

SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

On Decoration Day we lay flowers on the headstones of ancestors buried at Greenlawn Cemetery in Milford. After the memorial service, during which the Legion commander, the mayor, and a local Pastor have reminded us of the heroism of our departed veterans; of the price of liberty; and of the need for vigilance, the lead trumpet player in the Milford High School band plays *Taps* - followed by a haunting echo from afar. Then, the 21 shot salute followed by boys scrambling to recover the cartridges - just as I did in the '40s and my son did 30 years later. Each family member takes a handful of flowers to visit and decorate each grave - at our own pace - with our own thoughts. My eyes and thoughts stray to the site which one day will be mine for eternity. I can wait.

After laying flowers on the stones of the direct ancestors last May 30, crossing a lane to the one acre tract of the original Gatch Cemetery, we tried to read the names and dates. "Which Gatch was that? How are we related? What did they do?" The last question was easy to answer. The first two generations were farmers. How we are related requires research in *Descendants of Godfrey Gatch of Baltimore County, Maryland*, a remarkable family genealogy, woven into the history of early Methodism in Maryland, Virginia, and Ohio. Virginia Gatch Markham completed this 500 page classic in 1972 with a frontispiece quoting Deuteronomy 32:7, "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations." The book tells the not uncommon story of immigrants to America - the story of Godfrey and Maria Gatch who with their sons Conron, Conduce, and Nicholas fled the homeland in 1720, sailing to America in steerage with passage

paid by a seven year indenture contract. Godfrey and Maria were granted a passport by the Hon. Leonard Calvert, Governor of the Province of Maryland on December 26, 1727.

Whereas Godfrey Gash – and Maria, his wife hath made it appeare to me that they are free persons, suffer them to pass and repass through all parts of the province without lett molestation or interruption whatsoever, they behaving themselves according to law, given under my hand at this City of Annapolis this 26th day of December Anno Domini 1727.

The name was written – as it was usually pronounced though there was no trace in the family records that the name was ever so spelled. The legend is that Godfrey and Maria emigrated from Hesse-Darmstadt, Germany but no record of this has been found, nor the name of the ship on which they sailed to America. After he and his family had completed their servitude, Godfrey purchased 50 acres in the neighborhood of Baltimore City. At his death son Conduce inherited the farm. During servitude Conduce had been beaten merely for speaking in his native tongue. After inheriting the farm, Conduce married Presocia Burgan. They had eight children including sons Philip and Nicholas, numbers four and five.

The Gatches came to America because of Godfrey Gatch. My family came to Clermont County because of Philip Gatch. His father Conduce and family had struggled to assimilate. Conduce pushed the family in to the only religion in town - the Anglican church. To his dismay, his son Philip fell in with some neighborhood boys who slipped

in to night time meetings of a fringe group engaging in something called Methodism. Much more fun than the Book of Common Prayer. Exhortations, extemporaneous prayers, frenzied whirling which could lead to collapse in spiritual ecstasy captured young Philip's imagination. The problem was Methodism was being sold by John Wesley, who remained an Anglican. Thus, the followers of Wesley were targeted as Tories, who might report on the growing sentiment for freedom from the King and his Church.

Conduce laid down the law. Philip, you will never again attend a camp meeting. Philip disobeyed and the next time he took the oldest child, Frederick with him, knowing that if Frederick approved, father might also. The plan worked and the Gatch family embraced Methodism. Philip was eloquent in delivering the message and soon became a circuit rider traveling to homes where meetings would be held, sometimes for several days. Returning from one such meeting, Philip was stopped by locals not convinced of his fidelity to their cause. Pulled from his horse he was tarred and feathered, losing most of sight in his left eye.

After being ordained as a Methodist minister by Bishop Francis Asbury, he was assigned to the Virginia circuit. He married Elizabeth Smith, daughter of a plantation owner. Virginia law held that women were not fit to own real estate in their own name. Elizabeth's father transferred a significant estate to Philip, together with equipment, supplies, livestock and a number of slaves. Philip and Elizabeth fretted under the circumstances. In time Philip sold the estate. Under Virginia law he was not able to

manumit all the slaves. Those of a certain age range thus accompanied Philip and Elizabeth when they moved, first to what is now Newtown and then to Clermont County.

