



## Problems with Dating Wassons

*If you want to date a Wasson, be prepared for some pitfalls.*

In an era where most of us carry a government-issued card with us that documents our date of birth, it can be somewhat challenging to determine the year that one of our ancestors was born, given all the discrepancies and variations found in the available historical records.

### **Determining Joe Wasson's Birth Year**

One of my basic questions for Joseph Wasson was what year was he born. The most specific U.S. Census record (1900) lists his month and year of birth as September 1857. Four versions of his obituary report that he died July 27, 1934 at age 76. But his headstone says he was born in 1858, and that he died in 1934. If he was born in September, then Joe didn't celebrate his 1934 birthday, and thus would have been born in 1857 if he died at 76.

With a September birthday, Joe's birthday in census years generally came after the census was recorded. So, when the U.S. Census records list him as 12 in 1870, 22 in 1880, 42 in 1900, 52 in 1910 and 72 in 1930, the arithmetic puts his birth year in 1857.

But use the same arithmetic, and the 1860 U.S. Census shows that Joe was born in 1856, and the 1920 U.S. Census shows he was born in 1859. (The 1890 U.S. Census records are not available.) The Iowa Census records don't show the dates the information was recorded, so we end up with 2-year age ranges, although the earlier year is more likely given Joe's fall birth month. The 1885 and 1895 Iowa Census records show that Joe was born in 1857 (likely) or 1858. The 1905 Iowa Census did not record ages. The 1915 Iowa Census shows that Joe was born in 1858 (likely) or 1859.

I found two other records that could be helpful. Or not. When Joe married Lydia Arnold in July 1903, he reported that he was 46. That would make 1856 his birth year. When Joe married Edna Hanna in August 1916, he swore that he was 55 years old, making his birth year 1860.

So, for Joseph Wasson I found 16 sources that suggest five different possible birth years, although the majority of these agree on 1857. For that reason and because the same 1900 U.S. Census record that lists his month and year of birth as September 1857 also lists birth months and years for his mother Jemima and son Duncan that are known to be correct, I have decided to go with September 1857 as Joe's birth month and year.

### **Determining Helen (Ellen) McNeil's Birthday**

Ellen C. McNeil, wife of Samuel Sawyer and mother of Carrie Sawyer, Joe Wasson's first wife and mother of his children, was born on March 26, 1840, according to her obituary. That seems straightforward enough.

But Ellen C. McNeil was born Helen Clark McNeil on August 12, 1837 in Glasgow, Scotland. It took some effort to connect Ellen McNeil to her family and birth record because of the incorrect date in her obituary. ("Ellen" and "Helen" are routine spelling variants of the same name in Scottish records, so that difference is irrelevant.)

Ellen was the sixth of seven children born to Duncan McNeil and Jean (Jane, another routine spelling variant) McTaggart. After Duncan died, Jane McNeil and her surviving children – John, Jane, James, Helen and Duncan – emigrated to Canada and then all but John moved on to Fort Edward, New York. The children's birth order remained the same even as their ages fluctuated over the years. Ellen's brothers James and Duncan fought in the Civil War; James was injured and Duncan was killed. Ellen and Samuel named one of their sons James Duncan Sawyer, and their daughter Carrie and her husband Joe Wasson named one of their sons Duncan James Wasson, presumably after Ellen's brothers. James McNeil and his wife Amelia visited Carrie in Jones County in September 1890, with the Anamosa Eureka stating that he was her uncle in its September 4, 1890 article about this visit. Thus, the evidence that Ellen was part of this McNeil family is solid.

In the 1855 New York Census, Ellen was listed as 17 years old. The 1860 U.S. Census, Ellen was listed as 22 years old and born in Scotland. Given the dates of the census records, that put her birth year as 1837 both times, matching her Scottish birth record.

But over the years, her birth year changed. The 1870 and 1880 U.S. Census records showed that she would have been born in 1839. Her 1900 U.S. Census record explicitly stated that she was born in 1843. Her 1908 obituary in the Cedar Rapids Gazette put her birth year as 1840. The birthdate in her obituary doesn't agree with any other source I found on her.

Because we have her birth record, we know that the specific date reported in her obituary is wrong, as are the birth years calculated from all but the 1855 New York Census and 1860 U.S. Census.

## Why the Differences?

There are a lot of reasons why we see differences.

- Birthdays have not always been as important as we make them out to be today. For that reason, people did not always know their exact birthday. In early church records, it was often the case that only the baptism date was recorded. After all, that's what the church handled. Although baptisms were sometimes held on the baby's date of birth, they were often conducted a few days later, and sometimes weeks, months and even years later.
- Widespread literacy is relatively recent. So, even if a person's birthdate was recorded somewhere, it wasn't necessarily accessible to that person, especially after they emigrated.
- Sometimes the person providing the information made a "best guess". If, for example, a census taker showed up at a farm, the person he talked with may not have been the best person to provide accurate information.
- Sometimes the person recording the information made a "best guess". A variation of this was the age rounding that occurred in the 1841 Scottish Census (adult ages were usually rounded to a number divisible by 5).
- There may be other motivations for "fudging" a year, such as avoiding military service or paying a lower price for ship's passage for young children.
- And of course, age-related vanity is nothing new. Some people I have tracked in our tree have lost a few years over time. I wonder if this was the case for Joe's marriage to Edna, where he was actually 20 years older than she was, not the 17 years that their marriage license indicates. Was Joe perhaps a little self-conscious about their age difference?

## Record Dates and Birth Years

When a record only reports a person's age, it is useful to know when the record was filled out. Censuses in the United States are usually conducted in the first half of the year. If a person's birthday hadn't occurred before the census was conducted, simply subtracting the person's age from the year of the census results in the calculated birth year being a year late.

Of course, not all records are dated, and we don't always know the person's month or day of birth. If we don't know one or both of these dates, then any birth year computed from them should be shown as an approximate age or a range of ages.

### **Cemetery Marker Years, Months and Days Lived**

It used to be somewhat common to record on their headstone both the person's date of death and the number of years, months and days the person lived. It would seem to be a simple matter then to compute the person's actual birthdate from this information.

However, there are at least three different approaches to doing this, and they do not necessarily compute to the same birthdate. First, you have to consider whether you include both the birth day and death day in your counts. For example, if on Monday you told someone to come back in two days, they likely would return on Wednesday. But if a person was born on Monday and died on Wednesday, did they live for two days or three?

Also, more often than you might have expected, sometimes every month was treated as if it had 30 days. This approach produces the same results as using actual day counts for the months only about 65% of the time.

Because we usually do not know which technique was used, a birthdate computed by subtracting the time lived from the date of death information found on headstones should be identified as approximate.

Prepared by Mark David Wasson  
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