



NEWSLETTER *of the* *Tefft Family Association*

uncovering the past

the descendants of John and William Tefft

Vol. 2, No. 4
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In this issue:

Just as America was about to explode across the continent, its citizens found themselves deeply divided over the issue of slavery. Caught up in these remarkable events, Samuel "Harlow" Tefft managed not only to find his own way but, as a humble Iowa ferry keeper, to help others make a safe crossing too.



Next issue . . .

What does the Tefft Coat of Arms look like? Tefft descendant Norman Burdett has re-created one based on Emma Augusta Tefft's c. 1900 description: Crest — a boar's head couped. Motto — Ubique fidelis. But Burdett warns: Use with caution!

Samuel "Harlow" Tefft

In the 1850s, he built a ferry house at a spot in America that divided freemen from slaves, stay-at-homes from sturdy pioneers of the westward movement.

An American at the crossroads

by Darlene Tefft Cobb

In every lifetime there are choices. In every generation, there are crossroads. Whether by fortune or choice, Samuel "Harlow" Tefft, born in Rhode Island, an adventurer in the California gold rush, followed a personal compass that landed him smack in the middle of America, at the crossroads of paths ancient and new that would lead to the signature events of his time — the westward expansion and America's most divisive war.

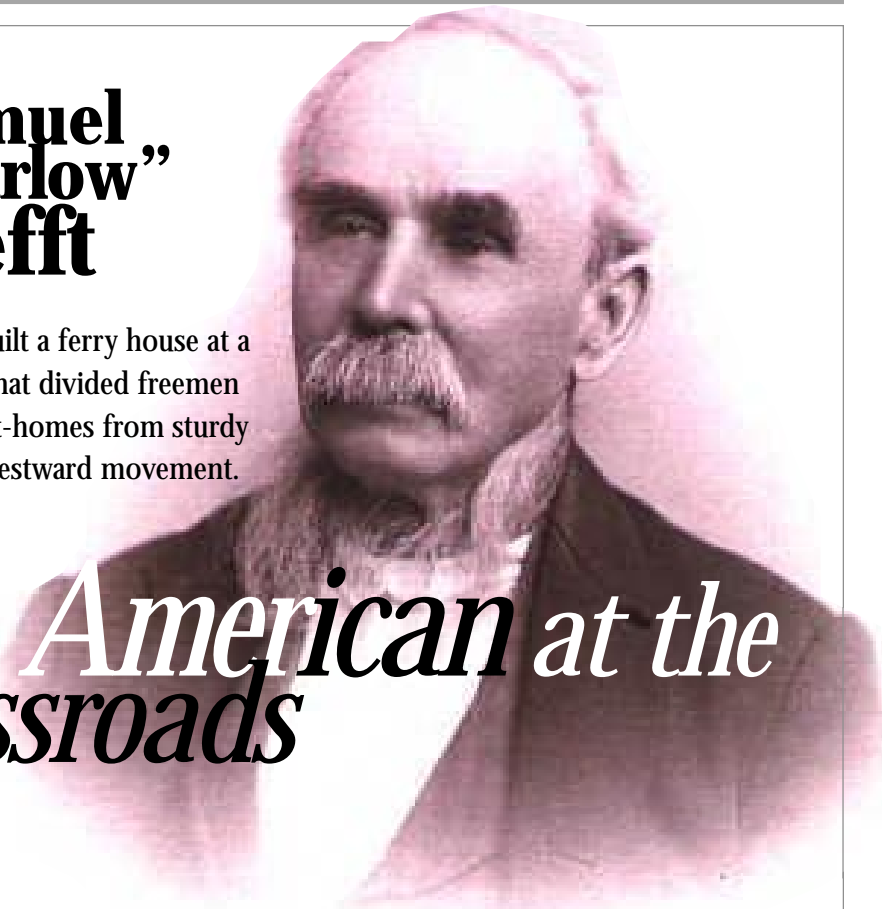
About 150 years ago, Harlow built a house just west of Lewis, Cass County, Iowa, at what was perhaps the most important stop for travelers between Des Moines and Council Bluffs. There he ran a ferry across the East Nishnabotna River, then just a few yards away.¹ (Because of the

straightening of the river in the 1920s, the ferry house no longer stands at the river's edge.)

