nancy Jones, and it is believed he was buried there after his death in 1896, but even that is uncertain.

By 1860 most of Walter Stewart's 75 grandchildren had reached adulthood. Surviving records don't tell us much about their individual sentiments about the increasingly intense debates on slavery and secession. But the secessionist impulse was particularly strong in South Carolina, and when the Civil War erupted in April 1861, the Stewart men answered the call to arms, and 41 grandsons and grandsons-in-law eventually joined the Confederate army. Twenty-nine served in various South Carolina units, 17 of whom enrolled in Kershaw's Brigade, commanded by General Joseph Brevard Kershaw, a prominent Camden lawyer and state legislator, who led the unit throughout the war. Thirteen Stewart men, nearly 32 percent of the total, died of disease or wounds or were killed in action. Among them were five sons of Robert Stewart, including twins Joseph Warren and Benjamin Franklin Stewart.

While the grandsons bore the brunt of the battle, so many of the Rev. Clark Berry Stewart's parishioners at Fairview Presbyterian Church donned Confederate grey that he joined them as domestic missionary or chaplain to the Army of Northern Virginia, under appointment of the Presbytery of South Carolina.

The agony of war also touched Stewart family members who remained at home. One particularly sad episode occurred in the summer of 1864 when Union cavalry arrived in northern Georgia with orders from General William T. Sherman to burn bridges on the Chattahoochee River and mills and machine shops that produced goods for the Confederate war effort. The targets included the Roswell Manufacturing Company in Roswell and the Sweetwater Manufacturing Company at New Manchester, which made Confederate uniforms. The troops



also had orders to arrest mill workers who refused to deport them and their families to prisons north of the Ohio River.

True to their orders, the cavalymen destroyed the mills and rounded up the workers, most of whom were families of Confederate soldiers. Nearly all refused to sign oaths of allegiance. They were loaded onto wagons for a journey that would take them to Louisville, Kentucky. Among the deportees were Charlotte Elizabeth (Lizzie) Russell Stewart, wife of Walter Washington Stewart, son of James Stewart, sire of the House of James. Lizzie and her children remained in Louisville until the war's end and were reunited there with Walter, who had been a prisoner of war at Camp Chase in Columbus, Ohio. They stayed in Louisville until the fall of 1865, when they finally accumulated enough money to for train fare back to Georgia.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the Walter Stewart Clan numbered in the hundreds, and his grand children and great grand children were spread from South Carolina westward to Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas. As the clan became diffused geographically and generationally, its members began to lose connections with each other and with their roots. One who lamented this development was Clark Berry's son John Wistar Stewart. Critical factors that inspired his interest in his family's roots were a large collection of his father's diaries, journals, and papers and a huge Peden family reunion at Fairview Presbyterian Church about 1899.

Deciding that his family needed to do the same thing, Wistar set out to gather and preserve the family's heritage. Over the next few years, he pored over his father's records, interviewed cousins who live nearby, and made copious records of their family memories. Then he pieced together a rudimentary genealogical chart of his father's generation, their wives, and their children. Once accomplishing that, he set to work on the next generations. It was a

daunting task, but by about 1906 he was ready to launch the idea of a reunion of the Walter Stewart Clan.

Wistar's envisioned the reunion as more than just a large, friendly get-together. When the Stewarts gathered for their first reunion, they would elect a chief—the eldest and most respected member of the Clan. Then they would elect sub-chiefs to preside over the seven Houses of the Clan, each named for one Walter Stewart's seven sons. The ancient traditions of the Stewart Clans of Scotland would thus be preserved for future generations. Wistar would die, but his family would be immortal.

To assist in the planning, he recruited a Reunion Invitation Committee composed of three cousins in the House of Robert: Hastings Dial Stewart of Martins Crossroads; Brooks Stewart, the Harmony community mail carrier; and Walter Stewart, secretary of the Fairview Church Sunday School, who accepted responsibility as temporary secretary in charge of clan genealogical records. Meanwhile, Wistar continued to devote extensive time to amplifying and organizing the family's genealogy.

