

The Impact of a Teenager: Our Earliest Immigrant Ancestor – Jurian Westfall

Researching the ancestors of my father, Murray Coleman, soon identified Sarah Westfall as Murray's paternal grandmother. Sarah had married Calvert Coleman and they had eight children, the youngest of whom was Arthur Roy Coleman.

Roy later became the husband of Margaret Paterson and the father of Murray. Murray married Kathleen Steil and they had nine children.

The ancestors of Sarah Westfall, like the ancestors of other grandparents of Murray and Kathleen, were traced back as far as available records would permit.

Kathleen's paternal grandparents were born in Germany and her maternal grandparents in Poland. Murray's maternal grandparents were born in Scotland. His paternal grandfather, Calvert, was born in the United States, while Calvert's parents were born in Ireland.

So Murray and Kathleen would generally be considered second generation Americans. Except for the blood line of Murray's paternal grandmother, Sarah Westfall.

Sarah came from a long line of American-born Westfalls, most of whom had lived in New York state. Research proved that Sarah was a seventh generation American.

Sarah's sixth great grandfather, Jurian Westfall, was born in 1629 in Luyderop, Netherlands. His family had moved there from a Prussian territory known as Westphalia. "North Rhine Westphalia" is now a province in Germany.

At the young age of 13, Jurian sailed from Holland aboard the ship Den Houttuyn, arriving at the port of New Amsterdam (New York) on August 4, 1642. It is not known whether his parents died on the voyage or whether he was an orphan when he started the journey.

Jurian left Westphalia in the midst of what later would be called the Thirty Year War. The religious war began in 1618 and ended in 1648 when the Peace of Westphalia was signed by the Holy Roman Empire and the Kings of Spain, France, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

Upon arrival, Jurian became an indentured servant of Kiliaen Van Raesselaer and was placed in the home of Michael Jansen. Indentured servants were common in seventeenth century America. Under the terms of a three to seven year contract, these immigrants were obligated to work for a particular master in exchange for their transportation to the new world and their lodging once they arrived.

Once the term of his contract was satisfied, Jurian left Jansen's farm in 1653 and bought land in Kingston, New York, where he married Marretje Hansen the same year. They had six children before Jurian was killed by Indians while acting as a guide for soldiers in 1669. One of the children, Symen Westfall, became the fifth great grandfather of Sarah Westfall.

A few years before he died, Jurian and 12 others petitioned Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch Governor of New York, to establish a church in the area in which they resided. The Governor agreed and a local branch of the Dutch Reformed Church of New York was created.

Jurian Westfall apparently was the only immigrant by that name for a hundred years. He is considered to be the founding father of all Westfalls in New York and those who moved to West Virginia after 1740.

The story of Jurian Westfall is a testament to the power of a teenager and the difference that a single individual can make in the world. One can only imagine the courage it took for young Jurian to leave his homeland and to embark on a three month voyage across the Atlantic ocean to the land of opportunity in America.

Once he arrived in New York, Jurian had other challenges to face, such as fulfilling the terms of his contract as an indentured servant, saving enough money to buy some land, starting a family, and surviving in an area peppered with ongoing battles between native Americans and recent settlers from abroad.

Jurian fared quite well on all accounts, except for his premature death in a clash with local Indians.

Despite this tragic ending, hundreds of descendents of Jurian Westfall should be grateful that this Westphalian teenager mustered up the nerve to come to America. Modern day teens, even adults, can learn a lesson in courage and perseverance from brave Jurian Westfall.



Signing of the Peace of Westphalia