

**Emigration of Union County, Pennsylvania, Families
to Stephenson County, Illinois, and
Green County, Wisconsin, 1837-1847**

**By
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In the late 1700s the central Susquehanna was on the frontier for those seeking land to settle. Within a few decades the frontier had moved on. In this essay I describe a migration in the 1830s and 1840s from Union County westward to Stephenson County, Illinois, undertaken by a group of my ancestors as open land further west beckoned anew.

Robert Chambers, a Scotch-Irishman from County Antrim, Ireland, immigrated to this country in 1726 with his three brothers, Benjamin, Joseph and James and settled first at the confluence of Fishing Creek and the Susquehanna River just north of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

In 1730 he became one of the original 1730 settlers of Middle Springs, Pennsylvania. He bought 300 acres and built a mill and farm and with others established the Middle Spring Presbyterian Church in 1738.

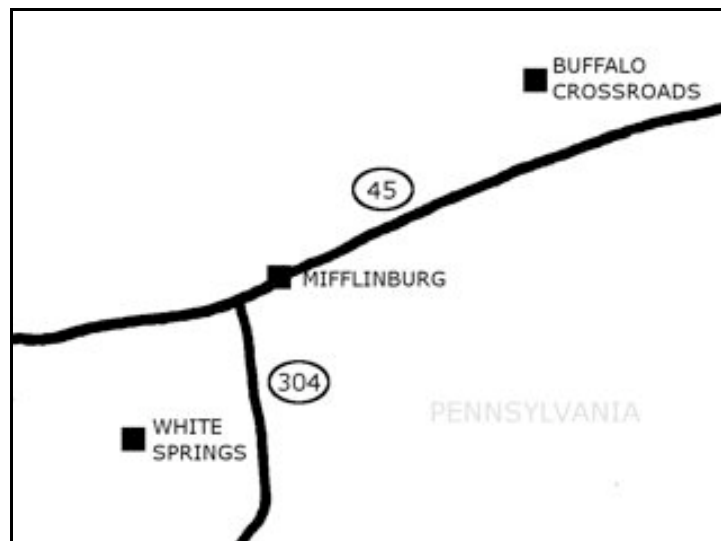
In 1777 he started looking for new farmland to settle 60 miles farther north in Pennsylvania in what now is Union County, Pennsylvania. He had lost his first wife and had married his second wife Mary Caldwell in 1753 when he was 50 years old and she was 18 years old. Mary was daughter of a neighbor to Robert and in an old land deed the marriage is listed as “arranged” as part of a land deal. Despite the age difference the couple had nine children between their marriage date and his death about 1781.

In 1776 he purchased 400 acres of land a couple of miles northeast of White Springs in Union County. The area was the wild frontier at the time and a dangerous location for white people to settle. He moved briefly to the area in spring of 1779 but was chased out by the Indians who lived in the area. When his son James, a militia man, was killed by Indians in 1780 Robert moved his family

temporarily to near Carlisle, Pennsylvania and it was there in 1781 he died from injuries he received when trying to mount a horse. He was 78 when he died.

Robert's wife and his nine children returned to Union County in 1783 and with the help of four Negro slaves began to develop the farm after the Indian uprising had subsided. His son Joseph was a youngster in 1783 but he took over the farm at an early age and made it successful.

A neighbor, Squire Robert Barber had moved to Union County about that same time from Columbia, Pennsylvania. Robert had a number of children and soon Joseph married Mary Boude Barber, Robert Barber's daughter. Together Joseph and Mary Chambers had eleven children including my great-great grandfather Benjamin Chambers.



Joseph and Mary Chambers, Robert Barber and their siblings all had large families. Most families at that time had ten or more children. All the children from this large extended family of Chambers and Barbers reached adult age of 18 in the early 1810's through the middle 1830's. The economy in this fledgling country of America was not good and farming, being the major way to make a living was limited because of the shortage of tillable land in Union County. All these children needed to find a way to make a living. It appears that the draw of inexpensive government land on the western frontier about 700 miles west promised a future for this large extended family.

