

The tragic Drowning of Samuel Pollak, Merchant

By Carol Prescott McCoy, Ph.D.

According to my grand mother, Connie (Irma Pollak) McCoy, her father drowned in the ocean at the Jersey shore when she was around three years old. I remember her saying that she thought he drowned in Spring Lake, NJ in Monmouth County. Supposedly he went in swimming and disappeared and his body was never found. Samuel died prior to the birth of his youngest daughter, Semele. Both my Uncle John and Aunt Carol describe Semele as a shadow of a person, most likely due to the early death of her father. According to her social security application, Semele was born in April 4, 1886. Clearly Samuel had to drown after impregnating his wife and most likely during the summer if he had been swimming in the ocean. That made his likely date of death, July-August, 1885.

Since he died in NJ, I expected to find an article on his drowning in the *NY Times* in July or August of 1885. I checked the Index for the *NY Times* for all of 1885 and found no reference to a drowning of a Pollak/Pollock. Finally I was given a clue when I was able to view the 1900 NY Census on line. I discovered that Semele's birth month was April, 1884 and her age was 16 on June 4, 1900. It seemed unlikely that Semele would lie about her age at such an early date so I assumed that 1884 was her correct birth year. Given this new information, I realized that Samuel must have drowned in July or August of 1883, not 1885.

So, now I checked "drownings" in the *NY Times Index* for July-December 31, 1883 and found the name of S. Pollock, drowned in Long Branch, NJ in the July 30th, 1883 *NY Times*¹. The Pollock drowning is part of a longer article "*Long Branch At Its Best: Visitors Thronging The Walks, Drives and Waterways.*" The sub-heading for the article reads:

"The Hotels Uncomfortably Crowded—Judge Hilton's Latest Enterprise—Drowning Accident at the Beach"....July 29, Long Branch. N.J."

Below is a photocopy of the relevant section from this shocking article.

¹ *NY Times* July 30th, 1883, 8:1

July 30, 1883.

The police service is simply farcical. The most distressing accident of the season, however, was the drowning this morning of a Mr. Pollock, of Montgomery, Ala. He resided in a cottage on Pleasure Bay-avenue, a road running back from the beach, just north of the East Long Branch Railway station. About 10 o'clock he left his wife, and with his brother and his brother's two children went down to the beach. Soon afterward his own little daughter went down to see him swim. The sea was smooth, but there was considerable swell and a strong southerly current running. Mr. Pollock is said to have been a good swimmer, but his fate gives reason to doubt this. He was quite near several other persons in the water when he began to swim with the current. No one paid any particular attention to him until he was suddenly discovered some distance away in a state of exhaustion. Before any assistance could reach him he disappeared from sight, and up to this evening his body had not been found. A crowd collected and search was begun, but it was unavailing. The saddest thing about the affair was the stupidity of the manner in which the intelligence reached his wife. His little girl, when she had learned the fatal result of her father's bath, ran home and, bursting suddenly into her mother's presence, cried out, "Oh, mamma, papa is drowned!" Of course, the poor woman was stunned by the shock, and for some time fears were entertained that her reason would give way. There have been many drowning accidents on this coast during the present Summer, and it is thought that most of them are due to the largely increased number of bathers.

There are several other newspaper references to the incident. August 1 - "Samuel Pollock, of New York city, was drowned on Sunday at Long Branch. A reward of \$250 was at once offered for the recovery of his body."² Apparently the search was in vain. Also on Aug. 1: "The friends of the late Samuel Pollak, who was drowned at Long Branch on Sunday, deny the truth of the report that his body has been found."³ By August 5th the reward was doubled! "The reward for the recovery of the body of Samuel Pollack, the merchant drowned last Sunday, has been doubled. Men, supposed to be agents of the insurance companies in which Mr. Pollack was insured for \$65,000 are stimulating the search for the unfortunate man's body."⁴

² The *Red Bank Register* from August 1, 1883

³ *NY Times* on Aug. 1, 1883: p. 8; col. 6

⁴ *NY Times*, Aug. 5th; p. 7, col. 2. Note that \$65,000 is worth over \$1,100,000 in today's dollars. Also note that his name is spelled as *Pollock*, *Pollak*, and *Pollack*.

Convinced that there must have been newspaper records in Alabama, I hired a wonderful genealogist, Marcia K. Collier, to research local Alabama records. She uncovered a wealth of information, including several articles relating to Sam's drowning. The following article is from the *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, Tuesday, July 31, 1883⁵.

Death of Mr. Sam Pollak—Drowned at Long Branch, N.J.

