

## John James Bartle (aka Bortle)

Born about 1838 in Columbia County, New York.<sup>1</sup>

Died 22 June 1899, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.<sup>2</sup>

Buried Rose Hill Cemetery, Chicago, Illinois.<sup>3</sup>

He was born John James Bortle and was buried as John James Bartle. He enlisted into the military under variations of both names,<sup>4</sup> his pension records include both. His widow had a difficult time securing her widow's pension because the office at the time in reviewing his military and pension files suspected his second enlistment was fraudulent because of the spelling of his surname.<sup>5</sup>

He first came to notoriety through a posthumous article published in the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* relating details of his marriage to a 15 year-old Tennessee Claflin.<sup>6</sup> He had given the interview while ill and believing himself near to death with the proviso that it not be published until he was dead—which happened a year later. By then Tennessee was Lady Cook and had achieved both fame and fortune. Her brother Hebern Claflin issued a long, indignant refutation of the marriage to the *Inter-Ocean*, forcing Lady Cook to telegraph both him and the *Inter-Ocean* to say that she did, in fact, marry Bartle.<sup>7</sup>

John James 'Bortle' was born in Columbia County, New York, the second child of William and Hannah Bortle's eleven children.<sup>8</sup> His parents moved throughout upstate New York over the course of their marriage. Like his father and two of his brothers, he was a carpenter by trade.<sup>9</sup> His preferred diminutive was Jim.

In 1861, Bartle was in Sycamore, Illinois, tending bar.<sup>10</sup> Tennessee Claflin was also in the city, with her sister Victoria "Claflin;" the two women made their living as spirit mediums.<sup>11</sup> A man was with the women, identified by Bartle as "John Claflin, a brother" was with the women. Because it is well-known that the sisters had no brother by the name of John, and because their two brothers Hebern<sup>12</sup> and Malden<sup>13</sup> have been proven to be elsewhere, the identity of "John Claflin" was very likely "Canning Woodhull." Victoria Claflin Woodhull had yet to divorce her first husband in 1861, and

<sup>1</sup> Place of birth is given in the 1865 New York State Census of Seneca Falls, where the Bortle family was living. Age is calculated from ages given in census entries and military enlistments.

<sup>2</sup> Cook County Clerk, Cook County Vital Records, 22 June 1899, see [cookcountygenealogy.com](http://cookcountygenealogy.com) the clerk's online database of births, deaths and marriages.

<sup>3</sup> Illinois Soldier Burial Places 1774-1974, [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

<sup>4</sup> While the spelling of his surname is problematic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it must be remembered that in this ear of the 19<sup>th</sup> century nothing in the way of phonetics or spelling was standardized. Clerks wrote down what they heard. Additionally, he seems to have answered to both John and James, as well as their diminutives.

<sup>5</sup> John James Bartle, pension records, file #945.832 (his invalid pension) and #701.516 (widow's pension), National Archives and Record Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>6</sup> "Tenny was His Bride," *The Inter Ocean from Chicago*, 2 July 1899, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Cook Defended," *The Inter Ocean from Chicago*, 29 July 1899, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> 1865 New York State Census of Elmira, Chemung County, New York, p. 25, line 10. Available at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *True Republican* (Sycamore, IL), 24 May 1871.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Also "Tenny was His Bride," op cit.

<sup>12</sup> See "Cook Defended," op cit. Hebern had no idea about the marriage, so could not have been with the sisters. Additionally, Hebern was married with a small child and by his own later account was living in Chicago at the time.

