

Article

The Lives of First-Generation German Immigrant Women in Franklin County, Missouri

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Abstract: The area along the Missouri River west of St. Louis, Missouri was a major locus of immigration from Germany between 1850 and 1860, in part due to a publication by Gottfried Duden that received wide attention in Germany. While a fair amount has been written about the lives of immigrants in Missouri, most has focused on the experiences of men. The lives of women are largely restricted to recordings of marriage, births and death. Lacking is context on what occurred between these life events. Using a variety of public and private sources, we describe the lives of five sisters from the first generation of women born in Franklin County, Missouri, bordered on its northern edge by the Missouri River. The process sheds light on the lives of immigrant women from Germany in Franklin County. Our sources allow us to shed light on the sisters' day-to-day life experiences over time, thus better capturing the challenges that they faced and the grace and strength that they displayed in facing them. Although their childhoods were homogeneous, their adult paths diverged from one another markedly. We conclude with a discussion of the factors that might have been responsible for their divergence of experience.

Keywords: genealogy; history; immigration; women

1. Introduction

While a fair amount is known about the first immigrants from Germany to arrive in Missouri during the period of peak immigration from the mid- to late-1800s, most focuses on events like marriage, birth, and death. Little has been written about the day-to-day lives of this group, and that is especially true about the lives of women. Lacking is context on what occurred in these women's lives between events such as marriage, birth, and death.

The population of Franklin County, Missouri, which is bordered on its northern edge by the Missouri River, increased markedly between 1850 and 1860. The aggregate population of Franklin County per the 1850 U.S. Census was 11,021. By the 1860 U.S. Census, however, the population had grown to 18,085, an increase of 64% over ten years. Available data on the percentage of foreign-born residents in the county compared to the percentage in the state sheds some light on why and how Franklin County's population increased to the extent that it did between 1850 and 1860. First, the percentage of foreign-born residents of the county in 1860 (no data were collected by county in 1850) was almost twice that of Missouri as a whole. According to the 1860 U.S. Census, 30% of Franklin County residents were born outside the United States. This suggests that Franklin County was a preferred location for immigrants.

Many Germans were drawn to Missouri by Gottfried Duden's report of his journeys to the United States between 1824 and 1827, which was published in Germany in 1829 (Duden 1880). This highly romanticized version of life in Missouri drew at least 40,000 immigrants to the state in 1830 alone, representing one third of all immigrants to the United



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States from Germany in that year. Franklin County, with its rich farmland and location only a day's journey from St. Louis on the Missouri River, was a preferred destination for immigrants.

To provide a range of illustrative experiences from the lives of first-generation women during a period of peak German immigration, we draw on the lives of the five daughters of Phillip and Anna Schneider Heeger, who were in the first generation of immigrants from Germany to be born in Franklin County, Missouri. Phillip immigrated from Kleinheubach, Germany in 1854 to avoid mandatory military service. Phillip's father Daniel and Phillip's four younger siblings followed in 1857. While the Heegers settled on open farmland in Franklin County, they had not been farmers in Germany. Kleinheubach is a commercial center in Bavaria where the Heeger family lived and operated the ferry across the Main River between Kleinheubach and Grossheubach.

Phillip and Anna Heeger's American-born daughters were: Anna, born in 1864; Emma, born in 1869; Bertha, born in 1871; Lillian, born in 1874, and Wilhelmina, born in 1877. The five were born over a thirteen-year span of time. Despite the commonality of their birth and childhood, their later life choices and experiences, and the context in which they occurred, were varied and disparate.

We describe the lives of these remarkable five women to shed light on their day-to-day lives in Franklin County, Missouri and beyond. The sources available allow us to better capture the challenges faced by them and the grace and strength that they displayed in facing these challenges, providing an important window into the lives of immigrant women from Germany in Franklin County, Missouri. The lives of the sisters will be described according to birth order and conclusions proffered on the factors responsible for their divergence of experience.

2. Results

2.1. *Life on the Heeger Farm*

A particularly detailed 1876 census of Franklin County provides a cross-sectional view of life on the Heeger farm at the time. The farm was located on approximately 200 acres of land on the St. John's and St. Jordan's Creeks in western Franklin County, Missouri. The family included eight children under the age of 18 years, five of whom were under 10 years of age. They owned two horses, three mules, five cows, seven sheep, and nine hogs and produced 480 bushels of wheat, 130 bushels of corn, 300 bushels of oats, 15 bushels of barley, ten bushels of wool, and 56 bushels of hay that year. In addition, they produced 15 gallons of wine and 80 gallons of molasses. The family farm seems to have been prosperous and the four pre-teenage or teenage boys and the eldest daughter likely helped with maintenance and production in that year.

