

FLEMING ABBOTT
Son of Joseph Abbott of Halifax County, Virginia

Research Report by Joan Horsley
Based on Research as of December 2013
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FLEMING ABBOTT

Son of Joseph Abbott and wife Frances

Born: Bet. 1777-1782, Halifax County, VA

Died: Bet. 1804-1815, Halifax County, VA (or possibly Richmond, VA)

No recorded or apparent marriage

FLEMING ABBOTT is named in his father Joseph Abbott's 1787 will as the last of "my three young sons namely John, Moses & Flemmon." Spelling was phonetic, often reflecting the regional dialect, and at that time in Virginia the name Fleming was also spelled Flemmin and Flemming. Fleming Abbott was Joseph's youngest son and the last of his 16 proved children, apparently by three wives. Fleming's mother, Frances, was Joseph's last wife whom Joseph married abt. 1765. Joseph Abbott died in early 1788 at abt. 78 years old.

Unlike most of his siblings, Fleming's age is difficult to determine closely, since almost no records exist for him. Even yearly Halifax tax list information for him is vague. He is enumerated in his mother's tax lists through 1804 but never appears there by name as sons usually did when they turned 21. Fleming appears to be born abt. 1777, based on his being enumerated in Frances Abbott's personal property tax list for the first time in 1798, and his next older brother, Moses, seems to be added to Frances' list only after he turned 21 instead of the usual 16. However, it is possible Fleming was, indeed, just 16 at the time, thus born abt. 1782. The only record for Fleming Abbott is in March 1803, when he witnessed the will of a neighbor, and almost certainly he was of legal age 21 or over by then. If Fleming were born abt. 1782, this makes his father, Joseph Abbott, was abt. 72 years old at Fleming's birth. While clearly not impossible (one only needs to recall a well-known U.S. Senator from South Carolina who died in 2003 and fathered children into his 70s), an earlier birth date for Fleming is at least more statistically probable.

On 31 Mar 1803, "Flemmin Abbott," signing by signature, witnessed the Halifax will of his neighbor John Fulkerson. [HWB6:545] The Fulkersons lived next to the Abbotts, and the families had been neighbors and friends since the early 1760s when John Fulkerson was a small boy. Fleming's older brother Richard Abbott married John Fulkerson's daughter Catharine Fulkerson in 1818.

Joseph Abbott's 1787 will and John Fulkerson's 1803 will are the only records found in Halifax County or anywhere else where Joseph's son Fleming Abbott appears by name. Fleming's widowed mother, Frances Abbott, still has a son enumerated in her 1804 tax lists, and almost surely he is Fleming. The only other son this could be is Fleming's next older brother, Moses Abbott, who is not named in Halifax tax lists that year. However, Moses was

living independently in a different part of Halifax from his family in 1803 and apparently left before the 1804 tax lists for Richmond, VA, where he was still living in 1815.

After spring 1804, there is no record or even an indication that Fleming Abbott was still alive. Fleming surely was deceased by Dec 1815, when his next-older brother, Moses Abbott, wrote his will as a resident of Richmond, VA and did not include Fleming among his surviving brothers, who were Moses' legatees (as explained in more detail below). During the intervening 10 years or so, Fleming is not recorded in Halifax or in any adjacent Virginia county, nor does he appear in any yearly personal property tax lists or records for Richmond or surrounding Henrico County or adjacent Chesterfield County, nor is he in any later U. S. census. No evidence has been found to support the repeatedly-copied but undocumented claim online that Fleming Abbott died in Puerto Rico at some unknown time and for some unknown reason, although there are clues how such an improbable and unproved story could have started, which we discuss shortly.

The absence of records presents two much more reasonable and realistic possibilities regarding Fleming Abbott's death. The obvious and more credible is that Fleming died in Halifax County bet. 1804-1805, when he disappears from all records, and there is some support for that date, as we shall see. The other possibility, based only on a highly unreliable family story, is that Fleming may have joined his older brother Moses Abbott in Richmond and died there sometime before Moses wrote his will in Dec 1815.

