By Charles Jack Peters

ACCORDING TO MY FATHER, our ancestors were prosperous Quaker millers living near Philadelphia who received our family farm on Crooked Creek in Western Pennsylvania from the Continental Congress in payment for flour supplied to Washington's army. My Uncle Ernest, a lifelong bachelor six years father's junior, was the last member of the family to work the farm. I had a chance in the 1970s to tell him what my father said. He was in his 80s by then; when I shook his work-hardened hand, it felt as strong and as rough as cement, though he was still limber in body and mind. When I told him my father's story, he said, forcefully: "I never heard that."

His brisk response did not leave much room for argument. I have since concluded that the story has elements of truth, but the whole story of the farm from beginning to end is much more complex,
and in its humanity, far more interesting than my father's simple anecdote suggests. It reminds us that history is filled with real people behind the names on faded documents.

During one of our frequent Sunday visits to the farm in the late 1930s, when I was a child, my father plunked me on the broad bare back of a work horse. My short legs stuck straight out to the sides. He climbed on in front of me, and we lurched off through the remains of an old orchard. My father loved it; I held on to my father for dear life. Even though we visited almost every week, the farm, with its unseen, shuffling animals in the large dark barn, its gas lights, its outdoor privy, and its open land was as foreign to me as the jolting ride on a horse rump. I was a townie, having grown up in Vandergrift in Westmoreland County, but my father never lost his love of the farm. He and his brothers and sisters never sat down when they visited. Instead they talked as they slowly drifted — to the corn crib surrounded by chickens, then perhaps to the spring by the corner of the house, then maybe out the lane a little way to see the hay. It was as if even then, years after leaving, they wanted to touch the farm.
But when they were young, they did sit down, usually late at night, to read or write letters. Some of them survived and became sources for this article.

After my grandfather, Samuel Peters, died intestate, every living blood relative was located and given an appropriate share of the proceeds from the farm's sale. I received the list of my relatives, the location of the last deed to the farm, and a check for 1/128 of its value after the final distribution from the estate was made in 1986. That information is a handsome legacy.

Our society keeps much better records of land than people, so it was easy for me to determine the succession of ownership of the farm. The chain of deeds, stored in Harrisburg and Kittanning, Armstrong County's seat, led me to the original warrant for the land granted to George Risler from John Penn, grandson of William Penn and one of the principals in Penn's colony. Risler obtained his warrant on August 21, 1776, then transferred it to John Vanderen. Father, it turned out, was partly right: an ancestor, John Vanderen, did acquire the farm about the time of the American Revolution, but it was not a gift of the Continental Congress.

My chance discovery of 26 documents recorded at Hannastown, once the county seat of Westmoreland, revealed the true nature of the purchase of the farm. Vanderen had bought many properties, almost all of them 300-acre tracts, and in almost all cases the payment was 5 shillings. Another common thread is that all of the transactions were witnessed by John Vanderen's son. Also, each document has a different individual as the seller. In the space of one year, Vanderen bought the right to buy at least 14 tracts in what is now Armstrong County and another 2,600 acres in other counties. In almost direct contradiction to the tenor of my father's story, this group of documents shows the farm was not a gift in recognition of patriotic service but a speculation made in the hope of quick profit.

John Vanderen was a well-off miller living in eastern Pennsylvania. He operated three flour and grist mills on Wissahickon Creek near its junction with the Schuylkill River in Germantown, a village just outside Philadelphia. So another part of my father's story is true: the original buyer was a miller.

Vanderen did not buy these tracts directly from Penn's colony because the "Proprietors," as they were known, would not sell more than 300 acres to an individual. Their intent was to prevent the formation of large estates like those in England. Speculators dodged this rule by arranging for friends to pose as buyers.

Purchase of virgin land was a long process. To protect the buyer during the purchasing process, the Proprietors gave the buyer a warrant. A warrant is not a deed; it is a promise to sell a vaguely described tract of land at a specified price. In the case of our farm, George Risler had agreed with Vanderen to pose as the buyer, to secure the warrant, and then to immediately transfer his rights to
the farm; for acting as buyer on his behalf, Vanderen paid Risler 5 shillings. Before Vanderen could claim ownership, he had to survey the tract and pay £15 to the Penn family.