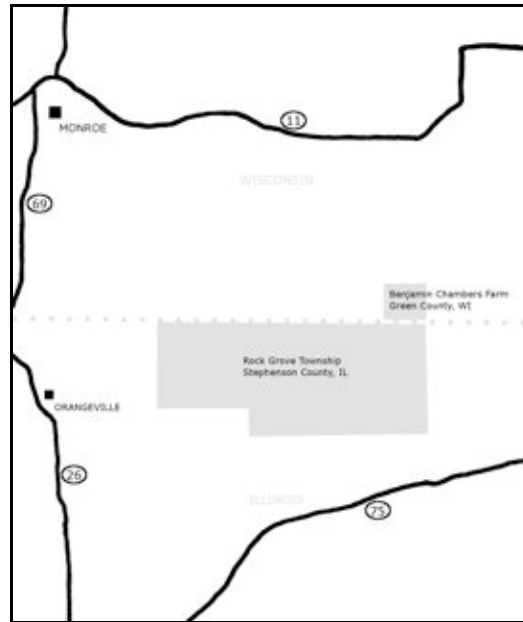
Dr. John Van Valzah was a physician in the Buffalo Crossroads area of Pennsylvania. He had two sons, Robert and Thomas, who also became physicians. When a young man, Dr. Thomas Van Valzah lived in the Union County area and had a sister who was married to Robert Barber, son of Squire Robert Barber.

Sometime around 1834-35, Dr. Thomas Van Valzah along with some other community leaders, including Robert Barber and possibly Samuel and Thomas Chambers from Union County, traveled to the future county of Stephenson in north central Illinois. They were scouting for land for people from Pennsylvania and discovered what they sought, sending word back home. Dr. Van Valzah and the Barber family purchased some land. Dr. Van Valzah put up a couple of cabins on his land. (Union County Pennsylvania, a Celebration of History by Charles M. Snyder, 1976, revised 2000. Page 44.)

Interestingly the next mention of the Van Valzeh, Barber and Chambers names comes in April 18, 1837 when a group of people from Union County led by Dr. Thomas Van Valzeh, a physician with substantial financial means, and Henry Barber set out from Union County by wagon for Stephenson County. With them were Joseph Green, Carpenter Miller, John Fisher Jr., John Glover Jr., and Nathan and Israel Sheetz. Both Van Valzah and Barber were cousins of Samuel and Thomas Chambers. Upon arrival in Illinois on May 30, 1837, seven weeks after they had left Pennsylvania, Dr. Van Valzah purchased a gristmill, built a sawmill and set up his practice of medicine. Henry Barber stayed in Illinois for 18 months and then returned to Union County where he again spread the word of the new land of opportunity.

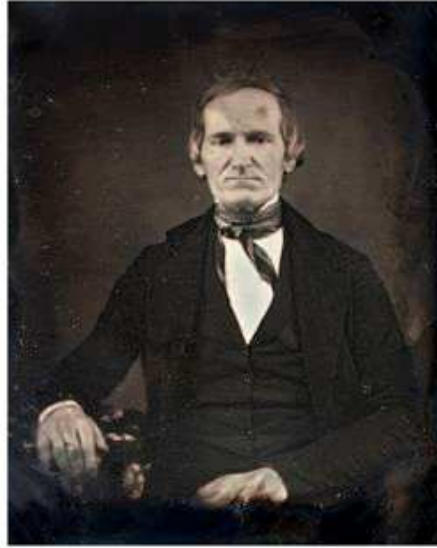
In 1835, Joseph Chamber's sons Samuel and Thomas Chambers decided to go west. It is not clear if these two brothers did this independently or was part of the Dr. Van Valzeh original scouting party. In the history of Stephenson County it is mentioned Dr. Van Valzah came with other people from Pennsylvania but does not mention the Chambers brothers by name. In The History of Stephenson County Illinois, by M. H. Tilden, 1880, page 733, Samuel and Thomas Chambers are mentioned to have stopped in Jo Davies County, Illinois for a short time and in 1836 claimed land in Rock Grove Township, Stephenson County, Illinois. In

1836, history books indicate the two were among the first 20 white settlers in the township (see *The History of Stephenson County, Illinois*, by M. H. Tilden, 1880 on page 483). They found the area to have good farmland with plenty of water. The topography of Rock Grove township is similar to what they were familiar with in Union County. They bought Federal land in Sections 19 and 24 in Rock Grove township.



