

Brick Wall Solutions – Finding Helen Carnegie at Last!

This blog post first appeared on the Unlock the Past website as part of the brick wall series in 2009-2010.

This is the first instalment of a theme-based blog on brick walls in family history research and how to break them down. Initially I will be using my own examples, but I also welcome input from others who have solved their brick walls using out of the ordinary resources or searches.

It is inspired by my finding last Saturday my gg grandmother Helen (Ellen) Ferguson (nee Carnegie) after looking for 32 years. I started my family history in 1977 and it was easy to purchase the certificates but without dates and places an additional fee for a search was charged. Those were the days before BDM indexes, MIs, genealogy and family history societies (in Queensland), email, Internet and all the other resources we take for granted now.



Ellen's story is a sad one and there are still gaps in it but over the years I have gradually built up a picture of her life. It starts in 1862 with her birth in Montrose, Scotland where she was named Helen. For most of her life in Queensland she was known as Ellen. Her parents John Carnegie and Helen Stratton made the decision to immigrate to Queensland in 1865 with their daughter Helen and son John. There are numerous brick walls here which will be the subject of other blogs but this one is Ellen's story.

We next have direct reference to her in 1880 in Brisbane when she gives birth to her son James Carnegie, father unknown. She gave her name as Ellen Carnegie on the birth certificate. The birth was certified by Helen Carnegie, mother but it is not clear if this is Ellen or her own mother Helen Carnegie. James complicated the picture by giving his mother's parents as his parents on his marriage certificate. It is not known if he was raised by them or not – it is a bit ambiguous and yet another brick wall to discuss later.

The next milestone is her marriage to Alexander Miller Ferguson in 1889 in Brisbane. She married under the name of Helen Carnegie. Alexander was a 37-year-old watchmaker from Thargomindah in western Queensland. It is not known how he met 26-year-old Helen. There were no children from the marriage.

There are references to Ellen, Alex and James in a letter written by Ellen's sister Clara's husband Charles Davis in December 1894 from Fremantle, Western Australia where he was working on the goldfields at Coolgardie. He refers to Alexander as Alick, Helen as Nellie and James as Jim but Jim is grouped with Helen's parents and indicates that he is living with them not Alick and Nellie.



Alexander is described on electoral rolls and post office directories as a watchmaker or jeweller. Between 1901 and his death in 1925 he is listed as a watchmaker and jeweller, labourer from 1915, in Eulo, not far from Thargomindah. It is not known if Ellen was with him – she is not listed on the electoral rolls for anywhere.

The next definite reference to Ellen was her arrest in Brisbane in December 1899 for drunkenness and her first of many visits to prison. During 1900 she was picked up numerous times and charged with drunkenness, disorderly conduct and obscene language which usually incurred a fine or imprisonment. She obviously could not pay the fines and usually did the time in prison although on some occasions the fine was paid by someone. This could have been her husband Alex, her son James who would have been 19/20 years old or perhaps even her parents.

This behaviour continued through 1901-1902 with Ellen adding prostitution to her list of offences. It is assumed that she had no means of support and prostitution was one way to earn money to buy the alcohol she so desperately needed. My last reference to Ellen was her release from Brisbane Prison in 1902.

I made exhaustive searches of prison and police records post 1902 but never found her again. I started to think she ended up dying as a Jane Doe and even looked at inquests where the deceased was unknown. Another possibility was that she went into an asylum, but those records were permanently closed in Queensland back then.

Her father John Carnegie died in September 1903 and Ellen is not mentioned in his will, nor is his grandson, James Carnegie. Her mother Helen Carnegie died in 1913 and in her will she left everything to her daughter Clara Davis, nee Carnegie.

Ellen's husband Alex Ferguson died in Brisbane in 1925. He had been transferred from Eulo to Dunwich asylum in 1924 as he was ill and had no one to care for him in Eulo. He stated that he did not know where his wife was. His admission record stated that he arrived in Queensland in 1886 and had spent 5 years in Brisbane and 20 years in Thargomindah as a watchmaker and jeweller. He married Helen in 1889 so he must have been on a visit to Brisbane at the time as he listed his residence as Thargomindah on the marriage certificate.

Over the years as various online resources such as Queensland BDMs, Brisbane cemeteries, Toowoomba cemetery (Toowoomba Prison was where they sent females in the early 1900s) and digitised newspapers, I checked them all for references to Ellen or Helen Carnegie or Ferguson.

