

Chester's Early Family

Early immigrants to this area tended to be Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who were born in northern Ireland. A majority of them came first to Pennsylvania (likely to counties there called Chester, Lancaster and York). Others landed in Charleston with hardly more than the clothes on their backs and found that available land for a poor man was in the upcountry or backwoods.

Matthew Elder, Jr. and Jennie McKay were married, according to a family account two days before they sailed for America with his father and Matthew's single sister. The ship, carrying 304 passengers, took three months to reach Charleston. They landed on Christmas eve, 1791.

A Chester County wagoner, Sam Miller, brought the Elder family inland to his home. Shortly after their arrival, John Nesbit invited them to stay with him until they found a home.

We can only speculate as to the motivation for Nesbit's act of charity but know from other accounts of the time that it was not unusual for newcomers to be taken in by those who had come earlier. The host may have needed additional labor to clear more land or he may have been hungry for news from the old country and especially if they hailed from the same area. Besides obtaining food and shelter, the newcomers could receive much needed advice.

The Elder family found a farm south of Chesterville that was a half mile east of the main route from Charleston to the mountains of North Carolina. Their neighbors bore the surnames of Kilpatrick, Cleghorn, Strong, Donnelly, Boyd, Hamilton, Sloan and McCullough—all Scots-Irish like themselves. (

Mary J. Elder, who has written a lengthy account of these Elder ancestors, wrote an interesting description of a "little Irish schoolmaster named Andrew Crawford." Not only was he a "real curiosity" but "He was the Gazette, the Bulletin, the Reporter, the Courier, the Herald of the community—riding on 'the filly' from house to house gathering and disseminating the news. . . . Andrew Crawford did all the "important writing in the neighborhood. He was exceedingly nearsighted and with the point of his nose blotted the letters as he traced them with his pen."

Ms. Elder's description of Andrew Crawford is remindful of another Chester man who performed similarly—Daniel Stinson. Stinson lived farther to the east than the Elders, in the lower Fishing Creek area and functioned the same way for the residents of the Rocky Mount and Landsford area. Stinson interviewed and recorded most, maybe all, of the Chester veterans of the American Revolutions, thus benefiting us to this day.

The Elders followed a pattern that by their day was well-established. Their first house of two stories and four rooms was pine logs with a roof of pine shingles. There were two rooms on the first floor and two fireplaces, one on each of the two levels. Children arrived and more room was needed. A larger home was built. The first residence was turned into a cook room and a loom room.

The eighth child of this family, another Matthew Elder, was born January 3, 1813. The War of 1812 was being waged and his father was in uniform in

Charleston at the time of the birth of his 8th child. It was this third Matthew Elder who wrote a lengthy and informative account of early Chester settlers.

He described how the homespun cloth was made; how the cotton and wool were carded along with the "incessant tread and clatter of the loom," and the indigo patch that furnished dye along with maple and red oak bark, walnut hulls, holly leaves, sumac and sulphate of iron.

Before 1811 the establishing of schools was left up to local communities. There was no state support. The Free School Act of 1811 provided enough money to pay a teacher's salary for instruction of the poor, usually for three months. People of means were expected to pay the tuition for their children and to erect the school houses or find places large enough to accommodate the pupils. Often the schools were housed in a local church.

Matthew Elder wrote that his school days were "very irregular and greatly diversified." Sometimes the teacher was available for only three months, sometimes for a year. This was still the case in most communities of this area until about 1920. Young Bessie Rodgers of Lancaster County wrote about her schooling which began about 1910, saying that she attended Osceola Grammar School for three months each year and when that time was up she went to live with her grandparents in Belair where school ran for four months.

At schools near Hopewell A. R. P. Church in Chester County, young Elder studied under nine different teachers. Five of the nine teachers had what was known as a classical education. Two, he reported, "utterly ignored the art of speaking and writing correctly." Elder's first teacher, Robert M. Galloway, not only taught him his ABC's but turned him into a "fair reader in the Bible, the text books being the American Spelling book, the New Testament, the Bible and Gough's Arithmetic."

Bessie Rodgers reported that in Osceola where Miss Iva Bennett of Rock Hill taught about 35 youngsters, "Our school wasn't graded. You stayed in a book until you knew every word. Then those books were passed down to someone else to use."

Matthew Elder's thought his second teacher had never used a dictionary and failed to make arithmetic comprehensible. The third teacher, John Hemphill, was described as "a little pumpkined mouth pedagogue, haughty, scornful. . . . No tears were shed when the future Judge and Senator (Hemphill later was Chief Justice of the Republic of Texas and a U. S. Senator) left Chester to become a student at Jefferson College. This bears out the fact that many of the early teachers had no college degree when they began teaching. The state in no way prescribed any requirements for teaching.

As Elder worked his way through school he had several excellent teachers to balance off the inadequate ones. When not in school he worked on his father's farm. He decided that it would be possible to do both—farm and teach. In the spring he would plant a crop and when it was laid by he could spent six weeks in teaching. Then back to full time farming as he gathered the crop. When that was over he had four and a half months in which to teach school.

Conditions on the farm were harsh. There were no labor-saving machines. Still, Matthew Elder managed to find time to study on his own and taught himself Latin and became a popular teacher. He was invited to teach at Cedar Shoal Academy. Elder then found himself in the "most desirable neighborhood in which it was ever my privilege to reside." Elder taught at Cedar Shoals for two years and nine months. He boarded with Dr. John Gaston who frequently visited the school and monitored the activities. Elder saved his money and taught so well that he was awarded an extra hundred dollars by the trustees.

It must have been tempting to stay at Cedar Shoals but Elder wanted a college education. He also wished to study in a Free State (non-slave state) and had been persuaded by an old friend to join him at Indiana University. He found the cost of living in Indiana to be only about one-third of the cost in South Carolina.

Elder distinguished himself as a scholar at Indiana University. After graduation he married Jane Stinson and several years later became an invalid. In spite of health problems so great that he could not stand, Matthew Elder taught for thirty more years in Chester and York counties.