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Did Dr. Samuel Steele of Wethersfield, Newington and Kensington,
Have One Wife or Two?

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One family from the Welles genealogy book was recently the focus of an article I wrote for *The American Genealogist* (TAG), titled “Ann Francis and Hannah (Nott) Collins the Wives of Dr. Samuel⁵ Steele of Wethersfield, Newington, and Kensington, Connecticut.” If you want to find it, look in the April 2007 issue, on pages 105-109. The article teases apart two different men named Samuel Steele, who were close in age, and who both married in 1749 in the Newington parish of what was then Farmington. One had a wife named Hannah and one had a wife named Ann. The Samuel Steele who had a daughter baptized first in the parish was the husband of Hannah, but the Samuel who later with his wife Hannah had children baptized a few years later was not the one who married Hannah in 1749. Instead, he was the one who married Ann. Confusing, no?

The format for writing a serious genealogical narrative in as respected a journal as TAG is pretty straightforward. It involves focusing on the important documents and then presenting the family structure you have uncovered. The style allows for no presentation on the process of uncovering the truth. This is such an accepted formal structure, that I even once wrote an article condemning the “genealogical travelogue” in which people wrote about their long search and didn’t focus on the records. I think, though, that the family association might enjoy an account of the confusion and its resolution.

First, it might be helpful to know just what information we had at the start of our search. One source was the manuscript, which said that Dr. Samuel Steele, son of Dr. Joseph Steele and his wife Elizabeth Hollister. Samuel was the fifth of ten children, born 24 September 1723 in Wethersfield, Connecticut. Samuel and his wife Hannah Nott married in 1752 and resided in East Hartford while also appearing on the records of the Kensington Congregational Church. Their children were (i) Lydia, b. 1753; (ii) Samuel, Jr., b. 1756; (iii) Hannah, b. 1757; (iv) David, b. 3 Jan 1759; (v) Daniel, b. 3 Jan 1759; (vi) Clarinda, no birth date; and (vii) Levi, b. 1762.

Donna’s take on this family structure is closer to what we later discovered than any of the other sources available, but there are still quite a few differences. For example, Henry Stiles in his book on Wethersfield says that Dr. Samuel Steele’s wife was Ann Francis, that is, he uses the first of the marriage records in Newington parish.¹ The oddest thing is that Stiles says that Ann died in 1755, but he lists kids in their family born after that date.

¹ Henry Reed Stiles and Sherman Wolcott Adams, *History and Genealogies of Ancient Wethersfield* (New York: Grafton Press, 1974), 2:339, 666, *op. cit.*, Stiles’ Wethersfield.

The other source for information is Daniel Steele Durrie in his genealogy on the Steele family. There, he identifies Dr. Samuel's wife as "Hannah or Ann" with no last name.²

There were several keys to unlocking this door and seeing the families of the two Samuel Steeles whole and intact. It took going beyond the published vital records and into the church records and the probate and estate records.

One of the keys to identifying which Samuel married first Ann and later an entirely different Hannah is in Samuel's trade. He was a medical doctor. In his time (he was born in 1723 and died in 1782), being a doctor was a trade in which one apprenticed. It was not something you achieved by attending college. It is true, of course, that many who went on to become doctors did attend college, but it wasn't required. Doctors at that time not only diagnosed illnesses but also mixed the medicines used for treatment. They required some surgical instruments and quite a few items that looked like they came from modern chemistry sets.

Thus, Dr. Samuel Steele's father was most likely the Dr. Joseph Steele who, in his will, left his medical instruments to his son Samuel. It helps to identify which Samuel he was by the fact that he was a doctor and had learned the trade from his father. In fact, Dr. Samuel later willed his medical instruments to his sons David and Daniel, doctors themselves according to the town history.

Another key was the church records of Newington. They show both the marriage to Honor Deming and the marriage to Ann Francis. In addition, they show that Ann, the wife of Samuel Steele, died after the marriage to Honor Deming took place. That told me that we were looking at two different Samuels. The church records also showed that the first child born to the marriage of Samuel Steele and his wife Ann was not owned as his own child by Samuel.

Another key was the will of Samuel Steele. In it he talked about his children by his first wife and his children by his second wife. He called his eldest child "My first wife's first child, so-called Levi Steele." This key told me that the assignment of the last baptism to son Levi was entirely wrong. Turns out, it was the baptism of daughter Clarinda.

When the family was all pulled together, we had pretty much the same children Donna had found, but in a different order. And we had a very interesting story, too.

² Daniel Steele Durrie, *Steele Family: A Genealogical History of John and George Steele, Settlers of Hartford, Connecticut, 1635-6, and their Descendants* (enlarged edition: Albany: J. Munsell, 1862), p. 15, *op. cit.* Steele Family.