

# NOTES ON THE FRANCIS S. BRYAN FAMILY OF NELSON AND DAVIESS COUNTIES

(Part One)

By Tom Stephens

*Myrtie Orene Bryan of Owensboro spent many years prior to her death researching her Bryan family, which came to Kentucky with other Maryland Catholics in the 1780s and 1790s. A kinsman, George B. Bryan, also researched the family, compiling notes for a manuscript he called The Bryans and the Bellamys of Kentucky. He died in 1996. The following article, which is the first in a series, includes information taken from their notes, as well as original research. The remainder of the series will appear in subsequent issues.*

One of the most interesting chapters in Kentucky history is the immigration of Maryland Catholics to central Kentucky in the 1780s and 1790s. Today, these events are remembered with a bi-annual reunion and by thousands of descendants who are busily documenting the families that sought religious freedom on the frontier.

One such immigrant was Francis S. Bryan, who settled on Pottinger's Creek in present-day Nelson County.

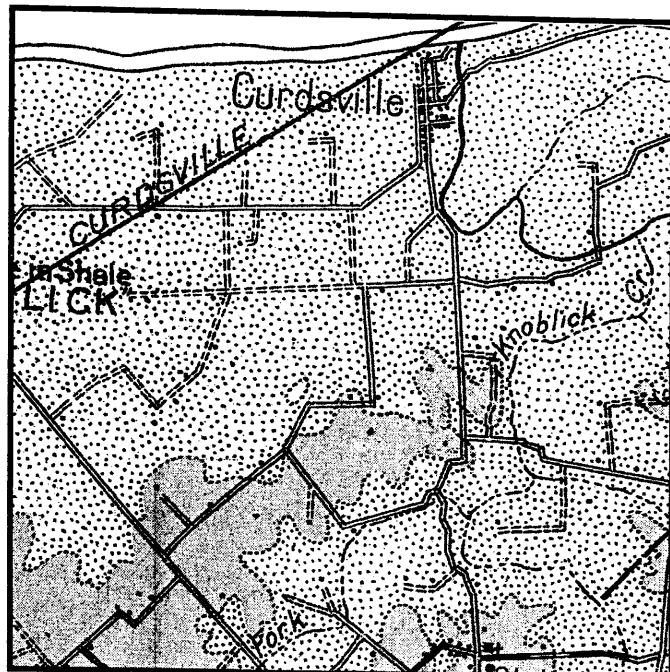
In 1785, about 60 Roman Catholic families, primarily from St. Mary's County, Maryland, formed a league to prepare a move to the Kentucky frontier as soon as circumstances allowed.

The first group, consisting of about 20 to 25 families, was led by Basil Hayden (d. 1804), who had a grant for 300 acres on Pottinger's Creek, about 15 miles south of what was to become Bardstown.<sup>1</sup>

Hayden applied for a bond for the land in Baltimore in 1785, which was secured by Philmer "Philip" Lee. Lee's compensation, apparently, was land adjacent to Hayden's. A meticulous diarist, Lee recorded much of what is known about early Catholic settlement in central Kentucky.<sup>2</sup>

Hayden's party first traveled to Pittsburgh, then down the Ohio River on flatboats to the newly established Limestone settlement of John May, now Maysville.<sup>3</sup> The party then proceeded overland from Limestone to Goodwin's Station (now Boston, Nelson County), where the women and children were left while the men went on to Hayden's land.

Once the boundaries of the new settlement had been staked out, the arduous toil of clearing land and erecting crude houses began. "The selection of Pottinger's Creek as the location of the new Catholic colony was unfortunate," began one account of those early days. "The land was poor and



Curdsville was the home of Francis Gabriel Bryan, a son of John Barton Bryan and Catherine Wathen. He was perhaps the first of the family to move from Nelson County to Daviess County, arriving in 1849.

the situation uninviting. Yet, the nucleus of the colony having been formed, these disadvantages were subsequently disregarded, and new Catholic emigrants from Maryland continued to flock to the same neighborhood. They preferred being near their brethren, and enjoying with them the advantages of their holy religion, to all other mere worldly considerations. They could not brook the idea of straggling off in different directions, where, though they might better their earthly conditions, they and their children would in all probability be deprived of the consolations of their religion."

