

Assembling an individual

An unknown woman is the center of many genealogical tales of intrigue and discovery, including this one.

Our unknown woman first surfaced in public records when Thornton Melville Fincher declared that he had an (unnamed) wife and child in his 1917 WWI draft registration.¹ A 1914 *Atlanta Constitution* birth notice announced the birth of a son, T. Melville Fincher Jr., to Mr. and Mrs. T. Melville Fincher.²

Thornton appears in the 1930 federal census in Atlanta, married to Maude with three children, including Harold Fincher, age 15, born in Georgia.³ The other two children, surname Jacobs, are named stepchildren of Thornton, suggesting the possibility that Maude is their mother and not the mother of Harold. In addition, the reported age at first marriage for Thornton is 24 (1911) and for Maude is 21 (1909), indicating that they were not first married to each other.

A search of *The Atlanta Constitution* revealed a notice of a marriage on 18 March 1930, for Thornton M. Fincher and Maude K. Jacobs.⁴ Our unknown woman either died or divorced Thornton before this.⁵

Eventually, Thornton, Maude, and Harold moved to Florida.⁶ In December 1940, *The Atlanta Constitution* contained an announcement of the engagement of Harrell Melville Fincher⁷ to Margaret Langdon Phillipoff.⁸ *The Evening Independent* mentioned that "the groom-elect is the son of Thornton M. Fincher, of Coral Gables, Florida, and Mrs. Robert J. Waller, of Lakeland, Florida."⁹ Ah, ha! Thornton's first wife did not die, but married Robert J. Waller. Still, we don't know either the given or maiden names for our unknown woman.

We searched census records to find Waller. In 1930, he was living with his wife, Thelma, age 32, and their son, Robert Jr.¹⁰ In 1920, Waller is listed

as the 23-year-old son-in-law of M. D. and M. C. Harrell, with their daughter 22-year-old Thelma Waller, and M. H. Fincher, grandson, age 5, born in Georgia.¹¹ In 1910, Thelma was 16 years old, living with her parents, Marcus and Missouri Harrell.¹² The 1900 census showed 4-year-old Thelma, born in August 1895, with her parents, Marcus and Missouri.¹³

Whoa! A sharp reader will recognize that we have found the name of the unknown woman. A sharp researcher will also realize that independent confirmation would be even better.

It appears Harrell Melville Fincher of 1940, Harold Fincher of 1930, M. H. Fincher of 1920, and T. Melville Fincher Jr. of 1914 are all the same person. We know T. Melville Fincher's birth date from his newspaper birth announcement, so it is no surprise that the 21 October 1977 death record for Harrell Fincher agrees with that date.¹⁴

In the 1935 Florida state census, R. J. Waller and Thelma were the managers of the Lakeland Terrace Hotel and had two children, Robert and Harold. Robert was 15 years old (born about 1920 in Georgia), while Harold was 19 and born in Alabama.¹⁵ Harold was about the right age to be Harrell Fincher.

The 1945 Florida state census did not include Thelma. It did include Robert J. Waller Jr., the son of R. J. and Thelma, married to Ethel Ward Waller, with two children: Robert J. III and James Harrell.¹⁶ Note the name Harrell.

Thelma died in 1945 in Polk County, Florida.¹⁷ Her obituary in *The Lakeland Ledger* states that she came from Jacksonville thirteen years before her death, she was 48 years old, and named her two sons: Robert Waller Jr. and Harrell Fincher.¹⁸ Her brother, Frank Harrell, is also named. That clinches it!

