**The Ancestry of Sarah Jane (Wilson) Dorris and Thomas Wilson:**

**An Exercise in Use of Y-DNA with Other Indirect Evidence**

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Draft of 23 October 2020

I interviewed older relatives when I began genealogical research. One was Hallard “Arvie” Dorris (1894-1978) of Williamson Co., Illinois. I asked him if he knew the maiden name of his grandmother, Sarah Jane Dorris. He told me that Grandmaw was Wilson, that she had a brother, Tom Wilson, buried over at Lake Creek. Thomas J. Wilson is actually buried across the road from Lake Creek Baptist Church in the Hartwell Cemetery, but Hartwell is often been called Lake Creek. Both Sarah, aged 12, and Thomas, aged 9, are found in Robertson Co., Tennessee in the household of Elisha and Sarah Wilson on the 1850 census (pp. 83 right-84 left).

Sarah Jane Wilson married James J. Dorris in Robertson Co. on 13 December 1853, as certified on the reverse of the marriage bond. Her maiden name and date of marriage are also recorded in an obituary of James J. Dorris in the minute book of the Williams Prairie Baptist Church of Williamson Co. (Her name is mis-recorded as “Watson” in Robertson Marriage Bk. 1, p. 236). The family was in Williamson Co. by the 1860 census (p. 973). Her death was in Frankfort Twp., Franklin Co., Illinois from pneumonia and place of burial as Williams Prairie (Franklin Co. Death Register, p. 108). Both the Death Register and her tombstone are consistent about her dates of birth and death: 1 June 1837-6 December 1908. The estate papers of James J. Dorris in Williamson Co. identify the children as E.L. (Elisha), Mary E. (m. William D. Sinks), James W., William T, Joseph E., and Luella (apparently in childhood died prior to the 1880 census).

Thomas J. Wilson’s tombstone says he was born in 1833, but this is incorrect. Although census records are inconsistent, all but one place his date of birth close to 1840. The most precise is the 1900 Williamson Co. census, which gives his birth as February 1840 in Tennessee (p. 128A). This is reasonably consistent with the Williamson Co. censuses of 1880 (age 41, p. 363 D), 1910 (age 70, p. 87A), and 1920 (age 82, p. 9A) as well as the 1850 Robertson census (age 9) which lists the children in order of age and shows Thomas to be younger than Sarah.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thomas was in Williamson Co. and aged 24 on the 1860 census (p. 173) with Sally, aged 20 and no children in the household. Both were born in Tennessee. The household is listed in a cluster of related families in Lake Creek Pct. who had recently arrived in Williamson Co. from Robertson Co. The T.J. and Sally Wilson household is separated from the James J. and Sarah J. Dorris household by the Lambert S. and Mary A. Clayton household. Mary was a sister of James J. Dorris. No record of Civil War service has been found for Thomas Wilson. The 1865 state census of Williamson Co. shows one male and one female child under 10 in the household, as well as one male and one female adult aged 20-30. Sallie apparently died after this census. On 25 April 1867 Thomas married Sarah Ann Moore in Williamson Co., Illinois (Marriage Record B, p. 191). Census records show that she was born in Illinois. She died on 12 December 1921. Thomas died on 12 December 1922 in Williamson Co. The death certificate lists his age at 89, but the informant, William Wilson, listed the names and places of birth of Thomas’ parents as “not known” and said of the cause of death, “Cause undetermined—he died without medical aide—he had been past going for some time.” From census and other records, the children of Thomas by the first wife are Sarah F. (m. George Wilkins), Andrew J., and those by the second were Ada (m. George Young), Julia, and William T.

The 1873 Robertson Co. probate file for Elisha’s estate includes a petition to sell land that identifies the heirs are identified as: Lutitice Chandler, widow of J.W. Chandler, Drury Wilson, Betsy, wife of Jack Dorris, John Wilson, Sandifer Wilson, Martha Ann, wife of Jack Elmore, Sarah, wife of J.J. Dorris, Mary, wife of John Drake, Thomas Wilson, Elisha Wilson, Mandy, wife of John Crockett, Zack Wilson, all children of Elisha), and grandchildren Alzada, wife of George Bloodworth, Bettie Wilson, and Robert Wilson, all grandchildren of Joe Wilson, decd. Sarah and Thomas were identified as residents of Illinois.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Elisha and Sarah J. Wilson are buried in the Bethlehem Baptist Church Cemetery in Robertson Co. He was born on 24 May 1800 and died on 9 July 1873; she was born on 15 October 1807 and died on 4 April 1866. They married in Davidson Co., Tennessee on 15 January 1825 (Marriage Record 1, p. 123). Sarah’s maiden name was Hurt. In 1830 they were listed on the Robertson Co. census (p. 383) and Elisha’s household is on all subsequent censuses of Robertson Co. through 1870, with his place of birth listed as North Carolina. Elisha died intestate and his estate was settled in Robertson Co.