This crossroads began as an Indian trail that became the State Road, or White Pole Road, the first road to cross the nation. The ferry and road were used by the western migration of emigrants and as a stagecoach and mail route. It was the passageway traveled by Mormon Handcart Companies and was an alternate route on the Mormon Trail. What's more, this busy juncture, which can be thought of as something akin to a major interchange or hub in today's highway system, was used in the furtive business of the Underground Railroad.

"The Ferry house...served as a home

See *Crossroads* page 4



Welcome Family, Associates and Friends . . .

One of the pleasures of doing genealogy and digging into your own family's past is to finally be able to tell the stories that never made it into the pages of America's history books. Far from being forgotten, many of these stories have survived for generations, handed down in fragments of memory lovingly preserved by those who came after. Dixie Laire is one of those who treasured these memories and through her work and that of others descended from Samuel "Harlow" Tefft we now have a remarkable story to tell.

It was my privilege to patch together the many pieces Dixie collected and provided to us so this story could be brought to light. Dixie credits Harlow's granddaughter, Marion Buell Dye, with being the "real compiler of our Tefft family information." A stickler for facts, Dixie insists, it's "her name, not mine, that should be mentioned as family historian. I'm just passing her information along."

Thanks are owed to both, as well as others who contributed to their knowledge and ours.

We are also forever indebted to the people of Lewis and Cass County, Iowa, particularly the Lewis Betterment Committee, and to the Mormon Trails Association for their dedicated work not only to purchase and restore the Old Ferry House but to see that the history that occurred at this important American crossroads is interpreted and shared.

With the events of September 11 still etched in our minds, we hope that both Samuel "Harlow" Tefft's story and the story of the citizens of Lewis, who have worked so hard to preserve their history, may serve as timely reminders of what American's can do once we set our minds to doin' it.



Darlene Tefft Cobb
Interim President, Tefft Family Association

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Family Album



Dixie A. Laire

Hi Tefft Cousins!
My name is Dixie Laire and I am proud to belong to this very special Tefft family. I live in Red Oak, Montgomery Co., Iowa, with my woefully spoiled cat, Baby, who is napping on top of the shelf of my computer as I write this.

My line in the TEFFT family goes like this: Dixie > Merv Laire > Harry Laire > Susan Jane

Tefft Laire Carpenter > David G. Tefft > George Tefft > Samuel Tefft & Phebe Niles > Ezekiel Tefft & Eunice (Unknown) > Samuel Tefft & Marcy Barber > John Tefft & Johanna Sprague > Samuel Tefft & Elizabeth Jenckes > John Tefft & Mary Barber.

My great-great-grandfather, David Tefft, was a brother to the Samuel "Harlow" Tefft. David and his wife, Abby Sprague Tefft, settled seven miles north of Red Oak, near Stennett. My great-grandmother, Susan Tefft, my grandfather, Harry Laire, and my father, Merv Laire, were all born on the same TEFFT family land that Samuel "Harlow" Tefft purchased on his way back to Rhode Island from the California gold fields.

I just want to say that I am very proud of the little community of Lewis, Iowa for undertaking the restoration of this Ferry House project. This was the home of Samuel "Harlow" Tefft, his wife and daughters. After the death of his wife, it was the home of his mother and sister who came from Rhode Island to help Harlow raise the daughters.

It is a real hardship for a town with a population of 433 to raise the funds needed to properly restore a historical site. They raise funds in anyway they can, from having community plays to preparing wonderful jams and jellies to sell. Others pitch in and break their backs doing physical labor. A labor of love, if I ever saw one! Just wanted to acknowledge the hard working people of the community of Lewis in Cass Co., Iowa, and tell them how much I appreciate their work and how PROUD I am that my TEFFTS were a part of this special piece of history so many years ago.



