

Who Was Aunt Mary? A Brief Case Study in Identification and Kinship “Correction”

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The family historian who cannot find direct evidence to prove a family relationship can still build a circumstantial case with strong evidence and a reliable conclusion—even when the relationship is erroneously stated in the document that launches the search. For a convincing case, the accumulated documents should be consistent and connected, come from a variety of independent sources, and support one another. The question this paper poses, *Who Was Aunt Mary?*, demonstrates this principle.

Research on the family of Colonel James Boydston Armstrong, namesake for the Armstrong Redwoods State Reserve in California, turned up two letters whose writer, on the surface, could not be fitted into the family.¹ One, addressed to Armstrong’s daughters Lizzie and Kate, was dated “March 13 ’92,” bore the return address “Athens,” and was signed “Aunt Mary.” The other letter was addressed to “Coz Jim” and was signed “Mrs. D. B. Stewart.” The handwriting in the two letters is identical. The Armstrong Family Bible, into which these letters were tucked, gives a fair amount of information on the Armstrong line, the family of the colonel’s mother (Mary Boydston) and the family of the colonel’s wife (Eleanor Wilson). However, nothing in the Bible records revealed a Mary who could be Lizzie’s and Kate’s aunt.

Where did she belong in the family? Was Mary an Armstrong or did she marry an Armstrong? Was she a Wilson or married to a Wilson? Or could she have belonged to the Boydston family line? Assuming the “Athens” from which she wrote was not in Greece, might this Athens have been in Georgia, Ohio, or elsewhere? Given that the colonel had come to California from Ohio, *that* Athens appeared the likeliest. The first letters’s _92 date presumably meant 1892.

The hypothetical place and time proved correct. A search of the 1880 census uncovered a D. B. Stewart with wife, Mary A., living in the village of Athens, Ohio.² The couple appear again on

¹The letters were tucked into the James B. Armstrong Family Bible, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, Translated out of the Original Tongues; and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised* (New York: American Bible Society, 1847); original in possession of Wendy Davidson Brimhall of Taylor, Arizona, who supplied a copy to Carmen J. Finley, March 2006.

²1880 U.S. census, Athens County, Ohio, population schedule, village of Athens, subdistrict 4, p. 26 (stamped folio 68-B), dwelling 2, family 271; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 22 February 2007); citing National Archives microfilm publication T9, roll 992.

the 1900 census as Danil [sic] B. Stewart, born in 1812, with wife, Mary E., born in Ohio, 1828.³ By comparison, Colonel Armstrong had been born in Ohio in 1824. At the least, Mary E. Stewart and Colonel Armstrong were close in age.

Census data for Mary and her husband suggest that they were prosperous enough to have generated obituaries, if not biographies in the “mug books” common to their era. Indeed, a contemporary local history offers a biography of Daniel Stewart, stating that he had been married twice, his first wife died in 1874, and his second wife was “Mrs. M. E. Pearce, widow of the late Dr. T. J. Pearce of the United States army.”⁴ A subsequent obituary for his widow was even more helpful, identifying her as “formerly Miss Mary Burgan of Wooster.”⁵

The Burgans of Wooster, in Wayne County, Ohio, had already attracted attention. Colonel Armstrong’s mother had an older sister, Elizabeth, who had married one Daniel Burgan.⁶ Elizabeth (Boydston) Burgan had died in 1834⁷ and her husband, Daniel, had died in 1838.⁸ That Bible record also identifies Mary (Boydston) Armstrong and Elizabeth (Boydston) Burgan as daughters of George and Barbary (Smith) Boydston.⁹ George Boydston left a will in 1845 in Kosciusko County, Indiana,¹⁰ in which he named his *grandchildren*—George, Evans, *Mary*, Elmore, and Benjamin Burgan—as heirs to receive equal shares of this estate with his living children. By implication, the Burgan grandchildren came into the inheritance through a deceased parent—apparently Elizabeth who died in 1834.

One final document serves to complete the chain of evidence that places “Aunt Mary” properly

³1900 U.S. census, Athens County, Ohio, pop. sch., Athens township, village of Athens, ED 4, sheet 7 (stamped p. 49B), dwelling 156, family 170; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://ancestry.com> : accessed 22 February 2007), citing National Archives microfilm publication T623, roll 1239.

⁴Jane Shute, contributor, “Athens County, Ohio - Daniel Bertine Stewart, bios, 1883,” *USGenWeb Archives* (<ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/oh/athens/bios/stewart.txt> : accessed 22 February 2007), citing *History of Hocking Valley Ohio* ([Chicago: Interstate Publishing Co.], 1883), 1389–91.

⁵Mildred Bleigh and Mary Davis, compilers, *Athens County Obituaries, January 1, 1910 - December 31, 1919* (Athens: Athens County Historical Society, 1990), 408.

⁶Richard G. Smith, compiler, *Seventy-Five Years of Wayne County, Ohio, Marriages, 1813-1888*, vol. 2 (Wooster, Ohio: Wayne County Historical Society, 1979), 28.

⁷Wayne County Historical Society, Genealogical Section, compiler, *Wayne County, Ohio, Burial Records, Congress Township, Congress Cemetery* (Evansville, Ind.: Wayne County Historical Society, 1975), 226.

⁸Daniel Burgan letters of administration, Probate File no. B-72, Wayne County Probate Court, Wooster.

⁹Loose papers found in James B. Armstrong Family Bible.

¹⁰George Boydston will (1845), Will Book 1: 9-10, Kosciusko County Clerk’s Office, Warsaw, Ind.

into the family: the death certificate for the widowed Mary Elizabeth Stewart (aka Mrs. D. B. Stewart) who died in Athens on 7 June 1919, at the age of 92 years, 4 months, and 25 days. Her mother's maiden name is said on that document to be unknown; but her father is cited as Daniel Burgan.¹¹

“Aunt” Mary was, more precisely, a first cousin to Colonel James B. Armstrong—the man she called “Coz Jim—but she was not an aunt to his children. Her relationship to Lizzie and Kate was that of first cousin, once removed.

Conclusion

Relationships stated in records cannot always be taken at face value. The 1890s were an era in which young people did not call elders by their first name. When a young cousin addressed one who was substantially older than the child, “Aunt” or “Uncle” was often added to the given name as a title of respect.

A variety of independent documents coalesce to form a sound basis for concluding where “Aunt Mary” belongs in the Armstrong family. The only information known initially was that in 1892 she lived in Athens (somewhere), she signed her letter to Lizzie and Kate as “Aunt Mary,” she greeted their father as “Coz,” and she signed off to him as “Mrs. D. B. Stewart.” The extant family Bible records do not name her. A combination of census records, a biography, and an obituary link the Stewarts to the Burgans. A marriage record, burial record, will, and probate record suggest her place in that family. Her death certificate confirmed that placement.

¹¹Mary Elizabeth Stewart, death certificate no. 36645 (1919), State of Ohio Bureau of Vital Statistics, Columbus, Ohio.