

CORROBORATING OR CONFLICTING EVIDENCE

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Last year in “Evaluating Evidence,” I wrote about the only deliberate genealogical fraud I have encountered in my personal research.

The case has surfaced again (not the fraud, but the original problem) with a letter from the descendant of Alfred Harper with whom I corresponded many years ago.

TO RECAP

Alfred Harper first appeared on the 1850 census of Letart Township, Meigs County, Ohio, as a 16-year-old in the household of Arias Chapman. He remained in Meigs through 1870 and then moved to Putnam County, West Virginia, where in 1880 Alfred stated his father was born in Ohio and his mother in New Jersey.

Was Alfred Harper a grandson of Revolutionary War pensioner Daniel Harper? Letart Township is not close to where Daniel’s family lived, but a suspicious document stated Alfred was the son of Daniel’s son Ezekiel. According to my notes, however, Daniel’s sons were born in Maine, Ezekiel did not have an unaccounted-for son in 1840, and his obituary identified all of his children, none of whom were Alfred. I concluded, based on this conflicting evidence, that the document was likely falsified. I then obtained a copy of the original. Alfred’s name was not on the original.

THE NEW INFORMATION

My correspondent had been reviewing old letters (a wise thing to do) and reread one from a descendant of Alfred that said Alfred had a sister Sarah Harper who married Peter Hartley. She smoked a corn cob pipe and chewed snuff and visited her son Oscar Hartley in Kansas. At the same time, he reread a letter from me commenting that an unattached Isaac, age 8, and Sarah, age 10, on the 1850 census could be Alfred’s siblings. His Internet search located a transcript of a Kansas history containing a biographical sketch for Oscar Hartley. It identified his mother as Sarah Harper and her father as Temple Harper. I knew Temple was a younger brother of Ezekiel. This is a chart of the relationships:

Daniel Harper
Ezekiel Harper
Temple Harper
Alfred Harper
Sarah (Harper) Hartley
Oscar Hartley
Isaac Harper

In “Seeking Siblings,” I mentioned that following siblings—who do, after all, have the same parent(s) as our ancestor—might produce the answer we seek, possibly through mug-book sketches.

In this case, the link was found in a sketch for a sister’s child (a different surname) in a different state. A great danger of accepting information (or wanting to believe) without sufficient evidence is that if the information is

incorrect (whether through fraud, wishful thinking, or the routine uncertainties of genealogical research), we might quit seeking additional records and following siblings, thereby denying ourselves the opportunity of the correct solution. Fortunately, my correspondent never quit looking.

SEEKING C-OR-C EVIDENCE FOR THE SIBLINGS

Did I immediately add Alfred, his wives, and children to my family history? No. I began a systematic search for corroborating or conflicting evidence, using information I can access fairly readily (home, Internet, library). Note that I seek both corroborating *and* conflicting evidence. I identify each element of new information and investigate one by one. I find it most effective to begin with the least significant person or element and with where I am most likely to find conflicting—rather than corroborating—evidence.

ISAAC

In 1850 Alfred was in Letart Township, but Isaac Harper, 8, was in Lebanon Township with William and Elizabeth Proctor. Also in the same household was Sarah Harper, 10.

- This is corroborating evidence that Isaac and Sarah were siblings. It does not corroborate that they were siblings of Alfred, other than that the ages are compatible.

A gap in the Proctor children had suggested to me that Elizabeth could be a second wife, with Isaac and Sarah from her first marriage. The Oscar Hartley sketch conflicted with this, requiring that I investigate further. I discovered William Proctor is said to have married Elizabeth Carol Williamson 12 December 1833 in Meigs, but I found no such marriage record. If true, Sarah and Isaac were not her children.

- There is no reason to doubt the date or names in the Proctor marriage, which are from a source unrelated to the Harpers. The exact date suggests that it is from a record (a year only would suggest it was estimated). It is likely the place is wrong, so I discarded my theory that Isaac and Sarah were Elizabeth’s children. But this does not connect them to Alfred.

Isaac was married in 1866 in Meigs County to Virginia Hartley, who was from a Jackson County, West Virginia, family and was just 16 at the time. They had a daughter Mary Jesse in 1868. At the time, they were of Sutton Township in Meigs, but Mary was born in Indiana. In 1870 Virginia, “at home widow,” and 2-year-old Mary J. were living with her parents in Syracuse Township in Meigs.

- Isaac’s early death meant that I lost the opportunity to learn his parents’ place of birth from the 1880 census, which would have provided C-or-C evidence for his connection to Alfred.

SARAH

I located the 1860 marriage in Meigs County of Sarah to Peter J. Hartley, whom I found was a brother of Isaac's wife.

- We are aware of how often the spouses of siblings are themselves siblings. This little detail helped knit the family together a bit more tightly.

Although the couple relocated, I quickly found them in the 1880 census in Roane County, West Virginia, with Oskar A., 12. It says her father was born in Maine and her mother was born in New Jersey.

- This is corroborating evidence on several points: Oscar was her son, her father was likely a son of Daniel Harper since he was born in Maine, and she was likely a sister of Alfred, whose mother was born in New Jersey. Alfred's 1880 entry says his father was born in Ohio, but one of the points in "Seeking Siblings" is "Your ancestor got it wrong."

The 1918 sketch for Sarah's son says that she was still living, a resident of Akron, Ohio.