2.2. *The Heeger Daughters: Anna Heeger Sullins*

Anna was the first-born of the five Heeger sisters, born on 21 February 1864, during the third year of the U.S. Civil War. Although no major battles occurred near her family's farm, the war almost certainly had a profound effect on her family. Anna's father Phillip and Uncle Jacob Heeger both served in Company C of the Enrolled Missouri Militia (EMM), a compulsory militia enrollment ordered by interim Governor Gamble in 1862 to garrison area locales when threats from the Confederate Army arose. Company C, which was made up largely of men from Jeffriesburg, was actively involved in the controversial 1863 shooting of Franklin County resident and Southern sympathizer James H. Barnes (Larson 2020). On September 30 of the following year, a large contingent of General Sterling Price's Confederate troops crossed the southern border into Franklin County. Price's troops

wreaked havoc, especially in the southern part of the county, for four days. These tensions almost certainly had an effect on life in and around Jeffriesburg.

After what seems to have been a conventional childhood and young adulthood, Anna married Celonious A. Sullins in 1888, when she was 22 years old. He was born in St. Louis in 1856, but moved with his family to Casco in Franklin County as a boy. He was 27 years old at the time of the marriage to Anna. Although still a young man, this was Sullins' second marriage. He had married 20-year-old Caroline Buentner ten years earlier, on 12 December 1878. The couple's son Joseph A. Sullins was born on 16 March 1879. Although no details could be found, Caroline and Joseph Sullins were listed in the 1880 U.S. Census as living with her parents and siblings in Lyon Township when Joseph was one year old. In Celonious' will, dated 17 November 1896, available through Franklin County Court records, he left \$1.00 to son Joseph A. Sullins and the remainder of his estate to Anna. Caroline and Joseph Sullins by then had moved to Bloomington, Illinois.

In the 1900 U.S. Census, Anna and Celonious lived with their six children on a farm that they owned in Lyon Township. The children ranged in age from 10 months to nine years (Lorenzo, Ollie, Harry, Jessie, Helen, and Harve, in ascending order of age). No child deaths were noted in the census. Celonious' occupation was listed as "farmer". According to the Kiel files, by 1905 and after 17 years on the farm, Sullins had become a merchant who owned a prosperous poultry, grain, and feed store on Plum Street in Union. In the 1910 U.S. Census, the family is listed as living in a house that they owned in Union, Missouri, the county seat of Franklin County. The store was approximately two blocks from their home.

The children in the home in 1910 were: (1) Harve age 21 years, and a lineman on the railroad; (2) Helen, age 19 years, and a public-school teacher; (3) Jessie L., age 17 years; (4) Harry, age 15 years; (5) Ollie M., age 14 years; and, (6) Ada A., age seven years. The children are the same as were listed in the 1900 U.S. Census, except for the addition of Ada, who was born in 1903, and the absence of Lorenzo. The 19 February 1911 *Franklin County Tribune* obituary for Celonious Sullins stated that Lorenzo died at 13 months of age.

Celonious Sullins advertised his business frequently in Franklin County newspapers and seems to have been very entrepreneurial. A *Franklin County Tribune* article dated 8 January 1909 bemoaned his purchase of supplies for his store in towns outside of Union, presumably to get the best prices. The article said, "Mr. Sullins is a hustler and knows how to build up trade but this is entirely too much money to leave our town forever". The article seemed to have been written with frustration rather than any sort of malice.

Celonious Sullins died on 18 February 1911 at 55 years of age after having been bedridden for a time, leaving Anna as a widow at age 47 years. All but one of their children was by then a teenager or young adult. Ada was eight years of age. According to his death certificate, Celonius died of stomach cancer that produced an internal hemorrhage, and had been under the care of a physician for 16 days. He was buried in the Union City Cemetery. His 19 February 1911 *Franklin County Tribune* obituary said that he "realized his condition from the first to the last with perfect calmness and resignation and began to arrange all of his business affairs to the minutest detail for his final departure", and was conscious to the end. He, for example, left instructions for the Modern Woodmen of Union, of which he was a member, to take charge of his grave.