<sup>13</sup> Malden was selling butter and groceries in Cincinnati, with a wife and four children.

the two were possibly living under aliases.<sup>14</sup> According to the *Republican's* accounts both sisters were using the surname Claflin during their time in Sycamore. The Woodhull's had recently returned from San Francisco, having stopped in Cincinnati and then New York, where Dr. Woodhull briefly had a practice at 53 Bond Street and where their daughter, Zula Maud, was born in April 1861.<sup>15</sup>

As James Bartle, the self-professed gambling man and bartender married Miss T.C. Claflin, clairvoyant and healer, on 30 September 1861 in Syracuse, De Kalb County, Illinois.<sup>16</sup> Tennessee insisted on keeping her maiden name, "because of business."<sup>17</sup>

After only a few weeks he said the couple a terrific argument over \$10, Bartle said he and Claflin went their separate ways.<sup>18</sup> From that point on, their marriage became a story of "he said, she said." In his account, Bartle makes no mention of a divorce from Tennessee, instead he only said, "I was to keep out of the way and not bother them anymore." From this point on many of the details in his tale are easily corroborated, though he was a bit befuddled about dates. He did say that right after the separation "the war came up" and he enlisted in what he referred to as "Bolton's Battery,"<sup>19</sup> and that he deserted his regiment ("the civil authorities were after him on account of some of his gambling escapades") and went to New York. Although his account is enhanced,<sup>20</sup> Bartle then said he enlisted in "Company G, Fiftieth New York volunteer engineers."

He did do all three of these things: he enlisted in Illinois, deserted, then enlisted again in Palmyra, New York, only the dates need to be adjusted according to the records.

In February 1862, he signed up as James Bortel into "Bolton's Battery," more correctly the 2<sup>nd</sup> Illinois Light Artillery, which was named for its commander, William H. Bolton. At the time he gave his residence as Chicago, his age as 24. He was 5'9" tall with brown hair and black eyes and a dark complexion. He was a carpenter, born in New York, and most telling, he said he was married. He was mustered in 28 February 1862 by William Bolton in Chicago.<sup>21</sup>

He deserted from La Grange, Tennessee, "in the face of the enemy" 10 November 1862.<sup>22</sup>

A little over a year after his desertion, he enlisted as a private, from Palmyra, New York, into Company G, of the 50<sup>th</sup> New York Engineers on 15 December 1863. His term

<sup>14</sup> Victoria was well known to adopt the practice. In St. Louis, she was known as Madame Holland, on other occasions she called herself Madame Victoria. If the couple Bartle reminisced about were in fact Canning and Victoria, they would have probably have left their six-month-old daughter and mentally challenged son with her family in Cincinnati.

<sup>15</sup> 1861 *Trow's New York City Directory*, Vol. LXXV, p. 930. For Zula's birth see the Ellis Island Records, 3 April 1928 (Frame 540, Line 30) and Ellis Island Records, 8 April 1931 (Frame 472, Line 20) which record her date and place of birth. [www.libertyellisfoundation.org](http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org)

<sup>16</sup> De Kalb County Marriages, De Kalb County Clerk, Illinois, Vol. 00B p. 288.

<sup>17</sup> "Tenny was his Bride," op cit.

<sup>18</sup> *True Republican* (Sycamore, IL), 24 May 1871 and "Tenny was His Bride," op cit.

<sup>19</sup> The war "came up" on 12 April 1861, he said he enlisted in 1863, but the actual date of his enlistment was February 1862.

<sup>20</sup> He said the Claflin sisters, whom he reported to be successful on Wall Street, helped resolve the issue of his desertion. The Claflin sisters would not be "successful on Wall Street" for another eight years. More likely he returned to his parents, waited a decent amount of time, then enlisted again. His brother enlisted in the same regiment four days later.

<sup>21</sup> Civil War Detail Report, Illinois Civil War and Descriptive Rolls, op cit. Also Bartle's pension records, op cit.

<sup>22</sup> Pension records, op cit.

was three years, and he mustered out with the company on 13 June 1865 at Fort Barry, Virginia.<sup>23</sup> In the 1865 New York State Census of Elmira, New York, taken on the fourteenth of June, he was enumerated with his father and mother.<sup>24</sup> This census required further details about military service, and he and his brother were both recorded as being on active duty in the 50<sup>th</sup> NY Engineers.

