
Was She Really Alice Fling? Righting a Wrong Identity

By Kay Haviland Freilich, CG

After surveying the published sources, one should adopt a two-pronged strategy. First, use original materials, combing them for all information they contain and all clues they suggest. Then, continue the investigation until every possibly relevant record has been examined. Throughout, one should keep an open mind because research leads down many an unexpected path.

Genealogists are taught to begin new projects with a survey of published sources. The object is to become familiar with the new subject—be it a geographic area, an ethnic group, a family, or whatever—and to determine what information is already in print. But researchers are also cautioned that no matter how reliable a derivative source generally is, it can contain inaccurate information on a specific point. After surveying the published sources, one should adopt a two-pronged strategy. First, use original materials, combing them for all information they contain and all clues they suggest. Then, continue the investigation until every possibly relevant record has been examined. Of course, throughout, one should also keep an open mind because research leads down many an unexpected path. At the least, one usually finds that the study of original materials offers higher quality evidence to substantiate published claims. Or the information discovered in primary sources may totally disprove long-accepted identities and relationships. Such is the case of “Alice Fling” of colonial Chester County, Pennsylvania.

In 1881, two well-known authorities published a local history that “identifies” Alice.¹ One of them, J. Smith Futhey, was an attorney, judge, and author of note.² The other, Gilbert Cope, earned the sobriquet “father of Pennsylvania genealogy” and became the third person elected to the National Genealogy Hall of Fame.³

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1. M. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope, *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania, with Genealogical and Biographical Sketches* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 550.

2. “Death of Judge Futhey,” *Daily Local News*, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 26 December 1888; copy in Newspaper Clippings File, Chester County Historical Society, West Chester.

3. *National Genealogy Hall of Fame* (Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society pamphlet, annually revised). See also Gilbert Cope obituary, unnamed newspaper dated 18 December 1928, Newspaper Clippings File, Chester County Historical Society.

Both men helped to found the county's historical society. Because of their impressive credentials, genealogists have readily accepted their identification of Alice. But they erred.

Alice McNamee, the daughter of Abigail Buffington, was allegedly fathered by David Fling. According to Futhey and Cope, Abigail wed twice. By her first husband, Edward Seeds who died in 1754, she had six children: Abigail [Jr.], Adam, Richard, George, James, and Mary. Thereafter, she married David Fling, by whom she bore Alice, John, Phebe, Hannah, and David.⁴ As typical in their era, however, the authors assume that readers are not interested in knowing their sources—or that readers inquisitive enough to wonder will be experienced enough to recognize what the unnamed sources likely are.

THE FLINGS

In Pennsylvania, a modern genealogist determined to go beyond this published statement would first seek out probate and orphans' court records, hoping that David left enough property to create a paper trail. He did, but the original court minutes cast immediate doubt over Futhey and Cope's long-accepted identification of Alice. David Fling died intestate. In March 1773, his widow asked the court to appoint a guardian for the minors John and David, both under fourteen years. (The issue was not that Abigail felt incapable of rearing her children but that the English-based common-law system required male guardians to oversee the financial interests of children who had an inheritance but no father to manage it.) Two older children—Phebe and Hannah Fling, minors over fourteen but under twenty-one—chose their own guardian.⁵ Alice goes unmentioned even though she should have been a minor, given that Abigail and David Fling would not have married until after Edward Seeds died in 1754.

Seeking *all* records relating to the estate did not yield any clarifying record that Futhey and Cope might have seen. Probate continued for years after David's death. In 1783 the heirs petitioned for a division of his land in which John, as eldest son, stated that his father left a widow, two sons (John and David), and two daughters (Phebe and Hannah). Again, no mention of Alice. When the heirs agreed on a final settlement in 1790, the distribution list identified them even more fully:⁶

- 1/3 to widow Abigail
- 1/5 of remainder to Joseph Baldwin and his wife Phebe, a daughter of the deceased

4. Futhey and Cope, *History of Chester County*, 550 (Fling), 591 (Seeds). Most records on the family in the 1700s spell the name *Seed*, but across time the name has been more commonly spelled with a final "s". The plural form will be used consistently in this paper, unless quoting directly.

Alice probably married the Hugh McNamee who was paid a day's wages in Chester County in 1756 (see Buffington-Marshall Papers, Chester County Historical Society), before moving to Hagerstown, Maryland. There, on 9 August 1800, Alice McNamee and Job McNamee signed an administrator's bond for the estate of Hugh McNamee, deceased; see Washington County, Administrators Bonds, A: 22, available as Family History Library microfilm 0,014,662.

