The Turner–Middleton Feud: A Family History That Stayed With Me

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A personal account of genealogical research, family connections, and the story of Fannie Middleton and John David Turner.

How my mother and I began

Long before family history was as accessible online as it is today, my mother and I began tracing our ancestors together. We worked with family Bibles, information passed down through relatives, early records available through Ancestry.com, and Harlan County historical and genealogical periodicals. It was slower, more hands-on research, but it brought us close to people whose names had once been little more than entries in a family tree.

My mother later moved from Michigan to Georgia, and we did not keep many of those old periodicals. I have regretted that ever since. Their pages introduced us to the Turner–Middleton feud, an especially painful chapter of Harlan County history, and left me with questions that remained for decades.

The families behind the feud

Our research led us to the Clover Fork area and the closely related Turner and Middleton families. According to our family research, Walter Middleton married Sarah Turner, a daughter of William Turner and Susannah Bailey. Their son Benjamin Middleton married Sarah Blevins. Benjamin's children included Fannie (also recorded as Fanny) Middleton and her brother Elijah Middleton, my great-grandfather. Elijah's daughter, Nancy Armentie Middleton, was my grandmother, whom we called Me-Me. That makes Fannie my great-great-aunt.

On the Turner side, Sarah Turner's brother James Turner Sr. married Elizabeth Clay. Their son James "Devil Jim" Turner married Sarah "Sally" Jones. One of their sons was John David Turner, who married Fannie Middleton. Fannie and John were related through the older Turner line as well as joined by marriage. The two family-tree diagrams attached below reproduce the genealogical appendix from my book; some names, dates, and relationships still call for independent verification.

I remember being struck by accounts of the deaths of Middleton men during the conflict. The loss seemed overwhelming, and I found myself wondering what it meant for the women and children who lived with its aftermath. One documented flashpoint was the killing of William Middleton, followed by legal proceedings involving James Turner and Francis Pace. Transcriptions of testimony and subsequent historical accounts deserve careful reading because descriptions of the feud, motives, and responsibility vary.

The complicated story of “Devil Jim”

James “Devil Jim” Turner is one of the most arresting figures in these accounts. He was convicted in connection with William Middleton’s killing and received a life sentence, but was later pardoned or released. Accounts differ over the exact legal terms of his release, including whether he was forbidden to return to Kentucky. Rather than treat that condition as established, I consider it an important question for the original pardon and court records.

Published accounts place Jim in Washington State after his release. A later Washington newspaper account describes the area near Toledo, Lewis County, as “Little Kentucky,” associated with Turner family settlers, and recounts bootlegging stories involving his descendants. These reports should not be taken as proof that Jim himself operated a moonshine business there. His wife Sarah (“Sally”) Jones Turner apparently remained in Kentucky rather than joining him; the reasons for that decision are unknown, but I have often wondered about the family circumstances behind it.

John Ed Pearce’s Days of Darkness: The Feuds of Eastern Kentucky helped me understand the broader world of the eastern Kentucky feuds and reminded me how easily family stories and newspaper accounts can become tangled. His book also covers the Turner–Howard conflict; my own family interest centers on the Turner–Middleton connection.

The marriage I could not stop thinking about

What has always fascinated me most is that Fannie Middleton, from one branch of the divided family, married John David Turner, the son of “Devil Jim.” How did they meet? What did their relatives think? How did they make a life together after growing up under the shadow of that history? No family tree could answer those questions.

A later family-history article recounts an interview with Fannie and John published by the Courier-Journal on February 24, 1963, as they approached their seventieth wedding anniversary. In that retelling, the young couple walked roughly fifteen miles over Black Mountain to reach a train, traveled to Sewanee, Tennessee, to marry, and then returned home. That image of two young people crossing the mountain stayed with me. It was a practical journey in their time, but to me it was also a beautiful human story.

The wedding date requires caution. The anniversary retelling reports March 6, 1893, while the Harlan KYGenWeb marriage index lists John Turner and Fannie Middleton under February 22, 1894, with James Blevins named as officiant. The original marriage register and the February 24, 1963 newspaper article should be compared before adopting a definitive date. These are not interchangeable sources, and I would welcome help locating the originals.

From research to a novel

For years I kept an outline, wondering what life between Fannie and John might have looked like. At fifty-five, I finally wrote Mountain Whispers, a historical novel inspired by those real relatives.

The marriage and family connections come from historical and genealogical accounts; the courtship, conversations, private thoughts, and many everyday scenes are fiction. The novel is not offered as a new record of the feud.

What began as research with my mother became a way to honor the people whose lives we encountered. I hope that sharing the family relationships and the leads below helps other researchers compare records, correct errors, and preserve the stories before they are lost.

Research sources and leads

1. Family Bibles, oral histories, the author's family notes, and Harlan County genealogy periodicals consulted with her mother; some periodicals and original notes are no longer held by the family.

