Family Stories: Legend or Fact?

by Holly Sammons

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It was June 1825, and the Marquis de Lafayette was traveling along the newly opened Erie Canal as "The Nation's Guest." When his boat was delayed near Schoharie Creek, a local farmer named Thomas Sammons and his twelve-year-old son ventured down to catch a glimpse of the famous French general. What happened next, according to family legend, was an extraordinary recognition that connected Lafayette to a Revolutionary War-era story involving the farmer's sister-in-law, Eva Veeder Sammons. But how much of this remarkable tale is true?

This question illustrates one of genealogy's greatest challenges. Family historians spend countless hours searching for records that provide evidence of their ancestors' lives, but evaluating that evidence proves equally crucial. Some sources are more dependable than others, and it falls to the genealogist to carefully assess each piece of information before incorporating it into the family narrative. The opportunities for error are abundant, yet none of us wants inaccuracies in our family trees.

Most families carry stories that can seem more like legend than documented history. The genealogical field has well-known myths that persist despite scholarly efforts to educate people about the truth. The common belief that immigrant names were changed[1] at Ellis Island, for instance, continues to circulate. While names were changed, it did not happen at Ellis Island.

Other family legends are more specific and personal—often colorful, scandalous, or spectacular stories passed down through generations. Determining where accuracy ends and embellishment begins presents an ever-present challenge for family historians.