On the way home from Greenlawn that day I decided to drive over Milford Hill, anchored by the town's prominent water tower, a tower a few of my daring boyhood friends had climbed. I took that detour because I wanted to pass the stone house, my great, great grandfather, Lewis Gatch, built in 1812, shortly after following his uncle, Rev. Philip Gatch, to Ohio. Philip had urged his younger brother Nicholas to come west, but he sent his son instead. When we speak of that first Lewis we call him L1, to distinguish him from my grandfather Lewis called L2, your reader, L3, and my grandson, Lewis, L4. That day we talked about L1 and the family he fathered. He had eleven children, the oldest, son John, my great, great grandfather, and the youngest, son Oliver, my great, great Uncle in connection with his Civil War duty. Oliver fought in the Civil War.

Driving past the old homestead, where those eleven children lived, something odd happened. An image of Oliver flashed across my mind, or perhaps past my eyes. Like a scintillating scotoma - only it wasn't. Perhaps an image of someone in uniform. I looked again at the house but saw nothing. "Did anyone see that?" I asked. No one saw or heard anything, not even our usually alert grandchildren - with their noses in their phones.

By the time we turned in our driveway I had convinced myself that Oliver had tried to contact me. That afternoon I sat alone in the backyard enjoying a sunny but turbulent spring day. Something was definitely in the unsettled atmosphere. As I admired the swaying branches of our magnificent oak trees I drifted towards sleep. Then Oliver came again. I cannot explain the technology, just how we communicated, but a connection was made. I realized he wanted me to do something. What I asked? To preserve the fading memory of the role that he and his brother Charles had played at Ford's theater the night of April 14, 1865 and on the morning of the 15th.

Oliver had selected me to channel the most important event of his life. I signaled that I would try, but hoped he would explain why he asked me out of the batches of Gatches spread throughout this land. His answer to that question, and the history to be channeled follows - in the first person.

Lewis, I thought of you when you passed the house this morning. When I waved, I saw that you noticed me. I could tell you were receptive. You are the right Gatch for several reasons. My father Lewis is your great-great-grandfather. My oldest brother John, is your great-grandfather. And there is another family connection, though less direct. Your great-grandfather on your father's maternal side is Charles Greeno, born in Troy, Pennsylvania, enlisted in 1861, a second Lieut., Company C, 7th Pa. Cav. 80th Regiment. By September 19, 1863, when the 80th Pa. fought with my 89th Ohio at Chickamauga, Charles was Capt. of Company H. At the end of that rout, the 80th Pennsylvania avoided the capture suffered by my regiment. When he mustered out August 23, 1865, C. L. Greeno as he was known thereafter, held his final rank as Lt. Colonel.

I did not know Col. Greeno during the great war, but soon did thereafter. He received a 5 acre land grant in Milford on which he built a three-story Queen Ann Victorian mansion for his wife, Lucy. He started the Greeno Mattress Company in Cincinnati and, making good use of his product, fathered 11 children. A daughter, Mary, became the wife of your grandfather, Lewis.

Not only did the 80th Pennsylvania survive Chickamauga, it went on to participate in the capture of Jefferson Davis in Atlanta. Col. Greeno entertained admirers in Milford, often from horseback in uniform, telling how Davis attempted to escape the bivouac which held him and his entourage after dark one night. How he disguised himself as a female by donning a woman's cloak and making for the women's latrine. A briar snagged the garment pulling it back to reveal the riding boots on the Confederate president who thus exposed himself as a coward, fleeing in women's clothing, leaving his family behind.

Finally, Lewis, I selected you to preserve the undisputed facts of a tragic story. After three generations no one personally remembers an ancestor whom they had never seen. Memories fade. Stories change in the telling. The solution is the written word. And you belong to a club whose existence depends on the written word. When I learned that on April 17th, two days past the anniversary of the death of our savior, Abraham Lincoln, you were to write and read a paper to a collection of men, many of whom are students of and writers about the Civil War, I knew that you were my Gatch. Your effort will be an

historical account that will be preserved forever in physical ink on indestructible parchment bound in sturdy volumes stored in the Club's chambers and in the vaults of the Hamilton County Historical Society. An account that I and my brother never recorded on paper for privacy reasons. The only written record until now can be found in an article in the December 1908 edition of McClure's Magazine. That author quoted me liberally, but not accurately. I submitted to the interview after my family persuaded me to tell the story for publication, probably thinking it would die with me. Now, my goal with you as medium is to correct the record.

I grew up like all farm children in Milford, learning to work the fields, prune fruit trees, harvest the crops, tend the livestock, ride horses, direct plow horses turning the soil each spring. To hunt, fish, live outdoors, survive as well as any of the Indians who lived on these same grounds before we arrived. What grounds? Our mutual ancestor, the Rev. Philip Gatch, my uncle and your great, great, great uncle, with \$920 purchased 230 acres from John Nancarrow, a Revolutionary war soldier who took the land in lieu of pay. The city of Milford now stands on part of that fertile acquisition. You have the recorded deed from the United States to John Nancarrow signed by Thomas Jefferson, notarized by James Madison. And, you also hold the subsequent deed from Nancarrow to Philip Gatch, the first real estate developer in Clermont County - among other talents. Aren't deeds a blessing? A recorded public document preserved forever - unless the courthouse burns down.

