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Royal Descents, Notable Kin, and Printed Sources #67

Two Remarkable Descendants of the Borden of Rhode Island

by Gary Boyd Roberts

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The last two columns were developed from data sent to me by Michael J. Wood of London. Another correspondent, mostly on matters of presidential genealogy, has been Theron L. Smith of Fort Worth, Texas, who several years ago told me of a Cowan genealogy that delineated the Borden of Rhode Island descent of a movie star and country-western singer for whom Yankee ancestry was indeed surprising. On last month's trip to Salt Lake City I found this Cowan genealogy — Michael S. Cole, *Cowan Connections: The Genealogy of Samuel and Sarah (Keith) Cowan* (1994). Also essential for many of the facts below was Roy T. Marshall, *Descendants of Nichodemus Keith and Margaret Borden (Revised)* — *Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico* (1989).

In *Notable Kin, Volumes One and Two* ([NK1](#), [NK2](#)) I trace some ancestry (but not the patrilineal line) of the three great Borden — alleged murderess Lizzie Andrew, milkman Gail, and Canadian Prime Minister Sir Robert Laird Borden, whose descents from Richard and Joan (Fowle) Borden may be easily obtained from *NK2*:95, 103, 1:83, plus the quite mediocre but mostly serviceable [*Historical and Genealogical Record of the Descendants as Far as Known of Richard and Joan Borden*](#) (1899) by Hattie Weld Borden. Elsewhere in *NK2* (pp. 136–37) I outline the six Borden descents (via Mrs. Mary Borden Gifford, Thomas Howland, Thomas Cook [twice], William Gray, and Mrs. Elizabeth Dennis Gray) of Charles Stanley Gifford, possible father of the actress Marilyn Monroe. The Borden descent of British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill is outlined in *NEXUS* 13 (1996): 166–72, 14 (1997): 65–68 (via #240), and *NYGBR* 73 (1942): 159–66 (repr. in V.S. Yerington, *History and Genealogy of Vera Stratton Yerington in American and Europe, 1189–1985* [1985], p. 38).

Benjamin Borden (1647–ca. 1728), youngest son of Richard and Joan (Fowle) Borden, moved to Middletown, New Jersey (several of his siblings also moved away from Rhode Island) and married Abigail Grover, daughter of James Grover, surveyor and secretary of the Gravesend [L.I.] Land Co. and an early settler at Middletown, and his wife Rebecca ____.

Their son Benjamin Borden, Jr. (1675–1743) was born at Middletown but died near Winchester, Virginia (in the Shenandoah Valley), having married his first cousin Zerviah Winter, daughter of William and Hannah (Grover) Winter of Monmouth County, New Jersey. John Borden (1718/9–1798), a son of Benjamin Jr. and Zerviah, lived in Bedford County, Virginia and Knox County, Tennessee. He married Anne (Hawkins?), and left a daughter Margaret (Peggy) Borden (ca. 1755–60–1830s), wife of Judge Nichodemus Keith (ca. 1755–ca. 1831) of Knox and McNairy counties (Tenn.).

Sarah Margaret Keith, their daughter (ca. 1778, Bedford Co., Virginia–ca. 1849, Titus Co., Texas), married Samuel Cowan, of Scots-Irish descent. Their eighth child, Stephen Cowan (1825–1907), died in Checotah, Oklahoma. He married in Franklin Co., Alabama, February 7, 1847, Elizabeth Long. Their son, James Martin Cowan (1857–1911) of Johnson Co., Arkansas, married there October 2, 1877, Sarah M. Willis and left a son, W. Arthur Cowan (b. ca. 1882), who married Julia Cullen in Johnson Co., May 9, 1903. Their daughter, Mildred Frances Cowan, born February 12, 1905, married John Virgil Turner, a sometime miner, insurance salesman, and even bootlegger, who moved frequently. Their daughter, Julia Jean Mildred Frances, was the actress Lana Turner, born February 8, 1920, Wallace, Idaho; died June 29, 1995, Century City (Los Angeles), California. Lana Turner's often melodramatic movie roles included *Ziegfeld Girl*, *Honky Tonk*, *Johnny Eager*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Peyton Place*, *Imitation of Life*, and *By Love Possessed*.

Lana Turner's private life often received more headlines than her movies. Her first husband was bandleader Artie Shaw, and her fourth was Lex Barker, well-known for his "Tarzan" movies. By her second husband, Joseph Stephen Crane (III), Lana Turner had her only child, a daughter Cheryl Christine, later notorious for the stabbing death of her mother's alleged mobster boyfriend, Johnny Stompanato. A third husband was Long Island society figure Henry J. Topping, Jr., and fifth through seventh husbands were rancher Ed May, producer Robert Eaton, and hypnotist Ronald Dante.

John Borden Keith (ca. 1786–post 1850), eldest son of Judge Nichodemus and Margaret (Borden) Keith, married Polly Ann (Tildy) Crane, and moved eventually to Hunt Co., Texas. Elizabeth "Betsey" Keith (b. ca. 1812), daughter of John Borden and Polly Ann, married John Hood (Jack Marshall) (ca. 1806–post 1870), sometime of Marion, Searcey, and Boone counties, Arkansas. Their son William Andrew Jackson Marshall (b. January 8, 1831, also of Boone Co., Arkansas) married Larmartha A. Hemphill (1835–1905). Their daughter Aprillia "Prilly" Marshall (b. ca. 1859) married June 3, 1875, in Boone Co., Franklin "Frank" Craig Nelson (b. 1858). William Alfred Nelson (1884–1939), a son of these last, married Nancy Elizabeth Smothers (1882–1979), and left a son, Ira Doyle Nelson (July 9, 1913–Dec. 1978, Austin, Texas), whose first wife was Myrle Greenhow (married ca. 1929 in Pindall, Arkansas). Their son, Willie Hugh Nelson, born April 30, 1933, in Abbott, Texas, is the well-known country-western singer and husband of Martha Jewell Matthews. The singer is said to have been raised by his grandparents, I assume paternal, who moved with his parents to Abbott, Texas, about 1929.

Thus, in addition to a Canadian and a British prime minister, the infamous Lizzie Borden, Gail

Borden of Borden's Milk, and the Rhode Island-born possible father of Marilyn Monroe, we may add two further major figures in popular culture to the proved progeny of Richard and Joan (Fowle) Borden of Providence, Rhode Island. A large number of Southern figures do indeed have strands of Yankee ancestry – note chapters 38, 42, 43, 45, and 46 of *NK2*, the Almy and Cornell ancestry of President Jimmy Carter, and my Internet columns on the ancestry of [Janis Joplin](#), [Ty Cobb](#), and my own family. Successful tracing of such descendants in the “backcountry,” Shenandoah, Appalachian or border areas of the South, however, is always a feat, and I much appreciate the research of Mr. Cole and Mr. Marshall on these Borden descendants. I also thank Theron L. Smith once more for bringing these connections to my attention.

In my next column I shall return to the notable progeny of seventeenth-century immigrants of royal descent, and consider the largest such group for an immigrant to Connecticut.

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