A DNA Study of the Descendents of Alexander MackMillion

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Alexander MackMillion is first observed in the colonial records in 1728 when he has a 100 acre tract of land named "Blunder" surveyed in Baltimore County, Maryland. The birth dates of three of his children are recorded in the register of St. Paul's Parish Episcopal Church in Baltimore County, Maryland spanning the years 1728 to 1735. Alexander sells Blunder to Thomas Gibbons in December 1737, and is next observed in the 1744-45 Orange County, Virginia records witnessing a bond and serving as a road hand. Alexander and family finally settle in Granville County, North Carolina where they are granted land, purchase and sell land, and pay taxes over the period 1748 to 1772. Alexander dies prior to May 1761, and leaves a Will naming his wife Phoebe, his sons Matthew, James, Henry Butler, Alexander and Amon, and his daughters Susannah and Yourrath. He leaves a portion of his estate to "my younger children" which may include an additional daughter Margaret.

Alexander and Phoebe have hundreds, if not thousands, of descendents in the United States today. Their immediate descendents spread out of North Carolina to South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi and Texas, and undoubtedly their present day descendents are scattered about the whole country. Because they were spread through the southern states, many records of these descendents were lost as courthouses burned, particularly during the War of 1812 and The Civil War.

A very active group of genealogists have pursued the descendents of Alexander and Phoebe for a number of years through the documentary records, in many cases finding only circumstantial evidence of relationships between family members – living in the same vicinity, using "family" names, marrying into associated families, etc.

That is the situation with my ancestor James McMillian. James has a wife Winnie identified in his probate records and deed records in Edgefield District, South Carolina. Joseph Bishop, also of Edgefield District, South Carolina, names daughter Winnie McMillian in his Will and names Reverend James McMillian as an executor. This Bishop family lived in Granville County, North Carolina at the same time and in the same vicinity as Alexander and his family. With no marriage record or other clear evidence that "my James" is James the son of Alexander, I am left with only circumstantial evidence of a family connection.

Genetic genealogy provides additional evidence for consideration in proving a potential relationship, adding to circumstantial evidence and increasing the probability of identifying the correct ancestor. Genetic genealogy is very good at disproving a relationship. Descendents with very different Y-DNA markers can be assured that they do not share a common ancestor in a genealogical timeframe. Those with similar, even identical, markers are left to interpret and ponder the statistics associated with marker mutation rates as DNA is passed from father to son.

With that in mind, I set out to locate other direct male descendents of Alexander through his sons Matthew, Henry Butler, Alexander and Amon to see how their Y-DNA markers compared to mine. Amon is perhaps the best documented of the sons, having settled in Anson County, North Carolina for an extended period of time before moving to Tuscaloosa County, Alabama in the early 1800s. Thus, Amon's descendents became the "gold standard" of genetic markers. Ruben McMillian, a study participant, is the 3rd great grandson of Amon McMillian and lives on property patented by his family in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama.

Another study participant is Henry C. McMillan, a cousin of Sybile McMillan Pierce. Sybile did extensive genealogical research on her McMillan family of Barnwell County, South Carolina prior to her recent death. Henry C. is the 4th great grandson of Henry McMillan of Barnwell County, South Carolina.

The research group in pursuit of Alexander's descendents longed to claim Henry of Barnwell as Alexander's son Henry Butler. Henry Butler went missing from the North Carolina records a few years before Henry of Barnwell first appeared in the Barnwell County records. Although Alexander's descendants were found in nearby Edgefield District, South Carolina about the same time, there was no clear documentary evidence that Henry of Barnwell was Henry Butler, the son of Alexander MackMillion.

Another study participant is Denny McMillan. Denny is the 2nd great grandson of William McMillan, who was born in South Carolina in 1788 and moved to Panola County, Texas in the early 1800s. William named one of his sons Bennett, a name that appears unique to Matthew's line. It is very likely that Denny is a descendent of Alexander's son Matthew and Matthew's son James.

Finally, my uncle Thomas McMillian and my first cousin Jerry McMillian have participated in the Y-DNA study. It is interesting that some of the greatest variation in Y-DNA markers in the study occurs among my immediate family.

The Y-DNA study results to date are summarized in the attached figure. Alexander's immediate family is shown along the top of the chart. His direct male descendents are shown down to each of the study participants. Thus far, no direct male descendent of Alexander's son Alexander has been identified or come forward.

The number of markers that match between descendents are shown at the bottom of the chart, along with the percentage probability that the two descendents share a common ancestor within the last seven generations. For example, Denny and Ruben match 37 out of 37 markers and there is a 95.73% chance that they share a common ancestor within the last seven generations. Denny and Henry C. match 36 out of 37 markers and there is an 84.48% chance that they share a common ancestor within the last seven generations.

