



# Alderson

Roots & Branches



## John Alderson, Senior: the Progenitor

The majority of Alderson families in the United States appear to descend from John Alderson of Yorkshire, who left England as a young man for New Jersey. In New Jersey, John Alderson was hired out for his passage to the Reverend Thomas Curtis of Hopewell, a pioneer Baptist minister and father of John's future wife Jane. After John himself was ordained a Baptist minister, he left New Jersey for the New Britain Baptist Church of Bucks Co., Pennsylvania, but the missionary spirit led him to take the Baptist ministry to the Valley of Virginia. At Linville Creek, in present-day Rockingham Co., Virginia, John and his family endured the hardships of Indian attacks and isolation, but his church survived and grew. His son John, Jr. followed in his father's footsteps and eventually introduced the Baptist Church to the wilderness lying across the Alleghanies. John Alderson, Sr. and his wife Jane left Linville Creek about 1775 to settle further down the Shenandoah Valley near Fincastle, in Botetourt Co. Here he died in 1780, ending a 50-year association with the ministry.

This account is a short outline of the life of John Alderson, Senior, from whom thousands of Americans can claim descent. His story has been told innumerable times and is prominent in the annals of early Baptist history. It is, however, worthwhile to take a second look at this story, to review the facts surrounding the history as it has been repeated,

and to uncover the documentary evidence that substantiates his life, family, and death.

Few primary sources of information on John Alderson remain. Among the earliest are minutes of the Hopewell Baptist Church in New Jersey and the Smith's and Linville's Creek Baptist Church in Virginia. Listing those persons who had joined the Church since its founding in 1715, the Hopewell Church minutes noted that by 1730, John Alderson had been added to the membership by baptism. He stayed less than 20 years; the minutes also note that he had left the congregation by 1749.<sup>1</sup> To date, no other record of John Alderson has been unearthed in New Jersey nor has written evidence of his ministry in Pennsylvania been found.

The record of his life in Virginia is much more complete. The minutes of the Smith's and Linville's Creek Baptist Church open with the covenant of organization on 6 Aug 1756 to which John Alderson and his wife Jane, along with six other residents, are signatories.<sup>2</sup> The church minutes begin with a history of the establishment of the church and mention that John Alderson "visited again his second Time" before he and his wife Jane "moved their residence, and came to us the same Spring before we were Constituted." This indicates that John Alderson visited Linville Creek at least twice before leaving Pennsylvania, and the date of his final move with his family can be fixed as the spring of 1756. A June 1756 entry in the Order Book of Frederick Co., VA, records the licensing of John Alderson as a "dissenting minister to attend meeting houses on the No. River of Shenando and Lenvell's Creek."<sup>3</sup>

The Linville Creek Church minutes are replete with references to John Alderson. Alderson was one of the leaders of the first congregational meeting of the Mill Creek, Ketoctan, and Linville Creek churches, which lasted for three days at Linville Creek in June 1757.<sup>4</sup> Although he had lived in the community for less than two years, John Alderson's standing was already quite high in the Linville

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1 Lida Cokefair, compiler, *Hopewell Town Records*, 1931, p. 128.

2 Abstracts of the Linville Creek Church minutes can be found in John W. Wayland, *Virginia Valley Records*, 1930, pp. 48-59; and in J. Houston Harrison, *Settlers by the Long Grey Trail*, 1935, passim.

3 Frederick Co., VA, *Order Book*, No. 7, p. 67

4 Linville Creek Church Minutes, in Harrison, 1935, p. 77.

Creek area, as evidenced by his position as elector from Frederick County in the 1757 election of representatives to the Virginia House of Burgesses. He is on record as having cast his vote for "Col. George Washington and Col. Martin."<sup>5</sup>

Only one year after their formal establishment, the Linville Creek congregation found their peace disturbed. Spurred on by the French, who were now at war with England, Indians attacked the Linville Creek community, preventing the celebration of communion and the confirmation of a new church member. Shortly after this attack of 14 August 1757, believers in the baptism custom of infant sprinkling disrupted the community, and called a Presbyterian minister, Alexander Miller, to their aid. According to the church Minute Books, on 21 September 1757, "Miller and a rude assembly with him in a disorderly manner... opened our Meeting House, and assumed our Pulpit, and there slanderously, falsely, and contrary to Christian Rule and Order, despitefully use our Minister, and Brother, the Deacon, with approbrious Speeches, of Spite and Malice, entirely untruth..."<sup>6</sup> Miller evidently had attacked the community before; the Minutes note that Miller had "rediculously aspersed our Rev. Brother Mr. Alderson of being a Papist."

