

Ida Frances Phelps Branch

The following is an extract from the draft text for the book *Prairie Queens* by Alice B. Gander.

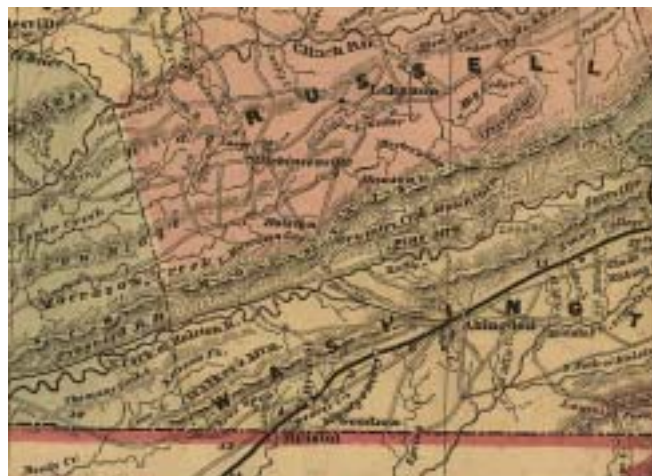
MOCASIN GAP is tucked away in the neck of Virginia near Abingdon. It is on the border between Washington and Russell counties in part of the Appalachian Mountains. This beautiful area of rolling green mountains and flowing streams in western Virginia had not been heavily settled at the time of the American Revolution. Large tracts of land here were granted to officers of the Revolutionary Army as military land bounties after the American Revolution. One such tract was:

... on the waters of the North Fork of Holstein [sic] River being part of a larger tract containing 23755 acres granted by the Commonwealth of Virginia unto John Fleming by Patent bearing date the ninth day of January 1796 and sold & conveyed by the said John Fleming to the said Alexander Henry and James Boggs by Indenture of bargain and sale bearing date the 18th day of June 1796 and of record also in the said County Court of Washington....⁵

It is not clear which John Fleming is involved here but there were a couple of officers named John Fleming who served in the Revolutionary War. The John Fleming named in this deed acquired over 100,000 acres of land in Washington County at about the same time from a number of Treasury Warrants. The following deed is recording the sale of 25 acres from this larger tract to John Phelps on August 16, 1830:

... bounded as follows, to wit: Beginning at three poplars corner of the land on which John Phelps now lives, thence to the line of the big survey thence down the creek to the land where Phelps lives this piece lying between the lines of Phelps land and Mill land and on both sides of the Russell road, with all its appurtenances.⁶

The Russell road mentioned here is almost certainly the road that runs northwest from Abingdon through Moccasin Gap into Russell County. The reference to the “big survey” is to the original survey that marked off the large tracts of land given as military bounties (or was it just the first “official survey” of the county after the war?). The deed books in Washington County contain many such deeds from the early 1800’s as these large tracts of lands were sold or otherwise subdivided.



1859 map of Moccasin Gap Area⁷

Reading the deed books is often like taking a stroll through the property. One such example is from a September 3, 1841 purchase of fifty acres by Martin Phelps from William Gilmore:

Beginning at a locust on or near a line of said Phelps’ old tract on the top of what is called the sink hole ridge and running thence in an easterly direction along the main top of said ridge to the cliff of the big mountain then with said cliff northerly to a line of Abram Gobble’s land thence with the line of said Gobble in a westerly direction to a line of John Phelps purchased of said Gilmore thence with said John Phelps line to a white oak corner to Martin Phelps’ old tract then with a line of the

⁵ Deed book 10, Page 257, Washington County, VA

⁶ Washington County Deed Book 10, Page 257

⁷ Excerpt of map from Library of Virginia

same in a southerly direction to the beginning with all its appurtenances unto the said Martin Phelps and his heirs.⁸

John Phelps Family

John Phelps was born May 12, 1800 in this section of Virginia to parents who had come from North Carolina. His father was Samuel Phelps (Felps), born in Rowan County, North Carolina, but not much else is known about him at this point. What we do know is that this John Phelps bought land in the Moccasin Gap area on the Washington County side of the mountain. His father Samuel Phelps owned land on the Russell County side of the mountain. By the time of the 1860 Census, John was listed as having \$2000 value in Real Estate and \$500 in Personal Estate, a respectable sum for the place and time. John Phelps must have married his first wife sometime before 1825, as we know that he had a daughter Jane born December 25, 1826. He may well have had other children from this first marriage but she is the only one listed in his will. Jane married George Washington Kestner and they lived nearby. We also don't know what happened to John's first wife but he had remarried on February 9, 1854 to Mary Margaret Mann (1829 - 1883), who was also from the Moccasin Gap area.

