

# Who Was Ralph Elton DeCator's Mother?

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My great-great-grandfather Ralph Elton DeCator (originally Decatur) was born in Nichols, Tioga County, New York, on 5 August 1853, and died in Owego, Tioga County, on 11 June 1926. He was married twice. His first wife was Rosalia E. Bonham, whom he married at Candor, Tioga County, on 17 May 1873. After she died of consumption, Ralph married on 20 March 1886 at Owego, as his second wife, my great-great-grandmother Jennie Martha Ellis (1867-1930). Their first child was my great-grandmother Rose Lorena, born 2 September 1887. My grandmother, Laura Lucille (Carpenter) Webber (1920-1990), was a daughter of Rose Lorena DeCator (1887-1971) and her husband Clayton Enoch Carpenter (1888-1972).

My grandmother Laura's cousin Francis William DeCator (1915-1993), the son of Rose Lorena's brother John William Pierce DeCator (1892-1952), was an avid genealogy hobbyist. Francis communicated to me, in a letter dated 25 August 1977, that the father of Ralph Elton DeCator was Ralph Decatur, who according to the 1875 New York state census for Nichols had been born in Broome County, New York; had been married once; and was 66 years old at that time. Francis wrote that the mother of Ralph Elton DeCator was Sally R. Hammond, who according to the 1875 census had been born in Ontario County, New York; had been married twice; and was then 61 years old.

With reference to the civil records pertaining to Ralph Elton DeCator's marriages and death, Francis added these comments:

There has been some question as to the mother's name. In the record of deaths, book 7, page 20, the mother is listed as Laura Hammel; but marriage records for both marriages and all census records say Sarah or Sally Hammond.

Nineteenth-century censuses do not give a married woman's maiden surname. Francis's point was that Ralph Elton's death record lists his mother as Laura Hammel; that the records for both of Ralph Elton's marriages say Sarah or Sally Hammond; and that census records say Sarah or Sally. In a follow-up letter on 11 January 1978, Francis expanded on his observations regarding the name of the mother of Ralph Elton DeCator:

The mother of Ralph E. DeCator, as far as I have been able to determine, is Sally R. Hammond. The 1850 Federal Census lists the name as Selora, and Sally or Laura are both nicknames for Selora. The 1855 State Census [and] the 1860 Federal Census use the name Sally, and the name Sarah is shown on the 1865 [and] 1875 State Census and the 1870 Federal Census. The marriage records for Ralph E. DeCator to Jennie M. Ellis on March 20, 1886, show his mother's name to be Sally R. Hammond. I have no information on the ancestry of Sally R. Hammond except that she may have been born in Ontario County, and the 1855 census indicates that she had lived in Nichols, N.Y., 36 years at that time.

According to the 1850 federal census for Nichols, the household of Ralph Decatur (age 40) included Selora (age 36), Catherine (age 11), Lucy (age 8), Oliver (age 5), and John (age 1). Ralph Elton had not been born yet. According to the 1855 state census for Nichols, this Decatur household then consisted of Ralph (age 45, years of residency in Nichols not given), his wife Sally (age 40, 36 years of residency), and their children Sarah (age and years of residency, 11), Samuel (age and years of residency, 8), John (age and years of residency, 6), and Ralph (age and years of residency, 4). Ralph's and Sally's

counties of birth were not given. All the children were born in Tioga County. The full actual name of the daughter listed as Lucy in 1850 and as Sarah in 1855 was Sarah Lucy. And the son listed as Oliver in 1850 and as Samuel in 1855 was Samuel Oliver, who in adulthood usually went by his middle name. On the 1880 federal census, for example, "Decater, Oliver" (age 29, born in New York), his wife Christine (age 25, born in Michigan), his son Abe (age 2, born in Michigan), and his mother Laura (age 65, born in New York), were living in Candor. And on the special schedule for veterans and widows of veterans from the 1890 federal census, he is listed in Owego as "Oliver S. Decator."\*

My grandmother's cousin Francis DeCator settled on Hammond as Selora Decatur's likely maiden name, even though the sources – scant though they are – also give the option of Hammel. But it is worth noting that the Ralph Decatur family, in Nichols, had neighbors named Hammel.

In the 1855 census for Nichols, the Decatur family was living in dwelling 19 as family 20. Also in that census, living in dwelling 25 as family 25 – six houses away – we find Oliver Hammel (age 59, 40 years of residency in Nichols), born in Orange County, New York; with his wife Sarah (age 55, 50 years of residency), whose county of birth was said to be "unknown." With them in their household were a daughter Anna Hammel (age and years of residency, 36), a granddaughter Catharine Cole (age and years of residency, 17), and a son-in-law David Wilber (age 30, 8 years of residency), all born in Tioga County. Five years later, in the 1860 census for Nichols, the "Ralph De Catur" family was living in dwelling 382 as family 354, with the following persons in the household: Ralph (age 47), Sally (age 46), Sarah L. (Age 17), Samuel O. (Age 13), John (age 10), and Ralph (age 8). All were born in New York. Oliver Hamel (age 70) and Sarah Hamel (age 68), both born in New York, were living in dwelling 285 as family 357, only three houses away. And one of the two households that were enumerated between the Decatur and Hammel households, was that of David Wilber (age 42), living with a wife Anna (age 33) and a son Horace (age 5) in dwelling 383, as family 355. We recall that five years earlier, on the 1855 census, David Wilber was living with the Hammels, and was identified as their son-in-law. So, the immediate neighborhood in which the Decatur family was living in 1860 was a Hammel family neighborhood. Was Selora Decatur living next door to a sister, and three doors down from their parents?

