Imagine my reaction when I received an e-mail from a park ranger employed with the Vicksburg National Military Park that answered one research question and finally closed a chapter in regards to an ancestor's life. For more than thirty years my mother and I had been trying to locate an elusive Benjamin Franklin Jenkins who fought and died in the Civil War. The search for Benjamin became our ‘holy grail’ of genealogical research as we disproved one family myth after another in our attempt to learn his true story.

Our tangled path of myths and false information all began with my father’s early years, growing up on the family farm in rural Missouri during the 1940s. Family members from many generations of both the paternal and maternal sides of the family surrounded him, teaching him the family lore. Perhaps, since
he was the youngest of the group, older family members found him eager to listen to their stories.

The oldest member living on the farm was Louisa Catherine Jenkins Finley Wilson, known as ‘Grandma Wilson,’ my father’s great-grandmother. Although confined to a wheelchair, Grandma Wilson was mobile enough to keep an eye on her young great-grandson. He, in turn, although not quite old enough to help by operating the farm equipment, was able to assist Great-grandmother, keeping her company during the long, busy days on the farm.

One of Grandma Wilson’s stories was my father’s favorite, about her own father, whom she had never known. He had died in the Civil War, in the summer of 1863; she had been born in April of that year.

When my mother began researching this line of my father’s genealogy, he was quite anxious for her to discover the details surrounding this mysterious great-grandfather.

This grandfather was believed to have fought for the Confederate Army and, was believed, killed in 1863 at the Battle of Gettysburg. My mother searched through the Missouri Confederate military records trying to find this information so she could begin putting the pieces of the puzzle together. She found no Confederate service records for Benjamin Jenkins.

Undefeated, we took a family trip one year to Gettysburg National Park on an unforgettably solemn and patriotic Memorial Day Weekend, only to discover that Confederate Soldiers certainly weren’t buried there! Nine at the time, I had just begun to accompany my Mother on genealogical research trips to the library. I loved it, and our search for Benjamin Jenkins hooked me!

Eventually, my mother went back to the information for Grandma Wilson’s generation in hopes of discovering a missed clue. Benjamin and his wife Elizabeth Marie Hicks had four daughters. Although the oldest two, Sarah and Philena, were born in Missouri, the younger two, Lacy and Louisa (Grandma Wilson) had been born in Iowa.

Perhaps Benjamin had not been a Confederate soldier at all. The family had previously lived in Missouri, where both Union and Confederate loyalties were strong, Benjamin could have been a soldier in the Union Army. Once again, we requested the Military records from the National Archives and this time a confirmed match was located. Success! One myth was dispelled when we learned Benjamin Franklin Jenkins volunteered with the Union Army as a Private in Iowa’s 34th Regiment, Company I.

Benjamin’s service records indicated that he reported for duty in June of 1863 after his release from the hospital at Benton Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri. He was then wounded at the Siege of Vicksburg on July 4th, 1863. His death the next month at the U.S. General Hospital...
at Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri, on August 27th, was caused by the amputation of his right arm. Another myth dissolved. Benjamin had not been mortally wounded in the Battle of Gettysburg, but instead, sometime during the final days of the Siege of Vicksburg. These events both occurred in July of 1863, which could have helped create the myth that Benjamin was at Gettysburg.

This line of the family tree lay dormant for some years while other lines were researched. I recently returned to Benjamin Jenkins’ story in an effort to find more details of his life and military service. Interested in discovering the movements of Benjamin’s Civil War regiment, I consulted *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*.

Volume III of this resource contains “Regimental Histories” including details of the movements and engagements for the infantry of the 34th Regiment. Although the regiment lost a total of 258 men, only eleven of the enlisted men and one officer were mortally wounded in battle. Disease took the lives of 246 enlisted men and officers. These statistics seemed to indicate that, although the regiment was in service from October of 1862 until August of 1865, it never encountered heavy fighting with large numbers of troops.

At this point in the search, I turned to the World Wide Web to find more information about the Siege of Vicksburg through the Vicksburg National Military Park’s Web pages. By taking an online virtual tour of the park, I learned that Iowa has a state monument on the grounds. The Web page about Iowa’s participation at Vicksburg also contained links leading to information about the numerous regiments that participated in the siege. I read over the information for the 34th Regiment, but nothing seemed to indicate the soldiers had been placed near any heavy battles. The first link I checked had photos of a smaller Iowa monument, now located on private land. It had been vandalized so the plaque and inscription were missing. Then, I discovered in the regimental listing,
a link to a 34th Iowa Regiment, Detached.\textsuperscript{11} I clicked on that link to learn that this small group of men from the 34th served at the ‘Battery Benton’ as the area is now named by the Park Service, in honor of the ironclad USS Benton that supplied the guns for this battery.\textsuperscript{12}

Hopeful that the defaced plaque or Battery Benton might lead to more clues, I sent a short e-mail to the Vicksburg National Military Park to learn if the words on the plaque had been recorded before its destruction. Unfortunately, I learned that the monument was vandalized in the 1930s and no record remains of the inscription on the plaque.\textsuperscript{13} Feeling that my search had come to a halt along these avenues, I set my research aside in an attempt to find some other unexplored angle.

