



Samuel and Ellen Sawyer

Samuel Sawyer and Ellen McNeil married and started their family while living in New York. But Samuel spent much of his Army service during the Civil War in a Washington, D.C. hospital. It does not appear that he and Ellen returned to New York after the war. Instead, they moved to Jones County, Iowa, where four of Samuel's siblings lived. Samuel and Ellen finished raising their family there. They spent the rest of their lives living in a handful of different cities in Iowa. We are direct descendants of Samuel and Ellen through their daughter Carrie.

Samuel Sawyer was born in Stanbridge, Missisquoi, Québec. After migrating to Washington County, New York, he married Ellen McNeil, who had migrated separately to Washington County, New York from Canada, although she and her family were originally from Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Scotland. We are direct descendants of Samuel and Ellen Sawyer.

Samuel Sawyer

Samuel Sawyer moved from Canada to Washington County, New York by 1850. He settled near Fort Ann, which is near Kingsbury, from which his grandparents Moses and Elizabeth Sawyer left for Canada after the American Revolutionary War. In the 1850 U.S. Census, he was 20 years old and working as a farmer at Fort Ann in Washington County.

I have not found Samuel in the 1855 New York Census.

The 1860 U.S. Census was conducted on July 3 of that year. It shows a now-30-year-old Samuel Sawyer working as a farmer, although the value of his personal estate was placed at \$50. Nothing was shown for any real estate, which suggests that either he was leasing a farm or that he worked on other people's farms.

- For more about Samuel, his early years and his ancestry, see [The Sawyers of England, New England and Canada](#).
- For more about Samuel's migration to the United States, see [Our Family Immigration History](#).

Ellen McNeil

Ellen McNeil, her mother Jean (Jane) and siblings Jane, Duncan and Anna moved from Canada to Washington County, New York in 1853 after her brother James had found work there. They were all living together in Fort Edward at the time of the 1855 New York Census. That census did not provide occupation information for any of them.

- For more about Ellen, her early years and her ancestry, see [The McNeils of Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Scotland.](#)
- For more about Ellen's migration to the United States, see [Our Family Immigration History.](#)

Marriage

The 1860 U.S. Census also showed that Samuel Sawyer, age 30, was already married to Ellen McNeil, age 22.

Research Notes

When Samuel Sawyer and Ellen McNeil got married is uncertain. I have not turned up a marriage record for them. Ellen's obituary says that she married Samuel Sawyer when she was 18 years old. Although Ellen was born in August 1837, which fits with the 1860 U.S. Census, her reported age changed a lot over the years – her obituary says that she was born in 1840. Depending on which birth year she was using, and Samuel and Ellen could have been married at some point between the 1855 New York Census and 1858.

Children

Samuel and Ellen Sawyer had three or four children, including the following:

- Carrie E. Sawyer, born perhaps in about June 1861, in Fort Edward, New York
- Elwin Samuel Sawyer, born July 14, 1863, in Fort Edward, New York
- James Duncan Sawyer, born August 4, 1864, in Brooklyn, New York

We are direct descendants of Carrie Sawyer.

Research Notes

Carrie Sawyer's birth date is uncertain. One source listed it as May 1860, whereas a FindAGrave.com entry reports it as June 18, 1860. However, the 1860 U.S. Census in Washington County, New York was conducted on July 3rd of that year, and Carrie was not included in the household. In the 1870 U.S. Census, which was dated July 5th of that year, Carrie's age was listed as 9. Neither the May nor June 1860 birth dates fit the 1860 or 1870 U.S. Census records.

In the 1900 U.S. Census, she gave her birth date as June 1862, and her age as 37. In the 1930 U.S. Census, Carrie's age was listed as 67. These suggest that she was born in 1862 or 1863.

Some records show Carrie's middle initial as "J.". Other records show it as "E.", including the 1885 Iowa Census, the 1900 U.S. Census and in her mother's obituary, which I assume Carrie wrote.

