

12-1-2013

## A disaster at sea in 1858

Inge Sjögren

Elisabeth Thorsell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sjögren, Inge and Thorsell, Elisabeth (2013) "A disaster at sea in 1858," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 33 : No. 4 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol33/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

# A disaster at sea in 1858

**This fearful accident has been forgotten, but has now been found again in a family history**

BY INGE SJÖGREN

TRANSLATION: ELISABETH THORSELL

*S/S Austria* was a steamship of the Hamburg America Line which sank on 13 September 1858, in one of the worst transatlantic maritime disasters of the nineteenth century, claiming the lives of 449 passengers and crew.

The *Austria* was built by Caird & Co. of Greenock, Scotland, and was launched on 23 June 1857. She was 318 ft and 2,684 BRT, with three masts and single screw propeller propulsion.

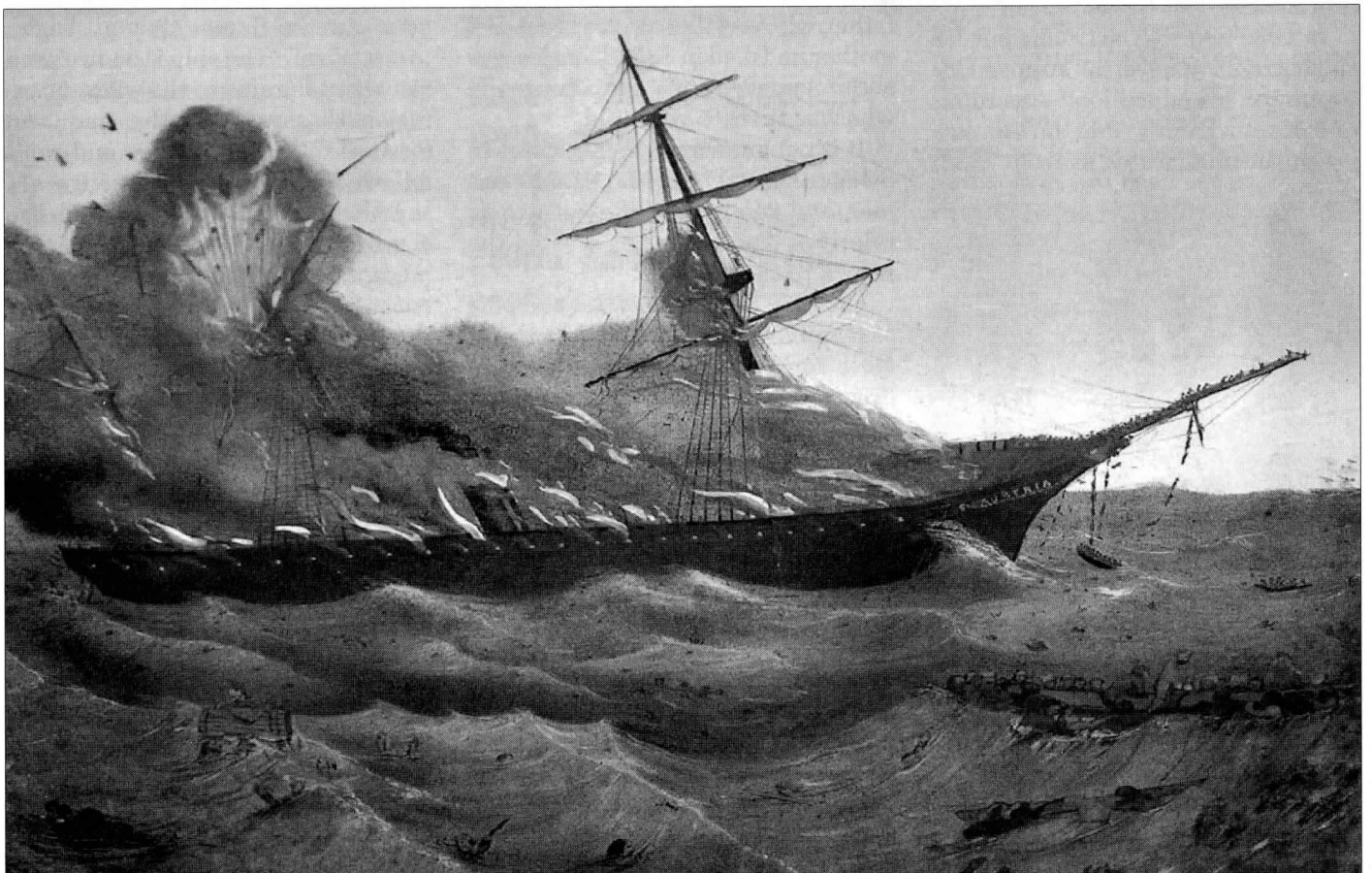
After a cancelled British government charter, she went into service with the Hamburg America Line on 1 May 1858 on the Hamburg-New York route.

