

Updating the Life and Death of A. L. Heermann

Joel Weintraub

Adolphus Lewis Heermann (ALH) was a 19th century naturalist who contributed to our knowledge of the geography, flora, and fauna of the western United States. He collected many new species and is honored with ten current taxa that have “*heermanni*” as their scientific name. A number of short biographies have been published covering his scientific contributions, but much less has been written about his background. His biographers interviewed people who knew him (Stone, 1907) and studied family lore (Hume, 1942; Pleadwell & Kerr, 1923), family documents (Casto, 1995), and letters of colleagues to research his personal life. To update this part of ALH’s biography, I made an exhaustive search for primary documents including legal, governmental, and archival material. As a result, I provide here new information on his birth, early years, and death.

Stone (1907) published the first biography of Adolphus in *Cassinia*. He stated, “From estimates of two who knew him, I infer that he was born about 1818, probably in South Carolina.” Many subsequent authors used this information and some as absolute fact. Hume (1942) devoted a chapter to ALH in his book on ornithologists of the U.S. Army Medical Corps. (Adolphus was a contract biologist/surgeon for the army on one of the Railroad Surveys of California and the southwest.) Hume found that ALH’s father, Lewis, was an important naval surgeon whose life had been documented by Pleadwell and Kerr (1923). They, in turn, relied on family information provided by a granddaughter of Lewis Heermann. Based on that material, Lewis and Eliza Potts were reported as married in 1821 and Adolphus was the youngest of five sons. Hume then set a birth date of 1827 for ALH which then was used by most subsequent authors. For some reason, Hume repeated the South Carolina birth location, even though Lewis’ biography showed he was elsewhere at that time; there is no mention of South Carolina in that biography. Casto (1995), in a little noticed article, used documents in the possession of brother Theodore Heermann’s family and the 1860 U.S. Census for Texas and concluded that ALH was the oldest of the five sons and that his information “... suggests that Adolphus was

born about 1821 in New Orleans.”

Adolphus Lewis Heermann was born on October 21, 1821 in New Orleans, Louisiana (Heermann, 1840) and was the oldest of the five sons of Lewis and Eliza Heermann. That he was the oldest

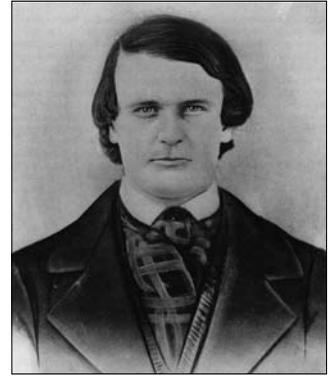


Photo: courtesy of Stan Casto

Adolphus Lewis Heermann

son can be seen on probate documents of his father (Louisiana, Orleans Parish Estate Files, 1804–1846) and from an index of births from New Orleans that shows the birth dates of all of the sons (New Orleans Volunteer Association, 2002). Adolphus’s father died in New Orleans on May 21, 1833 leaving his widow with five sons under the age of 13 (Louisiana, Orleans Parish Estate Files, 1804–1846). The estate, appraised at over \$200,000, remained in probate until the youngest living son reached the age of maturity. From the probate records, two of the sons (probably the two oldest, Adolphus and Theodore) on June 6, 1833, were sent to the New York area, and there was a subsequent tuition bill from A. N. Skinner who ran an exclusive boys school in New Haven, CT. His widow Eliza relocated to Baltimore and then took her sons to Europe (c. 1836) where they continued their education. Adolphus and Theodore returned to the United States on the ship Albany arriving back in New York on August 15, 1842 (Ancestry.com, 2010). The profession of each brother was listed as “gentleman.”

This information fills a previous gap in the life of Adolphus Heermann. Many people associate ALH with the photo, published in Stone (1907), of a rough mountain man in buckskin with a large gun and an out-of-control beard (which is mostly fake), but the reality is that Adolphus was a well-educated and wealthy individual who dedicated his life to the Acad-

Updating the Life and Death of A. L. Heermann

emy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (henceforth, Academy) and to collecting natural history material.

