

# **THE STORY OF ALEXANDER BURNS**

## **Revolutionary War Patriot**

Introduction - 2007  
Carol J. Bell (Member DAR)

Photographs of Alexander Burns Grave Marker - 2006  
Carol J. Bell

Bronze Tablet Inscription by Burns Descendants - 1946

Message from Dorothy Bell Orr (Member DAR) to John M. Bell - 1963  
Relationship: First cousins once removed

Story of Alexander Burns  
Written by James C. Burns and Given to Robert Bell - circa 1920  
Relationship: Second cousins

Submitted by Carol J. Bell, gggg Granddaughter

## INTRODUCTION

As a result of the TV mini-series, *Roots*, which aired in 1977, I became interested in investigating my own roots. My father's cousin, Gertrude Bell Maxwell, gave me a family document of the story of Alexander Burns, our Scottish ancestor. The provenance (history of subsequent owners) of the document was described as: original material written by James C. Burns, given to Robert Bell, given to and transcribed by Dorothy Bell Orr, transcribed copy given to John Milton Bell, given to Gertrude Bell Maxwell, given to Carol Jean Bell. I could not guarantee that Dorothy Bell Orr's transcription done in 1963 was exact; nevertheless, I transcribed her copy of the original material word for word including punctuation and inserted the term *sic* (meaning "so") in brackets to indicate that an error existed in her material. I proofread my work several times and confirm that this version faithfully reproduces her material. In the list of Burns children at the end of the document, note that Nanny Burns was Nancy Burns, and Wm David was her husband, William Davis.

Alexander Burns was a Scot, a Revolutionary War Patriot, and an American pioneer. Two Bell women became members of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) through the lineage of his daughter, Nancy. Dorothy Bell Orr was admitted to membership in 1913, and I became a member in 2005. More descendants of Alexander Burns were members of the DAR through the lineage of his other children.

For almost 30 years I could not find the grave of Alexander Burns. A few years ago on a visit to West Alexander Cemetery, I stopped near the entrance to see a granite memorial. As I was taking a closer look, I saw a grave nearby with a bronze tablet and flag. I walked over to see it better. It was the final resting place of Alexander Burns and his wife, Jane Carroll. For all these years, I have been driving past his grave every time I visited the cemetery. I felt so lucky to have found his marker just in time to include a photo of it in my DAR application for membership.

