

My Most Elusive Ancestor: Hannah Amelia DAWSON

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My great-aunt, Hannah Amelia DAWSON, was the eldest child of Thomas and Harriet Jane (née HOLMES) DAWSON. Hannah was born in Riccarton, Christchurch, New Zealand on 14 July 1860.¹

When I became interested in helping with the research into my DAWSON family twenty years ago, relatives had already put together a wealth of information which was easily verified and supplemented from official records. Hannah's parents and her six younger siblings were traced and documented, but Hannah herself proved to be remarkably elusive.

The story in the family was simply that great-aunt Hannah had gone to Australia. More questioning revealed that she had run away and that at some stage my grandfather, Thomas George DAWSON and one of his brothers, had travelled to Sydney to look for her. The family story records that they did find her, but that she was very reluctant to return to New Zealand. So reluctant in fact that the brothers had to drag her to the wharf to bring her home. However, at that point, she gave them the slip and was never seen again. The two brothers had to return to New Zealand without her.

This dramatic story intrigued me and raised many questions. Why had she run away? Was she pregnant or was there another reason for her departure? The family obviously wanted her to come home, so why didn't she want to return? Perhaps more importantly, did I have second cousins in Australia, just waiting to be discovered?

On the other hand, I did wonder how much of the family story was true, so I decided to try to prove it. Firstly, I turned to the New Zealand records to work out when Hannah Amelia DAWSON had left, so that I would know what time period to search in Australia. Hannah was a witness at the marriage of her sister, Rachel, on 9 August 1882² and again at the marriage of a friend, Margaret FOREMAN, on 20 June 1884.³ From then on, I could find no further reference to her in the New Zealand records, until the death of her father, Thomas DAWSON, in 1924.⁴ In his obituary it was stated that "*All the children, with the exception of Hannah Amelia, survive Mr Dawson.*"⁵ That was a definite end point, even if I could not be sure when Hannah had first left New Zealand.

It was of course possible that Hannah had returned home before her death, although there was no indication of this in the family story. A thorough search of the New Zealand death records from 1884 to 1924 was completed to check for her return, but there was no Hannah DAWSON dying during that period.

The next task was a search of the Australian death and marriage records for any Hannah DAWSON from 1884 onwards. I also searched for a baby born to Hannah DAWSON without success. When I did this research, records were not as accessible as now, so the search was not completed beyond 1920, but I had expected to find some trace of our Hannah in the earlier part of the time period. However, I found nothing and I seriously began to doubt the story of her departure to Australia.

At this stage I was beginning to think that the family story had been made up for a reason, maybe to hide something back at home in New Zealand, so I decided to continue my search in the New Zealand death records and eventually found the death of a Hannah DAWSON in 1927.⁶ This Hannah had died in Sunnyside Mental Hospital, Christchurch, of congenital syphilis. Could this be our Hannah? What better reason could there be for a family to invent a story? This Hannah DAWSON was a spinster, aged 49, born in New Zealand and her parents were not named. Apart from the fact that the Hannah I was looking for would have been 67 at this stage, I could not discount any of the other sparse details stated on the certificate. My heart sank. Surely my quest was not going to end in such a tragic manner.

¹ NZ Birth records: Birth Certificate of Hannah Amelia DAWSON, Ref: Folio number 331/1860

² St Saviour's Anglican Church, Templeton: Transcript of Marriage registers 1865-1963, Ref: Vol 97 pg3 No 2A

³ St Saviour's Anglican Church, Templeton: Transcript of Marriage registers 1865-1963, Ref: Vol 97 pg3 No 7A

⁴ NZ Death records: Death Certificate of Thomas DAWSON, Ref: Folio number 2570/1924

⁵ *Lyttelton Times*: Obituary, Wed Aug 20 1924 *A Canterbury Pioneer. Late Mr Thomas Dawson*

⁶ NZ Death records: Death Certificate of Hannah DAWSON, Ref: Folio No. 3719/1927

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The most useful piece of information on the death certificate was the fact that this Hannah had been buried at Cust, north of Christchurch, and a search of the cemetery records⁷ provided the evidence I needed to eliminate her as part of my family. She was buried in the Cust Cemetery with her parents, Richard and Mary DAWSON, so it was with great relief that I noted in my file that this was definitely not our Hannah DAWSON.

Hannah Amelia DAWSON's mother, Harriet Jane (HOLMES) DAWSON, died of "cancer of liver"⁸ in 1902. Her death notice in the newspaper supported the belief that there was some substance to the story of Hannah running away to Australia as it ended with "Sydney papers, please copy".⁹ As far as I knew, we had no other connection to Australia, so this must surely be for Hannah's benefit. The family story claims that the sons who tried to fetch Hannah back from Sydney went sometime around 1900, so perhaps Harriett Jane wanted her eldest daughter back home prior to her death. Of course, it is also possible that the sons wanted their sister home to take over the burden of caring for their mother during her illness.

I couldn't see how to progress further, so for a few years I put the puzzle of Hannah's disappearance aside, until recently, when I began the quest again, hoping that the emergence of the Internet and online resources would help me to make the breakthrough that I needed.

