

Loyalists and Scoundrels In The Family

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As I began to research the Steele family tree in order to apply for my UEL certificate, I came across my great-great-great grandmother, Martha Doan. An early internet reference indicated that she was a cousin to the “notorious Doan outlaws”. That piqued my curiosity, as you might imagine.

The Doan family was not represented on the Mayflower in 1620, but even so, by 1631 John Doan was a well-respected and important member of the Plymouth society. Some of the line moved to the New Jersey area and became prominent there. Eventually, Israel Doan and his family migrated west to Bucks County, in Pennsylvania. His son, Joseph, became a prosperous and respected farmer in that area. He and his wife produced a large family which included five sons- Moses, Aaron, Levi, Joseph Jr., and Mahlon. These five boys, along with a cousin, Abraham Doan, were to give rise to the Doan legends.

The boys were excellent riders and marksmen, and were widely known for their overall athletic abilities. With the approach of hostilities with Britain, the rebel factions began to pressure those who tried to stay out of the coming conflict. Joseph Sr., being Quaker, would not swear to support either side. This, to the rebels, marked him as a Loyalist; the farm was raided frequently, property was damaged and both crops and animals were stolen. In addition, Joseph was branded on one hand to mark his refusal to support the rebel views. The Doan sons soon decided that it was time to avenge these wrongs, be they Quaker or not.

The gang, led by Moses Doan, began raiding neighbouring rebel farms, extracting revenge and sharing their loot with others who had been similarly wronged. The gang members soon had a price on their heads, but the rebels were totally unable to catch the outlaws, who had many caves as hideouts, and had supportive neighbours to supply their needs.

Moses Doan came to be regarded as almost supernatural, with his ability to appear at any time and place, and to vanish just as suddenly. He aided the British several times with important information, and came to be known to General Howe as the “Eagle Spy”. On Christmas Day of 1776, Moses learned that the rebel forces were planning a surprise attack at night on the British and Hessian troops at Trenton,

New Jersey. The rebels were desperate for a victory, but Moses was able to get a note of warning to Colonel Rahl who was in command at Trenton. It read, “Washington is coming on you down the river, he will be here afore long. Doan.” The colonel was playing cards, reportedly, and put the note, unread, into his pocket. It was found there the next day, after a great victory by Washington’s forces. On such small events do the great moments in history depend.

As the war wound down, the Doan gang began to target banks from time to time. This caused them to lose their popular support, and they became true wanted outlaws. Eventually some of the gang were cornered in a saloon, and captured. Moses surrendered and handed over his gun, after which he was shot dead. Levi and Abraham Doan were tried in Philadelphia and hung. Mahlon Doan was jailed and had shackles on his legs. While he awaited his hanging, he somehow got hold of a knife or razor. He trimmed the meat from his ankles and slipped out of his shackles, got to a horse and escaped. His jailors followed the bloody trail through the snow, but he got away.

Years later, his brother Joseph claimed that Mahlon had gotten on a boat and sailed for England. Aaron and Joseph Doan escaped into the Niagara area of Canada, where they settled and raised large families. They were active in the War of 1812, helping the Lincoln Militia repel the American invaders.

In the Rebellion of 1837, another cousin, Joshua Gillam Doan, was involved in a raid from Detroit into Windsor to oppose the Family Compact. A boat was burned and a Canadian soldier was killed. Doan and a friend were captured, tried as traitors and hung in the London, Ontario jail.

The family tree revealed some other interesting kin, though admittedly not close relatives. One James Doan was a pharmacist in Kingsville who gained fame for his backache pills. The Olympic speed skater Catriona Le May Doan is a cousin, as is Shane Doan who plays for the Phoenix Coyotes of the NHL. Carey Price, the Montreal Canadiens goalie, also has a place in the family.

You really can’t tell who may be hiding in your family tree...