Thomas Hill and Phillip Miles led another group to the area in 1787, followed the next year by a group led by Robert Abell (d. 1802).<sup>4</sup> Benedict

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Spalding and Leonard Hamilton brought more families in 1790, some of whom settled on the Rolling Fork of Salt River, in present-day Marion County. This may have been the settlement founded by the Hardin family about 1785 that became the present-day town of St. Mary.

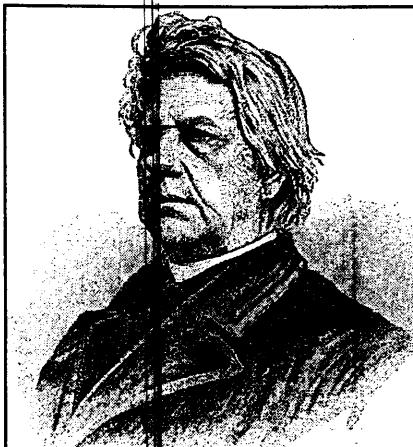
These families, many of whom had been neighbors in Maryland, had surnames still familiar in central and western Kentucky: Bald, Boone, Bowles, Bowlin, Brewer, Brown, Bryan, Bullock, Burch, Byrne, Cash, Cissell, Clark, Coomes, Dant, Edelin, Elliott, French, Hagan, Hayden, Hill, Howard, Howe, Hutchins, Johnson, Lancaster, Lee, Lucas, Luckett, Mahony, Mattingly, McAtee, Melton, Miles, Mills, Mollihorne, Mudd, Nally, Norris, Payne, Peak, Queen, Rapier, Smith, Spalding, Speaks, Stevens, Thawles, Thompson, and Wathen.

The year of Francis Bryan's arrival is not known, but evidence points to 1790. The first known reference to him is in a 15 June 1791 tithables list in the Nelson County Minute Book. Bryan had one titheable, himself. That is the same year that Benedict Spalding and Leonard Hamilton, who led the 1790 group of immigrants, first appear.<sup>5</sup>

Among those also on the 1791 lists are Joshua, Samuel, and Barton Abell, presumably relatives of Robert Abell, leader of the 1788 group.

The year 1791 must have been a momentous one for Francis Bryan, involving a wedding and preparing for a family, since, on 8 January 1792, his wife – whose name is unknown – gave birth to a son at the Pottinger's Creek settlement. The child was named John Barton Bryan.

The naming of children meant a lot to 18<sup>th</sup> century parents, and names were often chosen to continue a tradition or to honor a family member. That is why the name John Barton Bryan is of interest. Was the firstborn of Francis Bryan named for Barton Abell? Was he named for his maternal grandfather, as was often the custom?



Reverend Robert A. Abell (1792-1873), a well-respected priest and the first ordained at the Bardstown diocese's St. Thomas Seminary. One of the grandsons of Francis S. Bryan was named for him.

A Barton family was certainly in Nelson County at the time. A Daniel Barton, listed in a 1787 tithables list, had his name marked out as "Dead." Others, including James, Roger, and Theophilus Barton, appear on lists of that time.

Bryan had another son, Gabriel, on 25 July 1797. He appears on the 1795 Nelson County tax list as "Francis Bryant" with one white male over 21 (himself), one horse, and six head of cattle. Only white and black males were listed at the time.<sup>6</sup> He has 60 acres of third-rate land on the "Landing Run" watercourse.

Francis "Bryant" also appears on the 1800 tax list and the 1810 census. The census lists the household as having two males under 10, two between 16 and 26, and one between 26 and 45; there were three females under 10, three between 10 and 16, and one between 26 and 45.

In 1820 there are two males under 10, two 16 to 18, one 16 to 26, one 26 to 45; and 3 females under 10, three 10 to 16, and one 26 to 45.

