

# Jessee Family Newsletter

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Dear Cousin,

I am a Jessee family member who has worked on the family genealogy for over 25 years. Our Chico, California branch of the family is descended from the original John Jesse(e) (1750-1815), and Frances (Frankie) Lea (1752-1836) of Caswell County, North Carolina and Russell County, Virginia, who had 15 children. I believe that all the Jessee cousins with whom I have corresponded are descended from this John Jessee. All of us living at this time who are descendants of this original John Jessee are about fifth or sixth cousins.

Of their 15 children, my line descends from their first son, John Jessee Jr., then his son Joseph Jessee, then John Tivis Jessee, Norval Clarence Jessee, Earl Wilson Jessee, then me, James Wilson Jessee. I am married to Nelda Faye Meline, and have two children Earl Wilson and Emma Elizabeth. I am 42 years old, and pretty much the family historian in these parts. By virtue of my mother, Frances Sylvia Brownfield, I venture to guess that my immediate family may be the only Jewish Jessee family in America. I would be greatly interested to learn of another. We host a Jessee Family Reunion every few years, and have had over 100 attend.

My great-grandfather John Tivis Jessee, was one of Robert E. Lee's officers. He married America Bickley of Russell County, Virginia, and moved from Russell County to Philo, Illinois after the Civil War. His eldest son, Robert E. Lee, was a doctor and prominent figure in Philo's history. His youngest son, Norval Clarence (N.C.), married Blanche Hester Richman of Villa Grove, Illinois, and moved in 1908 to Chico, California. Chico is 172 miles north of San Francisco in rich Sacramento Valley farm country. N. C. Jessee was an orchardist, he helped pioneer almond farming, water well drilling, and several agriculture businesses in the Chico area. He also had eight sons, my father and my seven Jessee uncles, which established the Jessee Clan in this part of California (see photo). Only my uncle, Gene M. Jessee, survives of the original eight Jessee brothers. I am one of the numerous first, second, and third cousins who make up the N.C. Jessee family now living in Northern California.

I have met or corresponded with several other Jessee families, all of which are descended from one of those original 15 children of John Jessee and Frances Lea. There is another Jessee family in the Sacramento and Auburn/Nevada City/Oroville area of California who are descendants of 5th child, David Jessee, and his son the "Elder David Jessee," who was famous in his own right. Bentley Jessee's family lives in the Fresno area, and they are all descendants of 3rd child, William Jessee. I recently met Janice Rodby, a member of the Oklahoma/Texas/Utah branch of the family, all descended from 2nd

child Archer Jessee. I have corresponded for years with Arlene Jessee of Atlanta, Georgia who is a descendent of the 14th child George Jessee. I have much closer, 2nd and 3rd cousins with whom I correspond, all are descendants of my grandfathers, either Joseph, John Tivis, or Norval Clarence. These Jessees live in Arizona, Virginia, Delaware, and various places in California.

I have visited Russell County, Virginia three times, each for only one or two days, as that is all the time I had. This only whetted my appetite. I am largely indebted to Dr. Leland Tate and his sisters of Lebanon, Virginia for showing me around Russell County and teaching me all that I know about the family there. Dr. Tate is also a John Jessee Jr. descendent, our common ancestor is my great-great-grandfather Joseph Jessee. He and his wife are retired professors from the University of Virginia at Blacksburg. He has researched and written extensively on Russell County. I have been to the home site and graves of John Jessee Jr. and Joseph Jessee, some few miles outside of Lebanon, Virginia. That country is full of Jessees and other related families. I believe that all of them must be descended from the original John Jessee.

I have other Revolutionary War period roots from various Jessee grandmothers in nearby Castlewood, Virginia on the Clinch River, and the Hinton area of West Virginia on the New River. I also research the Bickley, Armstrong, Smyth, Porter, Richman/Richmond, Barrick and other families who have intermarried with the John Jessee Jr. line. Most of these families seem to have originated in the Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina colonies.

Please forgive the long narrative above, especially if you have received it before, but I am repeating it for those who are now just receiving my correspondence. From my correspondence, I see that there are several serious Jessee Family genealogists, all working on their own branches of the family. I am humbled to include myself, because I have personally benefited from the work of others on tracing the Jessee family. I have done little original research myself on the Virginia roots of the family, but have received much information from others. I am very grateful to all these genealogists, and their predecessors, the fruits of whose labor I enjoy. My first benefactor was Mrs. Louise Detweiler, of St. Louis, Missouri, who provided me an outline of John Jessee and his 15 children on a "thermofax" nearly 30 years ago. She put me in correspondence with Dr. Leland Tate, and that was the beginning of my work. I still correspond with Dr. Tate, but lost contact with Mrs. Detweiler. I would love to know if she is still living, or if any of her family has carried on her work.

