

By Midge England (great-great granddaughter of William Delaney Patton)

William Delaney Patton

Dec 1810 – Dec 1, 1883

¹Quite unlike the typical Civil War stories of valor, William Delaney Patton was more of an undisciplined lothario. With 5 wives, 18 children and a most bizarre case of bigamy, which propelled the War Department into a protracted turmoil, William's life rivaled even the most scandalous modern day soap operas.

Born of Scottish-Irish descent in Shelby County, KY in 1810, William grew into a handsome, nearly 6ft tall, Don Juan with black hair and riveting gray-blue eyes. By the age of 17, he had moved to Centre Township, Monroe, OH. Within the next two years, William married Miss Margaret Anne McClelland of Pennsylvania who gave birth to his first child, George W. Patton (1829).

By 1831, their second child, Mary J. Patton had been born. William and Margaret sold their land and relocated to Illinois the following year. Three more children, Margaret Jane (1836), Louisiana (1837) and William (1838) were born during their seven years in Illinois.

By 1839, they had once again returned to Woodsfield, Monroe, OH, where William became the county Sheriff with his son, George W. as his deputy. One interesting newspaper item on Oct 12, 1843 stated, "**Constable William D. Patton ordered to warn Rachel Woods to leave township.**" [One has to wonder what Rachel had done to elicit such a stern reaction from the citizenry for such an order to be posted in the local newspaper and would tend to make you wonder if William was involved on a personal level.]

William later served as a Justice of the Peace in Monroe County, OH ... [perhaps a prelude of unforeseen things to come?] Five more children were born to William and Margaret; Eliza M. (1841), David (1843), Henrietta (1845), Thomas J. (Aug 18, 1849) and Susanna (1851). By the 1850 census, William was reportedly unemployed and "Doing Nothing." Daughter Henrietta seemed to have some type of impediment or disability marked on the census, but it was not specified.

A new church was formed in Woodsfield in 1851 where Margaret and Louisiana had become charter members, but their lives would soon be cut short. Margaret had succumbed to Tuberculosis by Apr 1853 leaving behind 10 children and the last semblance of any normalcy in William's life.

¹ The intricate details of William Delaney Patton's life were derived from the dozens of pages of depositions, affidavits, investigative reports and court documents contained in his Civil War service and Pension records. Many prominent citizens, neighbors, relatives, government employees, soldiers, officers and doctors provided testimony and personal details of William's life. Additional information was derived from various records, such as church, court, census, periodical and similar sources.

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Six months later, in Oct 1853, William married wife #2, Mary Elizabeth Frazier of Noble County, OH (widow of Louis Oliver) who was known by her friends and family as "Betsy Frazier." On the first anniversary of Margaret's death, 18 yr old daughter Louisiana also died from TB. [It gives one pause to wonder whether the TB outbreak might have been associated with someone connected to the new church since the only two members of William's family, which died from TB, were also the only family members who had joined the new church. I would be curious as to how many other members may have shared the same fate?]

Elizabeth (wife #2) gave birth to 5 children during her 9-year marriage to William; Mary Elizabeth (1854), James Christopher Columbus Patton (Aug 5, 1856), Ophelia S. (1858), Rosa H. (1859) and another boy named William in 1861. The 1860 census again shows William having no job. The depositions from friends and former soldiers all concurred that William never did like to do any work. They said he did not like to perform any physical labor and avoided work as best he could.

In 1862, Elizabeth was stricken by a lengthy unspecified illness and died in June of that same year. [One could speculate that it might have been TB or childbirth related. Or perhaps it was something more nefarious.] Coincidentally, Margaret Landis (widow of Dr Isaac Clark who had died 3 years earlier) had been a neighbor and claimed to have been a friend to Elizabeth for 8 years prior to Elizabeth's death. She stated that she had visited Elizabeth frequently over those 8 years and had been caring for William's stricken wife before she died. Another neighbor who had helped prepare Elizabeth for burial commented that William married the Widow Margaret Landis Clark just 6 weeks after Elizabeth was buried. [It seems that wife #3 might have been something other than a friend to Elizabeth, wife #2. To have married the husband of her friend just 6 weeks after Elizabeth's death might indicate she may have had other intentions toward William, prior to Elizabeth's untimely death. William was not known to shy away from opportunities with the ladies. Especially those who were widowed.]

