

John Zink, His Life, and His Mysterious Demise

I'd like to thank Kris Gembara for sending me this article about John Zink written by Buck Harris that was published in the 2005 Backroads. The Zink's owned a large tract of land bordered by Spy Run Gap Road, Zink's Mill and the current Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 25. The second highest point on the property was called Round Top at 3,300 feet above sea level and was the location for the future home of Mr. Leslie Cheek which was named "Skylark."

Nelson County pioneer John Zink was born in Augusta County, Virginia in 1822 and died some time in 1865. The cause of his death is still a mystery. His parents were David and Mary Ann Fauber Zink, and his grandparents were Phillip and Christina Summers Zink.

History has it that two Zink brothers immigrated to this country from Baden, Germany in the early 1700's and settled near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They were machinists and ironworkers by trade and established a machine shop and foundry in Germantown, Pennsylvania. The business prospered and the brothers invited and assisted their two younger brothers from Baden to come and join them. A decision was then made to turn the machine shop and foundry over to the younger brothers (one being Hiram) and the older brothers ventured into the business of making gunpowder. Hiram and his unknown English wife had a son, Phillip, who was born in 1766.

Phillip, working in the iron business, became a very skilled machinist and iron worker but was enticed to leave the business in Pennsylvania and relocate to August County, Virginia to assist Robert H. McCormick develop the reaper. Zink purchased a farm in southeast Augusta County near Steeles Tavern (a farm known as The Wright Place on Dabney's Road today). In addition to his farm work, he worked for and with Robert Hall McCormick in the design and development of a machine to harvest grain—the reaper.

As a matter of interest: Even today there is still considerable contention as to who was the original inventor of this new mechanical reaper; Robert Hall McCormick, or his son Cyrus Hall McCormick. In either case, tradition has it that members of the Zink family, father Phillip and his son, Samuel U. Zink, played a significant role in its technical design and development. Phillip worked with Robert for over twenty years and up to about 1831, when Robert apparently either gave up the efforts or gave his work in progress to son Cyrus. According to history, Cyrus H. and Samuel U. Zink successfully demonstrated and operated a grain harvester or reaper in a matter of weeks after restarting the efforts on 1831. This was a crude device but it could still harvest in one day the same amount of wheat that it would take five men to harvest by hand.

Cyrus and Samuel continued enhancements and modifications to this reaper until 1834, when Cyrus obtained a patent for a modified and enhanced mechanical reaper in his own name. In researching the records of this article, it was interesting to note that the history we were taught indicating Cyrus Hall McCormick patented the first reaper is in error. The first patent was issued to an Obed Hussey of Illinois in 1833.

It is obvious that the Zink's, both Phillip and Samuel U., contributed significantly to the technical design and development of the reaper but do not sell Cyrus Hall McCormick short! He was a brilliant and tenacious businessman, ruthless administrator and topnotch salesman. The McCormick's made millions from this invention and other International Harvester equipment but it is obvious they used this windfall wisely. Many educational and charitable organizations are still being funded today by endowments left by the McCormick family. This subject is history in itself and would be an interesting research project for someone.

Most of the Zink's were mechanical geniuses and would be classified as design engineers in today's workforce. Whereas Phillip and Samuel U. devoted their efforts toward the reaper, John's dream dreams were to develop a device that would thresh out the grain from its husk and separate the husk and stem from the grain. Sometime prior to 1860, John apparently had become successful in developing this mechanical grain threshing machine prior to his death in 1865. John had not obtained a patent or attempted to sell this new device by the time he died in 1865. This prototype machine was stored in the basement portion of his home located on the Zink farm near Round Top. After John died, his brothers Henry and Andrew Jackson Zink relocated this device from the mountain home to the Phillip Zink homeplace near Steeles Tavern. It was their intent to patent the device and sell the patent if they were not able to line up a manufacturing capability.

In 1880, the Zink homeplace burned and along with the destruction of the home, was the destruction of the prototype threshing machine. Henry and A. J. became discouraged and abandoned their efforts. No record could be found in the U. S. Government Patent Office that any Zink had made an application for a machine to thresh any form of grain. As a matter of record, the first patent issued for the "threshing machine" was in 1851 to Cyrus Roberts and John Cox. Apparently, this first machine patented merely threshed (beat) out the grain but did not separate the grain from the husk and straw.

John Zink married Susan Evaline Hatter in 1855 at Massies Mill, Virginia. Evaline was the daughter of Jessie and Roxie Hatter of Nelson County. They had six children as follows:

Virginia Roxie Zink, b. July 27, 1856

James William Zink, b. January 2, 1858

John Ballard Zink, b. November 29, 1859

David Henry Zink, b. July 28, 1861

Adeline Whitemen Zink, b. October 5, 1863

Samuel Berry Zink, b. April 5, 1865.

John and Evaline owned and lived on a large farm in Nelson County in the vicinity of Montebello; a farm known as "Round Top." John worked the farm and did carpenter and machinist work throughout the area. The Zinks sold the farm to the Fauber family who owned it for several generations (Jacob Tilden Fauber, David Franklin Fauber, Hercy Franklin Fauber, and lastly, Harry Jefferies Fauber) before selling it to a man named J. K. Timmons. Timmons, in turn, sold the farm to a Mr. Leslie Cheek, Jr. who built a large and beautiful home at the summit of Round

Top Mountain which was named “Skylark.” Cheek then left the farm to Washington and Lee College in Lexington. The college grew Christmas trees on the farm that were sold to the public for many years before it was sold again. The farm is now a winery with commanding mountain views.

By studying history and genealogy of “The Zink Families in America” as developed, written and published in 1933 by Dora Kellogg Zink, of Omaha, Nebraska, and then “The McCormick Family and Their Mechanical Reaper,” as written and published by the Department of Astronomy, University of Virginia, published 1999-2004,” one will develop an appreciation of the connections between these two families.

In her research, Dora Kellogg Zink indicated that John Zink was a member of the CSA with Captain James Newton’s Company and was killed on March 11, 1865. Oral history from members of the Zink family supports the fact that John served in the Civil War but was killed by carpetbaggers on the way home after the war. An application to the National Archives in Washington DC received a response that John Zink was not a member of either the Union or Confederate Army. The closest match that could be made was for a John H. “Sink,” Co. B, 24th Virginia Infantry, who enlisted on May 23, 1861 and was killed March 5, 1864. This soldier was originally from Franklin County and joined the CSA in Lynchburg. However, John did have two brothers, Henry H. and Andrew J. Zink, who served in Co. E, 5th Virginia Infantry that was commanded by the Captain James Newton.

The 1860 census reveals that John Zink (age 38) and wife Evaline (age 32) were living in Abingdon, Virginia, with their three small children. They were living next door to John’s uncle, Andrew Jackson Zink (age 47) and his wife Lucy (age 47) and their six children. Both John and A.J. were working as machinists. By the 1870 census, and after the Civil War, John is not found but Evaline is living back at their homeplace at Round Top in Nelson County, widowed, and with her now six children. Andrew Jackson Zink had moved from Abingdon to Christiansburg; remarried to wife Catherine, and working as a pattern-maker and finisher.

The cause of John’s death in march of 1865 (if that is the correct date) is still in question. He was fathering children in Nelson County during the Civil War period of 1861 through 1864. Does anyone know what really happened to John Zink and where he may be buried? Significant information presented herein was captured from the Dora Kellogg Zink publication, copyrighted in 1933.