According to a *Republican Headlight* article dated September 8, 1916, Anna Sullins and daughter Ada had moved to St. Louis to live near her other children after selling the family business. The two later moved back to their home in Union, though, and seemed to have spent time in both locales. By several accounts, Anna maintained a wide array of friends in St. Louis and in Franklin County. According to notices in the *Franklin County Tribune*, she visited her sister Bertha Heeger Muench often in Washington, Missouri, six miles to the north of Union.

The 1920 U.S. Census found Anna and 16-year-old Ada living in the family house in Union. By the 1930 U.S. Census, Ada had married Stewart Jenkins and 66-year-old Anna was living with her 36-year-old daughter Jessie Moore and her husband, a captain in the National Guard, and their infant son in St. Louis. Anna Sullins died five years later at 72 years of age at the home of Ada Jenkins in University City, Missouri. According to her death certificate, she died of carcinoma of the cervix and uterus on 13 October 1935. The physician who signed her death certificate said that he had been treating her for the condition for several months. According to cemetery records, she was buried in the Union City Cemetery on 15 October 1935.

Aside from the death of her husband Celonious in late middle age and one son at age 13 months, Anna Sullins seems to have lived a stable and fairly prosperous life, with income from her husband's business and a good deal of support from her six children who lived into adulthood. Although she was the first to have been born in the United States and lived through two disruptive wars, her death at age 72 years makes her the longest living of the five sisters. Anna's longevity may in part be due to the social networks of her daughters that included very good access to healthcare. Anna's oldest daughter Helen Sullins, for example, served as a nurse for the American Red Cross. She was deployed to Paris at the end of World War I in 1918, to Siberia after the Red Army invasion later in 1918, and then to Cuba in 1929, after the stock market crash in the United States devastated the Cuban economy. Helen Sullins seemed to have inherited the energy of her father and the stability of her mother.

Of note is that Anna received state-of-the-art medical care in St. Louis. In her final months, she was treated for her gynecological cancers by German-born George Gellhorn, MD, an internationally-renowned oncological gynecologist and Professor of Medicine at Washington University. Gellhorn was the father of journalist Martha Gellhorn, the third wife of Ernest Hemingway. It is possible that Helen Sullins knew Martha Gellhorn through their shared time in Paris. Gellhorn, who grew up in St. Louis, was an acclaimed war correspondent whose first job was with the United Press in Paris in 1918.

Anna Sullins began her adult life as a farm wife and spent 17 years on her nuclear family's farm. Her children all were born on the farm in Casco, in Franklin County. The family then moved to Union and she and her husband ran a prosperous business there until his death six years later. Her husband's energy and business savvy, and her ability to dispose of the business to her advantage, allowed her what appears to have been a fairly prosperous and stable life in both Union and St. Louis.

2.3. *The Heeger Daughters: Emma Heeger Gehlert*

Emma was the second daughter of Phillip and Anna Heeger and was born in February of 1869, five years after her sister Anna. Two brothers (August and Henry Heeger) were born between the births of Anna and Emma.

Emma would have been only seven years old and too young to work on the farm during the above-mentioned 1876 census. However, because she remained on the farm until her marriage in 1897, it seems probable that she did contribute to the farm's functioning.

Emma married John F. Gehlert on 4 November 1897. According to the marriage application documented in the *Franklin County Tribune*, Emma lived in Jeffriesburg and John in Union when they married. They were 23 years apart in age, with Emma 28 years of age and John 51 at the time of their marriage. In a 12 November 1897 *Franklin County Tribune* published an article titled "At Last", the writer noted that, "the world had become accustomed to look upon John as an incorrigible bachelor". By all accounts, Emma and John were opposite in temperament. Emma seems to have been quiet and unassuming while John was social and entrepreneurial, much like his brother-in-law Celonius Sullins.

Emma's father Phillip Heeger died eight months after her marriage, on 26 July 1899, after inhaling a lethal dose of Paris green pesticide while spreading it on his potato plants. After his death, Emma's mother Anna and older brother John managed the farm until it was sold in 1902. Anna and John then moved to Washington, Missouri, where Emma's younger sisters Bertha Muench and Wilhelmina lived. Emma and John lived nearby in a since-dispersed township called South Point on the Missouri River.