### John Barton Bryan

John Barton Bryan, one of those listed in his father's household, was coming of age during this period. Thirty-eight years old in 1830, having been born in 1792, he appears on that year's census as "Barton Bryan," his first known appearance as head of household. In his household are two males under 5, two 5 to 10, and two 10 to 15. No females are listed. The "Francis Briant" household consists only of one male 70 to 80 and one 15 to 20. Francis died in Nelson County on 26 July 1831.<sup>7</sup>

John married Catherine Wathen (b. 23 December 1797, d. 19 February 1865). The couple's children were: John C. (b. 16 January 1818, m. 3 April 1853, Mary M. Murphy)<sup>8</sup>, William<sup>9</sup>, Francis Gabriel (m. 3 February 1853, Susan Mary Hayden), Daniel, Hillary/Hiltary(?) (m. Frank Mitchell), Robert Abell (b. 11 June 1830, d. 22 July 1900, m. Sarah Jane Kelly), Thomas L. (m. 14 November 1864, Martha Davis), Anne (m. Joe Montgomery),

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Elizabeth Gabnio (m. 1855, Robert Burch), and James Ignatius.<sup>10</sup>

John died at age 61 in Daviess County on 22 March 1853.<sup>11</sup>

### Francis Gabriel Bryan

Francis Gabriel Bryan (a son of John Barton Bryan and Catherine Wathen, listed above) moved to Owensboro in 1849, following many Nelson County natives to Daviess County.<sup>12</sup> Four years later, on 16 August 1853, he married Susan Mary Hayden, likely a descendant of Basil Hayden or a kinsman, at "Mrs. William Hayden's place" in Daviess County.<sup>13</sup>

The 1870 Daviess County census lists "Gabreal" and Susan's children as: Eugene, 15 (b. circa 1855); Annie B., 12 (b. circa 1858); Carmilla, 10 (b. circa 1860); "Gabrial, Jr." 8 (b. circa 1862); Susan M., 6 (b. circa 1864); Robert, 4 (b. circa 1856), and Jenrose, 1 (b. circa 1869). Gabriel is listed as 45 (b. circa 1825); Susan as 35 (b. circa 1835).

He was a carpenter, but worked for about five years in the mercantile trade. From 1854 to 1872 he farmed and worked in the flourishing tobacco-stemming industry. Afterward, he moved to Curdsville (Daviess County) and returned to farming.<sup>14</sup>

### Robert Abell Bryan

Robert Abell Bryan (a son of John Barton Bryan and Catherine Wathen, listed above, and a grandson of Francis S. Bryan) followed his brother to Daviess County in 1853 and settled on a farm two miles southeast of Owensboro. He married Sarah Jane Kelly, daughter of Henry Kelly and Sallie Bingham, on 8 April 1858.<sup>15</sup>

Their children were Ida Emmaline (b. 10 February 1859, d. 3 March 1919), who married J. William May on 13 January 1880 in Daviess County; Susan Elizabeth (b. 27 June 1860, d. 1 April \_\_\_\_\_), who married \_\_\_\_\_ Vowels; Mary Belle (b. 23 July 1862, d. 7 April 1941); John Barton (b. 30 June 1865, d. 2 December 1927), who married Artie Belle Clark on 3 October 1887<sup>17</sup>; Robert Emmett (b. 3 March 1868, d. 24 January 1940), who married Mary Magdalene Hubbard (d. 13 April 1954) on 3 April 1894; Sarah Ann/Sara Anne (b. 5 March 1872, d. 27 January 1953)<sup>18</sup>, who married James Moses

Nelson (b. 11 September 1869, d. 16 December 1951) on 19 February 1895; Augustus Tyler (b. 27 November 1874, d. 18 October 1876); Peter Cooper (b. 16 August 1877, d. 17 December 1960), who married Mary Genevieve Montgomery on 9 February 1904; and Catherine/Katherine Frances (b. 23 August 1879, d. 1 March 1957), who married Charles Leslie Medley (d. 1946) on 25 October 1898.<sup>19</sup>

### Civil War

The nation was tearing itself apart in the spring of 1861, and everyone had to decide which side to follow. Location had much to do with such decisions, and many western Kentuckians chose the Confederacy.