Margaret Landis Clark married William to become wife #4 despite her own mother's misgivings about the sanity of combining Margaret's 6 children of Dr Clark with William Delaney Patton's 6 youngest children of the 15 who were still at home. From the hostile deposition Sarah Landis (Margaret's mother) provided to Pension investigators many years later, it was obvious that Margaret's mother held an intense disdain for William's laziness and misbehavior from the onset and had emphasized that she had not been invited or informed of her daughter's marriage to William until sometime afterward. Margaret chose to ignore her mother's warnings about William's reputation. A warning she should have considered more carefully as she would soon find out.

Considering the negative response Margaret was receiving from friends, family and close neighbors who were clearly outraged [which they expressed in later depositions] by Margaret and Williams lack of respect and propriety toward his recently deceased wife, Elizabeth... Margaret and William decided to have a secret marriage at his home on Aug 12, 1862, by Monroe county Justice, Edward Salisbury, Esq. with only some of their children present. Close relatives and neighbors later commented in their depositions that they had not known about the marriage having occurred until sometime later and Margaret had attempted to conceal the date of the marriage because she knew it would invoke heated disapproval from the entire community.

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Just two months after their marriage, on October 8, 1862, William ran off to enlist for 3 years in the 77th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, Company I under the command of Capt. William T. Robinson. At that time, the US was well embroiled in the Civil War [then referred to as The War of 1861 or the War of the Rebellion]. Margaret was left behind to care and fend for the 12 children without any sustenance. [While it is apparent William was really looking for someone to tend to the children, Margaret seemed unusually poor for a recent widow of a local doctor. I would be interested to see the details of Dr Clark's Will to shed more light on the situation.]

Just one month after enlistment, Nov 1862, William was promoted from a Pvt to Sgt. Six months later, May 27th 1863, Lt William W Scott, commander over Company I, sent a letter to Headquarters requesting that **“William D Patton be reduced in ranks to Pvt as a consequence of his inability to perform the duties of a non-commissioned officer.”** Colonel William B. Mason approved the request to reduce William's rank to Pvt, which William held for the remainder of his tour or service.

At the end of the Red River Campaign in July and Aug 1863, companies A & I of the Ohio 77th Infantry marched into Arkansas. William was temporarily detached from company I to serve as a nurse in a hospital at Duvalle Bluff, AR for 2 months. After returning to company I, William and the other soldiers of companies A & I embarked on a hard march from Helena, Arkansas to Little Rock in Aug of 1863 (a distance of 121 miles). William Delaney Patton complained of painful varicose veins, which had formed in both legs. From Oct 1863 through May 1864, William was assigned to Provost duty to guard the railroad Depot in Little Rock. On May 15, 1864, William claimed to have contracted chronic ophthalmia and granular conjunctivitis caused by blowing sand, excessive labor, severe cold, exposure and contact with others who had the same condition. William was admitted to the General Hospital at Little Rock on June 8th which determined William was unfit to perform his duty due to the increasing severity of his eye condition. On June 22nd 1864, William was transferred to the Desmarres Eye and Ear Hospital in Chicago for further treatment.

At some point, William had taken a two-week leave of absence to go home just long enough to infect wife #3, Margaret with Gonorrhea. In addition to William's extremely **“sore eyes”** [a description frequently used to describe his severely infected eyes] Margaret later stated he had also complained of rheumatism in his back, piles [hemorrhoids], inflamed lungs & coughing, as well as varicose veins. [His rheumatism may have been Rheumatoid Arthritis considering other family members who subsequently developed this condition.] Margaret was furious at having been infected by William's **“private disease,”** and later expressed the humiliation she felt, as a widow of a prominent local doctor, when she had been forced to seek medical help from Dr Smith of Monroe County. Margaret stated she had to undergo arsenic treatments to cure her infection. [Arsenic was the only treatment for gonorrhea at the time since this was several decades before the development of antibiotics.] At some point, William was also treated by Dr Smith and was reportedly free from his gonorrheal infection before he was discharged from the Ohio volunteer Army, but the entire incident was kept a secret until 1875 when Margaret's mother was deposed by a pension investigator.

