CHAPTER IV

The Norton and Spencer Families

Before going farther with the life of Elias Poston, let us get acquainted with the family of his first wife. This short chapter will pertain especially to those who are descended from that first marriage; and since some readers may not be sure, this means: all descendants of Joseph and Sally Poston Winship, of John and Elizabeth Poston Winship, of John Milton Poston, of Elijah Poston (son of Elias—do not confuse him with his grandfather Elijah), of Elisha Jr. and Catherine Ann Poston James, and of Robert and Nancy Poston Ward.

Nancy Norton, first wife of Elias Poston, born in Bourbon County, Kentucky, May 15, 1791, was a daughter of John and Sarah (Spencer) Norton. We are still hunting for documentary evidence as to the ancestry of John Norton. But there is a tradition, long held by two different lines of his descendants, which we are sure is true. It runs, in effect: that a Commodore Norton resigned from the British Navy and settled either in Virginia or on the shore of Albemarle Sound, N. Carolina, "shortly before" the beginning of the Revolutionary War. That "shortly before" is indefinite. Whatever the time, he was in America, and definitely in Virginia, long enough to feel himself American rather than British when the War began. His first name is believed to have been David.

The tradition goes on: that he had five sons, all of whom served in Virginia units under George Washington; that one son, David, was taken prisoner and died on a British prison ship in Charleston harbor; that after the Revolution, the two older sons, William and Thomas (or—one account says—Solomon, not Thomas settled in South Carolina; and the two younger sons, John and James, came to Kentucky with their father, and settled near Lexington.

Now why do we feel sure that this tradition is substantially true? Before we heard of the tradition we had already found a good deal about John and James Norton in Kentucky; we knew the names of ten of John's eleven children, had a copy of his will and records of his land holdings. We also knew quite a bit about James and his military service in Kentucky, but did not know where the brothers had come from. And then, within a period of three weeks, there came unsought from widely different sources two accounts of this tradition. One account was written four years ago by a descendant of Margaret Norton, sister of Nancy. This Margaret married John Darnell in 1814; the Darnells were among the early settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois, and the descendant who wrote this account lives in Springfield. The other account was written as told orally by a son of Hiram Norton, brother of Nancy. This son of Hiram, Colonel Nimrod Lindsay Norton, living in Texas some forty-odd years ago, gave the story to his nephew, Dr. Charles F. Norton, who wrote it down at the time from his uncle's telling. Dr. Charles Norton's written version of the story lay in his desk, unnoticed after his death, until it was discovered in December, 1941. And by one of those strange turns of good luck that seem providential, both accounts came to us within three weeks.
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Now these two branches of John Norton's family—the Darneilles and the descendants of Hiram Norton in Texas—had, so far as we can learn, no contact with each other since 1814, and the two individuals who told the legend had never heard of each other. Yet the two accounts are identical, almost word for word, though each has one or two details not in the other. When the one story passes down through three or more generations in widely separated branches of the family, we feel that it goes back to a common source—to John Norton himself.

We are confident that we shall soon have other evidence to substantiate the story. Some may suppose it would be easy to verify it through the archives in Washington. Friends, if you believe that, try it. Have you ever hunted for something that was well hidden in a big old house with dozens of closets and cupboards and old trunks? You are sure it is there—but where? And suppose you try, from a great distance, to direct some one else to find it.

We have James Norton's Revolutionary War record, which tells us the tradition but tells nothing of the father. We have a War record of John Norton which indicates that he enlisted in 1780, was at the siege of Yorktown and the surrender of Cornwallis (1781) and guarded prisoners from Yorktown to Rolrand's Ferry in Loudoun County, Virginia. We have also the War record of John Black who married Milly Norton, sister of John and James, and who speaks of having served with the two brothers; also the War record of John Black's brother, which likewise confirms that part of the story. One seeming discrepancy in one of these documents needs to be cleared up before we guarantee all details. But no document so far gives the name of the father of John and James Norton, or throws any light on the story of the commodore. Under wartime conditions, it may be many months before we can learn whether records of the English navy in the 18th century verify the first part of the tradition.

By the Springfield account, John and James Norton came with their father to Kentucky in 1784; by the Texas account, in 1788. The first date is nearer the truth. The Texas account says they came down the Ohio by boat, landed at Mayaville (Limestone) and went to the country near Lexington. Neither version mentions any sister; but the War record of John Black specifies that he married Milly Norton, sister of John and James, and that she was born in 1774. It would appear certain, then, that Milly was born in this country. Here the brothers born here or in England? We do not know—yet. The Springfield version says that the commodore was buried at Stony Point, Kentucky. This was a country church about four miles from Paris. But the church disappeared, long ago, and no trace of any gravestone remains by which we might have hoped to verify the first name and the age of the commodore.