5. Chester County Orphans Court—Minors, Fling, 1773, Chester County Archives, West Chester.

6. Chester County Orphans Court—Decedents, David Fling, Chester County Archives.

- 1/5 of remainder to Joseph Buffington, in right of his late wife Hannah, a daughter of the deceased
- 2/5 of remainder to John Fling, eldest son
- 1/5 of remainder to David Fling, another son

Again, Alice Fling should appear in this record. The only possible explanation for her absence from the division of the property would be her death without heirs prior to the division. Otherwise, one must ask, *was she David Fling's child at all?*

The widow's will settles part of the question: Alice not only outlived David Fling, but she survived her mother as well. Writing on 17 April 1797, the elderly Abigail made several specific bequests, then assigned equal shares of the remainder "to my children Adam Seed, George Seed, James Seed, *Alice Macknamee*, Abigail Seed, Mary Graham, Phebe Baldwin, John Fling, and David Fling.⁷ In short, Abigail provides a conclusion and a clue. The conclusion is that Alice was not the daughter of David Fling; she clearly was alive when his land was divided among heirs and she did not share. The clue lurks in the order in which Abigail named her children. She listed the Seeds first and the Flings last, and she placed Alice amid the Seeds.⁷ That order was not a fluke.

A thorough investigation involves not only research on direct ancestors but also collaterals. Abigail's brother illustrates the point, offering a will that echoes Abigail's silent clue. A bachelor, Joseph Buffington penned his will on 16 November 1785, including among his beneficiaries the children of Abigail Fling. He cited no last names, but he listed them in the following order: Adam, George, James, Alice, Abigail, Mary, John, Phebe, Hannah, and David⁸—an exact match.

Alice was surely a Seeds. With such clear evidence against her identity as a Fling, how could the misidentification have occurred? What Seeds evidence could have misled a historian and a genealogist as capable as Futhey and Cope?

THE SEEDS

Orphans' court records of Chester County also include a file for the minors of Edward Seeds. On 21 March 1758, Joseph Buffington asked the court to appoint guardians for them, explaining that

sometime ago the said Edward Seed died, leaving a widow named Abigail (who is since intermarried with one David Fling) and *eight children* to survive him, six of whom, viz^f Abigail, Adam, Richard, George, James, and Mary are all minors and under the age of fourteen years, the other two are above 14 years of age.⁹

Eight children, six of them named—the same six listed by Futhey and Cope. The auxiliary record that surely was created, the one in which the minors over fourteen

7. Abigail Fling Will, Probate File 4912, Chester County Archives. Emphasis added.

8. Joseph Buffington Will, Probate File 3745, Chester County Archives. Emphasis added.

9. Chester County Orphans Court—Minors, Seeds, 1758, Chester County Archives. Emphasis added. This file also contains an invoice dated 30 October 1758 for "doctoring Richard Seed." He obviously died before 1785, given that he is not named in the 1785 or 1797 documents.

chose their own guardian, is missing. Who, then, were the unidentified children? Edward Seeds did leave a will; it names only his widow, not their offspring.¹⁰

The courthouse records offer no further clue; but an exhaustive search extends beyond the courthouse bounds, of course. Almost every community has its private collections, its business papers, its files kept by such professionals as doctors and lawyers. This family's corner of Chester County is no different. The county historical society owns the Buffington-Marshall papers that date as early as 1700.¹¹ Included are the following pair of documents:

INDENTURE

5 March 1756. "*Ealse Seeds, daughter of Edwards Seeds, late of East Bradford in Chester County*" agrees to be apprenticed to James Marshall for a term of four years, eleven months. Witnesses: Abigail Seed and David Fling.¹²

WILL

Undated will of Abigail Seeds. In the event that her son Eli did not survive her, her heirs were to be her brothers (Adam, George, and James) and her sisters (*Alice* and Mary). The executor named was her "*half-brother John Fling.*"¹³

Alice was no Fling; she was the daughter of Abigail Buffington and Edward Seeds.

THE MORAL

Even the best researchers make mistakes. In this case, a too-quick reading by either Futhey or Cope focused on the six named children and overlooked the reference to two others. In their defense, one might point out that another part of the file lists these six again, this time with birth dates—a situation that might suggest they were the only heirs. Whatever the basis for the error these two authorities made, generations of genealogists have accepted their published account. Trusting derivative sources when the originals exist is folly. Consulting only part of a record, and then making a decision before all relevant sources have been examined, compounds that folly. Of course, it is still smart to survey the literature at the start of every new project. That is a helpful *preliminary* step. But correct conclusions often hinge upon a willingness to search out the *original* records upon which published information is based and a determination to find *all* the documents that relate to the problem.

10. Edward Seeds Will, proved 7 October 1754, Probate File 1549, Chester County Archives. The other unidentified child may be Francis Seeds who is cited as "absconded" on the Chester County Tax Discount List, 1765, Chester County Archives.

11. The papers were part of the Gilbert Cope Collection, originally housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. According to employees of the local society, county residents often turned over to Cope papers they found in attics, basements, etc., because of his well-known interest in the area's history.

12. Doc. 405, Buffington-Marshall Papers. Emphasis added.

13. Doc. 2186, *ibid.*, emphasis added. Chester County's recorded wills do not include one for Abigail Seeds; and the present writer has found no record of a marriage for her.