



March 15 2022

## Retson Genealogy Newsletter

This newsletter may interest in the genealogy and in particular those related to persons related directly or indirectly to Grace and Clifford Retson.

### I exist...I think!

My genealogy website is located at <http://www.retson.ca/retsongeneology.html>  
On the left side you will see a list of Family Roots.

There was a pair of twins that were born in the city of Paris in 1944, the same week that Paris was liberated. The father registered the births but the registration was completed as one child with 4 forenames instead of two children each with two forenames each. The second spent the rest of his life attempting to prove his existence.

This week I received a longform birth certificate ordered from the Province of Nova Scotia. It is a beautiful document that proves that there was a George Clifford Retson and a Grace Elizabeth Atkinson who registered their child who was born on a specified date. What proves that I was that child was DNA test taken by my sister who had 2471 cM of shared DNA. That proves that we were siblings having the same parents and I take that as acceptable proof of the beginning of my lineage.

Ancestry, a company that boasts having the largest collection of DNA test results has during the last couple of years has created a new tool (called ThruLines) that combines the results of these tests, together with a large database of historical records and research submitted by genealogist researcher around the world to create a suggested table of DNA connections. This week, I communicated with one of these connections a 5<sup>th</sup> cousin from England. Together, with two other individuals in the world, we connect back through generations to my 5<sup>th</sup> great grand mother Elinor "Nancy" Bowman who we share as our last common ancestor. This also take me back one more generation in my paternal line of ancestors.

Having made this link, I was also able to connect back along the Bowman line another 4 generations to Thomas Bowman born 13 Jan 1572 in Askham, Westmorland, England. I have opened a file and will continue work in the future to gain further knowledge of this line and their spouses. Genetic genealogy has opened many new vistas for test takers all over the world.

### A Continuation of Social History - Occupations

Social History is concerned about the lives of ordinary people and their strategies for coping with life rather than political, military, diplomatic and constitutional events. One of the chief elements of coping with life is choosing an occupation that provides food on the table for your self and those who depend upon you for subsistence. An occupation is an activity or task with which one occupies oneself, usually specifically the productive activity, service, trade, or craft for which one is regularly paid. Vocation is a synonym of occupation. As nouns the difference between vocation and occupation is that vocation is an inclination to undertake a certain kind of work, often in response to a perceived summons or a calling. I have opened up a file at <https://www.retson.ca/retsonancestoroccupations.pdf> to keep track of the various occupations of our ancestors.

Early occupations were a subset of existence. The early cave man did not see his hunting and gathering as an occupation. Getting food to survive wasn't a separate part of one's life but the very basis upon which life was sustained. Humans invented agriculture between 7,000 and 10,000 years ago, during the Neolithic era, or the

New Stone Age. Before agriculture became widespread, people spent most of their lives searching for food—hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. Over centuries, the growth of agriculture contributed to the rise of civilizations. To be sure, additional hunting, fishing and gathering continued to supplement agriculture, but eventually agriculture replaced hunting and gathering as the main source of providing the necessities of life

Between the 17th century and the mid-19th century, Britain saw a significant increase in agricultural productivity and net output. New agricultural practices like enclosure, mechanization, four-field crop rotation to maintain soil nutrients, and selective breeding enabled an unprecedented population growth to 5.7 million in 1750, freeing up a significant percentage of the workforce, and thereby helped drive the Industrial Revolution.

In time, additional pursuits complemented agriculture and in the due course of time occupations became specialized and may have totally replaced agriculture for many persons' occupation. Mole catching as an occupation was intertwined with agriculture.

### **Some of my Relatives were mole catchers**

My grandfather was quite proud to have come from five generations of mole catchers and of the caliber of his their skills. George Retson, the father of our grandfather William Rankin Retson, was born in Sorn, Ayrshire, Scotland 9 May 1848. In the 1861 Scotland Census, at the age of 14 was described as a lodger at Bottom, Douglas, Lanarkshire and his occupation, Molecatcher. The 1881 census describes his occupation as mole catcher and farmer of 32 acres in Fenwick.

