

Joseph Jefferson Copeland, known as “Big Joe,” was born in 1783 in Jefferson County, the son of Colonel Stephen Copeland, the first settler of Overton County, Tennessee, where Joe died on April 17, 1957.

Big Joe was reportedly seven feet, three inches tall and weighed 350 pounds. His wife, a Cherokee named Hannah Thatcher Ward Carrier, also was said to weigh about 350 pounds. Their children were James Richardson, Moses Wilkerson, Stephen Harrison, William Ellison, Solomon Addison, Jefferson Madison, Joseph Anderson, Louisa, Agnes, Sally and Octavia.

According to “Lend an Ear: Heritage of the Tennessee Upper Cumberland,” an article edited by Calvin Dickinson, Larry Whiteaker, Leo McGee and Homer Kemp, Big Joe was known for cracking walnuts with his teeth, lifting forty-gallon kegs of brandy and lifting two hundred pounds hogs from a pen to put them on the scales. The article stated that a strong man rode a horse

from Virginia to fight Big Joe but changed his mind upon seeing the giant.

Another legend tells that Big Joe, also a legendary hunter, killed sixty-two bears one winter.

Big Joe is said to have owned most of the land in the Copeland Cove area. Some historians believe he is buried in a now unmarked grave in Roaring River Cemetery off Old Highway 42 in Overton, where he spent many hours roaming.

Of the sons who survived him, all were reportedly more than six feet tall. Stephen was allegedly seven feet, while Joseph Anderson’s enlistment papers listed him at six feet four inches. William Ellison, known as “Little Ellis,” would eventually weigh 360 pounds.