John Gehlert has an interesting early history that may have contributed to his decision to prolong his bachelorhood. His life changed radically in 1862 when he was 15 years old. John was the oldest of the seven surviving children born to Gottfried and Margaretha Rapps Gehlert in Clover Bottom, Missouri, located seven miles north of Jeffriesburg. The family operated the first general store and boarding house in the area. According to his mother's obituary, one sister and three brothers had died in childhood. In 1862, when John was 15 years old, he accompanied his father Gottfried to the wharf in downtown St. Louis, approximately 50 miles away to pick up supplies for the family's grocery store, including barrels of whiskey that he bought for 2 1/2 cents a gallon and sold at his store for 20 cents per gallon. According to John's obituary in the *Franklin County Tribune* dated 6 March 1917, Gottfried was kicked in the abdomen by a mule on that day (19 November 1862) while loading supplies and died shortly afterward of internal bleeding. John then was left to return his father's body to Clover Bottom in the family's wagon. His five younger siblings were ages 2 to 13 at the time, and his mother was three-months pregnant with son William, who was born on 10 February 1863. John and his mother kept the farm going until she died at age 42 years on 13 March 1868 from an infection after stepping on a nail. According to John's obituary, he then took care of the farm for several years before leaving to become a carpenter. By then, only two of his siblings were still children requiring care. Brother William was five years old when his mother died. Brother Louis, who was born in 1861, became a resident of the Fulton State Hospital, the first public mental institution west of the Mississippi River. Although no detailed record can be found, he is listed in the 1870 U.S. Census as "idiotic", perhaps due to developmental problems.

John Gehlert had acted as a father to his siblings for many years, taking over the duties usually reserved for adults. In essence, the family that he created with Emma was his second family. In his early and middle adult years, he moved from carpentry to business and politics. He ran the family store until 1890, when he opened a farm implement business, followed by creamery and hardware businesses in Washington and Union, before he began to run for elected office. John was elected the Washington Assessor in 1910, after Emma's death, and served as constable of Washington from 1912 to 1916.

According to the 1900 U.S. Census, Emma and John had been married for almost four years when Emma became pregnant. Their first two sons died either before or shortly after birth. One unnamed son born in 1900 was buried with his parents in the family plot in Wildey Cemetery in Washington, Missouri. No record of the second son could be found, suggesting that he might have been stillborn. Two sons survived to adulthood. George Phillip was born on 17 November 1900 and lived to age 80 and Charles Frederick was born on 7 October 1902 and lived to be 79. The two remained in Franklin County.

Emma Gehlert contracted a medical condition that shortened her life. She died on 25 April 1906 at age 36 years, but had been ill for some time prior to her death. Records from her sister Wilhelmina mention visiting Emma, by then quite ill, at the Gehlert home in Washington early in 1906. Although no death certificate could be found, family members relate that she died from pernicious anemia, a fairly rare inherited autoimmune disease in which the gut loses its ability to absorb vitamin B. This fits in terms of the condition's usual onset after age 30 years. Because diagnostic testing and treatment of the disorder did not occur until the 1920s, we will never know of what Emma died. According to a

family member, her older sister Anna's daughter Ollie Sullins died at age 22 years after experiencing what was described as attacks of rheumatism, another autoimmune condition, during her years in school. No death certificate could be found for Ollie.

Charles and George were ages three and five years when their mother died. By the time of the 1910 U.S. Census, when they were seven and nine years of age, respectively, they lived with their father John, then the elected Washington Assessor. At some point later, the two boys lived with their Uncle Daniel Heeger in Stanton, Missouri. He died in 1918, a year after the death of their father John Gehlert at age 70 years.

2.4. The Heeger Daughters: Bertha Heeger Muensch

Bertha was born on 5 March 1871. She remained on the family farm after grade school and, according to her obituary in the 28 March 1940 edition of the *Washington Missourian*, found employment in St. Louis for a time.

On 1 November 1899, at age 28 years, she married George M. Muensch. The couple initially made their home on the 80-acre A.D. Gale farm located 1.5 miles west of Washington, Missouri, which Muensch had purchased in 1896. In 1919, they purchased a home in the city of Washington, and remained there throughout their lives. George Muensch was 57 years old at the time of the move and continued to operate the farm for several years after the family moved to the city. The paucity of public information on George is in stark contrast to that of brothers-in-law Celonius Sullins and John Gehlert. His aforementioned 1951 *Washington Missourian* obituary may provide a small glimpse of the reason in noting that "his creed of hard work and thrift brought success".

