

*My Name  
Is Stiff*

By

Judd Golladay Stiff

(From Benton Genealogical Museum)

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Judd Golladay Stiff

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A Bicentennial Tribute to My Ancestor

JAMES STIFF

Revolutionary War soldier, 1776-1780, who fought at the Battle of Germantown, wintered at Valley Forge, and who lived a long and prosperous life in Bedford County, Virginia.

Dedicated to my grandchildren

David Machon Stiff

Sterling Scott Stiff

Erica Susan Stiff

Grant Benjamin Stiff

## Preface

Research of the family of **Stiff** has been meager. Previous known efforts have been primarily directed to a particular line and upon that accomplishment, the effort concluded. Actually, that is all I have attempted, for the paternal direct line has been given particular attention. However, collateral lines which have been explored or which have been submitted by friends and relatives have been included for they make the story of this family clearer and more complete. To say the least, with this information, segments of **Stiff** genealogy will have been made available in printed form. There are other family members just as worthy as those mentioned. But with hundreds of Stiffs presently existing, only a few could be included.

Never is one's history complete, either past or present. Certainly, these references are not infallible. This story represents one person's interpretation of the information resulting from the review of grants, deeds, wills, marriage and death records, many in early handwritten form, difficult to read or understand, and from which another's opinions could easily differ. Nevertheless, the ever-present thought during the hours spent assembling, compiling, and writing the data of this little publicized pioneer family has been that valuable information would be at hand for future family generations, and too, this might prove of assistance to others wishing to continue research of a most interesting family.

Why was this started in the first place? Perhaps it was a desire to meet a challenge. Perhaps it was an inspiration resulting from correspondence and discussions about the family with sundry members. Principally, however, it was an attempt to answer satisfactorily the question frequently asked by my three sons, "Who are the Stiffs?"

It was thought in the beginning that the very unusual nature of the name **Stiff** would make it easy to research. It is

not as frequently mentioned in print as Smith and Brown. The spelling is simple. After twenty years of intermittent research, including the opportunities of exploring the southwestern section of England, the Diocesan Registry of Gloucester, the Society of Genealogists of London, and personal visits to the Library of Congress and the National Archives, Washington, D.C., genealogical societies, court houses and libraries in Virginia, Kentucky, and Texas, I discovered this to be no small task. The Stiffs were a prolific group and long-lived. Although the spelling of the surname differed in some cases, the principal difficulty arose in the area of given names. There were many Jameses, Jacobs, and Johns (the original of the latter so very elusive) that made generation separation difficult. If record corrections are discovered, I would welcome your advices. All will be properly noted and filed for future chroniclers.

The format selected for the following pages is somewhat that of a story, in hopes the factual information so necessary in genealogy recording will appear more interesting. Conditions existing at various times have been introduced permitting the transition of each migration to be better visualized. A special chapter has been devoted to anecdotes, newspaper clippings, letters, and the like, as it is felt that from such the family assumes a warmth and humaness not possible from statistics alone. These are the stories found in withering memories, much like the faded bloom of a flower awaiting the next gust of wind to scatter it in many directions to enrich the soil and entice another generation.

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\* Photographs by the author

## CHAPTER I

### The Surname Stiff

Have you ever wondered about your name, what it means, where it might have come from? Family names, or surnames, were not in general use in England until after the time of the Norman invasion in 1066. With the “population explosion” there were so many Johns and Williams and Samuels with nothing to distinguish between them that it became necessary for convenience to designate them in some manner, perhaps according to occupations, as John Farmer or John Cook, or simply as John's son (Johnson). Some names were derived from the place where a man lived, as Hill or Dale, and others were descriptive of his appearance or character. Sources were many, but there was once a reason for every name. In modern English the word “stiff” has become very narrow in meaning, but in Anglo-Saxon or middle English it connoted not only the idea of rigidity but of valor and strength as well. Thus as a name it probably referred to the qualities of its bearer, and to our early English ancestors a man called **Stiff** was doubtless one who was valiant or brave, or exhibited firmness of character.

Researching the origin of surnames involves several problems: finding the origin of the personal name upon which it is based; locating areas and recorded examples in which it appears; and perhaps most important of all, recognizing the variations in the spelling of the name.

The Stiff family is indeed fortunate to have had one of its members spend years of research posing all of the questions inherent in these problems and presenting some most interesting answers. W.P.W. Phillimore of England, although he changed his name from **Stiff** to that of his great grandmother, was so interested in his true name that he undoubtedly spent a great amount of time as well as money trying to find out as

much as he could about the name of **Stiff**, He has left to all Stiffs true legacy in his book, "**Collections Relating to the Family of Stiff**" printed for private circulation in Stroud, Gloucestershire, England, in 1892.

The first evidence of any name approximating the form of Stiff that he finds is that of a Jutish chieftan called Stuf, and in a most interesting, scholarly, and logical manner he develops a possible connection between Stuf and Stiff. Stuf landed on the Isle of Wight in 514 and was the founder of a family which several centuries later occupied a very prominent position. A descendant was Queen Osburg, the mother of Alfred the Great, King of England about 850. It was said that she was noble, not only by disposition, but also by descent from the Goths and Jutes, being "of the race of Stuf and Wightgar." King Alfred was born at Wantage, in Berkshire, and place names in that area support the suggestion that a clan of Stifingas, descendants of Stuf, migrated northwards and lived thereabouts.

What a remarkable coincidence to find the name **Stiff** existing in this part of the country for centuries. Using the assumption that many modern Englishmen derive their surnames from the ancient names in use before the Norman invasion, Phillimore makes it seem quite possible that the modern Stiffs may be directly descended from the Jutish chieftan Stuf.

It would seem a name consisting of only one syllable, like Stiff, would not permit much variation in form, and from the point of view of the genealogist that would be advantageous. Such an advantage, however, is evident only in current research, for from its early origin numerous variants have occurred. To attempt to trace the medieval history of a family such as the **Stiffs** (always few in number, leading uneventful lives, and rarely rising above the yeoman class) it is necessary to rely almost wholly upon early wills, deeds, and charters, assize rolls and subsidy rolls, and above all, manor rolls, which contain records of small landowners. Many of these records are sealed books, but from time to time some have become

available, and it is from these, through his painstaking research, that Phillimore has developed the following information.

The surname **Stiff** is one of a group of three names which are probably identical in their origin: **Stiff**, Steff, and Staff. The first is the form most in use in the west of England, and the other two in eastern England. Steff is very rare and is apparently becoming extinct through absorption in the ranks of either the Stiffs or Staffs. There are other forms, no longer extant, depending upon the alteration in the vowel, the change of the "f" to "v" and the addition of the letter "t". That these variants are interchangeable forms, there is in most cases ample documentary evidence. They may be arranged in the following table —

Stuf and Stuph, Stefe, Stiff, Styffe, Steff, Staff  
Stive, Steefe and Stiffe Steffe