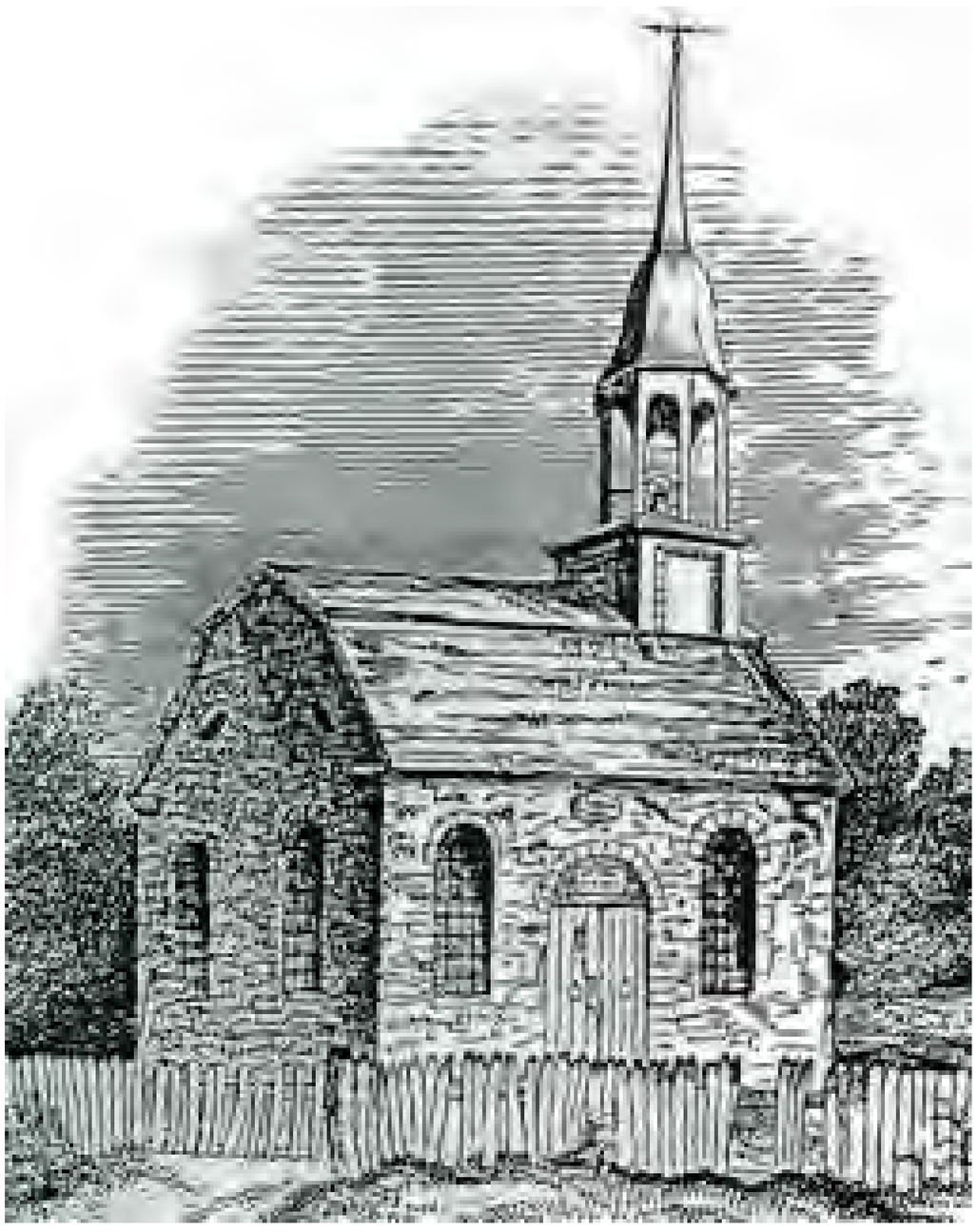

Image: Caughnawaga Reform Church, Fonda, NY.
Source: https://sites.rootsweb.com/~nytryon/fonda.html

The Early Lives of Eva Veeder and Jacob Sammons

Eva Veeder was baptized on 6 Apr 1761, in the Dutch Reformed Church at Caughnawaga, New York—the town we know today as Fonda.[2] Her parents, Johannes Veeder and Catherine Mabie, were both of Dutch descent, their families among the early settlers who had established themselves in the Albany and Schenectady regions. Around 1750, Johannes Veeder purchased land just west of the Caughnawaga village, where they would raise Eva alongside her three sisters and four brothers.[3]

At nearly the same time, another Dutch family settled less than two miles away. Samson Sammons and Rachel Schoonmaker had moved north from Ulster County, likely drawn by the same promise of land and opportunity that attracted so many others to the expanding Mohawk Valley. The Sammons family included six daughters and three sons, the eldest being Jacob—Eva's future husband.[4]

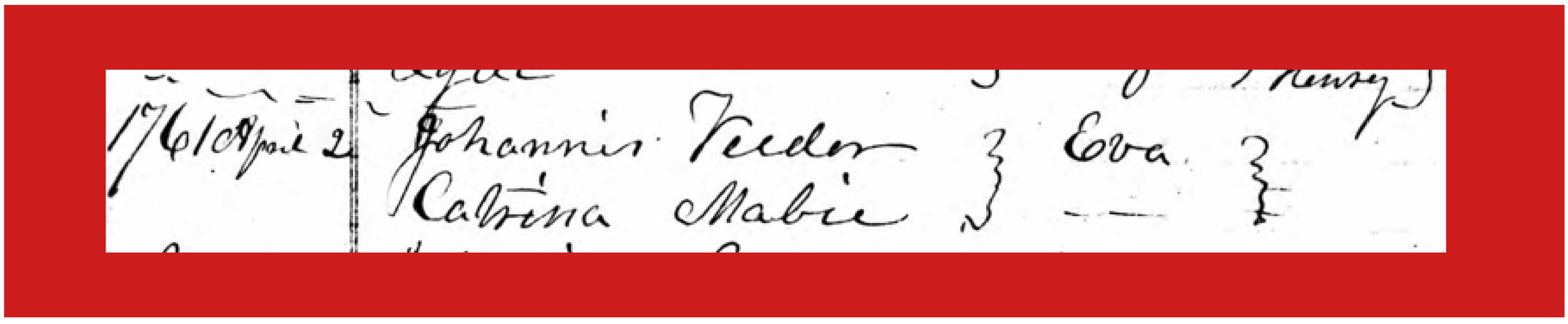

Image: Baptism Record for Eva Feeder. Records of the Caughnawaga Reformed Church.

