

**PLACES NEAR
THE
MOUNTAINS**



by Helen R. Prillaman

**Places Near the Mountains [Botetourt
and Roanoke Counties, Virginia], by
Helen R. Prillaman, Baltimore, MD,
Genealogical Publishing Co., 2002**

The Coon Family

Available information indicates that the first "Coon" (spelled many different ways—Gohn, Goan, Kohn, Kuhn, etc) in America was John Gohn (Coon) who came from the Palatinate—a German province—to Pennsylvania on the ship "The Thistle" which landed in Philadelphia September 19, 1738. Two others of the same name, Adam and Philip Gohn, came on the same ship and it is thought that John, Adam and Philip were brothers. The three were married before they came or were married shortly after their arrival.

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Soon after landing in Philadelphia the Gohn (Coon) brothers made their way to the Susquehanna River, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, settling in the area that was to become York County, Pennsylvania.

John Gohn (Coon) died in the fall of 1769, leaving seven sons and two daughters. No mention was made of his wife, Rosanna, in the settlement of the estate, indicating that she predeceased him.

The children of John and Rosanna Gohn (Coon) were:

1. ANDREW who succeeded to the ownership of his father's property on the Susquehanna River. He died, leaving his widow Veronica and a number of minor children. It appears that these children continued to live in York County, Pennsylvania.
2. JOHN married Catherine Synder. He moved with his family from York County, Pennsylvania shortly after the Revolution. However, it is not known where he settled after moving from Pennsylvania. A number of his nine children came to Botetourt County, perhaps all of them, in 1797 and 1798. Prior to the War of 1812 they had moved on to Fayette County, Ohio.
3. ADAM, born in 1743, left York County, Pennsylvania in 1782 and with his wife, Catherine and four children. It is thought that they moved to Berkley County, Virginia (now West Virginia). After Adam's death the widow and children moved to Ohio.
4. JACOB, SR. died in Botetourt County in 1813. His wife, Eve Burger Coon, survived him by one year. They left no will or real estate. They had nine children.
5. MICHAEL died in Botetourt County in 1814, leaving his widow Dorothy and ten children.
6. CHRISTIAN was born in 1753. He left York County, Pennsylvania in 1782 or 1783. His wife's name was Elizabeth and they had a son, John.
7. ELIZABETH was born in 1756. It is thought that she married John Fout and moved to Botetourt County in 1783.
8. LEWIS was born in 1758. He came to Botetourt County in 1782. He was unmarried.
9. CATHERINE was born in 1760. She married John Custer in 1780. They came to Botetourt County where John died in 1837. They had 12 children.

All of the Gohn (Kuhn, etc.) descendants who came to the Valley of Virginia and on into the Roanoke Valley, Anglicized their name to "Coon". One of the descendants tells us that according to information passed down through the family, members of the family were so incensed over the Hessian soldiers coming to America and fighting against the Colonists during the Revolution, they had their name changed to the Anglicized spelling of "Coon".

While it is not the intention to trace the Coon family lineage, it is important that certain information be given about members of this family who played such an important part in the development and economic growth of the area.

During the last few years there has been much discussion and interest in the Highland Park area, specifically the house known as the "Alexander-Gish" house, a log-bodied structure covered with clapboard, which is located in Highland Park, City of Roanoke, Va.

A review of the history of this house reveals that it was built by Michael Howbert who married Hannah Peffley on July 31, 1818, on a 55-acre tract of land which had been given to him by his father, George Howbert, located on the north bank of the Roanoke River.

Michael Howbert traded this property on October 22, 1825 to Abram Walters for land on Little River in Montgomery County. On December 12, 1829 Walters sold the property which he had acquired from Michael Howbert to Watkins L. Eanes. Eanes sold the property to Jacob Wingate on May 2, 1832. Wingate had purchased an additional 26 acres adjoining the 55-acre tract from John Campbell. William Coon purchased the total acreage from Wingate on October 3, 1836 and a survey showed that he had 91 acres of land along with the old Howbert log house.

William Coon, born in 1807, and his wife Leah, born in 1802, had four sons — William R., John, Patterson and Robert. Mrs. Leah Coon died in 1852 and was the first to be buried on a slope west of their home (the log house built by Michael Howbert). William Coon died in 1860. The son, William R., and his wife, Nannie Ellen Mason, lived in the old house. At his father's death he inherited his estate.