2. Harlan KYGenWeb, indexed marriages: "Bride_MO" and "Groom_TZ," entries for Fannie Middleton and John Turner dated 22 February 1894. https://kygenweb.net/harlan/Bride_MO.html ; https://kygenweb.net/harlan/Groom_TZ.html . Index entries should be checked against the original register.

3. "An Unlikely Wedding," Timeless Bonds family-history blog, 27 July 2020; cites a Courier-Journal interview of 24 February 1963 and reports a marriage in Sewanee on 6 March 1893. https://timelessbonds.blogspot.com/2020/07/an-unlikely-wedding.html . Original newspaper issue not independently examined for this article.

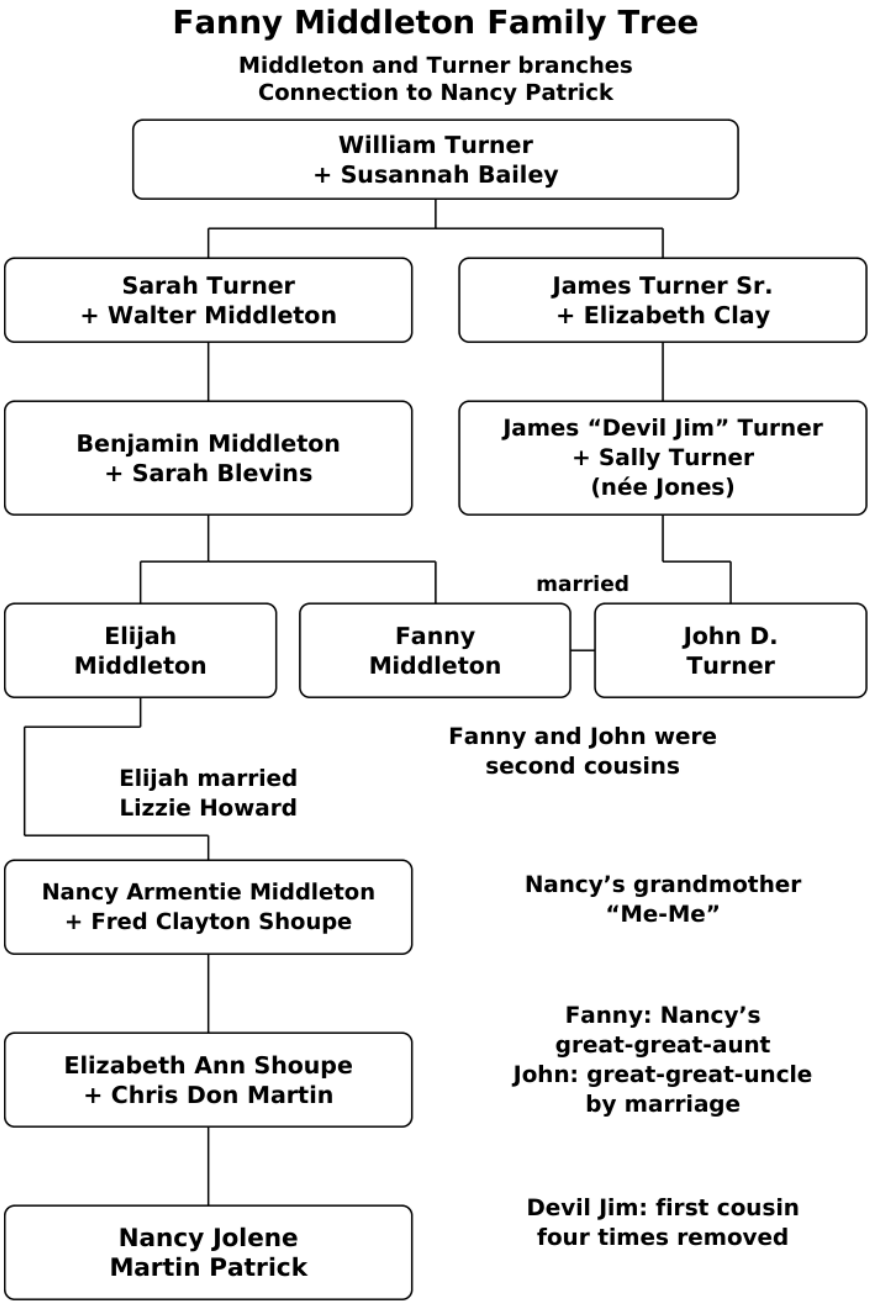
4. "Transcript of the Testimonies of the Trial of James (Devil Jim) Turner and Francis Pace," transcription hosted at Francis Pace family-history website. https://francispace.weebly.com/the-trial-of-james-devil-jim-turner-and-francis-pace---transcripts-of-the-testimonies.html . A transcription, not the original court record.