The family seems to have been prosperous. Although it is unclear in what year it was purchased, they were one of the first families in Franklin County to own a car. According to Kiel's listing of automobile owners in 1916 (Kiel 1986, p. 46), they owned a 19-horsepower Royal automobile in that year. Bertha was very socially active, as evidenced by frequent newspaper articles chronicling her travels to St. Louis to visit her sister Anna and nieces, parties, motor trips to other parts of Missouri and Illinois, and visits that family members and friends made to the Muensch home. Local newspapers describe gatherings at the home. A *Washington Citizen* article dated 11 March 1921 describes a party at the Muensch home for Bertha's birthday, with 26 guests. The same newspaper in an article dated 9 November 1923 describes a Michigan card party in honor of the Muensch's 25th wedding anniversary that included what is described as a "dainty" lunch.

Despite their prosperity and social ties, Bertha and George Muensch endured the loss of three children during infancy. According to the 4 November 1898 edition of *Die Washington Post*, a son died at 10 months of age in 1898 and was buried in Washington's Odd Fellows Cemetery. A six-day old infant died in 1902, as reported in the *Franklin County Observer* edition of 19 September 1902, and was buried in the same cemetery. The 1910 U.S. Census reports three infant deaths for the couple, although record of the third child's death could not be found. One daughter Anna Muensch, who never married, was born in 1900 and survived to age 95. Anna Muensch made frequent motor trips with her mother to visit family in Franklin County and St. Louis.

According to her death certificate, Bertha Heeger Muensch died in her home on 20 March 1940 of chronic valvular heart disease. She was 69 years of age at the time. Her husband, who never remarried, died in 1951 at age 89 years.

2.5. The Heeger Daughters: Lillian (Lillie) Heeger Meyer

Lillie was born on 22 November 1873, when her sisters Bertha, Emma, and Anna were 2 ½, 8, and 10 years of age, respectively.

She grew to adulthood on her family's farm and married Jacob Meyer there in 1892. At the time of their marriage, Jacob was 29 years of age and Lillie was 19. They lived on approximately 40 acres of farmland in Clover Bottom, Missouri. Their children were: Anna, born in 1893; Oscar, born in 1894; Sophia, born in 1897; Edwin, born in 1898; Roy, born in 1906; and Katherine, born in 1908. The 1900 U.S. Census indicates that two other children had died by that year, which would suggest eight pregnancies and six live births during the 15-year period between 1893 and 1908, when Lillie was 36 years of age.

The turning point in Lillie's life occurred in 1911. According to Franklin County Court records, Jacob Meyer submitted a petition to have his wife declared insane on 14 September 1911. Two physicians, one from St. Louis and one from Washington, Missouri, were subpoenaed as expert witnesses to testify on behalf of the husband, as were five neighbors and two relatives (namely, her younger sister Wilhelmina Heeger Baumann and brother-in-law John Gehlert). A hearing was held on 20 September 1911, and the then 38-year-old was declared insane and admitted to the Fulton State Hospital, where John Gehlert's brother was known to reside in 1870. At the time of her admission, Lillie's children ranged in age from two to 18 years.

Lillie Meyer lived for six more years and was buried in Clover Bottom in 1918 at the age of 44 years. According to her certificate of death, she died of tuberculosis of four years duration. It is unclear how long Lillie stayed in the Fulton State Hospital. She was living in the family home at the time of her death. Although Lillie was living at home at the time of her death, it is likely that she contracted tuberculosis while living at the Fulton State Hospital.

It is interesting to note that the last of Lillie Meyer's children was born six months *after* she was admitted to Fulton, on 4 March 1912. This suggests that she was pregnant when admitted, perhaps without the knowledge of her or her family, and may have been released to home to give birth to her last child, son Charles.

No diagnosis was mentioned in the hearing about Lillie Meyer's sanity, which was not unusual for the time, nor was her behavior described in court records. The first system for classifying mental disorders was developed in Germany in 1883 ([Kraepelin 1899](#)), but did not diffuse to the United States for many years. The Franklin County Court used several criteria for sending patients to Fulton at public expense. If the person was deemed insane, the condition had lasted less than one year, and the individual or family was without sufficient means, the Franklin County sheriff escorted the person to Fulton and charged the County Court for transport and the Fulton State Hospital billed Franklin County for their care. According to Franklin County Court records, 111 Franklin County residents were transported to the Fulton State Hospital between 1871 and 1920, the last date for which records can be found. Over half (i.e., 59) were sent between 1900 and 1920.