The family story that makes Fleming's death in Richmond somewhat possible passes us into the realm of legend, which we shall try to navigate with available facts. The story comes from a book published in 1906 by the author, Maj. Lemuel Abijah Abbott, called *Descendants of George Abbott, of Rowley, Mass...* Vol. 2. The book includes Joseph Abbott's family in Halifax County, VA under "Miscellaneous Abbotts," but it contains significant proved errors and false assumptions about the family. (See report on Joseph Abbott for details.)

The author also says, with no documentation, source, or evidence, that Joseph Abbott's sons "Moses and Flemmon were importers for a time at Richmond, Va." [*Lemuel Abijah Abbott (1906), Vol. 2, p. 1039*] Passed-down family stories usually contain statements that in themselves are not true, but some may have kernels of truth in them, albeit distorted by time and misunderstandings. In this case, there is no evidence that Moses Abbott was himself "an importer," and he certainly did not own his own business. However, we do have proof that Moses was living in Richmond at least by 1813, and there are indications from two Richmond deeds, his 1815 will, and his estate settlement that he probably worked for a merchant or businessman who dealt with imported merchandise. Moses also was involved with associates who in time became such merchants, as Moses may have become himself were his life not cut short at around age 40. (See report on Moses Abbott for details.)

Fleming Abbott definitely was not an "importer." Any man of business would leave some record behind, even if just a record of the debts he owed or were owed to him. Yet unlike Moses, Fleming had no real or personal property at all, as no deed, no will, and no tax or probate records exist for Fleming in or around Halifax or Richmond. In fact, no evidence has been found to show Fleming ever lived in Richmond as the story says. Fleming Abbott is not listed in any tax list for Richmond or for Henrico County, where Richmond is located. He purchased no land there and is not among Moses' co-purchasers in Moses' two Richmond

property deeds, nor is he a witness. Fleming is not named in the 1810 census for Richmond, and he is not included in Moses' household in Richmond in the one 1813 tax record that exists for Moses there. On the other hand, few records exist during that time period for the general populace who owned no land or taxable property, and if Fleming were living with an employer (as Moses likely was in his missing years), Fleming would not be named in tax lists or the 1810 census for Richmond either. So it is not impossible that Moses' younger brother Fleming could be in the same place and employed in the same kind of business as Moses but without Moses' financial success, perhaps because Fleming died much earlier.

Nevertheless, all we have is a handed-down piece of an unreliable family story that has other errors and exaggerates or misunderstands their occupation but yet pairs Fleming together with Moses in Richmond with no evidence Fleming was ever there. Another troubling piece of the puzzle is that Moses did, indeed, have an associate in Richmond named Fleming, but he was Fleming James, a co-investor with Moses in Richmond property. *[HenricoDB12:430]* Did someone hear or see something about a Fleming with Moses, and, not realizing that the name then was more common than it seems to us today, did they just assume the name referred to Moses' brother Fleming? Another kind of name confusion is involved in the next part of this strange story fragment.

The second part of the 1906 story is a good example of how a family story can grow into legend, as passed-down stories often do. The full statement in Maj. Abbott's book reads: "Moses and Flemmon were importers for a time at Richmond, Va. One of them probably d[ied] in Havana, Cuba." "Probably" why, when, how? The author gives no more information, explanation, source, or evidence, leaving the strong impression that he is simply repeating a family story that someone repeated to him without anyone knowing any facts to support it. Nothing in existing records found so far makes any mention of Cuba, not even in background research on the merchants Moses was associated with and those he possibly worked for. However, at the very bottom edge of one page of the accounts settling Moses' estate is a squeezed-in blurred entry that at first sight does look exactly like "Cuba." With the advantage of computer programs to clarify and enlarge, the word turns out definitely to be "Contra," which is a standard accounting term (ie, credit). Is this how a legend was created? Family legends have been woven out of even thinner thread.