5. John Ed Pearce, Days of Darkness: The Feuds of Eastern Kentucky (University Press of Kentucky, 1994). Publisher record: https://www.kentuckypress.com/9780813118741/days-of-darkness/ .

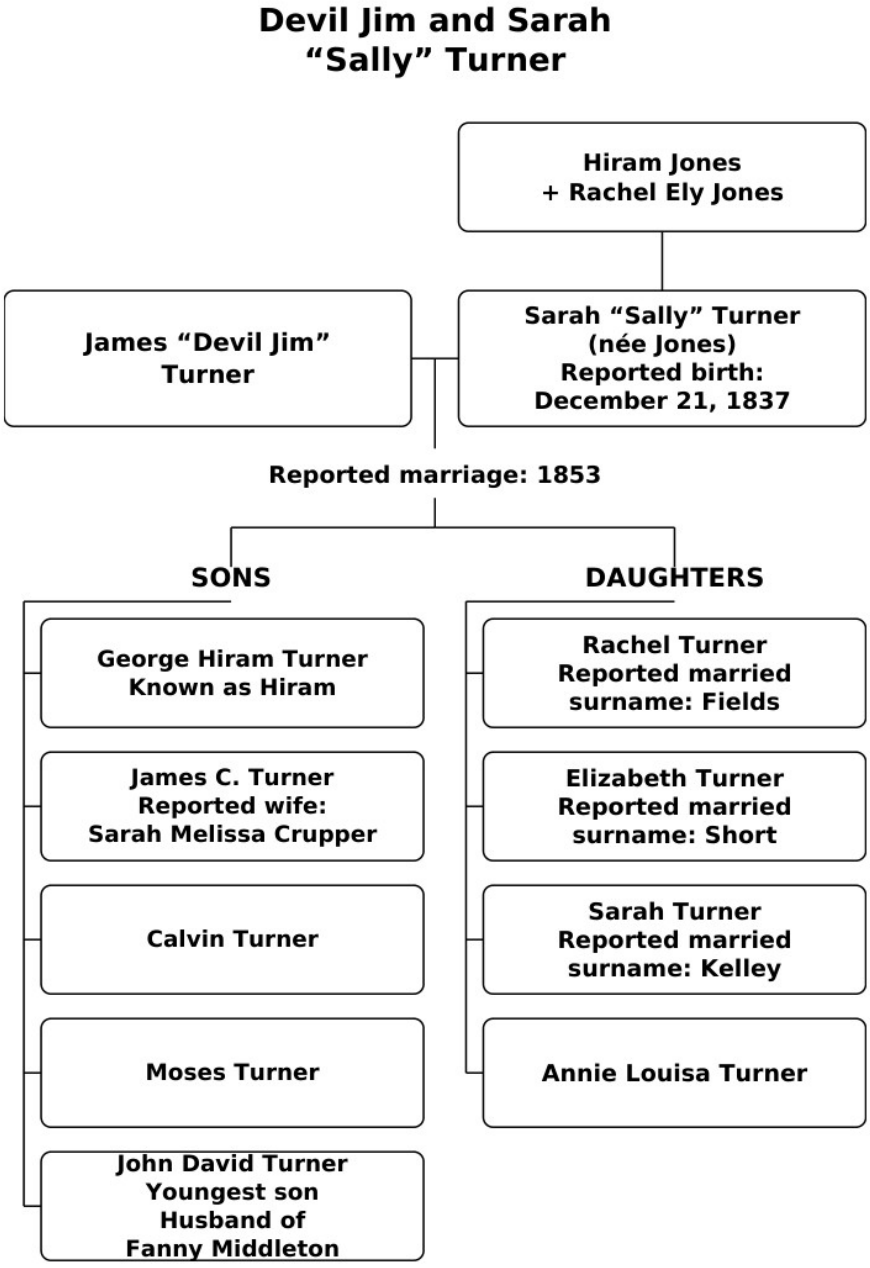
6. Julie McDonald, "Devil Jim Turner settled at Toledo in 1891 after release from Kentucky prison," The Chronicle (Centralia/Chehalis, Washington), 31 December 2024, commentary; references descendants, Little Kentucky, and Washington newspaper reports. https://cdn3.creativecirclemedia.com/lafromboise/files/20241230-134350-5c3-TDC_241231_WEB.pdf .

7. The Morning Oregonian, 9 March 1910, report on James Turner's death, cited in Mountain Whispers historical note; original newspaper should be consulted directly.

Editorial note: This essay distinguishes remembered family research, secondary historical accounts, and indexed/transcribed records. Dates and relationships marked as uncertain should be confirmed against original documents before reuse as verified genealogy.



Source: Mountain Whispers, family-tree appendix. These are family-research diagrams, not independently verified vital records.



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