We likely will never know exactly what happened to cause Lillie Meyer to be declared insane. Her husband Jacob never remarried and died at age 60, and there is no indication that he had mal intent. We do know that Lillie spent much of her life pregnant, with small children on a farm that likely required a good deal of work on her part. It was a hard life. That she was pregnant at the time at which she was deemed insane suggests a diagnosis of post-partum depression (from her penultimate child), which was not recognized as a disorder until 1994 ([American Psychiatric Association 1994](#)), 76 years after her death.

2.6. The Heeger Daughters: Wilhelmina (Wilma) Heeger Baumann Hazard

Wilma was the youngest daughter of Phillip and Anna Heeger, and the last-born of the first-generation Heeger sisters. Wilma was born on 6 September 1876, three years after the birth of her sister Lillie. Her mother was 40 years old at the time and her father was 43 years old.

A 23 January 1903 article in *The Franklin County Observer* found Wilma living in the home of her sister Emma Heeger Gehlert near Union at age 27 years. In the Fall of that year, she married Henry W. Baumann in Jeffriesburg. Henry was born in Washington, Missouri in 1873 and lived there at the time of his marriage. Wilma's older sisters, Emma Heeger Gehlert and Bertha Heeger Muench, also lived in Washington at the time.

Henry Baumann was an up-and-coming businessman who began his career working in Otto & Company's furniture store in Washington, Missouri and in 1898 bought a half interest in Louis Reese's livery stable in Washington. He was a member of the local Woodmen Lodge. In the 1900 U.S. Census, Henry Baumann was listed as a liveryman living at 14 Oak Street in Washington. In March of 1906 Henry and Wilma bought a livery stable in Union and moved from Washington to Union.

Because of her sister Emma Heeger Gehlert's health problems, Wilma and Henry often traveled back to Washington to visit her. On 27 March 1906, Henry returned to the couple's home in Union after spending the weekend with his wife at the Gehlert home in Washington. He was found dead in his bed the following morning at 33 years of age. His obituary says that he had been thought to have been in good health.

Wilma's beloved older sister Emma Gehlert died on 25 April 1906, less than month after Henry's death. The loss of the two people who almost certainly were closest to her must have been devastating to Wilma.

Wilma Baumann was only 29 years of age when she became a widow. A *Franklin County Tribune* article dated 22 February 1907 announced that she had sold the livery business in Union and was preparing to move to Washington to live with her mother. Three years later, the 1910 U.S. Census found her renting a house in Washington with her 18-year-old niece Bertha Heeger (daughter of Wilma's older brother Jacob "Fritz" Heeger), who was listed as a stitcher in a local shoe factory. Wilma is listed in that census as unemployed and without children.

Wilma and Bertha lived in one of three homes rented by Heeger relatives. Her brother-in-law John Gehlert and small nephews lived in an adjacent house. Wilma's widowed mother Anna Heeger, by then 73 years of age, and Wilma's older brother John Heeger lived next to that house. John Gehlert, by then 63 years of age, served as the Washington Assessor. Wilma and her mother likely helped care for Gehlert's young sons.

By the 1920 U.S. Census, Wilma Baumann lived in a rented apartment on Fifteenth Street in St. Louis and worked as a laundress. She likely remained in Franklin County until at least March of 1912 when she testified at her sister Lillie's insanity hearing in Union. Her mother Anna had died on 27 April 1913 and her Gehlert nephews were living as young adults after their father's death on 10 March 1917. Wilma's move to St. Louis at age 43 years may have been precipitated by a need to seek employment because the funds she obtained from the 1907 sale of the livery stable in 1907 had dwindled.

In that same 1920 U.S. Census, John Hazard was listed as a boarder in Wilma's rented St. Louis apartment who worked as a railroad laborer. His draft registration says that he had also lived at the Fifteenth Street address during 1917 and 1918. According to his death certificate, he died at 45 years of age on 15 September 1924 from pulmonary tuberculosis.

