

## Finding Sarah (Lewis?) Wilson Ackley

Looking for female ancestors before 1850, when the US census started recording their first names, can be frustrating. Records in the 1700s are particularly poor. This summary provides a glimpse of the process of winnowing down the possibilities—and the likelihood of just not finding complete answers.

Records in the Barbour Collection<sup>1</sup> show that Nicholas-2 Ackley (1708-1763) married as his second wife Sarah Wilson. A year is not recorded, but likely was 1757 at the latest because the first child, Lewis, was born on 05 Jan 1758. The second child, Nicholas-3, was born in 1762. Nicholas-2 died in 1763. (See his timeline at the end.)

Nicholas-2 had raised a full family before the death of his first wife. Although records are poor, we know of at least two daughters and two sons. Nicholas-2 was age 49 at the birth of Lewis.

Nicholas-2 had two younger children at home at the time of his first wife's death: a daughter about 13 and a son about 16. Running a household in those days was extremely labor-intensive. Widowed men married again as soon as possible for that reason. Widowed women also married again as soon as possible because options for supporting themselves unmarried were almost entirely absent.

When Nicholas-2 died, he was close to destitute. Nicholas's worth at death was £12 owed him for his service in the French and Indian War, and a few personal items worth little. No land appears in his inventory, which suggests he did not own his home. To put this in context, the average wealth of a man in Connecticut at that time was £111. That left Sarah with a meager sum, possibly no place to live and one toddler and one infant. Her best option would have been to remarry, unless she had parents able to take her in.

The last official record of Sarah is when she was granted legal guardianship of son Lewis on 4 July 1763. This was routine for minor children, although no such record has survived for her other son. (Often, it was only the eldest son and for inheritance purposes.)

Does all this matter? Yes. The search requires all these basic details. And we [do have a result](#), although it is not completely certain.

### Year of birth

1. First marriage. According to the norms at that time in Connecticut, Sarah would have been at least 21 at marriage. That would make her birth year about 1736 if she married in 1757.
2. Widowed. If Sarah was a widow, then she may have been born considerably earlier. The best way to set the lower limit on age of birth is by calculating backward from the birth of the last known child. Women at this time ceased childbearing by about age 43. Pushing that a bit, if Sarah was 45 when her last known child was born in 1762, then her birth year would be 1717.

This means that the most likely **year of birth** for Sarah would be **between 1717 and 1736**.

Could she have been born earlier or later? Yes, but not by much. If a search of 1717–1736 turns up no likely Sarahs, then 2–3 years could be added on each end of the range.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a compilation of all known records of births, deaths and marriages, readily available on Ancestry and for free (but more difficult to use) on archive.com. It is a standard reference work for genealogy.

### **Name before marriage**

A 21-year-old woman marrying a 49-year-old man as her first husband would have been seen as undesirable, particularly when that older man was not wealthy, which Nicholas definitely was not. Sarah likely was older, perhaps for some reason never married or, more likely, was widowed at a fairly young age.

But if she was widowed, then searching for a Sarah with the maiden name of Wilson would produce nothing.

A search of probate papers of men named Wilson who died between about 1750 and 1756 might turn up a Sarah as a widow. A potential candidate would still have to fit in our birth year range, of course.

At this time in Connecticut, it had become fashionable to give the mother's maiden last name to one child as a first name, usually a son. Lewis was a common British/Colonial surname and quite possibly was Sarah's actual maiden name.

This gives us **two sets of name clues**:

1. Lewis as a maiden name, with evidence of marriage to a Wilson if possible
2. Wilson as a maiden name or a widowed name.

The year of birth still should fit inside the range of 1717–1736. But a widow would be close to the lower limit, i.e., 1717, because she would need to have had time to marry someone else.

### **Year of death**

At this time, women could live to be well into their 60s. So if we generously assume Sarah lived to be 70, her year of death would have been 1806 at the latest, assuming she was born in 1736.

We know Sarah was alive in July 1763, when she was granted legal guardianship over Lewis.

Sarah died, then, **between 1763 and about 1806.**

### **Name at death**

We **do not know Sarah's last name at her death.**

With two young sons to support, it is very likely she remarried right away as a practical matter of survival. Remarriage, of course, would mean she was no longer Sarah Ackley. No record of a marriage of a Sarah Ackley of the right age appears. This only means no record exists.

It is unlikely that Sarah returned to using her maiden name; this just was not done at the time.

