

## Taking Stock

*by Betty Bridgers Cullen*

Confetti, cheers, and the clang of bells ring in the New Year the world over – a cause célèbre. Momentous occasions such as this provide us with an opportunity to take stock of our present in light of our past in order to align ourselves with our future material and spiritual goals. Resolutions to change for the better and hope for the best replace plans that have led us down a rutted path to nowhere.

As we chart our fortunes and misfortunes in the long view of history, say 500 years, we discover clues to wealth, health, and happiness in the last wishes of our ancestors. Up against the final bell (the church bell that is), sixteen generations of Bridger grandfathers had run out of all options but to write a will or die intestate. Expansive or concise, most of our grandfathers penned narratives so replete with imagery that we have short versions of sometimes long lives in the context of their times. With Death at their proverbial door, they arrived at their day of reckoning with directives that would affect descendants to this day.

With great wealth came responsibility – the needs of the people within their sphere of interest and all that they owned had to be accounted for. Their wives and children, their homes and lands, their livestock and crops, their jobs or businesses, their servants, and, yes, their slaves were all named and described in their wills. Debts to their neighbors were paid and debts owed them were transferred to their sons or were forgiven. The poor and unfortunate, especially widows with children, were given bequests as were the churches they attended and the schools where they were educated. Nothing was left to chance or so they thought.

Following the tradition of primogeniture, many Bridger ancestors gave large portions of their estates to their eldest sons. However, other Bridger grandfathers left their wives in charge of their homes, land, and children provided the wives did not re-marry. In England and America, widows considering re-marriage in the 16th and 17th centuries often transferred ownership of their inheritance to their children. Otherwise, by law, all that they owned would go to their new husband. In 1686, General Joseph Bridger tried to by-pass laws of Virginia governing a woman's right to inherit by giving his daughter, Martha, her legacy outright. Unfortunately for Martha, the courts found in favor of her husband who was awarded the fortune left to his wife by her father.

While the majority of our ancestors accepted their fate with equanimity and strategic planning, three “[did not] go gentle into that good night.” Second marriages and

recalcitrant sons caused Lawrence Bridger (1550-1630) and Joseph Bridger, Sr. (1660-1713) to “rage, rage against the dying of the light” and Thomas Harris Bridgers (1832-1894) to die intestate leaving his wife with nothing of any value to declare. The eldest sons of all three men and their descendants were the most affected.

Lawrence’s son, Samuel (1584-1650), chose not to challenge his father’s bequests of the manor home, lands, and money to his step-brother, Joseph, lest Samuel be divested of his own inheritance. Lawrence’s admonitions of dire consequences prompted Samuel to rise above the fray of litigation and family strife and be content with his own substantial holdings. As for Joseph Bridger, Jr. (1660-1773), there is much speculation among historians as to why his father, Joseph, Sr. amended his will with two codicils that served to disinherit Joseph, Jr. and his future descendants. Joseph, Sr. owned Whitemarsh (13,000 sq. ft. brick home) and over 17,000 acres in Isle of Wight County, Virginia much of which was to go to Joseph, Jr. at the death of his mother. Fortunately for Joseph, Jr., his mother, Hester, had a soft spot for her rebellious son and helped him sue his brothers for much of his “rightful” inheritance. By all accounts, he became a wealthy and respected man in his own right – a son his father would have been proud of. Not so fortunate was Charles Thomas Bridgers (1855-1916) whose father, Thomas Harris Bridgers (1832-1894), left nothing to his family but the will to survive. Family legend points an accusatory finger at his second wife who was said to be a spendthrift. For several generations to come, Bridger descendants inherited nothing but a DNA memory that hard work, determination, and respect for others was the key to a better life.

In all wills, our ancestors expressed a belief in the saving grace of Jesus Christ and put considerable faith in God Almighty and Everlasting Life. With the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, devout Catholic Bridger families became devout High Anglicans. Once established in the New World, Joseph Bridger, Sr. built St. Luke’s Church in Isle of Wight County so that the General Assembly and colonists would have a proper place to worship as Anglicans. From 1521 to 1686, our Bridger grandfathers were buried in churches, as befit their status in society. As the family drove their wagon trains into North Carolina in 1700, there were few, if any, churches or graveyards. Churches were built, in due time, and most families were buried on their own land.

In the final analysis, a spiritual life transcended the trials and tribulations of material gains, or lack thereof. Our ancestors believed all their gifts came from God and the purpose of their lives was to praise God in His Glory. Joseph, Sr. built a church, Lawrence was a minister for 55 years, Samuel was an auditor and sub-dean in a cathedral, and Henry (1480-1521) gave land to his church at his death. From the frontier settlers of North Carolina to this day, Bridger descendants are devout in their worship no

matter their religious affiliation. In addition, those forefathers with wealth and/or an education lived longer and better, had important connections in their communities, worked in professions, and had a larger worldview. The more land they inherited, bought, or patented appeared to increase their status, even if they had little money. For all these men accomplished, we have endless admiration. However, our greatest respect goes to our grandfathers and grandmothers who were not so blessed and did everything they could in difficult circumstances to build a better life for generations to come.