

Solving the Mystery of the Two Marriage Certificates

By Holly Ardinger

When I first realized my interest in genealogy, I quickly learned that my paternal grandmother was a treasure trove of information and she readily shared with me what she knew along with news clippings, family letters, books and photos of her relatives. Questions that came up were shared with her three sisters for answers and as a group separated by both geography (from California to Florida) and age (17 years between the oldest and youngest) they communicated often and seemed to be well-informed about their ancestors.

One of my favorite photos from my grandmother showed her father, my great grandfather Charlie Murtagh, posed with his family when he was an early teen in the mid 1890s. He was the youngest child in his family and is standing on the right with his older brother James C. Murtagh standing on the left. Charlie's parents were Mercy Blossom Murtagh sitting on the left and James X. Murtagh sitting on the right. The occasion of the photo was a visit from Philadelphia of Mary Murtagh (sister of James X.) who was sitting in the middle. There was an additional son in the family, Edward Murtagh, but he was 13 years older than Charlie and working as a banker in another town at the time that this photo was taken.



THE MURTAGH FAMILY

Although I knew Charlie when I was a child, I never knew the other people in the photo, so I was interested to fill in their history, starting with my great great grandparents, James X. and Mercy Blossom Murtagh. From written family history notes and a county history, I learned that James X. had come to the US from Ireland as a child with older siblings in the 1840s after their parents had died. As a

young adult, he made his way to Iowa as a harness maker and found work at the only harness shop in the small town of Waverly (Bremer County) in about 1866. A year later, to the surprise of the townspeople, he married the shop owner's daughter,

Mercy Blossom, who at that time was 18 years old and twelve years younger than James X.

During a search through microfilmed records at a Family History Center, the Bremer County marriage license record was located with a date of 7 May 1867. Mercy and James X. had five children all born in Waverly, Iowa (Bremer County): Edward in 1868, Anna in 1871, Mary in 1878, James C. in 1880 and Charlie in 1881. Both Anna and Mary died in infancy and were buried in a small cemetery in Waverly.

While I was looking for other Murtagh family marriage records in Iowa, I happened on a second marriage record for Mercy Blossom and James Murtagh dated 10 July 1875 also in Bremer County. While the first document showed that a license was issued, this second document indicated that both a license was issued and a marriage was performed. When I asked my grandmother for an explanation, she seemed genuinely surprised and hypothesized that they had lost their marriage certificate and needed it for something business related or church related. She had not heard any mention of a second marriage ceremony nor was this information contained in any of the family records.

This mystery lay dormant for some time until I presented it at a session of the Bainbridge Island Genealogical Society Evening Discussion Group. The possibilities raised included a divorce or that the first marriage had not officially occurred or the marriage return had never been filed correctly with the county. Attendees discussed possible records (divorce, church, town, land, military) for me to search for clues as to why there were two marriage licenses. Newspapers were mentioned as a possible source of information about the family although I had searched through Newspapers.com and Newspaper Archive without success. However, Betty Wiese shared her success in finding her family mentioned in digitized old newspapers through library systems or archives local to where her ancestors lived. These involved small town newspapers not commonly found in other online newspaper sources and made available to the public through the work of a company known as Advantage Archives.*

That night I did an online search and found that the Waverly, Iowa Public Library had some digitized newspapers of the right vintage to search without cost.

To my surprise, I found the following article on page 8 of the Waverly Republican dated 15 July 1875 which gave me my answer.

This solved the mystery of the second marriage record and although this was in the newspaper at the time, I wonder if the younger sons of Mercy and James X who were born five and six years later ever knew about the divorce and remarriage. Given the

Jim Murtagh was married Saturday eve. to Mrs. Mercy Murtagh by Justice Tanner. There is a little bit of romance connected with the marriage. Five or six years ago Jim Murtagh and Mercy Blossom were married and lived together two or three years. At length they separated and a bill of divorce was granted. Since that time they have both lived in the city and occasionally met. A bright little boy was the fruit of the marriage and both loved the child with all the ardor of fond parents. This link of affection at length drew the former husband and wife together and revived the old love again. At once they decided to try wedded life again and on Saturday evening were united in wedlock a second time. We hope they may enjoy life heartily. This is the second case on record in the county where the same couple were married to each other twice.

17-year gap between my grandmother and her youngest sister, the 13-year span for the children of Mercy and James X. was never considered unusual although now it is clear that the large interval between sibs was in part due to parental separation.

I appreciate both the availability of historic community newspapers with their human interest articles which add to our family stories and the BIGS members who readily share their genealogy search experiences.

I am also especially grateful for "Uncle Ed" (as the first son of James X. and Mercy Murtagh was referred to in later generations) who as a "bright little boy" apparently drew his parents back together in 1875. Had they remained apart, there would have been no younger sons and I would not be here today writing this story!

*Advantage Archives contracts with community libraries across the United States to help preserve local documents such as newspapers and also make them accessible in a searchable digital archive. By searching online using the words, historic newspapers advantage archive plus the name of the state or town you are interested in, you may find a link to the available small town newspapers that you are interested in, but which are not available through other newspaper collections. As an alternative, Kenneth R. Marks has been tracking what newspapers are available through Advantage Archives (along with a variety of other newspaper resources) on his website, Ancestor Hunt (see <https://theancestorhunt.com/newspaper-research-links.html>)