



The Adventures of a Boylston Shoemaker of the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry

By Leah Withers

Abel C. Farwell Jr. is perhaps one of the most interesting and unique veterans to ever serve from the Town of Boylston, Massachusetts. His later life included many adventures which would earn him local renown, surprisingly not in Boylston but in Montana, where he spent the second half of his life. He made such a name for himself that to this day there remains a creek named after him in the state. But before he was a local celebrity in the American west, he was a typical young boy born circa 1837 and raised in Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, son of Abel Farwell Sr. and Mary Holloway Bowman.¹ He was one of the youngest in his family, with 5 older siblings and 1 younger. The firstborn was Francis Warren, born 30 June 1827, followed by Frederick Holden on 29 October 1828.² Unfortunately Frederick died 25 July 1829 at the age of 9 months.³ Then next came George Abel on 18 May 1831.⁴ Abel's sister Betsey Mariah was born 1 June 1833, followed by Louise Eleanor on 27 September 1835.⁵ Next came Abel Jr. and then finally Charles, born circa 1842.⁶ Abel Sr. supported this family by operating a farm of 14 acres, on which in 1850 the family owned 2 milk cows and one pig, and produced 6 bushels of rye and 25 bushels of corn.⁷ This was an incredibly small farm for the time, and it was valued at just 500 dollars, equivalent to property worth \$17,000 today.⁸ Later, as the older siblings began to grow up and move out, the family moved to Northborough.⁹

First Marriage and Children

On 11 December 1858, Abel married Elvira S. Lakin, the daughter of Crosby Lakin and Elvira Walton.¹⁰ Abel was working as a shoemaker in Boylston Centre at the time, and later became a master cordwainer with two apprentices, Charles H Glazier and Nathan B Ellis, living in his home.¹¹ Soon after his marriage to Elvira, the pair had their first daughter, Estella, on 18 June 1860.¹² However, just a month later Estella contracted cholera infantum, a disease common to young children and especially present in the summertime. This caused Estella's tragic passing on 1 August 1860, just a month and 14 days after her birth.¹³ She was buried in the Pine Grove Cemetery in Boylston, the very same place where her mother would join her decades later. Soon after this tragedy, another daughter was born to the Farwell family, Emma E. Farwell. Emma was born 31 July 1861, but this daughter again was taken from Abel and Elvira far too soon.¹⁴ Twelve days after her birth, Emma died of malnutrition.¹⁵ She, as well, was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery with her sister.

Civil War Service: Union Army, 2nd Massachusetts Infantry

Despite the hardships that the family had endured, the Civil War was beginning and Abel soon had to leave his Boylston home to join the fight in the Union Army against the Confederacy. On 25 May 1861, he enlisted at Boston for three years in the Massachusetts 2nd Infantry Regiment, Company D.¹⁶ Although he enlisted as a corporal, on 3 July 1861 he was demoted to private for bringing liquor into his camp.¹⁷ His unit saw many major battles including the Battle of Antietam and the Battle of Gettysburg, but none such battles were ever seen by Abel. On 28 February 1862, he left the battlefield and became the Ward Master at Frederick Hospital in Frederick, Frederick County, Maryland.¹⁸

He continued to serve this hospital for one full year until he was discharged on 28 February 1863 by order of the War Department.¹⁹ His son Abel Farwell III was born in Fitchburg, Worcester County, Massachusetts on 1 November 1863.²⁰ That very same day, Abel reenlisted and continued to work as a Hospital Steward until his final discharge on 31 August 1865. After this, he began to make his way back to New England.²¹ Following Abel's discharge from his military unit and the birth of young Abel, the family moved to Nashua, Hillsborough County, New Hampshire in 1866. Abel picked up shoemaking again, just as he had before the war.²²

Divorce and a Move to the West

This is where things began to take a turn in Abel's life. Soon after the family moved to Nashua, Abel was hired as a trader for the Northwestern Fur Company, a job that required him to travel long distances across America.²³ His last known record in New England is in 1866.

Two years later, in 1868, Elvira could be found in Nashua, alone, listed in the city directory as a widow. Young Abel III sadly died from consumption in Nashua on 12 May 1869 at age 5 years, 6 months, and 12 days.²⁴

However, Abel was alive and well in the West. In December of 1870, Elvira filed for a divorce from her husband. She listed no reason for divorce when she filed.²⁵ That same year Abel could be found in Dawson County, Montana, living along the Missouri River.²⁶ His work as a fur trader had given him the opportunity to take ownership of a small trading post near where the modern-day Canadian border was eventually drawn.²⁷

New Wife and Family

Eventually he made his way south and settled down on the Crow Tribe's Native American

¹ Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1837

² Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1827, 1828

³ Death Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1829

⁴ Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1831

⁵ Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1833

⁶ Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1834

⁷ Agricultural Census Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1850

⁸ Agricultural Census Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1850

⁹ Massachusetts State Census, Northborough, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1855, digital image, ancestry.com

¹⁰ Marriage Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1858

¹¹ United States Federal Census, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1860, digital image, ancestry.com

¹² Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1860

¹³ Death Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1860

¹⁴ Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1861

¹⁵ Death Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1861

¹⁶ Military Muster Records, Abel Farwell Jr, Massachusetts Infantry, www.fold3.com, digital image

¹⁷ Military Muster Records, Abel Farwell Jr, Massachusetts Infantry, www.fold3.com, digital image

¹⁸ Military Muster Records, Abel Farwell Jr, Massachusetts Infantry, www.fold3.com, digital image