Exactly one week after this incident, Indians attacked the settlement on Linville Creek. Without protection, the families fled to the safety of the forts or to settlements east of the Blue Ridge mountains. Although communion was again held in January 1758, sporadic attacks by the Indians, harsh winters, and an outbreak of smallpox prevented the reassembly of the Linville Creek church until September 1759, when French defeats in Canada lessened the frequency of Indian attacks on the frontier settlements.<sup>7</sup>

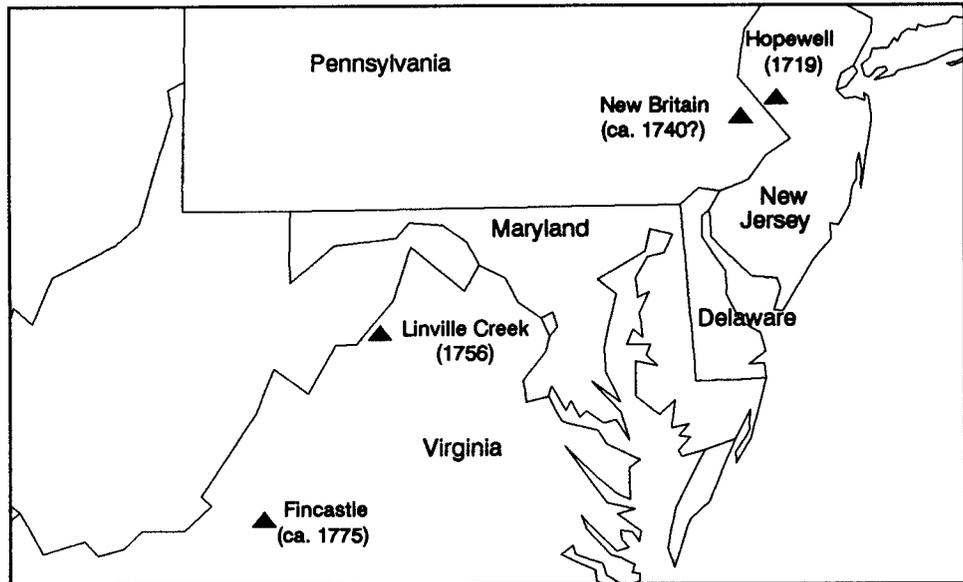


Figure 1  
Residences of John Alderson, Sr., 1719-1780 (dates of arrival in parentheses).

After several years of growth, the Linville Creek church decided to apply for membership to the Philadelphia Association of Baptist churches. At the May 1762 meeting, church members appointed John Alderson to travel to Philadelphia to meet with the Association. On 12 October 1762, the Smiths and Linville Creek church was formally accepted to the Association at a meeting in Philadelphia, but it was not until the following March that the letter of acceptance was read to the Sabbath congregation at Linville Creek. This was the third and last Baptist church in Virginia to join the Philadelphia-based Association, organized in 1707. The member churches of the Association included the Pennepak Baptist church in present-day Philadelphia, founded in January 1688 (NS) and mother church to numerous Baptist churches in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, including the Hopewell Baptist church, which John Alderson joined in the 1720s.<sup>8</sup> Pennepak was also the church where the Reverend John Davis, father of Hannah Davis, first wife of Thomas Alderson, son of John, began his ministry that in later years took him to Harford Co., Maryland.<sup>9</sup>

5 *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 4, 1899, p. 163

6 Linville Creek Church Minutes, in Harrison, 1935, p. 178.

7 Linville Creek Church Minutes, in Harrison, 1935, p. 179.

8 Horatio Gates Jones, *Historical Sketch of the Lower Dublin (or Pennepak) Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pa.*, Morrisania, NY, 1869, pp. 5-15.

9 *History of Baptist Churches in Maryland*, Maryland Baptist Union, Baltimore, MD, 1885, pp. 10, 27.