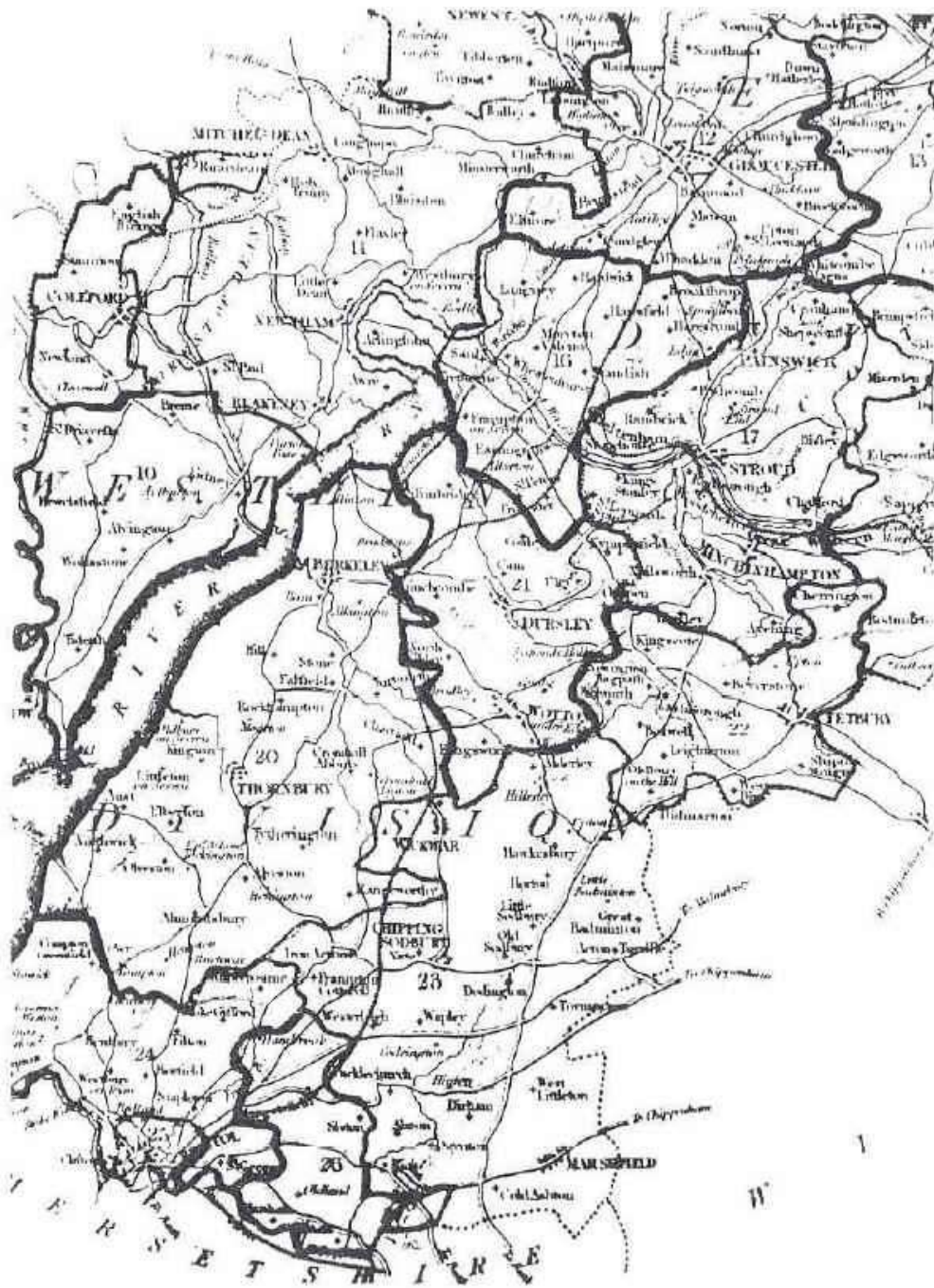
Stife, Stift, Stifft

Stief, Stytite and

Styfe, Steyfte

Most of these variants have been found in early wills and other records of **Stiffs in Gloucestershire** in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, and are interchangeable. That Stiff and Steff are identical is shown by the registers of St. Magnus, London Bridge, and the wills of Northamptonshire **Stiffs** and Steffs, and records relating to the Steffs and Stiffs of Drinkstone in Suffolk.

The two million population of England shown in 1086 in the Domesday Book of English lands was approximately one-thirteenth of a later 1881 census. If the various families of Staffs, Steffs, and **Stiffs** have increased at the normal ratio during that eight hundred years, their number in 1086 would have been about 150 persons, 10 Steffs, 60 Staffs, and about **80 Stiffs**. This represents about ten original families bearing these names who could all well be descended from a single common ancestor living four or five hundred years earlier.



*Early Map of Gloucestershire*

## CHAPTER II

### England

There can be little doubt that the family of **Stiff** is indigenous to England for early records found and researched indicate that families of this name (or its variations) have been located and confined to an area about fifty miles wide, twenty-five on either side of a line drawn from Bristol on the west to Lowestoft on the east. Counties in which distinct and very localized settlements have existed from early times are Wiltshire, **Gloucestershire**, Berkshire, Hampshire, Northampton, and Suffolk.

One of the earliest records of the surname **Stiff** is found in Wiltshire in the twelfth century. Humfrey Stive possessed a considerable holding of land in Swindon which his father had held before him in the days of King Henry (1100-1185), and there is a reference to the fee of Richard Stive in Swindon around 1220. In the following century among jurors summoned the names of **Robert Stife** and **John Stife** and **Roger Stive** appear. The **Gloucestershire Stiffs appear at Hawkesbury as early as 1419**, where they are frequently found in the register of that parish, and branches of this family have been located subsequently in numerous small villages close by. In Berkshire the name appears as early as 1584 and is associated with districts in mid-Berkshire around Lambourne, and on the southern edge of the county adjoining Hampshire, in the northern part of which county they appear as early as 1509. The subsidy rolls in Northamptonshire show a Robert Steffe at Norton in 1524. The will of Robert Styffe of Norton was proved 1548, and that of Richard Steife of Norton in 1556. Suffolk has been the home of numerous Stiffs, whose early spelling of Steff has been almost wholly superseded by **Stiff**.

An overall picture of the localities of **Stiffs** in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is given by the following chart:

Wiltshire	Stive	Swindon	1135
	Stife		1174
<b>Gloucestershire</b>	<b>Stiff</b> , Stefe	<b>Hawkesbury</b> , from	
	and Stift	Cam, <b>Dursley</b>	<b>1419</b>
		Iron Acton	
Hampshire and South Berks	Stiff	Silchester	1509
Mid-Berkshire	Steff or Stiff	Lambourne	1584
Northampton	Steff or Stiff	Woolpit	1529
	Staff	Drinkston Tuddenham	1598

Of course, with the mobility of modern times, descendants of these early Stiffs are now scattered throughout England — and the world.

When I retired in 1973 we decided to take a European tour that would include a visit to England. How interesting, we thought, to take some extra time and see some of the localities in which these early ancestors had lived. Since **Gloucestershire** records seemed more complete and the old families of **Stiffs** more numerous than any of the other places, we allowed ourselves five days in which to visit and research this area. Five times five would have been too few! With a car and two young girls, one to drive and one to be our guide, we started out on a bright September morning to cover much of this beautiful countryside that had once been home to **Stiff** ancestry. Armed with map and research notes, we showed our guide where we would like to go, particularly to **Hawkesbury Upton** and the old church there, as well as **Dursley** and **St. James Church**. We were seldom on a main highway, but wound back and forth on country lanes through tiny villages, many with names included in our notes, and all representing a reminder of early Stiff settlements, situated in rural areas where the lives of the people were centered around their humble homes and churches.

The principal occupation had been farming and sheep raising, and these rolling meadows, fallen stone fences, small farmhouses and cottages with thatched roofs that dotted this **Cotswold** area, were certainly indicative of how things must have been in an earlier time. We looked for a spot still known in the area as "**Stiff's Close**", but were unable to find it.

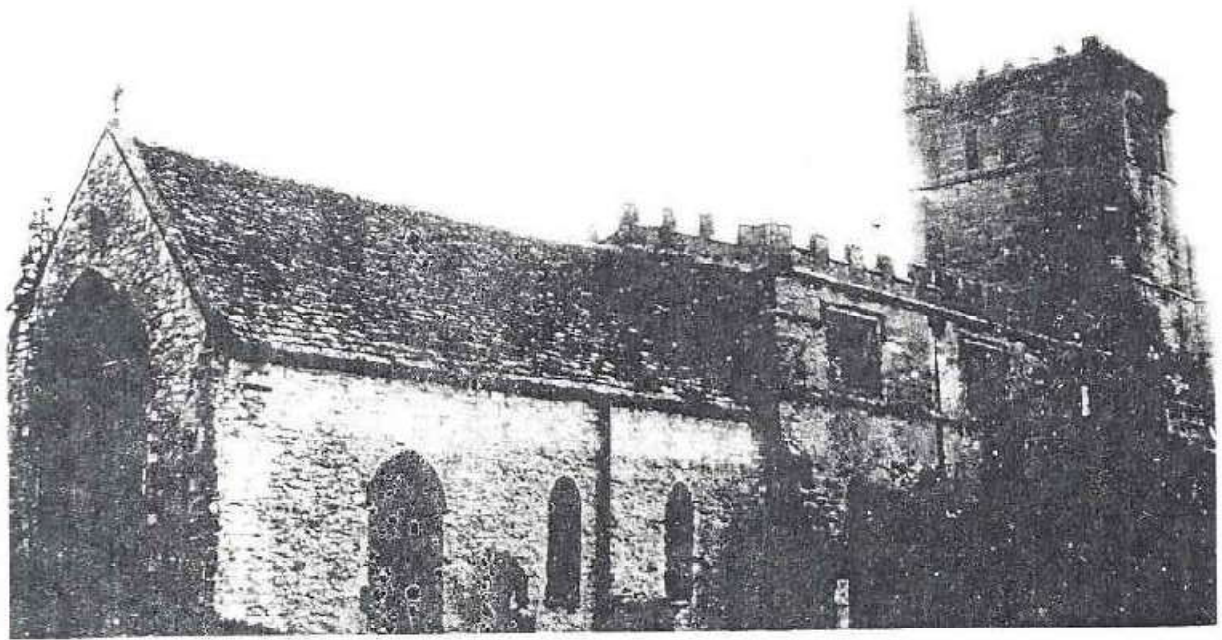
**Hawkesbury Upton**, however, was not difficult to find, It is today a small English village atop a hill from which can be seen in the meadow below the beautiful little church of **Hawkesbury**.