James Norton died in 1897. He is buried in the Hiram Norton burying ground, on lower Jackstown Pike, Nicholas County. His gravestone gives his age as 96; if so, he was born in 1761. That date may be off by a year or so. But it appears likely that John, who is always named as the elder of the two brothers, was born about 1759.
Of James, we know that he had been orderly sergeant in Washington's own guard; and that after coming to Kentucky he served in a number of campaigns against the Indians. His papers mention service under Simon Kenton—that daring young chap who was a sort of irrepressible Douglas Fairbanks among the men who were near to Boone. James Norton is on record as serving also under Boone and Benjamin Logan in brief campaigns between 1786 and 1789, and against the Miami Indians in 1791. But the exciting point in his fighting record is that he was in the Battle of the Blue Licks, when Boone's son Israel was killed (August, 1782). His papers attest this fact, and a family tradition bears it out. James Norton in his old age was very fond of Hiram, John's son. And Hiram Norton passed this story of his "Uncle Jimmy" at the Blue Licks, on down to some of his descendants.

The story runs, that James Norton was fighting by Daniel Boone's side, when he saw an Indian tomahawking a white youth a little way off. He cried out to Boone, "My God, Dan'l, it's Israel." We shall never have documents to prove this; but the Norton traditions are singularly true, and most of them turn out to be well supported by documents.

But how did James Norton come to be at the Blue Licks in 1782, when the Springfield and Texas versions of the tradition give 1784 and 1788, respectively, as the date when he and his brother John and their father moved to Kentucky? I think this may be the right explanation: Soon after the surrender of Cornwallis in 1781, and not waiting for the treaty of peace, a host of Revolutionary soldiers hurried off west to look for cheaper new lands in Kentucky. The tide of new settlers became a flood by 1784, and many of the men who moved their families in 1784 or 1785 had made a previous trip across the mountains to look at the land. I conjecture that James Norton was among the earliest of the disbanded soldiers to take this preliminary trip; that he was in the vicinity of Boonesborough when the hurry call went out for fighters to relieve Bryan's Station, and that he joined Boone and the others on that march that led to disastrous ambush at the Blue Licks. Then, having satisfied himself that good land was to be had for the taking, and in spite of the danger from Indians, he went back to Virginia, convinced his brother John and their father, and as soon as they could settle up their affairs, probably by 1784, the three of them migrated for keeps. James Norton's descendants, the Babers, cherish a story of how he used to walk back to Virginia, once a year, to collect his pension, until a pension office was established in Kentucky.

James Norton had at least one daughter, Malinda, who married Jonathan Baber in 1815 and left a large line of descendants, some of whom are now living in Winchester. We believe he had other children. The Texas tradition speaks of James Norton having descendants in southeastern Missouri; this would have been long ago—probably before the Civil War.

And now, back to our own ancestor, John Norton. He married Sarah Spencer in Bourbon County, probably about 1787. In 1789 he signed two petitions to the Virginia legislature, in behalf of Kentucky settlers: one, asking for more courts, one for better tobacco warehouses. He paid taxes in Fayette County.
in 1790, and in Bourbon in 1791. A David Norton is also listed as a taxpayer in Bourbon in 1791, and is named as a witness or bondsman in the proving of a sale of land to John Norton in the same year. This would indicate that David and John were related, and would give some support to the tradition that John's father was named David. If this David was the commodore-father, he had come a long way from an English man-of-war; but all mature men in Kentucky in 1791 had come a long way, and from strangely different backgrounds.

On July 25, 1791, John Norton bought 150 acres on Stoner's Fork of Licking in the newly organized Bourbon County. You will remember that Elijah Poston also bought 200 acres along the same creek, in 1805, and may have been occupying the land earlier. For his 150 acres, John Norton paid seventy-five pounds—or about $250, at the value rate of Virginia currency at that time. Again, in April, 1794, he bought 22½ acres, also on Licking, from Lewis Craig. It is said that he also owned land in Nicholas County. John and Sarah Norton deeded land to their oldest son, Hiram, and their youngest son, Spencer, but we have not the details. From the provisions of his will he would seem to have been a practical farmer, not overly rich, not poor.

