

James Clarkson – A lingering question about his military service

I have decided to accept the premise that my great-grandfather James Clarkson is the same man that appears in George Ridsdale's Company of the 54th Regiment of Foot, garrisoned in Cork Ireland in 1774. The evidence collected by several researchers gives good support to this theory. But, here's the problem:

James Clarkson was christened in March 1749, and it is assumed that his christening followed a few weeks, or perhaps months, after his birth. His parents were Peter Clarkson and Ann Costerdine, who lived in the small town of Blackley, outside of Manchester, in Lancashire England. James Clarkson's adult life clearly suggests that he grew up in his parent's home, had some opportunity for education, and was well trained in his father's trade of weaving. All of these childhood experiences must have happened before he joined the military. James Clarkson was about age twenty five when he appears on the muster lists of George Ridsdale's company of the 54th Regiment of Foot, dated 5 August 1774, stationed in Cork Ireland. From that point we can trace his military career up to July 1777 when he deserted from the British forces fighting in the American Revolution, and settled in Essex county Virginia. But, there is an earlier James Clarkson that appears on the muster rolls of the 54th Regiment of Foot. This "other" James Clarkson first appears on 7 January 1762, and is regularly recorded up to 30 January 1768. During this six year period our James Clarkson would probably be between the ages of thirteen and twenty (approximately). It was not typical for such young boys to join the military, and this period from 1762 – 1768 would seem to be the time when our James Clarkson was being apprenticed as a weaver. So who is the earlier James Clarkson?

In 1997, Mary Clarkson Bucholz commissioned research on James Clarkson, to learn more about his military service, and ancestral link back to England. The work was done by John B Marsden of the Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society. His excellent report was dated 9 October 1997. Appearing below is an extract from John Marsden's report, related to James Clarkson's military career.

Details of Research: The Military Career of James Clarkson prepared by John B Marsden, 9 October 1997;for Mary Bucholz

note – The appendix's referred to in James Marsden's report, are not included here.

The evidence of the travel document issued September 1777 told us that James Clarkson had deserted by 29 September of that year but did little to tell us precisely when and from where he went absent from his regiment. Crucially, it did not tell us with which regiment he was previously serving.

The PRO's records contain a number of volumes of what are termed "out letters" ie copies of letters sent out by the Secretary at War dealing with the subject of deserters. It was felt that it

might be worthwhile to check these letters in the hope that there would be mention of James Clarkson's desertion. Those covering the period of interest, August 1772 to April 1778, are held under call number W04/601.

Examination of these letters proved fruitless. It appears that they dealt almost exclusively with desertion from regiments stationed within the British Isles. Moreover, the majority dealt with cases where the deserter was either apprehended or returned of his own will. This was manifestly not the case with James Clarkson.

It was concluded, therefore, that there was little alternative but to examine the surviving muster rolls for each regiment known to be serving in America in 1777 until the name James Clarkson was found and then to check the casualty lists for a record of his desertion.

The definitive work on the disposition of British regiments during major campaigns is "In Search of the Forlorn Hope" by John M Kitzmuller II (Manuscript Publishing Foundation, 1988). This provided a list of regiments engaged in the War of Independence with approximate dates. This is abstracted in Appendix 2.

A search was made beginning with the 1st Regiment of Foot (infantry) of the musters, where they survived from 1776 to 1778 in the belief that James Clarkson should be listed in 1776 and possibly early 1777 but should appear as a casualty either in late 1777 or early 1778. Note was taken whenever the name Clarkson was encountered even if not for James since the possibility existed that he was known by a different first name (possibly a middle name). Several Clarksons were encountered and noted during this search and details are attached as Appendix I. These include two James Clarksons both of whom were found to have died whilst still serving with their regiments. A third James Clarkson was found in the musters of the 54th Foot and proved of greater interest.

WO12/6398 – 54th Foot

The muster taken at Staten Island [New York] on 11 August 1776 contains the name of James Clarkson, a private in Captain John Breese's company. The following muster taken at Rhode Island on 20 October 1778 also contains his name under John Breese's company and it was initially concluded that this was yet again an unfortunate coincidence of names. Reading onwards, however, the name James Clarkson also appears in the muster for Captain Robert Rannie's company. Of far greater interest is that his name appears among the list of casualties since 25 January 1777 with the note "deserted 18 July 1777". This is almost without question the person we were seeking.

There are, in fact, two copies of the Rhode Island muster for 20 October 1778. The reasons for this are not clear but the details concerning James Clarkson (present in Breese's company but deserted from Rannie's) agree in either case. It was considered that there might be two James Clarksons in the regiment and so the musters both before and after this date were examined painstakingly. There is no evidence to support this possibility.

It would appear that James Clarkson transferred from Breese's company to Rannie's some time between the August 1776 and October 1778 musters. It is suspected that for some reason this fact was not properly noted by Breese's company and so his name appeared in the 1778 muster in error. His appearance for the first time in Rannie's muster, even as a deserter, makes it clear that they believed he was a member of their company. This may reflect the difficulties in maintaining an effective administration under the pressures of warfare.

Since we now had an almost unassailable candidate for our subject, the musters were traced backwards from 1776 to establish James Clarkson's movements before his desertion. All of the following information is taken from WO12/6398.

6 Jul 1761; Gibraltar; James Clarkson not in muster
7 Jan 1762; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in John DeButts's company
8 Jul 1762; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in John DeButts's company
8 Jan 1763; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in John DeButts's company
29 Jun 1763; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in Edmond Eyre's company
13 Jan 1764; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in Edmond Eyre's company
11 Jul 1764; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in Edmond Eyre's company
5 Jan 1765; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
3 Jul 1765; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
2 Jan 1766; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
9 Jul 1766; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
7 Jan 1767; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
9 Jul 1767; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
30 Jan 1768; Gibraltar; James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
30 Jul 1770; Granard (Ireland); James Clarkson not in surviving musters
1770 to 1774 – musters are missing
5 Aug 1774; Cork (Ireland); James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
5 Aug 1774; Cork (Ireland); James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
6 Oct 1774; Cork (Ireland); James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
1 Apr 1775; Cork (Ireland); James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
17 Jul 1775; Dingle (Ireland); James Clarkson in George Ridsdale's company
16 Oct 1775; Carrick on Shannon; James Clarkson in John Gordon's company
10 Jan 1776; "Lord North" (note); James Clarkson in John Breese's company

note: The Lord North was a transport ship and the muster was taken while on board the ship in Cork harbor in Ireland. This was the last muster taken before their arrival in America.

The gap in the musters is unfortunate since it is not possible to determine whether we have one James Clarkson who served throughout or one who served from 1762 and left during the 1770-1774 gap followed by another (our subject) who served from 1774.

Further Research Possibilities (Marsden)

Before any further research is undertaken to extend the pedigree, it seems desirable to resolve the uncertainties created by [this fact] brought out by this research:

The presence of James Clarkson in the 54th Regiment from 1762 onwards requiring him to have enlisted aged 13 if he is the subject of our research and not a separate person.

The association of James Clarkson who deserted from the 54th Regiment with Peter Clarkson of Blackley depends upon two earlier pieces of research, Sarah Filder's in 1879 which presumably relied heavily on family oral record and that carried out by Arnold Motley in the 1940's. It would be beneficial to have sight of such parts of the above as provide explanation of how the relationship between James Clarkson of America and Peter Clarkson of Blackley was established.

Do you want to know more?

[Link to James Clarkson in database](#)