Church, land, and probate records provide the direct evidence connecting these families to each other. This represents the "easier" aspect of genealogical research, where official records create clear trails. The Dutch Reformed churches maintained meticulous records of family events, often including women's maiden names—a practice that proves invaluable to modern researchers.

Yet the natural course of investigation opens questions that records cannot answer: Did the Veeder and Sammons families know each other before their children married? How did Eva and Jacob meet? When direct evidence fails to provide answers, genealogists must look for indirect clues.

Historical evidence suggests the Veeder and Sammons families were connected in multiple ways. They lived in the same community, belonged to the same church, men from each family served during the Revolutionary War, and various family members witnessed important life events including baptisms and marriages.

Patriots and Politics in the Mohawk Valley

The years leading up to the Revolution marked a time of tremendous growth and expansion in the Mohawk Valley. In 1772, the new county of Tryon was carved from Albany County's western territory, expanding the province's frontier. One early settler who left a great impact on the Johnstown and Caughnawaga areas was Sir William Johnson, an ambitious Irish immigrant who had worked for the British crown as liaison to the Six Nations of the Iroquois while building a successful business empire managing his uncle's extensive estate. In many ways, Johnson embodied the colonial dream of what was possible in the outlying regions.

The entire Johnson family were staunch Loyalists; their connections and importance to the crown would play a significant role in the colony's struggle for independence. Unlike the Johnsons, however, both the Veeders and Sammons were patriots—Whigs who harbored serious concerns, if not absolute disagreement, with British colonial rule.

In 1775 a significant event would bring these families together in a new way—the Johnsons, Veeders, Sammons and hundreds of others in the area, loyalists and patriots, friends, family and neighbors. This gathering would become significant not just for those involved, but for the broader story of Revolutionary ferment in the Mohawk Valley.

On 17 May 1775, shortly after the events at Lexington and Concord and around the time of the Second Continental Congress, patriots in the Caughnawaga area gathered at the Veeder farm to discuss resistance plans and erect a liberty pole—a powerful symbol of colonial opposition to British authority.[5] Such poles were being raised throughout the colonies as acts of symbolic defiance.[6]

The gathering attracted some three hundred patriots, but their meeting did not go unnoticed. When Sir John Johnson (who had inherited his father's title and holdings after William Johnson's death in 1774) learned of the plan to erect a liberty pole, he arrived at the event with armed Loyalist supporters, determined to disperse the gathering.

Guy Johnson, Sir John's brother-in-law, attempted to take control of the meeting and spoke forcefully in favor of the crown, directing considerable vitriol toward the assembled patriots. Eighteen-year-old Jacob Sammons was among those present. Incensed by Guy Johnson's rhetoric, Jacob stood up and loudly proclaimed Johnson "a liar and a fool." Johnson and his supporters immediately attacked Jacob, striking him to the ground with a whip handle and beating him unconscious. This confrontation is often called "the first skirmish of the

Revolution in Tryon County"—though in reality, it marked the beginning of what would become a protracted conflict between neighbors as much as against British rule.

The Liberty Pole story makes compelling family history. Any descendant of Jacob and Eva might take pride in including this narrative of early patriotic courage. The account has been published in multiple sources, though specific details sometimes vary between versions. This raises important questions for family historians: Did the event really occur as described? How many details are accurate? Should such uncertainties concern us?

Significantly, this past May marked the 250th anniversary of the liberty pole event, celebrated with a large commemoration in Montgomery County—suggesting the story maintains strong local historical acceptance. In addition, historical context supports the story's plausibility. Liberty poles were indeed erected throughout the colonies as acts of resistance, and records clearly document the escalating hostilities between patriots and Loyalists in the Mohawk Valley between 1775 and 1780.

