

# A FAMILY MYSTERY

Fransuelle W. Cole

Murray Ky - Jan 8th 1870  
Mr. L Linn

Dr Sir

I can make some  
partial shifts to answer  
my immediate demands  
& if you will give me  
the trade which you propos-  
ed when I saw you  
In 2 weeks from now  
I will close the trade  
with you.

If you can't do it  
please send me word  
Monday or Tuesday—  
let me hear from you  
I am yr friend &c

R.F. Hamlin

This letter, folded and addressed simply "Lilburn Linn, at home" on the outside fold, was found recently in an old book. Its discovery raises many questions, not the least of which is whether it should have remained hidden. The letter is well written, if cryptic, and gives no hint of the "trade" which was to take place in two weeks, probably in Calloway County, Kentucky; and that in itself makes it almost compellingly interesting. Can you hazard a guess as to the subject of this letter?

In trying to find some answers, public records of Calloway County and the city of Murray were researched, as well as special collections in the University library.<sup>1</sup> As is common in such research, more questions were raised, and very few were answered.

We must assume that Mr. Linn was well known in the county, because of the manner in which the note was addressed, and that someone going "that way" obligingly carried and delivered the letter for Mr. Hamlin. It seems apparent that Hamlin, Kentucky, was named for the local Hamlins, reflecting some prominence in the area. And, Lynn Grove and Linnville seem to be named for the local Linn family, some members of which spelled their surname with the "i" and some with the "y". So, we have two men, prominent in the community, consummating a deal which obviously was legitimate and legal. But what was it? Perhaps more detailed knowledge of the two men and their families would help uncover the mystery.

In 1870 Mr. Richard F. Hamlin was 36 years old and a teacher in the Common School. He was a family man, having a wife Laura who was 23, and two daughters, ages 3 and 2. He had personal property valued at 500 dollars, and a domestic servant, a 12-year-old black girl, who could neither

read nor write, a seeming incongruity in a teacher's household. He had grown up in Calloway County. His parents had moved their family there when Richard was 6, arriving in 1841 from North Carolina. His father was a prosperous farmer with real estate valued at \$2,600 in 1850 and at \$5,600 ten years later; and he and his wife continued to live and farm in Calloway County for more than forty years after their arrival. All of their children, including Richard, appear to have stayed in the area and become hard working citizens of the community. These seem to be the first Hamlins in the area.

By the time Richard was 15 he had stopped going to school, even though education was thought to be necessary in the household; all five of his younger siblings, from 14 to 6, attended school regularly. Perhaps he quit in order to be of more help on the farm, or maybe he had learned all that the current teacher could teach him, or possibly he had completed all the grades offered in his school. Whatever the reason for stopping, he no doubt did continue his schooling at a later date; probably he went away to school. Also, it is possible that he fought in the War Between the States or left to "make his fortune" in some way, because we find no trace of him in Calloway county for several years, until he married and settled down in Murray to teach school. Later on he became County Court Clerk, and served in that capacity between 1882 and 1890.

The Linns arrived in Calloway County somewhat earlier than the Hamlins. Adam Linn, who was a veteran of the Revolutionary War, moved with his wife and several of their 12 children from Bedford County, Virginia, to Kentucky, settling in Trigg County at about the turn of the century. The children scattered, and two of them migrated to Calloway County before 1825. Reuben Linn and his brother, Charles Linn, Sr., located in Calloway with their families. However, Reuben, with his wife, 5 sons and 4 daughters, soon moved on and left Charles, Sr., as the patriarch of the Linn family in the county. Charles and his wife had 10 children, most of whom stayed in the area and whose descendants are still there. One of the sons was Lilburn Linn, the recipient of the letter in question.

At the time of this mysterious letter, Lilburn Linn was 60 years old, a prosperous farmer with real estate south of Murray valued at \$3,000 and personal property at \$1500. He was very active in buying and selling land. He was just about to lose his first wife; she died April 27 of that year. He had three non-family members living in his household; a young white man who farmed with him, possibly sharing in expenses and profits—a partner; a black man, 50, who was hired to work on the farm; and a black woman, 35, who was the housekeeper. Neither of them could read or write. After the death of his wife, Mr. Linn's granddaughter, who was 12, moved in with him for a while, probably to help ease the trauma of his loss. However, in less than 10 years Mr. Linn had remarried, a woman 11 years his junior, who also preceeded him in death.

Mr. Linn and both of his wives are buried in the Locust Grove Church cemetery. He was 91 years and 6 months at his death, and is buried between his wives. His tombstone has an arrow pointing downward toward each side with the words "Wife of my youth" and "Wife of my old age." He

must have had a certain flair for the unusual! And, he was interested enough in religion to donate several acres of land to the Locust Grove church, about five miles south of Murray, on which stand the church building and the parsonage. At a later date, 1886, he donated an additional one-half acre to the church trustees for a graveyard, the one in which he and many of his relatives are buried. He gave the land to the "good people in the vicinity of . . . [the] church," because of "the kind feeling that I have for the citizens in that vicinity . . ." <sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Mr. Hamlin was the county clerk during several of the land transactions to which Mr. Linn was a party, including the transfer of the graveyard property. Mr. Linn continued to actively buy and sell land within the county until just a few months prior to his death. The last recorded deed naming him dates from 1900.

Now that we know something about the principals in the letter, what can we determine as to the subject of the letter? Nothing! Mr. Linn proposed the trade. Mr. Hamlin was willing, but was going to have to make some partial shifts to answer his immediate demands until the time came for the trade. Did Mr. Hamlin start the whole thing, with Mr. Linn proposing the specific trade in order to accommodate Mr. Hamlin? And, after Mr. Linn proposed the trade, why would Mr. Hamlin think there was a possibility that Mr. Linn could not go through with it? We could begin naming things and or services which might be traded, but the list would be as long as there are people to guess. Did Mr. Linn respond on Monday or Tuesday to Mr. Hamlin, feeling at that point that he could not make the trade? Or was the deal consummated? Did it have far reaching effects, whether or not it was completed? And why was the letter saved for over 110 years?

We have the questions—lots of them—but we have few answers.

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Lilburn Linn is the paternal great-great grandfather of the author.

The direct lineage is:

Lilburn Linn

Burnetta Linn Wilcox (his daughter)

Richard H. Wilcox (her son)

Tipton C. Wilcox (his son)

Fransuelle Wilcox Cole (his daughter)

This letter was discovered with other family memorabilia, which had been kept, untouched, for years. No one in the family or among the many relatives knows just what this "trade" was.

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1. Census records, marriage records, deeds, bonds, mortgages, wills, *lis pendens*, land partitions, DAR records, Linn and Wilcox family records, and personal interviews all were used in compiling this information.

2. Deed book Z, p. 134, 1886.