Although John Hazard was listed in the 1920 U.S. Census as a lodger at Wilma Baumann's address, his death certificate lists him as married, although no wife's name was listed. That the two were married at some point seems confirmed by the 1930 U.S. Census in which Wilma, then age 53 years and named Wilma Hazard, is listed as a widowed, unemployed roomer living at the Fifteenth Street address. That Wilma was unemployed may be explained by the economic downturn that St. Louis experienced in 1930 as part of the Great Depression. St. Louis' experienced 30% unemployment in 1933 ([Federal Reserve](#)

[Bank of St. Louis 2025](#)). An unskilled female worker of Wilma's age would have been hard pressed to find employment.

Although no record of her can be found in the 1940 U.S. Census, a death certificate dated 9 December 1944 had Wilma Hazard living north of her prior address in St. Louis at the time of her death. According to the certificate, she died of coronary sclerosis and arteriosclerosis on 30 November 1944. Under usual occupation, the certificate said "nil".

Wilma Hazard was buried in Wildey Cemetery in Franklin County on 4 December 1944, at age 67 years. No obituary could be found for her. This might have been because Wilma had no children and only one of her 10 siblings (i.e., Henry Heeger) was still living at the time of her death. She had been gone from Franklin County for at least 24 years by then, and may not have formed ties with younger members of her family.

Rather than being buried by either of her husbands, Wilma was buried in Lot 14 of Wildey Cemetery, in one of four plots purchased by John Gehlert. He, Emma Heeger Gehlert, and one of their children who died in infancy, are in the other plots. It seems a lonely end for someone who by all accounts was happily married, embedded in her family, and a business owner earlier in life.

3. Materials and Methods

Materials come from available genealogical data bases, most notably Ancestry.com (Blackstone Group, Lehi, UT, USA) and Newspapers.com (owned by Ancestry.com), and U.S. Census records for the years 1830 to present. In addition, materials come from the extensive collections of the 4 Rivers Genealogical Society in Washington, Missouri. These include Franklin County probate records, cemetery records, obituaries, and the 1878 and 1898 plat maps of Franklin County ([St. Louis Atlas Publishing Company 1878](#); [St. Louis Atlas Publishing Company 1898](#)). The 4 Rivers Genealogical Society, under the aegis of the Washington Historical Society, also is the sole repository for the 100,000-page Kiel Files, collected by Herman Kiel between 1880 and 1922, which contain local newspaper clippings gathered by Kiel plus his notes and letters. A limited portion of Kiel's files were published in a 1986 biographical edition ([Kiel 1986](#)). Some private records and stories were provided by descendants of the five sisters.

Methods involved reviewing records to build a portrait of each of the five sisters. In the few instances when sources varied, the author triangulated them to build evidence for one interpretation over alternative interpretations, based on the frequency with which each version appeared in records.

4. Conclusions

The present story of the five Heeger sisters adds to the discourse on first-generation immigrant women in three main ways. The first has to do with the period in which they lived. While the mid-1800s was a significant period of U.S. immigration ([Moslimani and Passel 2024](#)), little is known about the lives of women during that period. Many personal accounts of the lives of first-generation women have appeared in recent years, made possible by advances in information technology. Many of these recent accounts (see e.g., [Bishi 2020](#)) focus on the conflict created when a woman is torn between her old and new identities. Yet the Heeger sisters' stories suggest little of this conflict. Instead, they suggest an overall optimism about the possibilities available in the new land.

The emphasis on women's experiences also distinguishes our work. [Rex \(2001, p. 88\)](#) argued for the importance of first-generation women's histories, saying, "often men were concerned with how much money was made, or what was happening on the farm". She further argued that women's stories are more detailed and more likely to convey emotion.

Our story also adds to the discourse on first-generation women from immigrant families by encompassing a time frame from the period during and after the U.S. Civil War to the Great Depression and its aftermath. In another seminal work on immigrant women, albeit a woman born in Germany rather than in the United States, [Schroeder and Schulz-Geisberg \(1988\)](#) use letters to family back in Germany to illustrate the life of Henriette Geisberg Bruns. Bruns was born in 1813, 51 years before the birth of the eldest Heeger sister. Combined with that of Bruns, the Heeger sisters' history extends our knowledge of first-generation German immigrant women's experiences in Missouri by 45 years, from the time of Bruns' arrival in Missouri in 1836 until Wilma Heeger Hazard's death in 1944. This provides information about 108 years of experiences.

Another major way in which our research is unique is that instead of focusing on just one woman, it provides five disparate experiences of women who shared the same nuclear family upbringing. The lives of the five Heeger sisters diverged in significant ways during adulthood. An investigation of records from public and private sources thus allowed us to identify a number of factors that may have influenced the lives of these first-generation immigrant women.