According to Capt Robinson and the depositions of several doctors and surgeons, William Patton was almost entirely blind from chronic inflammation with a gray opacity of the eyes by the time he was given a disability discharge from service. According to the

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medical reports, the opacity of William's eyes made it impossible for him to read or tolerate light and could barely see enough to walk with great difficulty.

On Jan 3, 1865 he was given a disability discharge based on his inability to perform any type of labor due to chronic ophthalmia, varicose veins, rheumatism and piles (hemorrhoids). The remainder of Companies A and I were mustered from service on March 8, 1866 at Brownsville, TX which is located at the extreme southern tip of Texas, over 1700 miles from the soldiers homes in Ohio.

According to Margaret, wife #3, William came home from his medical discharge continuing to complain of rheumatism in his back, painful lungs with some coughing and very sore, granulated eyes which had to be poulticed with rotten apples while he remained in a darkened room. His wife said that his private disease was gone by then. She described how William wore green shades or goggles over his eyes when he went out but spent most of his time in a darkened room.

Eight months after William came home, Margaret filed for divorce on Aug 1865 for abusing and starving her. She said he would go off for a week or more and not provide for her. William had tried to coax her to come back but she would not go. When asked if William worked, she told the investigator that he did not and could not work but occasionally played the violin at parties. No children were sired during this marriage, but William was far from giving up his wayward ways. All of William's 15 children who had not reached the age of maturity by that time were spread out across Ohio, WV and PA among friends, family and to others. Some, as young as 13, were being used as domestic help or laborers. Neither Margaret (wife #3) nor William kept any of the Patton children with them. Margaret subsequently withdrew her suit for divorce 13 years later, thus no divorce was ever finalized. [Per the documents submitted to the commission for widow's pension.]

William did not remain in a cold bed for long. Once again, his penchant for widows and their inherited properties went into full swing. By 1866, he had already relocated to Wheeling, WV and moved in with Lavina Williamson (widow of Samuel Hartley who died in a railroad mishap in 1861). Lavina became wife #4 when William took her to West Alexander, Washington, PA for a secret marriage on Jan 11, 1867. William cited his 3rd wife's pending divorce action as the reason he wanted to keep it secret. [During the subsequent pension investigation, which questioned many lifelong citizens of Washington County, PA, it was determined that there had never been a Justice of the Peace by the name of Snidiker in Washington County PA. The investigation revealed that William had managed to set up a phony JP to fool Lavina into thinking she was married to him. Coincidentally, the Monroe county, OH courthouse burned down with all the records that very same year.]

Lavina and William lived together as husband and wife for ten years. In addition to the children she had from her late husband, three more children were born to William and Lavina; Charles (Nov 18, 1867) and twins Anna Laura and Robert Edward (June 1870). Robert Edward died before age 3. [These would be the last of William's known 18 children, but it is not impossible that there might have been more children and other marriages we have yet to discover].

While living with Lavina (wife #4), William went to see wife #3 to persuade her to get back together and go out West with him. Margaret said William thought she did not know

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he was living with Lavina or his intention to bring Lavina along on the journey West, but Margaret was wise to him and refused to go. She booted him back to the street for the last time.

On Jan 14 1878, three days after their 10th anniversary, Lavina (wife #4) left William, claiming poverty and cruelty; similar to the complaints from all of his wives. William's daughter Margaret Jane Thomas had laid the fault of their breakup on Lavina's grown daughter, Belle Hartley.

William had not worked since 1849, which might explain his penchant for selecting widows who could support his scandalous behavior, Each had stated that William never supported his family, abused them and left them in poverty to starve while he disappeared for weeks at a time to fend for themselves.... No doubt while he was spending time with one of his other ladies. Lavina did not file for divorce.

However, William continued to suffer terribly with the pain from his "sore eyes" (chronic ophthalmia), which would continuously crust over, leaving him in near total blindness and relegated to a darkened room. In the dozens of reports from doctors and surgeons who examined William, half were of the opinion that the eye infections were due to gonococcal infection while the other half determined it to be a chronic ophthalmia he obtained during the war. William endured nearly 20 years of unimaginable pain and anguish from his infected eyes, rheumatism, chronic lung problems and continuing discomfort from the piles and varicose veins in both legs.