Marriage and War

Events leading up to and during the war had significant and long-lasting effects on the county and the colonists—no matter what side they took. Families were torn apart and friendships destroyed. In the Mohawk Valley, not only were the colonists divided but Native American tribes were also affected. Of the 7,500 European settlers in the region in 1775, one-third were killed or driven out while another third (including the Johnson family) fled to Canada as Loyalists, later returning to plunder their former neighbors.[7]

Amid this turmoil, Eva Veeder and Jacob Sammons were married in the Dutch Reformed Church in Caughnawaga on 2 Jul 1777. The marriage record at the church provides documentary evidence of this union.[8]

About five weeks after their wedding, Jacob found himself at Oriskany, participating in one of the bloodiest battles in American history. He was joined by his father Samson, Eva's brothers Volker, Abram, and Johannes; another family member; and Eva's brother-in-law John Davis, who was killed during the fighting.[9]

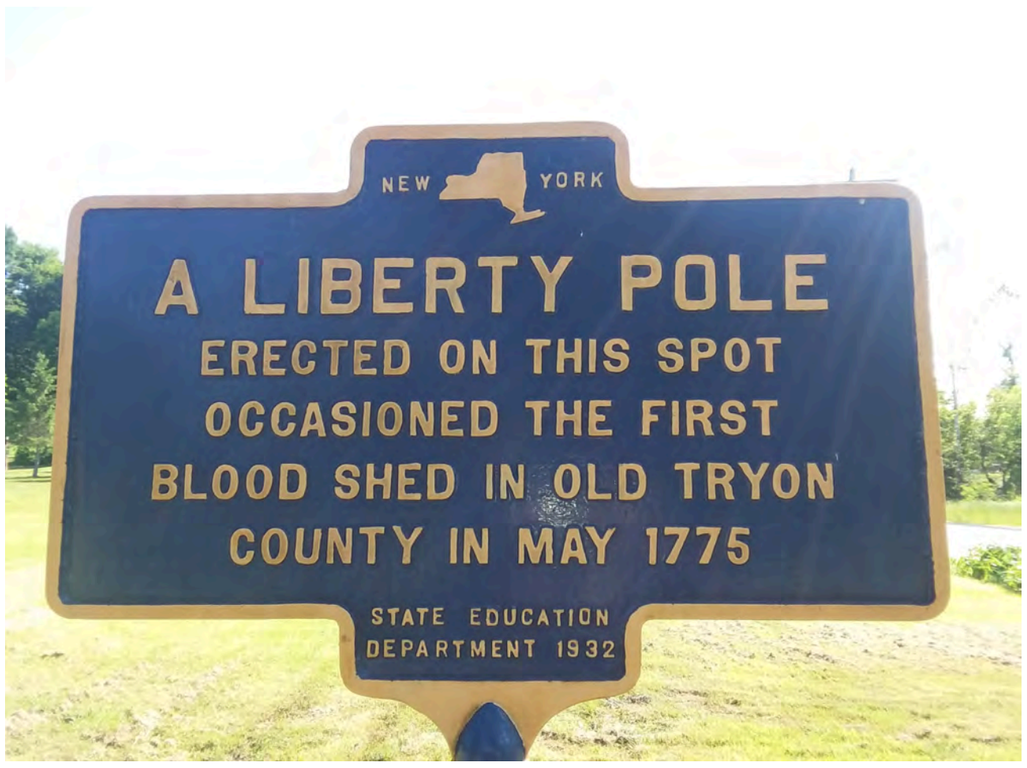

Photo: Historical marker designating the location of a liberty pole in Tryon County. Source: https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=81119. Photo by Craig Doda.

While many believe no comprehensive list exists of those who fought at Oriskany, evidence does document the presence and activities of Jacob and the other family members mentioned above.

Johnson Hall and Revolutionary Hospitality

Like many Loyalists, Sir John Johnson fled to Canada in 1776. After his departure, Jacob Sammons leased the Johnson family home, known today as Johnson Hall. In addition to being a resident, Jacob farmed the Johnson land and conducted various business ventures that supported the patriot cause, including hosting numerous guests and council sessions at Johnson Hall.[10]

One particularly significant council meeting held over several days in March 1778 brought together General Lafayette, General Schuyler, and seven hundred Iroquois and other tribal delegates. The Continental Congress sought negotiations with the Iroquois, and while the March 1778 council achieved limited success, it represented a significant diplomatic event and was likely one of several occasions when Eva and Jacob hosted Lafayette at Johnson Hall.[11]

This documented connection between the Sammons family and Lafayette would later prove central to evaluating the family legend.