Joshua Elder, district surveyor, surveyed the farm September 29, 1776, recording his work on a tablet-sized piece of paper. Payment should have been made soon after the survey was completed, but the American Revolution intervened. Instead, the new State of Pennsylvania confiscated Penn’s land, including the farm. The Commonwealth held title to the land for some 40 years.

In fact, not until John Vanderen’s estate was settled would ownership of his land speculations be sorted out. Because of his heavy speculations, he died, in 1788, almost bankrupt. Even though the estate sold most of the tracts, a number remained unsold when his widow died 31 years later. Upon her death in 1819, the estate was closed and the remaining tracts were distributed by lot among Vanderen’s heirs. Susanna Vanderen Johnson, his granddaughter and the only child of Susanna Vanderen and George Johnson, drew three parcels of land in Armstrong County, to which Pennsylvania still held title. She paid Pennsylvania and took control of the farm.

When Susanna V. Johnson married Samuel Fothergill Peters in a Quaker ceremony in 1823, her land holdings followed her into the marriage. After living for nine years on a succession of rented and purchased farms, one as far away as Hector, New York, the almost simultaneous death of two of husband Samuel’s brothers led Samuel to return to his family home near Philadelphia.

A decade later, Samuel found out that squatters were living on his wife’s far-off lands on Crooked Creek. For evicting the squatters, Samuel’s lawyers received half the farm: the 1843 partition divided the 345-acre tract into a rectangle fronting on the township road, which roughly parallels the creek, and a tract with three straight sides and the creek for boundaries. The lawyers took the tract on the road. Susanna and Samuel were left with 192 acres on the creek. Even today, to reach the farm on Crooked Creek, one must traverse a dirt lane, which is slippery clay mud in the spring, hard deep ruts in the summer, and sometimes closed by drifting snow in the winter.

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After experiencing squatters and lawyers, Samuel kept an eye on his property by visiting the tenants almost every year. On an earlier visit, he had written to his wife that tenants “are enough to try the patience of Job for they do nothing but gull the land & the owners…. Tomorrow I go down Crooked Creek to the G. Risler farm … & then I shall have been on all the farms.”

Samuel seemed to flourish while traveling to his properties. In another letter, he observed, “I rode about 22 miles last seventh day (Saturday) in the stormes so that thee may see that I am not very sick.”

Samuel even entertained notions of “removing to the West,” as he put it in an advertisement offering his Aston (near Philadelphia) farm and mills for sale. But he found no buyers. Instead it was his son, Charles Vanderen Peters, who did move west — twice. First he went to California in the 1849 gold rush, sailing for nine months and 16 days from New York around the Horn of South America. Charles perfectly fit the mold of the average ’49er: male, 25 years old, single, tolerable financial resources. But within a year or so — again, a typical ’49er story — he returned home. The only ripple left from the adventure is a batch of letters in the Pennsylvania State Archives.

In 1858, Charles married Anna H. Peters, his first cousin, and daughter of James Shelly Peters. She was disowned by the Quakers for this marriage. Charles, too, had been disowned two years earlier for not attending meetings. The two disownments mark the departure of my branch of the Peters family from the Society of Friends.

The couple lived on the family property near Philadelphia in a frame house, Charles operating his father’s sawmill and gristmill. His placid life was interrupted in 1862 when the Confederate Army moved north across the Potomac River, spreading panic in the eastern counties. The governor issued an emergency call for 50,000 volunteers. Charles, age 38, enlisted as a private in the 16th Regiment Militia. He was discharged after eight days when the Union stopped the Confederate advance at Antietam Creek.

Two of Charles’s children — George Johnson Peters and my grandfather Samuel F. Peters — would reach adulthood, but late in 1863, both his wife Anna and an infant daughter died.

For a short time after the Civil War, Charles continued to operate the sawmill. Then in a flurry of activity,
he got remarried (to Margaret Pierce) and sold his real and personal property to buy the farm on Crooked Creek from his father for $7,700. The family moved there in April 1870. Tax records indicate the property already had a dwelling and a barn. After 69 years of neglect — the last 25 in the hands of renters — the farm on Crooked Creek finally had a family member living on it.