John Phelps and Mary Mann had one son and six daughters over the next twelve years. Lucy Ann (Louzana), William R., Martha W., Myra Finan (Phiney), Ida Frances, and identical twin daughters Evangeline Bell and Palestine L. These latter twins were born when John Phelps was 68 years old.

Among his farming pursuits, John was a beekeeper and family stories included how he put his bee stands underneath the porch to hide them from the marauding soldiers during the Civil War. Apparently this effort was not successful, but he still had five bee stands in his possession at the time of his death on August 20, 1886. John was not only a long-lived man, but also a very thoughtful man who prepared thoroughly for his eventual death. After his wife Mary died in 1883 and he was getting old himself, he prepared his will on August 22, 1885, beginning with:

In the name of God, Amen,

I, John Phelps of the County of Washington and State of Virginia of the age of eighty five years and being of sound mind and memory do make publish and declare this my last will and testament...⁹

He then proceeded to name his children and specify an amount of money or a parcel of land to be given to them. One daughter, Evangeline "Van" who had married Will Davis, is not named in the will but given a separate deed of land on the same day "in consideration of esteem and affection as my Daughter", with the sole reservation that he had the right to receive one third of the grain raised on said land during his life.



Evangeline Bell Phelps Davis, about 1905. Known as Van, she was one of the identical twins born to John and Mary Phelps in 1868. Her sister, Palestine L. Phelps Scott, was called Pal or Pallie.¹

⁸ Deed Book 15, Page 270, Washington County, VA

⁹ Will Book 22, Page 308, Washington County, VA

Young Ida Frances Phelps

Ida Frances Phelps was born December 24, 1864. The Civil War was not yet over and all in the area endured hardships. Ida's long brown hair reached well past her waist by the time she was in her late teens. She often braided her long tresses into a single braid that hung down her back. She was proud of her hair and made sure that her long braid was in view for photographs. Ida was well educated for the time and place. Whether she had any training in math or science is not known, but she was very literate and also had a natural talent for art. This area of Virginia was not particularly wealthy and the Civil War had not helped the situation. Thus for her drawings and arts Ida used colored rocks from the creek to supplement her pen and pencil. The soft colored rocks were called "mark rocks". Often the outline of a drawing would be sketched in pencil and then colored in with the mark rocks and any other colored pencils she had.

When Ida's mother died in 1883 at the age of 54, Ida was only 19 years old and her little sisters Van and Pallie were only 15. On the other hand, her father was 83 years old so it must have fallen on these daughters to help care for him in his last years.

The Branch Family Arrives

Alfred Alexander Branch, or Allie as he was called, was one of the children who moved to Washington County with Nelson and Nancy Branch. Alfred was born in 1856 in Pulaski County. He had had a childhood and teenage period that must have been tumultuous. He was not yet five years old when the Civil War began. His family suffered a number of predations and indignities during the course of the Civil War. And his father, who had peaked in prosperity in 1859/1860 with 66 acres and a regular spot on the Pulaski County Grand Jury, had sunk inexorably deeper into debt during and after the Civil War until Nelson, hounded by Creditors, declared bankruptcy in 1872, under the newly passed "Uniform Law for Bankruptcy". It is not too hard to imagine, therefore, that Alfred Alexander Branch had never really known security or wealth at the time his family moved to Washington County. He had not yet married when they arrived in Washington County as a handsome, slender young man with a bold mustache and dark hair. It wasn't long before

he caught the eye of a young girl whose family had been in the Moccasin Gap area for generations.

