

Bio: Captain Norbourne L Cooke
An account by William "Bill" Millay, 2015.

According to Jessie Cooke Bingham's autobiography and personal correspondence of my Aunt Nora Cooke Esterling, Norbourne L Cooke was rather tall, handsome, and due to the business successes of the family, sent to Oxford to be educated. Upon returning to the USA, Norbourne, skilled in business and engineering, acquired a passenger steamer and several smaller freight packets. These operated successfully on the upper and lower Ohio River and its tributaries ranging from the Kanawha in WV to the confluence with the Mississippi near Wycliffe. This gave the family business access to Charleston WV(Kanawha River), Huntsville/Decatur, AL, Chattanooga, TN and Paducah, KY(Tennessee River), Nashville, TN and surroundings(Cumberland river) and Bowling Green and south-central KY(Green River) as well as the major Ohio river ports and St. Louis on the Mississippi River. The Kentucky and Green Rivers of Kentucky had been canalized since the 1830s and so provided year-round warm water transportation of goods available to and from the interior of the state and on to markets in the states of the deep South. The interior of Kentucky became a breadbasket and supplier of raw materials until the Civil War.



Captain Cooke(N.L.) had a bit of a moral epiphany some time just prior to the Missouri Compromise. He attended a slave auction in Evansville, IN and witnessed slave families being sold piecemeal. Prior to this in such dealings, the Cookes always traded in entire families and attempted to keep them together as much as possible. Norbourne found the practice so barbaric and abhorrent that he later that year travelled to the Alabama properties, sold them outright and gave the resident slaves their freedom. Considering the racial climate of Alabama of the 1840s and 1850s, the former slaves were offered an opportunity to travel North to the family holdings in Kentucky to work as freemen, if they desired. Considering the alternatives, the majority made their way to Henry County, Kentucky and around 1858, to newly acquired land in Henderson and Daviess Counties in western Kentucky on the Green River.

Around that time, Col. Harralson from North Carolina, Mr. Andrew M. Allen and Captain Cooke drew up plans for a community they named Delaware after a small creek that emptied into the Green not far from their location. The surrounding farmland was perfect for Burley tobacco and food crops.

Tobacco seemed a very logical choice as it was very labor intensive. That's one of the reasons the Cooke family got into tobacco: to give the ex-slaves work. So there was a steady, reasonably experienced workforce available for the farming, harvesting, housing, factory processing and transportation of that product as well as for community sawmills, gristmills and for roustabouts on the packets and on the wharves. The War Between the States completely disrupted the local economy and the coming of the railroads was the death knell of Delaware, since they came nowhere near the port. The closest rail head was in Owensboro, the county seat, which was about 15 miles to the northeast. Service came there in 1880 or so.



After several business and personal disasters in the early 1880s, including the untimely deaths of two of his sons, Captain Cooke heard of a burgeoning frontier community that showed promise along the Red River in Texas. He heard that Denison, TX was the new land of milk and honey and so he offered to transport whomever would go to St. Louis MO on his packets. Then they had a day and a half train trip across Missouri and halfway across Kansas before crossing what was then Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). They basically mass migrated and settled in Denison. Captain Cooke was getting up in age and decided to sell his flotilla in St. Louis and essentially retired to

Denison, where he died sometime in the 1890s, we think. His second wife, Rhoda, is buried there, for sure. There was some speculation at one time back in the 1980s that Captain Cooke may have been returned to Delaware after his death, but I was unable to locate a marker for him. It would have been rather prominent, as the one for his son, Stephen Clayton Cooke, certainly is.

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A note about the photographs, added by Pam Garrett:

The photo of Norbourne L Cooke, that appears in the Bio by Bill Millay, comes from the Cooke Family Photo Collection of Eva Fleming Royster. Bill Millay explains, "I have included what I believe to be the only known photo of Norbourne L. Cooke, presumably onboard his passenger steamer. In the original photograph, there is a young lady with an infant in her arms. I believe they may be Mary Helen McLean Cooke, recent widow of Norbourne's 2nd son, William Eugene Cooke, and my grandfather, Needham Hatchett Cooke. This photo could then be placed in the Summer of 1879 at the wharf in Delaware, KY."

The second photo is the gravestone of Captain Cooke's son, Stephen Clayton Cooke, "who passed on in 1883, not too long before the mass migration to Texas." He is buried in the Delaware Church Cemetery, at Delaware, in Daviess county Kentucky.

[A link to Norborne L Cooke in the Markham of Chesterfield database.](#)