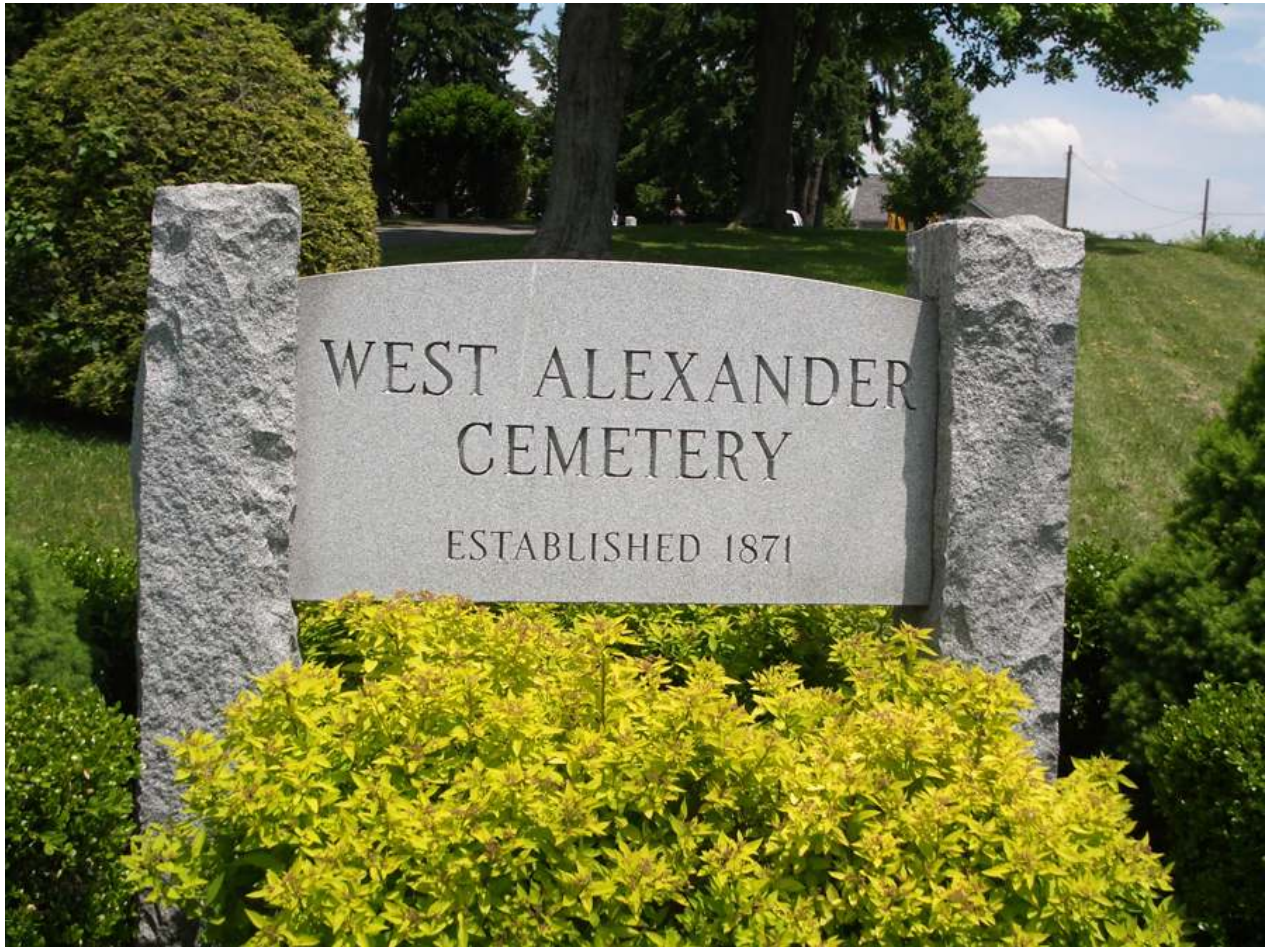
Dorothy Bell Orr thought this story of Alexander Burns was like a movie script, and I agree with her. Life was very difficult in the days of our founding fathers.

Carol J. Bell

March 2007

## **Alexander Burns and Jane Carroll Burns Grave Marker**

West Alexander Cemetery, West Alexander, Washington County, Pennsylvania  
National Road (U.S. Route 40) near the West Virginia - Pennsylvania state line







Photos by ggg Granddaughter, Carol J. Bell, in 2006

## Bronze Tablet Inscription

ALEXANDER BURNS  
DIED JANUARY 12, 1826, AGE 87

JANE CARROLL BURNS  
HIS WIFE, DIED SEPTEMBER 22, 1858, AGE 78

THE REMAINS OF ALEXANDER AND JANE CARROLL BURNS WHICH FORMERLY LAID IN THE OLD SECEDER GRAVEYARD AT WEST ALEXANDER, THAT HAS SINCE BECOME A PLAYGROUND FOR THE CHILDREN OF AN ADJACENT SCHOOL, WERE TRANSFERRED AUGUST 27, 1946 TO THIS REED FAMILY LOT BY ROBERT J. REED, A GREAT GRANDSON, THIS IS MOST FITTING AS JANE BURNS REED, A GRANDDAUGHTER, AND EIGHT OTHER DESCENDANTS REST HERE.

ALEXANDER BURNS WAS A HERO OF TWO WARS, THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR AND THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR, HE WAS CAPTURED BY THE INDIANS, ESCAPED AFTER THREE YEARS, AND SOON ENLISTED IN THE AMERICAN ARMY, FIRST PENNSYLVANIA REGIMENT CONTINENTAL LINE, AUGUST 15, 1778.