After chores, we liked to follow the plow along the bottom lands of the farm my brother John purchased in 1849, along the East Fork of the Little Miami River. The overturned soil revealed articles of the Little Miami Indians who lived on those grounds for centuries. Arrowheads, Tomahawk stones, bowls, grinding stones, hammerheads, bone spoons and knives. You and your brother did the same thing as you grew up on that 100 acre farm in the stone house built by the first owner, John Pollock, in 1820.

In my 22nd year my tranquil life ended suddenly when our Union reverberated with the attack on Fort Sumter. I readily volunteered when Col. John Marshall of Brown County formed the 89th Ohio Volunteer Infantry on August 1, 1862 at Camp Dennison. Patriots from Highland, Brown and Clermont County signed up. The 89th was a three year regiment, quite a commitment, but one I made willingly. After all, I was protecting not only the Union but more immediately my family, our home, our farm a short distance to the east. Mustering in and training on the very grounds where I had hunted and camped all my life gave me great comfort. Col. Marshall assigned me to Company G. Upon issuance of my uniform and a Springfield percussion rifle-musket I was ready. I carried my own knife - a well honed Bowie that father gave me at age 12.

Soon after I enlisted, Col. Marshall recognized my skills and made me a first Sgt. The following month, to fill a vacancy, I was promoted to first Lieut. I was glad to become an officer. But, sorry to give up my musket. Able to drop a squirrel from the top of an 80 foot beech tree, I knew I could drop a much larger target - a traitor - within 100 yards. Instead I was armed with a Remington percussion revolver and a foot officer sword,

foretelling the hand to hand combat required of an officer. Lewis, one hears them referred to as “rebels,” but I was there - they were nothing but traitors.

The next spring influenza put me in the regimental hospital from March 21 to May 1, 1863. Upon release from the hospital, to my surprise, I was promoted to Captain to replace Capt. William Haight, who had resigned his commission.

Discovering that the country boys needed little training in weaponry or wilderness living, Col. Ross declared the one thousand officers and men of the 89th ready for combat shortly after its formation. No waiting for an assignment. Our commanders learned that the traitors planned a siege of Cincinnati. The 89th was attached to Army of Kentucky. We crossed the Ohio on a pontoon bridge to a camp three miles south of Covington. The siege, if one was planned, never happened. Perhaps they learned that the 89th now stood in their way. The 89th then served in West Virginia, and in early 1863 was ordered to Tennessee to join Gen. Rosencrans. After remaining in Murfreesboro Road until June. Our regiment joined in the movement against Bragg at Tullahoma. Then on to our Waterloo - the unplanned battle at Chickamauga Creek. On the second day, September 20th we ran out of ammunition. Our commander from well to the rear, realized our plight and ordered us to retreat. We never received the order. The traitors captured the messenger. Surrounded, we had no choice. The heart of the 89th beat strong but most of the body belonged to the South.

The only good news I heard was that as a Captain I would be confined at Camp Libby, a prison in Richmond reserved for Union officers. Perhaps I imagined clean sheets, fresh pork and a pleasant prison yard. I could not have been more mistaken.

Conditions at Libby were wretched. On the three day train trip to Richmond they gave us only a few hard crackers and for two days after arrival, we received nothing but bad water. They just weren't prepared for the capture of a full company. Just as we weren't prepared for defeat. We were holed up and jammed into every nook and corner of this converted tobacco warehouse. At night the floor was covered, every square inch of it. We were packed in a huge, improbable box like nocturnal sardines. I was on the second floor in a 45 x 100 area, called the Chickamauga Room. The windows were open and barred, but we could not go within 3 feet of a window. The room had no furniture, nothing but an occasional bench. We had to sleep "spoon fashion" - head to foot in alternating rows along the floor. We were packed so tightly that as we slept, the highest ranking man called out "spoon over" throughout the night to enable us to roll over in unison.

After seven months at Libby, they transferred me to Macon, then Charleston, then Columbia, and finally to Charlotte, North Carolina to Camp Asylum. Having endured 17 months behind bars, and sensing that the Union might be close to victory causing the guards to be less vigilant, I decided to escape. Two other captains and I had built a sufficient purse to bribe one of our guards, not only for an unlocked gate, but also for a Bowie knife which I took. With the west wind of freedom in my face I became that

teenage Ohio farm boy living off the land, following its hills, vales and forests for protection. We split up. In less than four weeks I covered the 450 miles to Knoxville. Not so the other two who were recaptured.