Devastation and Imprisonment

In May 1780, Sir John Johnson returned to Johnstown to reclaim his property during a multi-day attack and siege in the Caughnawaga and Johnstown areas. The devastation was complete: Jacob's father's home was burned to the ground, livestock killed or stolen, property pillaged, leaving the family, according to his father Samson, "with no covering but the heavens above, and no prospect but desolation around them."[12] The Veeders suffered similar losses of home, livestock, and property. By the end of Johnson's campaign, it was recorded that "the torch was applied to every building excepting the church."[13]

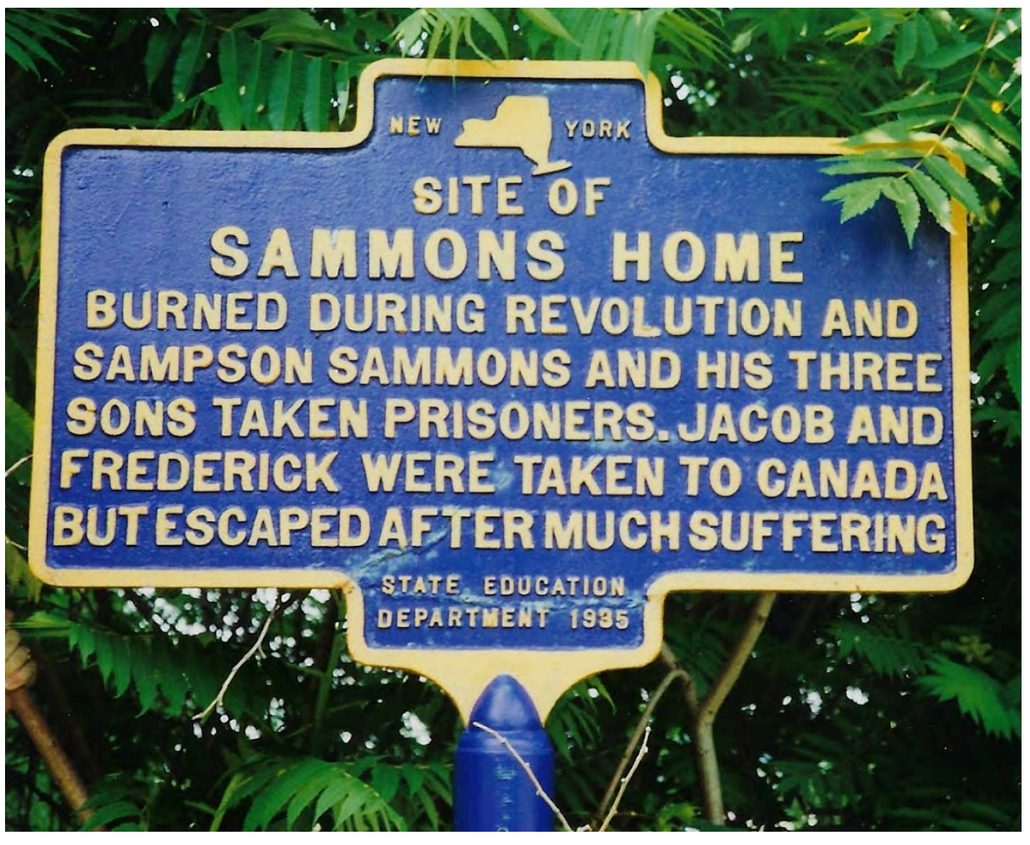

Photo: Historical marker designating the location and the events of the Sammons home during the Revolutionary War. Source: https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=67056. Photo by Howard C. Ohlhous.

Many men were taken captive during Johnson's raid, including Jacob and his brother Frederick. They were shackled and marched to the prison garrison at Chamblee, about eighteen miles south of Montreal. Jacob was imprisoned for many months before escaping. Frederick endured an even longer captivity before making his own escape.[14]

It would be natural for the historian to wonder about Eva's whereabouts after this siege in 1780. Both her family's homes were destroyed; she was the new mother of an infant daughter in need of a home and support. Should family historians speculate about Eva's whereabouts during this uncertain time, or leave such gaps acknowledged but unfilled?