**WORKING THE FARM**

THE FRONTIER HAD MOVED FAR TO THE WEST BY 1870. When Charles arrived, Burrell Township boasted a population of 964 (admittedly not much less than today’s) which supported eight schools, three churches, a post office, two general stores, a flour mill, two sawmills, two shoemakers, five mechanics, two blacksmiths, a wagon maker, and a physician. Kelly Station, the nearest railroad depot, was nine miles away, and within 12 miles were three towns — Kittanning, the county seat; Apollo, a manufacturing town with an iron rolling mill, brick works, foundry, and planing mill; and Leechburg with a rolling mill. They provided goods and services for the family, and markets for the farm products.

With 192 acres, Charles’ farm was more than three times the size of an average farm in the Township. It contained 70 acres of tillable land on high ground. From this plateau, the land slopes off to Crooked Creek 150 feet below. The lower part of this slope, well-watered by springs, is good for pasture and hay. Another stream, Pine Run, flows through a wooded section of about 84 acres along the eastern edge of the property. John Vanderen may have been attracted by the prospect of putting a mill on this stream. In fact, one George Beck operated a powder mill there from 1811 until an explosion halted operations in 1826.

Perhaps Charles found what he was looking for because he spent the rest of his life on Crooked Creek. The careful inventory and appraisal of Charles’ estate from September 1888 paints a detailed picture of his farm.

The barn, built on the brow of the hill, measured 45-by-55 feet. Typical of a bank barn, it took advantage of the slope of the hill to permit ground-level access to the two lower floors. Charles and his family lived in a six-room house in which most rooms had floor coverings of either carpeting or linoleum. The coal-fired cooking stove supplied most of the heat in winter, although there was another stove in the parlor. Illumination came from three lamps which burned about two gallons of coal oil (kerosene) a year. The house furnishings included a sewing machine, three bedsteads, a lounge, 14 haps (quilts), 20 pillowsips, and 18 sheets. Entertainment was provided by *Dr. Grimes Home Book and Pecks Bad Boy and His Pa and Compendium of Fun.*

All the modern farm implements, with the exception of the light gasoline tractor, were invented and adopted during the 30 years before Charles and his family had moved west. Charles had the money to replace hand tools — sickle, scythe, flail, hand rake, and hoe which had remained almost unchanged for over 1,000 years — with horse-powered machinery. Indicative of the importance of livestock in the farm economy, the most expensive piece of equipment was a Champion mower for cutting hay. He also had a grain drill, a farming drill, sulky cultivator, a corn planter, and iron plows with replaceable points, all powered by horses.
In one year, Charles raised 400 bushels of oats, 20 tons of hay, and 500 shocks of corn to feed 51 head of livestock, including six horses, five cows, two bulls, 13 hogs, 12 ewes, seven lambs, one buck, a dog, and millions of flies. He grew 200 bushels of wheat and more than 100 bushels of potatoes. The flour from about 20 bushels of the wheat and 25 bushels of potatoes were sufficient for family use. The surplus wheat was sold for about $120 to Cochran’s Mills or fed to his livestock. His wife, Margaret, skimmed the cream from the cow’s milk and churned it into butter to sell. The leftover skim milk was fed to the swine. Other livestock ate the corn and middlings from grinding the wheat, oats, and hay.

Most of the meat the family ate was pork. Two or three hogs could supply pork for a year, the other nine or ten bringing about $70 total. The potatoes the family didn’t use had a market value of about $15. The sheep were valued both for their wool and meat. Their total market value was about $93. Some of the horses were kept to work the farm, but the rest, which were raised for market, could be sold for $200.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1916 prepared an estimate of farmers’ standards of living. By placing a dollar value on the things the farmer produced for his own consumption, such as the foodstuffs listed above, the study concluded that a farmer with a cash income of about $200 annually had a standard of living equivalent to that of the highest paid wage-earners. Although Charles Peters was farming 30-odd years earlier, commodity prices and farm practices did not change much in the interval, and his cash income was several times $200.