Iowa citizens give *NEW LIFE* to the *OLD FERRY HOUSE*

The Old Ferry House in Lewis, Cass County, Iowa, might have rotted back into the scenery, its 150 years of history lost, but for a group of Lewis residents with other ideas about the matter.

Saving the ferry house was first proposed at an annual potluck supper held each fall by a group of former Lewis residents now living in Des Moines. During this social gathering, members discussed their hopes for improving several of the historical buildings still left in Lewis. The group decided it was worth a try.

That was more than seven years ago. Today, thanks to a good deal of hard work and coordinated action, the Old Ferry House is well on its way to becoming a lasting landmark in Lewis.

The goal of purchasing and restoring the Old Ferry House has been met. It involved a seemingly endless stream of civic-minded individuals and groups willing to support what eventually became the larger goal of funding a Cass County Morman Trails/Lewis Restoration Project. Through extensive fund raising and applications for grants, and with the grit to face some significant setbacks, the project has survived to complete purchase of the Old Ferry House and move ahead with other portions of the plan.

Among the groups spearheading the effort were the Lewis Betterment Committee, the "Des Moines Group" (comprised of former residents of Lewis) and the Cass County Morman Trails Association.

With the Old Ferry House site safely purchased, project organizers are proceeding with a restoration that will include the addition of a public restroom and furnishings appropriate to the 1850s period.

The site will be opened to the public and operated as part of the Morman Trail project.



With a history of trails leading west, the town of Lewis, through the Lewis Betterment Committee, took on the purchase and restoration of the Old Ferry House, once occupied by Samuel

"Harlow" Tefft. Purchased by the committee in 1994, the site today is being restored to become part of a Cass County Morman Trails project that recaptures the history of pioneering movement and pre-Civil War Underground Railroad activity.

Shown above, in a recent photo taken during the restoration at the ferry house, are some of the Lewis residents involved in the project. They are, from left, Marion Wissler, Lloyd Roberts, Bob Kennedy, Betty Sanny, Sharon Roberts, Valda Kennedy, Ilene Rhodes and Berneice Ihrke. About \$30,000 was raised through their grassroots activities to complete the restoration.

For more information about the project, contact Betty M. Sanny, P.O. Box 216, Lewis, IA 51544.



Crossroads

From page 1

for the ferry operator at the Nishnabotna crossing of the State Road. The road was part of the Oregon, California, Mormon and gold rush trails. Underground Railroad conductors smuggled fugitive slaves across the river at this point. In one case we know, a posse camped near the house waiting for fleeing slaves."²

After surviving in dilapidated condition for nearly a century and a half, the Old Ferry House is being restored and today is designated a National Historic Register site. It is believed to be the only known ferry keeper's home in existence on the Mormon Handcart Trails. (See "Iowa citizens give new life to Old Ferry House," page 3.)

Who was Samuel "Harlow" Tefft?

Samuel "Harlow" Tefft was born on Oct. 28, 1821, probably in Hopkinton, R.I.³

That Harlow may have been a man with a stubborn turn of mind about things is suggested by one Cass County history:

"(Tefft) learned the trade of harness and carriage making, which he followed for some time. He was also employed in a cotton mill, but this being about the time of the war (War with Mexico, 1846 - 1848), he was discharged on account of political preference."⁴

We are left to guess which particular "preference" this might have been, though the issue of the day was over opening up new land to be disputed by pro- and anti-slavery forces. The War with Mexico, which eventually yielded over 500,000 square miles of new land, met with widespread resistance by anti-slavery forces who feared it was just a way to extend slavery. Others also found reason to protest, including Congregational, Quaker and Unitarian churches, Henry David Thoreau, James Russell Lowell and Walt Whitman, who wrote it is time for the world to see that "America knows how to crush, as well as expand."

Fields of gold

Whatever its source, the conflict with his employer apparently was enough to cause Harlow, then in his late twenties, to seek greener pastures, or more accurately, fields of gold. The same Cass County history continues:

"In 1848, he left his family and embarked for California, arriving in San Francisco on the 4th of April, 1849."