There is no record of their marriage in the Washington County Virginia courthouse. And none was found in the Russell County courthouse just "over the hill" from where Ida lived. But, at that time, marriages were not always recorded. It seems unlikely that they would have married anywhere else



Wedding photo of Alfred Branch and Ida Frances Phelps.
About 1883.

but in the Holston area as Ida's family had always lived there. In any case, they were married sometime between 1881 and the end of 1884. Alfred and Ida took up residence in a small cabin on a parcel of land that belonged to Ida's father John Phelps, probably an abandoned slave cabin. At least that is what their first child Iona believed. But the 1860 Census slave schedule does not show John Phelps as owning any slaves and this mountainous area of Virginia did not have many slaves.

It isn't known how Alfred supported his family but at least part of his livelihood was in farming. He may also have helped his father with the foundry work. One of the big employers in the area was the railroad in Abingdon and Alfred's older brother Will did work for the railroad.

When Ida's father died in 1886, she inherited a parcel of land in partnership with her sister Pallie as specified in her father's August 22, 1885 will. Her brother William R. Phelps also inherited land:

Fifth, I give and devise to my two Daughters viz. Ida F. Branch and Palestine L. Phelps, their heirs and assigns a certain tract or parcel of land situated in little



John Phelps' tombstone in the Phelps cemetery hidden in the woods off of Hidden Valley Road.

Moccasin Gap in the County and State aforesaid to be equally divided between them or their heirs. Beginning on a wild cherry on Myra F. Phelps line and with said line to the branch, thence with Martha W.

Martin's line to four poplars on James Phelps line, thence with said line to Martin Gobble's line, thence with said line to Martin Phelps line, thence with said line to James Phelps, thence with said line to William Phelps line, thence with said line to the Vangeline B. Davis corner on apple tree thence with said line to the beginning.

Sixth, I give and devise to my son W. R. Phelps his heirs and assigns, one tract or parcel of land situated in Little Moccasin Gap in the County of Washington and State of Virginia. Beginning on walnut and hickory corner to V. B. Davis's line thence with said line and fence to a stake near a large apple tree, thence with the fence to an apple tree corner of V. B. Davis and William Phelps thence with Ida F. Branch's and P. L. Phelps line to an apple tree W. R. Phelps corner, thence strait line to James Phelps line thence with said line to a hollow corner of V. B. Davis thence to the beginning. And I also give and bequeath to my son W. R. Phelps the sum of one Dollar and direct and order it to be paid in one year after my decease.¹⁰

Ida's parcel was thus adjoining those of her brother William and her sisters Myra "Phiney" Phelps, Martha Martin and Van Davis. Alfred and Ida soon had a growing family, with Iona Hope arriving September 25, 1885 and Samuel Thomas arriving October 5, 1887. Ida's sister Pallie married John J. Scott, Jr. about 1886 and so Ida and Pallie officially split their parcel of land between the two families in a deed dated August 20, 1887.

Eyes to the West

Early in 1887, Ida's brother William R. and her sister Louzana Phelps Mann both went to Colorado to homestead. They went to a section of southeast Colorado that had just been opened for homesteading in January 1887. Since they would have both collected their inheritance in 1886 and their father was dead, it might have been a good time for them to move. Louzana had married her first

¹⁰ Will Book 22, Page 308, Washington County

cousin, Joseph Mann. William had married a neighbor, Lou Kestner.

The following is an outline of events. The details about William Phelps' homesteading activities come from his final Homestead papers obtained from the National Archives Records Administration.

1861: Colorado Territory formed

1872: Territorial Board of Immigration was created with the objective to "present facts concerning Colorado as an attractive and desirable locality for those seeking homes in the Great West; to supply immigrants with full and authoritative information, as well as to aid and facilitate their journey hither".

The official booklet printed by the Board of Immigration lists the average annual rainfall in Colorado at just over 12 inches.

1876: Colorado achieves statehood

Summer of 1886: Congress created the new Bent land district, comprising over six million acres of Southeast Colorado, and at the same time established a land office at Lamar, near the center of this district. The land was subject to entry under the "Pre-emption Homestead and Tree Culture Laws".

August 20, 1886: John Phelps died in Moccasin Gap, Washington County, Virginia at the age of 86. His will specifies the division of his land between his children including William R. Phelps, Lou Mann, and Ida F. Branch.

This area of Virginia is rich and green with an average annual rainfall of 44 to 47 inches compared to the 12 inches per year in Colorado.

