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SAMUEL MASON

1739-1803

Captain in Virginia
Judge in Pennsylvania
River pirate in Kentucky
Desperado in Mississippi

by
Raymond Martin Bell

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Washington, Pennsylvania
1985

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| DATE MICROFILMED | |
| April 15, 1985 | |
| ITEM # <u>2</u> | |
| PROJECT and | G. S. |
| ROLL # | CALL # |
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| <u>2029</u> | |

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This is the story of Samuel Mason who in 1781 was the "Honorable Samuel Mason," associate judge of Washington County, Pa and for whom the governor of Mississippi in 1803 offered a reward of \$500 for his capture as a desperado. His brother, Isaac, was one of the leading citizens of Fayette County, Pa, listed in the Dictionary of American Biography as "pioneer ironmaster". In the same volume Samuel is a "desperado and river pirate". Samuel's sister, Elizabeth, married John Fell, a Methodist circuit-rider.

Samuel's grandfather, George Mason, a justice and captain, died in Norfolk, Va in 1711. Samuel's father, Thomas Mason (Meason), died in Fayette Co, Pa in 1779. Samuel, born in 1739, grew up near Charles Town, W Va. In the 1760s he was accused of stealing horses from Col Hite near Charles Town; in the 1770s of taking supplies from the fort at Wheeling, W Va; in the 1780s he ran up debts in Washington Co, Pa; in the 1790s he was robbing boats near Henderson, Ky; in the 1800s he was killing people near Natchez, Miss. In 1800 he got a Spanish passport.

He was living at Little Prairie, just south of New Madrid, Mo at the end of 1802. He was brought to trial in January 1803 by the Spanish authorities at New Madrid for alleged crimes. There is a complete record of the trial. Samuel Mason and four sons testified. In 1803 Mrs Samuel Mason was living at Bayou Pierre, Miss, across the Mississippi river from St Joseph, Ark with her daughter Elizabeth Briscoe. In 1823 family members lived in Warren and Jefferson Cos, Miss.

Yet, Samuel served as a captain at Fort Henry (Wheeling, W Va) from 1777-81, performing gallantly - even suffering wounds in an attack. Many stories of his exploits are given by Otto A Rothert in The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock. The area is now an Illinois state park.

How could a man like this fall so far? The reason will never be known. Some of his children were respectable citizens in Ohio and Texas.

Thomas Mason, father of Samuel, was born in Norfolk, Virginia Feb 22-1707. His first child was born May 3-1737. The last record of Thomas at Norfolk is three months later, when he sold some land. There is still a Mason's Creek at Norfolk. The second child, Samuel was born Nov 8-1739. The place is not known. The next record of Thomas is in 1754 when he bought land on Mill Creek (now W Va). He sold this in 1759 and bought land on Everett Run, a branch of the Shenandoah in Berkeley (now Jefferson) Co, W Va. He sold the second tract in 1777 and moved to what is now Fayette County, Pa. The Everett Run tract was near Charles Town, a few miles east of Mill Creek - originally Frederick Co, Va.

Jefferson County is across the river from Washington County, Maryland. Samuel was married about 1767, possibly to a Dorsey, for he had a son, Dorsey. Dorsey is a well-known family in Maryland. It is not known when Samuel went west. His brother, Isaac, four years younger, went to Fayette County in 1771 and was married the next year. Another brother, John, went with Isaac to Fayette County.

There is no record of Samuel in Fayette County. He likely went to what is now Ohio County (W Va) about 1773 or 1774. He lived about 2 miles east of Wheeling at Mason's Bottom. He bought 3 tracts on Wheeling Creek. The first record is January 7-1777 when he was named militia captain. He was wounded in a rally against ambushed Indians in September 1777. In 1779 he moved from Wheeling Creek to Buffalo Creek, now Buffalo Twp, Washington Co, Pa. His farm adjoined that of Samuel Williamson, lying to the southeast. Mason bought it from Joseph Arnold Mar 3-1779, although Arnold did not have a deed from Williamson until April 15. In 1785 the sheriff seized the land for debts of Mason and sold it to Daniel Leet, who had the land warranted and patented. Leet sold it in 1796 to Hardman Horn.

