

When the Simons and the Martins met

Most Dreisbachs and Dresbachs living in the United States are descended from Simon Dreisbach Sr or Martin Dreisbach Sr. and share a common ancestor who lived in the late 1500s. Descendants are referred to as being from the “Simon line” or from the “Martin line”. These two families have kept in periodic contact, strengthened by the Dreisbach-Dresbach Family Association, regular reunions, a newsletter and a website (dreisbach-dresbach.org). This newsletter is an attempt to address an often-asked question – Did Simon and Martin ever meet? Spoiler alert, the answer is ‘probably no’, but read on to find out about Simons and Martins who did meet.

Dreisbach and Dresbach are two of the many variations of our surname whose spelling varied with pronunciation, place of residence and time. The original spelling found in documents from Wittgenstein, Germany was “Dreisbach”, however already in the 1700’s Martin used both Dresbach and Dreisbach. His descendants living in Ohio generally use the Dresbach or Dresback while Simon line descendants retain the Dreisbach spelling. In this newsletter, we use “Dreisbach” because it was the predominant spelling at the time these events occurred.

AN OFTEN-ASKED QUESTION: Did third cousins Simon and Martin Dreisbach ever meet in Pennsylvania? There is no evidence they did, though while he was still in Wittgenstein Martin must have heard about Simon going to America in 1743, and it can be assumed Martin knew Simon and his family had settled in what was then the northern part of Bucks County (now Northampton County). However, there is good evidence that their grandsons met.

Martin, as far as we know, did not stay in Philadelphia after he and his family arrived in October 1751. He wasted no time in getting to Cocalico Township in north-eastern Lancaster County where his wife gave birth to a daughter before the year was out.¹ A pregnant wife and getting his family settled were Martin's priorities. The distant relatives up in Northampton County could wait.

Fortunately for us, Martin's grandson, Rev. John Dreisbach, wrote "A Short Family History and Genealogical Statement of Martin Dreisbach, Senior, and His Descendants, written by his grandson, John Dreisbach, Preacher". This little booklet is now in the holdings of the Pickaway County Historical & Genealogical Library. After giving information on his own forebears, Rev. John adds a brief section titled, "A Short History of Another Branch of Dreisbachs", which follows (copied from a transcription made by Rachel Meyer in 1999).

"My grandfather, Martin Dreisbach, had a first cousin by name, Simon Dreisbach, who came to America 10 years before my grandparents came over, who settled in Northampton County, Pa. This Simon Dreisbach was a tanner by trade, and had seven sons, of whom I saw and got acquainted with two, John and George, the other five I did not get to see. Simon Jr. was also a tanner by trade and was a member of the Pennsylvania legislature four or five sessions. George, his brother, had among other sons, Abraham, Yost and John, the last two mentioned resided on the north branch of the Susquehannah, above Berwick. Abraham settled in Ohio and had Joseph and his brethren and sisters. Thus, George was second cousin to my father, and Abraham his son, is a third cousin to me, and Joseph, son of Abraham, is fourth cousin to my children."

¹ See *The Life and Times of Martin Dreisbach (1717-1799)*, available at: <https://www.lulu.com/en/us/shop/marcia-dreisbach-falconer/the-life-and-times-of-martin-dreisbach-1717-1799/paperback/product-1rzmn9n6.html?page=1&pageSize=4>

Rev. John was born in Buffalo Valley, in what is now Union County, PA., in 1789 to Martin's youngest son, Martin, Jr. There is no date for Rev. John's family history booklet, but it was written after 1849, the date of his mother's death, which appears in the text. Rev. John can't have gathered much information from his immigrant grandparents because his grandmother died before he was born, and his grandfather died before Rev. John turned ten. There were many aunts and uncles though, who probably were the source of his information. Rev. John was a kind of circulating link between that part of his family which stayed in central PA and those who moved to Ohio in the early 1800's, with access to the family traditions preserved in both places. Rev. John died in Circleville, Ohio in 1871 so his family history booklet seems to have been written between 1850 and 1870.

Communication between the Simon and Martin branches of the Dreisbach family will have been governed by distance. Three geographical regions involved: the Simon line settlement in Northampton County, PA., Martin's original settlement in Union County, PA., and Pickaway County in Ohio, where Martin's descendants settled in the early 1800's.



Ohio – Pennsylvania map. Green circle in Ohio is the region where Martin's children settled in Pickaway County. Small green circle in Pennsylvania is where Martin had his land in Buffalo Valley, Union County. Red circle is the area in Pennsylvania settled by Simon Dreisbach and his children. Modern day distance between this points is shown in miles but will have been longer in the 1800's. Small rectangle in Pennsylvania is the area near the town of Berwick where Rev. John and the descendants of Simon Sr. would have met.

Knowledge acquired in the past few years has shown there are parts of Rev. John's text which require correction, including the year of Martin's immigration and the section having to do with Rev. John's acquaintance with his Northampton Co. cousins. We will compare what Rev. John wrote about meeting his Simon line cousins with the documented genealogy data we possess.