The Bryans were no exception. Robert's brothers Thomas L. and Edward Daniel Bryan (listed above) enlisted in Company G of the Confederate army's 1<sup>st</sup> Kentucky Volunteer Infantry, commanded by Colonel Thomas H. Taylor. They enlisted on 1 June 1861, in Owensboro.<sup>20</sup>

By December, their regiment was stationed along the perimeter of Washington, awaiting a federal attack, when Thomas wrote his brother in Daviess County:

Army of the Potomac  
CAMP NEAR CENTREVILLE DEC 10<sup>th</sup> 1861

Dear Brother:

As an opportunity presents I write you again to inform you that I am yet in the land of the living,  
We are camped  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from Centreville and 7 from Manassas. Centreville is 20 miles from Washington City and is very strongly fortified it is best fortified place in the Southern Confederacy. the yankees cannot bring enough men here to take the place. The yankee army is about 10 miles from here. We have been expecting them to advance for the last 3 months but they have not come yet, and I don't believe they ever will attack us here though head men here are expecting them to come on and attack us every day. Nearly all of the men in this

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Regiment want to go back to Ky. very much. I am about out of hopes they promised to send us back so often that I have begun to think that they are going to Keep us here. There one good thing our time will but(crossed out) be out in 5 months more. We will go to Kentucky then sure. Whenever the fight comes off here we will go to Ky and I am afraid not before. We heard here yesterday John C Breckenridge was advancing on Owensboro and Henderson which is good news if true. I hope the yankees will soon all be driven out of Ky. I wish I was there to help to make swim the River Daniel and myself are both well. The health of the whole army is very good. Give my love to Jane and Mother. I want to hear from you all very bad. Don't let them arrest take(crossed out) you. Take the oath or anything else to Keep out of prison. Such an oath is not binding no how Wm Wallace is well and sends his best respects to you and Jane and the children

Give my respects to all who inquire about me. Be sure to write to me, as soon as you think there any chance of a letter reaching me. Hopeing that we may all live to see the war ended and peace restored, I Remain

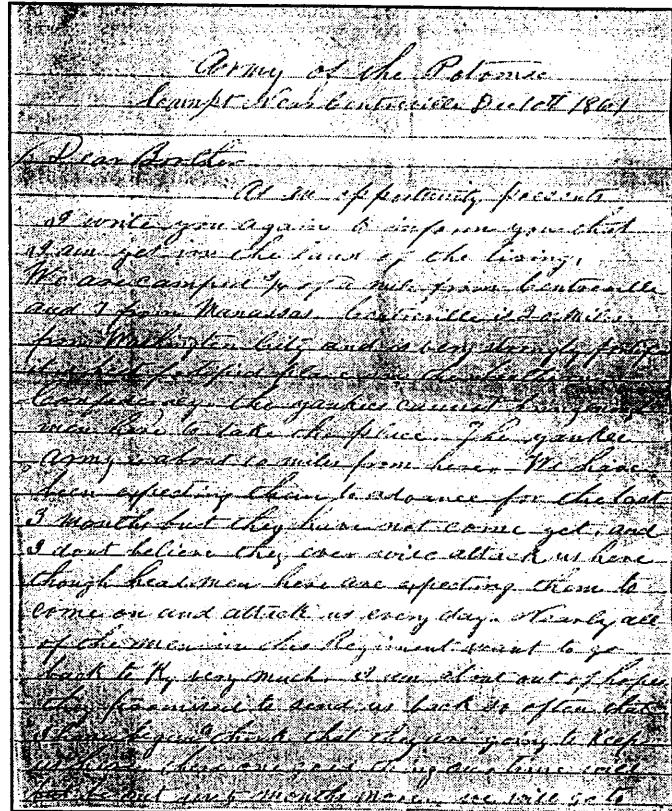
your affectionate brother  
Thos L. Bryan

Robert and Jane's children to whom Thomas Bryan sent his respects were Ida Emmaline, nearly 3 years old in December 1861, and Susan Elizabeth, 1 ½. A third daughter, Mary Belle, born on 23 July 1862 (as listed above), had been born by the time the following letter was received:

Charleston, Bradley County  
Tenn. August 1<sup>st</sup> 1863

Dear Brother

As an unexpected opportunity of sending a – letter through the lines presents itself, I embrace it to write you a short letter to inform you that I am yet



Thomas L. Bryan, a member of the Confederate 1st Kentucky Volunteer Infantry, wrote this letter to his brother Robert Abell Bryan in Owensboro on 10 December 1861.

alive and well I have not been in the army since our Regiment was disbanded (at Richmond) a year ago last May. I have been employed in the Nitre and Mining Bureau ever since that time. I worked for nearly a year at a lead mine near Jonesboro, in the upper part of East Tennessee