Previous accounts of Mason have not given much on his connections with Washington County.

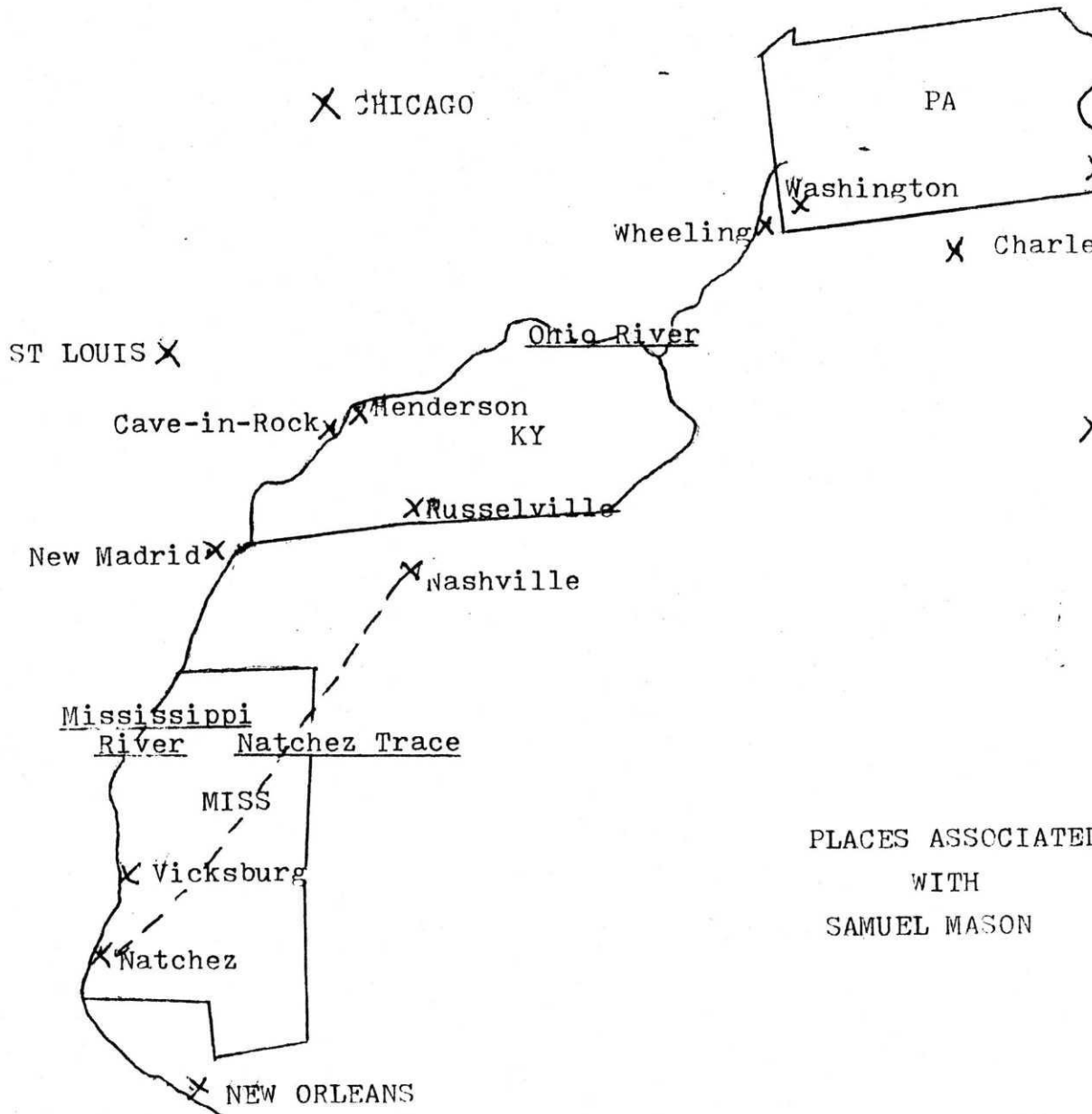
On Dec 11-1779 Samuel Mason with neighbors, James Clemens, Samuel Williamson, John Boggs and John McBride, went to Redstone Fort (Brownsville) to apply for Virginia certificates for their Buffalo land. When Washington County was formed Mason was chosen justice of the peace for Donegal Twp (Jul 15-1781) and as the "Honorable Samuel Mason" was commissioned associate judge of the county Aug 24-1781. In the first tax list in 1782 he is taxed for 500 acres, 2 horses, 4 cows and 6 sheep. In 1783 he had 4 slaves. Late in 1784, with several law suits against him for debts, he left for Kentucky. On June 3-1785 he sold his farm on Buffalo to his oldest son, Thomas, but the sheriff sold it anyway.