The first reunion was scheduled for 10:30 a.m., Thursday, October 17, 1907, at New Harmony Presbyterian Church, which for more than a half-century had been the family church of most of the Stewarts in the Fountain Inn area. In anticipation of an overflow crowd, Cousin William Stewart of the House of Robert and his brothers Jim and Sam built an arbor and an outdoor stand for the ceremonies in the grove of trees across from the cemetery. Meanwhile, the Invitation Committee addressed handwritten invitations to out-of-state kin in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. They also ordered colorful lapel ribbons to be pinned on each attendee. Each ribbon bore the Scottish thistle, Scotland's national emblem, and the initials WSC—for Walter Stewart Clan.

Finally, Wistar and the committee completed the vital work of transforming the family into a perpetual association by drafting the Walter Stewart Clan Constitution and Bylaws for approval at the reunion. The articles set forth the name of the clan, its purpose, and the officers and their duties. Article VIII required the chief to wear his insignia of rank—a red and navy tartan tam, the traditional headdress of the Royal Clan of Stewart, that Wistar had ordered from Scotland. The final article specified two clan mottoes: “God our King,” and “Onward and Upward.”

The great reunion arrived as scheduled, and it was a glorious success. Although no known members of the House of James could be located and none from the House of David were able to attend, the other five houses were there in force, with a total throng of nearly 200. The Fountain Inn Stewarts threw open their homes to out-of-town visitors, and the tables at New Harmony church groaned with baskets of fried chicken, ham biscuits, potato salad, deviled eggs, choice vegetables, pickles, spiced peaches, and desserts of every variety. Welcoming speeches were delivered, the constitution and bylaws were adopted, and William Stewart of the House of Robert was duly elected the first chief of the clan.

For Wistar himself, the reunion was an opportunity to collect new information from cousins with whom he not previously communicated. As a result, he filled in numerous blanks in the genealogical chart and learned addresses of long lost members of the House of James who had moved on to Texas. With these additions, the American records of the Walter Stewart family were virtually complete.

Chief William Stewart served until his death in 1909 and was succeeded in 1910 by Wistar himself. He presided at the great reunion of 1913, which celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his father’s birth. Wistar presented a paper on Clark Berry Stewart’s early life and work, and

the Rev. Calvin Lewers Stewart, Wistar's brother, presented a paper on their father's ministerial work. Wistar died in 1914 and was succeeded as chief by Samuel Turner Stewart of the House of Robert, who presided from 1915 to 1917, during most of World War I.

The fourth chief was Dr. Henry Boardman Stewart of the House of Clark, Wistar's brother and a family physician in the Fairview community for many years. He served until his death in 1947, a span of 29 years. Sometime during this period, but prior to 1921, the crest of the Royal Clan of Stewart was replaced as the chief's insignia by a gold lapel badge bearing the name of the Walter Stewart Clan. The tam made its last recorded appearance in 1948, when Wesley Brooks Stewart of the House of Robert, a son of third Chief Samuel and a member of the original Invitation Committee, was elected the fifth chief. It is reported that the tartan tam lay on the pulpit at New Harmony as he took office, but he modestly declined to wear it in favor of the gold badge of office.

The clan met with almost unwavering regularity throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, skipping only a year or two during World War II because of gas rationing. The reunion usually alternated between New Harmony and Fairview churches, and reportedly assembled once at Bethany Presbyterian Church in lower Laurens County, where Walter Stewart first settled.

As the economy changed from agriculture to industry and the automobile replaced the horse and buggy as the primary mode of transportation, the reunion shifted to Sunday, with the clan meeting in formal session after the church service. By mid-century, reunion traditions were well established. The meeting traditionally opened with prayer and a hymn. The mottoes were stated, attending members were recognized by house, deceased members were memorialized,

and officers were elected and re-elected. Once the meeting ended, everyone enjoyed a festive picnic dinner.

Meanwhile, the clan history continued to accumulate, meticulously recorded in ledger books by secretary Walter Stewart. For many years, the Social Security Administration accepted his original ledger as proof of birth in lieu of a birth certificate for many older clan members. As his health began to fail, Walt depended increasingly on his wife Annie for assistance. He had been secretary for 50 years when he died in 1958.