His will was probated in April, 1814. Its essential parts are: "To my beloved wife, Sarah, the choice of 4 head of horses to be kept on the farm, 6 head of cattle and sheep to remain on the farm for the use of the family. I have given to my eldest daughters, Polly and Nancy, about $65—same amount to each of younger daughters, Patsy, Peggy, Catherine, Sarah and Betsy. Also 25 choice hogs to be kept on farm for use of family."

"Also to my beloved wife Sarah all household and kitchen furniture and farming implements during her life. Negro Sam to remain on farm until my younger son, Spencer, becomes of age. To my sons, Hiram, John and Spencer, on decease of my wife, balance of property not mentioned."

John and Sarah Norton are buried at North Middleton, in Bourbon County. Their old home still stands, on Levy Pike, between North Middleton and the Levy. It is a two-story house with weather-boarding; whether it is of logs underneath we do not know; but good frame architecture was becoming common in the country around Lexington before 1800. The good stone chimney was built by George T. Hart, "the chimney builder."

Seven Norton sisters. My mother had a pillar rose in the front yard in Illinois, called Seven Sisters. And there ought to be a nice ballad about the Norton girls. Listen how the names sing themselves:

Polly, Nancy, Patsy, Peggy,
Catherine, Sarah, and Betsy

We know that Polly and Nancy were oldest of the girls, and that Spencer was the youngest of the ten children; but it won't do to infer that the others were born in the order of their names in the will. We happen to know the birth-dates of three of the ten:
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Nancy, b. May 15, 1791
Peggy (Margaret), b. Oct. 25, 1793
Hiram, b. June 6, 1795

There is plenty of room for Polly to be born before Nancy. By a tight squeeze
Patsy can come between Nancy and Peggy. But not even as triplets can the
next three girls crowd in between Peggy and Hiram. Besides, there is still
another complication; there was still another brother, not named in the will.
This brother, James (not to be confused with his uncle, of the Blue Licks
battle) was also an Indian fighter. According to the Texas version, he was
an officer under William Henry Harrison at the Battle of Tippecanoe (October,
1811). The story runs that, unhurt in the battle, he was killed in a hunt-
ing accident a few days later, while shooting squirrels for his wounded com-
panions. Now if he was old enough to be even a minor commissioned officer in
1811, he must have been born by 1790 or earlier. He may have been the oldest
child of John and Sarah, and they may have married as early as 1786. It
looks as if this James Norton was the first of the Poston-Norton kindred to
die in Indiana—somewhere in the Wabash woods between Tippecanoe and Vincennes.

Polly Norton married John Stuart; we have no further trace of that line.
We have already told about Peggy (Margaret), who married John Darneille in
1814, and their Springfield, Illinois, descendants. Hiram Norton married
Nancy Spencer, a cousin, in 1820. They have descendants in the familiar
country about Lexington; they also have descendants (through Hiram's son,
Nimrod Lindsay Norton) in Texas. John Norton, Jr., married a Cassandra
somebody; in 1826 he and his wife sold to his younger brother Spencer, fifty-
eight acres on Indian Creek in Bourbon County. We do not know of any descen-
dants of John Jr. and Spencer, nor what became of the four other sisters. If
they married and each had as many descendants as Nancy, we have quite a host
of cousins.

Cuming, an English traveler, who came down the Ohio and visited Lexington
in 1807, writes: "And I must remark that throughout this whole country,
wherever you see a cabin you see a swarm of children." Yes, indeed, Mr. Cuming.
Working over the Poston and Norton and Farra and Boone family records,
generation after generation, we ourselves had begun to suspect something of
the sort might be true.

Of the Spencers, John Norton's wife's family, we know somewhat more,
and considerably farther back. Around 1650 there lived at Cople in Bed-
fordshire, England, a Nicholas Spencer. The English would have called him
"a gentleman of quality." In 1657 two of his sons, Nicholas and Robert,
migrated to Maryland. They came with two other young men—brothers—whose
name wakens a teasing sense of familiarity in the mind—where have I heard
that name before? These two brothers, friends of the Spencer brothers, were
John and Lawrence Washington. And like an eager radio quiz-program manager,
for fear you might not guess the easy answer, let me—yes, yes—I can see
that you have guessed it: this John Washington was due to have a
great-grandson who could not tell a lie: and that should be enough to dis-

tinguish any man. In fact, the young Spencers and the young Washingtons 

were, in a sort of way, related: there had been a marriage between the two 

families back before 1600.

