THREE BROTHERS AND A SISTER

By Lily Lee Nixon*

THE three brothers and their sister were all born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, children of James Lee of Inverness, Scotland. James' father, William Lee, had been a supporter of Prince Charles, the Young Pretender, and was killed in the battle of Culloden, which was fought just five miles from Inverness. James, himself, was educated and was known to have preached, though whether he was an ordained minister or not is not known.

Although a seaport, Inverness is really the capital of the Highlands. The beautiful Ness River winds through it to the Moray Firth, but it has come from the Highlands. Strengthened by porridge and Scotch broth, made from the Scot's chief foods—oats, barley, and mutton—the Lee children must have keenly enjoyed their childhood and youth: watching the sailing vessels leaving for Leith, for London, or perhaps for far-off America; tramping over the Highlands with Munro and Davidson relatives; counting the sheep on busy market days as the woolen merchants weighed the fleeces, or running breathlessly past the spot where

*Miss Lily Lee Nixon is the author of James Burd: Frontier Defender, 1726-1793, a Contributing Editor, Pennsylvania History, and a teacher of history in Peabody High School, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
Macbeth murdered Duncan. But the generation of Scots living after the terrible defeat at Culloden had a hard time in their economic, political, and religious life. The Covenanters, particularly, were not happy. So it is not surprising that more young folks looked to America, the land of the free.

We shall speak of the youngest son first, for he was the one, strange to say, who chose to stay in the old world with his parents although in a different country, England. Seldom, indeed, in those distant days did a whole family emigrate. This youngest son, Alexander, became a physician in London. Family tradition says he was known for research and the translation of several medical works. A descendant has in her possession a letter written by him from Three Crown Square, London, in 1832—the year of Britain’s Great Reform Bill—to his brother in America. In part it says: “It will be nothing new to tell you that Reform in the Body politic & Cholera in the Body physical have convulsed our unhappy country to the very centre—in my district as one of the Medical Officers of our Cholera Hospital tis not unusual to see 20 die in 24 hours—and some of these after 12 or 14 hours illness.” This physician may have felt more at home in disturbed London than in quiet Inverness, for, despite support of the Stuarts, tradition and some data indicate an English origin for this Lee family. Alexander had a son, Dr. Alexander Cooper Lee, who wrote and lectured on the eye, but after the death of the three brothers and the sister, the family tie seems not to have held.

It is presumed that the sister, Elizabeth, came to America with the oldest brother, William. Did the bagpipes of their MacPherson clan play the MacCrannmon lament, by which most “Highlanders marched to the shore when they were about to embark as emigrants to some distant clime”? They chose the United States and landed in Philadelphia, its capital and metropolis in 1796, when the United States and William were each twenty years of age. Elizabeth married William Wright. The couple had several children. We have little knowledge of Elizabeth but have many letters from her son, William Wright, Jr. He was well educated for the times and a successful business man, among other things an early-1849-investor in Pennsylvania Railroad stock and in coal lands.
This son of Elizabeth had the peculiar misfortune of having his home at 173 South Ninth Street, Philadelphia, entered twice by burglars—in 1850 and in 1854. His own letters and the newspaper accounts show that he was either a very brave or a very foolhardy man. In each horrible and bizarre case, he fought to defend his home and family and as a result was crippled for life. After the second attempt, the Philadelphia Public Ledger & Daily Transcript had, besides a long news article, an editorial about the Wright burglary and the need for more adequate police protection. Little more is known of sister Elizabeth and family. She must have many descendants in America—Wright, Rodan, Thomas and others.

William Lee, who came to America with Elizabeth, was a shepherd boy in the Highlands but was educated in the Lowlands and possibly in London, where he spent four years before sailing for America. He probably lived with his Uncle William Lee, a merchant, “in the straw bonnet line.” Young William is mentioned in the Philadelphia directory for 1798 as a school master, later a school teacher, then an ice man, then an ice dealer. His letters are written in a splendid hand and in good concise English. What influence upon his students did he have? Were they so thoroughly grounded in Mathematics, Latin, and English that they could take a valuable part in the affairs of the city, state, or nation? One cannot teach in one city for almost a quarter of a century as he did without leaving some impression for good or ill. If Inverness was then noted for the correct English accent as it is now, William must certainly have struggled with the various dialects of Philadelphia.