Jeremiah Clemens, son of James, visited Mason near the Red River in Kentucky in April 1789, spending a week with him. Jeremiah's father in a letter written in November 1788 had warned Jeremiah about Mason:

I must believe you to know Mason so well as to be particularly well acquainted with the policy he generally makes use of where he expects an advantage. Take particular care not to give up the judgment till you have a final satisfaction for the whole amount.

Mason became leader of a robber band first near Henderson, Ky and then near Natchez, Miss. John Dodd, a prominent citizen of Washington, Pa, who kept a tavern across from the courthouse, went on a trip to New Orleans in 1794. He drew up his will on April 2 before departing. He died returning from New Orleans; his will was probated July 15. Years later Jonathan Leet (1768-1853), brother of Daniel, said Dodd was killed by Mason and his band. While judge, Mason had probably visited Dodd's tavern.

In 1803 Mason was arrested by the Spanish authorities and brought to trial, but he escaped. He robbed boatmen on the Ohio and Mississippi and travelers on the Natchez Trace. The governor of Miss offered a reward for his capture. He was killed by members of his gang in July 1803. He said if he robbed someone from the Pittsburgh area he gave them money to get home.



PLACES ASSOCIATED
WITH
SAMUEL MASON

- THOMAS (son of George) MASON b Feb 22-1707 Norfolk, Va d Mar 15-1779
Westmoreland (now Fayette) Co ml 1736 Mary (dau of Nathaniel)
Newton; m2 c 1742 Elizabeth --- b Apr 12-1721 - - in Norfolk 1737;
in (now) Jefferson Co, W Va 1745, 1777 - children all living 1779
1. Hannah b May 3-1737, single
 2. (Capt) Samuel b Nov 8-1739 d Jul 1803 near Natchez, Miss m cl767
 - a. Thomas b cl768 - in 1803 trial, wife in Miss^{(?Rosanna ?Dorsey}
 - b. John b cl770 m 1794 Margaret Douglass - in 1803 trial - to Canada
 - c. dau
 - d. dau m 1794 Kuykendal in Ky
 - e. Dorsey b Aug 11-1776 d Aug 25-1814 Fairfield Co, Ohio m Jan 20-
1799 Hannah (dau of John) Mason b Jan 1-1782 d Aug 3-1859 near
Montpelier, Ind - - living 1806 Fairfield Co
Ch: Samuel 1800-, John 1802-1819, Rosannah (Howe) 1804-1866,
Harriett 1806-1839, Thomas 1808-1883, Dorsey 1811-1880,
Magnus 1813-1883
 - f. Elizabeth b cl778 d cl815 m cl800 Philip Briscoe cl758-1832+
Ch: Rosannah (Briscoe), Elizabeth (Clark) 1809-1898, Thomas,
Margaret (Grissom), John M - - lived Miss
 - g. Isaac b cl780 in Fairfield Co 1806 may have d Champaign Co 1838
Ch: William, Sebastian, John, Isaac, Rachel, Ann, Sarah, Elizabeth
 - h. dau b cl782
 - i. Samuel b 1784 Pa d 1863 Fort Bend Co, Texas m Mary ---; 1803 trial
Ch: Dorsey, Roseannan (Kenchelow), Elizabeth (Nolan), Susan
(Briscoe), Thomas
 - j. Magnus b 1786 Ky - in 1803 trial
 3. (Col) Isaac b Aug 15-1743 d Jan 25-1818 Fayette Co, Pa m Apr 1772
Catherine (dau of Lawrence) Harrison
Ch: Thomas 1773-1813, Elizabeth (Murphy), George -1813, Isaac
1779-1836, Mary 1780-1852 (Rogers)
 4. George b Feb 6-1746, living 1779, ?no issue /Cape Girardeau, Mo
 5. Rachael b Nov 6-1749 ml Robert Worthington Jr m2 --- Thompson - 1803
 6. Sarah b Feb 15-1751 m George Cole Briscoe
 7. (Major) John b Feb 22-1753 d Aug 1805 m 1772 Hannah (dau of William)
Ch: Isaac 1773-1845, Elizabeth (Cherry) 1776-, Martha \Frost
(Randall) 1779-, Hannah (Mason) 1782-1859, John 1784-,
Nancy 1787-, Mary (Watson) 1789-, Thomas 1791-, Frances 1794-,
(Salter) 1793-, George 1796-
 8. Thomas b Jul 17-1755, 1779 with George Rogers Clark, Ky
 9. Joseph b Jul 7-1759, 1779 with George Rogers Clark, Ky
 10. Ann b Jan 27-1761, single
 11. Mary b Jan 22-1763, single
 12. Elizabeth b May 11-1768 d Jul 10-1831 m cl780 (Rev) John Fell
1763-1845 Abington, Ind
Ch: Catherine, Matthew, John Wesley, George, Mary (Connelly)
cl798-1834, Elizabeth (Fleming) 1802-, Hannah (Stephen) 1802-