Still, I could not forget about the soldiers from the 34th Iowa, Detached, and their contribution to the Siege of Vicksburg at Battery Benton. The story of these men begged to be found? Could Benjamin Jenkins have received that fateful wound causing the loss of his right arm, and eventually his life, while serving at Battery Benton?

Once again, I sent a short, concise e-mail message to the staff at Vicksburg National Military Park asking for any information about the names of the soldiers serving at Battery Benton. I also asked in my query, that a check with the park’s historian or librarian be made for any additional information on record about an action at the area now known as the Battery Benton.

Their reply I received a few weeks later, the e-mail mentioned at the beginning of this saga, brought excitement and joy. It confirmed that Benjamin Franklin Jenkins had served at Vicksburg but had died after receiving wounds at Battery Benton.\textsuperscript{14} A park ranger at Vicksburg checked the Official Records for the list of casualties involving a mortar attack on Battery Benton on July 1, 1863, but it was missing! However, after a further check with the park historian, a letter was found describing the incident at Battery Benton. The letter listed several names, including Benjamin Jenkins, 34th Iowa, Company I, who died of wounds, August 27, 1863, at Jefferson Barracks.\textsuperscript{15}

The letter detailed the events that took place between Battery Benton (Union) and South Fort (Confederate), as remembered by Warren S. Dungan of the 34th Iowa. He stated:

The guns used by Gen. Herron at ‘No. 1’ were borrowed from the Navy
and J. Frank Reed, Acting Master from the gunboat Benton, was in command. There were two of them. They were 42-pounder rifle guns. A detail of 37 men from the 34 Iowa was made to man those guns. Not an artilleryman was there to aid in the work. On the night of June 30, 1863, Col. Edward Higgins, commanding the river batteries, placed a large Morter [sic] in south fort (so now called). Our battery opened doing much damage, the morning of July 1st. After the rebs had fired a few shots from their mortar [sic], they got the distance accurately [sic], and a shell fell in the midst of our guns wounding seven of our men, three mortally, viz: Silas Williams, Co. B; Elijah Wayland, Co. E, both of whom died that night or very soon thereafter; and Benjamin F. Jenkins, Co. I, who died of these wounds at Jefferson Barracks [sic], Mo. Aug. 27th, 1863. The others all recovered.16

Dungan’s letter continues to describe the aftermath of the mortar attack, and tells of his investigation into the conditions under which the thirty-seven Iowa soldiers fought. There was no place for the men to take cover from the Confederate guns. It is likely that these Iowa farmers, turned soldiers, found themselves in unfamiliar Mississippi enemy territory without the proper training in the use of a 42-pound rifle gun.

Wanting to get a feel for the layout of the siege lines at Vicksburg, our family took a short trip over Memorial Day Weekend of 2002. My parents, coming from southwest Missouri, met us and we spent the weekend studying the occurrences surrounding this historical event. I found it particularly fitting that we had visited Gettysburg over Memorial Day Weekend so many years before in
search of the same answers, wondering what Benjamin Franklin Jenkins had experienced during his short life and military career. The trip was highly rewarding and it helped us to understand the fateful events of early July, 1863, and the battle that claimed Benjamin’s life, leaving his widow, Elizabeth, with four daughters and a step-son to raise. As with most genealogical research, the doors have been opened to yet more questions. A man named Frederick Jenkins also enlisted with Benjamin from Decatur County, Iowa, in 1862. Asher Jenkins had settled and purchased land near both men in DeKalb County, Missouri. Further searching has produced more clues that make it highly probable that these men were younger brothers of Benjamin, but thankfully, that is another story for another time, which is not nearly as tangled with misleading information, or proceeded by family myths. While the use of online sources were instrumental in helping solve the mysteries surrounding the life and military service of Benjamin Jenkins, the print sources and records were equally invaluable to the task of fitting the puzzle pieces together. Although the researchers of previous generations were completely dependent on paper records, today’s genealogist will find that using a combination of online and print records will enhance the quality of the collaborating evidence needed to tell the stories of their ancestors’ lives.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the professionals employed at the Vicksburg National Military Park for their patience and diligence while answering questions relating to the park and the historical records of the Siege of Vicksburg. This genealogical adventure is dedicated to my parents who taught me to love history, geography, and family.

