

Middle Names Can Reveal Complicated Family Connections

by John E. Norvell

Early Nashville families often reveal interesting relationships hinted at only by the seemingly odd middle names of family members.

The key to one such relationship, can be found in the person of Samuel *Norvell* Lapsley, who was a Presbyterian missionary in the Congo. He died from blackwater fever at Matadi, Lower Congo in 1892, and was buried at the Underhill mission site. He is credited with founding the Presbyterian Church of Zaire. ⁱ

In looking at this man's pedigree chart one discovers that, unlike many Southerners, he did not get his middle name from the family name of a mother or grandmother. This leaves us to wonder how he came by this unusual middle name.

Samuel was born April 14, 1866, the third son of James Woods Lapsley and Sara Pratt Lapsley. ⁱⁱ His grandparents were Rev. Robert Armstrong Lapsley, D.D., of Nashville and Catherine Rutherford Walker Lapsley. ⁱⁱⁱ



Samuel Norvell Lapsley
(1866-1892)

The Reverend Grandfather Lapsley was a native of Kentucky. He was a prominent Nashvillian in his day, serving as president of the Nashville Female Academy in 1834, pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Nashville in 1850, and from 1856-1865 served as an interim pastor in several churches in Carthage, Tennessee. ^{iv} His wife Catherine Rutherford Walker Lapsley, was the daughter of John Moore Walker and Margaret Woods. ^v The Lapsley, Walker, and Norvell families of Nashville can be found in the census and many other records of Nashville in the early 19th century. ^{vi} But identifying the connection between the Lapsleys and their Norvell neighbors requires a bit more digging.

A trip down the Walker line reveals the connection. Samuel's grandmother Lapsley had a sister, Agnes Walker, who married Joseph Norvell in 1823. ^{vii} Aha! So Samuel's great uncle by marriage was a Norvell. A tenuous connection – but perhaps the one we are looking for.

Joseph Norvell died in 1847 leaving his widow Agnes dependent upon her relatives for a home. ^{viii} Her sister Catherine had died in 1844, leaving Rev. Lapsley with a large family of children. Agnes evidently took it upon herself to fill in for her late sister, and moved into the Reverend's household. The 1850 census shows her in Nashville with this family. When Rev. Lapsley moved out of Nashville to tend the flocks in the Carthage area, Agnes went along. She is shown again with this family in the 1860 census in Dixon Springs, Smith County. ^{ix} By 1870 Rev. Lapsley had moved to New Albany, Indiana where he died in 1872. ^x It doesn't appear that Agnes Norvell went north with them. Instead, she went to live with her nephew, James Lapsley (son of the Rev.), and was with him in Alabama in 1880. ^{xi} Agnes died in 1884 and is buried in Selma, Dalles County, Alabama. ^{xii}

The itinerant Agnes Norvell must have been beloved by her sister Catherine's family. Samuel, the nephew at whose home she lived and died, was just two years old when his mother died. Agnes was probably the only mother he ever

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knew. Thus, it is no surprise that in 1866 he named his own son Samuel Norvell Lapsley. And thus the mystery of how the Norvell name got into the Lapsley family is solved.

But there is a bit more to the story and other connections as well.

The brother of Joseph Norvell, Agnes Walker Norvell's late husband, was Moses Norvell.^{xiii} He married Hannahretta West,^{xiv} the daughter of Kentucky inventor Edward West.^{xv} Hannahretta's sister Sarah Brown West married Robert Woods, who had a sister named Margaret Woods.^{xvi} To bring this full circle, it was this Margaret Woods who married John Moore Walker, and they were Agnes Walker Norvell's and Catherine Rutherford Walker Lapsley's parents. Imagine them explaining that connection at their family reunion!

Although it is most likely that Samuel Norvell Lapsley was named after Agnes Walker Norvell, who was his grand aunt, evidence shows that the Norvells were well connected to the Lapsleys in several ways, each of which gave good reason for the Norvell and Lapsley names to be linked in subsequent generations.

ⁱ John R. Hendrick and Winifred K. Vassy, Dictionary of African Christian Biography, "Samuel Norvell Lapsley 1866-1892 Presbyterian Congo," http://www.dacb.org/stories/congo/lapsley_samuel.html

ⁱⁱ Samuel Norvell Lapsley, *Life and Letters of Samuel Norvell Lapsley: Missionary to the Congo Valley West Africa*, (Whittet & Shipperson: Richmond, , 1893) 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lapsley, 11.

^{iv} Augustus Theodore Norton, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Illinois* (W.S. Bryan: St. Louis, 1879) 46.

^v John Moore Walker, was the son of Joseph Walker, a trustee of Washington College, later Washington and Lee University; Lapsley, 11.

^{vi} For a detailed look at the Norvells in Nashville, see "How Tennessee Adventurer William Walker became Dictator of Nicaragua in 1857: The Norvell family origins of The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny," by John E. Norvell, *The Middle Tennessee Journal of Genealogy & History*, Volume XXV, Number 4, Spring 2012, 149-155.

^{vii} Ancestry.com. Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002, Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2008. Original data: Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002. Nashville, TN, USA: Tennessee State Library and Archives. Microfilm.

^{viii} Obituary, Joseph Norvell, Nashville City Cemetery (http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1847.htm#norvell_p1)

^{ix} 1850 U.S. Census, Davidson County Tennessee, p 133, # 893, Robert Lapsley Family; 1860 U.S. Census, Smith County, Tennessee, p 7, #74, Robert Lapsley Family, Ancestry.com

^x Norton, 46.

^{xi} 1880 U.S. Census, Milton, Autauga County, Alabama, p 36, #314, James Lapsley Family, Ancestry.com.

^{xii} Agnes Norvell Walker Grave, Live Oak Cemetery, Selma Dallas, Alabama, Findagrave. Com (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSlN=NO&GSpartial=1&GSbyrel=all&GSst=3&GSctry=4&GSSr=7681&GRid=102072075&>).

^{xiii} Norvell, 149-155.

^{xiv} Harriet [Hannahretta] R West to Moses Norvell Marriage Date: 28 Feb 1814 County:Davidson, Ancestry.com. Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002, Ancestry.com. Original data: Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002. Nashville, TN, USA: Tennessee State Library and Archives. Microfilm; Moses and Hannahretaa West Graves, City Cemetery, Nashville http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/160078_norvell.htm; Hannahretta West Norvell Grave, Findagrave.com <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSlN=Norvell&GSiman=1&GScty=135876&GRid=33537943&>

^{xv} George Washington Ranck, *History of Lexington, Kentucky: Its Early Annals and Recent Progress* (Robert Clarke & Co: Cincinnati: 1872), 184; John E. Norvell, *Lt Lipscomb Norvell of the Virginia Line*, (Private printing: Canandaigua, New York, 2012), 87.

^{xvi} Robert Wood to Sarah B. West, Marriage Date:19 May 1818, Marriage County: Davidson, Ancestry.com. Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002, Ancestry.com. Original data: Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002. Nashville, TN, USA: Tennessee State Library and Archives. Microfilm.