

Voyage *of No*
RETURN

N O R M A P L A N K

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Introduction

After six generations, this story has been preserved and still continues to be popular in the Plank families. While some imagination was needed to weave the true facts together in this story, most of the names and all the dates come from historical records.

The story you are about to read is built around the following true facts.

Johan Melchior Blankenburg was kidnapped from Holland, and then sold as an indentured servant, but his Mennonite ancestors are thought to have come from Switzerland during the Reformation. Of course there is no way we can know all that was said and done, but the story stays close to the time period and actual things that happened to indentured servants according to personal records and historical facts.

According to the preserved records, Johan and his wife, Margaret, a young married couple, went to the port of Rotterdam, Holland, to bid farewell to friends who were leaving for America. The captain told them his ship would not leave until the next day. He graciously invited Johan and Margaret to stay, free of charge, with their friends on board his ship during the night. They agreed. During the night, while they were fast asleep, the ship set sail. The Blankenburg couple (they were later called Plank) awoke in the morning to find that they had been kidnapped. The captain had tricked them so he could fill his ship and then sell them as indentured servants when his ship docked in America.

Years later, Johan's great-great grandson, one-armed David Plank (son of Bishop David E. Plank), wrote some words similar to the following: "When Johan got up the next morning and looked out over the ocean there was no land in sight. Johan decided it was too far to swim, too deep to wade, so there was nothing to do but come to America."

Upon arrival in Philadelphia, they were sold as indentured servants to pay for their passage. The ship's list clearly shows that Johan Melchior Blankenburg left Rotterdam in the summer of 1767 and arrived in Philadelphia in October on the ship *Minerva*. Johan and the other foreign men signed the required statements of loyalty and renunciation on October 29, 1767, at the office of Thomas Willing. Being illiterate, Johan placed his mark (X) beside his name, which someone had written for him. The

name “John Melchior Planckenberg” is listed as a 1767 immigrant. Because Johan’s fare had not been paid, he returned to the ship to wait for a buyer who was in need of a servant’s help.

Johan’s wife, Margaret, gave birth to their first child, Jacob, while waiting on board the *Minerva* in the Philadelphia harbor. Baby Jacob was born November 6, 1767.

According to the preserved indenture papers, on November 27, 1767, Johan was first sold to Jason Cloud. He worked for him a little over one year. Then Jason sold the rest of Johan’s indenture to Howard Hughes for the remainder of the time. I believe Mr. Hughes was a cruel master, because Johan or possibly Colonel Jacob Morgan paid Howard Hughes the sum of five pounds so Johan could be free. That five pounds was enough to pay for a year of service, but Johan owed Howard Hughes for only five more months of service. Johan even gave up his rightful “freedom dues”, which was quite a loss. The freedom dues varied from colony to colony, but I found an example in my research. In Maryland, the “freedom dues” consisted of one new suit of broadcloth or jersey, one new shirt, one pair of new shoes and stockings, and a wool cap. Also to be furnished were two hoes, an ax, three barrels of corn, and fifty acres of land. Women servants got a similar amount of clothing and land and a year’s supply of corn.

A son, Christian, was born during Johan’s time with Howard Hughes. Christian is the bloodline through which my husband, Donald Plank, was born.

The records tell us Johan farmed for “Colonel” Jacob Morgan. As a free man, he worked for him during the Revolutionary War and possibly for the rest of his life. The “Colonel” was very concerned about the high taxes, which England was demanding on tea and other items. He was also present to sign his name to the indenture document (making it legal) when the indenture changed owners—from Jason Cloud to Howard Hughes.

Personally, I’m glad they came to America, because if they hadn’t, I wouldn’t have married my husband, Donald Plank. Donald’s first wife, Doris Good, died in 1987, and in the same year I lost my husband, Marion Hartman, to cancer. Donald and I married June 3, 1989. It was then that I heard this fascinating story of his grandfather—six generations removed.