Perhaps no village church in England is of greater genealogical significance than this one, for it is certain that one existed here before the close of the seventh century. It is thought that the foundation of a wall discovered in a late restoration may well have been a part of the original church. Dedicated to the blessed Virgin, it was the mother church of an extensive parish about thirty-five miles in circumference, and was originally known as the mother of seven daughters, for that many district hamlets lay within its boundary: Hillesley, Tresham, **Kilcot**, Saddlewood, **Hawkesbury Upton**, Ingleston, and Little Badminton. (We were in or quite close to most of these during our drive.)

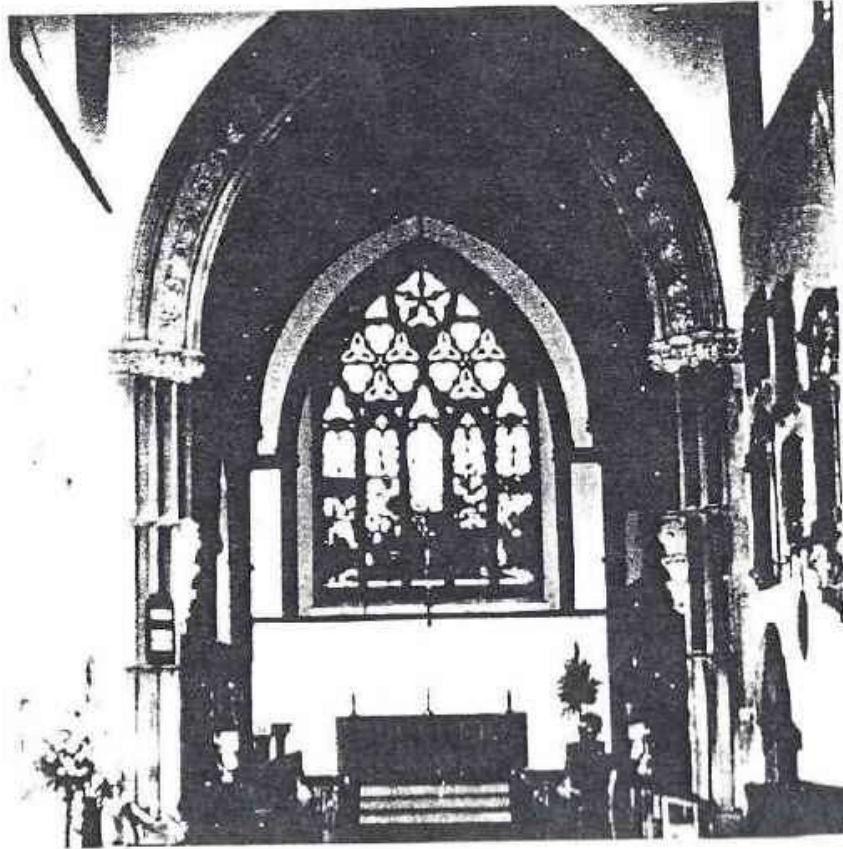
The church is small, only about 130 feet long and 70 feet wide, including two porches. It is said that almost every style of building is exhibited, fragments of pre-Norman work with a Norman doorway, portions of the tower are Early English, and another part of the tower is of the Decorated Style. Some felt that the last restoration efforts in 1883 did little to enhance its appearance or value, but to us it was beautiful, and it was quite awe-inspiring to stand in the doorway and know that other **Stiffs** in generations past had entered here to worship. The enclosed graveyard that surrounds the church is the resting place of many **Stiffs**, but the inscriptions were worn and the day waning so we were unable to verify this. However, the Rev. J.W. Marchant, **Vicar of Hawkesbury**, arrived for evening services, and upon learning of our interest promised to go through some of the old church registers and see what information he could find.

**Dursley**, a much larger town than **Hawkesbury Upton**, is today a small industrial center. In earlier times it was a leading wool producing area of Western England. St. James' Church in the Market Square and the Georgian town house just opposite the Church's gate were of particular interest for we had been told that the building now occupied by Lloyd's Bank of London was formerly Eagle House, home of a **Jacob Stiff** in 1751, and that in the church was a coat-of-arms. A memorial plaque to Jacob's wife, Elizabeth, and himself. These we saw and here again felt a link with the past.

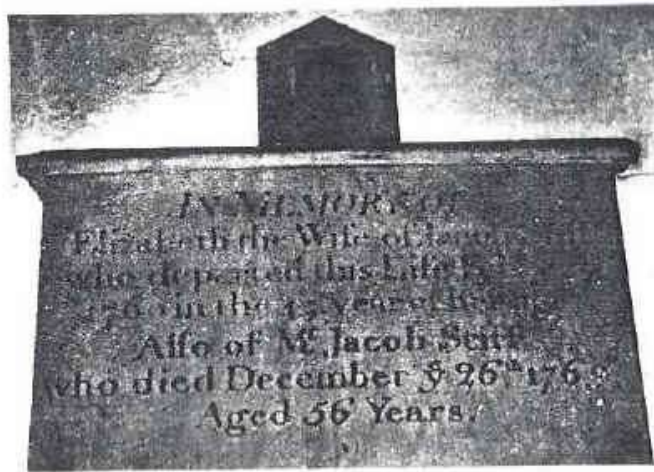
The remainder of our sojourn in **Gloucestershire** was spent doing research in the marvelous Library in the city of **Gloucester**, talking with people about the past, calling those with the name of **Stiff** still in the locality, and enjoying being a part once where there is an excellent chance our forefathers once lived.



*Hinkesbury Church, Gloucestershire*



*Chancel, St. James Church, Dursley, England*



*Jacob Stiff Memorial Plaque, St. James Church*

True, any definite link with the past remained elusive but there was always the feeling that on the next page, or that with the next person we talked, a door would open and we would have our connection. To show how very tantalizing this research can be, follow a very complete pedigree for a **family of Stiffs in Gloucestershire from before 1600**. Since I am interested in the **Stiff name**, I will give male descendants only.) These names and dates present the possibility that some member or members migrated to the New World in the 1600's. Also it gives a picture of one of the more prosperous **Stiff** families of this early time.

From the will of a **Richard Stiff**, proved in the Court of Canterbury in 1614, comes a great deal of information about this particular family. He was evidently a bachelor and the numerous bequests to his kinfolk indicate that he was well-to-do. **His brother, Edmond Stiffe, is the ancestor of several distinct lines of the name**. This chart follows one line, which might be called the **Dursley** branch where several lived during their most prosperous days and shows how closely the names resemble those to be found during the early settlement, of Virginia, where a **John** and **Thomas Stiff** are known to be in the year 1684.

I. **Edmonde Stiffe, of Kilcot, Parish of Hawkesbury**

Will proved 1593; wife Margery

1. Richard — d. Hawkesbury 1620; wife Catherine
2. **John** — of whom below (IT)
3. Anthony — of Kilcot, d. 1607
4. Robert — of Oldbury, d. 1598; wife Margaret  
Edmonde — Son

II. **John Stiffe (Styff) — Wotton-under-Edge, m. 1579**

Eizabeth Seburne — d. 1605

1. Edward — b. 1583 d. 1614
2. Edmond
3. **Thomas** — of whom below (III)

III. **Thomas Styffe** — **Wotton-under-Edge** b 1599

m. 1618 — Mary Parsons

1. Daniel — b. 1627 — wife, Mary  
(Son Thomas b. 1653)
2. Jonathon — b. 1628
1. Thomas — b. 1630 — wife, Mary  
{Son Thomas — b. 1661)
- John — b. 1632
5. **Abraham** — of whom below (IV)

IV. **Abraham Stiffe** — b. 1638; became a cardmaker in **Dursley**

Married three times: Anne Saunders, Edith Smith, Mary ?

with Anne:

1. John — b. 1663
2. **Thomas** — b. 1664
3. Samuel - b. 1670
4. Abraham — b. 1672
5. Isaac — b. 1674
6. Jacob — of whom below (V)

V. Jacob Stiff — of Dursley, cardmaker, b. 1679 — d. 1735 —

m. Elizabeth Webb. His tomb in Dursley churchyard  
known to have existed, now destroyed.