More interesting was the fact that his marital status was quite clear. How many times married? *Once*. Now married? *Yes*. He was. His second wife, Hannah Robbins, and infant son, James, were enumerated with his parents, so he obviously ignored his brief early marriage. That this was indeed James Bartle's second wife is corroborated by the 1891 death of the infant son included in this census. "Bartle—March 20, James J. Bartle Jr., beloved son of J.J. and Honor Bartle, aged 27 years. Funeral services will be held at No. 12 N. Curtis st. Sunday, March 22, at 11 a.m. Binghamton and Union (N.Y.) papers please copy."<sup>25</sup>

Both regiments are included in his pension records.<sup>26</sup>

Bartle's fuzziness about the relationship of the Claflin siblings is further corroborated when he said that he followed the two sisters through their careers and believed that Victoria married Dr. Woodhull after their success in New York. He also said that Tennessee married a St. Louis man named George Collis – the one statement that has never been proven<sup>27</sup> – and went on to say that Tennessee then married John A. Greene. That marriage (whether a formal ceremony took place or not) was published in several papers around the country in 1874.<sup>28</sup> Greene was a well-known editor in New York City; some of his obituaries<sup>29</sup> mention Tennessee as his first wife, noting that they were "not together long." No record of any such marriage, nor divorce, has been found it may well have been a common law marriage.

Bartle continued to follow the careers of the sisters and observed "Finally they left the dust of their native land from their feet and elected to live in London. Victoria Woodhull married John Biddulph Martin, a rich London banker, who was completely fascinated by her and gratified her every whim, but she was said to have been entirely

---

<sup>23</sup> 50<sup>th</sup> NY Engineers Report of the Adjutant-General, New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, Rosters of the New York Engineers and Sharpshooter Battalions During the Civil War, New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, p. 838.

<sup>24</sup> 1865 New York State Census of Elmira, Chemung County, New York, pages 25, line 10 and page 28, "Additional Inquiries Relating to Officers and Enlisted Men, now in the Military or Naval Service of the United States." Available at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

<sup>25</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, March 21, 1891, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Available from the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. or from the NARA's [www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com) for a fee.

<sup>27</sup> This does not say that Tennessee did not have a relationship with a man from St. Louis by the name of George Collis; it is the writer's suspicion that she may well have, given how many facts that Bartle related in his interview proved correct. To date, however, there is no proven association with a man by the name of George Collis and Tennessee Claflin.

<sup>28</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 January 1874; *Helena Weekly Herald*, 3 September 1874; *St. Cloud Journal*, 12 November 1874; *Ottawa Free Trader*, 5 December 1874; *Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), 31 December 1874; *Brooklyn Eagle*, 10 November 1889; and *The American Stationer*, 5 September 1889 (John A. Green's obituary).

<sup>29</sup> "John A. Greene Gone," *New York World*, 2 September 1889, p. 2, col. 7; "John A. Greene," *New York Tribune*, p. 5, col. 5; "Condensed Locals," *Washington Evening Star*, 3 September 1889, p. 8, col. 1; "John A. Greene," *The American Stationer*, vol. 26, 5 September 1889, p. 653; Thomas Byrnes, "Women Who Made a Stir," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 10 November 1889.

loyal to him and to have mourned him sincerely when he died about a year and a half ago. She is now the editor of the *Humanitarian*, a monthly magazine, which is never dull if it is sometimes a little spicy.”<sup>30</sup>

Bartle claimed he never saw the sisters again after their parting of the ways “until the year of the World’s Fair.” Hebern Claflin and his wife vehemently denied that Tennessee and Victoria were in Chicago for the World’s Fair but that they were there “the year before.”<sup>31</sup> The World’s Fair opened to the public on 1 May 1893. But the dedication ceremonies were held 21 October 1892, and Mr. and Mrs. Martin were certainly in attendance for the festivities. John Biddulph Martin was Britain’s world’s fair commissioner. The couple arrived in New York on 16 October and left for Chicago by train that evening. On that memorable train ride, Martin told several fellow passengers that Hebern “did not amount to anything and was receiving hush money from Sir Francis Cook,”<sup>32</sup> which resulted in Hebern suing him for libel. The case was settled out of court within days, with Hebern probably adding income to his coffers. It is unlikely Hebern forgot about that incident.