This is at odds with the account reported by one obituary, which places Harlow's departure from his boyhood home at precisely 28 years and one day from his birth:

"On Oct. 29, 1849, Mr. Tefft departed from Providence, R.I., on the *Curlew*, as a seaman before the mast, bound for San Francisco by way of Cape Horn; and after a six months' perilous voyage, the crew reached their destination."⁵

The Oct. 29, 1849, date of Samuel's departure for California is substantiated by an entry for a seaman's certificate registry which reads:

"Tefft, Samuel H. Date of Certification - Oct. 29, 1849, age 28, light complexion, place of birth: Richmond, R.I."⁶

Accepting for a moment the six months it took to sail around the Cape, this would have put Harlow's arrival in San Francisco at about April 4, 1850.

A traveling family man

Before leaving for California, Harlow had wed Maria Francis Johnson in October 1841.

There were nine children, all daughters, from this union. Most died young and only four survived their father's death on Dec. 8, 1904, at age 83 years, one month and 10 days.⁷

Both family tradition and documentary history suggest Harlow left this family behind, either in Rhode Island or elsewhere, returning to them on at least one occasion, as his fortunes in the gold fields improved.

Tefft genealogist Dixie A. Laire notes the family story is that Harlow went to California twice by ship, returning once to Rhode Island by ship, and the last time by land. On this second return, as he made his way back east traveling across the vast open expanses of America, he fell in love with the area around Montgomery and Cass counties in Iowa. He convinced his brother, David Tefft, and his brother-in-law, Jason Streight (Strait, Straight), to move their families to Iowa, where Harlow had purchased land he had passed through on his travels. The men and the older sons came back to Iowa and built homes, then went back to Rhode Island and collected their families for the final move west.

See *Crossroads* page 6





Samuel "Harlow" Tefft

A Life's Journey



28 October 1821 — Samuel "Harlow" Tefft born, probably in Hopkinton, R.I.

October 1841 — Marries Maria Francis Johnson.

13 May 1846 — United States declares war with Mexico.

2 February 1848 — The United States signs the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the war with Mexico.

19 August 1848 — Discovery of gold in California reported in *New York Herald*.

29 February 1849 — The first gold seekers arrive at San Francisco aboard the ship, *California*. Thousands more will follow by land and sea. By the end of this year, the population of California will swell to 100,000.

29 October 1849 — Samuel "Harlow" Tefft, age 28, receives a "seaman's certificate" in Providence, R.I.

4 April 1850 — Harlow arrives in San Francisco.

1853 — Harlow returns home to his family from California, possibly traveling by land.

1853 or 1857 — Harlow sells his claim in California. By various accounts this claim included 160 acres in Oakland and/or a stock ranch in what today would be the center of San Francisco.

1856 — Harlow is in Iowa; his name appears in the 1856 Montgomery County, Iowa census as a laborer, age 34.

1857 — Harlow builds a mill at Stennett's Grove, Montgomery County, Iowa; later sells out and comes to Lewis.