OTHER BURNS DESCENDANTS, IN TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY OF THEIR REVERED ANCESTORS, HAVE PLACED THIS TABLET HERE TO GIVE MORE PERMANENCY TO THE INFORMATION.

Lucetta Burns, President  
Helen Burns Wilson, Secretary  
Mary Burns Laird, Treasurer

These words were written by Dorothy Bell Orr of Lafayette, Indiana, to John Milton Bell.

My D.A.R. #103657

*John Bell-*

*Sumner S. Bell & Ida*

*John Bell and*

*Joseph Bell and Jane D. Bell*

*Jane Bell was the daughter of*

*Wm. Davis and Nancy B.*

*Nancy B. Davis was the daughter of Alexander Burns*

*Sort of a line if you ever are interested in the Revolutionary Ancesters [sic].*

*To: John Bell*

*Written Sept. 3, 1963*

*I copied the story of Alexander Burns for you.*

*This was written by James Burns to my father along about 1920. So many of the sheets of paper are torn and its hard to decipher. However, it sounds like a movie script.*

*Looking over the list of ancestors [sic], the watch must have belonged to Wm. Davis- That would have been my Fathers grandfather. And your grandfather and my Father were brothers.*

*I hope you can make out some of the story-Sometimes its [sic] a bit confusing. McComb Ill. is where this James Burns lived- when he wrote this history. Summer is about over, and I will soon close the cottage for the season. It was so nice you all could come up. I hope it can be repeated.*

*/signed/ Dorothy Orr*

## ALEXANDER BURNS

By James C. Burns

Alexander Burns was born in Ayershire [sic] Scotland in 1739. He died near Burnsville in West Finley Township, Washington Co. Penn on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of June 1826, Being 87 years of age. He was buried in the graveyard of the Old Secider [sic] Church in West Alexander. He was for many years an elder and devoted member of this church, which he helped to establish. A horizontal slab of ancient style inscribed with his name, age and date of death marks the spot where his body lies.

When Alexander was a child 12 years of age his parents moved from Ayershire [sic] in Scotland into Ireland, settling at Market Hill in County Armagh some 10 to 12 miles south of Belfast. Here he spent his youth under the influence of Scotch Presbyterian. Particularly that branch known as Seceders of which church he early became a member.

When a lad 16 years of age, one day he accompanied his mother to Belfast where they went to market. While his mother was disposing of her goods and making her purchases, the lad went down to the Wharf and was investigating a British Man-of War whose sails were idleing [sic] flapping in the wind while the vessel lay quiet in the Harbor the Captain saw the boy with alrge [sic] eyes watching the ship. The Captain, coming down the gang plank invited the boy to go aboard to see the ship. Accepting the invitation he was taken into the rigging where he was shown some of the introcicities [sic] of Navigation. How by tacking [sic] the vessel could be crossed with the wind oblique to the course and even in the face of the wind. Next he was taken down into the Hold to be shown the fighting Machinery. When they returned to the deck, the lad found to his conternation [sic] that the vessel was under full sail several hundred yards from shore.

The Seven year War commonly called in America the French & Indian War had just broken out and the vessel was putting to sea to take part in the great conflict. The Captain was in need of a powder boy and took the means of impressing the lad into the British naval Service. The Magazine must be as far from the guns as possible. In the time of battle it is the duty of the powder boy to sarry [sic] powder from the magazine to the cannoners [sic]. This was the duty imposed [sic] on the young Scotch Lad. His name appears in the list of the Kings Soldiers who took part in the siege and Capture of Tomsburg in 1758, as given in the New England Historical and Genillogical [sic] Register.

It was seven years before the youth was permitted to set foot on land. At the close of the war when the ship sailed into New York Harbor he went ashore and did not return. This is how it came about that six generations with Burns Blood in their veins have lived in America.



He hired to a Dutch farmer in the neighborhood of New York City for a time. But learning that wages were much higher in Philadelphia, he journeyed to that city. Philadelphia was on a boom. Labor was scarce and wages were high. He soon earned enough money to enable him to return to his old home at Market Hill in Ireland.