1. FIRST COUSINS? Were Martin and Simon first cousins? This has been disproved by Wittgenstein researcher Gustav Schneider and by church records in Wittgenstein. They were third cousins, sharing a great, great, grandfather, Georg, born about 1560.

2. ARRIVAL DATE: Did Simon arrive ten years before Martin? Close enough. Simon arrived in September 1743 and Martin arrived in October 1751. Eight years passed between their coming to Philadelphia. Elsewhere in his text Rev. John says that his grandparents emigrated to North America in 1746. We now know that Martin and his young family were passengers on the Queen of Denmark arriving in Oct. 1751.

3. TANNERS? Simon Sr. was "a tanner by trade". This is not impossible, but no other known source confirms it. "Simon Jr., was also a tanner by trade". This is confirmed by many sources. We know Simon Sr. and Simon Jr. often were confused both in oral history and in documentation, with both referred to as "Simon".

4. SONS? "...Simon... had seven sons". Simon Sr. had only five sons (Jost, Adam, Simon Jr, George and John). Simon Sr. had a son, Alexander, who died in Wittgenstein at age five, but he would hardly have been counted in this context. Simon Jr., however, did have seven sons, if one counts Simon III who died in 1769 just before his fifteenth birthday. We know Simon Jr wrote the birth dates of all his children in his Bible (which was in the care of descendants until a few years ago but now has disappeared). We have a photocopy of the page from this Bible with a list of Simon Jr's children written in Simon Jr's own hand. They were: John, Simon III who died age 15, George (who was deaf), Peter, Jacob, Adam (also born deaf), Elizabeth [Hower], Daniel (deaf), Sophia (deaf), Maria Magdalena [Hagenbuch], Mary Catharine [Butz], Susanna [Deschler].

Rev. John "saw and got acquainted with two (of the seven sons), John and George". Which John and which George did Rev. John get to know? There were two sets of brothers with the names John and George Dreisbach, who were living at the same time in south-eastern Pennsylvania: George (b. 1733 in Wittgenstein) and John (b. 1735 in Wittgenstein) were the sons of Simon Dreisbach Senior. The other pair of brothers were John (b. 1752) and George (b. 1756), who were the sons of Simon Dreisbach Junior.

The best match for the "John and George" that Rev. John spoke about, are the two eldest sons of Simon Jr., John and George (who was born deaf). These brothers worked a farm together in Lehigh Twp. and served together in the PA Militia. They married at about the same time and both men and their wives are buried at Stone Church in Kreidersville, PA.

A good reason for choosing this set of brothers is the order in which Rev. John names them. John was the oldest and the one who looked out for younger, deaf brother, George. When speaking of these two, one would say "John and George". However, in the other set of brothers, George was the oldest and John the youngest. When referring to this pair one would normally say "George and John". We can assume that Rev. John related tales of meeting with the Pennsylvania brothers many times which reinforced his use of the order of their names – John and George.

This pair of brothers had a good reason for traveling west from Northampton County. John and George had a sister, Maria Magdalena who married a Hagenbuch and lived near Berwick, and they had a younger brother, Yost, who lived nearby in Roaring Creek in Columbia Co, PA. They also had a cousin, John, who lived in the same area, in Catawissa Twp, PA.

Just to confuse things, this cousin John was the son of the other, older, George (b. 1733 in Wittgenstein). So, while this older George might have travelled west to visit his son living on the Susquehanna River, there was no reason for George's younger brother, John (born 1735 in Wittgenstein) to travel to central Pennsylvania. We can be confident, therefore, that the pair of brothers Rev. John met up with were the sons of Simon Junior.

I know, I know, this story and the genealogy of the Simon Dreisbach line, contains entirely too many Johns and Georges. The same names were used over and over, naming babies for grandparents, uncles, cousins, and godparents so we will have to use other clues to figure out which person we're talking about.

5. WHEN? When did the meeting occur? Having been born in 1789, Rev. John most likely was a young traveling minister when he met the brothers. At age 19 Rev. John was responsible for the entire Northumberland County preaching circuit which at that time included Berwick, Roaring Creek and Catawissa where the local Dreisbachs lived. Rev. John was part of the newly formed Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB Church) while the Dreisbachs traditionally were members of the German Reformed Church. Still the arrival of *any* minister would draw people from a wide area regardless of their formal religious affiliation. The EUB had a church in Berwick where Rev. John would have preached. We can therefore trust that the local Dreisbachs and Hagenbuches had previously met Rev. John during his service as a preacher in Berwick. When the visiting brothers from Northampton County arrived (sometime between 1808 and 1815 - which were the years when Rev. John served as a circuit rider for the EUB), the local Dreisbachs would have arranged a gathering of the families.