Sarah’s parentage and lineage are easier to determine than Elisha’s. Sarah’s father, Josias Hurt, purchased 109 acres on Stones River in Davidson Co. in 1814 (Deed Bk. K, pp. 329-330). He came to Tennessee from Virginia, where he married Elizabeth Young (Prince Edward Co. Marriage Bond, 2 January 1796).[[3]](#footnote-3) Josias died in Davidson Co. leaving young children. An inventory of his estate was made on 15 January 1818 (Will Bk. 7, pp. 239-240). A valuation and distribution of the slaves was made at the home of Mrs. Elizabeth Hurt (the widow) and recorded in Davidson Co. on 6 April 1835 (Will Bk. 10, pp. 429-430). Elisha Wilson was a distributee. The Davidson Co. censuses of 1820 and 1830 list Elizabeth has head of a household, aged over 45 and 50-60 (pp. 57, 259). In 1840 a female aged 60 to 70 was in the Elisha Wilson household in Robertson Co. (p. 168). Elizabeth Hurt is buried in Bethlehem Baptist Church Cemetery, where Elisha and Sarah Wilson are also buried. Her tombstone bears no dates but identifies her as the consort of Josias Hurt. It also says, “Supposed To be 76 years.”

Elisha’s ancestry is more challenging. Elisha was born in 1800 in North Carolina and was the son-in-law of Elizabeth Hurt. Immediately above Elizabeth on the 1820 Davidson Co. census Joel Wilson is listed, aged 45 with three males under 10, one female 26 to 35, one 16 to 26, one 10 to 16, and four under 10 (p. 57). There were other Wilsons in Davidson Co., the closest of whom was three dozen names away from Joel and Elizabeth. Further research failed to reveal a connection between the other Wilsons and either Elisha or the Hurt family.

Joel Wilson was born between 1770 and 1775, combining his age groups on the 1820 Davidson and 1840 Humphreys Co., Tennessee censuses (pp. 57, 242). A precise date of 20 October 1771 is found in a list of birthdates of the children of Elisha Moore Wilson apparently taken from a family Bible.[[4]](#footnote-4) Two men named Joel Wilson, aged 26 to 45, appear on the 1800 Sampson Co., North Carolina census (pp. 506, 509). Both have a female aged 26 to 45 in the household. The first has one male child under 10, and the second has two male children under 10, consistent with Elisha’s 1800 birth. Joel married a second time on 25 October 1811, taking Christina Binkley as his bride in Davidson Co., Tennessee (Marriage Record 1, p. 122). He served in Capt. William Creel’s Co., 2nd Regt. (Cheatham’s) West Tennessee Militia from 28 January to 10 May 1814. He remained in Davidson Co. as late as 1829, appearing on the county tax list, but is missing from the 1830 census. He and Christina were among the heirs of Peter Binkley, who sold a tract of land in Robertson Co. to Jacob Binkley on 14 April 1831. Joel’s residence is not given. On 17 November 1832 Joel Wilson of Dickson Co., Tennessee granted power of attorney to David Cobb for settling the estate of his deceased brother Shadrack Wilson in North Carolina (Sampson Co. Deed Bk. 23, pp. 56-58).[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1832 Dickson was to the immediate west of Davidson Co. Joel is on the Humphrey’s Co., Tennessee tax lists starting in 1837. Humphreys was to the immediate west of Dickson Co. Joel Wilson died on 13 July 1842 in Humpheys Co. His widow Christina applied for bounty land based on his service in the War of 1812, stating his date of death. She said that he enlisted against the Creek Indians under Capt. William Cree at Stoner’s Lick in Davidson Co. and that she married Joel in Davidson Co. in October 1811.

Joel Wilson of Davidson was the same man as Joel Wilson of Humphreys and the Joel Wilson of Dickson was from Sampson Co., North Carolina. Joel in Dickson falls in a gap from 1830 through 1836 when Joel of Davidson and Humphreys cannot be found and indicates a westward migration in short steps. Joel is on the Davidson 1820 census adjacent to Elisha’s future mother-in-law. This is suggestive of a connection between Elisha and Joel, but still weak.