In his long absence [sic] many changes had taken place. His Mother was dead. His Father had married again and his family scattered. More over [sic] he had gotten a taste of Life in the New World where large opportunities were open to men of ability and he determined to return to America.

He brought his cousin James with him, who eventually settled in the border of Adams and Brown Co Ohio where a large body of his kin folks lived.

When the battle of Lexington and Concord occurred [sic] in April 1775, Alexander Burns was living near Carlisle in Cumberland co. Penn. He was one among the first soldiers in Penn. to enlist under the call for troops by the Congress of the Confederation. A full act of his enlistment and the Services of his Company and regiment is to be found in the Penn. Archives where his name appears possibly a dozen times on the March routes. A few of the references will be found below-

For the History of Col. Thompson's Battalion of Penn. Riflemen, of which Alexander Burns was a member, see the Penn. Archives Fifth Series Volume Two- Page 3 to 15.

Alexander Burns was a member of Capt. Wm. Hendricks company in Thompson Battalion of Riflemen enlisted in Cumberland Co. Pa. In June 1775 and arriving in Philadelphia the second week in July plowed Hill on the Penrich [sic] (this is like its spelled D) on [sic] mile north west of Bunker Hill on the 27<sup>th</sup> of Aug. 1775.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of Sept. 1775 Capt. Hendricks Co. was ordered to parade on the Commons in Cambridge and was selected as a body of expert Riflemen to accompany the detachment to go with Benedict Arnold on the Quebec expedition.

A Virginia Company of riflemen was also selected to accompany the expedition is found in Judge John Joseph Henry's Narrative [sic] published in Lancaster Pa.-1812 and copied in the Penn. Archives.

These two companies led the advance under Capt. Paul Morgan, who became the famous General. Faced June 14-flag day to raise 6 companies of expert riflemen in Pa. 2 in Maryland, 2 in Virginia. Each company consisted of 85 men.

In the latter half of June 1775, Alexander Burns, who was living in Cumberland Co Pa. enlisted as a private in Capt. Wm Hendricks Company. In so doing he took the following oath "I, Alexander Burns have this day voluntarily [sic] enlisted myself as a soldier in the American Continental Army for 1 year unless sooner discharged and do bind myself to conform in all

instances to such rules and regulations as are or shall be established for the government of such army." For this service he was to receive the sum of six and two thirds dollars a month and to furnish his own arms and clothes.

This Battalion was commanded by Col. Wm Thompson of Carlisle and latter by Col. Hand of Lancaster and Major Robert Morgan of Carlisle. Alexander burns was in the Company Commanded by Wm. Hendricks, who was killed Jan 1776, while storming the Citadel of Quebec.

First Lt. John McClelland, who was killed from exposure on the March thro [sic] the wilderness of Maine 1775. Second Lt. Francis Nickols who was captured, while the Regiment was storming the Walls of Quebec.

The Patriotism of the men of Central Penn. is shown by the rapidity with which the Battalion consisting of more than 750 men was formed. Scarsely [sic] two weeks had passed after the call of Congress until the Battalion reached Philadelphia. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of July the Battalion in company with the Virginia Men under Commander [sic] of Col. David Morgan passed through West Point on its way to Cambridge to assist Washington drive Horoe [sic] out of Boston. They arrived in Cambridge Aug. 1 in much to the delight of General Washington.

They were a remarkable set of men many of them exceeding 6 ft. They were dressed in white frocks, a hunting shirt, and round hats topped with a squirrel tale. They were remarkable for their accuracy of aim, striking a mark with great certainty at 200 yards. On their arrival at Cambridge their markmanship [sic] was tested in the following manner.

A target was set up 17 in. in diameter. The men were required to March at double quick, past this target at a distance of 50 yds. and fire on the run. A majority hit the target and all were near it.

The first action in which Burns took part was the Battle of July 28, 1775. The Battalion passed through West Point on its way to Boston. It arrived in Cambridge Aug. 7, 1775. Took part in the action in Plowed Hill Aug. 7, 1775 and left Boston for Quebec in company with Benedict Arnold and Aron [sic] Burr.