### **Geographic area**

At this time, most marriages were between people who lived in the same area, within 25–30 miles of one another. Travel was over extremely rough roads by horse or oxcart, or by foot, and anything more than a few miles was just not routine.

East Haddam, however, was on the Connecticut River, a major travel route, which meant that people from southern CT were not unlikely to travel to East Haddam/Colchester and trade there. Nicholas-2 may have been a tradesman (stonecutter, carpenter, tanner, etc.) and could have had such travelers as his customers. In addition, Nicholas served in the French and Indian War the year before he married Sarah;

it is possible she was the widow or sister of someone with whom he served but who was from a different part of Connecticut, or Massachusetts.

A further complication is that Sarah might have been born in one place, but her parents later moved. Or the Wilson she married might have moved. A slightly wider search area might be useful.

Could Sarah have been born outside Connecticut? Yes, even in Britain. Since no immigration records exist (the colonies were part of Britain) and ship's manifests are spotty and incomplete, finding the record for the right immigrant Sarah Wilson—a common name—would be extremely difficult.

All things considered, however, it is most likely that Sarah was from an area within 25–30 miles of the East Haddam/Colchester area.

### **The Search Parameters**

The above gives us the following search parameters.

1. Year of birth between 1717 and 1736
2. Year of death between 1763 and 1806
3. Possible maiden names: Lewis or Wilson
4. Possible widowed name: Wilson
5. Catchment radius: within 25–30 miles of East Haddam/Colchester

### **Searches turn up the following information**

Records at this time are spotty, at best. The prospects of solving this entirely are slight. But results to date follow.

#### **Possible Sarahs with the maiden name of Wilson**

Note that all these are *outside* the radius set above.

1. 1720 Sarah, dau of Samuel (Church records for Fairfield, CT). She is a possibility, but would have been in her late 30s by her first marriage (to Nicholas)--unusual.
2. 1722 Sarah, dau of Ebenezer and Ann Wilson (Barbour, Killingly vital records). She married John Mascraft of Woodstock in 1740 (Early CT Marriages) and died in 1801, still Sarah Mascraft, at age 78 (Hale Collection; Find a Grave)
3. 1732 Sarah, dau of Joseph and Abigail (Church abstract, Fairfield, CT) does not appear in records after 1732, as far as I can determine. She is a possibility.

#### **Possible Sarahs with the maiden name of Lewis**

This includes Sarahs for whom no additional information exists, i.e., a marriage to a man named Wilson could have taken place. All possible Sarahs are *outside* the 25-30 mile radius but the couple could have moved within the search radius after marriage.


The search was limited to Connecticut because that seems most likely.

1. 1735, born to John and Martha in Fairfield, CT. No record after her birth and baptism. (Barbour and CT church records)
2. 1735, born to Jno and Sarah. No record after her birth. (Barbour)
3. 1736, born to Ebenezer and Sarah, baptized 1729. No record after baptism. (Barbour and CT church records)

4. 1742 baptized, born to Charles and Rachel (CT church records).

### **Possible widowed Sarah Wilsons**

Probates for Wilson men in Connecticut who died between 1750 and 1756 found four records. The wife of one man had predeceased him; the wife of a second is named in the will as Susanna. Two other records are possibilities.

1. Jonathan died in Killingly (outside our geographic radius) in 1755. His probate contains no will or distribution instructions—no wife is indicated or named.
-  2. Samuel Jr. died in Colchester in 1752. His probate contains no will or distribution instructions—no wife is indicated or named. But the circumstantial evidence suggests this could have been Sarah's first husband.<sup>2</sup>
  - a. A Samuel was born on 14 Dec 1727 (Barbour, Windsor CT) to Samuel of Windsor who had married Jemima Lewis of East Haddam. This is certainly in our area.
  - b. Samuel Jr. would have been about 25 at his death and may well have left a young widow—Sarah? Note that no marriage record has been found.
  - c. The maiden name of the mother of Samuel Jr. was Lewis. Did Sarah take that name for her first son with Nicholas?
  - d. If Sarah was roughly the same age as Samuel Jr., she would have been about 30 when she married Nicholas-2, and she would have been living within our catchment radius. She fits both the birth year and location criteria.
  - e. Although his probate does not include names of heirs, Samuel, Jr. was of average wealth, which Sarah would have inherited, possibly making her an attractive second wife for Nicholas-2.
  - f. Samuel Sr. died in The Oblong in Dutchess County, NY<sup>3</sup> in about 1761; many families from Colchester had moved to this general area, including some of Nicholas-2's Ackley close relatives. In 1763/4 after his death, Nicholas-2's son Abel and daughter Sarah migrated to that area. Did Sarah have a hand in sending them there?