The many things the Peters family did purchase for cash provide an additional measure of his prosperity. They bought coal oil, horse collars, sugar, crayons, candy, patent medicines, and even a windmill and a plow at the nearby King and Woodward general store at Brick Church. When William, youngest son of Charles, was age 6, his father bought him chalk and a copybook for school. He also bought gaiters, tobacco, and shirt fronts for himself. The only foods purchased were coffee, spices, molasses, and (rarely) a dozen eggs for 12¢, or a pound of butter for 28¢. Sugar was bought in such large quantities that it must have been used for preserves. Shoes, straw hats, overalls, stockings, and boots complete the list of clothing purchased.

Margaret Peters, in one year, purchased 58 yards of flannel, calico, gingham, ticking, and other material. She also bought buttons, ribbons, thread, pins, and needles. Of all the machines on the farm, only the Champion mower and the grain drill were valued more highly by appraisers in the 1888 inventory than the sewing machine. The common characteristic of all these purchases is that they could not be easily made on the farm.

Once or twice a year, usually in winter or early spring when the roads were impassable, the entry in Charles account is “To Cash,” followed by an amount varying between $2 and $50. Also about once a year, there appears an entry such as “cash paid Murphy — $9.41.” In both cases, the general store was providing the services we now receive at a bank; both entries represent a loan to Charles — one for cash for personal use, the other to pay his hired hand.
Sometimes Charles would pay cash on his account in amounts between $1.07 and $120 (even the latter payment, by check, did not bring the balance to zero.) The store charged 5 percent interest on the outstanding balance. Mostly, however, he paid the general store by selling his farm products — “2 dressed hogs $38.32,” “produce $1.01,” or “20 bushels of corn $5.” Many entries indicate that Charles traded butter, eggs, a hide, or corn for items of lesser value, so the entry is “Bal. butter $1.62,” etc. In the bartering of farm products for store goods, money was not used so much as a medium of exchange but as a way of keeping score. The Peters family trade at King and Woodward amounted to around $100 annually.

When Charles had moved west in 1870, my grandfather Samuel was 11 years old, and his brother George was 9. Another brother, William, was born about a year after the move. Burrell Township’s 225 pupils attended school about five months a year. Samuel, as a young man of 20, finished his education at Elders Ridge Academy, akin to a high school.3 Students there stayed at local houses during the week and walked home on weekends; for Samuel, it was a 10-mile walk.

Immediately after his term at Elders Ridge Academy, Samuel left home to work for the railroad. Continuing the family drift west, he landed a position as telegraph operator at Rewey, Wisconsin. He met and married my grandmother, Margaret A. Manning, on February 6, 1884. They moved further west to Cleves, Iowa, where he became station agent-telegrapher at a new depot. Samuel, Margaret, and eventually three daughters and five sons lived above the station in an apartment with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. He was the first of my ancestors to hold a steady job paying a set wage.

A few years after Samuel settled in Cleves, his father died. None of the three sons were interested in taking over the farm. Charles’ widow remarried and the farm was leased. But after 18 years working for the railroad, Samuel purchased his brothers’ share in the farm and suddenly moved back to the property in 1903.
I believe Samuel built a two-story frame house on the hillside below the barn. Cool water from a spring, at the northeast corner of the house, flowed through a trough in the cellar where milk cans and butter crocks were stored. The cellar was a cheery room with whitewashed walls illuminated by sun streaming in full-length windows. The root cellar was under the kitchen and porch. The back porch, high above the ground, overlooked the meadows and creek.

Now, one by one, it was Samuel’s children who left the farm. Eldest son Charles married and settled on a nearby farm. Next oldest William became a physician. Tom and my father Lee left in 1913 to work in the oil fields of northwestern Pennsylvania and Ohio. The family kept in touch with a steady stream of letters: my father saved the 50 letters he received from 1913 to 1919, most from his mother. In one, she wrote, “Received your letter to Pa and also the card with your picture on it. One thing I did not like about your picture — it looked too well satisfied ... Lee have you cut the booze ... and tobacco. I see a big chew in your mouth.” Iona, the youngest daughter, had a more poignant view of the photograph: “Mom would take it and say ‘Hello Lee’ and then she would say ‘Hello Mom.’”