A history book gave me the true story of Elizabeth Hanley, who left for America to escape an undesirable marriage and was then indentured—exchanged for a yoke of oxen to pay her passage. Also, many people were taken to America from the overcrowded prisons in Europe and then sold as indentured servants to pay for their passage. Many children were kidnapped for the same purpose. Then, too, there were some examples too

cruel to mention in this book.

After much thought and research, this story started to take shape in my mind. I have my husband and Darlene Bonvie, a sister in the Lord from Nova Scotia, to thank for the great encouragement they were to me. They urged me to get started and to keep going. They spent time proofreading and giving helpful criticism. Others who were a great help with editing and giving helpful suggestions and encouragement were: Roger Berry, Mrs. Dan (Sandy) Wengerd, Mrs. Dan (Diane) Freed, Mrs. Stephen (Lydia) Good, and Mrs. Raymond (Elizabeth Ann) Shenk.

We trust this story helps the reader to have a greater faith in God. May He receive honor and glory; He alone is worthy.

Mrs. Norma Plank

Genealogy of Johan Melchior Blankenburg

1. Johan married Margaret
Children: Jacob, **Christian**, John, Barbara,
Margaret, Peter (Amish Minister) Lancaster County, PA
2. Christian married Barbara (Yoder)
Children: Joseph, Jacob, Martha, Christian,
John, Magelene, Barbara, Isaac, **Samuel**
3. Deacon Samuel Plank married Juliana (Hertzler)
Children: Joseph, **David**, Leah, Elizabeth,
Martha, Barbara, Juliana, Samuel, Mary
4. Bishop David Plank married Mary (Hertzler)
Children: Samuel, **Salome**, Levi, Mary, Elsie,
Lydia, Anna, Catherine, Juliana, David (one-armed Davey)
5. Salome Plank married Samuel B. Plank
(Plank from OH married a Plank from MO)
Children: Marion, **Ira**, Fred
6. Ira Plank married Laura (Kanagy)
Children: Floyd, Oren, Roy, **Donald**, Dwight
7. Minister Donald Plank married Doris (Good)
Children: Donna, David, Diane

Because of illiteracy, the name Blankenburg was changed through the years from Blankenburg to Blanckenburg to Blanck to Planck to Plank. When a Dutchman says Blank, it sounds like Plank, so possibly that is how it got changed. Johan Melchior Blankenburg could neither read nor write.

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Life Without Father

Johan (Yo-han) Melchior Blankenburg, a muscular 21-year-old, hunched forward on a one-legged milking stool, his head pressed against the warm flank of a cow. He softly sang a hymn as he milked the last of his eight cows, a typical herd for an Anabaptist farmer in Holland in 1765. As always, Johan enjoyed his early morning chores, but his singing suddenly died away as deep thoughts took over. *Here I am, 21 years of age, and there seems to be no way to make enough money to have a home of my own. I'd like that, but I guess I shouldn't get too concerned because I haven't met anyone I would want for my wife. I'll pray about it though.* He smiled as he finished stripping out the last of the milk. Getting to his feet, he set the milk aside, then reached forward and unchained the cow, giving her a gentle pat on the neck. Pushing his thick blond hair back from his damp forehead, he watched her amble out to join the other cows that were eating lush grass on the polder.

Johan carried the buckets of milk from the barn to the spotless milk house. Removing his wooden shoes at the door, as the Dutch custom was, he quickly slipped into a pair of cloth slippers and carried the milk over to the worktable. Carefully he strained the milk and poured it into twenty shiny brass pails with swinging metal handles. He placed them into a trough of fresh, cool, running water. Great flapping windmills pumped the water into the trough, after which it ran out the overflow pipe to a nearby canal.

Johan had worked up a healthy appetite and was looking forward to a good breakfast as he slipped into his shoes and headed for the house. An aroma of sausage and pancakes met him as he opened the kitchen door.

He sniffed appreciatively and said, "Good morning, Mother. Sure smells good in here."

"Well, it's ready," she replied, "so let's eat. Come, Greta and Hilda, leave your spinning and knitting and come to the table. Johan is in a hurry to deliver the milk and butter to his customers."

