

Alexander Black and John Black, Two Men

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For decades our family lore has included a story about John Alexander Black being our ancestor and for whom the town of Blackville, South Carolina was named. Research has proven this to be inaccurate. Alexander Black and John Black were two different men associated with Blackville, South Carolina. John Black is our ancestor. A time line and comparison of the two men substantiates this conclusion.

Alexander Black aka Alexander Black, Esq. aka Maj. Alexander Black, was born in Ireland about 1789 and came to Charleston, South Carolina when he was a child. He petitioned for Citizenship when he was 21 years of age in 1811. Through hard work and discipline he became independent. He was a staunch Whig Patriot, lawyer, merchant and politician. As a member of the Irish Volunteers he served at the ranks of Captain and Major. As an accomplished business man, he formed several partnerships and served on Committees or the Board of Directors of a number of companies, was active in many Societies and organizations and owned many properties. Mr. Black was married and was predeceased by his wife. Alexander Black lived in Charleston, Ward 4, and was a member of the Second Presbyterian Church where he was buried upon his death from Influenza in Aug 1849.

He was listed in the Charleston Directory and Stranger's Guide beginning in 1819, a Merchant at 315, King Street. There was newspaper post in December 1821 concerning the Estate and death of Nathan Foster, his law partner, and his wife Sarah where Alexander Black was the qualified executor. He posted a notice to the public about the business of the Firm of Foster and Black located at No. 47 Elliot St. would continue until it expired by its own limitation. Also, in December 1821, he formed a grocery business partnership with Cyrus R. Keith known as Black and Keith located at the corner of Gadsden's Alley and Elliot Street. In 1822, the partnership of Foster and Black was dissolved. The partnership of Black and Keith was also dissolved in December 1822 by the death of Mr. Keith. This same year there was talk of a rail road or canal connecting Augusta, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina to secure the trade going from Augusta to Savannah, Georgia.

In 1823 he was a member of the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston. He served as Secretary of the Second Presbyterian Church Corporation and in 1827 as President and on the Standing Committee in 1838. Also in 1823, his political career was boosted when he was elected to replace James Hamilton, Jr. in South Carolina House of Representatives, qualifying November 24, 1823. He would continue to serve as a Representative representing the Mercantile, Mechanic, and Planting interests for the terms of 1824 to 1825, 1825-1828, 1828-1829 for the Election District of St. Peter's Parish (in the Beaufort District).

He was said to have a plain, practical, interesting style. Alexander Black served on the Board of Directors for many companies. In 1824 he was listed in the Charleston Directory as Director of the Charleston Fire, Marine and Life Insurance Office. This is confirmed by numerous newspaper accounts

through 1840. In 1827 Mr. Black served on the Committee to Charter the Rail Road Company that was to run from Charleston to Hamburg. He secured the Charter for the railroad when the bill he introduced to the Legislature in Washington, D. C. was quickly passed and approved on December 19, 1827. Some consider "Alexander Black may be regarded as the father of the enterprise." As it was well known the rail way project connecting Charleston to Hamburg, upon its completion the longest rail road in the world, was the concept of Maj. Alexander Black.

Some people say that "Alexander Black may be regarded as the father of the enterprise," because Maj. Alexander Black conceived the Charleston to Hamburg railway project, which was the longest rail road in the world at that time.

By 1828 he was a member of the "Friends of Ireland and served as a Director on the Board of the Rail Road Company. The Directors had been tasked with building a new method of transportation. With little knowledge of what and how to accomplish the task they formed the "Committee of Inquiry" on which Mr. Black served. The Committee submitted its report on November 11, 1828. In 1829, at a meeting of the South Carolina Canal and Rail Road Company, he was unanimously elected Superintendent of Construction. He is best known for his service on the Board of Directors for the S.C. Canal and Rail Road when he went to Washington, D. C. to procure subscriptions for the remaining stocks needed for the S. C. Canal and Rail Road. This same year he served on the Charleston City Council for Ward 4.

In 1830 he lived at 97 Wentworth Street in Charleston. In 1831 he offered contracts for workers to build the line from Charleston to Hamburg. He had accumulated many rental properties by 1833.

Blackville, South Carolina was incorporated in 1837. It was named for Alexander Black in honor of his work with the South Carolina Canal and Rail Road. In 1849 some citizens of Blackville petitioned to change the name to Clinton. The name was briefly changed to Clinton in honor of Revolutionary War hero General James Clinton. However, in 1851 the town name reverted to Blackville after sectional pride led residents to conclude that it was more fitting to honor a southern railroad entrepreneur than a northern general. They renamed the town after Alexander Black's death.

By 1838 Alexander Black was President of the Charleston Hotel Company and a member of the Hibernian Society. He was elected to the Board of Directors of South Western Rail Road Bank in 1839. By 1842 Maj. Alexander Black petitioned for bankruptcy, and under the Decree in Equity, numerous properties belonging to him were auctioned in 1843. Under reversers of fortune, he was described as having manly fortitude and a cheerful spirit earning the sympathy and admiration of all.

