

Thomas and Sarah McNelley- Putting down roots in Chicago

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Thomas Lawrence McNelley (1855-1936)
Photo courtesy of Sharon Angelo, descendant



Sarah Amelia (Lamb) McNelley (1856-1932)
Photo courtesy of Sharon Angelo, descendant

Thomas Lawrence and Sarah Amelia (Lamb) McNelley arrived in Chicago in 1883. They had been married two years and had an infant son. Chicago must have seemed like a good place to find work and establish a home.

Chicago was a relatively young city. When Thomas and Sarah moved there, it had only been fifty years since its founding in 1833. In 1848, the Illinois and Michigan Canal was completed, linking the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River. By 1860, there were a dozen rail lines that entered the city. Chicago was the transportation hub of the Midwest. By 1870, it had become a manufacturing center as well as a center for agribusiness. It had also become a magnet for migrants from the Eastern states and emigrants from Europe, primarily from Germany, England, Ireland, Sweden and Holland. In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed much of the city. The city rebounded quickly; post-fire resettlement included the development of outlying neighborhoods which grew up along the rail lines. By the time that Thomas and Sarah arrived, the city had a population of half a million.

Thomas' Origins:

Thomas Lawrence was born in Cleveland, Ohio on July 13, 1855 to Thomas T. and Mary Sarah Miller. He had two sisters: Mary E., born on August 17, 1853, and Sarah Isabella, born on December 22, 1858. The children would be left orphans at an early age. Thomas' mother died of consumption on September 15, 1866. His father died on January 3, 1869. (Sources: U.S. census record of 1860 for Cleveland, OH; McNelley Family Bible, Cemetery record for Mary McNelley, Death record for Sarah McNelley and guardianship papers for Sarah Isabella, filed in Cuyahoga County, OH) Thomas Lawrence is listed in a number of U.S. census records. In the 1860 U.S. census for Cleveland, Ohio, Thomas L., age 5, is listed in the household of Thomas and Sarah McNally. In the 1870 U.S. Census for Ashtabula, Ashtabula County, Ohio, there is a listing for a Thom L. McNelly, age 14, living in the household of John Perew. Ashtabula is some 60 miles east of Cleveland, and is a shipping port on Lake Erie. Thomas' occupation is listed as farm laborer. The occupation of John Perew, head of household, is listed as a lake engineer. Thomas Lawrence's father, Thomas T. had a brother named William H. McNelley, a ship captain who worked for Frank Perew, owner of a Great Lakes shipping company. This William married a Mary E. Perew. It appears that young Thomas Lawrence, son of Thomas T. McNelley, was living with the family of his Aunt Mary Perew in 1870. There is also a Thomas McNelley, age 24 and single, listed as a farm laborer/ hireling on the U.S. Census of 1880 for Copley, Summit County, Ohio. Copley is about 30 miles from Cleveland and about 16 miles from Boston Township where Sarah, his future wife, was raised. No doubt they met while Thomas was working in Summit County.

Sarah's Origins:

Sarah Amelia Lamb was born on January 20, 1856 in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. She was the tenth and last child born to Nathan Lamb and Sarah Ann Crampton. Her parents were both born in Vermont. The Nathan Lamb family moved to Ohio sometime between 1850 and 1853. Sarah, who lived well into the twentieth century, was the granddaughter of Joseph Lamb, a soldier who served as a private in the American Revolution. Joseph was forty-four when Sarah's father Nathan was born in 1808. Nathan, in turn, was forty-eight when Sarah was born in 1856. Sarah's oldest brother, Alden (Allen) was a Union soldier in the Civil War. He died in 1862 on the battlefield at Winchester, Virginia, fighting against the troops of General Stonewall Jackson. Sarah's lineage goes all the way back to the Willard, Hill and Lamb families who were 17th-century settlers in the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

The Marriage and Family of Thomas and Sarah McNelley: Thomas Lawrence McNelley married Sarah Amelia Lamb on March 30, 1881 in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

Thomas and Sarah had six children, but only three would survive to adulthood:

Oscar James was born on April 12, 1882 in Canton, Ohio. He married Louise Marie Mikkelsen in 1908 in Chicago, IL. He and Louise had two children: Theodore Thomas (B. August 25, 1910) and Alta Adele (B. June 25, 1913). Oscar moved his family to Ft Wayne, Indiana in 1924. He died on March 9, 1953 in Elgin, Illinois and Louise died two months later, on May 30, 1953 in Palatine, Illinois. Both are buried in Greenlawn Cemetery, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Clara Isabelle was born on January 20, 1885 in Chicago, Illinois. She died of whooping cough in Trigo County, Kansas on June 20, 1886, at the age of seventeen months. It is not known where she is buried.