- One task of evaluation is to determine how close the source is to firsthand knowledge. Sarah may have been consulted on the details. Additionally, the personal details of the pipe and snuff in the old letter add verisimilitude because it truly sounds like a family story, linking Alfred with Sarah.

Now that I was comfortable that Alfred, Sarah, and Isaac were siblings, it was time to investigate their parents.

SEEKING C-OR-C EVIDENCE FOR THE PARENTS

Having satisfied myself that Alfred, Sarah, and Isaac Harper were siblings, I turned my attention to the statement in Oscar Hartley's biographical sketch that his father "married Sarah Harper, whose father, Temple Harper, was a West Virginia farmer." No mention is made of the mother.

TEMPLE

My files show that Temple Harper married three times in Meigs County: Nancy Jay in 1834; Marjora Perry in 1852; and Catharine Jane Rider in 1858.

- The first place to look for C-or-C evidence is in our own prior research. I had very little on Temple other than these marriages and the 1840 census.

In 1840 Temple's household in Bedford Township had a female 20 to 29 and three boys under 5.

- I had originally assumed this eliminated Temple as the father of Alfred, who would have been in the 5<10 category. I have since learned Alfred was said to be born in June 1836, which provides a corroborating census slot for him as a son. Sarah was 10 in 1850. If Temple is her father, she was born after the census, so this is neither corroborating or conflicting for her as a daughter.

I found Temple in Lebanon Township in 1870 with his third wife Catherine (born in West Virginia) and a daughter by his second marriage—claiming he was born in Pennsylvania and that both of his parents were of foreign

birth! Some family members have concluded that he was born when the family was moving from Maine to Ohio, but the foreign birth is clearly an error, possibly belonging to Catherine, whose first husband was German, suggesting that her parents might have been German.

- It is important to treat the elements of Pennsylvania birth and foreign parents separately. Because Catherine has a non-Ohio birth, it is unlikely that her birth state accidentally got recorded on Temple's line.

I couldn't find Temple on the 1860 or 1880 censuses, but Ancestry.com showed me that he was in two Ohio units in the Civil War and drew a pension in 1872, which his widow Catherine "Yokey" drew in 1880.

- I am focusing on what *can* be done to evaluate the new information that arrived in my mailbox, not what *could* be done. Hence, ordering Civil War records is not part of my evaluation process. I suspect my correspondent will want to order the records.

I searched in vain for Catherine Yokey on the 1880 census and her remarriage, but I didn't even find the surname Yokey.

- This is potentially conflicting evidence about Catherine's remarriage. But this does not reflect on the validation process for Alfred's ancestry. It is important to be clear about which points affect the problem at hand.

CALLING IN REINFORCEMENTS

At this point, I called my cousin to see what was in her files. I had a note in mine that said she might have Temple's obituary. She did. The obituary said he died 22 March 1873 near Bashan in Meigs County.

- Sarah's son probably "got it wrong" when calling Temple Harper a West Virginia farmer. If Temple lived there, it was briefly, and no corroborating evidence has been found.

The obituary says Temple was born in Maine.

- Again, we have conflicting evidence. We've already decided Alfred's claim that his father was born in Ohio was an error. Thus, either the census (Pennsylvania) or the obituary and Sarah (Maine) "got it wrong."

The obituary includes the nonspecific information that "He leaves a wife and three children to mourn his loss. The deceased was a brother to Mr. Ezekiel Harper, of this township."

- The number corroborates the hypothesis that in 1873 his surviving children were Alfred, Sarah, and Eliza J. Further corroboration is found in the Meigs marriage less than six months later of Eliza J. Harper and Benjamin Rider, surely a relative of her stepmother. We also have corroboration that we are working with the correct Temple, brother of Ezekiel and son of Daniel.

NANCY JAY

Alfred, Sarah, and Isaac would all appear to be the children of Nancy Jay, whom Temple married on 4 December 1834. However, I was not able to place her in a Jay family, nor did I find that the Jays were from New Jersey. Those in Meigs were from Virginia.

- This is potentially conflicting evidence for Nancy Jay as the mother, but I have not done any additional in-depth research on Nancy. Hopefully, my correspondent will find the answer in Sarah's death certificate.

EVALUATING

I found no explanation of why the three Harper children were in the Chapman and Proctor households in 1850, nor could I find that Temple Harper or Nancy Jay had any connection with the Proctors or Chapmans.

There was conflicting information among the documents (such as three states of birth for Temple). But there was also corroborating evidence in censuses, providing a spot in Temple's household for Alfred (1840), linking Isaac and Sarah (1850), and giving the same birth state for the mother of Sarah and Alfred (1880). Temple's obituary matches the proposed family profile. Lacking

corroborating evidence that Nancy Jay was born in New Jersey, I am less certain that she was their mother.

So how do I reply to my correspondent? "Dear Cuz, ..."

Postscript: This is a description of how I evaluate any new piece of information against what is readily available to me. It is important that we do so before we accept it for our files, even if it does not relate to our direct lineage. Our files may eventually be seen and used by others. What if I had simply accepted Ezekiel as Alfred's father based on the forged document, rather than going through a process like that described in the earlier article that caused me to reject it? We say—too often—"More research is needed." Of course it is. But that does not relieve us of the obligation to perform a structured evaluation based on evidence that we possess or can readily obtain.