As evidenced by the records, Alexander Black was connected with the Alexander McDowell Family of Charleston, South Carolina. Alexander Black was an Executor for the Will of John McDowell dated November 27, 1820; "I also hereby Will and appoint my true & loving friend Alexander Black one of my Acting Executors in Lieu of George Pringle who's Appointment in Said last will and Testament is hereby declared null and Void." In the South Carolina Archives, 1820-1828, there are numerous Case References for Judgement Rolls for Andrew McDowall and Alexander Black, otherwise known as McDowall and Black. A newspaper advertisement confirms their law firm partnership. We learn

Alexander McDowell is a half-brother to Alexander Black in McDowell's Will dated March 20, 1832. He is named as a step-son to Alexander McDowell in his will of May 11, 1835. Finally, in the Will of Alexander Black, dated August 27, 1849, we learn of his sister, Ann Meek, his nephew, Judge Alexander B. Meek, and nieces Elizabeth, Julia and Caroline Meek. This is confirmed by an "In Equity" newspaper advertisement. He had no living children.

The South Carolina, Death Records, 1821-1965 list Mrs. Alexander Black, age 58, died of gastritis on April 22, 1849 and was buried in the 2nd Presbyterian Burial Ground. Alexander died from influenza on August 22 1849 in Charleston, South Carolina and was also buried in the 2nd Presbyterian Burial Ground.

In 1851 after his death the citizens of Clinton petitioned to change the name of the town back to Blackville.

The State of South Carolina Barnwell District

To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives

The undersigned Citizens of the Town of Clinton and its vicinity, Respectfully sheweth that shortly after the establishment of the Charleston and Hamburg Rail Road, and soon after the settlement of our Village, the name of Blackville was given to it, as a testimony of Respect to one of the then Directors of the said Rail Road, Major Alexander Black (now deceased) whose untiring exertions, great sacrifice of personal ease and pecuniary interest, contributed so largely to carry into successful operation the said Road. For nearly Twenty years our Village has been his name, without the slightest dissatisfaction to its inhabitants, or the people of the District generally, until within the last two years, when at the suggestion of a few individuals, application was made to your Honorable Body to Change the name of Blackville to that of Clinton, which application was granted -

We your Petitioners pray your Honorable Body to restore to our Village its original name Blackville for the following reasons -

1st The name of Blackville has long been familiar to our people, and that appellation is still given to our Village by them, in fact is among us known by that name

2^d The name of the Post office, still retains the name of Blackville, the Post office Department would not change the name to Clinton, there being several other Post offices of that name in the United States

3^d Because our Title deeds to property in said village refer to the Plat of Blackville made by its founders 4th We consider that some Honor is due to the man (Alexander Black) who contributed so much to building up the great highway which connects our State with the West — that the change of name casts reflection on his memory, besides destroying a monument there to, and erecting another to a man, a Northerner, and one to whom we are in no immediate and direct manner indebted, however useful his services may have been to the United States

E. Lantique

W. D. Mathis
James. C. Caus

John Black

M. J. Maloney

J. L. Roberts

W. Spears

George A. Addison

Thomas Addison

Robt. Cooney

L. H. Lancaster

James Kelly

A. J. March

Edward Campbell

W. J. Kennedy

William Black

W. D. Sarrice

Ernst. C. Behling

William M. Smitto

John A. Seybath

J. V. Silliman

J. H. Still

In Contrast, the first record for our immigrant ancestor, John Black is his Certificate of Naturalization in Charleston, South Carolina, dated August 31, 1832 which states he is age 22 and allows for an extrapolated date of birth of 1810. He gave his occupation as a Carpenter. Several documents indicate his place of birth as Scotland. In 1831 Alexander Black advertised for carpenters to help build the railroad. It is very likely that John Black answered the ad and this is why he made his way from Charleston, South Carolina to Blackville, South Carolina.

John Black married Gemima Givens, daughter of Eli Givens, in 1835. He was enumerated in the Federal Census Records of 1840 Barnwell District, Barnwell, South Carolina. In November 1849, John Black signed the "Citizens of Blackville, Petition for Incorporation as Clinton." In the 1850 Federal Census Records of Barnwell District, Barnwell, South Carolina he was working as a mechanic. He signed the "Citizens of Clinton and Vicinity, Petition, and Supporting Paper for Changing Name Back to the Original Blackville" on January 31, 1851. By 1860 his first wife, Gemima, had died and John Black was married to his second wife Elizabeth Conway. He was working as a carpenter. This is the last documentation for John Black. His death date has been estimated to be 1875 in Blackville, Barnwell County, South Carolina. He is said to have been buried in the Blackville United Methodist Church Cemetery. His grave site was probably covered over when the church building was expanded.

Overlapping the time lines for Alexander Black and John Black in 1832, Alexander Black is living in Charleston, South Carolina and as Rail Road Commissioner he was offering contracts for workers to build the line. He owns many rental properties in Charleston. John Black is becoming a Naturalized Citizen in Charleston, South Carolina and is a Carpenter. Alexander Black died in 1849 and in 1850 John Black is enumerated in the Federal Census Records for Barnwell District, South Carolina.

These two men were merged into a nonexistent man, "John Alexander Black. " Misguided credit was afforded to John Alexander Black for his work with building the railroad half way between Charleston and Hamburg. Unfortunately, the story has taken a "life of its own" on the internet. Hopefully, these facts compiled from numerous sources will help clarify the story.

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