

Reverend John Cosson

Written by John W. Zimmerman, family researcher,
with additions by Donna Cox Briggs, Washington County Archivist,
Deed work by Gordon Edwards

Reverend John Cosson was our GGGGgrandfather. I cannot document his birth or earliest years – until August 17, 1768, when as (I presume) a young man he presents himself to the Countess Selina of Huntingdon in Wales – with a letter of introduction claiming him to be a worthy student for her new college at Trevecca. The Countess supported many famous dissident ministers – John and Charles Westley, John Fletcher and George Whitefield amongst those most have heard of. This was the first year of her college, her 60th birthday and John was accepted as a student and began his studies.

In 1770 George Whitefield died in the American Colonies – and left his orphanage, Bethesda outside of Savannah GA to the Countess in his will. She assembled a group of past students including John Cosson, a housekeeper (Betty Hughes) and a leader (William Piercy) and sent them to stabilize the orphanage and preach to the slaves and Indians. John and Betty arrived on the first ship on Boxing Day 1772 and asked to be married that very night. They were – and then settled at the orphanage.

Four months later Betty gave birth to a son to everyone's surprise. Piercy panicked and sent John back to England, Betty and the son (whose name I have yet to discover) were sent 100 miles north to Charles Town SC and put up with a local family as they were deemed too fragile to make the voyage. The countess had supported their marriage – and John claimed to have been married the year before leaving and so all was good and the Countess and John and Betty exchanged letters during the next few years until John was returned to GA at the Countesses expense in 1774 and back to being the house manager with his wife Betty. The revolution confused communications and it was not until Piercy wrote the Countess in 1777 that we learn that John and Betty had left Bethesda in the summer of 1776 heading north for a church. Betty died soon after. I have recently learned that their son had died earlier, between the time John returned to Bethesda and their leaving for the church.

The next I can document is that John was ordained by the Orange Presbytery in 1778 – one year after Thomas Hill – another of the students from Trevecca who had accepted the assignment to come to Bethesda. John preached at the Bethel Presbyterian Church in what is today York SC about this same time. He followed the prior minister of Bethel, Rev Hezekiah Balch, over the mountains and to the Watauga Settlement about 1780 – 1782 and while he purchased property in several nearby locations, settled on the Big Limestone Creek on what is today the Washington Co side of the border with Greene county.

John remarried about this time – to one Margaret Davies – of whom I can prove little but from a contemporary source (*Autobiography of a Pioneer or The Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Jacob Young* p135) where Young says "...The Rev. Mr. Cosson was a native of old England, brought up in the school of Lady Huntingdon, and trained in early life by Fletcher and Benson. He was well acquainted with Whitefield and Wesley, and used to relate many anecdotes of these great and good men. Fletcher was his favorite. After he came to America, he joined the Presbyterians. Mrs. Cosson—sister to Mrs. Hardin, consort of Gen. John Hardin, of Kentucky—was a professor of religion, a gay and sprightly member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but very unlike her sister Hardin. They reared a large family of daughters, well trained, of fine manners, and of great beauty."

There were ten children born to John and Margaret – all named in his will. I have dates of birth for seven of them. The earliest was Celina Huntingdon Cosson (named for the Countess) who was born in 1780. Our direct ancestor is the younger daughter of John and Margaret – Albina Roe Cosson who was born in 1797. She had an interesting history – not so unique then but it would be now. She married at age 13 to our GGG grandfather, Col Walter Emerson who was 35 at the time. He had returned to the area from Kentucky to marry Albina and they then settled in Kentucky and so our family line was only in this part of Tennessee for the time between roughly

1780 and 1810 when Albina married, 1811 when John died, and 1830 – the last year we can find Margaret who appears there on the census as the head of her household.

His will is in the archives at Jonesborough, and the Register of Deeds Office holds a dozen land transactions that involved him either buying or selling land. Below is a photograph of his home which apparently still stood, though in partial ruins, in the 1960s. If anyone remembers where this house once stood, please contact the archives and tell us!



John Cosson's land was in the Carson Creek Road area of Washington County, and the deed was from Moses Moore to Rev. John Cosson, dated 1785 and was a portion of North Carolina Land Grant #467. The similarity in the names, Cosson and Carson was very interesting and caused us (Archives' staff) to wonder if Cosson somehow morphed into Carson. They sound so similar, I can see that happening. If anyone has any kind of proof, please let us at the archives know, and we will document it.

Reverend John Cosson was the first president of what was the Martin School - as documented in the NC state notes at: https://www.carolana.com/NC/Education/1783_XLIV_Act_for_Two_Academical_Schools_in_Morgan_District.html, where he appears as John Causon. This school became Washington College and he was also a board member during the years it submitted for recognition under the State of Franklin as well as later when recognized by the new state of Tennessee. John was not a charter member of the board for the second school - that one established in Greene County, TN by Rev Hezekiah Balch - but he did replace an outgoing board member in the mid 1790's and remained on the board until 1807.

Reverend John Cosson became the settled minister at Providence Presbyterian Church and is buried there. The marker is somewhat odd, not the rough headstone as the others there from this time period, but rather a new marker claiming his dates to be 1743 - 1818. Also on this marker is one William Cosson of similar dates and it is indicated that they were revolutionary soldiers. Much of this is wrong or suspect. We know his will was probated in 1811 so it is unlikely that happened 7 years before his death. I can find no mention of any William Cosson - anywhere. Maybe John Cosson encouraged a brother to follow him later in life and this William did little of note and so left no lingering clues. The birth date of 1743 is likely from the web and unsourced. I believe that an enthusiastic bicentennial committee or something like that had the marker made - and it is nice to see him remembered but as the church records seem to be lost to us - none of these facts can be confirmed and should not be believed unless confirmed from an actual source.



The church and cemetery at Providence Presbyterian Church,
Greene County, Tennessee

Our ancestor, Reverend John Cosson had an interesting life. It is rare that one has any actual first hand info on ancestors from 200 or more years ago - but a dozen letters in his hand exist and so do many of those written by his first wife, Betty. I can also document that he traveled to the Presbyterian Synod for the annual meeting in Philadelphia in 1787 - and that he returned to Charles Town, SC to work with Reverend Thomas Hill in 1785. He wrote the Countess his last letter from there that year and described having traveled 500 miles from Bethesda into the wilderness to preach to Indians - and that he now lived 300 miles to the northwest (which is about the distance to Washington Co, TN).

I have many more documented things about his history and his family and descendants and would be willing to share with anyone interested in more detail.

John W. Zimmerman Jr.
jwzimmerjr@gmail.com