In 1911, after being threatened with blackmail on a visit to Chicago, some attempting to use her first marriage as an exposure, Tennessee gave a slightly different, and to some perhaps a more respectable, reason for the couple’s separation:

As all of the old friends of my family know, I was only seventeen [*sic, she was fifteen*] when I married James Bortle. Very shortly afterwards a woman with a seven-year-old boy appeared at our home and made common-law claims upon Mr. Bortle. The child called him “Papa.” So I went home to my father. . . . Lawyer Asay had my marriage annulled, and then as a double protection for me advised my father to procure a divorce for me, which he did. I was married to Mr. Bortle in ’60 or ’61. The records of my marriage and of my divorce were destroyed in the Chicago fire. This woman—her name I never knew—claimed to have been married to Mr. Bortle in a West Side Church, but we never could find any evidence of this marriage. Later I was married to Sir Francis Cook.<sup>33</sup>

Since Bartle was born in 1838, he would have to have been roughly fifteen when he fathered a boy who was born in 1853. Bartle was in Seneca Falls with his family in 1850,<sup>34</sup> and there is no indication of any of them being in the Chicago area until 1859.

The real question is not an argument about softened facts, but did the couple actually divorce? There is no extant record of it.<sup>35</sup> Tennie’s account of the repository of the records of the marriage and divorce were vague. However, very early on in the sisters rise to notoriety was often referred to as “Mrs. Claflin.” One New York paper, the *Herald*, tellingly noted in an 1870 interview that “Mrs. Claflin, *though married eight*

---

<sup>30</sup> “Tennie Was His Bride,” Chicago *Inter Ocean*, op cit.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> “A Woodhull-Claflin Dispute,” *The Illustrated American*, 12 November 1892, p. 471. Cook was motivated to pay off several people who knew too much about Tennessee’s past.

<sup>33</sup> “Lady Cook Ill from Threats,” *Chicago Examiner*, 3 March 1911, p. 1, col. 5.

<sup>34</sup> 1850 US Federal Census of Seneca Falls, New York, p. 346, line 1.

<sup>35</sup> Even if there was a divorce and the record destroyed by the fire, there is also no record of a divorce in the Chicago paper’s court reports.

years, is still a young lady of *some twenty-four years of age*.”<sup>36</sup> The record of her marriage was not destroyed in the fire, it was in Syracuse, Illinois. The ‘Lawyer Asay’ whom she referenced was pronounced dead by Hebern Claflin in his 1899 refutation of Bartle’s story.<sup>37</sup> Finally, in his interview Bartle said that a lawyer residing in Chicago still had the marriage certificate and other papers which were placed in his hands by Bartle.<sup>38</sup> Obviously, Bartle went on with his life had married again previous to the 1865 New York State Census.

His ex-wife behaved quite differently, as if she knew there was no divorce. In 1870, she called herself “Mrs. Claflin.” Then there is the problem of Tennessee’s two marriages to Francis Cook. In the first, which took place 1 October 1885, she was recorded as Tennessee Celeste Claflin, a spinster aged 33.<sup>39</sup> As has been well documented elsewhere, Francis Cook was hit with a deluge of blackmail threats after their marriage. On 9 January 1889, Tennessee and, now Sir, Francis married again with the following corrections to her information: Tennessee Celeste Cook, formerly Bortel, the Divorced wife of James Bortel, previously Claflin, Spinster, of full age, with a note ‘previously married to the said Francis Cook at St. Mary Abbots Church, Kensington on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1885. The second marriage was by licence, forestalling the need to have banns called and therefore any chance of objection.