My father dallied in answering letters, which prompted his mother to scold, “… answer right away or I will step in and pull your ear. Oh I miss you boy.” Grandmother wanted them, particularly my father, to return to the farm and “make a big go of it.” My father did return to help when he could not find work, but Tom soon married and came back only to visit. When he could not find work in the oil fields, Tom took a factory job: “I don’t like to work in a factory these nice days, but can’t help it.” But in another letter, Tom comments on the luxury of working a nine-and-a-half-hour day: “I am working for Smithy again at $3.50 per day. We start work at about 7:30 AM and quit at Five. It is pretty nice to be home every evening.” But they were all short-term jobs, and when one was finished, there was a frantic search for the next.

When my father suggested that he might go to Oklahoma or Kansas in search of work, his mother and siblings tried hard to dissuade him. Brother William, in medical school, warned him about spotted fever, malaria, and typhoid fever, prophetically as it turned out. His mother pleaded with him not to go, also citing diseases and how much they would miss him. “Please don’t go away out there or I will die,” she wrote. He didn’t leave that season, but he did go to Kansas later.

There was, meanwhile, much work to do on the farm. Grandmother wrote, “Ernest [my uncle] and Pa are up sorting potatoes and I have some more work to do and it is now eleven. The lima that you are so anxious is not on yet. I have been harping it, but the spring was so late and roads impassable that when they got to plow they could not be pulled off.” Later that summer, she said, “The potatoes had a good many bugs on them. I have nearly all of them sprayed with Pirocks. The men were late in the harvest and could not stop to bother the bugs so I tried it and it went all right. Only was very tired. I find it very wearing on a person to have to work the whole year, winter same as summer.”
Samuel and Margaret struggled to hire a hand. Considering that they could not convince their own children to stay on the farm, it must have seemed like a hopeless task. They thought things were all set when Joe Claypool agreed to come, but then he wrote, "I have changed my mind and so you can hire somebody else. You must be able to get Charlie Hefferfinger. so long."

The never-ending work and oppressive debt produced an interesting reaction in my grandfather, who wrote, "... attended socialist meeting, and got me a 'RED' card." The Socialist Party would appear to have little appeal to farmers — it advocated restriction of the power of the injunction; establishment of a Bureau of Labor Statistics; reduction of the hours of labor; passage of an employer's liability law; prohibition of child labor; compulsory education; government inspection of factories, mines, and workshops; and payment of wages in cash — but Samuel's experiences on the railroad and farm influenced his decision to join the Socialist Party. He obviously felt a need for some institution to balance the power of Big Business.

By the late 1910s, most of their farm income came from peddling products at markets 11 miles away in Vandergrift. One April, my grandfather wrote:

Ma and I went to Vandergrift Tuesday with two bushels of potatoes, sausage, eggs, etc. and came darn near sticking on Harry Clark's hill as frost was all out — no bottom except stones. Left Vandergrift at 7:20 PM with gas range, two sacks of clover seed and what little pork left, and range being too heavy left it at Amos Miller's place and got home at 1:05 AM. Horses sometimes would want to rest every two rods and was certainly a killer on a team. Friday, Ira and I went after range and it took us from 8:30 AM till dark to get home, as roads had got stiff and heavy in places and other places it was awfully muddy.

What little cash the family possessed did not sit idle long, for they were constantly borrowing from each other. From his brother William, my father heard the plea: "Write immediately, am anxious and broke. Need money. Have never received your check and owe $25 room rent. Will not receive any pay for hospital work. ... don't forget check."

Then his sister Lucy wrote to my father, "I wish you would pay me what you owe me as soon as possible ... must have money for...." My grandmother answered my father's request: "Am sorry we haven't the money ... am going to Vandergrift and see if I can't make some money off the EC ... will give you whatever I make."

Among my father's pleas for financial help is one from Augusta, Kansas, where he'd gone in search of work. His father, the letter indicates, sent $26 to tide him over.

