

History of James Bowyer Shelley & Elizabeth Bray

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James Bowyer Shelley, an Orphan

When James, the father of Thomas Shelley, was born, George Washington was the president of the United States. The well-known English poet with the same surname, Percy Bysshe Shelley, was also born in the same year, 1792. James' mother, Martha Shelley, never married James Bowyer, his father. We know that Martha Shelley and James Bowyer met in Easthope (see the Village of Easthope for more information). She raised her son, James Bowyer Shelley, and he bore her surname as his own. When James was just six years old, Martha married Samuel Hughes. James was orphaned at ten. As far as we know, his sons never wrote or told others about their father's life in England. Edith Shelley, a researcher on the line stated, "If we are right, his mother was buried in 1802 making him only ten years. Her father and mother died in 1798. Her brother Richard in 1802. The only one left was her sister Ann who married Edward Morris. They lived in Neenton. Since James Boyer [his father] moved out of the area and didn't mention James Shelley in his will, he must not have helped him."¹

Agricultural Laborer

James was an agricultural laborer according to the 1841 census.² George F. Shelley states a little about James' farming in a biographical sketch he wrote, a person who he never personally knew. "The golden headed grain was cut by hand with the sickle or the old fashioned cradle and then carted to the barn and stored until the cold weather of winter came on when it was threshed out with a flail, furnishing employment to the farm hands during the winter season. Farm wages were low, ten shilling a week ... was considered a good wage."³

More Wealthy Than A Typical Agricultural Laborer

According to the 1840 Tithe Map James was farming several parcels that he rented in 1840.⁴ Because of this and the fact that he was able to emigrate with all of his family who converted to Mormonism in 1851, it is clear that he was much better off financially than the typical agricultural laborer of the day.

¹ James Boyer Shelley Ancestral Family Newsletter. Volume 1, No. 1. November 1984, p.5.

² Great Britain. Census Office. Census returns for Claverley, 1841. Family History Library Film 474583.

³ Shelley, George Frederick. Life History and Experiences of George Frederick Shelley. Published 1943.

⁴ Shropshire Records and Research Center. 1840 Tithe Apportionment List and Map for Claverley. Shrewsbury.

Elizabeth Bray's Character

We don't know much about Elizabeth, the wife of James Bowyer Shelley. According to biographical sketches, she was spiritual and a member of the Methodist and Anglican Churches at different times in her life. Elizabeth was a dedicated wife. These sketches don't tell us about her life in England.

Modest Wealth and Marriage

She came from a family that had assets and may have had modest wealth when she married James Bowyer Shelley. Elizabeth undoubtedly brought more assets than most wives to a marriage with a rural agricultural laborer, James Bowyer Shelley. After marriage, Elizabeth's property became the property of James. The wife could not make a contract. If the husband wished, he could confine her against her will until 1891. If the wife committed a crime, it was the husband who was responsible. If the wife entered into debt, again the husband was responsible. Until 1857, divorces were only possible through the Church of England. Divorce was difficult to obtain. The 1857 Divorce Act "liberalized" the allowed reasons for a divorce. Men could now get a divorce for adultery. Women needed adultery plus another action, such as desertion for two years or physical cruelty.⁵

Literacy

Perhaps Elizabeth's greatest asset to her family would have been literacy. She appears to be the reason that her children, including Thomas Shelley, were extremely well educated for agricultural laborers. Wives of farm laborers like Elizabeth might do washing for others, sell their eggs, make and sell pies or other confectionery, or work on a craft. This would also add to the income of the family.⁶ Together, James and Elizabeth managed to start moving out of the agricultural laborer class to become a small farmer in Claverley before they emigrated. Her family's financial wealth undoubtedly helped this progress too.

Her Grandfather, Francis Bray (Surgeon)

Elizabeth's grandfather, Francis Bray, was born in 1727. He was a surgeon. A surgeon was a tradesman, much like a shoemaker, carpenter or other tradesman. A surgeon fixed broken bones, wounds, and any external injury. A "physician" did not fix broken bones. A physician was trained at a University, like Oxford or Cambridge. Physicians prescribed drugs. A surgeon learned his trade by being apprenticed to another surgeon. Surgeons were of lower social status than Physicians. When addressing a Surgeon, "Mr." was the correct title. When addressing a Physician, "Dr." was used.⁷ In 1745, near the time Francis Bray was a surgeon, surgeons were still formally linked with barbers as a trade.

⁵ Pool, Daniel. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, pp.180-6.

⁶ Mingay, G.E. *Rural Life in Victorian England*. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1998, p.73.

⁷ Pool, p.379.

