

Sarah A. Thomas – Who Was She?

The Oregon Trail runs about 30 miles south of Lander, WY, on its way across the South Pass region to the pass itself. South of the main trail and the Sweetwater River, there's an alternate route called the Seminoe Cutoff that avoids Rocky Ridge and eliminates several crossings of the Sweetwater River.

On 29 June 1854, a young woman named Sarah A. Thomas died and was buried near the trail on the Seminoe Cutoff. Unlike the vast majority of trail graves, a stone was carved and left to mark her grave. And then her party continued on, because a delay could mean hitting early snow in the mountains and that could be fatal.

On 1 February 2024, almost 170 years later, I clicked on the Oregon-California Trail Association's video "The Curious Case of Sarah Thomas' Tombstone".¹

Randy Wise, curator of the Fremont County Pioneer Museum, gives some background on the Oregon Trail and the fairly high mortality rate (the vast majority of deaths due to accidents and disease) before telling Sarah's story.

The little information known is from her gravestone and because an unrelated person in another party, Jacob Hays, witnessed her funeral and noted the same date and location.

Randy then noted that a new, larger stone was left in the 1920s that may've been left by relatives, and that reminded me of a story I'd heard about 50 years ago.

Back in the early 1970s, my grandfather told me a story that he'd heard from his father, Ed Brennan. Ed (or possibly his father, also named Ed) either knew or had met a gentleman named Bill Thomas.

Bill had told Ed about his grandmother dying on the Oregon Trail, and that over 50 years later he'd been able to find her grave using his grandfather's notes and sketches.

I don't remember anything about a gravestone in the story, but my grandfather did say that Bill was named for his grandfather.

It wasn't much to go on, but I'm a genealogist and I love a challenge. And I had a feeling I really should start looking for Sarah.

I found her.

Sarah A. Thomas was Sarah Ann Campbell, the second oldest child of Hiram D. Campbell and Catharine Dennison. She was born and raised in Windsor Township, Lawrence Co, Ohio.^{2,3}

In 1847, the family moved to Linn County, Iowa, where Hiram was the first blacksmith in the area and where he built the second house in Center Point.⁴

On 15 September 1848 in Linn County, Iowa, Sarah married William A. Thomas⁵, in 1849 they had their first son John Clark, and on 3 October 1850, the three are enumerated immediately after Sarah's family on the census.⁶

Their second son Lee Dignis (sometimes Dignus), was born the next year, and their third son, Louis K, was born in 1852. Sadly Louis died very young. He's buried at the Center Point Cemetery, where 3 of his Campbell aunts are also buried.

In 1854, William, Sarah, John, Lee, and Sarah's younger sister Lucinda Campbell set out with a team of oxen for California.

And on June 29th, Sarah died on the trail and was buried along the Seminoe Cutoff. A gravestone with her name, date of death, and age was carved to mark her grave. And then the family had to move on so they wouldn't get behind and risk being caught by snow in the Sierras.

The rest of the family arrived safely in Illinoistown, CA, early that fall. William clerked for Mr Mendenhall for a time, then he and the boys moved to the Bloomer ranch (owned by his father-in-law Hiram Campbell⁷) south of Auburn and ran a hotel there for a few years.

In 1860 William married Mrs Ursula Blakely and the expanded family moved to the 15 Mile House on the old Auburn road that linked Sacramento to the mines. William provided rooms, refreshments (for people and animals), etc., for both wagon crews to and from the gold country and for stagecoach travelers.

In 1862, William donated five acres of land for the first school in Sylvan Corners. He's also credited with the name Sylvan.

In 1864, when the train lines opened and wagon traffic to the mines dropped to a trickle, the Thomases moved about six miles to Roseville, just over the Placer County line. William opened the first mercantile business in town, which also included rooms to rent and a post office.

Sarah's father Hiram Campbell died in 1865. His will names his deceased daughter Sarah Thomas and states that her share of his estate will go to her sons Lee and John.

On 12 Dec 1867 at Bloomer Ranch, Sarah and William's eldest son John married Charlotte Annereau, and they had four children. (The second son was named for his grandfather: William Alexander Thomas. Was he the Bill Thomas Ed Brennan told my grandfather about? I don't think I'll ever know.)

William Alexander Thomas died in 1897. His obituary was in the Placer Argus on 2 April 1897. It mentions his marriage to Sarah Campbell in Linn County, Iowa.

The Roseville Press Tribune published a biographical sketch of William on 14 August 1962, 65 years after his death. Unfortunately, his and Sarah's year of marriage is off by 6 years, his death is off by 2 years, and Sarah's death is off by 4 days. With that being said, it does list her as Sarah Ann Campbell and notes that "Mrs. Thomas died at South Pass in the Rockies

en route to California on 3 July 1854.”

Randy Wise (to whom I sent articles I'd found that mentioned William's wife Sarah dying en route to California) forwarded what I'd sent to Randy Brown, an Oregon Trail researcher who's the authority on trail graves and who's written about Sarah's grave.⁸

Randy Brown contacted me and agreed that it's very likely that Sarah Ann Campbell Thomas is the same person whose body was buried on the Seminoe Cutoff.

Two discrepancies from the 1962 about William Thomas that concerned me turned out to not be an issue: the exact location (“at South Pass” vs on the Seminoe Cutoff) and 29 June 1854 vs 3 Jul 1864. I brought up my concerns with Randy Brown in an email.

Randy told me that recording the closest well-known landmark for a burial location was common as are small discrepancies in dates. The recorded date might be when the recorder arrived at the landmark or a place where they could write a letter to be sent home via an emigrant headed east or the mail company; the date on the letter might be the only date recorded. Randy said he's seen that many times.

Given the much broader discrepancy in other dates in the 1962 article and Randy's explanation, I'm very confident that I've reconnected Sarah A. Thomas to her family.

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¹ The Curious Case of Sarah Thomas' Tombstone,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Om9fazTlbEA>, published November 2023,
Oregon-California Trail Association

² 1830 Census of Windsor Township, Lawrence Co, Iowa.
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHGK-D3V>

³ 1840 Census of Windsor Township, Lawrence Co, Iowa.
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHTH-5FX>

⁴ *Celebrating 150 Years, Center Point, Iowa 1854-2004*, pages 1-2,
<https://www.thecpchs.com/history-book>

⁵ Sarah Ann Campbell, "Iowa, County Marriages, 1838-1934,
<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/sources/viewedit/QLVT-57C>

⁶ 1850 Census of <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MZ4N-97F>

⁷ I've yet to find a solid date when Hiram, Catharine, and the rest of their children emigrated to California. I had to be between 1853 and 1856 (their youngest daughter Quean died Jan 1853 and is buried at Center Point Cemetery, and Hiram testified in a trial in Sacramento County Jan 1858 mentioning his boarding house the previous October). This does make me wonder if the Campbell's were travelling in the same party as the Thomases and that Lucinda travelled with the Thomas wagon to take care of Sarah before her death if she was ill or injured and/or to take care of John and Lee after their mother's death.

⁸ The Seminoe Cutoff and Sarah Thomas Grave by Randy Brown:
<https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/seminoe-cutoff-and-sarah-thomas-grave>