The existence of an unknown fourth Sawyer child has not been determined. In the 1900 U.S. Census record for Ellen Sawyer, she indicated that she had given birth four times, but only three of the children survived. Most other references support the idea that there were only three births, and Ellen died before having the opportunity to repeat that claim in the 1910 U.S. Census. In general, once a child dies, they no longer appear in the available records, other than they may be mentioned in their parents' obituaries.

One researcher suggested that there was a child named Annie J. Sawyer, born in 1861, but that researcher did not include daughter Carrie. I believe that this could have been due to a misreading of the handwritten entry for Carrie in the 1870 U.S. Census.

Samuel Sawyer in the Civil War

Samuel Sawyer enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army during the Civil War on August 20, 1862, and he was mustered into Company E, 169th Infantry Regiment on September 25, 1862. He later served as a corporal in Company C, 10th Volunteer Regiment of Cavalry. His company fought mostly in Virginia. He was injured early on and was hospitalized in Washington, D.C. in 1863, where he remained until the end of the war. He was mustered out of the army in Washington, D.C. on July 19, 1865 while he was still hospitalized.

- For more about Samuel's Civil War service, see [Our Ancestors in the Civil War](#).

After the War

It is not clear when Samuel finally left the hospital. I have not found any evidence that he returned to Fort Edward, New York.

At some point between 1865 and 1870, the Sawyers moved to Jones County, Iowa, where Samuel's brother Eli and his family had been living since 1858. His brother William and his family had settled there by 1865. His brother Gilbert and his family moved there at about the same time that Samuel did – these brothers lived on adjacent properties for a while, including in 1870. Samuel was working as a teamster in 1870.

The Sawyers lived on 20 acres in Madison Township at the time of the 1877 plat map, but by the beginning of 1879, they were living in Olin, Iowa, a village in Hale Township, Jones County. No occupation was provided in the 1880 U.S. Census, but the 1885 Iowa Census identified him as a farmer.



Looking out towards the 20 acres that Samuel and Ellen Sawyer owned in section 24, Madison Township in 1877.

Marital Strife

Samuel and Ellen Sawyer had a rocky marriage, especially after the children left home.

By 1890, Samuel filed for divorce. But by the end of that year, he and Ellen had reconciled, and Samuel had the case dismissed.

In 1892, Samuel and Ellen were living together in Wyoming, Iowa, but later that year Samuel moved to a different residence in town.

By 1893, Samuel and Ellen had reconciled and were living together in Olin, Iowa.

By 1894, Samuel and Ellen had moved to Davenport, Iowa, where they were still living in 1895. It appears that they returned to Olin, Iowa by the end of that year.

By early 1896, Samuel and Ellen had separated again. Samuel Sawyer moved to Audubon, Iowa, where he lived in a boarding house until his death that spring.



Samuel Sawyer once owned this house in Wyoming, Iowa.

During this period, Ellen had sold to Samuel two-thirds interest in a property in Hale Township, Jones County. Samuel later sold the property to Calvin Biggert (or Biggart). Ellen discovered this after Samuel died, and went to court against Biggert to assert her one-third interest in the property. The court ruled in Ellen's favor.

Samuel's Death, Burial and Subsequent Legal Battle over his Estate

Samuel Sawyer suffered from some unspecified chronic illness for the last several years of his life.

Not long after he moved to Audubon, Samuel Sawyer became seriously ill. After several weeks of this, he died on April 19, 1896. The Algona Courier, May 1, 1896, reported that Samuel starved to death. He had been confined to bed for the last six weeks of his life. Because of a stomach disease, he was unable to eat for the last four weeks of his life.

After his death, it was discovered that while in Audubon, Samuel changed his will, replacing his wife and children as his heirs with the Methodist Church and others in Audubon. After moving

to Audubon, Samuel “experienced religion” and was baptized a few weeks prior to his death. While he was bedridden and not eating, he changed his will, making the local Methodist Church the primary beneficiary of his reported \$3000 (actually closer to \$2000) estate, leaving smaller sums to the Ladies Aid Society and to the G.A.R. Post of Audubon. He made the church pastor the executor of his estate without bonds.