Now, Robert Spencer is our ancestor; but let us take a look at Nicholas. 

Nicholas took up large tracts on the Eastern Shore of Maryland; then, about 

1667, he moved to Westmoreland County, Virginia. (Look where the Potomac runs 

into Chesapeake Bay. Nicholas became a man of affairs in the colonial govern-

ment; he was secretary of the Colony of Virginia, and became Acting Governor 

in 1683. Before this, however, he and John Washington, as partners, had re-

ceived from Lord Culpeper, the Governor of Virginia in 1670, a grant of 5000 

acres farther north along the Potomac. And more than a century later, a part 

of this tract became the Mt. Vernon estate of the Washingtons. When you visit 

Mt. Vernon, therefore, you have the legal right to sigh; that right is assured. 

I doubt whether it would be tactful to tell other tourists that our uncle 

once owned a part of the original estate. And I feel positive that it would 

be unwise to steal a slip from the shrubbery on the excuse of being one of 

the Family.

And now, back to our own-Spencer line. Robert Spencer settled in Talbot 

County, Maryland. In 1674 his son James, aged twenty, married an Isabel 

somebody. This James Spencer's son, James II, married Anne Benson, of a good 

old colonial Maryland family, and founded Spencer Hall in Talbot County. That 

would indicate that he had become one of the almost-nobility of colonial 

society. James Spencer II died in 1743. Among his several children was 

Thomas, born in 1721. Thomas was the daring one, the one whom Adventure chose 

for her favorite. The Maryland family could only record of him, long after, 

that he "went west or south and never came back to Maryland." We know that 

he went west, though probably by way of the Carolinas; for in 1783 he bought 

400 acres in Kentucky. And we know quite a bit about his family.

This Thomas Spencer (son of James II, son of James I, son of Robert, 

son of Nicholas of Bedfordshire) married a Nancy Stuart. They had six chil-

dren, maybe more. The six we know of were: William, John, Sarah (our an-

cestress), Jane, Catherine and Elizabeth. We know the names of the persons 

these six married, but to avoid confusion of too many names, we omit them 

here. It is known that William was born before his father left Maryland; and 

indeed it is almost certain that the other five were born before the family 

came to Kentucky. William has descendants living in and near Lexington; 

indeed, it is to one of these that we owe all our knowledge of the Spencer 

family.

Thus far, what we have told about the Spencers rests upon sound evidence.

Now for a bit of romantic tradition, which may or may not be true; we believe 

it is true, but we lack evidence. The story is that Thomas Spencer, grand-

father of our Nancy Norton, was so ardent a Jacobite that he went back to 

England in the 1740's; that the Nancy Stuart he married was related to the 

Stuart kings (who, you remember, had lost the throne); and that he fought for 

Prince Charles Edward Stuart at the Battle of Culloden, in 1746, when that
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exiled prince tried to regain the English crown. There is quite a story of how this Thomas Spencer had to shift and hide, after the defeat at Culloden, before he could slip away and return to Maryland.

Well, we lost the Battle of Culloden. If we had won, all of us might be dukes and duchesses by now, and not have to sell groceries, or teach school, or go out in the cold dark of frosty mornings to do the chores, or plan how to make Susie's coat over for Nancy. Not even have to tie our own shoes—hang the luck! But then, if we had won, there would have been no Queen Victoria and think how we'd miss her. So maybe it's just as well.

There now, isn't that enough romance? You insist upon more? Very well, then. It is probable that all the Spencers in England at the time Nicholas and Robert migrated to Maryland were descended from Norman families that came to England with William the Conqueror. The name Spencer, like many other family names, was derived from a man's occupation or office. Smith, Miller, Mason, Shepherd, Carpenter, Tanner, Dyer are familiar examples; Fletcher, Mercer, Scribner, Loriner are good but less obvious occupation names. William the Conqueror's household bursar—a combination of steward and paymaster—was the dispenser of royal monies. As time went by, the families of these royal bursars took the name of Despenser, which in turn was shortened to Spencer or Spencer. The office was not inherited, and not continuous in one family. But it is likely that most, or all, of the Spencer families were descended from one or another of these royal household Despensers.