In preparing for my talk on *Convicts & Criminals* and accompanying handout at the Mulwala Family History Expo in November 2009, I looked at new resources and as always, used my own family names to search. *Queensland Police Gazettes*, which had been closed to public access when I did my original research, have now been digitised by Archive Digital Books Australasia and it is possible to name search them. Entering Ellen Ferguson returned five hits, four of which I knew about.

The fifth one excited me because it was for an Ellen Chick alias Ferguson in 1904 for vagrancy in Barcaldine. If she was mine, it should have been Ellen Ferguson alias Chick so there was one doubt, the second was why and how did she go to Barcaldine if she was mine. The vagrancy fitted but the entry was only notification of an arrest and did not give personal details. A search for Ellen Chick revealed that this was the only reference to her which was odd for a vagrant, so it strengthened the case for it possibly being Ellen Ferguson.

ARRESTS REPORTED DURING THE WEEK ENDED 21st MAY, 1904—continued.						
Name of Offender.	Place of Arrest.	Nature of Charge.	If Arrested on Warrant or Otherwise.	Reference to Police Gazette or Criminal Offence.	How Case Disposed of.	Arresting Constable.
Nowigmeaw (S.S.I.)	Plane Creek	Threatening words	No warrant	Nil	Fined £5 or 3 months' imprisonment	First-class Constable R. Brett.
Ellen Chick, alias Ellen Ferguson	Barcaldine	Vagrancy	ditto	ditto	3 months' imprisonment	First-class Constable J. Holohan.
George Hammond	Muttaharra	Hawking without a license	On summons	ditto	Fined £10 10s. and 10s. 4d costs or 3 months' imprisonment	At the instance of Acting Sergeant P. Duffy.
Thomas Henry Burchill	Cunnamulla	Stealing	No warrant	ditto	Committed for sentence, District Court, Roma, 14th June, 1904	Constable H. J. Houston.
Frank Lyons	Nambour	ditto	On warrant	<i>Police Gazette</i> , 1904, page 193	Fined £7, 13s. 3d. restitution, or 1 month's imprisonment	Constables W. Adams and J. O'Dea.
Ditto	ditto	Stealing conjointly	ditto	Nil	Fined £5 or 1 month's imprisonment (cumulative with previous sentence)	ditto.
John Haygart	Ingham	Supplying liquor to a South Sea Islander	On summons	ditto	Fined £5 or 1 month's imprisonment	At the instance of Constable G. Hobbs.
Wai-teet Win (Kanaka)	ditto	Aggravated assault on a female	No warrant	ditto	4 months' imprisonment	Constable J. Brady.
Arthur Mason	Brisbane	False pretences	ditto	ditto	3 months' hard labour	First-class Constable R. Barry and Constable W. E. Foster (C.I.B.)
Charles Hutchinson	ditto	Obscene language	ditto	ditto	Fined £5 or 3 months' imprisonment	Constable J. Sexton.

Interestingly, I had found references in the post office directories to an AM Ferguson in Barcaldine, a selector and meat company manager but as my AM Ferguson was in Eulo and Thargomindah, I never followed it through. Now with this reference to Barcaldine I will have to go back and investigate if there was any connection between the two Ferguson families. The coincidence of a reference to Barcaldine is amazing.

I then checked Queensland BDMs online for a death reference to Ellen Chick but there was none which again was odd. I was disappointed but it was still a clue to follow up.

On the morning of my talk, I woke early and started looking at emails and there was one advising that Queensland BDMs online had expanded their date ranges, so I clicked on the link to do another Ellen Ferguson/Chick search. Perhaps I had missed something the day before or it would magically appear this time. Whenever I have searched for Ellen, I have also searched for Helen as the two were interchangeable. There was still no Ellen/Helen Ferguson/Carnegie, so I did the Ellen Chick search again and realised that I had not searched for Helen Chick.

I can't begin to tell you how I felt when an entry for Helen Chick came up listing her parents as John Carnegie and Helen Stratton. It had to be my Ellen Ferguson, but she had died in 1946, 44 years after being released from prison as an alcoholic prostitute. She would have been 84 years old – how could she have possibly lived that long and where? Now I have the agonising wait for the death certificate to arrive (approx 6-8 weeks) and hopefully there will be some useful information. The fact that her parents are listed accurately means that whoever the informant was, they knew Ellen's real identity.

Stay tuned for the rest of this brick wall to come down, and in the meantime, I will write about Ellen's father and his brick walls.

Brick Wall Tips

- Search name variations eg Ellen or Helen
- Search spelling variations for both given and surnames
- Check all available records
- Keep revisiting the research as more records become accessible and online
- Never give up
- Tell others how you did it – inspiration and clues for researching their own brick walls