His family challenged the will in court, and the church responded by hiring its own attorney. The Sawyers first moved to have the case transferred to Jones County on the grounds that Jones County was the last place of residence for Samuel Sawyer. That motion was denied.

Before the case was heard in Audubon County, the district court of Audubon County appointed Elwin Sawyer special administrator of his father’s estate. Elwin gave the bond, typical in estate cases at the time. The Audubon district court ordered that Samuel Sawyer’s cash and other effects be turned over to Elwin pending trial. Elwin was also appointed special administrator of the estate by the district court in Jones County, although the order appointing him did not cite any judicial facts to justify its action. This would lead to additional legal proceedings.

For the trial, several people from Jones County provided depositions regarding Samuel’s state of mind. According to the Wyoming Journal, March 18, 1897, “There were depositions from a number of Olin people tending to show Mr. Sawyer of unsound mind at times for years back, that he was queer and unstable, restless and unable to live with any of his children or his wife but a short period before he would be impelled to move or change his location. No one could satisfy his captious demands....” In a March 1897 trial in Audubon County, Ellen and her children won.

But that wasn’t the end of it. On April 9, 1897, Elwin submitted his “final report” regarding the settlement of the estate. The Audubon County district court rejected Elwin’s final report and named attorney John Nash of Audubon County as estate administrator. The judge ordered Elwin Sawyer to turn the estate over to Nash. When Elwin refused, the court issued a bench warrant, and Elwin was arrested. A writ of habeas corpus was served upon the arresting sheriff, preventing him from taking Elwin to Audubon County.

This led to more legal proceedings that resulted in two cases that reached the Iowa State Supreme Court – 114 Iowa 742 (1901) and 124 Iowa 485 (1904). In the 1901 case, it was determined that the Audubon attorneys were entitled to draw upon the bond posted by Elwin Sawyer. Elwin turned over \$2069.30 to Nash as a result of that decision.

When Nash finished resolving the estate, he came up with about \$1500 in bills and legal fees, leaving only \$514.70 for Samuel’s estate to pay out to Ellen Sawyer and their three children. The Sawyers appealed Nash’s fees as excessive.

Much of the high legal fees resulted because Nash, an experienced attorney, hired two additional attorneys to work on the case, even though it was a small and generally simple estate. In the 1904 case, the court substantially reduced the attorney fees allowed. This finally put an end to the legal fights surrounding Samuel Sawyer's estate, more than eight years after he died.

Samuel was buried in Maple Grove Cemetery in Audubon, Iowa.

known.
Mrs Sawyer is now staying at Jos Wasson's since the death of her husband at Audubon week ago. The demise of Mr. Samuel Sawyer removes another veteran citizen and soldier from the active battles of life. He leaves a widow and three children, two sons, Elwin, at Elm, and Dimeah, in California, and one daughter, Mrs. Jos. Wasson, of this place.
O. Johnston was in Chicago last week with a

News of Samuel Sawyer's death, Anamosa Eureka, April 30, 1896



Samuel Sawyer's marker, Maple Grove Cemetery, Audubon, Iowa

Ellen's Death and Burial

Ellen's life seemed to become much quieter after Samuel died. She lived for a time in Olin, Iowa, and then moved to Stanwood, Iowa, not long after her newly divorced daughter Carrie Wasson moved there. Ellen and Carrie then moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa in about 1901. Ellen had her own home there until about 1906, when she moved in with her daughter Carrie and Carrie's second husband, Ralph Miller.

On January 25, 1908, Ellen suffered a paralyzing stroke at her daughter's home. She died two days later on January 27.

Although her obituary said that she would be buried at Oak Hill Cemetery, Ellen was actually buried at Linwood Cemetery, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Her children Carrie and Elwin would both be buried there years later when they died.