Later in 1763, following French defeat in the Seven-Years War, the church at Linville Creek suffered its last attack by Indians. Summer attacks prevented a scheduled church meeting in August, but by September, the threat was past.<sup>10</sup>

Over the following few years, a number of church members moved away, including Samuel Newman and his wife Martha, who left Linville Creek in 1765 for "some parts of North, or South Carolina." The Newmans, from Bucks Co., PA, had been founding members of the Linville Creek church with John and Jane Alderson in 1756. The Newmans were replaced by summer by two new members, one of whom was "a Negro Man called Joe." John Alderson's work continued with a trip to the Association meeting in Philadelphia in the fall of 1765, for which "every Male Member [was] to pay seven Shillings."<sup>11</sup>

John Alderson had the pleasure to baptism a number of his children and their spouses into his church. In June 1766, John's son Benjamin and wife Ann "submit[ted] to the Ordinances of Baptism and the Lords Supper." In March 1769, his son John was baptized after giving "clear and satisfactory answers to such questions as were asked concerning his Faith." Son Curtis was baptized in 1771, and Mary Alderson, wife of John Alderson, Jr., was baptized in 1772. In August of the same year, Hannah Alderson, wife of John's son Thomas, was baptized.<sup>12</sup>

By 1773, John Alderson's stature at the Linville Creek church had begun to diminish. In September 1773, John Alderson was ordered to appear at the next Monthly Meeting "to vindicate the Charges alledged against him." He apparently was unable to vindicate himself; in June 1774, the church ordered him and two other men to "go and make faithful Enquiry concerning the Reproach, alledged against him by two Men in Frederick Town, in Maryland." The content of these charges are not revealed in the abstracts of the Linville Creek Church, but they were serious enough that on "August 13, 1774...Rev. John Alderson Sr., was also suspended."<sup>13</sup>

By the time of his dismissal, John Alderson had evidently already considered leaving Linville Creek.

On 6 August 1773, in partnership with Adam Walker, he leased the 100-acre Miller's Mill property in the town of Fincastle, Botetourt County, from Israel Christian.<sup>14</sup> In this deed, he and Walker are referred to as "merchants." It is not known exactly when John Alderson left Linville Creek for Fincastle, but he likely visited back and forth before his final move. Taylor notes that John Alderson stayed 16 years at Linville Creek, and was in Fincastle about 9 years before his death.<sup>15</sup> This would place his move in 1771-2, a year or two before the lease of the mill property. The church minutes record his activities of late 1773 and 1774 at Linville Creek in connection with the charges he faced, but there is no further record in the abstracts until 13 March 1777, when the church "Called a Meeting, upon the Accompt of the Revd Jno Alderson sn, who gave as Grounds to hope that the Lord hath restored him by a sound Repentance, and we received him into his Place, in the Church."

This entry marks the beginning of a ten-year gap in the church minutes, so no further record of John Alderson's life at Linville Creek is available. At Fincastle, the record is even sparser. Aside from the lease recorded in 1773, only his will and estate settlement have come to light. The will of John Alderson was written on 24 Feb 1780, witnessed by Joseph Ward, Elias Owens, and Samuel Garwood, and probated in the November Court, 1780.<sup>16</sup> In it, he mentioned his wife Jane; sons John, Curtis, Benjamin, Thomas, Simon; grandson Thomas, son of Curtis; and grandson George, son of John. No mention is made of a daughter. Of interest in the final division of property in the will is the emphasis on books, especially religious and philosophical titles. Son Curtis received Dr. Owens *Expositions*; son John received a volume of parables by W. Keith; and wife Jane was bequeathed the works of Mr. Flavel, "to give...to which of her children she pleases." Grandson George Alderson was given Mr. Owen's Sermons and the Works of Andrew Gray, while the remainder of the books were equally divided "among my four sons John, Curtis, Benjamin, and John." John Alderson's love of books is also apparent from the debts he incurred to purchase them: his will leaves "all money that I have

10 Linville Creek Church Minutes, in Harrison, 1935, p. 180.

11 Linville Creek Church Minutes, in Harrison, 1935, p. 187.

12 Linville Creek Church Minutes, in Harrison, 1935, p. 232.

13 Harrison's version of the church minutes gives John Alderson, Jr. This is unlikely given the fact that John Alderson, Jr. was not ordained pastor of the Linville Creek Church (by the Rev. John Marks) until October 1775 and thus would not have been referred to as the "Rev. John Alderson." Wayland has "John Alderson, Sr."