Like so many before and since, William Lee used his teaching
experience as a stepping stone to business success. Financially he surpassed both his brothers. He was one of the pioneers in the cutting and storing of natural ice in large quantities in Philadelphia, just as a grand-nephew seventy-five years later was one of the pioneers in the manufacturing of ice in Pittsburgh. Letters from him and from relatives tell about his ice wagons starting off in the morning, of the beautiful box hedges around his three-story brick “messuage” at Schuylkill Fifth and Barker Streets (now South Eighteenth and Ludlow Streets), of his fond hope of a big sheep-raising project in Buck Valley, Bedford County (now in Fulton County), of some of the settlers to whom he sold land, and, despite his three sons, of his two sons-in-law gradually taking over the business.

One can easily understand why William Lee would prosper if he pursued all his business with the same thoroughness that is indicated in a letter dated 1840 to his nephew, James Lee (son of John), of Pittsburgh. In reference to the sheep-raising project he tells James to so conduct himself in his travels through Ohio and Pennsylvania “that you will not be deficient in any particular concerning them (sheep) on which I may catechise you viz. the general time of lambing, the time of weaning, the washing, shearing, pasturing, the kind of pasture, of wilds [sic] and enclosures, the number per acre that can be kept, the feeding and foddering in time of deep snow, the manner of their care and attendance and the expense, the returns of profit from the fleeces and carcasses, their comparative profit with cattle, horses and swine, etc. Make inquiries as to who is the largest sheep owner west of the mountains.” There seems only one query missing: the wages paid to drovers of those days.

Although he had been blind for years, when William died in 1849 he was quite wealthy. A printed copy of his will (Will Book 23, page 89, etc.) lists many houses and lots on Chestnut, Broad, Cedar, and around Schuylkill Fifth and Barker in Philadelphia, and also many acres in New Jersey and in what was listed in early maps as Sarahs Manor, Bedford County, in Southern Pennsylvania. At one time he owned 25,000 acres in the latter region. A map of his holdings was lithographed by Lehman and Duval. The canny Scot may have engrossed all the land in that area which Revolutionary soldiers could not hold or did not appreciate; but
he bought more than 20,000 acres from one person, John Conrad. His will caused a great stir and a long law suit. His wife, Elizabeth Thompson, whom he had married in 1806, had predeceased him. The two married daughters and the sons-in-law received most of the property and all of the power. A son who had left home and had not been heard from was cut off with $500.00 (it developed later that he had fought through the Mexican War). Wealth had brought dissension and discord into the William Lee family. His descendants—Lee, McKibbon, Lehman, Sloan, Charlton, Lafferty, Taylor, and others—probably still live in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Nebraska, and other western states.

Now we come to the last of the brothers, John, born in Inverness in 1780. He was quite young when his mother died; therefore he was reared in the Highlands by his grandparents. After a severe attack of scarlet fever he was left somewhat deaf, and little money was spent on his education. Later he was impressed into the British army. He served during most of the Napoleonic Wars and was stationed at Great Britain’s most strategic stronghold, Gibraltar. Finally, his father “bought him off” and he came to Edinburgh where his father, who had remarried, then lived.

At the age of thirty, with little health or education and with no trade or profession, John Lee from Tolbooth Church Parish married Jane Davidson from New Greyfriar’s Parish in Gael Chapel, November 30, 1810. John Gordon, uncle of the bride, came down from the Highlands to be one of the witnesses of the contract. The girl’s father, John Davidson, was dead. The marriage certificate has reposed most of the time since—and still does—in a small, flat, metal container which was doubtless part of the husband’s equipment at Gibraltar.
About the time of his marriage, John Lee received letters from his brother William in Philadelphia urging him to come to America. Jane's mother was strongly opposed to her daughter leaving Scotland. Three times the couple packed and unpacked their goods. Once it was almost decided that John should go first and Jane follow if the venture proved successful. But finally in 1811, when John's father at the age of 68 and his family had decided to go too, Jane determined to go with her husband. She never saw nor heard from her mother again.

