

June 24, 1844:

Genealogical and Theological Reflections on the Life and Death of Adeline (Lasher) Denegar

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Those who know me know that I enjoy genealogy. True genealogy is not just “ancestor collecting,” but it is learning the real stories of real people of the past – stories that are, at a deeper level, also a part of the ongoing story of their descendants.

My great-great-grandfather Morgan Denegar was born in Clermont, Columbia County, New York, on July 9, 1840, the son of Philip H. Denegar and his wife Adeline (Lasher) Denegar. I have always known that Morgan lost his mother when he was only three years old, and when she was only 30. The church records for Christ Lutheran Church in Germantown – also in Columbia County, and directly adjacent to Clermont – indicate that on “June 24, 1844, Adeline, the wife of Philip Denninger Jr. rec’d the Lord’s Supper on her sickbed.” Morgan was also baptized on that day. Morgan’s godparents were his mother’s brother Morgan Lasher (after whom little Morgan was named) and his wife Margaret (Proper) Lasher.

It would seem that Philip and Adeline Denegar had become delinquent in their involvement in the life of the church, since Morgan had not been baptized soon after his birth, as his two older brothers had been – (Philip) Horace on November 8, 1835, and Lewis on November 12, 1838. But Adeline’s grave health issue, whatever it was, had apparently jarred the family into a renewed seriousness about “ultimate questions,” and had reminded them of their need for God’s grace in their lives. And so the Reverend Augustus Wackerhagen – the Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church – had been invited to come to the house, to bring to this family the comfort of the gospel in Word and Sacrament. He knew this family. He had united Philip and Adeline in marriage on May 3, 1834, and was the pastor who baptized their other children.

Adeline died on July 1, and her funeral was conducted the following day. Pastor Wackerhagen wrote in the church register: “Adeline, wife of Philip Denninger, died July 1, 1844 & was solemnly interred on the 2[nd], being 29 years of age.” (The pastor was mistaken regarding her age, since she had passed her 30th birthday on May 22, 1844.)

For a long time I never knew why Adeline had died at such a young age. But now I know. During a perusal of the *Fulton History* website, on which digital scans of many old New York newspapers are available, I found a scan of the July 1, 1844, issue of *The Evening Post*, a newspaper published in New York City, which included this brief notice: “On Friday, the 21st ult., Mrs. Denegar, the wife of Philip Denegar, of Clermont, near Hudson, fell from a cherry tree, the distance of 8 or 10 feet, and so injured the spine of the neck as to leave the body lifeless from the neck downward, and she is not expected to live.”

As I read this, the events that had taken place in the Denegar home on June 24, 1844, came into sharp and vivid focus for me. A young wife and mother is laying on her bed paralyzed, apparently from a broken neck incurred through a freak accident. Given the state of medical science at this time, no hope of recovery is held out to her. Three days earlier, life was full of carefree optimism for Adeline and her young and growing family. Now she, and her family members, are essentially waiting for her to die. Her three sons, whom she no doubt loves more

than life itself – aged nine, six, and three – are frightened by things they do not fully understand. Her husband Philip, distraught yet trying to be strong for his wife, is hovering close by.

Philip had previously experienced the death of close relatives. His father, George Denegar, had died just two years earlier, on May 21, 1842. His mother, Elisabeth (Lawrence) Denegar, had been gone since October 12, 1839. Those deaths had been relatively easy to deal with. As difficult as it is when it does happen, people do expect to bury their parents someday. But no one ever expects the kind of grief that Philip is now facing.

It can be assumed that among the neighbors and relatives who are coming and going, trying to offer support and encouragement as much as they can, are Adeline's parents, Philip and Catharine (Van Valkenburgh) Lasher. They are in their 60s, and live in the community. They are very likely at their daughter's house on this particular day also because of their grandson's baptism. A baptism is supposed to be, and is, a joyous event, but they are unable to hold back their tears of sadness on this occasion, as they also see their beloved daughter and the situation she is in.

Adeline's aunt and uncle, Jonas W. Rockefeller and his wife Lena (Van Valkenburgh) Rockefeller, are also probably here. They, too, live in Clermont, and Adeline is particularly close to them. The Rockefellers had named a daughter after Adeline, for whom Philip and Adeline Denegar has served as godparents. Adeline's goddaughter and namesake was actually baptized on the same day as Adeline's son Lewis.