Then was that the beginning of the pervasive claim now on most Abbott family files on the Internet that say Fleming Abbott died in Puerto Rico? (No when, why, or how included there either.) Having already made the unfounded assumptions that Moses and Fleming were importers having something to do with Cuba where one of them "probably" died, did "Cuba" then morph into "Puerto Rico," the Caribbean country more in the popular mind a generation or two after Maj. Abbott's version, as the story passed down and around? Discovering that Moses did, indeed, die in Virginia, did someone conclude as a fact that "Fleming Abbott died in Puerto Rico?" Truth can be stranger than fiction, but even if some record were found of a Fleming Abbott in Puerto Rico in the relevant time frame, we still would need some evidence to connect him with Joseph Abbott's son Fleming Abbott of Halifax County, VA. In the end, truth, while sometimes strange, does have to have true facts behind it. So far, none have been found, either for the 1906 story or the internet version 100 years later.

The few facts that are known point more reasonably to Fleming Abbott dying shortly after spring 1804 in his home of Halifax County, although, thanks to the story, we cannot definitively rule out a possibility he died bet. 1804-1815 in Richmond, where his next-older

brother Moses lived. Moses Abbott wrote his will 24 Dec 1815, apparently en route from his Richmond residence to his family in Halifax for the Christmas holidays (as explained in the report on Moses Abbott). [*Henrico WB5:71*] He left a lifetime bequest to "my dear mother," Frances Abbott, and otherwise left his estate to "my three brothers Moody, John and Richard and my two unmarried sisters Elizabeth and Patsy." Of his four surviving brothers, Moses' will leaves out only William Abbott, who was a half-brother 20 years Moses' elder, while the three named were his full brothers with whom he lived all his Halifax years. There seems no reason for Moses to omit his year-younger brother Fleming Abbott from his will unless Fleming already was deceased.

A nephew's name might be a significant indicator of when Fleming Abbott died. Fleming's older sister Frances Abbott (b. c1769) was abt. 8 years old when her baby brother Fleming was born, and in such a large family she surely helped raise him for the next 17 years before her marriage to John Robertson in Jan 1795. Frances and John named their fourth son Fleming Robertson, born 25 Nov 1805, the year after Frances' brother Fleming Abbott disappears from all records. Families frequently named children after siblings who died relatively young, and the timing here could indicate Fleming Abbott died bet. 1804-1805, as the records seem to show. Fleming's elder brother Leonard Abbott also named a son Fleming Abbott, and Leonard's son Fleming Abbott was not born until abt. 1815; however, Leonard's older sons were named after his wife's father, his own father, his next younger brother John Abbott, and himself, Leonard Jr., in that order before Fleming.

Combining the evidence found so far, Joseph and Frances' son Fleming Abbott may have died abt. 1804-1805 but at least before Dec 1815, when Moses wrote his will. We have no evidence that Fleming died outside of Halifax County, except for a highly suspect story fragment. However, we leave open the possibility he might have died in Richmond, Henrico County, VA, where Moses lived, particularly if Fleming died closer to 1815. (Given the numerous Abbott records in Halifax bet. 1805-1815, had Fleming been alive, he surely he would be in some Halifax record, too.)

Personally, I lean towards the earlier death date, for this reason: Joseph Abbott's family in Halifax were prosperous people, and the ones who lived long enough became still more prosperous. Even Moses, who died at about age 39 or 40, significantly expanded his financial assets with the opportunities he found and made for himself in Richmond. Every family could have its profligate, ne'er-do-well, or spend-thrift, but odds are that Fleming, too, would have been successful had he lived long enough. (After all, would two siblings name a child after the family black sheep?) Since Fleming had no assets when he died argues for an earlier rather than later death. However, that is only my speculation and needs to be taken merely as that. Research on Joseph and Frances' son Fleming Abbott continues in an attempt to learn more about his short life and early death.

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Joan Horsley. *Fleming Abbott, Son of Joseph Abbott of Halifax County, Virginia*. (Raleigh, NC: J. Horsley, 2013) Available online at [www.joanhorsley.org](http://www.joanhorsley.org).

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