Life After the Revolution

Jacob eventually returned home, and the war ended. Eva and Jacob had twelve children between 1778 and 1804; baptismal records have been located for all but two. When the war ended, Jacob received a bounty land warrant from the government granting him two hundred acres in the town of Sterling, in what was then Onondaga County.[15]

The family—Eva, Jacob, and most of their children—moved to Onondaga County around 1803, presumably to establish Jacob's land claim. They settled in the town of Geddes; Jacob died there in 1815. Eva lived almost twenty years after her husband's death, dying in 1834; she was buried beside Jacob.[16]

Apart from church records, her father's will, and one deed requiring her signature when Jacob sold land, few records document Eva's life, especially during her nearly two decades as a widow. This scarcity reflects the typical challenges genealogists face when researching women's lives in this period.

The Lafayette Legend

Against this backdrop of limited documentation about Eva's later life emerges one of the most intriguing family stories: an account of her meeting with General Lafayette during his celebrated return to America.

The Marquis de Lafayette was renowned for his Revolutionary War service, and many historians argue the war's outcome would have been dramatically different without French aid, particularly Lafayette's contributions. In 1824-25, some fifty years after the Revolution, Lafayette returned to the United States to be honored as what President Monroe called "The Nation's Guest." He toured for thirteen months, visiting twenty-four states.

In late spring and early summer 1825, Lafayette, who strongly supported the Erie Canal project, spent part of his tour traveling along the waterway. On June 9th, he arrived in Syracuse, spending time in the area before continuing east with stops at Utica, Oriskany, Schenectady, and Albany.[17]

Before reaching Schenectady, Lafayette's boat was delayed near Schoharie Creek, not far from the Sammons homestead. The property had been rebuilt after the 1780 destruction and was then owned by Jacob's youngest brother, Thomas Sammons. Thomas and his young son Simeon—who would later carry the family tradition of patriotism into Civil War service—ventured to the canal hoping to glimpse the famous visitor.

The account of what happened next was supposedly recorded by Simeon and first published in an 1878 Montgomery County history. According to this version, while Lafayette rested on his canal boat, Simeon and his father were permitted aboard to greet the general:

*“Lafayette was reclining on a couch with his head upon his hand. As his visitors stepped up to him he looked Mr. Sammons in the face for an instant, and then springing to his feet, grasped both his hands in his own, and with his eyes sparkling with animation, eagerly asked: "Where have I seen you before? I have met you somewhere." "At Johnson Hall," replied Mr. Sammons; and as the Marquis with the rapidity of thought recalled his sojourn at the old Johnstown mansion, his next question was: "Is your brother Jacob living?" and his next, when told that that much tried patriot had passed away: "Is that good woman his wife, alive?" Being told that she was, and was living in Onondaga county, the Marquis made a hasty note of the fac*t.

On arriving at Syracuse, Lafayette had the committee of reception bring Mrs. Sammons before him, and gave her a purse containing ten guineas, telling her not to open it until she reached home.” [18]

Evaluating the Evidence

It is indeed an amazing story, but how credible is it? The documented evidence suggests both Jacob and Eva likely did meet Lafayette at Johnson Hall, perhaps on multiple occasions, given the March 1778 council meeting and other diplomatic gatherings. Lafayette's 1825 tour route and timeline were well documented in contemporary sources.

However, several questions challenge the story's accuracy. According to the documented timeline, Lafayette had already visited Syracuse before the alleged meeting with Thomas and Simeon Sammons near Schoharie Creek. Would he have retraced his steps specifically to meet Eva? If such an extraordinary gesture occurred, wouldn't stronger contemporary evidence exist?