Since Denny and Henry C. have at least a one marker difference, FDTNA can also calculate the percentage probability that they share a common ancestor within some number of generations while taking into account knowledge that they do not share a common ancestor within the last few generations. This reduces the statistical probability since five or six generations of possible common ancestors are excluded from the population, but it takes advantage of *a priori* knowledge gleaned from documentary evidence. Using this knowledge, the probability that Denny and Henry C. share a common ancestor *exactly* seven generations ago is reduced to 27.74%. Stated another way, there is a 72.26% chance that their common ancestor occurs some time prior to Alexander MackMillion. The probability that two participants share Alexander MackMillion as the common ancestor, when excluding recent generations from the calculation, is shown in parenthesis on the figure.

The descendents of Alexander's son James (this includes myself) differ from the other participants by three or four markers. At a three-marker distance, the probability that Thomas and Denny or Thomas and Ruben share a common ancestor within the last seven generations is only

33.74%. If the last five generations are excluded from the population then the probability is reduced to 16.62% that the common ancestor is Alexander MackMillion.

While this may seem like a low probability of a recent common ancestor, in particular Alexander MackMillion, the DNA evidence augments the meager documentary evidence. A broader DNA study has shown that there is a wide variation in DNA markers in the MacMillan clan. Thus, it is likely that two or more early American McMillan families that live in the same state or region by happenstance would have a substantially different set of markers, and DNA testing would be able to easily sort out descendents of the two families. Of course if the families are relatively close cousins from the old country, then it might be difficult or impossible to distinguish the families and associate descendents with a particular American immigrant.

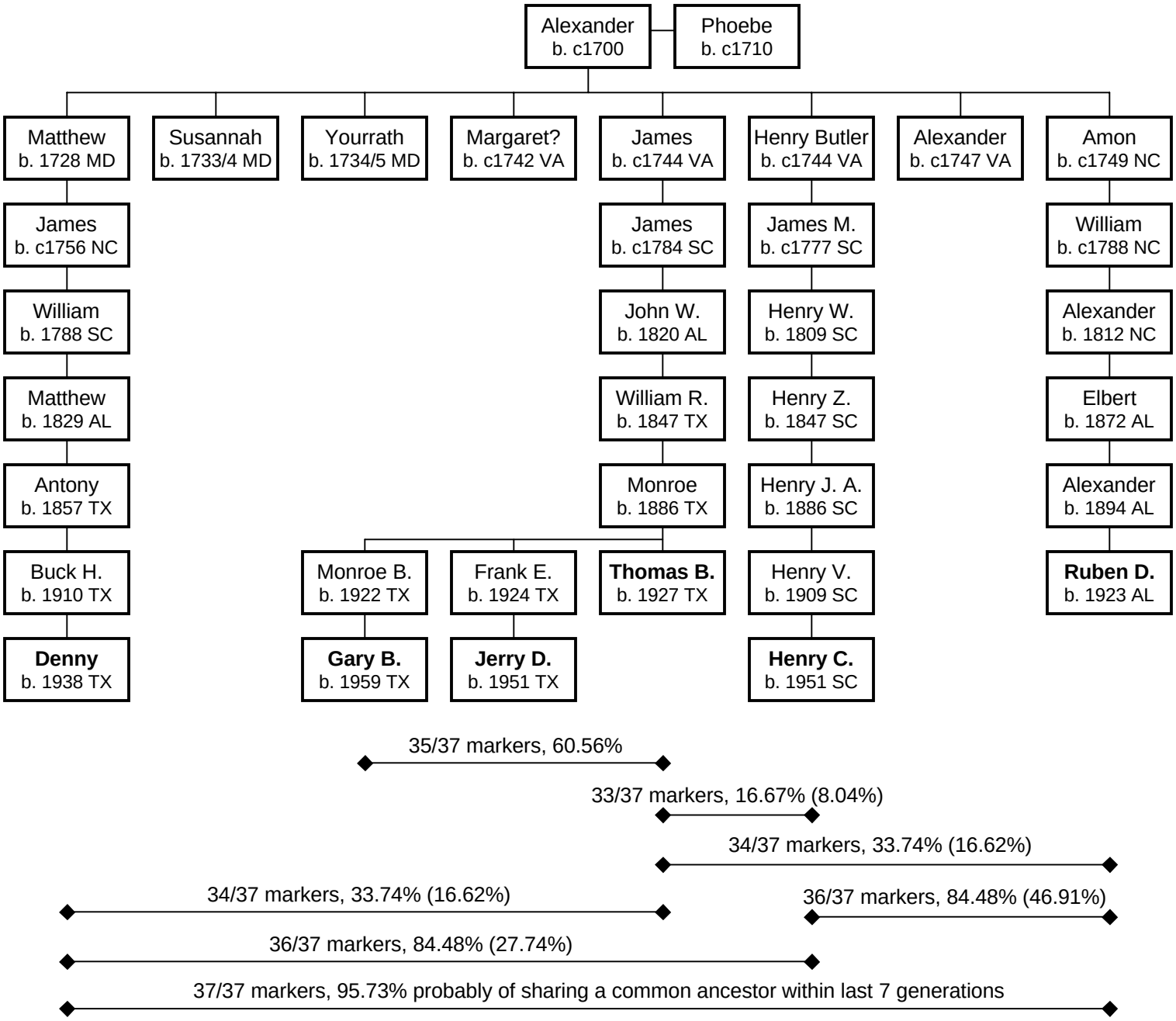
Within this study, almost all of the marker differences are observed in the polymorphic markers, which are known to exhibit higher mutation rates. It may be that the descendents of Alexander's son James have particularly high mutation rates for a physiological reason or the differences may be a result of pure chance. According to the FTDNA calculation, the probability that my uncle and I share a common ancestor within the last seven generations is just over 60%, which seems rather low given that we are known to share a very recent common ancestor. I hope to attract additional participants from this line to develop a better understanding of this phenomenon.