During the 10 years he lived with Lavina, William was embroiled in an unending battle over his Civil War Disability Pension. In 1875, an aggressive (pit bull) Special Agent Cowan, working for the Commissioner of Pensions, declared that since the Surgeon who had signed the original medical discharge for William had since passed away as had several other witnesses, that he would be able to remove William from the pension rolls. [Agent Cowan's methods were later determined to have been a case of gross misconduct and unethical practices when a Special examiner was assigned to review the case 13 years later].

Agent Cowan had learned about William's "private disease" infection from Margaret's mother, Sarah Landis. Dr Smith, who had cured Margaret and William with arsenic treatments, had also died by this time. Agent Cowan also managed to find a doctor who minimized the extent of William's eye infection and blindness. [Although, it initially appeared that William's eye infection was indeed from gonococcal origin, later depositions from fellow soldiers and officers who served with William described the eye and lung infections as a common malady contracted by many of the soldiers in William's regiment. Gonococcal Ophthalmia would have been a likely cause if William had been the only soldier who contracted this eye infection, but since a high percentage of other soldiers had also contracted the same problem, the likelihood of a gonococcal origin would be slim and highly improbable. In that situation, one has to consider the possibility that this severe ophthalmia might have been a Pink Eye type of infectious conjunctivitis or other types of eye infections. Cross contamination of other bacteria from using common outhouse facilities, bathing facilities or by handling other commonly shared items which may have been contaminated under the poor sanitary conditions would spread such infections rapidly among the soldiers. Prevalent lung problems which a large number of soldiers in companies A & I developed after the long march through Arkansas could indicate the possibility of something like Anthrax which was common in

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the soil. Without modern diagnostics or antibiotics, the actual cause of their afflictions would be difficult to ascertain].

Agent Cowan's summary and recommendation to the Pension Commission claimed that William was seldom sober enough to know what he had done. [Which was disputed by every other person interviewed who knew William Delaney Patton including William's former commanding officers]. In his report, Agent Cowan bragged to the commission that the previously provided testimony and affidavits, which originally substantiated William's disability claim, were from doctors and witnesses who had since died and could be dismissed as evidence. Agent Cowan also bragged to the commission that William would not trouble the Pension Agency with his presence again because he had been able to get William to sign a document stating his eye infection was caused by Gonorrhea. [But keep in mind, that William was blind and had no way to see what he was signing. This was later confirmed in 1882 when William submitted an appeal describing the threats and abusive conduct of Agent Cowan. William said he had been forced to sign a document, which he could not see and Agent Cowan refused to read. He stated that Agent Cowan used threats of imprisonment if William did not sign the document. William had stated that he would have never signed such a document if he had known what it said]. With the contrived evidence in hand, Agent Cowan, successfully recommended the termination of William's Disability Pension payments in 1875. William made no further attempt to have his pension restored until 1882. During that time, William had no income and with his blindness and poor health, was unable to perform any type of manual labor.

Less than a month after Lavina left in 1878, William already had selected his 4th widow to be wife #5. Ellen, an immigrant from Ireland (widow of Thomas McElwee) first met William in 1876 and fell for the stories he used to impress the ladies. Despite his blindness, health problems and advancing age, William's charm, lies, waning good looks and magnetic appeal had enabled him to sweep Ellen off her feet. They were married on Feb 14, 1878 in West Alexander, Washington, PA by Justice James F. Mayes. William and wife #5, Ellen lived together in Wheeling, WV as husband and wife.

By now, his eye condition had degraded to the point where his blindness was total other with only the differentiation between light and dark remaining. His sensitivity to light left him to remain in a darkened room. Friends commented that William was unable to recognize them and would ask who they were. At times, William could recognize their voice.