Emma Laura was born on September 11, 1889 in Chicago, Illinois. She died of diphtheria at the age of seven on May 7, 1896 and is buried in Rosehill Cemetery, Chicago. When Emma was born in 1889, the family was living at 17 Fairview Ave in Chicago. Thomas' occupation was listed as "Express Messenger."

Lulu May was born on January 31, 1893 in Chicago, IL. Aunt Lou, as she was known in the family, was a jovial sort of person. She worked for the Boy Scouts for much of her adult life. After retirement, she moved to Florida to help take care of a dear friend of hers (surname Jeffrey) who was ill. After the

woman died, Aunt Lou stayed on in Florida and married the widower of her friend. It was her first marriage: she was 72 and he was 80. He died a year later and Lou died on December 11, 1973 in Orlando, Florida at the age of eighty.

Mary Ellen was born on July 10, 1894 in Chicago, Illinois. She died three years later, on June 26, 1897, of complications of bronchitis and was buried in Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago.

Thomas Lawrence was born on December 8, 1897 in Chicago, Illinois. He married Blanche J. Baretta in Chicago and they had two children: Donald (B. December 25, 1917) and Thomas Lawrence (B. March 8, 1923). Blanche died on March 26, 1940 at the age of 42. Thomas Lawrence died in Chicago about 1957. (His granddaughter Sharon Angelo noted that he died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 60.)

Occupation of Thomas Lawrence Sr. According to his granddaughter, Alta McNelley, and great-granddaughter, Sharon Angelo, Thomas Lawrence, Sr. and his wife Sarah had a bakery on Logan Square. In the Chicago City Directory of 1900, Thomas is listed as a baker at 434 W. Fullerton Avenue. In an Eagle Lodge Publication (published in Chicago, date of publication unknown), it states that Thomas was first employed by Adams Express Company and later became a commission salesman for the Quaker Biscuit Company. At the time of this publication, Thomas was living at 2569 Fullerton Avenue, about a mile east of Logan Square. Sarah's youngest brother Willard lived, at least for a time, with Thomas and Sarah. He is listed in their household in the U.S. census records of 1900 and 1910. Willard's occupation is listed as baker. Apparently he never married and helped out in the family bakery.

In 1931, Thomas and Sarah celebrated their 50th Wedding Anniversary, in the presence of their children Oscar, Lulu, and Thomas Lawrence, Jr. The wives and children of Oscar and Thomas Lawrence, Jr. were also present. (See Golden Wedding Anniversary Photo on the following page.)

In their later years, Thomas and Sarah lived at 4718 N. Hamilton Avenue in Chicago. Their daughter Lulu lived in the same building in the apartment next door. Sarah Amelia died in Chicago on September 18, 1932 at the age of 76. Thomas died there on March 14, 1936 at the age of 80. Both are buried in the Rosehill Cemetery next to their young daughters Emma Laura and Mary Ellen. (Emma and Mary have grave markers, but the parents do not.)

Thomas and Sarah, along with their children, are listed in the U.S. Census records of 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 for Chicago, IL. In the 1930 census, the birthplace for Thomas' mother is listed as "Northern Ireland." This is not correct: Thomas' mother was Pennsylvania German. His father (Thomas T.) was born in Canada. Thomas T.'s brother, William H. McNelley, a lake captain based in Cleveland, reported in the U.S. Census of 1880 that his father was from Scotland and his mother was Irish; hence the family belief that the McNelley forebears were Scots-Irish.

Today, more than 130 years after Thomas Lawrence and Sarah McNelley settled in Chicago, there are still descendants of the couple who make Chicago their home.

Sources: U.S. Census records in VT, OH, and IL; McNelley family bible; death and cemetery records; letters from Aunt Lou to her grand-niece and grand-nephew; letter from Sharon Angelo, great-granddaughter of Thomas and Sarah McNelley.



Celebrating Thomas and Sarah McNelley's Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary: Front Row- Thomas Lawrence III, Sarah Amelia and Thomas Lawrence Sr. (seated). Back row- Oscar, Louise, Lou, Thomas Lawrence, Jr., Alta, Theodore Thomas, Blanche, and Donald. (Photo courtesy of Sharon Angelo)

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