I left there about two months ago, and came to this place. We are – working a lead mine here you can have no idea how bad I want to see you all I have not heard a word from home for two years I am sometimes almost tempted to start and try to get back but the fear of being taken up and shot as a spy, or put in prison until the war is over prevents me. I see from the papers that they have shot Frank Cowan and have Jack Thompson and Charlie Kirk in prison as spies. I suppose some of the

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boys of our old company have gone back to Owensboro I saw several of them with Col John H. Morgan last – Summer at Knoxville since that time I have not seen any of them. I have been doing carpenters work at the mines at two dollars and half per day, which is Scarcly sufficient to board & clothe me. I think I shall start to Ky soon. Gen Buckner is now in command of east Tenn and I think I can get permission from him to go home. I can assure you that times are pretty hard in Dixie now. you must be sure to write to me if there any possible chance of sending a letter to this country. Give my love to all the Family. I hope I may yet live to see the war at an end and the time come when I can return to my native State again. If you write to me, Direct your letter to Charleston Bradley County Tennessee.

I could write you a great deal more but have not time as the man that is going to take this letter is waiting  
I Remain

your Brother  
Thos L. Bryan<sup>21</sup>

But the war also pitted many relatives – including siblings – against each other. Robert's sister, Elizabeth Gabinio Bryan, had married Robert Burch (1833-1902) in 1855. Though Daviess County was almost entirely southern in sympathy, Burch favored the Union, alienating himself from his in-laws. He enlisted as a sergeant in Company H of the Union's 12<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Volunteer Cavalry on 28 October 1862, reporting for duty the following February 11 in Munfordville.<sup>22</sup>

Even in 1865, when federal forces were pushing the war to a successful conclusion, Burch remained apologetic in a March 6 letter from Louisville to his brother-in-law. This may have been

because at least two of the couple's three children were living with the Bryans.

Apologizing for the "hard feelings between us," Burch wrote: "I buried all malice hoping I might be pardoned by those whom I offended. The mail has stopped and there is no telling when it will start again. You will please keep my little children at your house until I can get some place for them. Tell my sweet little daughter to be a good little girl and attend the baby."

(According to census records, Robert and

Elizabeth Burch's children were Barnett, born circa 1855; Ellen, born circa 1857; and Thomas A., born circa 1859.)<sup>23</sup>

It must have seemed an eternity, but the war did end.

Robert was working in a distillery in 1870 when the census was taken.<sup>24</sup> Daniel Bryan was living with Sarah Jane's parents, Henry and Sallie (Bingham) Kelly, his occupation listed as laborer.<sup>25</sup> Thomas L. Bryan married Martha Davis in Daviess County on 14 November 1864.<sup>26</sup>

### Family Tragedy

In 1882, Robert and Sarah Jane moved their family to a farm "just beyond Elmwood cemetery, on the Hartford road," four miles west of Owensboro.

By 1885, Sarah's brother Sam had joined the household.<sup>27</sup> Reportedly addicted to opium and often drunk and quarrelsome, Sam Kelly brought a negative presence to the household. Kelly claimed that his brother-in-law mistreated him and over the years had so often threatened the lives of Robert Bryan and his sons, Peter Cooper Bryan and John Barton Bryan II, that no one took him seriously.

But Kelly's grudge would lead to tragic consequences.

July 22, 1900, was a Sunday, and the Bryan family was eating lunch when Kelly started an argument with Robert, by this time, at 70, known as "Uncle Bob" in the neighborhood. Ignoring him at first, Bryan reportedly took Kelly by the shoulder and escorted him out of the house.

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"I can assure you that times are pretty hard in Dixie now. you must be sure to write to me if there any possible chance of sending a letter to this country. Give my love to all the Family. I hope I may yet live to see the war at an end and the time come when I can return to my native State again."

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Marching off, Kelly walked to the homes of several neighbors, whom he asked for guns. They declined, and he returned to the Bryan residence vowing to kill his brother-in-law "before sundown."

When Kelly started another argument with him, Robert Bryan took his 5-year-old grandson, Joseph Earl Nelson (b. 11 May 1896, d. 26 September 1966), with him to the family's barn.

Kelly went into the house and emerged soon after with Bryan's double-barrel shotgun. Sarah chased her brother, asking what he intended to do. Pushing his sister away, Kelly threatened to kill her if she got in his way.

