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2209 William Parsons Meeker: Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Ancestor

by Terry Joyce

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Portrait of William Parsons Meeker by Gilbert Stuart c1803

Two engraved family silver serving spoons are a tangible link to my American great great great grandfather William Parsons Meeker. The initials 'EV' (Emanuel Vandenbrandt) are engraved on one spoon handle and the other has 'WPM' (William Peter Meeker). Emanuel Vandenbrandt was William Parson's father-in-law and William Peter Meeker, his son and heir. The paper's focus is an adult William Parson Meeker. William worked as a merchant trader and obtained great wealth and social standing when money was plentiful in Philadelphia, America. He lost his fortune and reputation during his stay in England due to rising financial crises throughout the Napoleonic wars. He enjoyed a relationship with an English lady who bore him a son in 1810. Proof of the timing and circumstances surrounding William's death are yet to be located.

The parents for William born c1769 and his four siblings were Matthias and Jane (Parsons) Meeker who lived in New Jersey, America.¹ William worked as a merchant trader in the city of Philadelphia (the then American Capital city) towards the end of the eighteenth century.² He often worked in partnership with his cousin Samuel Meeker and/or Samuel Denman, his cousin's brother-in-law.³ They traded dry goods and hardware, sold land and William was a part owner of the schooner *Sally*, which transported cargo for sale from places such as Santiago de Cuba to Philadelphia.⁴

Recently, evidence of William's success came to light. A 'lost' Gilbert Stuart portrait of William painted c1803, appeared at a 2009 American art auction.⁵ The rich and famous including George Washington, America's first president, and the established merchant and landed classes commissioned Stuart to paint them.⁶ Thus, William likely sat for the artist to signal his own commercial achievements.

In 1806, it was a prosperous, self-confident and optimistic William Parsons Meeker who sailed to London, England with hope of increasing his wealth and social standing. He continued as a merchant trader with his business partner Samuel Denman who remained in Philadelphia. Denman advertised the wares that William bought and shipped from England and sold them to Americans at discount prices.⁷ While in England, William lived and worked at a large fashionable five-bedroom dwelling with attached warehouse and offices at 64 Basinghall Street, London.⁸ The property, which signified wealth and success for the occupant, cost William £40 rent/year and £8.00 Land Tax.⁹

By mid-1807, William found it difficult to pay his London creditors which caused an abrupt cessation of Denman's weekly advertisements. The seriousness of the situation is realised when William was declared bankrupt in London on 9th July 1808.¹⁰ Samuel Denman subsequently announced the dissolution of his trading partnership with William.¹¹

Each phase of the bankruptcy process was reported in England's newspapers including the individual's name, trading title and address.¹² It is easy to imagine the compound effect of this public exposure on debtors. For William, the worst was yet to come; liquidation of his assets was William's final 'fall from grace'. During December 1808, he was forced to sell his leasehold home and his *genteel effects* to repay creditors.¹³

It would be difficult to blame William entirely for his own financial losses when you consider how Britain's high taxes plus trade restrictions associated with the Napoleonic wars led to abject poverty among many of the British population and subsequent financial losses for merchants such as himself.¹⁴

William was now homeless, unemployed and without family support. He would be reliant on others to provide shelter and employment. It is possible that Emanuel Vandenbrant responded to William's predicament. Emanuel who was a London merchant 'taylor' (and owner of the cited silver serving spoon) lived and worked at 32 Maddox Street, St George, Hanover Square.¹⁵ His thirty-four-year-old spinster daughter Elizabeth Vandenbrant not only lived with her father, she also enjoyed a romantic relationship with the handsome Mr. Meeker.¹⁶ Their relationship may have motivated Emanuel to address some of William's needs.

Not long after William's house was sold, it was reported on 18th March 1809 that he would receive a bankrupt discharge certificate.¹⁷ This event was followed by the birth of his son in 1810.¹⁸ The Parish baptism entry dated 9th September 1810 for William Peter Meeker (my great great grandfather and owner of the second silver spoon) shows he was born on 1st January 1810 and that William and Elizabeth Meeker are his parents. Sadly, William's relationship with his father was cut short.