The search for the exact death date of Adolphus required substantial research to try to explain why Stone (1907) gave September 2, 1865 as the date (as then did subsequent authors) when ALH actually died on September 27. The interpretation by all other biographers (e.g., Mearns & Mearns, 1992) of the information presented in Stone (1907) was as follows. After the 1865 death of Adolphus in Texas, Theodore Heermann wrote to Henry Dresser, a European ornithologist who had spent time with Adolphus in 1863 and 1864 in Texas. That letter, presumably, included all the details of his death, which 40 years later were relayed to Stone in response to his 1906 inquiry to Dresser. Dresser wrote Stone that Adolphus had gone out collecting alone, an accident occurred, and his gun had gone off killing him (Dresser, 1906; Stone, 1907).

The 1865 Theodore Heermann letter to Dresser does not exist in the Dresser archives at the University of Manchester (H. McGhie, personal communication), but Dresser wrote others on receiving the news of ALH's death. Two letters still exist (Dresser, 1865a, 1865b) and both affirm that Theodore's letter stated Adolphus died on September 27; the circumstances of the death, however, were not stated, but Theodore was said to have been there at the end. Furthermore, Theodore went down to New Orleans six months after his brother died and had a death certificate sworn out, probably for probate reasons (Heermann, 1866a), that showed the September 27 date. Figure 1 shows that certificate. Finally, the Texas probate records of ALH's ranch property outside San Antonio include testimony that he died "on or about" September 27, 1865, but again, no cause of death was given (Heermann, 1866b).

Photo: Joel Weintraub

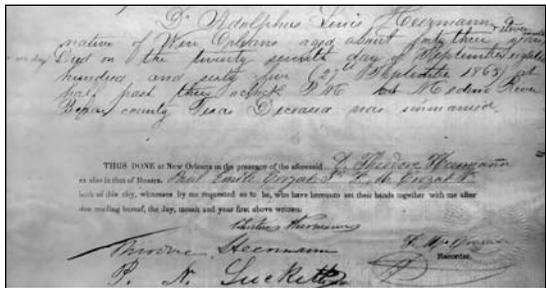


Figure 1. Louisiana death certificate (detail) for Texas death of Adolphus Lewis Heermann .

The 1906 correspondence of Dresser to Stone has been preserved (Dresser, 1906). Dresser by then had forgotten when Adolphus died. All Dresser could tell Stone was when their correspondence ended. Why then did the subsequent biographers get confused over the source of the death date in Stone's 1907 paper? The apparent reason is that Stone (1907) quoted Dresser's letter on the circumstances of ALH's death, and then, out of quote marks but at the end of the same paragraph, and added a short, unreferenced sentence that September 2, 1865 was the death date. Subsequent biographers assumed the date came from Theodore's initial letter to Dresser. Let me propose where the September 2, 1865 date came from. Stone, at that time Assistant Curator of the Academy (Huber, 1940), must have gotten that date from the minutes of an Academy meeting on January 2, 1866, at which it was announced that Adolphus died on September 2, 1865 (Academy of Natural Sciences, 1866). But Adolphus' Academy membership card (Minutes and Correspondence 1812-1924, 1967b) has on it a written death date of September 27, 1865. In the original notes from the meeting on January 2, 1866, Heermann's death was recorded as September 27 (J. Vess, personal communication).

The actual minutes of that meeting provide a clue to this puzzle (Minutes and Correspondence 1812-1924, 1967a). The image of the document shows a glued, blank strip of paper right below the line where Adolphus' death announcement appears. (The death was announced by John Cassin who had sponsored ALH's membership to the Academy.) This strip at the bottom of the page obscures the "7" of the 27 in ALH's item. Vess (personal communication) found (at my request) that the information hidden beneath the paper strip stated the meeting was adjourned, but instead, the Academy reconvened as a business meeting. So, instead of crossing off that incorrect adjournment statement, someone glued a paper strip over it, apparently leading to problems for the person summarizing ALH's death date for the Proceedings. I think that led to the wrong death date on Stone's (1907) paper and subsequent introduction of that error into the literature.