Walter's successor as secretary was Maude Stewart Buford, the daughter of Wistar's brother Twyman Clark Stewart and wife of Dr. Joel Buford of Greer, in Greenville County. A member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and early victim of the genealogy bug, she eventually became assistant secretary of the Stewart clan and picked up where Wistar left off in the search for family data. In 1937 she accomplished a major feat: through the sponsorship of the University of South Carolina, the federal Works Projects Administration financed the typing of the Rev. Clark Barry Stewart's entire journal series from 1836 until his retirement in 1885. Running in the hundreds of pages, it is housed at the university's South Carolinian Library in Columbia.

Maude later recruited Nan Stewart, the widowed granddaughter of William Stewart, the first chief, as her assistant. A professional laboratory technician and excellent typist with a passion for names, dates, and facts, she played a crucial role in putting the material Maude had gathered in better order. When Maude became secretary in 1958, Nan Stewart stepped into the position as historian and devoted herself to updating family records. By the time of her death in 1964, she had accumulated data on nearly 3,000 individuals in about 600 families descended from Walter Stewart, Sr. and his two wives.

The 1960s were a period of intense social change in the United States, but the Stewart Reunion continued unabated. In 1965, Chief Brooks Stewart, the last survivor of the original Invitation Committee, died at age 96 after 18 years of service. At the time, many other large family reunions were dying out and attendance at the Stewart gathering was in decline. Some feared that their own clan would meet the same fate. But the new chief, William Tinsley Stewart, was determined to reverse the downward trend and reinvigorate the clan. The grandson of first chief William Stewart, he asked reunion attendees to sign a register and to provide their addresses. He then passed them along to his daughter, Mary S. Lesslie, who mailed out postcards announcing the time and date of annual reunions. The reminder sparked new interest, and attendance soon recovered to former levels of about 100 annually.

Another step in reinvigorating interest evolved after the death in 1972 of Fronde Stewart, who had succeeded her sister Nan as custodian of the archives. The records were delivered to Chief Tinsley, who began pondering the idea of an official Clan Historian. He formally proposed the office at the 1977 reunion and it was approved. Elected to fill the position was his widowed daughter, Mary Stewart Lesslie, who had just completed her doctorate in psychology at the University of South Carolina. Although relatively ignorant of genealogical techniques, she put her scholar's talents to work bringing the records up to date.

Despite the immensity of her task, two developments worked in her favor. First, other members of the clan had begun working on the records of their own families, some of them tracking entire houses. Second, the use of computers to organize genealogical data was becoming increasingly common, and xerographic technology made it easier to reproduce data in large quantities. These developments inspired the appointment of house historians who would document the continuing development of their families. Soon she had recruited historians for

each of the seven houses, including the “long lost” house of David Bobo Stewart, with which there had been no contact for more than fifty years.

The house historians set to work at their various tasks, and by the beginning of the 1980s a move was afoot to publish a formal history of the Walter Stewart Clan. In 1981 Mary S. Lesslie took time out to marry her old friend and fellow genealogist, William Rawlinson, and at the reunion that August the clan formally approved a proposal to publish a book-length clan history. Over the next year, with assistance from her new husband, her daughters, and dozens of others, she sifted through old photographs, updated family records, consulted with editors, and double-checked facts, names, and dates. By the time it went to the press, the book had over 6,000 names. As the reunion neared, orders poured in and the excitement was palpable. Coinciding with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first reunion, the August 1982 gathering was the largest in decades.

Having achieved his goal of pumping new vigor into the reunion, Chief Tinsley Stewart died in 1983 and was succeeded by his son, Charles B. Stewart, a partner in the Stewart Furniture Company in Woodruff, South Carolina. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the reunion highlighted the clan’s history with Saturday field trips to homes, churches, cemeteries, and other sites associated with each house. When that cycle ended, the field trips continued, focusing on other interesting historic and contemporary sites, ranging from the homes of famous South Carolinians such as States Rights Gist and John Calhoun to the new BMW automobile plant in Spartanburg. As it gathers for the 100th anniversary, the Walter Stewart Clan reunion remains a remarkable expression of the importance and resilience of the family as a fundamental building block of any society.

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