Surgeons learned a lot about anatomy by operating on corpses. Until 1833, surgeons got corpses from graveyards.⁸ They would employ grave robbers who would steal the corpses at night after they were buried. Surgeons also acquired the bodies of criminals from the government after they were executed. There wasn't a shortage of executed criminals either. In 1800 you could be hung for stealing something worth more than 5s (less than one week of wages for an agricultural laborer). After an execution, the body would either be given to a surgeon for an anatomy class or else, until 1832, it would be hung in chains-preferably at a crossroads from a crosspiece set about twenty feet off the ground.⁹

It was illegal to practice a trade, such as a shoemaker, surgeon, milliner, etc. without being an apprentice for seven years. This law was passed in 1563. It wasn't repealed until 1875. A youth or his parents would sign a contract (indenture) with a master to become an apprentice. The apprentice could not get out of the contract. If you were a pauper, the overseers of the poor could apprentice you without your consent from the time you were eight until twenty-one.¹⁰ At the end of the apprentice period, you became a journeyman and could practice, as you desired, including starting your own business.

The will of Francis Bray, written in 1803 the year before he died, has him bequeathing to his children and grandchildren hundreds of pounds.¹¹ He also forgives substantial debts. To Francis, the father of Elizabeth Bray, he leaves 100£ and forgives his debts (amounts unspecified). Francis has eight children at the time the will is written. None of them, including Elizabeth Bray, are mentioned in the will. Sarah and Richard have already been given "shares of his substance" when the will is written and are given just a shilling. Three of Richard's children receive 20£ each. His son Thomas is forgiven a 100£ debt. He gives 5£ to the son of Thomas. His son William is forgiven a 100£ debt. His daughter Martha is forgiven only a 30£ debt because a previous debt of 170£ was already forgiven. The husband of Martha gets 10£ and her daughter gets 5£ plus the remainder of the estate. There is only one object mentioned in the will, a watch given to Martha. This is a substantial estate in that day (most rural English in the 19th century didn't leave any will at all). To put these amounts in perspective, a laborer would have made just 20£ working one year.

The land tax was assessed on real property with a tax of at least 2s. In 1798 the tax assessed for Francis Bray's property (the surgeon) was the fourth highest in Abdon.¹² The tax was 3£14s; even though he didn't own the property. The tax on the property of the father of Elizabeth, Francis Bray Jr., is 12s. The total tax in Abdon was 29£8s. There are 18 dwellings shown on the tax list in 1798 in Abdon and of these, either Bray or Tasker families occupy 7 of them. To put this in perspective, Isaac Wagstaff (3rd-great-grandfather of the author, 1787), a contemporary of Elizabeth Bray, paid 2s (the minimum) in tax for the property he occupied each year from 1812 to 1823.¹³ Since there are 20s to the pound, the property occupied by Francis Bray was 36 times more valuable than that occupied by Isaac Wagstaff.

⁸ Pool, p.251.

⁹ Pool, p.135.

¹⁰ Pool, p.241.

¹¹ Church of England. Diocese of Hereford. Episcopal Consistory Court. Probate records, 1517-1858. Family History Library Film 91612.

¹² Great Britain. Board of Inland Revenue. Land tax assessments, England and Wales, Shropshire, Vol. 1-2 (174-727) 1798-1799. Family History Library Film 1483040.

¹³ Bedfordshire County Council. Land tax assessments for Northill, 1797-1949. Family History Library Film 1595627 Item 14.

Her Grandfather, John Collier (Rector)

Elizabeth's paternal line wasn't the most educated or wealthy. Her grandfather Tasker had even more wealth and married the daughter of a Rector (Clergyman), John Collier. He was the Rector (Clergyman) in Abdon from 1745 to 1780. He was also a clergyman in Badger from 1729 to 1737. Clergymen were frequently the most highly educated people in rural villages. They also had a great deal of social status.¹⁴

Elizabeth's great-grandfather, John Collier, would be in the second highest class. He was a gentry. Until about the start of the nineteenth century there were few other churches in England. These churches, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - Mormons, were called nonconformist churches. The Anglican minister wouldn't talk to, socialize with, or eat at the house of the common laborers, such as our ancestors. It would be demeaning to his upper class status.¹⁵

Disowned by Her Family

Because Elizabeth had joined the Methodist and Mormon religions (nonconformist religions), it is clear that her family would have strongly disapproved. In England, there was often much contention between these nonconformists and members of the Church of England, or Anglicans. Most likely, Elizabeth's family was very upset with her repeatedly joining nonconformist churches. In 1851, her parents had died long ago but she still had at least two brothers living nearby. According to Earl, before leaving England Elizabeth's family would not speak with her.¹⁶ During the long trip to Utah, Elizabeth accidentally drowned in the Mississippi River near Memphis.¹⁷

¹⁴ Mingay, 147.

¹⁵ Mingay, 149.

¹⁶ Earl, Lizzie Conder. Sarah Shelley. Biographical Sketch.

¹⁷ Sonne, Conway B. Saints on the Seas. A Maritime History of Mormon Migration. 1830-1890. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983.