

John George Molz and Sophia Catharina Gampper

From family history, I know that John George Molz was born sometime in 1832 in Bammental or Reilsheim, Baden, Germany. Bammental and Reilsheim are adjacent, about six miles southeast of Heidelberg. Baden is now the western part of the German state of Baden-Württemberg.

After his arrival in the United States, he wed Sophia Catharina Gampper, born 1833 in Stuttgart, Germany. They were married in New York City on 17 July 1854.

John and Sophia had four children –Ernestine Christine (b. 6 June 1856, m. Ernst Platz), John George (b. 8 Sep. 1858, m. Sophia Pauline Volz), Carolina (b. 30 Aug. 1860), and Susana (b. 20 June 1863).

During the late 1990s, I was fortunate to work in Washington, DC – directly across the street from the National Archives. At that time, all civil war military and pension records were maintained there only in their original paper format. So became a registered researcher and acquired the requisite white cotton gloves.

From those military records, I learned that John George Molz enlisted in Company E, 45th Regiment, New York Infantry on 11 Sep. 1861 in New York City. The records suggest he was a small, swarthy man – 5 feet 5 inches in height with a dark complexion, blue eyes, and light hair. His occupation was listed as tailor.

While the records are sketchy, the Muster Rolls from 28 Oct. 1861 and 1 Jan. 1862 show him as neither present nor absent. On 8 May 1862 (from the Muster Roll for March and April), he was present. However, the Muster Roll for May and June lists him as absent – sick in the hospital in Winchester, VA.

On 24 June 1862, the records list John as having deserted at Mount Jackson, VA. He must have returned to New York at that time, as his daughter Susana was born about a year later.

You can imagine my chagrin in learning that we were descended from a deserter. I couldn't imagine how I would tell my mother about this, as she spoke with pride about her civil war ancestor.

Then it occurred to me that this didn't make sense. The family's oral history told of Sophia receiving a widow's pension. Certainly there were no pensions for the widows of deserters, so back to the National Archives for more research. A check of the pension records showed her receiving benefits from John's service in the Pennsylvania Volunteers rather than the New York Infantry.

John enrolled in Company K, 98th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteers as a veteran on 23 Dec. 1863. He enlisted in the field at Brandy Station, Virginia. I was told by other researchers at the National Archives that "desertion" and re-enlistment were common. There was no process for taking leave and, according to the New York records, John had been ill. There may have also been a sign-up bonus for re-enlistment.

About four months later on 5 May 1864, John George Molz was killed in battle at Wilderness, VA – just 16 miles south from his point of re-enlistment.

A stop at the Visitors Center in Chancellorsville will pinpoint the location of the 98th Regiment on 5 May 1864. With this information, it is quite possible drive within a few yards of the 98th's engagement.

Because John George Molz is not listed in the records of nearby civil war cemeteries, he is assumed to be buried either in a grave marked as unknown or, more likely, in the field at Wilderness.

While John's military service is interesting enough, the story of Sophia's later life may be even more so. This information comes from the civil war pension records.

Upon John's death, Sophia applied for and received a widow's pension. She was awarded \$8 per month for herself and \$2 for each of her four minor children. Her pension continued until she married Jacob Yoos in Philadelphia the next year on 18 April 1865.

Apparently, Yoos was somewhat insane, had a penchant for strong drink, or both. In one incident, Yoos reportedly swallowed a box of matches after a night of heavy drinking. Then, he cut open his own throat in front of a mirror thinking he could retrieve the matches in this way.

After this, and having lived with Yoos for only three months, Sophia had him committed to an asylum in Frankfort, Philadelphia. She and her children returned to Brooklyn to live with her sister, and the pension just for her children was resumed.

While in New York, she kept house for Joseph Meier for several years. Without benefit of a divorce from Yoos and knowing that he was still alive, she married Meier on 13 Dec. 1870. Sophia bore Joseph two children – Sophia Catharina in July 1869 and Emma in August 1871.

Jacob Yoos eventually succeeded in taking his own life in Christmas Day, 1880. Joseph Meier died in Philadelphia on 8 June 1888.

On 19 March 1909, Sophia applied for reinstatement of her pension from her marriage to soldier John George Molz. In her mid seventies at that time, she was described as frail, uneducated, and speaking only broken English.

Sophia's request for reinstatement was initially declined 10 Sep. 1909 and, after a Special Examination, finally declined on 31 Oct. 1910. The basis was that the law allowed

pensions to be awarded only to women of “good character,” and that she knowingly maintained an adulterous relationship with Joseph Meier from 1870 (and before) until 1888.

Interestingly, the Special Examination held that if she married Meier again after the death of Yoos in 1880 and before the “good character” law of 1882, she would have “cured” her adultery and been pension eligible.

When discussed by the family, Sophia Catharina Gampper Molz Yoos Meier was always called “Grandma Meier.” In the 1900 Census, she listed her occupation as housekeeper, and in 1920 as Bag Dealer. While I do not know the date of her death, she must have lived in Bridesburg, Philadelphia for some time after 1910, as she was known to my mother (b. 1914).



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