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Elusive Ancestors: Searching for Mollie Sensabaugh

by Paul Beatty

The Rockbridge/Augusta County region of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley is home for one of the largest concentration of Sensabaughs in the country, and a woman who identified herself as "Mollie Sensabaugh" is the oldest known ancestor of a sizeable branch of the family there.

But who was Mollie Sensabaugh? A few vital records identify her as the mother of various children in the area, apparently illegitimate, but tell nothing of her own origins. She cannot be positively identified in any census from her lifetime. Family Bible entries tell us more, but are somewhat contradictory, reflecting either confused information, or even deliberate attempts to blur Mollie's possibly unflattering biography. Stories passed through several generations offer other leads, though such secondhand accounts must be evaluated with caution.

Yet some possible identities for Mollie Sensabaugh do emerge from the murky evidence. Sorting through all these possibilities would challenge any genealogist; the quest requires careful evaluation of information that varies in both source and quality. What follows is the chronicle of the search for Mollie Sensabaugh—but the search is not concluded, and anyone who can contribute to the story or the search is most welcome to do so.

Mollie and her children

Some basic facts are not in dispute: four children born in Virginia in the 1870s and 1880s claimed Mollie Sensabaugh as their mother. This information is accepted by family and is well borne out by vital records, gravestones, obituaries, and other sources (although some exact dates are

disputed). The children are:

- (1) John William Rice ("J.W.R.") Sensabaugh (1874-1931).
- (2) George Franklin Sensabaugh (1877-1968).
- (3) Dora Sensabaugh (1884-1900).
- (4) Harry Tucker Sensabaugh (1888-1929).

J.W.R. Sensabaugh¹, the oldest, was born in the Walkers Creek region of Rockbridge



Mollie Sensabaugh. This photograph, the only known photo of Mollie, is owned by the author. It was probably taken in the early 1890s. The original is 24 inches tall, and although extremely faded, was undoubtedly once quite impressive. This version has been scanned and enhanced by computer to bring out some detail.

County. According to family lore, his mother Mollie had been in love with a boy from a nearby Wiseman family. Although quite young, the two wanted to marry. But the Wisemans disapproved of and rejected Mollie (it is unclear whether this was before or after she became pregnant). In any case, J.W.R. was an illegitimate child, as were his three siblings that followed. J.W.R. believed they all had different fathers.

Mollie, working as a housekeeper and having virtually no possessions, did not raise her children. J.W.R. was raised by a local farmer named Sam Mynes during his early youth, and later by an "uncle," Amos Sensabaugh. George, the second oldest, was raised in the Craigsville-Fordwyck area, nestled against the Allegheny Mountains, by a veterinarian named Walton. (George later recalled being "dropped off like a cat" there by his mother.) We know little about the other children's early upbringing, except that they were not raised together. According to the 1900 census, teen-aged Harry lived with his older brother J.W.R., and Dora lived with the same Amos Sensabaugh who had helped with J.W.R.'s upbringing (she is listed as Amos' niece). The siblings apparently maintained contact with each other; J.W.R., and possibly the others, also maintained contact with their mother.

By 1894, Mollie was keeping house for two bachelor brothers, Sam and Ike Huffman, while J.W.R., nearly 20 years old, was about to establish his own home. J.W.R. planned to bring Mollie in to live with him, but she fell ill and died before this happened. His Bible¹ records the date as 8 June 1894, in Fairfield, Virginia.

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