With the exception of the 1871 mention in the Syracuse, Illinois, *True Republican*, there are no public references to Bartle’s marriage to Tennessee until the news broke in 1899. The *Chicago Examiner*’s article was picked up in papers around the United States.<sup>40</sup>

In 1868 and 1869, Tennessee had managed to attract the attention of Commodore Vanderbilt and rumors swirling were that he had asked her to marry him. Ever the opportunist, under normal circumstances and despite the objections of his family, she *characteristically* would have done so. She *uncharacteristically* refused him. The convenient Chicago fire was still in the future. If she and Bartle were not divorced, Vanderbilt’s public profile would surely lead to her exposure as a bigamist. It is clear from the record of her second marriage to Cook, she realized the time had come to ‘come clean,’ at least with her husband, if not the rest of the world.

The legacy of the brief marriage of Bartle and Tennessee was that she lived with the marriage for the rest of her life, while he moved on. His exposure of their marriage in 1899 certainly brought into focus many of the choices she made after the couple parted company. It should be noted that there are no legal records of a marriage to or divorce from her purported husband John A. Greene. The only notices are a few newspaper snippets announcing the marriage and a few notices in his obituary. Perhaps John James Bartle’s nuptial gift to Tennessee was a life where she had to embrace the concepts of free love on a personal level.

---

<sup>36</sup> “The Queens of Finance,” *New York Herald*, 22 January 1870, p. 10, col. 3. Which would lead the reader to suppose that she was married in or about 1862 and was still married.

<sup>37</sup> “Cook Defended,” *op cit*.

<sup>38</sup> “Tenny Was His Bride,” *op cit*. Bartle gave his interview a year before it was published.

<sup>39</sup> General Register Office, entry 299.

<sup>40</sup> For example, *Aspen Daily Times* (Aspen, Colorado) 30 July 1899.

Bartle's second marriage ended with Hannah's death in an insane asylum in 1895. She had been committed, suffering from chronic and severe depression in 1890.<sup>41</sup> While she was hospitalized, Bartle retained a housekeeper, Henrietta Louise Varwig, a German immigrant 25 years his junior. They had a daughter together prior to his second wife's death, in 1888. Bartle fully acknowledged the girl as his, and one week following Hannah's death, he married Henrietta.<sup>42</sup>

Bartle applied for an invalid's pension claiming that he had kidney disease, hay fever, "rectal disease," and a hernia – all as a result of his service. Though questioned by the pension office, his application was approved 8 September 1890 at the rate of \$12 a month. Towards the end of his life, Bartle's kidney disease worsened, and in his last year he was described by his doctor as having dementia with childish behavior. He died of uremic poisoning on 22 June 1899.<sup>43</sup>

Henrietta was left penniless with a young daughter to support. She quickly filed for her widow's pension. She had to produce character witnesses, affidavits from people who knew the details of her husband's prior marriages, and explanations about the multiple spellings of Bartle's surname. One obstacle stood in the way. There was no divorce record for the marriage of Tennessee Claflin and John James Bartle. The pension office waived attorney's fees for her application and contacted the embassy in London to see if they would contact Tennessee, Lady Cook. Tennessee filed a sworn affidavit. In it, she again alluded to the destruction of the records in the Chicago fire but swore she did secure a divorce. The widow was given her pension.<sup>44</sup>

When Tennessee visited the United States after the death of Sir Francis Cook, she often visited Chicago. In 1911, Bartle's relatives reached out to her and spoke to the press of their memories of her when she was "Jimmy's wife."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Pension records, op cit. His widow had to present documentation of all of his marriages and how they ended to establish her legal status as his widow.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "Lady Cook Ill From Threats, Ex-Brother-In-Law Is Here," Chicago Examiner, 3 March 1911, p. 1, col. 5.