The DNA study has yet to yield a clue as to whether Alexander MackMillion immigrated from Scotland or Northern Ireland. The 37 markers associated with Alexander MackMillion are similar to those of descendents of colonial era McMillans that immigrated from Scotland or Northern Ireland to Pennsylvania. These descendents have a Time to Most Recent Common Ancestor (TMRCA) indicative of a common ancestor 10-18 generations ago (assuming a 50% probability of certainty). At this time there is insufficient data to localize this common ancestor to a particular area in Scotland or to determine if he lived on a Northern Ireland plantation in the 1600s.

The most statistically likely scenario is that Alexander MackMillion was part of the mass migration from Northern Ireland to the American colonies that started around 1717 and went in several waves ending in the late 1700s. But there were a number of Scots that immigrated directly from Scotland to America during this period, too. And it is possible that Alexander was a second or third generation American. Genetics may eventually help tell this chapter of Alexander's story.

On one last note, the Y-chromosome DNA study provides insight into the lineal male descendents of Alexander MackMillion. A Mitochondrial DNA study of the lineal female descendents of Phoebe and her daughters Susannah and Yourrath is possible, and might provide insight into Phoebe's lineage. The research group believes that Phoebe may be the daughter of Henry Butler of Baltimore County, Maryland since she appears to name several of her children after members of the Butler family.

Descendents of Alexander MackMillion are invited to join the study by visiting the following website: http://www.ftdna.com/public/mcmillian. Other MacMillan cousins are invited to join, too. Results from the McMillian Surname Project are combined with other MacMillan projects at the following website: http://home.comcast.net/~mcmillanmail/DNA/MacMillan.html.


Alexander b. c1700
Phoebe b. c1710
Matthew b. 1728 MD
Susannah b. 1733/4 MD
Yourrath b. 1734/5 MD
Margaret? b. c1742 VA
James b. c1744 VA
Henry Butler b. c1744 VA
Alexander b. c1747 VA
Amon b. c1749 NC
James b. c1756 NC
James b. c1784 SC
James M. b. c1777 SC
William b. c1788 NC
William b. 1788 SC
John W. b. 1820 AL
Henry W. b. 1809 SC
Alexander b. 1812 NC
Matthew b. 1829 AL
William R. b. 1847 TX
Henry Z. b. 1847 SC
Elbert b. 1872 AL
Antony b. 1857 TX
Monroe b. 1886 TX
Henry J. A. b. 1886 SC
Alexander b. 1894 AL
Buck H. b. 1910 TX
Monroe B. b. 1922 TX
Frank E. b. 1924 TX
Thomas B. b. 1927 TX
Henry V. b. 1909 SC
Ruben D. b. 1923 AL
Denny b. 1938 TX
Gary B. b. 1959 TX
Jerry D. b. 1951 TX
Henry C. b. 1951 SC
35/37 markers, 60.56%
33/37 markers, 16.67% (8.04%)
34/37 markers, 33.74% (16.62%)
34/37 markers, 33.74% (16.62%)
36/37 markers, 84.48% (46.91%)
36/37 markers, 84.48% (27.74%)
37/37 markers, 95.73% probably of sharing a common ancestor within last 7 generations