Since his father's death three years before, Johan had been the man of the house, so as they all sat down, he said reverently, "Let us pray." Each one prayed silently and Johan ended with "Amen."

"Greta," queried Johan as he speared a plump sausage with his fork, "how much butter do we have? I hope there is some extra, because Dame Hummel would like three pounds instead of the usual one pound. I believe she said she's getting company from Leyden."

"Yes, Johan, the cows are giving a lot of cream these days. You never saw such lovely yellow butter. And the cheeses, you should see them. Hilda is twelve now and old enough to be a good help, so we have a dozen balls of cheese nearly ready to sell. They look and smell so good." Greta handed the butter and syrup to Johan for his stack of pancakes.

"Good!" exclaimed Johan, looking at his smiling mother. "Not only because there is extra butter, but the way the girls work together is wonderful." Turning to his sisters, he continued, "After Father died, Mother and I made all the butter and cheese, but not anymore—thanks to you girls."

When the meal was over, Johan pushed his chair back and got to his feet. "Well, it's time to deliver the milk," he said as he jerked off his slippers and put them on a low shelf by the door.

"Johan," said Hilda, springing to her feet, "may I help you harness the dogs? They are so well trained I could even run your milk route."

"Sure, Hilda, I'll be glad for your help," agreed Johan, chuckling as they headed for the barn. "But I'm not sure you're old enough to handle the dogs; at least not when they meet another dog team that's determined to fight. The other day I saw two teams in a fight. What a mess they made of the produce—vegetables were flying everywhere. One of the squash flew out and clouted one of the dogs on the head. That was enough for him. He yelped loudly and decided to tend to his own business. He and the rest of his team tucked their tails between their legs and struck out at high speed for safer territory."

"Oh, Johan, that must have been a funny sight," laughed Hilda, her eyes dancing. "You helped the poor man pick up his vegetables, didn't you?"

"Yes, I arrived just in time to help him gather his scattered produce."

The tomatoes were done for, but the other things came through in fair shape. Now, if you'll hold these three dogs, I'll slip the harness on them." Johan's fingers flew as he buckled each strap. Connecting the harnessed dogs to the milk cart, he stopped and watched Hilda as the dogs crowded close, licking her hands. "Looks like they really like you, Hilda. The dogs are well trained, so maybe some day when your work isn't too pressing, I'll see if you can drive the milk route. I'd go along, of course, and see if you really can handle these dogs."

"Oh," squealed Hilda, clasping her hands with delight, "I'll work extra hard so we can have a trial run soon."

They placed the full milk containers and small tubs of butter into the cart, and Johan took up the driving lines.

As Johan spoke to the dogs, Hilda watched his every move. With a hearty, "Thank you, Hilda," and a wave of his free hand, he was on his way.

By 9 A.M., Johan returned home with the empty milk pails rattling in his cart. Many men would have ridden home in the cart after the milk was sold, but not Johan. He believed the dogs would become bad tempered if he overworked them.

After unloading the empty pails at the milk house, he loaded up four large stone pails with their stone lids. He drove his team a short piece down the road to buy some boiling water from an old woman who made her living by tending great fires of peat which flamed beneath her shining, water-filled copper tanks.

"Good morning, Dame Bowman! How are you this fine morning?" greeted Johan. "Do you have some boiling water for me?" He glanced at the group of ragged-looking children crowded around the old lady.

"That I do, but I reckon you'll have to wait your turn. These poor, hungry *kinder* (children) haven't had their breakfast, and their mothers are waiting for them to bring home a bit of burning peat and a jar of hot water for their gruel," explained the grinning old woman, showing her few remaining teeth.

"Do you mind if I help you?" asked Johan.

"Why no, lad," agreed the astonished old woman, sitting down with a sigh. "That'd be a great help to an old woman the likes of me."

For the next fifteen minutes, Johan was busy lifting small burning blocks of peat into stone pails and hot water into similar pails. For these two items, each child gave the old woman a Dutch cent. She kept her stivers and cent pieces in a large pocket in her gathered skirt.