Another Clermont couple that is likely present, is Philip Denegar's blood uncle Jonas Denegar, and Adeline Denegar's blood aunt Hannah (Van Valkenburgh) Denegar – who are married to each other. Before her marriage to Philip, Adeline and her brother Zachariah Lasher had served as godparents for Jonas and Hannah Denegar's daughter Adeline, baptized on July 14, 1832. Philip Denegar and Adeline Lasher, in their youth, may very well have gotten acquainted with each other through their shared kinship with this couple. What happiness Jonas and Hannah Denegar no doubt felt a decade earlier, when they saw his nephew and her niece fall in love and get married. What are they seeing now, as they gaze upon the sad circumstances of their nephew and niece's home? What are they feeling now, as tears gently roll down their cheeks?

And Pastor Wackerhagen is also here. As a Lutheran pastor myself, I know exactly what he is thinking and trying to accomplish. When things seem hopeless, especially as far as life in this world is concerned, there is hope. There is hope in Christ, who in his death and resurrection has overcome this world, with its grief and sadness, and with its sin and death. In his victory over the grave, Jesus had opened up a pathway to a new eternal future for Adeline, for little Morgan, and for everyone else – a pathway of repentance and faith, with Jesus himself as the Christian's loving companion and guide on that pathway. The pastor is here in this modest house in Clermont, on June 24, 1844, to impress this sacred truth upon all present – not by his own cleverness and rhetorical skill, but by the inherent power of God's Word, which creates faith, and which fills those who are touched by it with the life of God himself.

“I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”

“Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me. Drink ye all of it. This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins. This do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.”

If you have drifted away from God, you do not need to wait until you experience a tragedy like this in your life – wrenching from you all earthly hope – in order to know that “ultimate questions” will not be answered by anything that is of earth. And you do not need to wait until something like this happens to you or to someone close to you, before you begin to ask those “ultimate questions.” You can and should ask those questions, and ponder their significance, even now.

Those questions are answered by Christ, the eternal God in human flesh, who came into this world to bring to troubled consciences, to unsettled hearts, and to confused minds, a peace that the world cannot give. This is the peace – a true and eternal peace with God – that Jesus brings to you and to all who call upon him, in and through his words of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Jesus, through Pastor Wackerhagen, brought this peace to Adeline (Lasher) Denegar on June 24, 1844. And seven days later, when she slipped from this world into the sleep of death, she entered fully into that peace.

In time, Adeline’s husband Philip remarried, to a woman named Catharine Cooper, by whom he fathered two more sons: Eugene and Byron. My ancestor Morgan Denegar went on to get married to a woman named Julia Marley, who had been born in Dublin, Ireland, on Christmas Day, 1837. Immediately before her marriage with Morgan Denegar she had been working as a domestic servant in the home of her husband’s uncle and godfather Morgan Lasher. We know this from the 1860 census. One suspects that the back story to this marriage – which was an unusual match by the social standards of the nineteenth century – involves a romantic tale of some kind. We do know that Morgan and Julia had four children together. The names of those children were written in Morgan’s own hand in the family register section of his personal Bible, which I now own. They were Helen, Philip, Frances, and Adeline. The youngest was obviously named after Morgan’s mother. And she was my great-grandmother.

Morgan turned four, just eight days after the day his mother passed away. Since he was only three years old when she died, we can be quite certain that his adult memories of her were fairly limited. Because of the traumatic nature of the last several days of her life on earth, his memories of her during those turbulent days may have been the ones that were most deeply seared into his mind.