January 3, 1887: New Land Office at Lamar opened for business. "Never in the history of the wonderful West has there been such a rush of settlers and people into a new territory."

April 8, 1887: William R. Phelps dug holes for the corners of his house on his homestead. He settled on the Northwest quarter section of Section 11, Township 30S, Range 45W, in Baca County near Vilas CO.

April 11, 1887 to May 21, 1887: William R. Phelps built a sod house on the land while his wife Lou Kestner Phelps and their five children lived in Hartland, Kansas while waiting for the house to be

finished. They moved into his first house on May 21.

Summer 1887: He planted one acre in corn and garden vegetables. The corn did not mature due to the late start.

July 1887: William went to work near Vilas for a month and visited his home on weekends. He worked for J. M. Smith doing general work.

August 25, 1887: A glowing article appears in the Neosho County Journal (Kansas) telling how wonderful the new Land Office in Lamar is and how great the homesteading opportunities are in Southeast Colorado. Although this particular article wouldn't have been seen in Virginia, it is a very good summary of the attitude about homesteading.

October 14, 1887: William went to Trinidad to work to get means of supporting his family and stayed there until February 12, 1888. In Trinidad he worked on the Railroad and in a sawmill. He also worked for Mr. Scoggs 20 days in a sawmill near Powell.

January 1888: Charles McFarland built the second home for the family, according to the testimony of William R. Phelps. This was a 14x16 ft dugout. Walls were six feet of dugout and 4 feet of sod. Had a board roof and sodded dirt floor. One door, one window single sash with four panes 12x14". This 224 square foot dugout was home to the family of seven!

April 1, 1888: William went to Coolidge to get freight and was gone 8 days.

April 5 to May 10, 1888: The VILAS DEMOCRAT runs the required notice that William R. Phelps has filed notice of his intention to make final proof in support of his claim on May 29th.

Spring 1888: He plants five acres of corn and ½ acre in garden. He has seven acres broken and prepared for cropping. He has also set out 100 cottonwood cuttings (probably to meet the Tree Culture aspect of the homestead act).

May 29, 1888: William R. Phelps is accompanied by Bernard North and Joshua McFarland to Trinidad to file the necessary Testimony documents for the homestead. Bernard North and Joshua McFarland testify that they know William R. Phelps has been on his land for the stated time and has met the requirements. They both testify that Joseph

Mann (William Phelps' brother-in-law) lives closer to William Phelps than they do.

William R. Phelps finally got his homestead land in 1891. He had managed to make it through the hardships that many others did not withstand. It isn't clear how long he lived in Colorado but by 1894 his



Lou Kestner Phelps and her husband William R. Phelps left Washington County Virginia in 1887 to homestead near Vilas, Colorado

family had also moved back to the Warren area of Marion County Missouri.

This was a time of great westward migration across America. New states were being admitted to the union and the railroads were spreading their network across the continent rapidly. A very favorable picture was painted about the opportunities in the west. While it was true that land could be had for free, the fertility of the plains was exaggerated. Nevertheless, the lure of free land could be irresistible and many families from the Holston area decided to head out west. In April of 1889, after selling Ida's 12-acre land inheritance for \$325, the young family set out for Colorado along with a handful of other families from the area. Ida's brother and sister had already been in Colorado for two years so they had some family in the area. There may have been some other families from Washington County out there. One of the families traveling at the same time in 1889 as Alfred and Ida Branch was Hardy Lilly with his wife Sarah Emeline "Aunt Em", her mother Matilda Gobble Kestner and their seven children: Jessie, Will, Matilda, who for some inexplicable reason was called Jimmer, Vint, Dora, Mary and Hattie. Emeline Kestner Lilly was a sister of William R. Phelps' wife Lou Kestner Phelps. The trip was to be by train, passing through Memphis and then on through Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas and finally arriving in Lamar Colorado. From there, they made their way south about 40 miles to take up a homestead near Vilas in Baca County.

This is a map of the railroad system in the United States about 1890. The main line through Virginia passed through Abingdon where the Branch family boarded the train for Lamar Colorado. The main line goes to Memphis. From there they would have taken a couple of different trains through Arkansas, Southwest Missouri, and Kansas on their way to Southeast Colorado. (Map source: Library of Congress)