Alternative versions of the story claim Eva traveled from Geddes to meet Lafayette near Schenectady, but this variation also lacks corroborating documentation.
The evidence for any meeting between Eva Veeder Sammons and General Lafayette in 1825 relies entirely on Simeon Sammons' account. According to a 1957 newspaper article, the Montgomery County historian claimed that Frederick W. Beers, publisher of the 1878 county history, interviewed Simeon directly for the story.[19] If this interview occurred near the publication date, Simeon would have been approximately sixty-seven years old, recalling an event from fifty-three years earlier.

This scenario exemplifies the evidence evaluation genealogists must constantly perform. As Elizabeth Shown Mills emphasizes in *Evidence Explained*, "We cannot judge the reliability of any information unless we know *exactly* where the information came from and the strengths and weaknesses of that source." [20]

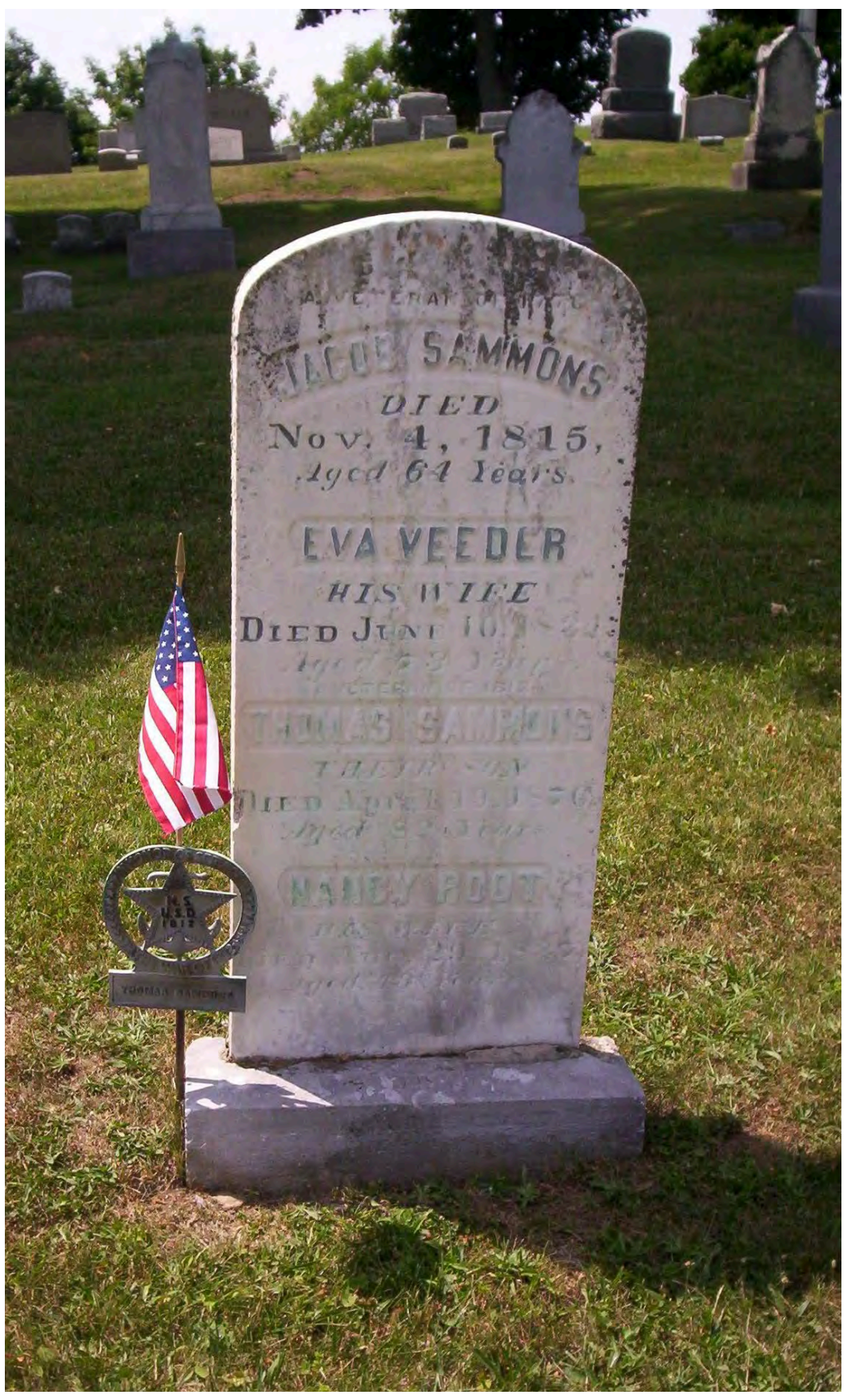

Photo: Cemetery stone of Jacob and Eva (Veeder) Sammons, Myrtle Hill Cemetery, Westvale, Onondaga, NY. Photo by Holly Sammons.

Conclusion: Legend, Fact, or Something Between?

The story of Eva Veeder Sammons and General Lafayette illustrates the complex relationship between family memory and historical documentation. While we can document Eva's remarkable life during the Revolutionary War era—her marriage amid conflict, her husband's imprisonment and escape, their family's losses and rebuilding—the Lafayette encounter remains tantalizingly beyond definitive proof.

Perhaps the legend's persistence suggests something equally important: the profound impact Lafayette and the Revolutionary experience had on ordinary families like the Sammons. Whether Eva actually received ten guineas from the grateful French general matters less than what the story reveals about how one family remembered and honored their revolutionary heritage.

For genealogists and family historians, Eva's story offers valuable lessons about evidence evaluation while demonstrating respect for family traditions. Her descendants may choose to include the Lafayette story in their family narrative, but they should do so with clear acknowledgment of its uncertain authenticity and the limitations of the available evidence.

In the end, Eva Veeder Sammons lived a remarkable life that intersected with some of the most dramatic events in American history. That documented reality may be even more extraordinary than the legend that grew around it.