¹⁹ Military Muster Records, Abel Farwell Jr, Massachusetts Infantry, www.fold3.com, digital image

²⁰ Birth Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1863

²¹ Military Muster Records, Abel Farwell Jr, Massachusetts Infantry, www.fold3.com, digital image

²² Nashua City Directories, Nashua, Hillsborough County, Massachusetts

²³ The Independent Record, Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Montana, 18 July 1902

²⁴ Death Records, Nashua, Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, 1869, digital image, ancestry.com

²⁵ Divorce Records, Nashua, Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, 1870, digital image, ancestry.com

²⁶ United States Federal Census, Dawson County, Montana, 1870, digital image, ancestry.com

²⁷ The Billings Gazette, Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana

reservation, where he married a woman by the name of Mary Horse Guard circa 1869.²⁸ At the time of their marriage, he was a Government Indian Agent and United States Marshall. Mary's Native American name was "Goes First," but she was known later in life as "Horse Guard" on the Crow Reservation. In life, Mary was also known as Mary Farwell, Crow Mary, Big Mary or most commonly as Old Mary. Mary was the daughter of Crooked Arm and Strikes Plenty Woman. She was known for being a very intense woman, weighing 250 pounds, who at one point so disliked a story that her husband told about her that she shattered a plate over his head.²⁹ However he was known for being a practical joker and took to Mary's intensities.³⁰

Abel had three children with Mary Horse Guard: Ella born in 1871 in Fort Macleod, Willow Creek, Alberta Province, Canada; Susan Elizabeth born 15 March 1876 in Fort Benton, Chouteau County, Montana; and Rosebud Marcus born in 1882 in Absarokee, Stillwater County, Montana.^{31,32,33,34,35}

Cypress Hills Massacre

But family life was not what made him so newsworthy in the area. It was his involvement in the Cypress Hills Massacre that brought him to stardom. One night in the spring of 1873, some Canadian fur traders made their way to Farwell's trading post, claiming that the natives had stolen their horses.³⁶ While this was not the case, both the traders and the natives were incredibly intoxicated and Farwell's efforts to negotiate with both sides instead of resorting to violence failed. In the end only one trader was killed, but 22 natives of the Assiniboine tribe lost their lives. This massacre, and Abel's subsequent fight for justice, thrust him into the spotlight. He wanted the settlers responsible for the massacre to be tried for murder, and a major trial went underway, but unfortunately Abel's sole eyewitness account and the general lack of credibility given to supporters of the Native American tribes lost him the trial and the traders walked free.³⁷

The only thing Abel earned was notoriety, which forced him to go into hiding to avoid angry traders. The Billings Gazette deemed him "one of the bravest men who ever crossed the Missouri."³⁸ He spent a few years dodging the police for his illegal whiskey selling, before settling down again in southern Montana on a ranch with his wife and children.³⁹ He later died on 8 May 1886 in his home on the Crow reservation after drinking two bottles of whiskey.⁴⁰ He believed that they were poisoned and sent a friend to get him some medicine, but when the friend returned, he had already died.

Medical examinations after his death concluded that the whiskey was not poisoned, and that he had simply overdosed on the high proof homemade whiskey.⁴¹ The ranch where he died was later converted into a brewery. He was buried on a hill near big springs in Silesia. His wife, Mary would remarry in 1887 and later die on 26 January 1901 when a tuberculosis epidemic swept through the Reservation and she was interred on her allotment of land.⁴²

Legacy: Farwell Creek, Montana

Today Abel's legacy can still be seen in Montana. The hill on which he was buried is beside a creek, which was named Farwell Creek in his honor. This creek can still be found today, although over the years the name has been slightly altered to now be called Farewell Creek. The allotment of land by the Crow Nation to Abel's wife Horse Guard who was a full-blooded Crow Native American, later became the town of Silesia, a modern-day tourist destination with tours of the Indian country, hot springs, Rocky Mountain skiing, and hiking within the Yellowstone region. The site of the Cypress Hills Massacre was named a Canadian National Historic Site, where the original location of Farwell's tavern can still be visited today.⁴³

Boylston Historical Society's Veterans Day Tribute to all our Veterans



²⁸ The Billings Gazette, Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana

²⁹ The Billings Gazette, Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana

³⁰ The Billings Gazette, Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana2

³¹ The Great Fall Tribune, Great Falls, Cascade County, Montana

³² Marriage Records, Yellowstone, Montana

³³ Crow Nation Census, Crow Agency, Montana, July 1893

³⁴ Death Records, Pryor, Big Horn County, Montana, 1932

³⁵ Death Records, Crow Agency Hospital, Big Horn County, Montana, 1928

³⁶ The Billings Gazette, Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana, 12 August 1902

³⁷ Allen, Robert S., A Witness to Murder: The Cypress Hills Massacre and the conflict of attitudes towards native people of the Canadian and American West during the 1870's, <https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/>

³⁸ The Billings Gazette, Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana, 12 August 1902

³⁹ The Great Fall Tribune, Great Falls, Cascade County, Montana

⁴⁰ The Great Fall Tribune, Great Falls, Cascade County, Montana

⁴¹ The Great Fall Tribune, Great Falls, Cascade County, Montana

⁴² Horse Guard Heirship for Land, Crow Nation, Montana, 1923

⁴³ <http://parkscanadahistory.com/series/chs/21/chs21-eng.pdf>

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