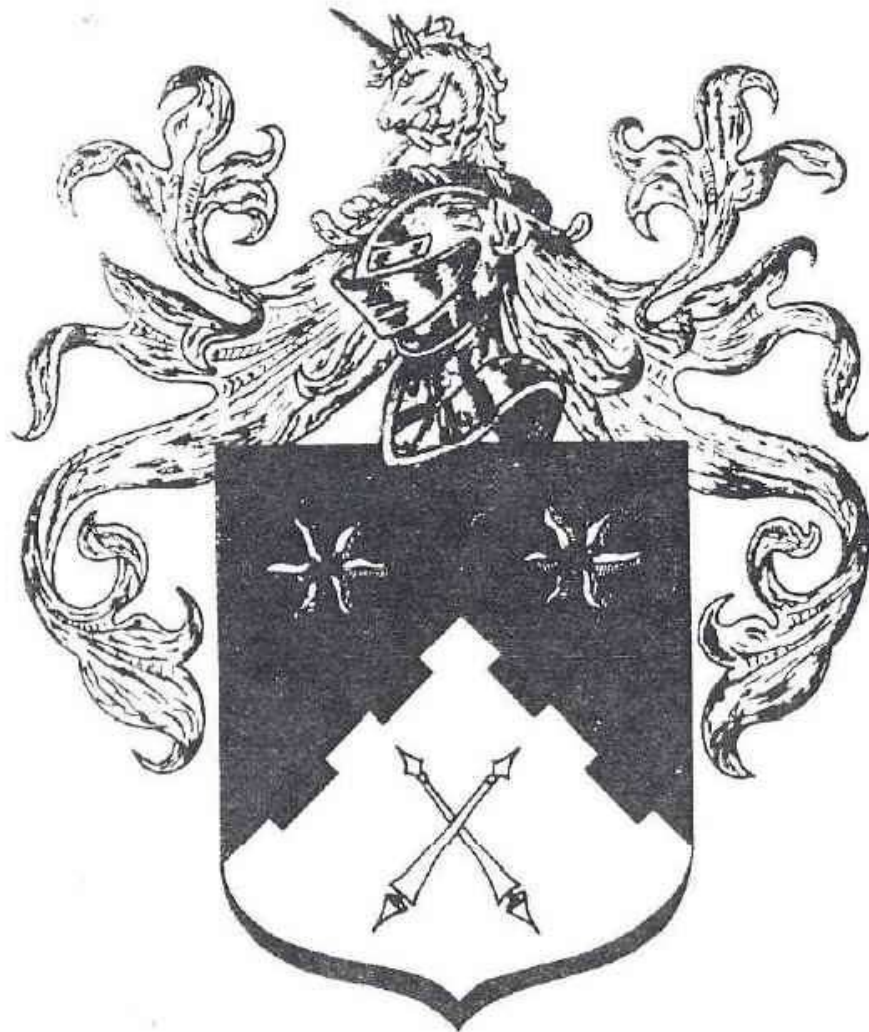
1. Jacob — of whom below (VI)
2. Richard
3. Edward
4. William
5. Thomas

VI. Jacob Stiff — of Dursley, cardmaker, b. 1713\*

"This is the Jacob Stiff who is said to have built and resided at  
Eagle House in the marketplace of Dursley. The initials of himself and  
wife, with date of 1751, were at one time Visible there and on the

adjoining house. He was the bailiff of Dursley in 1740. In his will dated Nov. 21, 1759, he gave thirty pounds for the benefit of Dursley, the interest of which was to be distributed in the form of a dole of bread. He died in 1769 and was buried in **St. James Church**.

How similar the above names are to those of the **Stiff** lineage in **Middlesex, Virginia** which was largely populated with emigrants from the west of England. The name Jacob, distinctive enough to attract immediate attention, appears in both families at one and the same time. Coincidence? Perhaps, but the fact remains that family members did depart from this area and arrived on America's shores with the same given and surnames, with the same spelling, or its equivalent, and at a time corresponding to the generation involved.



**Stiff**

**Stiff Coat of Arms**

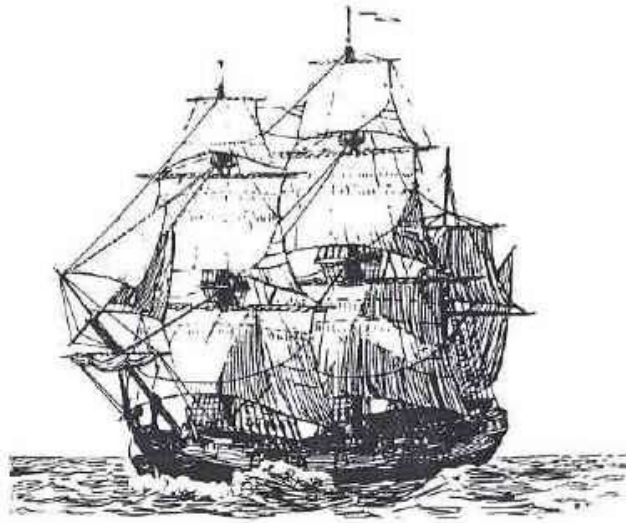
In "The General Armory of England, Scotland and Wales," by Sir Bernard Burk, dated 1884, under the heading "**STIFF (Dursley. Co. Gloucester)**" the following description is given: "Per chev. embattled sa. and ar. in chief two estoiles of the last. and in base as many tilting spears in saltire gu." It further states that these arms, described in Bigland's \* "**Gloucestershire**" appear on the mural monument A.D. 1760, of Jacob Stiff, Esq., of Eagle House, Dursley, a benefactor to the parish.

St. James Church in Dursley was visited in 1973, and the above described Coat-of-Arms was located on the right wall of the sanctuary with the following inscription:

"In memory of Elizabeth the wife of Jacob Stiff who departed this life February 25th '76 in the 45th year of her age. Also, of Mr. Jacob Stiff who died December 26th 1769 age 56 years."

Photographs of this crest and the interior of the church were taken. The present existence in its almost original state, the benevolent nature of its donation, and the first known existence of a crest bearing the present spelling of the name **STIFF** justifies its credibility for the writer's adoption for that of his family. The basic design for the crest as furnished by the Heraldic House of Thomas Mullins, Dublin, Ireland, was designed from the Bigland description.

## Chapter III



### The Westward Migration

To better understand and appreciate the motivation behind certain members of the **Stiff** clan leaving their homes and families for a new and unknown life, one must raise history's curtain and review conditions existing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, not only of England, but of the European continent as well. Up to this time the ruling monarchs of England, Spain, Portugal and France, the countries possessing the great armadas, had participated in an era of discovery, and each had taken an active part in exploring the distant lands that lay beyond the Atlantic. The search was for a trade route to Asia, gold and other treasures, and each vied with the other in claiming territory in the new world. Little had been done toward settlement, for there was still meager knowledge of navigation and explorers experienced difficulty in securing grants from skeptical parliaments. Inducements had not become great enough for people to leave the known for the unknown on any permanent basis.

England's early claim to the new world territory rested on John Cabot's success in reaching the American mainland in 1497, but Spain practically held a monopoly in the Americas in the sixteenth century.

This all changed, however, in 1588 when England defeated the great Spanish Armada and became the mistress of the seas. In 1583 Sir Humphry Gilbert, who held a proprietary patent from Queen Elizabeth, had tried to establish a colony, but his efforts ended in failure and his death. His patent passed to Sir Walter Raleigh whose futile efforts from 1585 to 1591 bankrupted him. However, the region of his "Lost Colony" was claimed for England and named Virginia after Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. This territory was a vast land extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific, its southern limit where Charleston, S.C., is today, and the northern line through what is now Pennsylvania.

When King James ascended the throne in 1603, he approved a new attempt at settlement and granted a charter in 1606 that incorporated the London and Plymouth Companies and gave them the right to settle that part of the American coast known as Virginia. Before the signing of the charter the London Company offered to make each subscriber to its stock who paid 12 pounds and 10 shillings the "lord of 200 acres of land" which would be given "to him and his heirs forever." This alluring inducement enabled the company to finance a colonizing expedition, and it dispatched its first emigrants as soon as the charter received the royal signature. About 140 colonists set sail late in 1606 in three small ships, the Sarah Constant, the Goodspeed, and the Discovery, commanded by Captain Christopher Newport, and they disembarked May 13, 1607, on the Jamestown peninsula. This group was made largely of "gentlemen" unused to work, anxious to attain quick fortunes. They preferred hunting gold to planting corn, and had not Captain John Smith been successful in securing food from the Indians during their first winter, they might all have starved. Although ships bringing new immigrants and supplies arrived from time to time in the next few years, the struggle against disease, starvation and Indians was never-ending. But as history accounts, they did survive, and perhaps their success was in a sense the result of failure. If these earliest colonists had discovered extremely profitable resources, the country might have been exploited and then forsaken. During the next several decades colonies sprang up all along the eastern seaboard as well as in the West Indies.