Johan sadly shook his head as he watched the ragged, undernourished

children struggle with their small stone pails. They tried to hold their pails of hot water and burning peat as far out as possible with their bony little arms.

Poor little kinder, thought Johan with a sigh. As he filled the large containers in his cart, he purposed in his heart: *Never will I let strong drink touch my lips. Full well I know the reason for the plight of most of these poor little kinder.*

Steam rolled up from the boiling water as each container was filled. He quickly capped the pails with stone lids so very little heat or water would be lost on the way home.

As he walked over to pay the old woman, she was shaking her head. "Johan, my lad, why are you so different from other men here about?"

"What do you mean, Dame Bowman?" asked Johan, with a hearty laugh. "I've got a head, two arms, and two legs like other men, haven't I?"

"You know that's not what I mean. I've never seen a man so kind. What makes you so different, Johan?" She was in earnest, waiting for an answer.

Johan hesitated as the color rose in his cheeks. "Dame Bowman, I serve a God who is very kind and who asks His children to be kind also. I'm one of His children, you see."

"Thank you kindly, Johan, for telling me. I've been meaning for some time to ask you." Her voice trembling, she added, "I suppose I've waited too long to be one of His children."

"Oh, no, Dame Bowman, it's God's will that everyone should become one of His children—no matter the age. I attend the little church about a mile up the road. It sits close to the canal. You are invited. Will you come?"

"Yes, I promise to come if I'm able to be there," said the old woman as she pocketed Johan's coins.

"I'll be waiting for you at the church door next Sunday," promised Johan with a smile. "See you there."

A few minutes later he was singing in the milk house while scrubbing the milk pails in hot, soapy water. After rinsing them, he placed them upside down on racks to dry. Now the pails were prepared for the next morning's milking. The Saturday evening and Sunday milk was always used later to make butter and cheese, making it unnecessary to sell milk on Sunday.

He turned his head as his mother opened the door. "Do you need my help, Johan?"

"I'm almost finished, but thanks for asking," he replied, flashing his mother a smile.

“I wish you’d step over and visit *Grootvader* (Grandfather) a bit—at least for an hour. He gets so lonesome since *Grootmoeder* (Grandmother) passed away,” encouraged his mother.

“Sure, I’ll do that. I always enjoy talking with him. He understands me so well and reminds me so much of Father. I’m so grateful for the many Scriptures and poems he has helped me memorize. I’m just thankful he’s still with us.”

“Yes,” agreed his mother, “he’s a wonderful blessing to us all. He’s had nearly eighty fruitful years, so we may not have him much longer.”

Johan slipped into his wooden shoes and headed down the road, whistling a merry tune. As he got close to Grootvader’s house, he was surprised to see him outside. He was sitting in his chair, placed alongside the white cottage.

Waving his hand, Johan shouted, “Good morning, Grootvader. Why are you sitting out here? Isn’t it a bit cool and damp for you so early in the morning?”

“It’s not too bad. You see I’m wearing the heavy lined blouse your grootmoeder made for me. I was feeling a mite lonesome for her, so I decided to come out here and enjoy her tulips. You know she set great store by them and never allowed a weed to spoil their beauty. When I sit just so, I can reach out my hand and touch her tulips and I’m not quite so lonesome. Just an old man’s foolish notion, I suppose.”

“No, Grootvader, I’m glad when you share your feelings with me. It helps me to better understand what a great love you and Grootmoeder shared.”

“Yes, Johan,” he agreed, “our love was great for God and for each other. It saw us through many hardships in this life, and our love grew all the stronger because of them. I’ve shared many of our experiences with you, but I’ll tell you more when you have time.”

“I have at least an hour, Grootvader, and I always enjoy hearing about your experiences.”

“Well, if you’re sure it suits, Johan. I thank God for my memories of bygone days. They are precious treasures and a great comfort to me, especially since I’m here alone.”

“Let’s go inside, Grootvader, where it’s a bit warmer and you can sit in a more comfortable chair,” said Johan. He reached out a strong arm to steady the elderly man as he got to his feet and they started for the cottage.