### **Sarahs with whom our Sarah often is confused**

1. A Sarah Wilson born abt 1708 and died in 1788 in New London, CT. She was far too old to be the mother of Nicholas's children and would have been "Ackley" at her death in 1788 anyhow if she was our Sarah.
2. Sarah Gates Ackley (1712–1771), who married James Ackley (Nicholas's older brother) in 1742. She is buried in Westchester, New London County and was still married to James when she died.
3. Sarah Ackley, a widow, died at age 85 in 1798. This fits the year of death range, but makes her year of birth 1713, which makes her 45 at the birth of Lewis and 49 at the birth of Nich-3. This Sarah was much more likely to have been the wife of Thomas Ackley whose death is recorded in the same church record and is roughly the same age as she.

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel had a sister named Sarah, born in 1832, who could have been a possibility. But she was married to a man named Haly according to their father's will dated 18 Oct 1760. (NYS Dutchess County Wills.)

<sup>3</sup> This was an area about 60 miles long and 1.81 miles wide that CT had ceded to NYS to settle a boundary dispute.

### Sarah's sons as clues

Sometimes grown children can provide clues to their parents' fates, but Sarah's do not. Lewis and Nicholas-3 both served in the Continental Army for the duration of the Revolutionary War, enlisting at ages 16 and 19 in early 1777 and serving until at least 1781. Nicholas-3 then disappears; Lewis appears again in the 1790 census living in Westfield, MA with a wife and young son. Only three are in the household, not a female who could be Sarah, and she also does not appear in the 1800 census with Lewis's family, either.

### Conclusions

Setting parameters for a search makes it easier to winnow down the possibilities. It requires some knowledge of the customs and laws of the times, and as much information as possible about other people closely associated. Perhaps most important to the search are the range of years of birth and death—a basic fact too often overlooked in online family histories.

In this case, Sarah Wilson's parentage, and even her fate after Nicholas's death, are likely to remain uncertain. Until and unless some new scrap of information surfaces, Samuel Wilson, Jr., appears to be the best possibility of a first husband—but the "evidence" is circumstantial at best. Even if that is correct, Sarah's maiden name remains a mystery.

Nicholas-2 Timeline			Context Timeline	
Year	Family event	Nich Age*	Year	Context Event
1708	Birth	--	1702–1713	Queen Anne's War—2nd French & Indian War
1709	Baptism	<1	1710s	Prosperity
1740	Marries <i>Jerusha</i>	32	1720s	Early religious revivals
1741	<i>Birth of son Arthur</i>	33	1730s	Severe economic depression
1742	Birth of son Jeremiah	34	1740s	Severe economic depression
1744	<i>Birth of dau Jerusha</i>	36		
1746	Death of father, James	38	1744–1748	King George's War—3rd French & Indian War
1746	<i>Birth of son Abel</i>	38		
1749	Birth of dau Sarah	41		
1755	Death of mother Elizabeth	47		
1756	Death of wife <i>Jerusha</i>	48	1755–1763	French and Indian War—4th French & Indian War

Nicholas-2 Timeline			Context Timeline	
1757	Marries Sarah Wilson	49		
1757	Joins provincial troops, 12 Apr - ? (autumn)	49		
1758	Birth of son Lewis, 5 Jan	50		
1758	Joins provincial troops, 29 Mar – 19 Oct	50		
1761	<i>Death of sons Jeremiah &amp; Arthur</i>	53		
1761	Joins provincial troops 13, Apr – 01 Dec	53		
1762	Joins provincial troops, serves with son <i>Abel</i> , 20 Mar – 30 Nov	54		
1762	Birth of son Nicholas-3 (2 Jun)	54		
1763	<i>Dies late May/early June</i>	55	Feb 1763	Treaty of Paris ends war
1764	Probate finalized	--		

\*Note that Nicholas was born in mid-December, making his age a year younger than if one simply subtracts years.

*Italics* = uncertain data, see explanations in the publication *Discovering James Ackley and Descendants Nicholas Ackley and Abel Ackley in Connecticut and New York, 1677–1835*