

Introduction

Our Founding Fathers created the blueprint. Business titans, political leaders, and military heroes oversaw the construction. But it was the ordinary people—the middling people—who cemented the foundation, put up the walls, and roofed our enduring republic. Unfolding in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Missouri, and Mexico, and spanning the years between 1746 and 1934, *American Tapestry* is a ride through American history in the company of a family of local community leaders. Today, the family, my family, would belong to the middle class—financially stable men and women who often volunteer on school boards or city councils or for other service organizations. In their day, the family members were farmers, wheelwrights, millwrights, teachers, engineers, managers, physicians, and of course, husbands, wives, and parents. In public affairs they served as overseers of the roads, overseers of the poor,¹ school board members, city councilors, county officials, state legislators, and in one case, a United States ambassador. In wars they marched as foot soldiers, and in times of peace they were officers in local militias. Thus, the family members were part of a group who stood somewhere between the struggling masses and the political, industrial, and military leaders of their time. That one family consistently fulfilled this societal role over a long period presented an opportunity for me to partially fill an underrepresented piece of the American story.

Initially I intended to write a short narrative about my great-grandfather John McEliece. He was among the dozens of obscure men who were profiled in *Biographical Sketches of Leading Citizens of the Seventeenth Congressional District, Pennsylvania*. The volume was one of the many books of biographies—derisively referred to as “mug books” because they typically required a fee for inclusion—that were published toward the end of the nineteenth century. As a

Civil War veteran, a justice of the peace, a captain of the local militia, a community leader, and a colliery superintendent, he was lionized as a man “of steady purpose and constant industry.”² But when I came across a Lewis Wickes Hine photograph of little boys working in a colliery, I realized that there may be another side to John’s story (see figure 1).

<Figure 1 about here>

As I gazed at the photo, I considered the predicament of the little boy, probably nine years old, in the bottom row in front of the man with the club. I saw the little boy’s eyes—afraid to look left or right, fearful lest he be clubbed again by the man with the stick. I saw his thin and raggedy jacket, the hard wooden bench, his ungloved hands, the coal dust on his cheek. Then I took notice of the fixed glower of the man behind him—probably no more than twenty years old—ready to enforce discipline on the youngster. I observed the dust-laden air and the rows of boys. Then I tried to imagine what it was like for these young boys to sit at their task of separating rock and slate from the coal for ten or twelve hours, six days a week.

The worst of Charles Dickens was better than this. And my great-grandfather was in charge of it all. Compelled to come to terms with the disparity between the flattering biographical sketch and the reality of John’s life as a colliery superintendent, I hoped to find the answer to a simple question—how could this be?—by exploring my family’s past.

On my journey through the archives of history, I discovered a family whose lives were interwoven with the often glorious and sometimes dark chapters of the American struggle. Being that they were neither war generals nor captains of industry, the memory of most of the family members was preserved only in commonplace documents—baptism, marriage, and death

records; land transactions; the census—and an occasional weatherworn gravestone. Yet, in the stories of those whose lives went beyond the ordinary—and there were many of those—a picture emerged of a family who was remarkably engaged from the very beginning. The story of their sometimes heroic, occasionally unlawful, but always unsung lives—woven into the soft greens and rich browns of the soil, the steely grays and bloody reds of war, the vibrant and inventive colors of commerce, and the glorious hues of honor found in frequent public service—is the fabric of the American tapestry.

American Tapestry tells the stories about selected family members—the Woodsides and Novingers, the Sallades, and the McElieces and Browns—by contextualizing their activities with concurrent events that faced the growing nation. They were real-life people who contended with real-life situations, and their stories bring history to life in a way that standard history texts do not. *American Tapestry* is not an account of the entire American experience. But with its long chronological focus on one family in localized settings, the narrative offers a fresh perspective on a wide range of less-well-documented developments such as the Whiskey Rebellion, the canal- and railroad-building period, xenophobia and religious bigotry in the nineteenth century, the relative importance (or not) of the Molly Maguires in Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal-mining region, the nineteenth-century child labor situation, and the progress of the medical profession in the progressive era.

My quest to unravel the family’s story caused me to acknowledge surprising facts about some of my forebears. Can you imagine my reaction when I discovered that Jonathan Woodside Sr. (see family tree) was arrested during the Whiskey Rebellion? Better yet, I remember when I clicked on a web page of Berner’s Auction Gallery of Springfield, Ohio, and learned from their offering that Jonathan Fletcher Woodside, the son of the Whiskey Rebellion arrestee, had been

appointed by president Andrew Jackson as chargé d'affaires of the United States of America at the Court of His Danish Majesty. Surely, there was a story behind that! When I saw the names of three of my relatives on the witness list in the 1877 murder trial of some Molly Maguires, I could hardly believe my eyes. Was my family somehow connected to a secret society of murderous Irish thugs? And there was worse.