14 Robert Douthat Stover, *A Seed-Bed of the Republic*, p. 394; Lewis Preston Summers, *Annals of Southwest Virginia, 1769-1800*, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1970 (reprint), p. 549.

15 James B. Taylor, *The Lives of Virginia Baptist Minister*, Series I, Richmond, VA, 1838, p. 22.

16 Botetourt Co., VA, Will Book A, p. 128.

at interest with all my Book debts in the hands of my beloved wife Jane Alderson during her widowhood." The settlement of John Alderson's estate is excerpted in Stover's *Seed-Bed of the Republic*; Stover's passage is worth quoting in full because it provides clues as to the whereabouts of John Alderson's children and provides an interesting sidelight to the funeral customs of the times:

"This estate settlement has numerous items of more than ordinary interest: the amount paid for cryer of his sale in Greenbrier, 1 shilling 6 pence; amount for rum used at the sale at Greenbrier, 3 shillings; the 9 quarts of brandy used at funeral, 11 shillings 3 pence; travel expense of the executor to Washington, Carolina, and Greenbrier and Clinch; and the nails of the coffin, 2 shillings; two-ninths as much the charge for expense of the trip to Carolina, 9 shillings." [p. 396]

These are the primary documented facts on the life of John Alderson. Over the years, a number of other sources have elaborated on the story of his life, especially of his motivation for leaving England for America. According to Taylor, who wrote about the Rev. John Alderson fifty-seven years after his death:

[John Alderson's] father, a minister of useful talents, and respectable character, opposed, with considerable violence, a matrimonial connexion he was about to form. To divert the attention of his son from this alliance, he prevailed on him to travel, and furnished him with a horse and the requisite funds. In a short time these means were exhausted, and the prodigal was at length bound on board a vessel, which brought him, without the consent or knowledge of his parents, to America. On arriving in this country, he was hired by the captain for his passage money to a respectable farmer of New Jersey by the name of Curtis.

His conduct during his term of labor was such as to gain the esteem of Mr. Curtis. He afterwards married his daughter, and was highly respected by all with whom he became acquainted.<sup>17</sup>

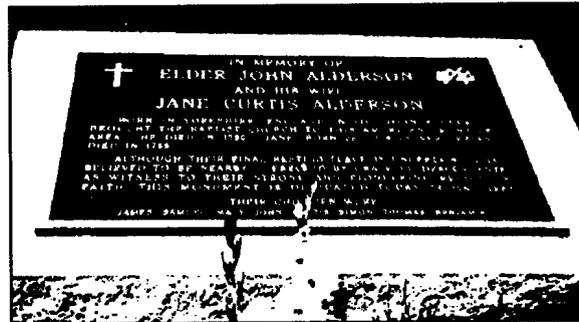


Figure 2  
Memorial stone to John Alderson, Sr. and his wife Jane Curtis Alderson, dedicated 24 May 1987 in the Alderson family cemetery on the farm of John Earl Alderson, Jr., south of Fincastle, Botetourt Co., VA. The exact location of their burials is unknown, but assumed to be nearby.

John Alderson's parentage and year of birth are a matter of some uncertainty. Taylor notes that Alderson was born in Yorkshire, England, the son of a minister, presumably Anglican. According to C.N. Feamster, writing in a postscript to a manuscript submitted to the Library of Congress, "in a letter, dated in 1773 now on file with the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress is the following statement of the Reverend Lewis A. Alderson, 'I have before me the facts in his

own handwriting.' This refers to the notes dictated by the Reverend John Alderson Sr. relative to his father also a John being clergyman in the Established Church in Yorkshire, England, about his (John the son) coming to America around 1730 and marrying Jane Curtis in New Jersey."<sup>18</sup> Feamster does not make it clear whether he actually saw this letter, but his early history of John Alderson notes that "his previous history he recorded for his descendants [was] as follows:"

He was born in Yorkshire in 1699. His father, also named John, was a clergyman of the Church of England, and desired that he, though unwilling to do so, should enter the ministry. His father also disapproved of a marriage that he greatly desired. Trusting that he would change his objection to being a minister and also that the marriage may be prevented, his father gave him a purse of money and directed him to use it in traveling. John, the son, in his travels, made the acquaintance of a sea captain and was invited to go aboard his ship. he did so and woke up at sea en route to America. He landed on the New Jersey coast in 1719, and began to work near Bethlehem