THE TRIAL OF THE MASONS AT NEW MADRID, MO 1803

Taken from a 111-page translation from the French, provided by the
Mississippi Dept of Arcives & History

Witnesses: Samuel Mason and sons, John, Thomas, Samuel, Magnus
and John's wife, Marguerite nee Douglas

Speaking against the Masons: John Taylor, alias Setton, who claimed
he had been held prisoner by Samuel Mason

Francis Detroutt and F Eustache telling of events at Henderson,
Kentucky about 1791

Pierre Billets telling of an event on the Cumberland in 1798

The trial was held before: Henri Peyroux, Commandant of New Madrid Dist
Pierre Antoine Laforge, Police Commiaioner
Joseph Charpentier, Interpreter

Also involved: Capt Robert McCay, Lt Francois le Sieur, Corp Felipe Cano

It all began on January 11-1803 when Pierre Dapron of New Madrid,
Igance Belan and George Raddet, both of Little Prairie, about 30
miles down the river, reported that at the end of December a band
of men, plus a woman with 3 children, arrived at Little Prairie.
They bought supplies, rented a house and hired a man to work for them.
They were well-armed, stayed together and spent a lot of time on the
river bank. The head of the group was said to be Samuel Mason, who
was charged with robberies on the Mississippi.

Mason had been issued a passport in March 1803 by Commandant Pey-
roux authorizing him to go to Natchez and return and settle in the
District of New Madrid. The group was said to be fleeing from the
governor of Natchez.

The group was ordered to be picked up and taken to New Madrid.
All their belongings were taken and the group put in the prison at
New Madrid. Over \$7000 in bank-notes were found. Mason protested
saying that he had done no wrong on Spanish territory (i.e. west of
the Mississippi). In the trial there was much discussion of a number
of robberies. Mason insisted he was not the culprit, that he was
trying to help solve the robberies.

Testimony was taken from January 18 to January 27. Dr Richard
Jones Water said that he had met Mason at Red Bank (Henderson) 1791/2 and
had given Mrs Mason medicine. He had also supported the granting of
the passport to Samuel Mason. On January 31 the Commandant ordered the
men to be taken to New Orleans for further trial. Expenses at New Mad-
rid = \$350 for trial and \$703 for making the arrest.

SAMUEL MASON said that he was a native of Pennsylvania; that his residence was at Bayou Pierre at the crossroads of The Stone to Sharpen. This was in the District of Natchez. He had sold his land and was hoping to establish himself at Little Prairie. He was heir to some land on the Monongahela from his brother who died without issue. His son-in-law and wife resided at Bayou Pierre. Philip Briscoe was married to his daughter. He had two sons who were to come down from the Monongahela. He had a sister at Cape Girardeau. Her first husband was Worthington, her second one Thompson. His brother who had charge of a kiln on the Youghiogheny married a sister of Genl Benj Harrison. (John Taylor in his testimony said that he knew Benjamin Harrison; that Mason talked of his part in the Revolution, spoke of robberies and said at his daughter's wedding the horses were stolen. Also that John Mason had been in prison and that Thomas Mason and his brothers-in-law had broken into the prison (near Natchez) and had freed John.)