Old Stone Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church, Berwick, PA. Built in 1808. The ME Church was similar to the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB). The two competed for members – and preachers but did cooperate to some degree. This church was built when the ME and EUB were pulling congregants away from the Reformed and Lutheran Churches. Rev. John must have visited this church and it might be where he preached. Photo from Find A Grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2227676/stone-methodist-church-cemetery>

6. WHERE? We can safely assume that the meeting took place in the area where the local Dreisbachs lived. Rev. John mentions Dreisbachs who lived "above Berwick" on the North Branch of the Susquehanna and this is probably best interpreted as being "in the area near Berwick".

In the early 1800's, a meeting of far-flung relatives was not just 'a dinner'. It would have involved a full day of socializing, several meals and at least one overnight stay. Such a meeting would have been sufficiently memorable for Rev. John to include it in his memoirs.

7. WHICH GENERATION WERE THESE COUSINS? As we have seen, Rev. John was the grandson of 1751 immigrant, Martin Dreisbach/Dresbach (he used both spellings of his surname); John and George were the grandsons of 1743 immigrant, Simon Dreisbach Senior. They were fifth cousins! At a time when some of us have difficulty naming our first cousins and many do not know their second cousins at all, knowing about – and meeting – a fifth cousin at a time when communication and travel were difficult, shows how very important family connections were to our ancestors.

8. ABRAHAM DRESBACK OF OHIO. Finally, Rev. John, in speaking about Simon Junior says: *George, his (i.e., Simon Jr's) brother, had among other sons, Abraham, Yost and John, the last two mentioned resided on the north branch of the Susquehannah, above Berwick. Abraham settled in Ohio and had Joseph and his brethren and sisters. Thus, George was second cousin to my father, and Abraham his son, is a third cousin to me, and Joseph, son of Abraham, is fourth cousin to my children."*

Deaf George (the son of Simon Jr) and his wife, Sophia Catharine Jung, did have sons named Jost, Abraham and John.² All three were baptized at Zion Stone Church, which makes very good sense since their grandfather, Simon Jr, was instrumental in founding this church and was a Trustee. Surely, he would want his grandchildren baptized in “his” church.

Simon Jr’s brother, George (the one born in Wittgenstein in 1733), did have sons named John and Jost (as well as sons named Simon, Henry, Adam) but not Abraham. Currently we do not have birth or baptismal records for any children of this George. George never had his children baptized at Zion Stone Church. All the evidence points to Abraham, Yost and John being the children of deaf George, the SON of Simon Junior.

Abraham settled in Pickaway County, Ohio about 1806. He is one of the few, known, Simon-line descendants who moved to Ohio. He married Maria Drum, who was another newcomer to Ohio having been born in Berks County, PA. The spelling of the Dreisbach surname was changing during Abraham’s life and he used three variations - Dreisbach, Dresback and Dresbach. By adopting the “Dresbach” version, his children and grandchildren blended into the Martin line descendants who arrived in Ohio about the same time as Abraham.

Abraham has a tombstone in the Tarlton cemetery³ which must have been erected many years after his death, probably by his son David who has his own impressive tombstone in the same cemetery. The actual details of Abraham’s birthdate and age at the time of death, were not known and the engraving clearly was done without consulting records from another state.

Abraham’s birth date of 10 May 1777 and baptismal date of 15 June 1777 are in the records of the Reform Congregation of Zion Stone Church. His date of death, 19 April 1842, was known and is inscribed on his tombstone. Just below it says, “Aged about 80 years”. A quick bit of math indicates Abraham was 65 when he died! He must have looked like a very old man to his sons!

CONCLUSIONS: Rev. John's account of meeting his Simon-line cousins was written some fifty years after the meeting took place. In essence, Rev. John is correct about the people he met. It is only the generations that he sometimes confuses, and that is easy enough to do with so many Simons and Johns and Georges to keep separate. This is a document valuable for our common Dreisbach history, and we are fortunate to have it.

Moreover, Rev. John's account does not exclude the possibility that others of the Martin line had encounters with some of the Simon descendants living along the North Branch, or even places closer to Northampton Co. The fact that the Abraham Dreisbach mentioned by Rev. John was born in Northampton Co. in 1777, but moved to Pickaway Co., Ohio as early as 1806, where he lived as Abraham Dresback/Dresbach until his death in 1842, suggests that there may have been other points of contact between the two Dreisbach lines.

To return to the question, did Simon and Martin ever meet? The answer must be: probably not. Martin, the young master ironworker from Siegerland will not have had much in common with Simon Sr, the older, not very successful farmer from the south of Wittgenstein. Still, it’s quite possible their children met, but not kept records of family encounters. How many of us record our visits with first, second or third cousins for posterity? Not many, I suspect.

We are fortunate that Rev. John found his visit with Simon Sr’s grandsons worthy of both remembering and writing about. His essay is true and valuable, even if some details have been confused. It’s a lovely story that must be retained.

² Birth and Baptismal records of the Reformed Congregation of Zion Stone Church, Kreidersville, PA.

³ Find a Grave Memorial # 45247569



Abraham Dresbach tombstone, Tarlton Cemetery, Pickaway Co. OH, was erected some years after his death. His wife’s tombstone has not been found.