Although all of the five sisters experienced some level of hardship during the 80-year-long span between the birth of Anna in 1864 and the death of Wilma in 1944, this hardship was mitigated for some by economic and social support from family. While women during the period of study were able to make some life choices, their economic lives were determined by men in significant ways. Only two of the sisters are known to have sought independent work: Bertha worked in St. Louis prior to returning to Franklin County to marry and Wilma sought work there after her first husband's death. Wilma's second husband John Hazard died at age 45 years and does not seem to have contributed significantly to her support.

Three of the sisters' husbands were Franklin County, Missouri businessmen who initially were successful. Anna Sullin's husband Celonious was known as an entrepreneur who established a successful feed and grain business. Henry Baumann, the first husband of Wilma, took a similar path and established a successful lumber business. John Gehlert started successful businesses before turning to public office. Yet, Celonious Sullins and Henry Baumann died while their businesses were active. The outcomes of their ventures differed in how well established the Baumann and Sullins businesses were at the times of their deaths. Baumann was only 33-year-old at the time of his death and his business was less well established than that of Sullins, who died at age 55 years. While Anna was able to sell the family business and live reasonably well from the profits, Wilma's husband Henry likely died leaving his business with less capital, thus putting her at risk.

Age also played into the sisters' disparate outcomes by determining whether adult children were available to provide social, and perhaps economic, support. Anna Sullins was 47 years old when she was widowed. Wilma, on the other hand was 27 years old when Henry died, and had no children. Compounding the hardship brought by her spouse's early death, Wilma's move to St. Louis to find work occurred during an economic period in which her likelihood of finding stable employment was diminished by the economic climate of the Great Depression ([Primm 1998](#)). Unemployment in St. Louis was said to be at an all-time high of 30% in 1933 ([Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2025](#)).

Bertha and Lillie and their families relied on farming rather than commercial business. Bertha and George Muensch seem to have maintained a profitable farm that supported them and their surviving child well. While the success of Lillie and Jacob Meyer's farm is less clear, it is possible that the burden of farm life contributed to Lillie's ill health and early death. Lillie married at age 19, earlier than her sisters, and gave birth to eight children,

six of whom lived past infancy, before the age of 36 years. She, thus, gave birth to eight children in 15 years.

Health and illness also affected the sisters' outcomes. Bertha, Wilma, and Anna lived to be 67, 69, and 72 years of age, respectively. All three exceed the average life expectancy of U.S. women of 62 years in 1930 (Social Security Administration 2025). No indication of chronic illness or illness during mid-life could be found for the three, with one possible exception. Three of Bertha's four children died during infancy or in utero, which could suggest some underlying reproductive issue that impacted her pregnancies.

Emma and Lillie died much earlier in life (i.e., at ages 36 and 44 years, respectively). Lillie died from tuberculosis, likely acquired at the Fulton State Hospital where it was rampant when she was a patient there (Missouri Secretary of State 2025). She very well may have suffered from postpartum depression, causing the problems that prompted her admission. Emma, who lost two of her four children before or shortly after birth, had been ill for some time with an undiagnosed illness. Both sisters relied on medical care in rural Franklin County in the first two decades of the 20th century. Although there is evidence that Lillie and Emma had family support while they were ill, it is unlikely that support could have saved them, considering the state of medical knowledge at the time. Emma died in 1906 and Lillie in 1918. When Anna developed cancer prior to her death in 1935, she was privy to state-of-the-art medical care in St. Louis. Yet, Emma and Lillie died prior to 1920, a time of breakthrough medical discoveries such as penicillin, insulin, and refined imaging techniques that dramatically increased the country's ability to preserve health and treat disease (Friedman and Friedland 1998). The three Heeger sisters who managed to live into late middle age almost certainly benefitted from these advances.

In summary, the present research study provides an important window into the lives of a group of first-generation women during a significant period in U.S. history, allowing some idea of the factors influencing their success. The lives of the five Heeger sisters diverged in adulthood due to existing social norms, medical knowledge at the time, and interactions between the two. Those who lived the longest and arguably the less challenging lives benefited from four things: (1) the economic conditions of the country during the time of their adulthoods; (2) their own good health and that of their spouses; (3) the availability of up-to-date health care; and, (4) having adult children able to assist in their support.

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