But be ye not puffed up. There is always a drawback. For in the reign of Edward II (1307-1327) Hugh le Despenser and his son, also named Hugh, so infuriated the barons by misleading the king and by grafting and haughty corneriness, that the barons up and hanged both of them. They hanged the son down in the West Country, at Hereford, where the white-faced cattle originated. Some antiquarians believe that the gallows in Hereford stood just north of town, beyond the slaughter house, where the road jogs east at Ralph de Ferrer's smithy. No blacksmith in all the country could fit a shoe as expertly as this Ralph de Ferrer. The more particular knights would ride half way across England to get a special fitting for their war-horses before an important tournament. Now just across the road from the smithy was a lush meadow where Walter de Wellemere's prize herd of white-faces lazied around in grass, belly-deep. This herd had won most of the blue ribbons in the royal cattle-show for years, and regularly carried off the sweepstakes cup in the beef cattle class, till the Durham breeders were green with envy. Now if you are inclined to brag a bit overmuch about your ancestry, go look a herd of white-faces in the eye and remember that their ancestor saw your ancestor hanged, and—no doubt, observing two minutes of respectful silence—went on turning meadow-grass into top sirloins, which brought a very handsome price that year on account of war conditions. And if a Hereford says "Moo" when you meet him, it may be well to interpret that from the Hereford point of view.

But we shouldn't joke too much about a dignified subject. It is true that a Walter de Norton was among the Barons who forced King John to grant
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Magna Charta, in 1215; and that Almaric and Hugh and Thurston de Spencer were also among these barons. The noble early Spencers passed their quality down to many later English families—some noble, some of the common people. The wife of that Earl of Warwick who was known as the King-maker in the War of the Roses, was a Spencer; and Edmund Spencer, the author of The Faerie Queene, was another descendant. But we mustn't go telling around that we are descended from either the Earl of Warwick or the gentle poet. Our Robert Spencer, who came from Cople in Bedfordshire, could trace his ancestry back through seven generations to a sound family that flourished in Bedfordshire in the 1470's. Farther than that, no one knows with certainty.

Speaking of another family, an observant person once said to me: "I have never known a flabby or worthless Putnam." that is but another way of saying what students of heredity well know: that among our many ancestors, some have been more prepotent than others. Each of us has sixteen great-great-grandparents; but a few among the sixteen have influenced us more than their mathematical share. We are fortunate when these more prepotent ones happen also to have been sound and wise and good: and the Spencer line stands out above the average in this respect. We are not entitled to say that any direct ancestor of ours, for five centuries, has been "noble" in the sense of holding a title of nobility; but it is good to know there has been a certain prepotency of noble human quality. Certainly Robert and Nicholas Spencer kept a fine and sound tradition of character in Maryland and Virginia. Then Kentucky and a western frontier tried the fibre of men and women. In an hour of discouragement we sometimes feel that democracy levels men down, lowering the best to meet the average. But suppose it levels them up, slowly but steadily improving the average?

Footnotes on Chapter IV

For the material in this chapter we are indebted mainly to three persons:

1. Mrs. Elizabeth Spencer Norton, librarian of Transylvania University, Lexington, Ky., has generously given much material on the Spencer family as well as on the Nortons. She herself is descended from William Spencer, older brother of the Sarah Spencer who married John Norton about 1786. Her husband was a descendant of Hiram Norton, brother of the Nancy Norton who married Elias S. Poston.

2. Mr. J. T. Baber, of Winchester, Ky., is a descendant of James Norton, uncle of our Nancy Norton Poston. Mr. Baber has a large fund of Norton history and story, and is gifted with the patience and critical judgment needed in this work.

3. Mrs. Edward Norton Passmore of Dothan, Ala., is devoting much time to reconstructing Norton history. Her husband is descended from William Norton, one of the older brothers of John Norton, father of our Nancy Norton Poston. This William and the other older brother (whose name is variously given as Solomon or Thomas or possibly David) went from Virginia to South Carolina after the Revolutionary War. Some
account of these S. Carolina Nortons is given in Seller's History of Marion County, S. Carolina. We learn that Seller, author of this work, was also of Norton descent. Mrs. Passmore contributes the interesting item that the British prison ship on which one of the five sons of the commodore died (in Charleston Harbor) was "The Old Jersey". Her family tradition has it that the first name of the commodore was John, not David.

For such help as it may give other students, these are the marriages of the children of Thomas and Nancy (Stuart) Spencer. Their births would range probably from the late 1740's to perhaps 1760 or a little later.

William Spencer, m. Mary Tillet; descendants now living in and near Lexington, Ky.
John Spencer m. Elizabeth Lander
Sarah Spencer m. John Norton; we are descended from this couple.
Jane Spencer m. John Congleton
Catherine Spencer m. James Porter
Elizabeth Spencer m. William Riddle.