17 Taylor, 1838, p. 21

18 C.N. Feamster, *Data Requested by the Library of Congress to Accompany the Colonel C.N. Feamster Manuscripts*, unpublished manuscript, 1955, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The 1773 date of the letter is highly unlikely. The Rev. Lewis A. Alderson was born in 1812 and died in 1881; perhaps the date is meant to be 1873. This assumption is strengthened by the additional passage by Feamster that "also contained in the letters of the Reverend Lewis A. Alderson are statements that in 1771-1773 etc, he (Lewis A. Alderson) had written biographical articles of John Alderson, Sr., John Alderson, Jr., both clergymen, and Joseph Alderson for publication in the *Herald*, meaning the *Religious Herald* published in Richmond, VA." The *Religious Herald* was not published until the 19th Century.



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life's story parallels that of a young nation; immigrant at 19, he followed the frontier as it expanded beyond the coastal settlements into the great interior valleys of the Appalachians. His courage in opposing the established Church of England in the colonies sustained him as he and his congregation faced not only "opprobrium" from their English neighbors, but also the danger of Indian attack.

John Alderson also wrote a significant chapter in the history of the Baptist church. He was a "Regular" or "Primitive" Baptist, who followed Calvinistic teachings that included particular atonement, predestination, and election. Although the Regular Baptists were predominant in the Middle Atlantic colonies, in Virginia and North Carolina, the "General" or "Separate" Baptists, who believed in general atonement and the free will of man, were most common. In the days of persecution before the disestablishment of the Church of England, the General Baptists suffered most because of their refusal, unlike the Regular Baptists, to obtain a license to preach as a dissenting minister. Regular Baptists from Maryland and Pennsylvania were the first to establish churches west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and from there they spread over the Alleghenies into Kentucky and what is now West Virginia.

John Alderson's early days at Hopewell, one of the first Baptist churches in New Jersey and offspring of the pioneering Pennepak church, imbued him with the missionary zeal necessary to expand the scope of the church's activities. His move to Pennsylvania placed him in closer association with other churches in the growing Philadelphia Association, and it was from here he left to establish the first Baptist church in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. He was instrumental in the organization of the Kettocton Association in 1766, which split off from the Philadelphia Association as church membership grew.

By the time of his death in 1780, John Alderson's work was being taken up by his son John, who succeeded him at Linville Creek and, in 1781, established the Greenbrier Baptist Church in present-day Alderson, WV. His life, which followed the expansion of the American frontier settlement, was only one of thousands that saw the country transformed from backward wilderness to independent nation. It is a story that deserves to be told. □

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## Computer Database

In order to facilitate tracking and listing the descendants of John Alderson, an Alderson family database has been started. It currently contains about 1,500 entries in multiple lines of descent

from John Alderson. We would like to expand this database to include as many lines of descent as possible and to make it available to any member, either for query or to transfer for use on a personal computer. The database is now maintained with Roots III software on a IBM-compatible with 2 MB of RAM (allowing over 30,000 entries) and it can be converted to the standard GEDCOM format for those with software that supports GEDCOM imports. Not included in the GEDCOM conversion, however, are the associated files of free-form text attached to a person's record.

The Roots III software also allows the printing of customized family group sheets, pedigree charts, Ahnentahfel charts, descendants listings, event listings, as well as a complete family history numbered in the convention of the New England Genealogical and Historical Society. The family history can be printed either as a compilation of descendants, or as a line of ancestry. Printouts of charts, sheets, and other listings can be made either to paper, as an ASCII text file, or in WordPerfect 4.2 or 5.0 formats.

This database will be a lengthy and continuous undertaking. In order to provide as much new material as possible, it is requested that those who wish to have access to material already in the database contribute a family group sheet or some other material collected while doing research. Submissions should be documented in order to maintain quality and accuracy. □

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## Editor's Note

Welcome to *Alderson Roots & Branches*, the newsletter of *Alderson Cousins*, the Alderson family association. This newsletter has been under consideration for a long time, but was spurred into development with the urging of Tom Alderson of Banner Elk, NC, who, as many of you know, collected donations for erecting a monument to John Alderson, Sr. and his wife Jane near their burial place in Botetourt Co., VA (see photo on page 4). Tom contacted me for suggestions about forming a family association, which several people had discussed at the dedication ceremony for the John Alderson monument. Since I had long considered putting out a newsletter aimed at those interested in Alderson family genealogy, I volunteered to design a newsletter for the family organization. This issue is its premiere appearance.