Alexander Burns was captured by the British in the siege of Quebec, and then entished [sic] in the Kings Service to escape being sent to England as a prisoner. But he soon escaped and again joined the American Army (Penn. Archives-Five volume Two-Page 27)

Col. Thompson's Battalion of expert riflemen was enlisted in the latter part of June and the first week of July in the Presence of an act of Congress Morgan [sic] of the Revolution. They passed up the Kennebac and down the Chanshire [sic] through the wilderness of Maine.

It was in Nov. the weather was cold and wet and the men suffered extremely from the exposure. On the morning of 31<sup>st</sup> of Dec. 1775 they participated in the attack on Quebec at Palace Gate where his brave Capt. Hendricks was killed; and the rest of the company, after

desperate [*sic*] fighting was compelled to surrender. Here the Noble Montgomery was killed and Benedict Arnold severely wounded.

He returned to Cumberland Co. Pa. on Aug. 15, 1778. He again enlisted in the American Army in the same regiment in which he had previously served, the First Pa. Continental Line. The Regiment was now Commanded by Col. James Chambers and his company by Lt. Col. Thomas Robinson. (See Penn. Archives 5<sup>th</sup> Series Volume 2 Page 670) His name also appears 704 Volume 2 Fifth Series, Penn Archives in the list of Non-commissioned officers and privates in the First Penn-Regiment Continental line complete with the statement that he was residing in Washington Co Penn in 1819.

Through lack of time and opportunity I have nor been able to trace the history of the first Regiment during the period of his second enlistment. Muster books of his company were not returned to the government but kept as private of the various Captions [*sic*].

Some have never returned and still exist in the families of the decendents [*sic*] of their Captions [*sic*]. Others many years after the Revolution were turned over to the Government and are now on file in the Archives at Harrisburg. The facts mentioned above regarding the services of Alexander Burns in the Revolution have been taken from such Muster books and particularly from the Journal of Capt. Wm. Hendricks who was killed in the storming of Quebec. The Journal printed on pages 25 to 28 Volume 5 2<sup>nd</sup> Series Penn. Archives.

The name of Alexander Burns of the First Penn. regiment appears on page 107-volume 4 5<sup>th</sup> series Penn archives in the list of soldiers of the Revolutionary war who received deprecated [*sic*] pay for their service in the War. One cancelled Certificated [*sic*] on file in the Division of public records on file in the state library. The explanation of this last statement is thus, when the Revolutionaty [*sic*] War was over the Congress of the United States had no money with which to pay the soldiers who had served under Washington and the Continental line to distinguish them from the Militia who were furnished and paid by the various states. They were issued certificate of indebetiness [*sic*] to them. The state of Penn offered to cash at a discount all the certificates of soldiers from penn who had served in the Continental Line.

Alexander Burns accepted this deprecated [*sic*] pay. When the new governemnt [*sic*] of the United States was organized under our present constitution in 1789. The National Governemnt [*sic*] redeemed these certificates at their face value so the State of Penn. profited financially by the services of Alexander Burns in the Revolution.

In 1794 the State of Penn granted to every soldier from Penn. who had served in the Continental line 200 acres of land as a reward for Services. The land was in the unsettled part of Northwestern Penn.-in Crawford and the surrounding County.

The record show that a patent for 200 acres of same was issued to Alexander Burns. His

number was 1258. He was expected to go to Crawford Co. select his land, have it surveyed and return the patent when a warrantee [sic] deed would be issued to him. The records show he did not return the patent and so he came into possession of the land. For the history of the transaction [sic] see Penn Archives third series Volume 7 page 748.

At the close of the War Alexander Burns crossed the Allegheny [sic] Mountains riding a little gray mare and came into Washington Co Penn where he purchased from the Commonwealth of Penn 400 acres of land in West Finley township. Being a portion [sic] of the ridge on which the Village [sic] of Burnsville now stands. He paid for this land out of the money he had received from the State of Penn. for his service in the Revolution paying 25¢ an acre. Here he built his cabin that was known as Burns Camp. The property is now owned by John Marshall whose wife was Sarah Gun, a lineal descendant of Alexander Burns. He afterward a larger land owner, adding 400 more acres to his holdings in West Finley Township. And purchased 800 acres near Wheeling Creek in Big Fish Farm, and a section of land in Gurnsey [sic] Co. Ohio.

