

Visitors to Ocracoke Island are often fascinated by the many family graveyards scattered throughout the village. In fact, at least 82 small cemeteries can be found on small tussocks, along winding footpaths, and in numerous back yards. As many readers of these newsletters know, nearly a dozen and a half family cemeteries line historic Howard Street. Many times the graves reveal more than birth dates and death dates, however.

Combined with local history, legend, and folklore they can be the beginnings of stories about sailing, shipwrecks, murders, military excellence, family tragedy, even geology. I have told some of these stories in past articles. Today I will share two more.

Directly across the lane from Village Craftsmen is the grave of Elnora Ballance. Born April 14, 1882, Miss Elnora died July 11, 1969. Her tomb (Ocracokers routinely use this term for a grave marker) is one that visitors often remark about because of the beautiful sentiment in the epitaph. It reads:

“She was as good as goodness is. Her acts and all her words were kind. And high above the memories I hold the beauty of her mind.”

Grave of Elnora Ballance:



Elnora was born Elnora O’Neal, and was a sister to my great-aunt Tressie O’Neal Howard. Village Craftsmen is built where Aunt Tressie’s garden was located. Elnora was married to William Dexter Ballance. William Dexter was the son of William Ballance, who in 1861 was involved in retribution for one of Ocracoke’s few murders.

In April of 1861 a sailor named Jim Devine found himself on Ocracoke Island when the brig he was sailing on, the “Black Squall,” wrecked on Ocracoke Beach. While he was stranded on the island Jim Devine got into a squabble with a young man, Bob Salter, “over a girl named Polly”. Jim Devine pulled a gun on Salter and shot and killed him.

At the time, Ocracoke was without law enforcement. William Ballance was among a group of men who retaliated by seizing Jim Devine and “riding him on a rail.” There is reason to

suspect that they may also have tarred and feathered him. The next morning Jim Devine hid behind the large live oak tree on Howard Street that stands across from the present-day Irvin and Elsie Garrish home. He shot at William Ballance as he walked into his yard, but missed his target. Jim Devine ran away and hid as the island men formed a posse and searched for him. Eventually they learned that he had escaped by boarding a schooner that was anchored in Pamlico Sound. He was never apprehended.

The “Jim Devine” Tree on Howard Street:



Elnora lived in her family home, now torn down, just on the left as you enter Howard Street from Highway 12. This house was also known as the Simon B. Howard and Eliza Gaskill home. The Westervelt family lives in a newer house situated there now.

Along with my Aunt Tressie and other island women Elnora Ballance often constructed beautiful hand-made quilts.

Quilting squares in the traditional Ocracoke “Cracker” Pattern:



Elnora was not known to be very talkative, but she was a devoted mother and wife. She and William only had one daughter, and one granddaughter. Her granddaughter, Patsy, lives off the island. Islanders remember Elnora as a wonderful cook, and “a good person.”

I suppose the epitaph says it all.

Not far from Elnora Ballance's grave site is the small family plot of James (March 26, 1839 - September 09, 1904) and Zilphia (February 08, 1841 - June 01, 1919) Howard, my great grandparents.

Zilphia & James Howard:



Visitors often remark on the four small tombstones there, and the tragedy of losing so many children. Actually, my great grandparents had twelve children, eight of whom died between one month old and just over six years old.

Graves of 8 of Zilphia & James Howard's Children:



If you look carefully on your next visit to the island you will notice that each small marker has inscriptions on both sides. Two smaller foot stones are situated between the pairs of graves. It is difficult to imagine the sorrow and pain of losing so many children to childhood diseases. The eight children all died in a twenty year period between 1865 and 1885.

James and Zilphia's twelve children (those who lived to adulthood are in bold font):

1	William	M	03/26/1862 - 07/14/1868	6 yrs, 3 1/2 mths
2	Florence	F	01/25/1864 - 09/10/1865	1 yr, 7 1/2 mths
3	Lorena	F	03/02/1866 - 03/14/1897	31 yrs

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4	Homer	M	06/21/1868 - 05/15/1947	78 yrs, 10 1/2 mths
5	Sabra	F	07/21/1870 - 11/27/1951	81 yrs, 4 mths
6	Edith	F	10/30/1872 - 07/16/1875	2 yrs, 8 1/2 mths
7	Wheeler	M	12/04/1874 - 11/02/1940	65 yrs, 1 month
8	Cordelia	F	07/16/1876 - 08/16/1876	1 month
9	Stacy	M	08/13/1877 - 12/18/1878	1 yr, 4 mths
10	Annie	F	01/25/1879 - 12/22/1880	1 yr, 11 mths
11	Thomas	M	01/18/1882 - 10/03/1882	8 1/2 mths
12	Elsie	F	07/21/1883 - 12/25/1884	1 yr, 5 mths

In 1861, when my great grandparents were in their early 20's, and as the threat of invasion by Union troops seemed imminent, the pastor of the Ocracoke Methodist Church, Rev. A.R. Raven, abandoned his island charge. The parish was without clerical leadership for eight years. In 1869 Rev. George E. Wyche was appointed to the Ocracoke church.

About fifteen years later the Rev. Lawrence O. Wyche, presumably Rev. George Wyche's son, and a young man, was appointed to the Ocracoke Methodist Church. He promptly fell in love with James and Zilphia's daughter, Lorena Howard. They married and continued to live on the island.

On October 16, 1887 Lorena H. and Lawrence O. Wyche had a son, Ira Thomas Wyche. Ira, who was born and raised on Ocracoke, graduated from the West Point Military Academy in 1911. He went on to serve in France during World War II, was eventually promoted to Major General, and held many important leadership positions, including Inspector General of the U.S. Army under President Harry S Truman.

Ira Wyche's distinguished military career often put him in contact with leaders such as Field Marshall Montgomery, Winston Churchill, and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Ira Wyche with Dwight D. Eisenhower:



Ira Wyche's Ocracoke ancestors are buried along Howard Street, across from the Village

Craftsmen.

Graves of Zilphia Williams Howard, James W. Howard, Rev. L.O. Wyche, and Lorena Howard
Wyche:



Look for more tales and history in the months to come. Ocracoke cemeteries can lead to so many interesting stories.

As I write Ocracoke is preparing for the annual Ocracoke festival of story and song, June 7 & 8. We hope to see many of you on the island this weekend.

Until next time, all the best to you from your friends on Ocracoke Island!