Notes:

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3. City and County of Albany Clerks Office Book 7 (1757-1768), pages 78-80; imaged "New York, Land Records, 1630-1975," Family Search (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-89WQ-GFD : accessed 5 April 2025), image 378.
4. *History of Montgomery and Fulton Counties, N.Y.: with illustrations descriptive of scenery, private residences...* (New York, N.Y.: F.W. Beers & Co., 1878), 144-146.
5. Oliver Bell Bunce, *The Romance of the Revolution...* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1870), 92-110. William L. Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant...*, 2 vols.(Cooperstown, N Y.: H. & E. Phinney, 1844)1:52. John T. Morrison, "Historical Facts Relating to Tryon County," *The Morning Herald* (Gloversville, N.Y.), 8 Sep 1922, 23.
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9. Vera DeWitt, *American Patriots at the Battle of Oriskany, August 6, 1777* (Kenmore, N.Y.; s.n., 1977).
10. “Johnson Hall During the Revolutionary War,” The Canajoharie (N.Y.) Courier, 27 May 1925, p1. c.4-5.
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12. William L. Stone, *Border Wars of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: A.L. Fowle, 1900),2:78.
13. Ibid., 2:76.
14. Records of Jacob and Frederick’s imprisonment and eventual escape have been published in a variety of records, including the county histories cited here, Stone’s “*Border Wars…*”, etc. Reference was often made to an “account of Jacob Sammons” – it has recently come to light that this record might be held in the Montgomery County archives in Fonda, NY. Further research is needed.
15. New York Secretary of State, *The Balloting Book and Other Documents Relating to Military Bounty Lands in the State of New York* (Albany, N.Y.; Printed by Packard & VanBenthuysen, 1825), 144.
16. “Myrtle Hill Cemetery Office Files (Syracuse, N.Y.).” Card file, n.d. Sammons Family, Block B1, section 45. Find a Grave, (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/5401651/jacob-sammons: accessed June 2, 2025), memorial page for Jacob Sammons (8 Apr 1752–4 Nov 1815), Find a Grave Memorial ID 5401651; and (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/42447202/eva-sammons: accessed June 2, 2025), memorial page for Eva *Veeder* Sammons (2 Apr 1761–10 Jun 1834), Find a Grave Memorial ID 42447202.
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