OBITUARY OF MRS. ELLEN SAWYER.

Mrs. Ellen Sawyer was born in Glascow, Scotland, March 26, 1840, and died in Cedar Rapids, Ia., January 27, 1908. Mrs. Sawyer was converted and joined the M. E. church at 12 years of age. At 18 years of age she was married to Samuel Sawyer in the state of New York, and moved to Wyoming, Iowa, in 1850. Three children were born to them; all of whom are living. They are Elvin S. Sawyer of Mechanicsville, Iowa, Duncan J. Sawyer of Campbell, Cal., and Mrs. Carrie E. Miller of 511 Second avenue east. She died at the home of the latter after only two days of serious illness, the immediate cause of her death being a stroke of paralysis. Mr. Sawyer died at Audubon, Iowa, about fourteen years ago. About seven years ago Mrs. Sawyer moved to Cedar Rapids, and for the last two years has made her home at her daughter's, Mrs. Miller. The funeral was held from the residence, 511 Second avenue, at 1 o'clock this afternoon, Rev. B. J. Clark of the First U. B. church preaching the sermon. Interment at Oak Hill cemetery.

Ellen McNeil Sawyer's obituary, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 30, 1908



Ellen Sawyer's grave does not have a traditional marker, Linwood Cemetery, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Carrie Sawyer (Samuel and Ellen Sawyer's daughter)

Little is known about Carrie's early years. She was born in Fort Edward, New York in the early 1860s. She moved to Jones County, Iowa in the later 1860s, and was living in Madison Township in 1870. She moved with her family to Olin, Iowa, by the start of 1879. It was at the home of her parents in Olin that Carrie Sawyer married Joe Wasson on February 5, 1879.



Joe and Carrie Wasson

Joe and Carrie had three children, including the following:

- Ellen “Ella” Jemima Wasson, born April 30, 1880, in Madison Township, Jones County, Iowa
- Jessie Gertrude Wasson, born May 27, 1882, in Madison Township, Jones County, Iowa
- Duncan James Wasson, born April 19, 1885, in Madison Township, Jones County, Iowa

We are direct descendants of Joe and Carrie’s son Duncan.

- For more about the lives of Joe and Carrie Wasson, see [Joseph and Carrie Wasson](#).

Elwin Samuel Sawyer (Samuel and Ellen Sawyer’s son)

Elwin married Anna Josephine Clay of Olin, Iowa on January 1, 1890.

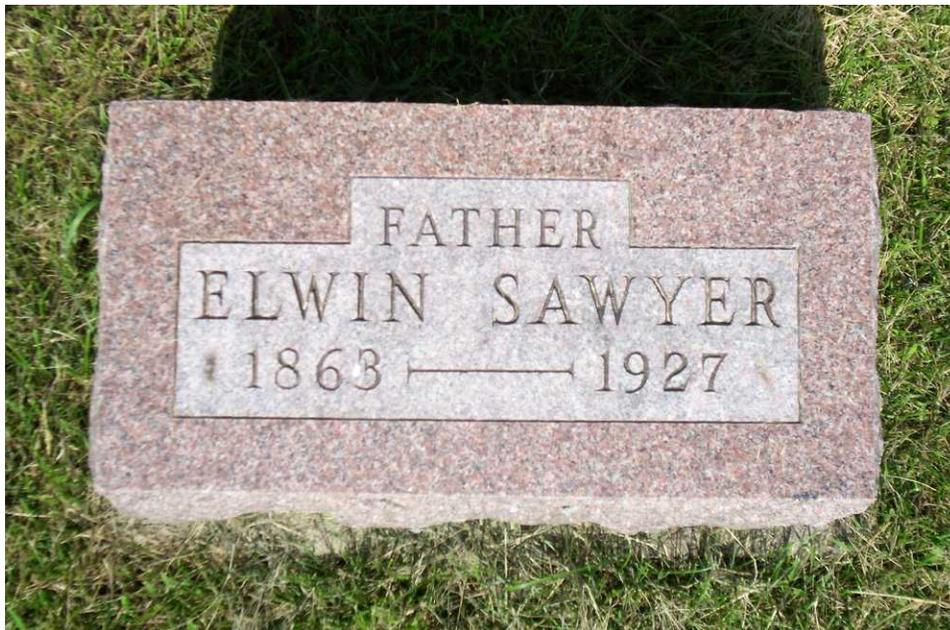
Elwin and Anna started out their married lives in the Olin, Iowa area. By 1900, they had moved to Stanwood, Iowa, where Elwin’s sister Carrie was also living. Elwin worked as a book agent at the time. By 1910 they had moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where Elwin worked as a carpenter and later in tiling. Elwin and Anna spent the rest of their lives in the Cedar Rapids area.