I subscribe to the *Jessee Family News*, which I hoped would turn out to be a legitimate effort. After several letters to them, proposing the printing of real Jessee Family information, with no response, I have come to the conclusion that it is phony. Therefore, this letter is written with the proposal that we establish our own *Jessee Family Newsletter*, a Jessee Family Genealogist's Mailing List and Information Exchange. I am volunteering to maintain a central mailing list, and to facilitate the exchange of information between us to the extent my time and means will allow.

I am providing the first newsletter to all of you on the enclosed mailing list. Some of you I know. Some of you I have learned about from others or from copies of your letters, inquiries, or work shared with me

by others. I am asking all of you to verify your interest by responding to this newsletter, and to help me identify additional Jessee Family Genealogists. If you are not interested, please give this newsletter to a member of your family that may be. Please feel free at anytime to withdraw your name from the mailing list, and please correct anything I may have wrong or wrongheaded. I have seldom met a Jessee without a definite opinion nor afraid to share it. Please provide me additional names, addresses and telephone numbers of family members who may be specifically interested in this effort. I am not looking for a huge list, not every family member, just serious genealogists who are willing to exchange Jessee family information and represent their own branch of the Jessee clan or their area of the country.

I would like you to specifically indicate your interest in this newsletter and information exchange proposal by sending me a self-addressed and stamped envelope comparable to the postage and envelope in which you received this newsletter, or a check for the same. That should provide me the means for the next installment and indicate serious interest. I will not make promises on the frequency of the newsletter. That will depend on the response to this one and what information there is to share. I would think that I can muster enough time for at least twice a year. I am imagining including in the future copies of various source documents that we might identify as desired, and genealogies of our members as those are submitted or developed. I will of course look for means to condense this material to keep copying costs within bounds. I will take responsibility for those costs, but wouldn't mind your help in defraying copying costs when appropriate.

I propose to organize our mailing list by the original 15 family lines descended from John Jessee. I would like to eventually trace all the 15 family descendants of John Jessee and Frances Lea, and organize that information into a single data base. I do my own work with an IBM compatible computer and *Family Roots* software by Quinsept. I am able to both provide and receive computerized genealogy information using the GEDCOM format and protocol, established by the Mormon Church. Much genealogy software is able to exchange data via the GEDCOM medium, most particularly the *Personal Ancestor File*, PAF, software, developed by the Mormon Church. If you have not yet bought a computer and software, the cheapest and probably best way to begin would be with the PAF software and a cheap IBM clone computer. I would like to exchange GEDCOM files with various of you, as we learn what information we each have and need.

I am enclosing my first efforts at developing this Jessee family data base. I have attempted to enter all the information that I have regarding the first three generations of the original John Jessee's family into my computer data base, and to print out this report for all of you to use, correct, and further develop. My sources are that original outline provided to me by Mrs. Detweiler, whose origin I don't know, and copies of pages from a book, *Early Settlers of Lee County, Virginia*, by Anne Wynn Laningham, for which I am indebted to various of you, and most especially, Mrs. Bland Osborn. I would love to see the original book, and ask if anyone knows if it's available anywhere? With that material, and various other individual genealogies that I have, I will be able to trace several of these families to modern day. This is admittedly a monumental chore. I am giving myself the rest of my life to accomplish it, and may he live so long! The fun is in the correspondence and friendships I develop with you along the way.

I would also like to propose some lines of research in which I think we all have common interest and

which may give our exchange of information structure and direction.

**1. Is our John Jessee (1750-1815) the first or only Jessee in America?** There is much to suggest that the Jesse(e)s were in this country for several generations before our John Jessee, suggesting that there may be several Jesse(e) families. I cite the Maryland Early Settlers records, where Thomas Jessee is shown to have "transported" in 1671; the Maryland Calendar of Wills where a John Jesse is listed as a witness in 1704; References to a Wm. Jesse, born in 1736 in King and Queen County, VA; and Kentucky Ancestors reference to the Bible of John B. Jesse where the birth of John B. Jesse is June 10, 1783 in Essex County, VA. This suggests that there was at least a John B. Jesse, and a William Jesse that were contemporaries of our John Jessee. All of these leads need exploration.

**2. Can we extend further the lineage of our John Jessee and Frances Lea?** I have speculated that John Jessee's father may have been Henry Jessee. I based this on the Will of Henry Jessee recorded in Caswell County, NC in 1781 in which John Jessee and Frankie Jessee are shown as witnesses. Henry could have been a father or brother, uncle or cousin. (See the Faynola Osborn letter.) There appears to be a growing consensus that Frances (Frankie) Lea spelled her name LEA. This would tie her into the Lea family of Caswell County, NC, rather than the Robert E. Lee family of Virginia. This Lea family may also be the progenitors of *Roots* author Alex Haley too. Obviously, there may be much more to glean from direct research in Caswell County, NC, for both families.

**3. When and why did the spelling of the name change from Jesse to Jessee?** I have speculated that it might have to do somehow with the spelling of Tennessee, a name which would have been prominent at the time of John Jessee.--James W. (Jim) Jessee