The brothers sent word back to Union County of what they discovered and may have urged their siblings and cousins to join them out west. It is logical that Dr. Van Valzeh, Robert Barber, Samuel and Thomas Chambers were all doing this venture together since all were related by marriage and came from the same geographical area of West Buffalo Township in Union County, Pennsylvania. I can find no family records from any of the three families, however, that confirm that conclusion.

Later in 1838, Barber cousins and Joseph Chambers' sons Robert and James headed west and joined Samuel and Thomas Chambers. The year after



Benjamin Chambers, born in Union County in 1807 and died in Union County in 1872 when he was visiting from his new home in Jefferson Township, Green County, Wisconsin. Photo courtesy of the author.

that in 1839 brother Benjamin Chambers, my direct line great-great grandfather became the fifth brother to emigrate to Rock Grove township in Stephenson county. The Barber and Chambers families all bought federal land in Sections 13, 17, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 30 and 31 all in Rock Grove Township. Benjamin Chambers soon after in 1847 purchased land from William Baker in the Town of Jefferson in Green County, Wisconsin. That farm sat directly across the state line from his land holdings in Rock Grove Township. He eventually sold the Illinois property and consolidated his holdings in Wisconsin.



Benjamin Chambers Farm, Green County Wisconsin, early 1900's
Photo courtesy of the author.

In 1842, Dr. Thomas Van Valzeh and his family moved back to Union County. History records indicate two Van Valzeh physicians, sons of Dr. Thomas Van Valzeh, remained in Stephenson County and practiced medicine.

The last large emigration of people from Union County to Stephenson County left Union County some time in May 1843. A short note in the Clarion Pennsylvania Register newspaper says "On May 31, 1843 a company of about 60 emigrants passed through this place on their way to Stephenson County, Illinois. They had 14 wagons, each drawn by a span of horses. They were all from one neighborhood and had plenty of cash. They were in good spirits."

In the book, History of Stephenson County, Illinois, page 742 it reports that a group of 54 people arriving from Union County, Pennsylvania in 1843. It is my thought the arriving group in Stephenson County was the same group mentioned as moving through Clarion. The fourteen-wagon train was led by brothers Samuel, George, and Thomas Barber, who all were cousins of Samuel and Thomas Chambers who had arrived in Illinois eight years earlier.

By the mid 1840's, then, we know there were at least 100 people who had left Union County and relocated in Northern Stephenson County, Illinois. While these emigrants to Illinois were called "Pennsylvania Dutch" they actually were a melting pot of nationalities. Indeed some were "Dutch" like the prominent Van Valzeh family, but also some were German like the Musser family, and still others were English like the Barber family. But the first of this group of mislabeled emigrants were the Chambers who clearly are "Scotch-Irish." After arriving in Illinois all of the names of families on the various arrival lists ended up mixing the family names together through marriage. In my direct line alone you will find the names of Musser, Chambers, Glover, Barber, Wright and Van Valzeh.

Interestingly, a little over 100 years after Scotch-Irishman Robert Chambers (1703-1782) and his brothers, Benjamin, Joseph and James arrived in Philadelphia (1726) from Ireland their ancestors were now truly Americans. They enjoyed the independence their ancestors fought for in the Revolutionary War. They could live where they chose to live, could marry whom they chose to marry and could practice the religion they chose to practice. The families were now a melting pot of nationalities. These western pioneers were responsible hard-

working Americans living the dream that their parents and grandparents could only imagine. Now in the mid 1800's the Scotch Irish brothers, grandchildren, and great grandchildren were not only enjoying their freedom but also contributing to population growth across America.

Key Sources:

1. The Robert Chambers Family of Middle Springs, PA and Buffalo Valley. Date and author unknown.
2. Chambers Family Genealogy by James Randall Chambers, 1928.
3. The History of Stephenson County, Illinois, by M. H. Tilden, 1880.
4. Union County Pennsylvania, a Celebration of History by Charles M. Snyder, 1976, revised 2000, page 44.

The author thanks Katy Lowitz for producing the maps used in this article.