The party of eight sailed from Greenock, Scotland, in the summer of 1811. Many times it was thought that the little sailing vessel would go to the bottom. John's young brother David was "lost at sea." But in October after nearly three months the grieving, storm-tossed passengers landed in Boston. From there our weary young couple took another vessel to Philadelphia. Years later after five letters from Alexander Lee in London had failed to arrive, a sixth told of some property left to Jane. Whether it was the case or not, Jane thought she would have to return to Scotland to claim it. Nothing could have induced her to cross the Atlantic Ocean again. She never knew whether the estate was large or small.

William Lee owned many acres in southern New Jersey, and he settled his brother John and wife with their infant son, James, born after their arrival in America, on a farm near Egg Harbor between what is now Atlantic City and Cape May. Here John battled the Jersey mosquitoes, harvested marsh hay, and visited the settlement of that famous and eccentric Methodist preacher, Lorenzo Dow. He must have been amazed and saddened to hear, less than a year after his arrival, that his adopted country was fighting Great Britain. Being a Scot he probably had no love for that country, but yet he knew that when America fought Great Britain she thereby was actually aiding Napoleon, the dictator whom he had tried for so long to defeat.

Conditions not being entirely satisfactory in New Jersey, John Lee decided to make a change. With his wife and their small family he set out for a settlement of Scots near Wellsville, Ohio. Traveling by slow wagon or on horseback, they reached Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, without mishap. There Jane became ill and the couple were unable to go farther. Before Jane recovered
John had the misfortune to fall on the ice and cut his leg on the axe which he had been carrying. The John Lees never forgot the great kindness which the people of Chambersburg showered upon them until they were able to resume their journey to the Scottish settlement. They stayed in Wellsville about three years, and in 1823 arrived in Pittsburgh where they lived the remainder of their lives.

Remembering the beautiful Ness, the other Lees had settled on rivers, the Thames and the Delaware; but John chose a spot with three rivers, the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio. Although not near the ocean as he would have liked, Pittsburgh seemed to welcome him, for it had been saved for English-speaking people by his wife's distant relative, John Forbes, it was a "Gateway" for his children, and it was a place where he could find plenty of congenial Scottish companionship.

Meanwhile, we know not what year, the father and stepmother had left Philadelphia for a visit to their son John, not knowing of a second change of residence. Inquiring from every innkeeper, stage coach driver, and boat captain, they went as far as Cincinnati, Ohio. Finally, getting no clue and fearful of what more hardships might do to two elderly people traveling under pioneer conditions in a strange land, they stopped. Weary and despairing, they turned back to Philadelphia, the father knowing he would now never see his son John in this life. What tragedies the lack of quick communication and transportation caused in those days.
As he went down the Ohio the father's boat may even have passed his son's house near Wheeling, West Virginia.

John never ceased to grieve, for his father and stepmother were very dear to him. The latter, in her widowhood, may have returned and visited John in Pittsburgh, for she was an indomitable old lady. In 1839 in Philadelphia, without the knowledge of her son, William, she booked passage on the Monongahela for England to visit her son Alexander. Listening to no protests she sailed alone at the age of 83, and lived six years longer in London to tell of the voyage.

John, in the meantime, had his beloved wife and a large family from which he received great affection. He did not live a long life—just sixty years. After her husband's death in 1840, Jane lived many years with a bachelor son. Finally they were both welcomed into the home of a married daughter. At Jane's death there was no law suit over the small estate left her by John Lee. The eldest son, James, had charge of the settlement. A descendant still has the legal papers connected with that estate. Other descendants of this brother, John Lee, can be found in various parts of the country—Lee, Old, Nixon, Wiley, McGaughren, McClurg, Heeter, Christy, and others.

So ends this glimpse into the lives of a Scottish family. A much more impressive tale than this one could be told by descendants of those families whose roots in this country lie deeper in time; but by the same token our newer Americans could not easily compete with it. May we gather a little wisdom from knowing a few of the faults and virtues of the three brothers and their sister, and may we appreciate what they and others of their generation have done for us.