Apart from Ralph Elton DeCator's death certificate identifying his mother as "Laura Hammel," there is no additional documentation available, in terms of birth or probate records, to confirm a relationship between the Decatur family and the Hammels. But if Oliver and Sarah Hammel's ages as given in the 1860 census were correct or essentially correct – putting their births in 1790 and 1792 respectively – then Selora Decatur (born in 1814 or 1815) was of the right age to have been their daughter. And Selora gave the names Oliver and Sarah to two of her children. My conclusion, therefore, is that Ralph Elton DeCator's mother was indeed Selora R. Hammel (not Hammond), and that she was probably a daughter of Oliver and Sarah Hammel of Nichols.

It is true that the number of years Sally Decatur was said on the 1855 census to have been living in Nichols, and the number of years of such residency given for Oliver and Sarah Hammel in 1855, do not match. Sally's 36 years in Nichols calculates to her having moved there in 1819, after having been born elsewhere in 1814 or 1815 (in Ontario County, as per the 1875 New York state census). But Oliver and Sarah's 40 and 50 years in Nichols, respectively, would calculate to Oliver having moved to Nichols in 1814 or 1815, and to Sarah having been there since 1804 or 1805. If these data are correct, then a daughter born to them in 1814 or 1815 would have been born in Nichols. Experience has shown, however, that such census data are often incorrect – just as the ages of people as given in census records are also often incorrect. I believe that the ages given for both Oliver and Sarah Hammel in 1855 are incorrect. On the 1860 census – five years later – Oliver was 11 years

older, and Sarah was 13 years older. Obviously, they should have been only five years older! So, I do not consider their stated years of residency in Nichols to be reliable, either – especially since those years of residency seem to be given in round numbers.

Oliver Hammel has been identified by Hammel family researchers as a son of Isaac K. Hammel, who was born in Orange County, New York, on 24 March 1770, and died in Erin, Chemung County, New York, on 4 February 1861. Isaac is buried in the Van Duzer Cemetery in Veteran, Chemung County, together with his wife Rachel Van Houten. Rachel was born in Pompton Plains, Morris County, New Jersey, on 21 February 1786, and died in Erin on 23 March 1849. She was too young to have been Oliver's mother, and her being 16 years younger than her husband suggests strongly that she was a second wife. Rachel has no known associations with Orange County, where Oliver Hammel and his presumptive father Isaac Hammel were both born. Rachel's parents, Adrian and Ann (Saunders) Van Houten, and their family, moved from Morris County to Tompkins County, New York. It would seem that Rachel here met and married Isaac Hammel, who had come to Tompkins County from Orange County, and who was now a widower with three children: Oliver, born 1790; Isaac, born 1804; and Belinda, born 1807. Isaac and Rachel then had a son together, John A. Hammel, who was born in Tompkins County on 29 April 1826, and who is also buried in the Van Duzer Cemetery (having died on 14 December 1896). The identity of Isaac Hammel's first wife (the likely mother of Oliver Hammel) is unknown.

The parents of Isaac K. Hammel were Bryant and Blandina (Van Aken) Hammel. Bryant was born in Ireland in 1725 and emigrated to America in 1746. He was of Goshen, Orange County, when his will was probated on 22 November 1792. Blandina was born in Machackemeck (Deerpark), Orange County, on 20 October 1743, to Abraham and Jannetje (De Witt) Van Aken. Through her mother Jannetje, Blandina descended from several prominent New Netherland Colony families.

Another interesting datum pertaining to Oliver Hammel is that he served in the War of 1812, in Lieutenant Colonel Philetus Swift's New York Volunteer Regiment. Records indicate that he was paid as a Private in Captain Thomas Dougherty's Company from May 23, 1812, to July 23, 1812, with the notation "In Service at Black Rock, N.Y."; and that he was paid as a Private in Ensign Isaac Cradit's Company from Nov. 23, 1812, with the notation "In Service at Black Rock, N.Y.," but with the further notation "Deserted."

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\*"Samuel O. Decatur" enlisted in Company H, 5th Regiment, New York Cavalry, on 30 December 1863, claiming to be 19 years old. He was discharged when his true age (16) was discovered. In later years he also served in the Regular Army. "Decator, Samuel O.," enlisted on 17 August 1872, and was mustered into Company E, 22nd Regiment, United States Infantry. He was discharged at Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory (now North Dakota) on 19 July 1877. A notation entered in the record of his discharge states: "Character Worthless." By 1880 Samuel Oliver Decatur had returned to Tioga County. Francis DeCator passed on to me the family tradition that Oliver was a heavy drinker, and that this met with the strong disapproval of his sister-in-law Jennie (Ellis) DeCator, who was a devout Methodist and a committed abstainer. She persuaded her husband Ralph Elton to change the spelling of his surname to DeCator, in order to distance himself – and her – from his brother Oliver.