Kelly then went to the barn and killed Bryan. He was arrested and charged with first-degree murder.

Convicted, Kelly was sentenced to life in prison. He was released, however, sometime before his death on 8 January 1911.

<sup>1</sup> Kentucky Land Records, Book 5, p. 56. See also *The Kentucky Land Grants*, by Willard Rouse Jillson (Louisville, Ky.: Filson Club, 1925, reprint. Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Co., 1971), 182.

<sup>2</sup> *The Centenary of Catholicity in Kentucky*, by Ben. J. Webb, 1884, Reprint. Evansville, Indiana, 1973, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Kentucky Place Names*, by Robert M. Rennick, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> *Collins Historical Sketches*, Volume 1, p. 486

<sup>5</sup> *Residents of Nelson County, Virginia (now Kentucky), Recorded in Tithable and Tax Lists (1785-1791)*, Volume 1, by Margaret Johnston Schroeder and Carl A. Schroeder, Bardstown, 1988, p. 131. See also pp. 59, 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Residents of Nelson County, Kentucky (formerly Virginia), Recorded in Tax Lists (1795)*, Volume 3, by Margaret Johnston Schroeder and Carl A. Schroeder, Bardstown, 1989, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *The Bryans and Bellamys of Kentucky*, by George B. Bryan (unpublished manuscript in author's possession), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. See also p. 37. Bryan, a resident of Owensboro, was a cooper who supplied barrels to the city's bourbon distilleries.

<sup>9</sup> A William H. Bryan, who may or may not be the William in question, was listed in the 1870 Daviess County census as living in the household of Charles R. Coffee. He was 27 years old and a drygoods clerk. Charles Coffee, 64, was listed as a "retail drygoods merchant." The William who was John and Catherine's son is not known to have ever married.

<sup>10</sup> Myrtie Orene Bryan, unpublished manuscript in the

author's possession. James Ignatius, who is not known to have ever married, is in the 1870 Daviess County census as 27 and a drygoods clerk living in the household of S. Dicen Kennedy, 47, retail drygoods merchant.

<sup>11</sup> *Bryans and Bellamys*, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>13</sup> *Marriage Records, Daviess County, Kentucky*, by Emma Dunn Mastin, Owensboro, 1935, p. 20 (Reprint, 1978, by West-Central Kentucky Family Research Association).

<sup>14</sup> *Bryans and Bellamys*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Myrtie Orene Bryan manuscript.

<sup>16</sup> Census of 1870 lists "Bettie" as 2 years old.

<sup>17</sup> Myrtie Orene Bryan. See also *Marriage Records, Daviess County, Kentucky, 1815-1865*. Compiled by Emma Dunn Mastin, Owensboro, 1935, p. 24. Reprint copyright 1978, West-Central Kentucky Family Research Association.

<sup>18</sup> Myrtie Orene Bryan also lists birthdate as 23 August 1879.

<sup>19</sup> George B. Bryan, research for *Bryans and Bellamys*.

<sup>20</sup> *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky, Volume 1 (Confederate)*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Bryan family collection, Owensboro, Ky. Photocopy of letter in author's possession.

<sup>22</sup> *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky, Volume 1 (Union)*, p. 334. The 12<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Calvary spent two years chasing Morgan's Raiders before being mustered out in Louisville on 23 August 1865.

<sup>23</sup> The 1870 census lists Burch, 37, as a carpenter, married to "Sisiley," 43 years old. Children listed are Barney, 14; Ellen, 12; Thomas, 10; Robert, 8; and John, 1. Elizabeth was 23 in 1860. Did Robert Burch marry "Sisiley" after her death? In the 1880 census he is listed as 44, with a wife, Margaret, 36, and children Ellen, 21; Thomas, 19; Robert, 18; John, 11; and Priscilla, 2. Listed out of order is Mary, daughter, 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Bryans and Bellamys*, p. 24. See also Daviess County census, 1870.

<sup>25</sup> Daviess County census, 1870.

<sup>26</sup> *Marriage Records, Daviess County, Kentucky, 1815-1865*, p. 20. (Owensboro, 1933. Reprint 1978.)

<sup>27</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, 25 July 1900.