In 1758 at Old Fort Stanwix [sic] New York the heirs of William Penn purchased from the Iroquois [sic] Indians all the land lying between the Allegheny Mountains on the east. The Ohio and Allegheny Rivers on the West, and as far north as Kittanning [sic] and as far South as the Southern boundary [sic] of Penn. including all of the southwestern Penn.

Paying the Indians for this land the party [sic] sum of \$10.00 and by treaty the chief agreed to remove all the Indian tribes into Ohio west of the Ohio River.

The ordinary Indians were dissatisfied with this transaction [sic] of their chief, for it robbed them of the finest hunting ground in America. And while they obeyed and moved into Ohio, they vented their anger upon the incoming settlers in Washington and Green Co.

In a manner unparalleled [sic] in history, the Valley of Wheeling Creek north and south 10 miles were turned into fields of blood—a veritable [sic] slaughterpen. You know of the massacre [sic] of the Crow sisters and the Carroll [sic] brothers who were your kinsmen as well as mine. The deferdation [sic] were all committed by small bands of Indians who would cross the Ohio frequently without the knowledge of their chief and slaughter till their vengeance [sic] was glutted and return to boast of their [sic] deeds and thus incite another band to come. After one of these raids [sic] the settlers would band themselves together, organized a company of Militia, cross over the Ohio and punish the Indians to compel them to respect their treaty.

On one of these expeditions against the Indians Alexander Burns was captured and held prisoner for nearly 3 years. My Father was a lad of 13 years when his Grandfather Alexander Burns died in 1826. His Grandfather told him of his many experiences with the Indians and these stories are common knowledge among his descendants [sic]. I shall select two or three of these experiences which my Father related to me.

On one occasion [sic] they compelled [sic] him to run the gauntlet. This was a cruel Indian sport tho [sic] not altogether unfair. As the runner was given a club to defend himself. From the Flower of the men in the files between which he ran the gauntlet. He ran the gauntlet successfully but just as he stop the last Indian in the file ran up behind him and hit him a severe blow with his club-Turning upon the Indian he felled him to earth with a heavy blow. Immediately there was a pow-wow. The Indians who determined to put him to death but the old chief interferred [sic] saying, "No Kill him-Brave Man."

When the Indians would go off on a hunting expedition and did not care to take him along, they would tie him with a stout rope around each of his wrists and ankles and laying him flat on his back, they would drive stakes through the ropes, pinning him down to earth. They would often go away and remain till they were ready to return. It might be a day or a week, In the meantime he would be without food or water. He could not brush a fly or mosquito away.

In their wondering [sic] with him to Detroit whose Forts were still garrisoned by British Soldiers. While there on one of these annual feast days came around, it was their custom at the feast to torture one of the prisoners. Alexander Burns was chosen the victim.

The mode of torture was as follows: The victim was stripped and tied securely to a standing tree. A fire was built across which were laid long slender poles. When these poles were burned in two in the middle, the Indians taking hold of the unburned end would thrust the red hot charcoal against the naked body of the prisoner until death.

Our Great Grabdfather [sic] was charned [sic] to the tree and the fire was built; the poles burned in two. The Medicine Men had began their dance and all was ready for the torture, when an old Squaw ran up to him, and throwing her arms around him claimed him as her son, thus saving his life. He was now to be adopted into her Indian Family. To do this he was taken to Detroit River and thoroughly washed to get the "White Blood" out of him. Then an incision was made in her arm and also one in his. They took blood from her arm and put in his. He then had Indian blood in his veins and according to the custom he became an Indian and was dressed in the Indian regalia. But the feast day was not yet over and a prisoner was yet to be tortured. For the second victim they selected a companion and fellow prisoner of out [sic] great grandfather. He also was chained to the tree and fire was built and all was again ready for the torturing process when two British soldiers came by. Seeing the fire and the men tied to the tree inquired as to what was about to take place. In being told they said to the Indians you can have a lot more fun out of a couple gallons of whiskey and all get glorisly [sic] drunk than you can from torturing the poor fellow.