But it was not the discovery of startling facts that brought me joy; it was sniffing out the backstory. Sometimes the problem lay in putting a puzzle together when the pieces were scattered or missing, as with James Woodside's experiences during the French and Indian War and in the 1776 Battle of Long Island. Other times I felt like a special prosecutor, trying to make sense of several seemingly isolated but ultimately interconnected events. Simon Sallade was a politician in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, who is remembered for the construction of the Wiconisco Canal. But who would guess that, in order to build the canal—it was only twelve miles long—he tangled with Nicholas Biddle and his little Bank War, and Thaddeus Stevens and the corrupt Canal Commission. At the same time, the project was impeded by Pennsylvania's infamous Buckshot War; the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, including Pennsylvania's default on its debt; numerous construction delays; and corporate infighting. There was George McEliece, the poor Irish immigrant whose life was portrayed in the nineteenth-century biographies as a classic rags-to-somewhat-fancier-rags story. His highest public achievement lay in being elected as Northumberland County's treasurer. But in the aftermath of a vicious yearlong nativist attack on him and others, a previously hidden part of George's story came to light. Next, I learned about John McEliece's experience as a private and corporal in the Forty-Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment during the Civil War: his unit was involved in two major battles, several skirmishes, and a lot of marching. But on his second tour of duty, serving as a sergeant in the

Thirty-Sixth Pennsylvania Emergency Volunteer Regiment, John's unit was assigned the dreadful task of cleaning up the Gettysburg battlefield, an aspect of the war that is seldom studied by historians. And then there was the story about the little breaker boys whose predicament inspired me to undertake this project. Was their miserable situation entirely a consequence of poverty and greed? Or was something else going on? Finally, there was the story of gentlehearted James J. Brown, the loyal and devoted physician, the "revered and honored friend" of the suffering poor of South Buffalo, New York.³

My research experience also induced me to reevaluate my basic understanding of American history. I grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s, and my concept of history was shaped by the paternalistic lessons of that period: classes focused on white men's achievements and trivialized, or avoided altogether, discussion of our country's imperfections. I came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s amid the upheaval of the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests. And then I got caught in the flurry of life—as a nurse, an accountant, a businesswoman, a politician, a wife, and a mother—never paying attention to what had been instilled in me as a youngster.

The image of the little breaker boy shook me out of my coma. And my studies, especially of the colonial and early republic periods, led to the discovery that America's first original sin—the centuries-long genocide of Native Americans, in all of its malignant forms—had been completely ignored in the classrooms of my youth. Thus, in addition to my family's story, *American Tapestry* explores aspects of the Native American experience from the perspective of a white woman who learned late in life of their travails.

Woven together, *American Tapestry* became more than a chronicle of family memory. Rather, the manuscript unfolded as a series of historical essays bound together by one family's

experience. Indeed, it was only after I completed my story that the similarities between James Woodside (c. 1725–1805), Jonathan Woodside (c. 1758–1809), Jonathan Fletcher Woodside (c. 1799–1845), Simon Sallade (1785–1854), George McEliece (1819–1886), John McEliece (1842–1904), and Dr. James J. Brown (1870–1934) came into focus. Imperfect though they were, each of them responded to the challenges of the time, challenges that exemplify the universal experience of the human condition. Importantly, the traditions the family members established and the values they embraced live on today in the millions of Americans who continue to volunteer in a multitude of organizations. Thus, a unifying theme of this long story—that middle-class values have endured through two centuries and countless historical transformations—offers assurance that we can overcome our present-day and future challenges as long as we remain true to those values. Borrowing the words of David Brooks, *American Tapestry* embodies a story that embraces the “democratic culture that captures, celebrates and ennobles the way average Americans live day to day.”⁴

¹ An overseer of the poor was a township official whose responsibilities included providing relief for the poor, protecting the township from vagrants, and finding apprenticeships for children of the poor.

² *Book of Biographies: Biographical Sketches of Leading Citizens of the Seventeenth Congressional District, Pennsylvania* (Buffalo, NY: Biographical, 1899), 368. A colliery is a coal mine and the buildings and equipment associated with it.

³ Sisters of Mercy, *Annals Mercy Hospital* (Buffalo, NY: Sisters of Mercy, Buffalo Archives, 1934), unpaginated document included with correspondence from Sister Helen Perot to author, November 25, 2008.

⁴ David Brooks, “What Holds America Together,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2018.