From 1600 to 1700 England, safe from conquest because of her naval supremacy, became a haven of refuge for those fleeing from the European continent's wars and political and religious strife. Centers of population became overcrowded, and England began to feel she had more people than she could feed. Farmers were finding it more profitable to raise sheep than to farm. They enclosed their lands and drove many laborers to the cities, for a few sheep tenders did the work of many farm hands. Wars on the continent prevented customers from buying English cloth and other goods. With farm laborers and weavers out of work, artisans suffered, too, for fewer persons could buy their wares. England was full of discontent, hunger, poverty, and religious repression. And there was America — where fruits, vegetables, and tobacco grew abundantly, where streams were filled with fish and wild game was free, and where there was freedom to worship as one pleased. Here, at last, were the inducements necessary for colonization.

Desire to come to this new country was not enough, however. It took money to pay for passage and the poor and discontented could not afford it. Thus, it was that a system of “indentured servitude” was developed. In some instances, wealthy Englishmen would take and pay passage for their personal servants, but in most cases servants were shipped out by sea captains or agents who collected their fee from an employer in the colonies. The master would supply board, lodging, and clothes, teach the servant a trade, and give him land at the end of his term of service, which was usually from four to seven years. Many thousands of men and women, not all destitute, took advantage of this custom to transport themselves to a new way of life. Many suffered great hardships, but most endured their servitude to reap the rewards of land, seed, and tools with which to become landowners themselves. Later many bought servants of their own and became prosperous, and many became heads of families that now populate all parts of our land. Some rose to eminence and took part in government. Seven burgesses of an early Virginia assembly had been indentured servants, as had the maternal grandmother of Benjamin Franklin.

Since, as the research in England has shown, some of the **Stiff** families had by this time become prosperous merchants, it is possible that they could have arranged for their own passage, but it would be more logical to assume that they took advantage of this system of indentured servitude. In fact, in searching for names on shipping lists and making inquiries, it was learned from Noel Currer-Briggs, M.A., an historical research consultant of London, that he had two names of early immigrants named **Stiff**, and the following information was given:

From Port of Bristol to America:

(1) March 7th, 1654/5, Henry Stiff of Fisherton, Wiltshire, labourer, a servant of William Cole of Bristol, merchant, for 5 years in Barbados

(2) December 16, 1666, Sarah Buff, servant of John Richardson of Bristol, tailor, for 4 years In Barbados

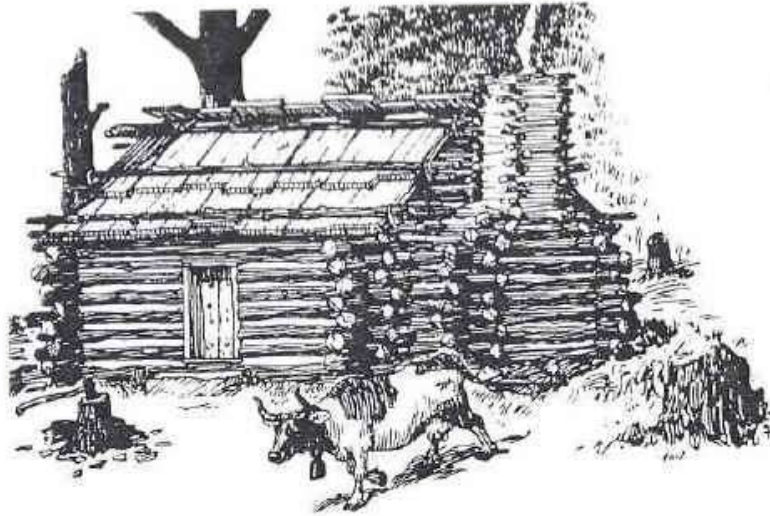
Further research revealed only one other of this name: November 10, 1690, Jonathon Stiffe, brother-in-law to John Godfrey (q.v.) to Jamaica 15/19.

Thus, from the three names found, two came as indentured servants, and they sailed from the port of Bristol, the debarkation point closest to their homes in southwest England.

It has been estimated that in an early 25 year period 10,000 English people sailed from the port of Bristol to take their part in colonizing Virginia, Maryland, and the New England States. Some went to the West Indies but the majority went to Virginia. Extensive research has been undertaken to locate additional Stiff names on shipping lists on either side of the Atlantic during these early years of colonization. Researchers continue to explore this phase of our country's history, and although documentary evidence is occasionally uncovered, there still remain many missing records and voids in both countries. Incomplete records result from a number of causes: loss of records at the source or destruction at sea due to shipwreck, willful omission on the part of a ship's captain for personal gain, failure to make proper entry from "waiting lists" when fulfillment unexpectedly

occurred, or when death occurred during the hazardous journey. Lack of identification also becomes a factor as many shipping lists contain only the given names of an indentured servant with no clue to a surname. This information, of course, can never be recovered, but it is hoped that additional records which do exist may eventually come to light.

## CHAPTER IV



### Virginia — Middlesex County

After a very dreary beginning at Jamestown in 1607, the Colony of Virginia grew quite steadily. From a population of 210 in 1610, it rapidly increased to about 70,000 in 1700. At what point in time the first **Stiffs** arrived must be conjecture. As shown in the previous chapter, there was the indentured servant, **Henry Stiff**, in Barbados in 1654, but the first mention of the name **Stiff** in Virginia that has been found at this time is in the description of a land patent granted to William Hunt, March 21, 1665, in which his land is described as “adjoining to **John Stiff's** patent previously granted.”

It would be appropriate to digress here and consider again the variations in the spelling of the name Stiff. It appears in early Virginia records as **Stiffe**, **Stiff**, and **Stith**, seemingly dependent upon the recorder’s interpretation. It seems safe to assume that **Stiffe** and **Stiff** are one and the same, but that **Stiff** and **Stith** are interchangeable cannot be assumed so readily, as will be seen when the aforementioned land patent to **John Stiff** is studied.

**The land patent granted July 29, 1664, for 550 acres on the north side of the James River in Charles City County is to John Stith**, and it is possible to trace his descendants for several generations. His grandson was Rev, William Stith, born 1689, who wrote the celebrated

“History of Virginia” and was President of William and Mary College. There is no doubt that this was a very prominent family, and how easy it would be for a county clerk to record Stiff as Stith, or, if he did not know the name, Stith could certainly sound to him like **Stiff!**

Handed down in our own family is the following story, very interesting, but one which research has not verified. During the early days in Virginia a Stith was expecting a consignment of negro slaves and had given a considerable deposit as “earnest money”. When the slaves arrived it was discovered that the invoice was made out in the name of Stiff in lieu of Stith. In order not to complicated matters, the receipt was signed ‘**Stiff**’, and the story says the Stiff name was used from then on.

It is not necessary, however, to rely upon the Stiths for the appearance of the family **STIFF** in early Virginia history, for in the **Parish Register, 1653-1812, of Christ Church, Middlesex County, there is recorded under the date Feb. 4, 1684, the marriage of Thomas Stiff to Sarah Salter, and there appears thereafter numerous entries from which it is possible to trace this family for well over a hundred years. The Middlesex County Court House also has well preserved records from which to add to and embellish the meager story of births, deaths, and marriages as revealed by the parish register.**

In 1694 there was entered for probate a will which stated “**John Stiff** late of this county saith that Mrs. Vallott should have all the estate he had, for the good of her and her children,” and signed by Ann Vallott. Was this the same John Stith-Stiff in Charles City County in 1665? Perhaps not. Was he Thomas Stiff’s father or, perhaps, brother? That question so far has not been answered.