“About 12 o'clock on Sunday, the 29th inst., telegrams were received in this city from Mr. Ignatius Pollak, giving the startling information that his brother, Mr. Sam Pollak, was drowned that morning about ten o'clock, while bathing at Long Branch. This sudden and unexpected news of the death of a well known man in the very bloom of health, caused amazement not only of those who knew him most intimately, but throughout the entire community where the name has been as a household word for ten years past. Of the particulars of his unfortunate death, there areand probably will not be except by mail, his brother, no doubt being too overwhelmed with grief to send the minor details of the unhappy event.

At last accounts the body had not been recovered, although determined and unremitting efforts were being made to secure it.

Mr. Pollak was possessed of all the requirements necessary to make a successful man of business. Energy, progressiveness, and generosity in the right place were admirable traits which he thoroughly possessed. He was mild mannered, amiable, and gentlemanly in his deportment with others, whether their stations in life were lowly or exalted. For this reason, his friends were numberless.

Mr. Pollak commenced business in this city in 1869, then 26 years old, and, in conjunction with his partner and brother, Mr. Ignatius Pollak, success has attended them to an extent possibly, without a parallel in this section. His good deeds will live after him. He has build for himself a monument in this city,

⁵ Microfilm M93.1150, micro #447, *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, July 31, 1883 at the Alabama Dept. of Archives and History (ADAH), Montgomery, Alabama.

although he was not strictly a resident, by never failing to respond to all worthy and public spirited demands and the earnestness and liberality with which he has urged, and subscribed to public and lasting improvements in our midst. Such men can be illy spared. His family and relatives have the sincere sympathy of this community in their heavy bereavement.”

Apparently there was also a detailed description of the grisly event in the *New York Herald* on July 31, 1883, which was reprinted in the *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* on August, 2nd, 1883⁶.

The Late Sam Pollak
An Account of His Drowning
The Heart-Rending Brief of His Family and Brother

A drowning accident, the circumstances of which were of a particularly distressing nature, occurred at Long Branch yesterday, a father going down before the eyes of his wife and children, despite heroic efforts to save him. Mr. Samuel Pollak, a merchant engaged in the dry goods and fancy goods business, whose principal store was at Montgomery, Ala, but who had an office at No. 21 Wooster street, this city, and resided at No. 55 East Eighty-third street⁷, about June 15 rented a cottage on Sea View avenue, Long Branch. There he took his wife and family consisting of two boys and two girls, and a babe a few months old. Recently Mr. Pollak’s brother, Ignatius who attends to the business of Pollak & Co. at Montgomery, also came to the cottage with his family to spend the summer months.

Yesterday morning about ten o’clock the brothers with their families, went, as was their wont, to Scott’s bathing house, to the south of Brighton Hotel. Mr. Sam Pollak, taking with him his four children, entered the water first. After remaining with the children for awhile, he took them from the water and left them playing in the sand upon the beach. He was about to return for a further swim when

⁶ Microfilm M93.1150, micro #447, *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, August 2, 1883 at the Alabama Dept. of Archives and History (ADAH), Montgomery, Alabama.

⁷ Note this is the address given as the birth place for Irma Pollak in April, 1882.

Alexander Emmons who is employed as an expert swimmer at the beach, said to him, "Don't go out too far; you know there is a treacherous whirlpool out there."

"Oh, I'm all right," responded Mr. Pollak, and in he plunged. He was a fair swimmer, though not an expert, and struck out vigorously from the shore.

A Cry for Help

A hundred and fifty yards out there is a "cut" in the sand, a broad swath parallel to the beach, being washed out. At low mark there is about fifteen feet of water at this spot and the incoming tide, meeting the water which comes back from the shore, forms a whirling current, which sweeps strongly out to sea. Emmons was watching the swimmer from the shore, as were also Mr. Pollak's brother and children. His wife, attired in bathing costume, was just coming down upon the beach, when Pollak was seen to throw up his hands and a cry for help was heard. Immediately afterward he disappeared.

Pollak's cry was answered by agonizing screams from his wife, children and brother. The wife and brother once plunged into the water. They were held back by bathers near at hand, as they could not swim. Emmonds had also sprung in, and he struck out for the spot where the man had disappeared. He was anticipated by William Lovell, the well known sporting man, who was less than one hundred feet away, had heard the cry and had seen Pollak go down. The drowning man came to the surface again a short distance away from where he sank and threw his arms about Mr. Lovell, who was quickly at his side. The latter shook off the hold after a struggle, as he was himself being pulled down.

By this time Emmons had arrived, and the two swimmers, grasping each an arm of the drowning man, turned their faces toward the shore. They were in the perilous outward sweep of the water, however, and could make no headway. Pollak was unconscious, and hung limp between them. A few minutes sufficed to

show the men that their efforts were futile. Their strength was becoming exhausted, and finally Emmons cried out, "I've got to give it up."