His father John Retson born in August 1809 in Kendall Westmorland. He was born with the shortest gestation period of any of our ancestors as his mother, Ann Bateman, married June 26<sup>th</sup> of the same year. It was his father that I believe my great Uncle John was referring to when he indicated that a “Scottish ancestor” had actually eloped across the border from England. Eloped he may well have but his marriage is actually recorded in the Kendall Parish in England as was the birth of his son John. John the son's occupation was recorded as mole catcher in the 1841 census . In the 1841 census John the father's occupation was given as mole catcher, farmer of 6 acres. Such was John's reputation that four of his children (John, William, George, Miles as well as many of their children) were able to get employment as mole catchers to supplement their income as dairy farmers around the Sorn to Fenwick, Ayrshire area of Scotland. In addition to being paid by parish officials based on their catch, they were also able to get compensated by fur traders for their pelts as well . The skill of mole catching came from experience and patience. Moles while respected, were regarded as lazy, unlike the hard working Scottish farmers.

John Retson (father of John born in 1809) was recorded as John Ratson in the Kenda Parish Westmoreland England 1779 and born in New Hutton, nearby. He died in Sorn Scotland in 1841. We do not know how early he became a mole catcher but there is some incidental recording of him as a mole catcher as early as 1815.

### **The Mole**

Moles are very common throughout Great Britain but not in Ireland. An individual mole around 14 centimetres in length and have a 2.8 centimetre tail. It can dig its way 14 metres of soil in an hour. A moles body is covered in a soft, thick, silver-black fur, which hides the small eyes. They have no external ears and very poor eyesight. They have an excellent senses of smell and touch. Moles have a well developed sense of orientation retaining a mental plan of their complex layout of underground tunnels. They feed exclusively on small invertebrate animals living underground such as earthworms and the larvae of beetles and flies. Female moles give birth to one litter per year containing 2 to 7 young. Gestation period is 4 weeks. The young leave the mother when about 5 weeks old. The average life span of a mole is 2.5 years. Today they number around 31,000,000.

In 1702, King William III, better known as William of Orange, was out riding when his horse, Sorrel, tripped on a molehill and threw him. He broke his collarbone, developed pneumonia and died, prompting his Jacobite enemies in Scotland to toast “the little gentleman in the black velvet waistcoat.” Moleskin have always been associated with the fronts of waistcoats.



In the early 20th century, Queen Alexandra, wife of King Edward VII. Queen Alexandra a fashion icon with enormous reach who set several trends among society ladies, encourage the mole fur trade. In 1901, as moles were creating havoc on Scottish farms, Queen Alexandra ordered a moleskin wrap. Demand for moleskin went through the roof, and Scotland’s pest problem was turned into a lucrative industry. During the period 1900 – 1913, the average annual supply of European and Asian moleskins was estimated at 1 million, and it increased thereafter. At the peak of moleskin’s popularity, the US was importing over 4 million pelts a year from the UK.

### **The Trapping of Moles**

In the Roman era, molecatchers used earthenware pots with water as traps. While traveling along their tunnels, moles would fall into the pots that catchers had inserted into the run. Potters began to make clay barrel traps until the use of wood caught on as a primary source for traps in the middle ages.

Moles were originally trapped as a pest due to the risk they posed to cattle breaking legs in mole holes. During the middle ages, molecatchers often traveled, moving from farm to farm catching moles for hire. In England and Scotland, many parishes and communities had local molecatchers. Traveling molecatcher came often threatened the livelihood of these local catchers. Many local and community molecatchers used contracts to help secure deals with local landowners. The longest running molecatcher contract ran for 31 years. In good times molecatchers made good money. They could make enough income to pay for their own houses, property, and lifestyle.