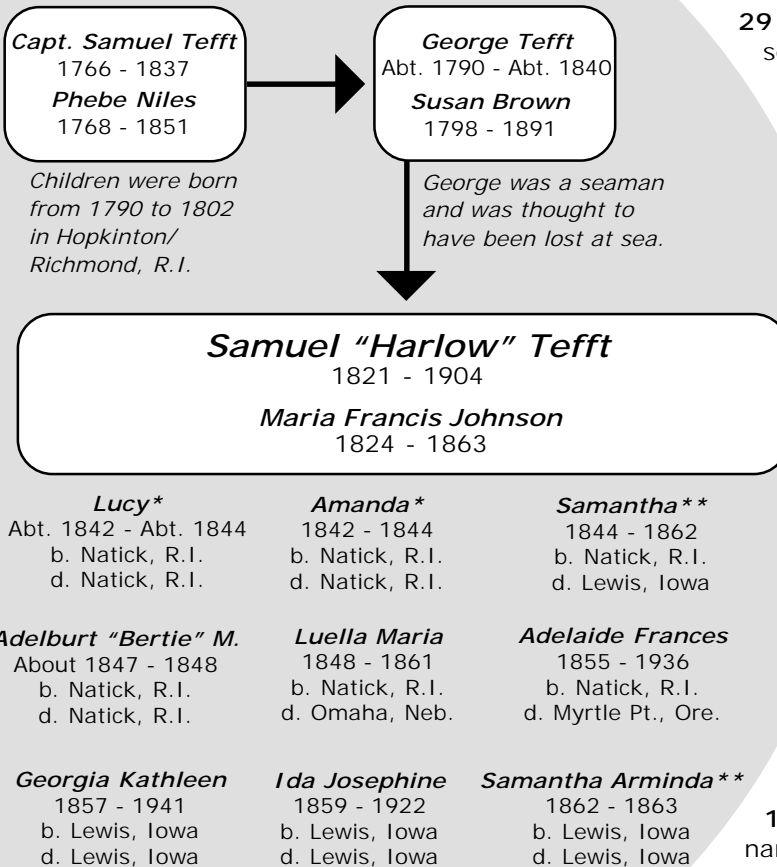
1858 — Harlow operates the ferry at the Nishnabotna crossing, collecting nearly \$10,000 in tolls from Nov. 1858 to April 1859.

1863 — Harlow buys 480 acres of land in Cass County, Iowa, giving 40 acres each to his two sons-in-law.

14 June 1870 — In Cass County census, Harlow is listed, age 47, farmer, value of real estate \$5,000, value of personal property \$2,400. Five others including his mother, age 68, and his daughters are also listed.

8 Dec. 1904 — Samuel "Harlow" Tefft dies at age 83 years.

Family Ties



Capt. Samuel Tefft
1766 - 1837
Phebe Niles
1768 - 1851

Children were born from 1790 to 1802 in Hopkinton/Richmond, R.I.

George Tefft
Abt. 1790 - Abt. 1840
Susan Brown
1798 - 1891

George was a seaman and was thought to have been lost at sea.

Samuel "Harlow" Tefft
1821 - 1904
Maria Francis Johnson
1824 - 1863

Lucy*
Abt. 1842 - Abt. 1844
b. Natick, R.I.
d. Natick, R.I.

Amanda*
1842 - 1844
b. Natick, R.I.
d. Natick, R.I.

Samantha**
1844 - 1862
b. Natick, R.I.
d. Lewis, Iowa

Adelburt "Bertie" M.
About 1847 - 1848
b. Natick, R.I.
d. Natick, R.I.

Luella Maria
1848 - 1861
b. Natick, R.I.
d. Omaha, Neb.

Adelaide Frances
1855 - 1936
b. Natick, R.I.
d. Myrtle Pt., Ore.

Georgia Kathleen
1857 - 1941
b. Lewis, Iowa
d. Lewis, Iowa

Ida Josephine
1859 - 1922
b. Lewis, Iowa
d. Lewis, Iowa

Samantha Arminda**
1862 - 1863
b. Lewis, Iowa
d. Lewis, Iowa

*Amanda's dates are from a gravestone transcription. Lucy's dates are less certain. The two were possibly twins, or even one in the same individual. **The two "Samanthas" are also problematic. One Samantha is confirmed, having married George Cotton and died as early as 1861.

Samuel "Harlow" Tefft genealogy courtesy Dixie A. Laire



Crossroads

From page 5

As the Cass County history has it: While in California, Harlow "was engaged in mining until 1858, when he returned home with the intention of removing his family, having a claim of 160 acres of land near the city of Oakland (Calif.)"

The obituary account of this time tells that: "He returned (home) and in 1853-5 made another trip to the same port by way of Panama (presumably by an overland route)."