**Christ Church Register records the birth of Jacob Stiff, son of Thomas and Sarah Stiff, as being January 11, 1685. A later record is of Nicholas Stiff, born to Thomas and Elizabeth Stiff, baptized June 17, 1694, with another entry showing his death in 1698. The baptism of James Stiff, Thomas and Elizabeth's son, is recorded as January 13, 1702. These entries indicate that Sarah, Thomas’ first wife, died and that he married a second time.**

The nuncupative will of **Thomas Stiff**, recorded on April 3, 1710, is quite interesting, and adds additional information about him and his family. It reads:

“Jacob Stiffe, Your most humble petitioner, most humbly she with that for as much as he is constituted and appointed sole total executor for the estate of **Thomas Stiffe**, his father ‘lately deceased. This therefore most humbly to implore your worship to grant that an inventory be taken of. the above said estate and brought to an appraisement forthwith according to law and humbly prayeth. Thomas Stiffe did say first that he gave to Thomas Walker five head of cattle cows and heifers and his riding horse he also gave to his daughter Elizabeth a mare with fold the above said fold to his son **James** and all thereof of his estate to be equally divided amongst his four children namely —

Jacob Stiffe, Constant Olphin, **James Stiffe**, and Elizabeth Stiffe, his son Jacob he made Executor and required him to take care of his two young children: Testis

Thomas Machen  
John Anderson.

The Thomas Walker referred to in the above will was undoubtedly Thomas’ step-son, son of his second wife, who must have been a widow, Mrs. Elizabeth Walker. **This was deduced from the act that in a will probated in 1721, Thomas Walker bequeathed all he had in the world to his brother, **James Stiff**.**

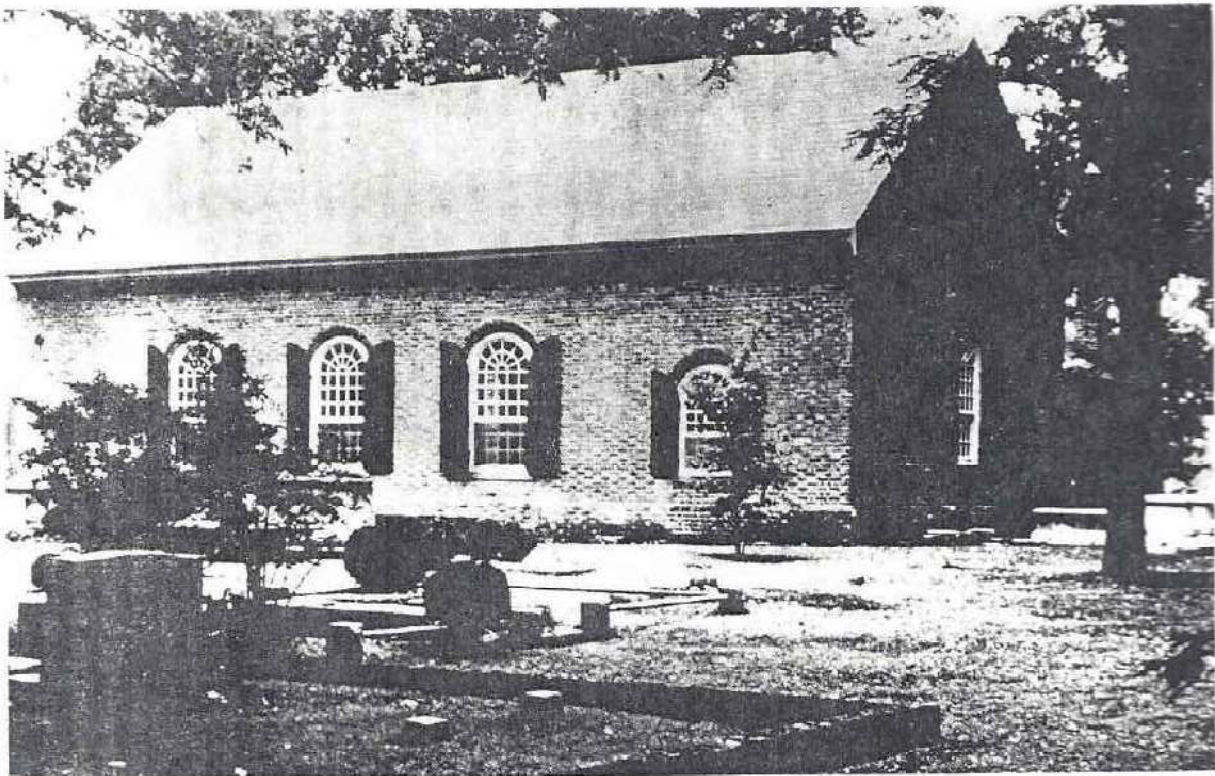
From this above information it is possible to make the following chart to show the beginning of the Stiff lineage in America:

**Thomas Stiff** m. Sarah Salter  
Issue  
Jacob Stiff  
Constantine Stiff (Olphin)  
Thomas Stiff m. Elizabeth Walker  
Issue

Nicholas  
Elizabeth Stiff  
**James Stiff**

Another interesting reference to **Thomas Stiff** is to be found in a listing of Middlesex County Militia for the year 1687. His name was on a list, stating "the Court judges a number of persons capable to serve and finde themselves with armes."

"When this colonial family arrived in Virginia or under what conditions can probably not be ascertained. However, during the middle years of 1600 small farms were profitable, wages for labor were four and five times those paid in England, and the colony was a veritable land of



*Christ Church, Saluda, Virginia*

opportunity for the poor and middleclass. The system assured each settler land, and this also applied to indentured servants and apprentices upon completion of their period of service. So, no matter what the beginning, by the late 1600's **Thomas Stiff** had made a place in the New World and was well on the way to becoming a prosperous land owner in the County of Middlesex, Virginia.

Middlesex County for many miles forms the western boundary or the Rappahannock River that flows into Chesapeake Bay and then to the Atlantic. Its fertile soil and gently rolling terrain offered excellent farming opportunities and no doubt reminded these settlers somewhat of their homes in England. Not far from the river is Christ Church, whose Registry and Vestry Book are the source of much of this early research. This church was established in 1666 and the building finished within six months. This building was used until 1712, when a new church was ordered built of brick. The present building occupies the identical ground of the original 1666 church, for when the new church was ordered built, directions were given also for an "arbor" in which services might be held during construction. During the Revolutionary period the Church went into a state of disrepair. By 1840 the roof had fallen in, the woodwork had rotted and a large tree had grown in the center aisle. In that year the building was restored and has continued in use until the present time, with further renovation being undertaken in 1920. There are seven graves under the floor of the church, with aisle flagstones now commemorating those early colonists. The parish is most fortunate to have historic records in the form of two printed volumes, "The Vestry Book of Christ Church, 1663-1767", and the "Parish Register 1653-1812", from which much of this information has been obtained. The graveyard surrounding the church contains many table tombs of historic interest. In early days, notices of Royal Proclamations and new laws were posted on the doors of the church and read from the pulpit and were the subject of much discussion in the church yard. It has been said that during the years just before the Revolution, resistance to England was begun in the vestries and spread to the churchyard, and it is easy to imagine these **Stiff** ancestors joining with their neighbors to decide upon what measures were to be taken.

From **Thomas Stiff's** first marriage. and that of his first son, Jacob, to Elizabeth Clarke, it is possible to trace without interruption ten generations bearing the Stiff name. For many years most of these remained in the Middlesex area and became prominent landowners and members of the community. This line has been separately traced and charted and is referred to as the **Middlesex Stiffs**.

While there is no record of the **marriage of James Stiff, (the son of Thomas Stiff and his second wife, Elizabeth Walker), the birth of a daughter to James and Edy Stiff is recorded in 1728, and elsewhere in Virginia Marriage lists was found a record of the marriage of James Stiff to Edith Dudley in 1724.** Presumably these are the same Stiffs. There are no further records of this family to be found in Middlesex, and as this was a country “on the move”, it can be assumed that he and his family moved westward. It is unfortunate that records from the counties where some trace of him might be found have been lost or destroyed, but when records from Revolutionary War files, pinpoint a **John Stiff** in Cumberland County, Virginia, around 1758, and further research reveals that he had sons named **James**, John and that ‘distinctive’ Jacob, the feeling that this connection is legitimate becomes very strong.

## CHAPTER V



Virginia — Bedford County

**In the twenty-five year period from 1725 to 1750 the most important development in Virginia was the westward migration into the Piedmont, across the Blue Ridge and into the Shenandoah Valley. Here the farms were smaller and the slaves fewer, but the newly cleared acres provided bountiful crops. Settlers were attracted from many places; they were land-hungry pioneers who worked their own farms, and their very nature introduced a new, aggressive, and democratic element. Their sons made some of the finest soldiers of the Revolution.**

**It would not be difficult to imagine that James Stiff and his wife joined in this westward movement, had more children, perhaps one named **John** during the 1730's who would have been the right age to have had a son in Cumberland County in the late 50's. Until additional information is uncovered, however, this has to remain speculation.**

There are other possibilities as to the beginning of this Bedford line of Stiffs. They could be descendants of the John Stith of Charles City County, giving credence to the aforementioned story of the change in spelling of the name. Another possibility is that they might have been related to a family living in New Jersey who had sons during the

Revolutionary War period, Since there no evidence to bear out either of these assumptions, It is most logical to connect the Bedford Stiffs with those in Middlesex, particularly in view of the fact the name Jacob appears in both.