It is said (without evidence) that William Parson Meeker died at sea during a trip to America in 1812.¹⁹ If these claims are proven, it raises questions about William's timing of his travel. Sailing to America was risky business because it coincided with Britain and America's battles on the high seas.²⁰ Perhaps William's desire to return home was so great that it outweighed the dangers posed by British ships.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding William's travel and his death, William Peter Meeker lost his father and seemingly never learned of his American family. This assumption is based on the content of Matthias Meeker's will dated 22nd August 1826.²¹ All of Matthias' grandchildren except for William were mentioned as beneficiaries of his estate

Until further evidence is found, circumstances surrounding William's death and his motivation for travel are speculation. Bankruptcy stole William's aspirations and soon afterwards he became a parent. Would these combined events have challenged William to take control of his own destiny? If so, was he returning home to find opportunities which would allow him to regain an 'acceptable' lifestyle for himself and for his family in England?

Upon reflection, many of William Parson Meeker's descendants (including myself) have 'inherited' and acted upon a belief that we should help ourselves when faced with adversity and not sit back and wait to be rescued. Perhaps this was Mr. Meeker's gift to his descendants? After all, William wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Yet, two family heirlooms - silver serving spoons bear testimony to his fluctuations of wealth.

¹ Meeker Leroy J. *The Meeker family of New Jersey as revealed in the correspondence of Charles H. Meeker, Junior*. (Charleston, West Virginia, 1973), Chart 1V 193.

² Ancestry Newspapers.com *Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily*, (Philadelphia) 28 October, 1797. Advertisement for Meeker, Denman, & Co., Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2001.

³ Ancestry.com. *Sir Edmund West, comp. Family Data Collection- Births*. [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2001; *Family Data Collection- deaths*. [database on-line]: Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2001.; Find a Grave, database and images. *Memorial page for Samuel Denman* 2 July 1774–8 September 1816, Memorial ID: 11323461, Christ Church Burial Ground, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, USA. (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/11323461/samuel-denman>; (Accessed 17/5/22).

⁴ Google Books. *Hamilton County, Ohio- Deed Records. Deed Records-Deed Book D-1*. 10 March 1804 p 568: https://books.google.com.au/books?redir_esc=y&id=V5cl8YcmaNOC&q=meeker#v=snippet&q=meeker&f=false; Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, 1798-1962* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006.

⁵ Ahrens Elizabeth 2008 *Gilbert Stuart Blog*. Bill Parsons Meeker; a sad fate, but his image survives, testimony to troubled times, 17 August 2009. <http://gilbertstuart.blogspot.com/2009/08/bill-parson-meeker-sad-fate-but-his.html> .Accessed/ 2010.

⁶ Ancestry Newspapers.com - *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) 18 December 1801, p 4. (Downloaded on Mar 29, 2022); The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Gilbert Charles Stuart – American painter. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gilbert-Stuart>. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (Accessed 29/11/21).

⁷ My Heritage Ltd., *General Advertiser Philadelphia* April 11 1807 p 1. Newspapers.com [online database], <https://records.myheritagelibraryedition.com/research/record-10606-1016862/general-advertiser?snippet=9cd83b94803f28c2b30fc032bcec40a2> (Accessed 18/5/22); Ancestry Newspapers.com *General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, USA) 12 May 1807 p1. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013.

⁸ Ancestry.com. UK, *City and County Directories, 1766 - 1946* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: 1808, *Post Office Annual Directory UK*. p 195.

⁹ Ancestry.com. *London, England, Land Tax Records, 1692-1932* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Call Number MS 11316/327 for WP Meeker. City of London, Bassishaw Ward. 1808 p3. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

¹⁰ Office of the Commissioners of Bankrupts and Court of Bankruptcy: Bankruptcy Commission Files. Reference: 3/3214 In the matter of William Parsons Meeker of Basinghall Street, London, merchant, bankrupt, 9 July 1808. Held by: The National Archives (UK), Kew Reference: B 3/3214; *The National Register Bankrupts* July 10 1808.