The Indians thought the soldiers were right, in the matter and traded their prisoner for 2 gallons of whiskey, The ransomed victim walked away with the soldiers and our great grandfather

said down deep in his heart he wished he had been traded for the 2 gallons of whiskey.

Some time after this he was lying tied down as before described while they [sic] Indians went off on a hunt. Thoughtlessly in Indians had left a butcher knife lying not far distant but apparently out of reach. By a skillful use of twigs around him he managed to draw the knife within his reach and cutting the ropes with which he was bound he was free.

Traveling mostly by night and guided by the stars he trudged thru Indiana and Ohio, subsisting on berries, roots and bark of trees. Swimming in the Ohio River, he at last reached his old neighborhood in Washington Co.

During his absence [sic], Robert Carroll his brothers and sisters Jane Carroll had immigrated from County Autrin [sic] Ireland, and settled in East Findley [sic] township, Washington Co.

It was to the home of Robert Carroll that he first came on his return from captivity. Though 45 years of age, the Hero of two great wars and a captive with the Indians lasting nearly 3 years, the fiery [sic] flame of Cupid had not yet ceased to burn [sic] in his heart. He could not stand the bewitching smile of Jane Carroll.

They were married some months after his return and went to housekeeping in the Cabin at Burns camp at the place now owned by John Marshall.

A little incident should not be omitted here. Before starting out on the expedition against the Indians, he put a bell on the little gray mare he rode across the mountains and turned her loose to prouse [sic] until his return. Upon his return to the cabin, hearing a bell tinkling he went out in the woods and found the mare. With her was a colt nearly 3 years old. So sparsely settled was country that probably no human eyes had ever seen the mare and her fold [sic] during his 3 year absence.

On the morning of July 20, 1786 he was standing in his cabin door and looking down the deep ravine, just east of the house, he saw an Indian sulking [sic] from one tree to another. Turning to his wife he said "Jane we must get out of here or we will both be dead within an hour."

Taking down his gun and ammunition they left the house and past the corn field in the rear. The corn was tall and completely hid them. As they climbed the fence on the opposite side of the field they heard a gun crack. The Indians had shot the dog. All day they trudged thro [sic] the deep forest and far into the night where they reached Findleys Fort, (where Prosperity now stands) a distance of 18 miles.

The next morning at day break, the wife after her long weary tramp, gave birth to a child, They called him James. He was my grandfather and this is how I came to be James C. Burns.

After the Indian scare was over and Jane and the young child were able to travel they returned to their cabin near Burnsville. Every thing of use or value had been carried off. Even

the bed tick had been taken out of the house its contents emptied on the ground, and the tick carried off. The little gray mare was missing; However the fold [sic] returned. The supposition is that the Indians made the mare swim the Ohio River but the fold [sic] refused to enter the water, back tracked and returned to its home.

Alexander Burns built his cabin on the present site of Burnsville. His nearest neighbor was Micheal [sic] Crow at crows Mill (MISSING) at the junction of Templeton's Ft. and Wheeling Creek.

Col. Shepard at Elm Grove-a family near claysville-The Lundley at Prosperity and the Stayters at Wanesberg [sic].

To Alexander Burns and Jane Carroll born 7 Children-six of whom raised families lived to a ripe old age. They were:

James Burns born Indian Fork	July 21,	
Alexander Burns	" " " "	June 3, 178 [sic]
Robert Burns	" " " "	March 26, 1791 Married at Sutherkawer [sic]
Mary Burns	" " " "	Oct 17, 1793 Married
Nanny [sic] Burns	" " " "	Aug 13, 1796 Married Wm David [sic]
John Burns	" " " "	Oct 3, 1803 His first wife was a Craig-Second was a Winget

He inherited the old homestead [sic]

Yours very truly

James C. Burns