By 1880, he apparently made some effort as a Sewing machine agent, no doubt through his son, Thomas J who worked as a salesman... although one can imagine just how much work William actually performed. Ellen claimed he previously used to peddle unspecified wares a few times. No children were produced from this marriage to wife #5. By now, William had developed Asthma, kidney problems and diabetes along with his worsening Rheumatism and blindness from the chronic granuloma ophthalmia. In 1883, his physician was called shortly before William's death to treat his stricture of the urethra from enlargement of the prostate. Dr Ulrich called in a surgeon to assist in the catheterization procedure but William never recovered from the uremic toxins, which had built up in his system. The irony was that the cause of his death on Dec 1, 1883 was the very thing that had gotten him into all of this trouble in the first place. William Delaney Patton died from uremic poisoning. For all the things he had done wrong in his life, William suffered terribly for nearly 20 years with the unbearable disabilities he endured.

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The most bizarre part of the story was yet to come. Upon William's death, three widows (wives #3, #4 and #5) all filed for widows Civil War pension. This set in motion one of the most extensive investigations by the Pension board and War Department in trying to sort out which wife was the valid widow. The paperwork in his files exceeded 300 pages by the time it was all over. The file contained dozens of depositions and affidavits from doctors, surgeons, friends, postal carriers, family members, civil war soldiers and officers and well known prominent citizens of WV, OH and PA. One letter was from a Congressman.

Wife #3 was initially not aware of William's death or Williams being married to two other wives until she was contacted by an investigator. She invoked her right to apply for the Widow's Pension and hired a tough lawyer to appeal the revocation of William's pension and restore the past and future pension monies he and his legal widow were entitled to receive. Margaret (wife # 3) produced a court document for the pension investigators dated June 21st, 1876 in which she had withdrawn her request for divorce. [One can only speculate as to whether a divorce might have been previously granted since all courthouse records were burned in the 1867 fire].

Repeated approvals and then denials of benefits went on for years after William died as the three widows continued to file appeals. Some of William's family supported Lavina because she had the youngest children and they felt she was in the most need. Other family members supported the last wife #5, Ellen. Perhaps they felt she had earned it by taking care of him during the last years of his life. They described Ellen as living in poverty with no means of income. None of the family or friends supported Margaret, wife #3. [I have the distinct feeling based on the comments contained in William's files, that she was a very rigid person who did not earn any compassion from his children. Neighbors continued to express negative feelings about Margaret's marriage to William just 6 weeks after the death of wife #2, Elizabeth. So, it appears that Margaret was not very popular.]

In 1888, a Special Examiner (Thomas F. Winthrop) was assigned to review the material evidence. He was clearly disturbed by the misconduct and actions of Agent Cowan had conducted 13 years prior. Winthrop wrote a summary, which included the statements **"little reliance should be placed on Special Agent Walter S. Cowan's investigative work and misconduct,"** [which had deprived William of his disability pension] **"or the conduct and methods Cowan employed in his investigation."** In a very poignant statement, the Examiner concluded in his review, that he was **"of the opinion notwithstanding the immoral character of the claimant, that injustice was done him by cutting off his pension and would recommend that it be restored."** The commission promptly ignored the recommendation and rejected reinstatement of the pension.

Ironically, the wife who ended up receiving the Pension and declared the valid widow of William Delaney Patton was Margaret Landis (Clark) Patton, wife #3. By 1884, she was living part time with her daughter in MO and part time with her 92-year-old mother Sarah Landis in Malaga, Monroe, OH.

Margaret later moved to her final home in Council Grove, KS. During the 37 years she survived after William's death, she was a thorn in the side of the Pension department. In one instance, she had a Congressman write a letter in her behalf after the Adjutant

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General denied her application for an increase in Pension. The congressional letter seemed to elicit and immediate change the mind of the War Department and the increase was granted just before she died at the age of 103 on June 1st, 1920 just two months prior to her 104th birthday. The increase in pension was not paid until after her death following another appeal by her daughter for the monies due in addition to supplemental funds her daughter requested to reimburse burial expenses. Margaret's daughter subsequently received all monies. Margaret had obviously been a tough old bird who took on the War Department on more than one occasion and ended up winning nearly every time. She seemed to have no limit on influential friends or her ability to persuade authorities to recreate missing documents for her.

We can only wonder how many more wives and children of William Delaney Patton are yet to be discovered.....