In Knoxville Gen. Stoneman ordered transportation for me to go to Secretary of War Stanton in the nation's capital to give my report on what happened to Company G at Chickamauga, and to be reassigned. I thought the prison time might accelerate my three year commitment. It didn't. I reminded him I had received no pay for a year and a half. He added to my orders that I was to report to the Paymaster to collect my \$130 per month. I further reminded him that I had not seen my family for almost two years. He added a short furlough to Milford. My brother, Dr. Charles Gatch, four years my senior, served as the surgeon at Camp Dennison throughout the war. When I arrived in Milford he too was on furlough and was thus able to go with me to Washington to give my report to Stanton, to receive a new assignment, and to receive my back pay.

Our several day train ride couldn't have been more pleasant. After a year and a half in a series of filthy compounds, crowded with sick and dying soldiers, uncertain of the future, I reveled in the space, the fresh food, the news of our impending victory. We arrived on Good Friday, April 14th. Charles and I, in full uniform, reported to Sec. Stanton who personally received the written orders and then my verbal report. Charles then answered questions about his service as a surgeon at Camp Dennison. Stanton took a few notes, thanked us for our service, and directed us to the Paymaster. We were glad

to have the time with Mr. Stanton, an extremely busy man. We had no idea we were to be with him that night.

Since Lee had surrendered the prior week and victory was being celebrated in the streets Sec. Stanton had not reassigned me. We found the Paymaster leaving his office. He pleaded a social engagement and asked me to return the following morning. We had no choice but to remain in Washington, despite our plans to return to Ohio that night. But we did not mind because we learned in a daily paper that Pres. And Mrs. Lincoln along with General and Mrs. Grant would attend a play that night at Ford's theater. Here was an opportunity to see two great men, perhaps to shake their hands.

Ford's theater on 10th St. Was a newly enhanced playhouse where the most brilliant audiences in Washington were to be seen. Management had offered Mr. & Mrs. Lincoln the use of boxes seven and eight, known as the President's box. When used by him the center partition was removed to create a single large box.

After dining at the Pennsylvania House, we walked through the crowded streets, enjoying a balmy spring evening. People were swarming to see the sights and mingle in the excitement that followed on the news of Lee's surrender. We went quite early but found all the orchestra seats taken. We bought unreserved seats in the balcony in the "dressing circle". Seats far to the right side facing the stage. Our seats were near the end of a row and close to what we later found out was the President's box. From where

we were seated, we could see the rear of the box, but not the front. The passage that led to the box entrance was to our right. Had we reached over, we could have touched the sentry stationed at the Presidents box.

The play was well under way when we heard a hearty cheering. In a moment we saw the presidential party. Mr. Lincoln came first, followed by Mrs. Lincoln, Ms. Harris, and Maj. Rathbone. Gen. Grant and his wife were not in the party. Lincoln walked slowly, his great body bent forward, his shoulders, wearing a noticeable stoop. He carried his high silk hat in his left hand and held it in front of him with its top down. His smile was a sad smile we thought for a man responding to such a deafening ovation as came from every part of the house. He entered the box first, followed by the others. Then the sentry closed the door shutting off our view of him. The crowd continued its wild cheering. Mr. Lincoln stepped to the box rail and acknowledge the applause with dignified waves, and never to be forgotten smiles. He sat down, and the performance resumed.

We heard him chuckle a few times at the light hearted performance. During a lull in the action of a scene, Charles, and I, cramped from sitting so long in one position got up to stretch. While we were standing in the aisle, close to the wall, Charles called my attention to a young man apparently watching the play while leaning against the wall near the entrance to the president's box. Charles remarked on this young man's striking appearance. I agreed thinking him to be quite handsome but with a haughty demeanor.

We noticed that he wore heavy riding boots with spurs, a rough blue denim coat, and a slouch hat, slung behind his head on a neckstrap. Why would one dress like that for the theater?

The third act continued. I saw the stranger edge towards the box as he watched the play. He entered the passageway and closed the door. In the next instant we were startled by the loud report of a pistol shot. People left their seats only to resume them again when cries of "down in front" came from different parts of the house. The crowd thought the shot was part of the play. The men in the orchestra who knew better, looking around wildly. Then the bluish white smoke drifted slowly out of the president's box, over a woman's heart rending shriek.