Elwin and Anna Sawyer had five children, including the following:

- Leila Marie Sawyer, born May 29, 1891, in Jones County, Iowa
- Ellen Lovisa Sawyer, born December 18, 1892, in Jones County, Iowa
- Inez Grace Sawyer, born June 24, 1894, in Olin, Jones County, Iowa
- Willard (or William) Elwin Sawyer, born October 28, 1912, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa
- Bernice Mildred Sawyer, born April 14, 1914, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

The long gap between the births of daughter Inez and son Willard is unusual, but records indicate that the later-born children were indeed Elwin's and Anna's.

Elwin died in Marion, Iowa, following a stroke on May 29, 1927. He was buried in Linwood Cemetery, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



Elwin Sawyer's marker, Linwood Cemetery, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

James Duncan Sawyer (Samuel and Ellen Sawyer's son)

As a teen, James Duncan Sawyer, who generally went by Duncan, was working as a hired man on the John Wasson, Jr. farm in 1880. By 1888, Duncan had moved to Nebraska. It was there in Akron, Nebraska that he met and married Avina J. "Anna" Messerschmidt on July 24, 1888.



James Duncan Sawyer and his first wife Anna

Anna's parents were German immigrants who had settled in Dane County, Wisconsin, where Anna was born in 1870. By 1873, she and her family had moved to Schoolcraft, in Madison County, Nebraska.

Duncan and Anna Sawyer began farming in nearby Boone County, Nebraska, where the first of their six children was born in 1890. Their second child was born back in Olin, Iowa in 1892. By 1894, the Sawyers were living in Santa Cruz County, California, soon followed by Santa Clara County, California. By 1900, Duncan worked as a barber, but the family moved to Campbell, California in 1908, where Duncan worked as a butcher.

Duncan and Anna Sawyer's six children included the following:

- James Leroy Sawyer, born January 19, 1890, in Akron, Nebraska
- Mathilda Anna Sawyer, born November 3, 1892, in Olin, Iowa
- Merna Malissa Sawyer, born November 6, 1894, in Capitola, California
- Vera Winona Sawyer, born January 9, 1899, in Campbell, California
- Hilda Irene Sawyer, born June 20, 1901, in Campbell, California
- Verne Duncan Sawyer, born December 16, 1904, in Campbell, California

Most of their children remained in California as adults.

Duncan returned to Iowa where he filed for divorce in Iowa in 1919, citing cruel and inhuman treatment.

By 1922, Duncan was married to Jennie E. Perry, who had been born in Madison Township, Jones County, Iowa in 1864. They were living in Long Beach, California in 1922, where they both lived the rest of their lives. By 1930, Duncan was working there as a hand sweeper in the sanitation department. Duncan and Jennie did not have any children together.

Duncan Sawyer died December 14, 1938 in Long Beach, California. He was buried in Rose Hills Memorial Park, Whittier, California.



Duncan Sawyer's marker, Rose Hills Memorial Park, Whittier, California

Prepared by Mark David Wasson
Last updated February 1, 2023