

Esther Springfield, Widows' Certificate Case File #38414

In 1841, an English woman named Esther Eaton married an English shoemaker in her local Manayunk neighborhood outside Philadelphia named Morris Springfield. In the next 17 years she would give Morris five children including the first, Morris Jr., born in 1850. Then the war began. Their youngest daughter, Elizabeth, was just two years old when her dad enlisted in Co. F of the 69th Pennsylvania Infantry. Esther was left behind to care for the children alone.

Almost three long years would go by before Esther received the terrible news that at age 44 she was alone now for good. Morris was killed by a gunshot wound to the head on June 7, 1864 in the trenches at Cold Harbor just one day before the two were to mark their 23rd wedding anniversary.

Thankfully, Esther could get some financial help. In July 1864, one month after Morris' death, she applied for a widow's pension. She was awarded \$8 a month which was what widows of privates in the army received at that time. In 1866 when the pension law was amended so that widows could receive \$2 for each child under 16 years of age, Esther applied for her increase. She got \$2 each for Alice, Thomas and Elizabeth, all minors living at home. In 1881, Esther reported that her pension certificate was stolen from her pocket on March 4, and she applied for a duplicate certificate. But other than that, all seemed well to the Pension Office with Esther collecting her pension money regularly. But was Esther really getting the money?

Something in 1884 tipped off the Pension Office that all was not what it seemed in Esther's case. They were investigating a pair of unscrupulous pension agents in the Philadelphia office and they had reason to believe that the agents had been collecting Esther's money. But where was Esther and where was her duplicate pension certificate?

In 1884, an examiner in the Special Examination Division pulled Esther's file and began interviewing neighbors and her son, Morris Jr., to answer that first critical question: where was Esther? Was she alive? Here's what the examiner discovered:

Esther lodged with Sarah Jane McClosky for about two weeks before June 5, 1882. Sarah and neighbor Catherine Hewitt both saw her for the last time that day. Esther has just drawn her latest pension payment, and Esther asked Catherine to pawn her certificate, trading an \$8 a month certificate for just \$2. Was this liquor money? Hours later at Catherine's house, Esther arrives under the influence and announces to Catherine that she's going to Jersey. Catherine

tries to get her to lie down and sleep it off, but Esther insists on leaving, and is never heard from again.

Two days later, another lodger at the McClosky house reads a description in the local newspaper describing the body of an elderly woman pulled from the Delaware River. All agreed that the description matched that of Esther Springfield, but no one visited the morgue to identify the corpse. Thus, the unknown woman is buried in grave 247 in Potter's Field in Philadelphia. Supposedly, the end of the story.

Fast forward to 1884. Pension Office Special Examiner Brooks interviews Esther's eldest son, Maurice Springfield and asks if his mother is dead. He says he hasn't seen his mother since late 1881 and was told later by those acquainted with her that she is dead. It seems mother and son did not keep in touch.

Brooks recovers Esther's pension certificate from the pawnbroker's and then determines that her money had been collected by pension agents Thomas Lawrence and W.S. Fries for the past two years. The criminal agents were arrested on December 4, 1884. But now there was only one thing left to do to close the book: positively identify the body.

So Coroner Thomas Powers orders the exhumation of the "unknown woman" in grave 247 on a cold day in January 1885. A swath of fabric is cut from the dead woman's apron, an apron that had laid there since June 17, 1882 when the corpse was buried. Sarah McClosky was there at Potter's Field to witness the exhumation. She identified that fabric from the coffin as being from the gingham apron she last saw Esther wearing that day nearly 3 years before. She identified the disinterred remains as being who they thought it would be: Esther Springfield. Now, poor Esther could be officially dropped from the pension rolls. And her case file, Civil War widow #38414, is closed with a final document marked "dead."

From the pension file of Esther Springfield, Widows' Certificate Case File #38414; Record Group 15: Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs; Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents; National Archives, Washington, D.C.