Then the crowd went mad. A wilder sight I never saw, not even in battle. Stunned at first, the people awoke and blazed with fierce passion against the murderer, who had in effect confessed to the crime by leaping down to the stage, holding the bloody knife with which he had sliced Maj Rathbone's arm. Brandishing the weapon he shouted *Sic semper tyrannis* and scrambled off the stage. In less than a minute after the shot was fired someone called to me to bring a doctor. I answered that my brother was a surgeon and a man literally dragged us into the box where the wounded president sat unconscious - his head fallen on his breast. On entering we found Ms. Harris and Maj. Rathbone opening his collar in an effort to locate the wound.

My brother introduced himself as a physician, and took over the examination. He pulled apart the upper garments as well as he could. He raised the president to a more upright position. In the process the index finger on his left hand came in contact with a jagged hole in the back of Mr. Lincoln's head below the left ear. Withdrawing his hand and observing the victim's brains on his finger, he turned to Maj. Rathbone and said quietly, "Here is the wound, and it is fatal."

While we laid the president on the floor and Charles held a handkerchief over the wound, Maj. Rathbone sent a messenger for Surgeon General Barnes.

No one seemed to know just what to do. Maj Rathbone was suffering from his wound. Ms. Keane, the star of the show, was with Ms. Harris ministering to Mrs. Lincoln. It seemed, for a few moments, as if we were all paralyzed. My brother broke the silence in our little group around the dying president by calling Maj. Rathbone's attention to the fact that while Mr. Lincoln was in a critical condition to be moved, he ought, if possible, to be got to a private house, to some more fitting place for the end that was so imminent. Maj. Rathbone agreed.

Accordingly, my brother and I and several soldiers who entered the box raised the president from the floor. We had put him on a shutter that was used to separate the boxes, because of the difficulty of supporting his long limp body. We carried him through the passage way, down the stairs and out of the theater. There was silence as we passed. No one spoke as we moved slowly across the street. The crowd parted to let us

through, and we carried the president up the steps of the house where a man standing outside, said we might come in. He showed the way to his own room, a small one on the first floor. We laid the president on this young man's bed, who we learned was William Clark of Company D, 13th, Massachusetts, detailed to the quartermaster's department, and was lodging in this house, which belonged to a tailor named Peterson. Soon there was a gathering of great physicians in a hopeless battle against death. I don't know if Mrs. Lincoln heard my brother's pronouncement, but Mr. Lincoln's death rattles surely forewarned her.

As the great men of the nation began to assemble around the deathbed, my brother and I withdrew to the windows of the parlor where we kept silent watch through the night. Mrs. Lincoln was there most of the time, and Capt. Robert Lincoln and others came and went. Stanton came and spent the night between the little room where Lincoln lay and a makeshift conference room. The vigil continued. Gray dawn streaked the window on the morning of the 15th. Dr. Stone, holding the president's hand and feeling that his life was fast ebbing away, asked Mr. Stanton the time. Stanton, taking his watch out, replied, 7:22. Dr. Stone, placing the president's hand gently across his breast, said the president was dead. Mr. Stanton said, "Now he belongs to the ages."

Charles and I helped carry the body to the hearse. Thinking it might be important if we were called to testify, we returned to Ford's Theatre to inspect the crime scene and piece together our recollections of what transpired. We were surprised to find soldiers milling

about but no security or guarding of the Presidential box. We decided to measure the distance between the balcony and the stage. It was 14 feet.

We finally went back to the Pennsylvania House, had breakfast and returned to the paymaster where I received my due. We left for home the same day, devastated by the memories of what we had seen. Charles packed the handkerchief with the precious Savior's blood. We also had retained Mr. Lincoln's cuffs, which Charles had removed while attempting to locate the wound.

We thought that we might soon be back to testify at a trial. Mr. Stanton knew us from the report meeting in the afternoon, and from our presence at the all night vigil. If he summoned we were ready. The assassin's welcome demise soon made a trial for him unnecessary.

As we prepared for the journey home, I sank into a deep despair. The horrible site of the president's brains on my brother's hand came again and again. What a terrible coincidence that we happened to be at the play and in that spot in the theater. Charles realized my anguish. Being older, and having spent four years repairing ravaged body parts, or removing parts beyond repair, he seemed able to deal with the terrible wound even though it had been inflicted on our great president. Soon after the train departed he sought to comfort me - to help me understand what had happened - to determine its meaning for the rest of our lives and for our nation. "Oliver," he said, "I can tell how upset you are. What are you thinking?"

I said, “Brother, we were there, just outside the box. We saw Booth. He didn’t fit. With those boots and riding coat he wasn’t there to see a play. Charles, we saw him close to our President. We saw him. We should have said something.”

Lewis Gatch
The Literary Club
April 17, 2017