The updating of the personal information about Adolphus Lewis Heermann was made possible by using primary sources and multiple lines of evidence.

That was necessary to resolve conflicts in the existing biographical information. There are more tools today that help find such documents than were available in the past. Biographers honor their subjects by presenting information that is as accurate as possible. Thus I honor naturalist Adolphus Lewis Heermann, who was born on October 21, 1821 in New Orleans, Louisiana and died on September 27, 1865 in Bexar County, Texas.

Acknowledgments

I thank the many people who have helped me with this research but especially archivists Henry Mcghe (University of Manchester), Jennifer Vess and Megan Gibes (Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University), Tad Bennicoff (Smithsonian Institution), and Peter Meadows (Cambridge University), as well as Stanley Casto (University of Mary Hardin-Baylor).

Literature Cited

- Academy of Natural Sciences (1866). *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*. January 2, 1865 meeting (p. 1). Philadelphia, PA.
- Ancestry.com (2010). *New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., from the National Archives and Records Administration, Microfilm Serial M237, 1820-1897; Microfilm Roll: Roll 050; Line: 15; List Number: 704.
- Casto, S. (1995). A. L. Heermann and his natural history collections from San Antonio and the Medina River Valley, 1854-1865. *La Tierra* 22, 19-24.
- Dresser, H. E. (1865a). Letter from Dresser to Alfred Newton, December 21, 1865. Alfred Newton Papers MS Add.9839/1D. University of Cambridge Archives.
- Dresser, H. E. (1865b). Letter from Dresser to George Boardman, December 23, 1865. Record Unit 7071: George A. Boardman Papers. Smithsonian Institution Archives.
- Dresser, H. E. (1906). Dresser correspondence to Witmer Stone, March 28 and April 19, 1906. Academy of Natural Sciences Archives Collection 450, Philadelphia.
- Heermann, A. (1840). Birth Certificate No. 346. Orleans Parish. Louisiana Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (Delayed birth certificate registered 1840 for 1821 birth).
- Heermann, A. (1866a). Death Certificate. Orleans Parish. Louisiana Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- Heermann, A. (1866b). Probate Documents Case No. 740. Bexar County Courthouse, San Antonio, Texas.
- Huber, W. (1940). Witmer Stone (1866-1939). *Journal of Mammology*, 21, 1-4.
- Hume, E. E. (1942). *Ornithologists of the United States Army Medical Corps* (pp. 190-205). John Hopkins Press.
- Louisiana, Orleans Parish Estate Files, 1804-1846, index and images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/JJZ8-LWP> : accessed 2013), Lewis Heermann, 1833; citing probate place Orleans Parish, Louisiana, Probate Court, New Orleans City Archives.
- Mearns, B., & Mearns, R. (1992). *Audubon to Xantus, The Lives of Those Commemorated in North American Bird Names* (pp. 225-233). Academic Press.
- Minutes and Correspondence 1812-1924 (1967a). Roll 6 Minutes 1861-1879. [Philadelphia] : [Wilmington, Del.: The Academy, Scholarly Resources, distributor]. Academy of Natural Sciences Philadelphia.
- Minutes and Correspondence 1812-1924 (1967b). Roll 36 Memberships. [Philadelphia] : [Wilmington, Del.: The Academy, Scholarly Resources, distributor]. Academy of Natural Sciences Philadelphia.
- New Orleans Volunteer Association (2002). Alphabetical Birth Indexes for Orleans Parish 1796-1900, HE through HN. LAGenWeb Archives, files.usgwarchives.net/la/orleans/vitals/births/index/nobihehn.txt
- Pleadwell, F. L., & Kerr, W. M. (1923). Lewis Heermann, Surgeon in the United States Navy. *Annals of Medical History*, New York, 5, 113-145.
- Stone, W. (1907). Adolphus L. Heerman, M.D. *Cassinia* XI: 1-6.

Joel D. Weintraub

Department of Biological Science
California State University, Fullerton
Fullerton, CA 92831-3599