Post script: Just to be sure, I searched for relevant evidence just one more time. I found

an article describing the marriage of Thornton Fincher and Thelma Harrell.¹⁹ Using my normal search engine, this article is invisible but it was found quickly using a different engine. I had two choices, not publish this account or use this incident to teach a fundamental principle of electronic searching—make sure you have all of the evidence. 🌳

Notes

1. "World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918," digital images, Ancestry.com <<http://www.ancestry.com>>, accessed 28 June 2010, Thornton Melville Fincher, serial no. 1088, order no. 871, Draft Board 5, Fulton County, Georgia; citing World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918, NARA microfilm publication M1509; no specific roll cited.
2. "Mr. and Mrs. T. Melville Fincher announce the birth of a son, T. [sic] Melville Fincher Jr., born July 25," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 26 July 1914, p. C6.
3. 1930 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia, population schedule, Atlanta, p. 257B, enumeration district (ED) 61-167, sheet 15B, dwelling 247, family 381, Thornton M. Fincher; NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 357.
4. "Mrs. Maud K Jacobs Weds Mr. Fincher at Quiet Ceremony," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 19 March 1930, p. 17.
5. No death certificate or divorce case prior to 1930 has yet been found.
6. "Florida State Census, 1867–1945," digital images, Ancestry.com <<http://www.ancestry.com>>, accessed 28 June 2010, 1945 Florida state census, Dade County, population schedule, Coral Gables, p. 43, line 1, Thornton M. Fincher household; citing Eleventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945, State Library and Archives of Florida microfilm publication S1371, roll 10.
7. There are four public family trees found on Ancestry.com containing the name of Harrell Melville Fincher, all seemingly identical to each other in his portion of the tree, with three creators and no documentation of any kind. Compare the information in this work with that found in those trees (search Harrell Melville Fincher).
8. "Engagements. Phillipoff–Fincher" and "Lovely Florida Belle to Wed Former Atlantan in Spring," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 29 December 1940, p. 2C.
9. "Miss Phillipoff, Harrell M. Fincher Will Be Married," *The Evening Independent* [St Petersburg, Florida], 28 December 1940, p. 5.
10. 1930 U.S. census, Duval County, Florida, population schedule, Jacksonville, p. 244A, ED 16-72, sheet 4A, dwelling 90, family 94, Robert J. Waller; NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 314.
11. 1920 U.S. census, Talladega County, Alabama, population schedule, Talladega, p. 155B/156A, ED 139, sheet 4B/5A, dwelling 75, family 90, M. D. Harrell; NARA microfilm publication T625, roll 41.
12. 1910 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia, population schedule, Atlanta, p. 42A, ED 85, sheet 24A, dwelling 142, family 174, B. F. Harrell; NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 192.
13. 1900 U.S. census, Madison County, Florida, population schedule, Madison, p. 67B, ED 93, sheet 17B, dwelling 277, family 292, Marcus J Harrell; NARA microfilm publication T623, roll 173.
14. "Florida Death Index, 1877–1998," digital images, Ancestry.com <<http://www.ancestry.com>>, accessed 28 June 2010, gives the death of Harrell M. Fincher in Pinellas County as 1946; the "Social Security Death Index" gives the death of Harrell Fincher as October 1977 in Jackson County, Georgia (born 25 July 1914); "Georgia Death Index, 1919–98" shows the death of Harrell M. Fincher as 21 October 1977, age 63, Jackson County, Georgia. The discrepancy in the death records for Harrell Melville Fincher does not affect our conclusions about the name and identity of his mother.
15. "Florida State Census, 1935," digital images, FamilySearch Record Search <<http://search.labs.familysearch.org/recordsearch/start.html#r=0;p=allCollections>>, Polk County, population schedule, Coral Gables, p. 120, line 42, R. J. Waller household; citing Tenth Census of the State of Florida, 1935, State Library and Archives of Florida microfilm publication S5, roll 25.
16. "Florida State Census, 1945," digital images, FamilySearch Record Search <<http://search.labs.familysearch.org/recordsearch/start.html#r=0;p=allCollections>>, Polk County, population schedule, Southwest Lakeland, p. 3, line 26, Ethel Ward Waller household; citing Eleventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945, State Library and Archives of Florida microfilm publication S1371, roll 37.
17. "The Florida Death Index, 1877–1998," Ancestry.com.
18. "Mrs. Thelma Waller Dies Suddenly," *The Lakeland Ledger*, 24 October 1945, p. 6, col. 3.
19. "Harrell-Fincher," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 29 August 1913, p. 6.

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