Whether ever truly intended or not, the family never made it to California and the property in Oakland was sold. "He returned to the great mining district and sold his claim, keeping only his stock ranche (sic), which, if remaining now, would be right in the center of the city of San Francisco."⁸

A home in Iowa

How long Harlow traveled between California and Iowa remains something of a mystery. The documentary record of these years leaves unclear whether Harlow actually settled in Iowa in 1858 or 1855. Probably, in 1855, he was merely locating his wife and children in Iowa while he returned to the gold country.

The obituary account puts the year at 1855. "(Tefft) at last sold all his shares in the mines, and returned east in 1855, and soon located in the Hawkeye State."

Samuel H. Tefft, age 34, married, turns up in an 1856 Montgomery County (Iowa) West Township Census where he is listed as an Iowan laborer, though for less than a year. Laire notes that Samuel's brother-in-law, Jason Streight (m. Anna Elizabeth Tefft), age 39, is also listed in this same census. Perhaps, it was around this time that the family removed from their home in the east to Iowa.

A still more confusing and restless picture of this time is painted by the obituary notice:

"(Tefft) went to Montgomery County and erected a mill at Stennett's Grove, and in the spring of 1857 sold out and came to Lewis, and has since made it his home, with the exception of a few months' visit to Colorado."

Ferry across the "Botna"

Harlow's eventual settlement in Lewis may have been prompted by the area's reputation as a good livestock and grain area. "The excellent water power furnished by the Nishnabotna was an asset for the mill, and in 1858, Keypeck

and Company built the first grist mill in Lewis."⁹

The ferry business at Lewis was brisk. According to a Mormon Pioneer newsletter, "It was here that over 30 Mormon Handcart Companies crossed the river in 1858."¹⁰

"Diaries of residents who lived across the road from the ferry house tell of 'watching the world go by' as people passed through. Four stagecoaches a day went by to use the ferry."¹¹

The ferry, a cable operated affair, served as a connecting link between Council Bluffs and eastern Iowa. "There was no other ferry across the river until you got to Missouri, some 70 miles away..."¹²

In his Cass County History, Lafe Young notes that, according to county records, by Nov. 4, 1858, S.H. Tefft, ferryman, had collected \$9,860 in tolls from that date to April 1859.¹³

A light in the window

Across the Nishnabotna River from the ferry house is the Hitchcock house, a home that served as a station on the Underground Railroad. Iowa had many such stations on the Underground Railroad, a network of safe houses operated by men and woman who actively assisted runaway slaves to reach Canada and freedom.

The Hitchcock house, now fully restored and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was home to Reverend George B. Hitchcock, a minister of the Congregational Church and an ardent abolitionist.

According to a May 24, 1996 news clipping from the *Des Moines Register*, "...runaway slaves were hidden in the basement of the Hitchcock House. 'All clear' signals by lantern were sent from the upstairs bedroom to and from the ferry."

Crossing over

After traveling so many trails, in his final days, Harlow appears to have enjoyed robust health and continued to take an active part in



community life until his death in 1904.

He was a member of the school board and a school trustee. In the spring of 1863, at about the time of the death of his wife, he bought 480 acres of land on sections 2, 3, 4 and 10 and gave 40 acres each of this land to his two sons-in-law.¹⁴

"Mr. Tefft, though 83 years old, bore his years well and would have been taken for twenty years younger," the writer of his obituary reports. "He seemed to have rugged health in body and mind until near the end. His sickness continued a little less than four weeks. He seemed to suffer much, but bore it all without complaint."¹⁵

Funeral services for Samuel "Harlow" Tefft were conducted at 11 a.m. on Sunday (date unknown) at the Methodist Church in Lewis. His remains were laid to rest in Oakwood Cemetery.¹⁶

In a remarkable lifetime, Harlow had crossed America several times over, seeing the nation and living the American experience as few others have been privileged to do. Lacking his words, his deeds alone must be sufficient to speak to us about the choices and crossroads faced not only in his lifetime, but in our own. Tempted to speak, the man who ferried so many across may yet have this to say: I found my way. You will find yours.