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Endnotes

1 “Military Service Record for Benjamin Jenkins,” File Co. I, 34th Infantry, Records of the Adjutant General's Office (Record Group 94), National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D. C. Note that records for Benjamin fall under the name “Jenkins” and “Jinks” and collaborating evidence has been used to ascertain that the records pertain to the same individual.
2 Louisa Catherine (Jenkins) Finley Wilson; Walter Horace Finley; Nathan Lewis Finley; Carroll Eugene Finley; Cheré Louise (Finley) Weible
3 A birth certificate for Louisa Catherine Jenkins has not been located. However, a certified copy of a “Standard Certificate of Death” issued 18 November 1968, by the Division of Health of Missouri and additional collaborating evidence from Federal Census Records and the “Military Pension Record for Benjamin Jenkins,” File 153231, Records of the Veterans Administration (Record Group 15), National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. supports this fact.
4 Genealogical Notes of Mary Etta (Finley) Glenn (daughter of Louisa Catherine (Jenkins) Finley Wilson. Mary's daughter Hazel Louisa (Glenn) Conley was in possession of the notes and provided a copy for Peggy Louise (Harper) Finley. This copy is now in the author's files.
5 Another piece of information that was misleading was the discovery of Benjamin’s widow on the 1870 U.S. Census, Union Township, LaClede Co., Missouri. National Archives Microfilm M-550, roll 786. This information had been located prior to finding the Military Service and Pension Records for Benjamin Jenkins. It confirmed that Benjamin’s widow Elizabeth had re-married, but the family was homesteading in Missouri, and not located in Iowa.
6 1860 U.S. Census, Dallas Twp., DeKalb County, Missouri. p. 589, National Archives Microfilm M-653, roll 618. Also, 1 October 1856. Sale-Cash Entry for Benjamin Jenkins. Preemption Certificate No. 14339. 114.35 Acres in DeKalb Co., Missouri. 2 Parcels of Land. 1SW, Section 31, Township 60-N, Range 30-W and S 1/2 2SW, Section 31, Township 60-N, Range 30-W. This information was located after finding Benjamin’s Military records. We knew the family was located somewhere in Missouri in 1855 and 1858 for the births of the two oldest daughters.
7 “Military Service Record for Benjamin Jenkins.”
8 A Regimental History of the 34th Iowa was presented in 1860 at Garland Grove, during a reunion of the veterans of the 34th. The history was written by J. S. Clark, Captain of Company C and Historian of the Regiment, and states that, “... the regiment returned to Benton barracks on the 5th day of February, 1863. The regiment at this time totally broken down.” This was due to the “100 or more cases of small pox and varioloid,” (a mild form of smallpox occurring in people who have been previously vaccinated or who have had the disease). These events are reflected in the Hospital and Company Muster Rolls contained in the “Military Service Record for Benjamin Jenkins,” who was ill for approximately five months. An online copy of the history can be found at: www.brumm.com/genealogy/walkers_moyers/certificates/Iowa34th.html
11 Iowa Troops. www.nps.gov/vicb/ia_lst.htm
12 Iowa 34th Infantry, Detachment. www.nps.gov/vicb/ia34inf.htm
16 Ibid.
17 Benjamin had two sons from his first marriage to Permelia, who died before 1852 in Kentucky. By 1863, Samuel Jenkins (age 17) was no longer living in the household, but his younger brother Zacharia Taylor Jenkins (age 14) was still with the family. “Military Pension Record for Benjamin Jenkins,” 1850. U.S. Census, District No. 1, Breckinridge Co., Kentucky. p. 142, National Archives Microfilm M-432, roll 193, and 1860 U.S. Census, Dallas Twp., DeKalb County, Missouri. p. 589, National Archives Microfilm M-653, roll 618.
18 “Military Service Record for Frederick Jenkins.” File Co. I, 34th Iowa Infantry, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office (Record Group 94), National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.
20 “Military Pension Record for Frederick Jenkins.” File 434219, Records of the Veterans Administration (Record Group 15), National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.; and 1860 U.S. Census, Dallas Twp., DeKalb County, Missouri. p. 594, National Archives Microfilm M-653, roll 618.; and 1870 U.S. Census. Union Twp., LaClede Co., Missouri. Elizabeth M. Jenkins Horn [widow of Benjamin] and her family was also in Union Township at this time.