**Irrespective of any prior relationship, it is possible to start with John Stiff Sr. of Cumberland County, Virginia, about 1758, follow him to Bedford County, and chart his lineage without interruption through eight generations.**

**Bedford County was formed from Lunenburg and Albemarle counties in 1753, and records from its earliest days still exist.** Sometimes these records raise almost as many questions as they answer, but that is what makes research so challenging. **In this Bedford family of Stiffs there are too many Johns that have not yet been completely identified, but from county records on James, together with his Revolutionary War files, it is possible to piece together a complete life from birth to death.**

**To begin this Bedford story, numerous family accounts indicate that John Stiff Sr. was the father of two sons, James B. Stiff and John, and that shortly after James' birth about 1758, the family moved to Bedford County.** As young men of 17 or 18, both James and John enlisted in the army in 1776. John was taken prisoner in 1777 and placed on board a prison ship where he died. Whether he was married is doubtful, however, there is an entry that shows he was on leave for a short time due to a sick child. If there was a wife or child they must have died, for in later years the court finds that "John Stiff is a nephew and one of the heirs at law of John Stiff, Sr., decd., late a soldier in Lee's Legion of the Virginia Line in the Continental Establishment."

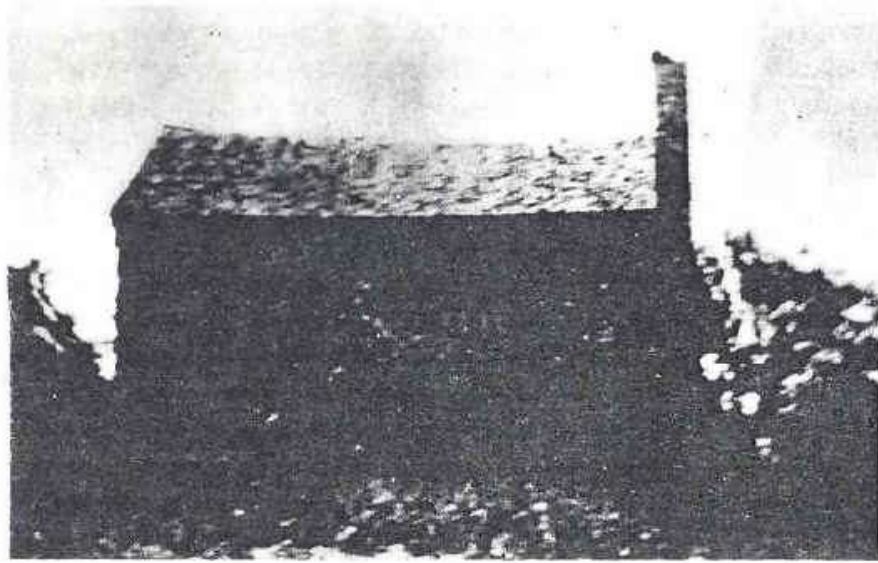
Early marriage records in this county indicate that the father John Stiff had at least three other children, Sarah, who married Samuel Warner in 1778, Jacob, who married Rhoda Scott in 1787, and Jesse, who married Amey Williams in 1786.

**There is no record of James Stiff's marriage to Molly Lewis, but throughout his long life, her name as Mary appears with his on many deeds for land transactions.** It is from his pension application made in 1833, that much is learned of his life during his service in the Revolutionary War. In the application he states that he 'thinks' he is about 76 years old, but has no record of his birth date. **He does state with certainty, however, that he was born in the County of Cumberland and moved to Bedford at an early age and lived there ever since. He enlisted for a period of two years in February 1776, served in Capt. Harry Terrell's Company in the 5th Virginia Regiment, (also designated as Capt. Wm. Fowler's Co.), took part in the battle of Germantown in Colonel Josiah Parker's Regiment, wintered at Valley Forge and was discharged in February of 1778. He was drafted in 1780 and served three months in Capt. Thomas Leftwich's Company. His pension was allowed February 21, 1833. Between his military enlistments, he married Mary (Molly) Lewis in Bedford in 1778 or 1779.**

After James' death in 1837, Molly applied for a widow's pension in 1839. To prove her legal marriage a number of affidavits were necessary as there was no record of the marriage in existence. She was at this time about 79, "old and infirm, and her memory not retentive of facts which transpired so long ago." There were additional affidavits signed by her son John, a brother-in-law, Thomas Brown, and his daughter, Martha B. Bowyer. From these statements comes much of the information concerning their early issue. Additional information has been added from the court records of the county, cemetery markers, and family information from continuing lines.

The children of James and Molly Stiff who lived to attain maturity as ascertained from the above numerous sources are as follows:

1. Sally — may have died in infancy or may have been the sister referred to by John in 1839 affidavit as having taken the family Bible when she moved to Kentucky many years ago.
2. William Burrell married Sarah Wray in 1801, went to Kentucky about 1812.
3. **John Adam Stiff** — married Bathsheba Stone in 1309, Filed for a bounty warrant in 1828 as an heir of John Stiff. Court finds him a nephew of John Stiff Sr., Rev. War Soldier, in 1829. He was still in Bedford at the time his mother applied for her pension in 1839 May have gone to Kentucky after that time.
4. Richard — married Katy Adkerson. Probably went to Kentucky about 1812 with his brother William Burrell. They are both located in Breckenridge County in 1814.
5. Henry — married Eney C. Huddleston and remained in Bedford
6. Nancy — married J.W.S. Bondurant and was mentioned in her mother's will.
7. Lewis — married Polly Miller. Came to Texas to join brother Jesse about 1848 after his mother's death.
8. Jesse - married Polly Feazle — was in Texas in 1835
9. James no information
10. Polly married Vinson Nelson in 1818



*James Stiff's Early Home, Thaxton, Virginia*



*James Stiff's Revolutionary War Marker*



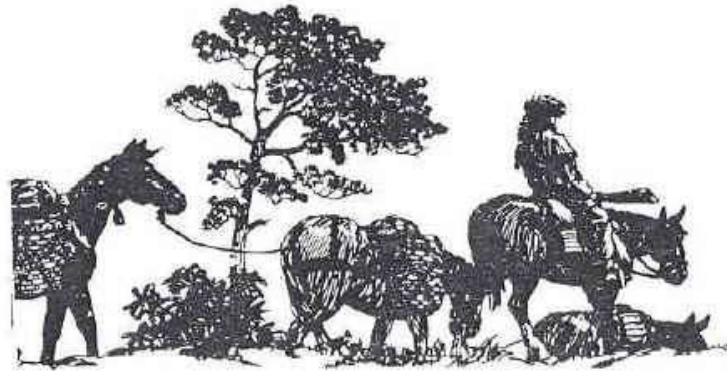
After serving his country in the Revolutionary War, **James Stiff** acquired land near Thaxton Switch and settled into the life of a frontier farmer. Thaxton is in the northwest part of the county where the country is mountainous. Taylors Mountain and Cobbs Mountain are a short distance to the north, in the same direction about ten miles away, the Blue Ridge begins with the Peaks of Otter. Part of the old house built by James Stiff in 1780 was still standing in 1932. After a long life together, they were both buried near this old homestead.

Although many of these **Bedford Stiff families moved on to other areas**, several of them remained thereabouts, and in 1924 the descendants of John Wesley Stiff, a grandson of Henry and great grandson of James, started the tradition of holding a family picnic each year on the fourth Sunday in July. In 1964 I was privileged to attend the 41st gathering. They had never missed a year and fortunately it had never rained. There were about a hundred and fifty members of this Stiff family present, with an additional fifty guests. A wonderful feeling of family loyalties was evident as well as gracious hospitality and a joyful approach to living in this beautiful countryside which had been home to Stiffs for so many years.