Struggling for Life

He relinquished his hold and Lovell was impelled to do the same. As the lifeless body sank it was carried swiftly out with the current. Then Lovell and Emmons began to struggle for their own lives. Nearly ten minutes had been spent in the effort to save Pollak, and the swimmers were nearly two hundred yards from shore. Slowly they made their way against the strong outsetting tide. To those on shore it was clearly a life and death struggle. Scott, the keeper of the baths, seized a plank and hurried into the water up to his armpits, but was unable to reach the men, not being a swimmer.

"I'm almost gone," cried Emmons, as he struggled feebly against the tide.

Scott shouted to the men directions to take advantage of a side current. They took the advice, and after a fifteen minutes' swim for life reached shallow water, where they were pulled out and dropped exhausted upon the shore.

"Save My Papa"

The scene upon the shore during all this time was piteous in the extreme. It was all that those upon the beach could do to restrain the wife and brother from flinging themselves into the surf, while the children clung to the knees of men helpless to said, crying, "Save my papa! Save my papa!"

All day long men grappled for the body of Mr. Pollak, but it was not found. A reward of \$250 has been offered for its recovery. Mr. Pollak was about forty years of age, about five feet nine inches in height and tall and spare in build. He wore a light mustache. He was considered wealthy."

There is still no official death record for Sam Pollak, perhaps because his body was never recovered. I wrote to both the NJ Department of Health and to the NY Department of Health and neither has an official record of his death. Still, with all the newspaper references to that fateful morning of July 29, 1883 it is clear when and how the young, successful Sam Pollak departed this earth.



While Pollak and Company closed in mourning of the death of Sam Pollak, it did eventually reopen as can be seen in this notice in the *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*.⁸

Pollak & Co.

The stores of Pollak & Co., which have been closed on account of the death of Mr. Sam Pollak, will be opened for the transaction of business, as usual, this morning.

⁸ *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, August 2, 1883 (?) Microfilmed at ADAH, Montgomery, Alabama.

The State of Alabama } Probate Court.
 Montgomery County }
 In the matter of the
 Estate of Samuel Pollak, deceased.

To the Hon. J. C. Randolph, Judge of
 the Probate Court, Montgomery County,
 Alabama:—

Your petitioner, Ignatius Pollak, respectfully
 represents unto your Honor that Samuel
 Pollak departed his life at Long
 Branch, in the State of
 — on or about the day of
 1883, leaving no last will or testament, so
 far as your petitioner knows or be-
 lieves, and that his death was
 known more than fifteen days before
 this day. Your petitioner further knows
 and represents unto your Honor that
 said Samuel Pollak was at the
 time of his death a citizen of the
 State of New York, residing in the City
 of New York, but died seized and
 possessed of real Estate in the State
 of Alabama, consisting of several store
 houses in the City of Montgomery, a
 dwelling and appurtenances near the
 corporate limits of said City, several
 leased lots and other realty in or

Probate of Sam Pollak's Estate⁹

We can see from Sam's Estate Papers that he died without a will. He apparently held quite a bit of property in Alabama that was held jointly with his brother, Ignatius. Julia was named

⁹ Estate Papers of Sam Pollak, microfilmed at the ADAH, Montgomery. Copy provided by Marcia Collier.

Executrix, but ultimately Ignatius took over as Executor of Sam's Estate. Ignatius sold Sam's property at auction to Julia.

To the HONORABLE FRANCIS C. RANDOLPH, Judge of the
Court of Probate in and for Montgomery County and State of
Alabama:

Your petitioner, Julie Pollak, respectfully shows
unto your Honor:

1. That she resides without the State of Alabama, and
resides in the City and County of New York and State of New
York, and that she is a resident citizen of the State of New
York, and that she is the mother of the following children,
to wit: Albin Pollak, aged seventeen years; Rudolph Pollak,
aged fifteen years; Alice Pollak, aged fourteen years; Wilma
Pollak, aged thirteen years; Irma Pollak, aged nine years,
and Semele Pollak, aged eight years, all of whom are minors
under the age of eighteen years, and that said minors reside
with your petitioner in said City of New York, and that she
has the legal custody of each of them.

Your petitioner further shows unto your Honor that
on the 11th day of January, in the year 1896, a decree was
rendered by the Probate Court of Montgomery County and State
of Alabama, in favor of Charles W. Ferguson, guardian ad
litem of said Albin, Rudolph, Alice, Wilma, Irma and Semele
Pollak, each for the sum of six thousand one hundred and
thirty-four dollars and sixty-six cents (\$6,134.66), aggre-
gating thirty-six thousand eight hundred and eight dollars
(\$36,808.00), against Ignatius Pollak, as administrator of
the estate of Semele Pollak, deceased, the father of said
minor children, for the alleged balance of money in the

Petition by Julie Pollak Dated April 30, 1892 in New York¹⁰

¹⁰ Estate Papers of Sam Pollak, in ADAH, Montgomery. Copied by Marcia Collier.