Betty (Dorris) Davis, a direct descendent of Elisha’s son John W. Wilson, and I sought DNA-evidence to strengthen the case. The connection from Elisha to his parents was too many generations back for an autosomal DNA to yield reliable results. We needed a man who descended from Elisha on a straight male line to act as our proxy by taking a Y-DNA test. We located such a man and he took a 111-marker test at FamilyTreeDNA.[[6]](#footnote-6) Of about 400 Wilsons in the FamilyTreeDNA data base, there was only one reasonably close match: three steps difference in three Short Random Repeat markers to a man taking a 37-marker test. FamilyTreeDNA says that this degree of matching does show a relationship “within the range of most well-established surname lineages in Western Europe.” We considered upgrading the 37-marker test, but the significance of the results was unlikely to change.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The man matching the proxy descends for Elisha Moore Wilson of Sampson Co., North Carolina through son Isham Wilson. Elisha Moore Wilson died testate in Sampson Co., signing his will on 26 May 1811 (North Carolina Original Wills, North Carolina State Archives). He named his wife as Sarah and children as Joel, Shadrack, Thomas, Isom, and Judith Manor. This leaves no doubt that Joel, who granted a power of attorney to settle the estate of this brother Shadrack in Sampson Co., was the son of Elisha Moore Wilson. The lineage of the man matching our proxy was established to Elisha Moore Wilson without use of DNA evidence, relying only on documentary evidence commonly used in genealogy.[[8]](#footnote-8) That man’s lineage also established that Elisha Moore Wilson was the most recent possible common ancestor with our proxy.

Brothers have closely matching Y-DNA. How do we know that Elisha of Robertson and Davidson was not the son of one of Joel’s brothers? Unlike Joel, the brothers left detailed records identifying their heirs. Shadrack Wilson’s estate was divided among his siblings (in one case the brother’s heirs): Isham Wilson, Thomas Wilson’s heirs, Joel Wilson, and Juded [sic.] Maynor (Sampson Deed 14, pp. 108-109). The estate of Thomas Wilson was divided among the heirs as follows: Thomas J. Wilson, Susan Ann Wilson, Young Wilson, Ezekiel Wilson, Arthur D. Wilson, Eleanor Wilson, Sally Jane Wilson (Sampson Deed Bk. 24, pp. 32-33). Isham Wilson made bequests in his will to the following sons and daughters: Wiley Wilson, Elisha M. Wilson, John T. Wilson, Nancy, wife of Needham Warren [not named as a daughter], Sarah Jane Wilson, and Susan C. Wilson (Sampson Co. Loose Wills, North Carolina State Archives). Only one of the siblings, Isham, had a son named Elisha. Elisha M. Wilson was living when Isham signed his will in 1851 and is listed on Sampson Co. census records in 1860, 1870, and 1880 (pp. 500 right, 336 left, 111A). Elisha M. Wilson was in Sampson Co. at the same time that Elisha, father of Sarah Jane and Thomas J., was living in Tennessee and after the latter Elisha was deceased. The evidence was not fitting together. Y-DNA evidence linked Elisha of Tennessee to the Sampson Co. Wilson family; Elisha’s was born in North Carolina in 1800 where Joel was living at the time; Joel lived in close proximity of Joel to Elisha’s mother-in-law in 1820; and none of Joel’s brothers were eliminated as the possible father of Elisha. The evidence wase clear and convincing evidence that Elisha was the son of Joel and grandson of Elisha Moore Wilson.

Elisha Moore Wilson was born sometime before 1745. William Willson, his father, signed his will that year in Northampton Co., North Carolina making bequests to his wife Judith, his sons John, Isaac, Elisha Moore, and daughters Katherine, Elinor, Mary, Charity, and Anne (Original Wills, North Carolina State Archives). He conveniently included Elisha’s middle name, making identification in later records from different counties much more certain. The bequest to Elisha was one shilling, a token in comparison to his siblings. By 1780 Elisha was in Sampson Co., where he purchased plantation containing 100 acres of land for £10,000 state money, a reflection of the loss of value of paper currency during the Revolution. He served in the Sampson Co. Militia during the American Revolution. His name in the second pay roll of Capt. Asher Pipkin in Revolutionary Account Bk. W2, North Carolina State Archives (p. 68-69). Like other privates in the company, he was paid £6.15.0 for his services. Three men in the company provided accounts of their service under Pipkin when applying for pensions. David Clark (S30936) said that in 1781 the company marked to Long Bridge where they served on scouting parties under Gen. Rutherford. They were discharged at Wilmington after serving three months. Arthur Dobbs Young (S7994) said the service was in the light horse. They crossed the Cape Fear River to Elizabethtown and then went down the south side of the river to Brunswick and to Lockhart’s Creek where they stayed some time. They then went up the river and after crossing went to Wilmington where they were discharged. John Holley gave a very different account. They marched to the vicinity of Wilmington, which was still held by the British. The British unsuccessfully attacked them at North East Bridge, about 10 miles east of Wilmington. The company marched to Top Sail where they remained for the rest of their tour of duty. As noted above, Elisha Moore Wilson signed his will in 1811.