Other matters besides money crept into the letters occasionally, and such details provide interesting accounts of social life during the 1910s in rural Western Pennsylvania. My father received a note during one visit home in November 1913: "Yes, I'll go with you to the Grange Hall on Sat. night." Another special friend who kept in touch wrote, "When I was home I was at a party. We danced the two step. All the music we had was the mouth organ."
In addition to the dances and fairs, "Society" was a periodic social gathering, which included all ages. Its location rotated among the one-room schools. The youngsters played games, the older children gave recitations and musical offerings, the young adults flirted, and the adults chatted and watched. Iona, age 13, loved the sled ride home: "We had so much fun we hollered like Indians. ... Earl Wriggle asked to take Lucy [her older sister] home and she ... said no, she couldn’t leave the sled load (all the time knowing her place in the sled was full) ... and he just coaxed her ... and his face was just as red as a spanked baby."10

Her mother, writing about the same gathering, related: "Ernest read a piece at Society — he was a little flustered. Iona played 'The Burning of Rome' and had a recitation, 'My Sister’s Best Fellow.' She did fine."

Iona reported the details of another society meeting in a March 27, 1916, letter:

Hewey Young was on for a declamation and he got up and said a ship without a rudder, a ship without a sail, did you ever see anything queerer unless it was a Socialist. And he just screamed the 'Socialist.' Oh!! but Lool [Lucy] and I were mad. Mom said she thought we didn’t like the Socialist party. And then they had a debate about what right United States had to go and invade Mexico.

Lucy, at 21, enjoying the chase for a husband, wrote of how a friend had told her "that Norman said I was getting better looking every year. Orwin Klingensmith forgets who I am from one time till the other. He said 'No wonder, you are getting better looking every time I see you!' Wasn’t that scrumptious?"

Lucy organized a lawn party, which my grandfather described: "There were 150 people there. She had it in the pasture. Had magic lanterns. They thought it was fun."

In another letter, Lee’s older sister Bertha feared that her daughter was getting cholera. She delighted in the same letter, "We have a bathroom in our [new] house." Inquiries about health were not idle courtesy; the inside toilet was the first line of defense against cholera, typhoid fever, and the like. The farm still had only an outdoor privy.

My father returned to the farm from Kansas in early summer 1917, seriously ill with typhoid fever. Probably the primitive
sanitary facilities allowed its spread to his father and sister Lucy. His brother William, by then practicing in nearby Homer City, came every day to tend them. His father Samuel survived but was permanently incapacitated. Vivacious sister Lucy died in June of that year, a tragedy which troubled my father for the rest of his life.

My father started a business in Vandergrift in 1921 and married two years later. That left only Ernest and my grandmother to work the farm. After my grandparents died, Ernest remained on the farm, but when he died in 1981, the farm, age 209 years, died with him.

The farm was created out of wilderness by a few boundary lines scratched on a piece of paper. After failing to bring a quick profit, 94 years passed before a family member lived there. When my great-grandfather Charles moved in, it flourished briefly, then began a slow decline. Now no one lives there; only foundations mark where the barn and house stood. The only signs of human life come from the owner who raises corn but lives elsewhere, and hikers on the Baker Trail — a path from Freeport to the Allegheny National Forest maintained by the American Youth Hostels — which passes through the property.


1 Before the American Revolution, the Proprietors, who were William Penn and his heirs, were granted by Charles II, King of England, all the land in Pennsylvania in 1681. Even though they sold much of this land, they still owned most of the land in Pennsylvania at the time of the American Revolution.
2 Since Vanderen had five children, this would imply that at least 15 tracts comprising 4,500 acres were unsold when his estate was settled in 1819.
3 Samuel belonged to the first generation in my family to receive middle names.
5 The community of Elders Ridge may have been named for Joshua Elder, the district surveyor who prepared the original survey of the farm in 1776.
6 Margaret used a hand sprayer that required a hard push of the handle for every puff of insecticide.
7 The injunction was the prime legal tool used to stop strikes.
8 Part of the royalty for the natural gas just discovered on the farm consisted of a ration of gas piped to the house.
9 The EC or electro-chemical ring, of pure iron, supposedly had medicinal powers for rheumatism, neuralgia, sciatica, and nine other afflictions. Price $2.00. My grandmother always wore one.
10 Iona’s imagery reminds us how much we have obscured the edges of life. On the farm, everyone, including children, heard the first cry of birth and the last breath of death.