Sources:

1. *Des Moines Register*. July 25, 1995.
2. *Botna Crossing*. A newsletter published by the Cass County, Iowa Mormon Trails Association. Winter 1998-99.
3. *History of Cass County (Iowa)*, 1884, pgs. 509 and 510. The recorded history is a muddle of contradictory dates and places. This reference gives Hopkinton, R.I. as Samuel H. Tefft's birthplace. Another, cited in note 5 below, has it that he was born at Mystic, Conn., though on the same date. Still a third, cited in note 6 below, records his birthplace as Richmond, R.I. With Richmond having been more of a county, or collection of villages, than a town itself, it seems likely that Hopkinton may have been Harlow's true birthplace.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Obituary, S.H. Tefet (sic) from an undated and unattributed news clipping in the possession of Dixie A. Laire, Red Oak, Iowa.
6. *Register of Seaman's Protection Certificates from the Providence, R.I., Custom District 1796-1870*, Book 5, pg. 79.
7. *Ibid.* Obituary, S. H. Tefet.
8. *Ibid.* *History of Cass County*.
9. *Ibid.* *History of Cass County*.
10. *Wheel Write*, a Mormon Pioneer newsletter. Winter 1996.
11. *Des Moines Register*. May 24, 1996.
12. *Ibid.* *Des Moines Register*. July 25, 1995.
13. Young, Lafe. *History of Cass County (Iowa)*, 1877, pgs. 71 and 72.
14. *Ibid.* *History of Cass County*.
15. *Ibid.* Obituary, S.H. Tefet.
16. *Ibid.* Obituary, S.H. Tefet.

~ Brothers and Sisters ~
Take the Ferry
 at Lewis



The Old Ferry House, in Lewis, Iowa was situated on the main route west. The Dragon Trail was near and the road that runs by the Ferry House was once called the White Pole Road, the first road to cross the nation.



Forlorn looking until recently, the Old Ferry House is being brought back to life today. It measures about 30 by 18 feet. The entire site is five acres and contains the house and some outbuildings. As the last remaining ferry-keeper's house on the Mormon Handcart Trails, it has earned National Register listing.



Graphic by Pat Tift Crawford (Murray, KY)

If this newsletter found you, then our search is over!

The Tefft Family Association welcomes new members. Benefits include the TFA quarterly newsletter and information of interest to genealogists, historians and others who are curious about Teffts, Tiffths, and other spellings of the surname. For more information, visit our Web site at www.geocities.com/tefft_family.

Come out of hiding to join us.

Just complete the enrollment form below and mail to:

The Tefft Family Association
3535 West Avenue J-13
Lancaster, CA 93536

About the Tefft Family Association

Who can join?

Descendants of John Tefft (Tift) of Rhode Island and his brother, William Teffe of Boston, including all the various spellings of the Tefft surname.

Others who wish to join as associate members are also welcome.

What are the annual dues?

Dues are \$10 per year/per member.

Contributions to cover mailing costs and other start-up costs for the TFA would also be greatly appreciated.

The TFA has not yet filed for nonprofit status.

Tefft Family Association Individual Membership Enrollment - 2002

1. Your name _____

2. Mailing address _____
Street _____
City/State/Zip _____

3. Home phone _____ 4. Business phone _____

5. Email address _____

6. Are you a Tefft descendant? Yes No Unsure

7. Are you applying for membership as a family (Tefft descendant) or associate member?
 Tefft descendant Associate member

8. My primary interest in joining the TFA is: (please check one ONLY)
 Preserving Tefft Homestead Attending Reunions Researching Genealogy Preserving Tefft Cemeteries Other _____

9. In addition to my annual membership dues of \$10, I wish to make a contribution to the TFA in support of the following:
 Management of Tefft Historic Park in South Kingstown, R.I. Unspecified Dues ONLY at this time

Thank you! Please mail to: TFA Enrollment, 3535 West Avenue J-13, Lancaster, CA 93536

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

We'd Hate to Miss You!
If you haven't paid your annual membership dues by Jan. 1, 2002, you might miss out on the next newsletter. Thanks for joining the Tefft Family Association!