Epaphroditus Moore outlived his son-in-law, William Willson, by a dozen years. Epaphroditus signed his will on 11 June 1757 (Original Wills, North Carolina State Archives). At the bottom of the last page is a note in a different hand that in the Oct. Term the will was presented by the executors, proved, and that there was an objection to the will. John Moore, one of the sons, filed a caveat for reason not specified. Epaphroditus made bequests to his wife, Elizabeth, his children, and other relatives. Grandson Elisha Wilson was to receive 200 acres of land, a slave, and a feather bed and furniture. Should he die without an heir the bequest was to go to his mother’s children by her husband John Hurst. A further bequest of a gun and a young horse was made to Elisha. A bequest also made to his daughter Judath Hurst. Judith had remarried after the death of William Wilson in 1745.

Before the Y-DNA evidence was available, there was very strong evidence that Joel Wilson of Tennessee was the son of Elisha Moore Wilson of Sampson Co., North Carolina. The evidence that Joel was the father of Elisha Wilson of Davidson Co. and Robertson Co. was suggestive, but by itself weak. Joel was listed adjacent to Elisha’s future mother-in-law on the 1820 Davidson Co. census and the 1800 Sampson Co. census places him in the state of Elisha’s birth with a male child in the household the right age to be Elisha. The Y-DNA evidence established that there was a relationship between Elisha Wilson of Davidson *C*o. and Robertson Co. and the Sampson Co., North Carolina family of Elisha Moore Wilson, a family that included Joel Wilson. Elisha was not the son of one of Joel’s brothers or of Elisha Moore Wilson himself. There is a generation gap between Elisha Moore Wilson and Elisha Wilson. Joel Wilson fills that gap. In essence, the Y-DNA evidence tied the other evidence together.

1. The family is not found on the very unreliable 1870 census of Lake Creek Twp. in Williamson Co., Illinois. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One other Wilson family in Robertson Co. also had children named Thomas and Sarah, but this is clearly not the Thomas who was in Illinois in 1860. The family of Thomas Wilson, aged 54, had a Thomas, aged 18, and Sarah, aged 12, in his household in 1850 (p. 189 right). Thomas and Sarah, like the elder Thomas and all children over the age of 6, were born in North Carolina rather than Tennessee. The younger Thomas Wilson, 17 June 1832-26 April 1904, is buried in the Wilson Cemetery in Robertson Co. He married Mary “Polly” Moore in Robertson Co. (Bond 21 February 1856). Hartwell Wilson, whose household is adjacent to the elder Thomas Wilson’s on the 1850 census, was bondsman. The younger Thomas is listed in the adjacent county of Cheatham in 1860 (p. 201 right) but was back in Robertson for the 1870 census (p. 129 right). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Josias Hurt descends from three ancestors recognized by the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) as providing Revolutionary service: Josias’ father Benjamin Hurt, his father William Hurt, and Benjamin’s father-in-law Abraham Forrest. Elizabeth Young’s parents, Henry Young and his wife Elizabeth, both provided Revolutionary service. Of these, only Benjamin Hurt and Henry Young provided military service. For every soldier you find, try to find service suited for man above prime military age or a woman for his parents and his wife’s parents. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ***The Heritage of Sampson County, North Carolina*,** 1983, pp. 696-697. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A search of Dickson County records, assisted by the Dickson County Archivist, failed to reveal any records of Joel Wilson in Dickson Co. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Due to privacy concerns that are widely discussed regarding DNA tests, including concerns within the genealogy community, I will not reveal the name of either the proxy or the match. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to a FamilyTreeDNA chart, upgrading from 37 markers to 111 markers would not increase the degree of relationship to “tightly related.” The number of steps difference could increase to 5 without decreasing the relationship to “probably related.” I also received advice from a genealogist more knowledgeable about DNA than I that upgrading the test of the man who matched was unlikely to change the significance of the results. I have since been advised that getting more people tested is useful. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This man joined the Sons of the American Revolution on the services of Elisha Moore Wilson. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)