The Industrial Revolution changed the world. Landowners and molecatchers also looked to the use of a new poison to get rid of moles: Strychnine. The poison was easy to use and could get rid of moles in half the time and at half the cost, yet molecatchers couldn’t show landowners their results as easily. Trapping had always been an easy way to show landowners the proof of their work. Poison didn’t offer the same results and ushered in environmental concerns as well. The use of Strychnine was banned in 2006.

From at least as early as the 18th century, every parish in England employed a molecatcher who supplemented his income by selling the pelts. Mole skin fur was once favoured by British high society, and at the height of its popularity gave value to a pest that was being trapped anyway. Pelts measuring only 4.3 to 6.3 inches long are cut into rectangles and sewn together into plates which are almost always dyed for matching pelts. These plates were then made into coats or trousers requiring 500 pelts or more, the lining of winter gloves (fur side in), and a very soft felt for premium top hats.

After World War II the popularity of moleskin declined, perhaps in part because pelts were in short supply. Traditional molecatchers were being displaced by industrial pesticides, notably strychnine, which was first synthesised in 1954. Because strychnine kills moles underground and unseen, supplies of pelts inevitably fell.

In 2001 the UK suffered an epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease and in a bid to stop the disease spreading, public rights of way across land were closed and molecatchers were banned from entering farms. Within a short time there was a mole population explosion to an estimated 40 million. In 2006, the European Union ruled that strychnine could no longer be used as a mole poison.

Three organisations sprung up claiming memberships in the hundreds – the British Traditional Molecatchers Register, the Guild of British Molecatchers, and the Association of Professional Mole Catchers.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/mole-catchers-britain>

William Rankin Retson learned the trade of a dairy farmer at his father's farm but we have little knowledge of whether he ever considered the occupation of mole catcher. He left the farm at a fairly young age to acquire an education and was described in the 1901 census in Scotland as "Flesher Apprentice". He emigrated to Bible Hill Nova Scotia and became Dairy Manager for the Nova Scotia Agriculture College after its creation in 1905. He was elected Director of the Canadian Ayrshire Breeders Association from The Maritime Provinces for two years. HE was well known in the Colchester and Pictou County region as a very knowledgeable farmer and was often called upon to assist at difficult deliveries.

His son George Clifford Retson attended the Nova Scotia Agriculture College and subsequently obtained his Master of Agriculture Science from Cornell University. As an agriculture economist, was the last of the line who earned their living in the field of agriculture.. All his children were employed in various professional lines.

### **Rootstech Virtual Conference**

In the beginning of March, Familysearch.org held its second virtual genealogy conference. Its sessions which were recorded will be available at <https://www.familysearch.org/rootstech/search> At that site you can choose from over 1000 sessions for stimulating classes and handouts. DNA and Genetic genealogy, was one of the areas that was well covered both at the introductory and advanced levels. I would highly recommend this site for those who want to venture further.

Additions to <http://www.retson.ca/retsongenealogy.html> since February 1 2022

Bowman Ancestors	<a href="https://www.retson.ca/bowman.pdf">https://www.retson.ca/bowman.pdf</a>
Social History	<a href="https://www.retson.ca/socialhistory.pdf">https://www.retson.ca/socialhistory.pdf</a>
Retson Ancestor Timeline	<a href="https://www.retson.ca/retsonancestortimeline.pdf">https://www.retson.ca/retsonancestortimeline.pdf</a>
Retson's Ancestor's Occupations	<a href="https://www.retson.ca/retsonancestoroccupations.pdf">https://www.retson.ca/retsonancestoroccupations.pdf</a>
Retson Ancestor's Land	<a href="https://www.retson.ca/ancestorlands.pdf">https://www.retson.ca/ancestorlands.pdf</a>
February Newsletter	<a href="https://www.retson.ca/retsongenealogynewsletterfeb2022.pdf">https://www.retson.ca/retsongenealogynewsletterfeb2022.pdf</a>

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