Concerning the descendants of James' brothers, Jesse and Jacob, there is practically no information on Jesse (not to be confused with James' son Jesse.) His name is on the tax rolls for a couple of years, 1788 and 1789, and nothing further appears about him in Bedford County. Jacob's name is listed on the tax rolls in 1787 and continues until 1821. A second Jacob appears in 1807, presumably a son, and continues for the same period of time. Court House records of marriages list marriages for four daughters of Jacob: Betsy to Corbin Chick in 1803; Polly to Rueben Parker, 1807; Lucinda to John S. Burnett, 1815; and Sally Stiff to Luceon Goodwin in 1820. On the 1830 Tennessee Census Jacob, his wife and a son are listed as living in McMinn County, as are the Goodwins. Research about families of Stiffs in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia shows them to be descendants of this Jacob and Rhoda Stiff. Edward Stiff who wrote "The Texan Emigrant" is one of their sons.

**From the early 1800's until 1850 descendants of the Bedford Stiffs continued a westward migration. By 1850 these families were well established in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia and Texas.**

## CHAPTER VI



### Kentucky

Kentucky was originally part of Virginia with the Allegheny Mountains presenting a formidable barrier to this vast region bounded on the west by the great Mississippi River and on the north by the Ohio. It was a dense wilderness, difficult to penetrate, that went unsettled until after the American War of Independence. The fine grazing blue grass and numerous salt licks made it a refuge for the buffalo, deer, bear, and wild game of all kinds. It was inhabited only by these animals, for the Indians, who had first claim on the area, as a rule did not live there but set aside this 'paradise' as their "happy hunting grounds". They called this land KAN-TEN-TAH-TEH, an Indian name meaning "**land of tomorrow**".

Eastern land companies sent Thomas Walker in 1750 to explore the Cumberland Gap region and the following year Christopher Gist went up the Ohio River as far as Louisville. The Indians certainly did not want anyone to encroach upon their territory, and the threat of the coming of the white man was strong enough to unite the various tribes, usually at war with one another, into a 'Confederation of the Six Nations', to do battle with the white man's hunting and war parties which were intent upon the slaughter of both animal and foe. The land became for the Indian, the "dark and bloody ground."

In 1769 woodsmen from North Carolina led by Daniel Boone came looking for land, and several settlements were made with much sacrifice of lives. In 1775 Boone brought his family and blazed the famous Wilderness Trail through Cumberland Gap to Boonesboro. In 1792 Kentucky became the 15th state admitted to the Union. The fertile soil and deep shade of this region produced a luxuriant growth of grass so dark in color that it reflected a distinct bluish tinge, from which the State received its nickname, "**Blue Grass State.**" Its mild winters, splendid pasturage, and abundant water made it particularly attractive to pioneers seeking a new home.

**That it attracted some of the Bedford Stiffs is evident from a review of the personal tax rolls.** William Stiff's name disappears from the Bedford County tax list in 1812 and appears on that of **Breckenridge County, Kentucky, in 1814.** Richard and James Stiff's names appear a year later, and a sister moved to Kentucky about this time, although her name has not been ascertained. Of course, by this time the State was no longer a wilderness. Numerous routes had been opened, but it was still a strenuous journey. Perhaps these families traveled through the Cumberland Gap and overland, but more than likely they made the journey part way by the Ohio River, as it and its tributaries were navigable all the way to their headrights. **Breckenridge County borders the Ohio, and Stiff land was situated only a few miles from its banks.** Although not in the heart of the Blue Grass region, this was still excellent country not only for farming but raising of cattle and fine horses. A later chapter tells of one of the early great horse races in Texas between Monmouth, a Kentucky bred horse brought to Texas by Harrison Stiff, and Steel Dust, another Kentucky bred horse.

Here in **Breckenridge County** William Burrell Stiff and his wife, Sarah, raised their large family. Except for a few dates and marriages found in other sources, the following information came from an old family bible in the possession of Pauline Stiff Sewell, a descendant of James Burrell Stiff, son of William B. and Sarah. Here is a list of their children:

Catherine 05-12-1804  
John 10-09-1806  
Matilda 01-30-1809  
Belinda 04-09-1811  
Wm. H. 01-19-1814  
Mary Jane 05-18-1816  
**Harrison 06-12-1818 - (Henry Harrison Stiff)**  
Sarah 08-14-1820  
Harriett 09-19-1823  
David Sterling 12-03-1825  
James Burrell 10-20-1827

As the years passed most of the children of William Burrell Stiff grew to maturity and began to acquire land and establish their own homesteads. **The move to Kentucky had proven successful as deed books indicate they owned considerable acreage on the headwaters of Sugar Tree Run and Spring Creek in Breckenridge County. Other property belonging to his children was not far distant in Meade and Hardin Counties.**

Knowing William Burrell Stiff's children's names has made tracing his family a much easier task, especially since a number of his children migrated to Texas and it has been possible to work backward as well as forward. William B. Stiff died March 9, 1840, and provided a will dated Nov. 9, 1837, bequeathing everything to his wife, Sarah, to be divided later among their children. A series of most interesting transactions took place, as deduced from courthouse records, during the period from 1852 until 1854. John Stiff and Ann, William Chappell and Catherine (Stiff), George II. Simmons and Belinda (Stiff), all in Meade County, sell their interest in their father's estate to **James B. Stiff** and

David Stiff (whose residence was given as Collin County, Texas). Then they and the remainder of the family, Sarah, the mother, William H and Margaret, his wife, Sarah S. Stiff, a sister, and Harrison sell 110 acres of land. David was attorney-in-fact for Harrison and signed for him. The conclusion to be drawn is that Harrison and David had been to Texas (David was listed on the 1850 Collin County Census) and decided they would make the move permanent and were getting their affairs in order. This conclusion is borne out by the fact that by 1854 the three brothers, sister Sarah, another sister, Harriett Stiff Shane, and a nephew, Edward Rollin Stiff, son of their brother William H., were all residing in Collin County.

Information obtained from several different sources, particularly from one extensive list of names furnished by Mr. & Mrs. J.E. Stiff of **Union Star, Kentucky, shows that between the years 1815 and 1850 there were in the Breckenridge and Meade County area at least four or five separate families of Stiffs.** One was, of course, William Burrell Suit, with several children migrating to Texas. A second William, of Meade County, married Rachel A. Webb. They were the parents of two known sons, William Webb and J.C. Stiff, who moved to Iowa. William Webb Stiff later settled in Collin County, Texas in 1883.

Another was James Stiff, father of one son, Nathaniel, whose descendants are later found in Missouri and Montana. **Yet another was Henry Harrison Stiff who married Mary E. Parker in Bedford and whose son John Parker Stiff was born there.** They were the parents of four other sons, Thomas, Dick, Henry and Pete, who died young. Henry died in the army unmarried. Thomas married Ellen Bandy and of their six children, three were boys, Joe, Roy, Odie and three were girls, Maggie, Alma, and Iown. **John Parker Stiff married Sallie A. Brown** and their children were **Paul Lambert**, Gene, Preston, Phillip, **John Edward**, Myrtle, Madie, Belle, and three others.

A family sketch of Phillip Henry Stiff is found in "Kentucky — A History of the State" by W. H. Perrin and published in 1886. **This family is said to have moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky.**

A fourth family was that of **John Adam “Addie” Stiff** who married Mary A. Claycomb. Whether he was born in Bedford is not known. He was married about 1850 and his children were John Dave, James Madison, Henry Louis, Mary Alice, Millisia Jane, Wendeline B. and Lydia A. Quite a large family was born to John Dave Stiff and Mallissia Bellow, the names of some are Carlton, Millard, Johnny, Ida, Josephine, Annie, Mattie, and Stella. James Madison Stiff and Charlotte Noble were the parents of four sons, Don Hugh, William Hobert, Walter Owen, James Estle (the J.E. Stiff who sent the above listings) and one daughter, Jannie, who married Crease Knott. J.E. Stiff married Englebert Hardesty and they have two children, Estella, who married Robert L. Mattingly, and James Francis Stiff, who married Rebecca Ray. The Mattinglys have six sons and their home is in Rhodelia, Kentucky. James Francis and his wife have five children and live in Irvington, Kentucky.

**Kentucky remains an important research area for many Stiff families, as it afforded a permanent home for some and a migration center for others.**

#### **Epilogue (Written by **David Earl Stiff**)**

This file reflects an excerpt from the book **My Name Is Stiff** by **Judd G. Stiff**. It contains information from Chapters I-VI (1-6). My purpose was to highlight the path of my ancestors from **Gloucester, England**, to **Virginia** to **Kentucky** and display in a font that is large enough for me to read more easily. The remainder of the book (Chapters VII-XIV (7-14)) can be found in the original copy that I had made at the Bedford Genealogical Museum in Bedford, Virginia in 2019.

<https://mbstiff.com/pdfs/MyNameIsStiff.pdf>