I reviewed the information I had already collected and decided to start with the New South Wales Births, Deaths and Marriages online historical indexes.¹⁰ I began the search by looking for deaths of 'Hannah' or 'Hannah A' DAWSON between 1884 and 1924, then progressed to marriages for the same period. Nothing looked likely, so I began to question all the facts I had, including the time period, and I decided to search for deaths for 'Hannah Amelia', any surname, from 1884 through to 1975. There were 37 matches and just one of them had the correct parents' names, Thomas and Harriet (Harriett) Jane. The married surname was WALKER, the date was 1947 and the place of death was Marrickville, Sydney. Could this be my Hannah Amelia? Surely not. This was 23 years after she had supposedly died. I took a deep breath, crossed my fingers and ordered the death certificate.¹¹

The certificate duly arrived and sure enough, I had found the death of my Hannah Amelia née DAWSON. It was a detailed certificate, giving her correct birth information, age and parents, so there was no doubt it was her. From it I was able to find her marriage to Amos WALKER in Sydney in 1917 and order that certificate.¹² I should have found this marriage in my original search but I had only looked at records for 'Hannah' and 'Hannah A' DAWSON. This marriage had the bride incorrectly listed in the index as 'Hannah H' DAWSON, so I had ignored it. However, the certificate was clearly my Hannah Amelia. She was the third wife of Amos WALKER and had been a spinster when they had married. They had married later in life, so there were no children of the marriage. That was clearly stated on the certificate, but of course it did not mean that Hannah had never had any children at all.

As for the name WALKER, that also raised questions. Hannah Amelia's father, Thomas DAWSON, was illegitimate¹³ and her grandmother, also named Hannah DAWSON, had later married a William WALKER.¹⁴ However, the second appearance of the name WALKER in the family seems to have been a coincidence because Amos WALKER's death certificate¹⁵ shows that he came from Bedfordshire, England whereas the other WALKER family connected to my Dawson family was from Cheshire, England.¹⁶ I have not yet found any link between these two WALKER families.

⁷ NZ Cemetery records: Cust Presbyterian Headstones: Section 2: Western Cemetery No 21

⁸ NZ Death records: Death Certificate of Harriett Jane DAWSON, Ref: Folio No 2577/1902

⁹ *Lyttelton Times*: Death Notice for Harriet Jane DAWSON, Sat Nov 15 1902

¹⁰ NSW BDM Historical Indexes online www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/

¹¹ NSW Death records: Death Certificate of Hannah Amelia WALKER, Ref: 9760/1947

¹² NSW Marriage records: Marriage Certificate of Hannah Amelia DAWSON and Amos WALKER, Ref: 3648/1917

¹³ UK Baptism records, Parochial Chapel of Macclesfield, Prestbury, Cheshire: Baptism of Thomas *Howard* Dawson 16 March 1834

¹⁴ UK Marriage records, General Register Office: Marriage Certificate of Hannah DAWSON and William WALKER 14 June 1847

¹⁵ NSW Death records: Death Certificate of Amos WALKER, Ref: 5936/1935

¹⁶ UK Marriage records, General Register Office: Marriage Certificate of Hannah DAWSON and William WALKER 14

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In my quest to find descendants, I searched the NSW BDM indexes online again for births to a Hannah DAWSON, looking for births with no father listed and found none in greater Sydney, so maybe she was not pregnant when she left – or perhaps she had assumed the name of the man if she was living with him as his wife. I hoped not, because if this were the case, it would be a well nigh impossible task to find a baby whose first name I did not know with a surname I did not know.

I was also able to access Hannah's burial records online and found that she had been cremated at Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park aged 86.¹⁷ She was "Buried in Accordance" which meant her ashes had been scatted at the Crematorium in an unidentified place in accordance with the New South Wales Health Act. This was because no-one had collected her ashes despite four letters to the person who had signed the application for cremation. It seemed a very sad ending.

Now I had discovered where my great-aunt had ended her days, but there were still so many unanswered questions. I still didn't know why she left New Zealand or with whom. I still didn't even know if she'd had any children, or what she had been doing for the more than 30 years preceding her marriage to Amos WALKER.

The next step was to check for wills for Amos and Hannah Amelia in the hope that this would throw a little more light on Hannah's circumstances. There was no will for Hannah, but Amos did have a will¹⁸ which revealed that he had left Hannah with 12 shillings a week and the house to live in for her lifetime, at which point the estate reverted to Amos' son, Henry, the sole surviving child of his first marriage, and Henry's descendants. What was most interesting for me was the fact that in the will Amos referred to Hannah as 'Annie Amelia'¹⁹ not Hannah Amelia. This seemed unusual in an official document, especially considering that her name had been recorded as Hannah Amelia when they had married and also when she had died. It clearly meant she had called herself Annie, not Hannah. Indeed, she had signed 'A A WALKER'²⁰ on one of the probate documents. What did this mean for me? I needed to go back to the NSW Births index online to look for births to 'Annie DAWSON'.

The search for births to Annie DAWSON was more productive, with a number of babies listed without a father's name, including one likely-looking birth in 1884 for 'Amelia DAWSON'.²¹ Unfortunately, the birth certificate revealed that this child was not the daughter of my ancestor, so the search for the birth of a baby to my Hannah Amelia DAWSON continues.

Hannah Amelia DAWSON has proven to be the most elusive ancestor I have ever researched. Although I now know for certain that she did go to Australia, I don't have any idea why she ran away from home. I have found her death and some facts about her later life, but there is still much to be discovered about her time in Australia. However, I do have some leads of interest. I can keep searching for a child born to Hannah, and I will try to find the descendants of Amos WALKER who are mentioned in his will in the hope that they can provide some information about my great-aunt.

Do I have second cousins in Australia? Sadly, it now seems unlikely, but even that question has not been answered for certain.

June 1847

¹⁷ Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park www.esmp.net.au/index.htm

¹⁸ State Records NSW: Probate Packet, Ref: Series 4, No. 204360

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ NSW BDM Historical Indexes www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/