

FROM MILL TO CIVIL WAR

By Chris Sanders

Have you ever looked at a census, found “your guy” (or “gal” as the case may be), then noticed others listed whom you can’t identify? What do you do? Do you “skip” them and keep on rollin’, or does your curiosity get the better of you—as it always does in my case—and you check them out?

My advice would be to “check them out.” It might shed a whole new world of light on your story, which is what happened to me recently.

I had located my g-g-grandfather, Josiah Fowler, ages ago on the 1850 census and his daughter Elizabeth Jane, age one year. Elizabeth was my grandmother’s beloved grandmother whom she knew very little about other than her maiden name, Fowler (thank you), and that, “She was from Berwick.” Also listed on the census with Josiah was his wife, Albina (Alice), age 19, William age 8, and, Mary C. age 6. At first glance I “assumed” these were Elizabeth’s siblings; however, I realized Albina was much too young to be the mother of William and Mary. I surmised they were Josiah’s children by a previous marriage.

Gosh, Josiah had been married before and apparently his wife had died. Wonder whom she was? (There I go again, wondering.) Sooo.....Elizabeth Jane had two half siblings. I forged ahead searching for information on her and sort of brushed William and Mary C. aside—for YEARS! I did do some cursory digging from time to time, but nothing popped up, and again they were forgotten.

Sadly I found Josiah died of Tuberculosis in 1859 at age 38. To my chagrin I have been unable to find his grave. I did however along the way run into a very small 1862 newspaper blurb stating that a “William Fowler of Berwick was killed at Winchester, Virginia.” I stopped in my tracks.....could that be “the” William on the 1850 census, I wondered? I made a copy “just for the heck of it” and “put it in a safe place” (that means I can’t find it!). It was forgotten but still in the back of my mind.

Over the years I managed to flesh out Elizabeth Jane’s story, which, I felt, was rather sad. Per her obituary in the January 17, 1924, Benton Argus, she was, “born January 31, 1849, at Berwick. Her father died when she was 12 years old (she was actually 10) and she was reared by her uncle Ashael Fowler,” although her mom was living, remarried several more times and had another child. Not sure what that was all about, but I won’t judge. My grandmother did say that Elizabeth—called “Lizzie” all her life by her dotting husband, Ira McHenry—would not leave her house and would send the children to the corner store. Maybe childhood sorrows manifest themselves in different ways, but my grandmother adored her (her own mother having died at age 35), especially the lemon cookies always in the bucket hanging just inside the cellar door!

Don’t ask me why, but my curiosity about William Fowler kept emerging from time to time—“are you talking to ME?” One day out of the blue on one of my excursions to the CCHGS, I mentioned his name to ever-helpful Dani. Within seconds she pulled Pennsylvania State Archive Civil War information on William Fowler, age 20, millwright from Berwick, Pennsylvania, who

died at Winchester, Virginia on March 23, 1862! He had only been in the Union Army three months, having volunteered on December 24, 1861. He was described as 5' 10", light hair, fair complexion, and gray eyes. Yes, everything fit. This MUST be William, Josiah's 8-year-old son listed on the 1850 census. I still wasn't 100% convinced, so tucked the information inside my notebook for another day. When I got home I laid the archival screen print on my dresser so I wouldn't forget—SURELY a "safe" spot! Every day I would see it lying there, staring at me. OK, OK, leave me alone!!!

Finally about three weeks later, the nagging feeling was so strong, I barely had time to finish my coffee before I climbed in my car and made a trip to the CCGHS on an early Saturday morning. Prepared for a long day of research, I tried to determine where to start. Okay, let's try Findagrave.com. OMG! There he was—just like that—William R. Fowler! I nearly fell off my chair. Having gone this route before, I really didn't expect to find anything! He indeed had been killed in the Battle of Winchester and a picture of his tombstone was posted! It stated, "Wm. R. Fowler, Espytown, Columbia County, Pa., died in the engagement near Winchester on the 23rd of March, 1862. 84th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, Company D." Further comments posted state, "William was killed at the first battle of Kernstown on the date indicated on his stone. William served with the 84 PA. This battle was the only sound defeat the north handed to Stonewall Jackson, but obviously at a great price." Burial Winchester National Cemetery, Winchester City, Virginia, USA, Plot 214. Imported from: US Veteran's Affairs.

I was happy but so sad at the same time. Such a short life this young man had and already was burdened by his share of tragedy in just 20 years. Now, he had given his very life during the terrible Civil War. I am comforted however that he at least was honored with a respectful resting place, which is more than some soldiers found and that his family knew of his whereabouts and sacrifice. At the same time, however, I think of the "what ifs." What if he kept working at the mill, got married, had a dozen children...lived to be an old man. The Civil War had been brought home to me as never before. Well, William wasn't done with me yet.

As I pondered, I googled William's name to see what else I could find (yep—never satisfied!) and there were a few Genealogy Forum comments posted over five years ago—with no response. Oh, well, let's check 'em out—never know. One short blurb stated, "I have a Josiah Fowler of Berwick married to Ann Seybert, daughter of Nicholas and Catherine of Briar Creek. Is this the same man?" Nope, couldn't be him, so I thought (I'm not sure why I jumped to this conclusion). However, I made a note of it, went back to the drawing board and, would you believe, with this little bit of information, I actually found the name of Josiah's first wife, Ann Seybert, mother of William! I could not believe my lucky stars! Lesson—never disregard ANYTHING! A little further pecking around and I found Ann's parents, Nicholas and Catherine Seybert, buried in Pine Grove Cemetery, Berwick, PA. (I was not able to find Ann, however.)

Elizabeth Jane, my g-g-grandmother, called Lizzie, all her life by her husband, Ira McHenry, would have been around 12 at the time of William's death. I wonder what her relationship was with William. Did they see each other, since they lived in different households? How did his death affect her? So many questions.

Lizzie did have other siblings (three brothers, children of Josiah and Albina), and a half-sister by Albina's second marriage. Lizzie got married at age 19 and had six children of her own. Lizzie had many sorrows in her life—lost a father, brother, son, two daughters, grandson, grandchild, great-grandchild and probably many more. How she endured it, I'll never know. But her love flowed down to her granddaughter—my grandmother—and thus down to me, and on to my children.

Well, I can finally put William to rest, I believe. Someday I would love to make a trip to the Winchester Military Cemetery, which is not too far from my old stomping grounds of Fredericksburg, Virginia. After all, you ARE family, William!

And in case you're wondering, no I have not forgotten Mary C., William's sister! I did find her living with her uncle Nicholas Seybert (named after his father Nicholas) in the 1860 census, at age 16. I'm not sure why she did not stay with her step mother, Albina. We can only surmise. So, I guess the moral of the story is, "Never give up." New information is being added to the internet all the time, and I have found this over and over. If that little voice keeps nagging at you, take heed. It's always fun when you can add one more piece of information to your ancestor's story. Sometimes we know more than the ancestor!

William, it took a while, but I finally listened. Thanks for being so persistent. You are not forgotten. You have been found and honored.