¹¹ Newspapers.com. *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). 26 September 1808.

¹² British Library Newspapers *Morning Post*, July 15, p 4, Issue 1189, 1808: Meeting of creditors at Guildhall tomorrow https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/apps/doc/R3209480438/BNCN?u=slnsw_public&sid=bookmark-BNCN&id=1054ca88. (Accessed 28/3/21); British Library Newspapers *Hampshire Chronicle*, 18 July 1808, p. 1, "News." link-gale-com.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/apps/doc/JL3241392428/GDCS?u=slnsw_public&sid=bookmark-GDCS&id=dd3dbfdd. (Accessed 19/5/22); British Library Newspapers: *Morning Chronicle*, December 16, 1808, Issue:12353. Advertisements & Notices: Creditors of William Parsons Meeker may receive a dividend. Gale Document Number GALE|BB3207110111 link-gale-com.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/apps/doc/BB3207105291/GDCS?u=slnsw_public&sid=bookmark-GDCS&id=6193d48c. (Accessed 19/5/22).

¹³ British Library Newspapers: *Morning Post*, December 21, p 2, 1808. Advertisements & Notices. https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/apps/doc/R3209698555/BNCN?u=slnsw_public&sid=bookmark-BNCN&id=a31d174f. (Accessed 29/3/2022); British Library Newspapers, *Morning Chronicle* 20 March, 1809. link-gale-com.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/apps/doc/BB3207105939/GDCS?u=slnsw_public&sid=bookmark-GDCS&id=5dfe0e0d. (Accessed September, 2020).

¹⁴ Fontana History of Europe Library, 1967. Rudé George Revolutionary Europe 1783-1815. Collins, London, England.

¹⁵ Find My Past. *Westminster Rate Books* 1634-1900 for Emanuel Vandenbrandt, 1786, in Maddox Street, St George, Hanover Square; *Grosvenor Book, Dover, Conduit Wards Poor, Highway Rates* 1786-1789; *Lists of streets in the Parish, Persons in arrears* 1790. Find My Past, *Westminster Rate Books*; Ancestry.com UK, *Register of*

Duties paid for Apprentices' Indentures, 1710-1811. For Emanuel Vandenbrandt, City (Town) Registers 1788 Aug-1791.

¹⁶ Ancestry.com. *Westminster, London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1558-1812* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2020; Westminster, London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1558-1812, St. James, Piccadilly (St James Westminster) 1761-1786 London, England.

¹⁷ British Library Newspapers *Morning Chronicle*, (from the *London Gazette*, 18 March) March 20, 1809, Issue 12435. https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/apps/doc/BB3207105939/GDCS?u=slnsw_public&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=5dfe0e0d. (Accessed 18/5/22).

¹⁸ Essex Archives [Online] Essex England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials 1538-181 p 142. Reg no. 42 for William Peter Meeker. Certified Requested Image 76 Ref. D/P 302/1/7; Ancestry.com *Essex, England, Select Church of England Parish Registers, 1518-1960*. Ancestry.com. Operations, Inc.2014

¹⁹ Ahrens Elizabeth 2008 Gilbert Stuart Blog. *Bill Parson Meeker; a sad fate, but his image survives, testimony to troubled times* 17 August 2009. <http://gilbertstuart.blogspot.com/2009/08/bill-parson-meeker-sad-fate-but-his.html>.

²⁰ Juliet Gardiner 1995 *History Today: The companion to British history*. Eds. J Gardiner & Neil Whenborn. Anglo-American War 1812-15 p 26. Collins and Brown, London.

²¹ Ancestry.com. *Louisiana, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1756-1984* (Wills, 1805-1824) [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

Image: William Parson Meeker by Gilbert Stuart p1

Personal Knowledge: Elizabeth Ahrens: Image courtesy of James D. Julia Auctioneers. Auctioneer stated the present owner of this portrait was told at the time of its purchase that William Parsons Meeker died enroute to New Orleans in 1812.