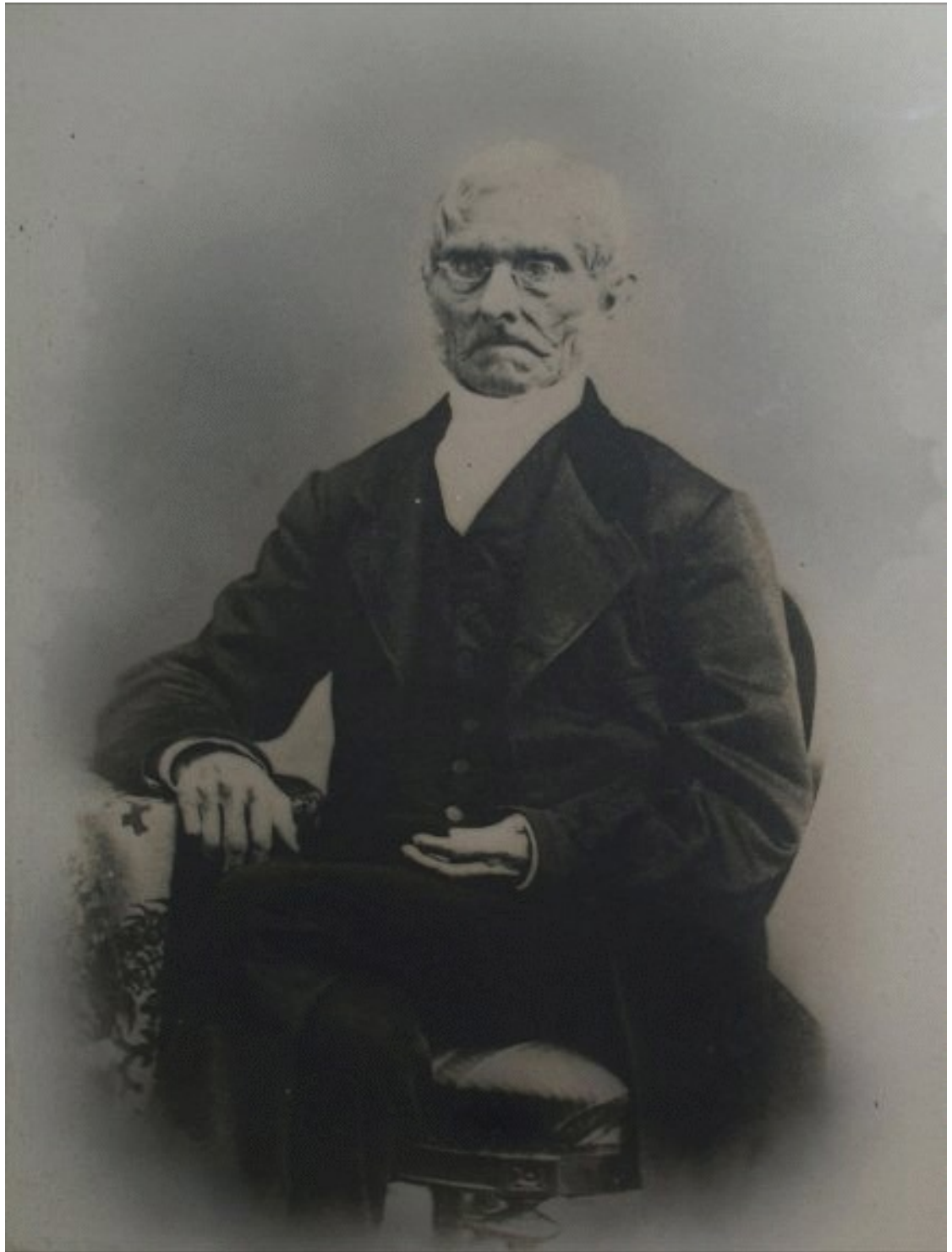
But life and love were nevertheless also a component of his memories of his mother, as sparse as those memories may have been. These might have been cherished memories of the time he was able to spend with her before she died, of his love for her, and of her deep and tender love for him. And these might have been memories of God’s special gift of life, and of the special manifestations of God’s love, that Morgan experienced on June 24, 1844. On that otherwise frightening and troubling day – in the midst of Adeline’s final days on earth – Morgan was baptized into Christ, and he witnessed his mother communing with Christ. And so, he was not afraid to name one of his children after his mother, and fondly to remember his mother, and the events of June 24, 1844, every time he called out his daughter’s name.

“Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you.” (Deuteronomy 32:7, ESV)

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The grave of Adeline (Lasher) Denegar in the cemetery of Christ Lutheran Church



Pastor Augustus Wackerhagen (in his later years)



Morgan Denegar and his daughter Adeline