JOHN MASON said he was a native of Penna; he had come from Nogales (now Vicksburg) to settle at Little Prairie. He had two brothers, one in Kentucky and one near the Ohio, an aunt and uncle Thompson in Cape Girardeau. At that place was a Mr Wheatis with whom he had been acquainted from the time he (John) was a little boy. He mentioned Briscoe living at Natchez.

THOMAS MASON (oldest son) was a native of Pennsylvania and resided at Bayou Pierre. He was a farmer; had gone into the west to collect; and had taken whiskey and flour to New Orleans.

MARGUERITE MASON said that she too was from Penna and had been married about eight years.

SAMUEL MASON Jr said he was 18, was born in Penna. He stayed with his father, except when he was with his mother at Bayou Pierre. His brother-in-law was Philip Briscoe. He had left her mother - an honorable woman and infirm - about October 1802.

MAGNUS MASON said he was 16 and was born in Kentucky. He had stayed with his father in Kentucky and his sister at Natchez.

The inventory is given in detail. It was valued at \$432 plus \$7163 in bank-notes.

John Taylor reported that Samuel Mason had said that "he had been at this trade" for 40 years. Did he mean stealing?

CHRONOLOGY

- 1739 Nov 8 Samuel Mason born in Virginia
- 1754 living with his father near Charles Town, W Va
Jefferson Co, earlier Frederick Co and Berkeley Co
- c1767 married
- c1773 to Wheeling Creek, now Ohio Co, W Va
bought 2 claims from Paul Stull, 1 from James Clarke
- 1776 Aug 11 son, Dorsey, born
- 1777 Jan 7 named captain of militia
- 1777 Jan 28 attended council at Catfish, now Washington, Pa
- 1777 Mar 3 road to be laid out from Fort Henry (Wheeling) to the
first forks of Wheeling Creek via Mason's bottom
- 1777 May pursued Indians - letter to Philadelphia told of it
- 1777 Jun 8 wrote letter to Genl Hand (see Crumrine)
- 1777 Jul 17 wrote letter to Genl Hand about Grave Creek
- 1777 Aug 12 at Fort Henry, wrote to Genl Hand
- 1777 Aug 22 patrolled from Fort Henry to Grave Creek
- 1777 Sep 1 wounded in Indian ambush
- 1777 Oct 8 took oath of allegiance
- 1777 Oct 13 paid for a drum
- 1778 on Ohio Co tax list (surety and appraiser several times)
- 1778 Mar 1 witness of will of Thomas Worthington
- 1778 Apr 7 administrator of Rodgers McBride estate
- 1778 Jun 2 stole supplies from Fort Henry
sued by James Caldwell
- 1778 Aug 4 Hugh Sidwell a witness for Mason
Mason sued by Joseph Tumbleston
- 1778 Nov 2 Ohio Co juror
- 1779 in militia district #7 - moved to Buffalo
- 1779 Mar 3 bought farm from Joseph Arnold
- 1779 Mar 14 got 5 shillings from father's estate

- 1789 Apr Jeremiah Clemens, son of neighbor James Clemens
visited Capt Mason near Russellville, Ky
- 1790 Samuel and Thomas Mason signed petition near Russellville
- 1791 Mason met Dr Water at Henderson
- 1792 got medicine for wife from Dr Water
- 1794 Apr Abraham Clemens, brother of Jeremiah, started down the
Ohio for New Orleans - got passport May 5 at New Madrid
- 1794 Jun John Dodd killed on return from New Orleans
- 1794 Jul 9 Benjamin Van Cleve in journal tells of visit to Mason
near Henderson
- 1795 John Dunn beaten
- 1797 Mason at Cave-in-Rock
- 1797 John Dunn, lawman, killed by Mason's band
- 1800 Mar 29 got passport at New Madrid
- 1801 Aug 14 Baker robbery on Natchez trail
- 1802 Apr Baker robbery on American side of Mississippi
- 1802 Owsley robbery on Spanish side
- 1802 to Little Prairie, Mo
- 1803 Jan trial at New Madrid, Mo
- 1803 Feb sent under guard to New Orleans, returned to U S
- 1803 Mar 26 shot boat commander and escaped - Gov Claiborne of Miss
offered \$500 reward for capture of Mason
- 1803 Jul killed and beheaded by members of his gang