William R. Coon died in 1863 at the age of 26. He had been in poor health for sometime and he tried to have a will drawn that would vest a life estate to his wife with the remaining part to his brothers. William R. Coon was buried in the family cemetery on a slope west of his dwelling, with his parents.

At the close of the War Between the States a Confederate Veteran by the name of Samuel Henry Gish (born in 1837) began visiting his sister, Mrs. Howbert, who was Mrs. William R. Coon's nearest neighbor. He became friends with Mrs. Coon and soon married her. Thus the Coon land that was to become part of Highland Park became known as the "Gish Land" and the wooded area "Gish's Woods".

John and Patterson Coon sold their part of the land to Armstrong, who sold it to John Trout. Robert Coon sold his land to J. F. Simpkins.

Time went on. The Shenandoah Valley Railroad connected with the N & W at Big Lick. There was activity again in the handling of the Coon land. The big boom in real estate came and in 1890 several prominent business people offered the Gishes \$80,000 for the property. The sale was never finalized, however, due to a number of factors, including the question of the right to sell in view of the terms of William R. Coon's will. On December 5, 1901 the City of Roanoke Council announced that \$10,000 was being offered for the property with the understanding that the tenants vacate and remove the bodies from the burial plot within 90 days. At that time citizens of Roanoke felt that there were many improvements needed in the City and there was a great deal of haggling between Council and citizens before the purchase became a reality. The park was not developed until a number of years following the purchase. The widow of William R. Coon, who married Samuel H. Gish, died in 1925.

Patterson Coon was born September 13, 1825 and married Nancy Barnhart, who was born October 15, 1827. They were charter members of the Peters Creek Church of The Brethren. Patterson Coon was a pioneer in commercial fruit growing and lived on a large farm in the Cave Spring section of Roanoke County.

Their son, J. William Coon, born May 22, 1850, married Sarah Catherine Huff on September 29, 1875. Sarah Catherine Huff was the daughter of Lewis H. Huff (Roanoke County's First Treasurer) and Elizabeth Nininger Huff. (Elizabeth was the daughter of Peter and Lydia Gish Nininger). John William and Sarah Catherine Coon lived in a large Queen Anne Style House which stood near the confluence of Carvin and Tinker Creeks on Hollins Road—in later years numbered 4815 Hollins Road. Their home was known as "Wheatland". The house was torn down in November, 1975 when the property was sold for industrial development.

John William Coon was a very successful and prominent business man in the area. He was President of the Commercial National Bank which stood on the northwest corner of Campbell and Jefferson. He was Vice-President of Traders Loan and Trust Company (A. S. Asberry was President) and Treasurer of the Melrose Land Company. Among other important positions held by Mr. Coon was his position as Treasurer of the Academy of Music Company. The Academy, which opened October 7, 1872, served Roanoke and surrounding areas for many years, bringing outstanding entertainment to the community. Mr. Coon began business for himself at the age of 18 and prided himself on being a "self-made man". He owned considerable business property in the City of Roanoke.

The beautiful and productive farm owned by the Coon family in north Roanoke on the old Hollins Road, at the confluence of Carvin and Tinker Creeks — is now the scene of development, mostly of an industrial nature. The impressive old Queen Ann style house that was for so long a familiar part of the area, was torn down in November, 1975. Workmen razing the old house were surprised to find that they actually had "a house within a house" on their hands. They found a full two-story log cabin underneath the weatherboarding. The cabin's logs still bore bark and according to Mr. Tony Whitwell of Hollins College, during a newspaper interview at the time, the logs had always been covered by clapboard. Mr. Whitwell is a well-known authority on architecture.

Mrs. Kathy Hill Fischer, of Florissant, Missouri spent much of her childhood at the Coon home. She remembers her grandmother, Mrs. Princess Lambert Coon, often telling her about her own youth and she also remembers that she mentioned many times that the Coon house was almost 200 years old. We must then wonder who built the old Coon home.

The first members of the Coon family came to America almost 250 years ago. A number of them came to the Roanoke Valley over 150 years ago. They have played a very important part in developing and making the Valley the great and beautiful place it is today.