I see this newsletter as an central and open forum through which readers can gain access to useful material for their own research and publish articles and data sources to share with other Alderson family researchers. I encourage all readers to send

whatever they feel is important to put and distribute in print, whether it be wills or probate documents, land records, census records, obituaries, biographies, birth, death, and marriage records, Bible records, or anecdotes that they have encountered in the course of their research. Questions and enquiries are also welcome; they will be printed as space is available.

Currently, the newsletter is being run on a shoestring. Tom Alderson has been generous enough to put up a sum of money to get this first issue out, and it is being sent to anyone interested in learning about and exchanging material on the Alderson family. If the response to this newsletter is favorable, I hope to continue putting it out on a regular basis, but it will necessitate charging subscribers for the copying and mailing costs of the newsletter. If you mark and return the questionnaire below that you would be willing to pay for receiving this newsletter, you will also receive a follow-up letter with a suggested subscription price.

I feel that there is a great deal of potential for a newsletter like this one given the vast amount of research that has been going on across the U.S. for the past few decades. I would like to reproduce as much of this research as possible in the newsletter, so as many people as possible can benefit. Maybe we'll be able to solve some of those long-standing puzzles in the Alderson line! For the next issue, I would like to include:

- Alderson marriages in Botetourt Co., VA

- Alderson marriages in Greenbrier Co., VA
- The life of Thomas Alderson, 1744-ca. 1838

I currently have the compilation of Botetourt Marriages by Anne Worrel, and the Greenbrier Marriage listing in the 1988 edition of the *Journal of the Greenbrier Historical Society*. I have transcribed some of the Alderson marriages directly from the copy kept at Lewisburg, but the handwriting and the reproduction are so poor that errors are inevitable. If readers have other documented sources of information, *please* share a copy with me so that we can provide the best listing possible of these marriages. I also have the Revolutionary War pension application papers for Thomas Alderson, but virtually no other material on him. Any other sources would be greatly appreciated.

I also would like to hear from any of you who are interested in helping out with the newsletter in any way possible. Articles, announcements, inquiries, research material, biographies, commemorations, and other written or reprintable material is most welcome. I will also ensure the return of any material you so request. (A SASE would be appreciated, if possible.) Any comments or suggestions for the newsletter would be most valuable.

I am excited to see this first issue come to fruition and I look forward to developing this newsletter into a useful tool for all those interested in the history of the Alderson family. My sincere thanks to all those who have helped this come about. □

David Fridley, Editor

### To be continued?

This is an initial attempt at producing a regular newsletter of Alderson Cousins.. Since the newsletter is produced on a volunteer basis, it is not possible with this first issue to predict how often it will appear nor the costs in time and money in providing it to the membership. To help in determining the extent of interest in a continuing newsletter, please fill out the following questionnaire and return it to the Editor, Alderson Roots & Branches, 817A 18th Ave., Honolulu, HI 96816.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you an Alderson descendant? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently researching an Alderson line? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you interesting in receiving this newsletter on a regular basis? \_\_\_\_\_

Would you be willing to pay a nominal subscription charge to defray the costs of this newsletter? \_\_\_\_\_

Would you be willing to contribute (articles, research results, data, ideas) to the newsletter or assist in writing articles or compiling data? \_\_\_\_\_

Please include any comments or suggestions on the back.

*Thank you!*

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### *Alderson Roots & Branches*

is a periodic newsletter of Alderson Cousins, the family association devoted to research and discussion on the history and genealogy of the Alderson family, particularly on the family of John Alderson, Sr., born 1699, Yorkshire, England, died 1780, Botetourt Co. VA.

Editor: David Fridley

Contributions in form of articles, photographs, vital records, Bible records, and other Alderson memorabilia are welcome. All material accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope can be returned. Suggestions, contributions, and research queries can be addressed to David Fridley, *Alderson Roots & Branches*, 817A 18th Ave., Honolulu, HI 96816.