THOMAS MASON 1707-1779

son of

(Capt) GEORGE MASON c1667-1711 Norfolk m Phillis (dau of Peter) Hobson

son of

(Col) LEMUEL MASON c1628-1702 Norfolk m Ann (dau of Henry) Sewell

son of

(Lt) FRANCIS MASON 1584-1648 Norfolk m Mary --- - to Virginia 1613

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Draper Mss 2S113

Capt Sam Mason - his brother Col Isaac Mason settled at the foot of Laurel Hill, above the head of Redstone, as early as 1771 - respected. But Capt Sam did not live there; settled early on Wheeling Creek with a bad name from the start - horse thief. He had two sons, one John; and two sons-in-law; and all of a feather. Capt M had a singularly Roman hooked nose, only equalled by his son John's. Mason lived at the Red Banks - a party of 20 men started to go and kill him, but he got wind of it and escaped in a skiff, saluted with several long shots. Then he went to the Walnut Hills - had a party - waylaid the trails, and would learn from Natchez when a man with a good sum was coming and lightened his load. If the amount was small, he would not be disturbed. He was apprehended at New Madrid by Spanish authorities, and sent to New Orleans, where it was found no crimes of his could be proven to have been committed in Spanish dominion. And it was determined to send him in irons to the U S, and while conveying him up the river in a boat, and while the men were careless and on shore, he seized a gun and shot the first who approached. The others ran off and thus he regained his liberty. He recommenced his old operations - captured boats loaded - reward offered - two of his men cut off his head. The second son went to Canada.

(Red Banks = Henderson, Ky - - Walnut Hills = Vicksburg, Miss)

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Passport - translated from the French

New Madrid, March 29th, 1800

Whereas Samuel Masson, Esqr. has expressed a wish to settle in this district and wishes to arrange his business affairs, We, Don Henri Peyroux de la Coudrenerer, Captain of the Armies of His Majesty, Civil and Military Commander of this Post and District of New Madrid, hereby grant permission to said Samuel Masson to proceed to Natchez per boat, and on his return from there, said Samuel Masson may select a suitable place in this District for himself and family. He, Samuel Masson, having by oath attested his loyalty and fidelity to us, we pray that no hindrance be placed to his proposed journey. HENRI PEYROUX

DB 1 128 Washington County, Pennsylvania

Know all men that I Samuel Mason have bargained and sold unto Thomas Mason all my right title and interest of and to a certain tract of land situate state of Penna & Co of Washington & Twp of Donegal, surveyed on Va certificate, it being the same place that I Samuel Mason lived on in said co & twp have bargained and sold unto him and his heirs from me and my heirs forever warranting and defending the same from all persons claiming or to claim with all and singular the buildings and improvements woods ways waters and everything thereunto belonging for the sum of £400 Pa money. June 3-1785.

Samuel Mason

Wit: Robert Goudy, Philip Briscoe,

John Emerson, Hugh Sidwell

June 18-1785 Hugh Sidwell testified he saw S M sign deed

Sidwell was then in Washington Co

Hugh Sidwell lived in Buffalo Two before 1775 to 1785, when he went to Ky. IN Aug 1778 he was a witness for Mason; in Dec 1784 he went bail for Mason. In June 1780 Sidwell sold land in Kentucky, recording the deed in Ohio Co, then Va. He was in Ky June 3-1785 when he witnessed Mason's deed for his Pa farm. Fifteen days later Sidwell testified in Washington Co that he had seen Mason sign the deed. A Pa neighbor, Jeremiah Clemens visited Sidwell near Lexington, Ky in May 1788.

MASON FARM IN BUFFALO TWP