On 1 September 1858, *S/S Austria* captained by F. A. Heydtmann sailed from Hamburg on her third voyage to New York City. There were 60 passengers in 1st class, 120 in 2nd class, and 450 in steerage, and a crew of 80.

At approximately noon, on 13 Sep-

tember, a decision was made to fumigate steerage by dipping a red-hot chain into a bucket of tar; the chain became too hot for the boatswain to hold, and it was dropped onto the deck, which immediately burst into flames; although the ship was traveling at only half speed it was impossible to stop the engines as the engine crew had become asphyxiated.

When the helmsman abandoned the wheel, the ship swung into the



*The Austria was engulfed in flames almost immediately.*

wind, spreading the flames down the length of the ship, racing through the mahogany veneer and varnished bulkheads, as passengers jumped into the sea.

The passing barque, *Maurice* of France, rescued most of the survivors, and the *Catarina* of Norway picked up more the next morning. As the blackened hulk was left to sink, all but 65 of 538 passengers were lost.

## The Swedish connection

As the *Austria* started out from Hamburg in Germany it might not have been supposed to have had any Swedes on board, but so was not the case.

Family historian Inge Sjögren of Kalmar, Sweden, was tracing his great-great-grandfather (*farmor's morfar*) Theodor Rosén's family in Kalmar, when he found that Theodor had had a brother who went to America. This brother was Carl Folke Rosén, born 1812 Sep. 12 in Kalmar *Stadsförsamling*, son of the merchant Folke Rosén and his wife Anna Christina Swarss.

In 1830 Sep. 27 Carl Folke left for Karlskrona, where he supposedly continued his education.<sup>2</sup> According to a Rosén Family Tree on Ancestry.com, he immigrated in about 1838,



A daguerreotype of Charles Rosene, wife Eliza, sons Charles and August, maybe in 1849, and sent to the Swedish family. (Inge Sjögren collection).

*Transport Verzeichniss*  
 der Personen, welche mit dem Schiffe *Austria*  
 Captain *W. J. J. J.* nach *New York*  
 zur Auswanderung durch Unterzeichneten engagirt sind.

N	Zu- und Vorname und Familie.	Geburts- und Wohnort.	Landes.	Gewerbe.	Alter	Geschlecht		Total	Reception			
						weiblich	männlich		Er- wartung und Ende des 6. Jah.	7. Jah.	8. Jah.	
11	<i>Charles Rosene</i>	<i>Richmond VA</i>	<i>Amer.</i>	<i>Music teacher</i>	<i>26</i>							
12	<i>Charles F. Rosene</i>	<i>Richmond VA</i>	<i>Amer.</i>	<i>Music teacher</i>	<i>15</i>							
13	<i>August W. Rosene</i>	<i>Richmond VA</i>	<i>Amer.</i>	<i>Music teacher</i>	<i>1847</i>							
14	<i>Theodore Oscar Rosene</i>	<i>Richmond VA</i>	<i>Amer.</i>	<i>Music teacher</i>	<i>1850</i>							

Charles Rosene (Rosén) and his son in the Hamburg passenger lists (Ancestry.com. Hamburg passenger lists, Direkt Band 012, 1858 Mar-Nov, page 279).

at age 26 to America. In America he settled in Richmond, VA, and became a well-known music teacher there. He married Eliza Frances Tower, born 1816 in Massachusetts, and they had three children, Charles Folke (Falk) (b. 1843), August W, (b. 1847), and Theodore Oscar (b. 1850).

In 1858 Carl (who was by then Americanized to Charles) decided to go home to Sweden and visit his old father, who was then 80 years old. His mother had died in 1850. Charles was accompanied by his son Charles F, who was then 15 years old.

It is not known when they came to Sweden, possibly in the early summer, and spent the time with their relatives. And then they started the return to the U.S.

On 1858 Sept. 1 they left the port of Hamburg on the *S/S Austria* for New York, in the company of hundreds of other travellers. On Sept. 4 the ship picked up more passengers in Southampton, England.<sup>3</sup>

What happened next will be told by Charles Rosene, Jr.

## Statement of Charles F. V. Rosene Newark Daily Advertiser<sup>4</sup>

Charles F. V. Rosene, Jr., of Richmond, Va., aged 15 years, was a passenger on board the *Austria* with his father, who had been on a visit to his aged parent in Sweden. They left New York in June by the *Ariel*, for Bremen. After their visit they returned to

Hamburg and took the steamer *Austria* on the 1st inst. Charles mentions the name of a Mr. Lingstein, of California, who was a passenger in the second cabin. On the day of the burning he was sitting abaft the engine with his father. He first saw the fire coming up through the ventilators, from which the wind-sails had been taken only a short time before. Instantly as the passengers saw the flames they all began to cry, "Fire!" "The ship is on fire" and ran about the ship in the wildest confusion. He says: "My father and I ran forward to escape the fire and were followed by the other passengers. I saw the fire pouring out through the sky-lights. In ten or fifteen minutes more the cry ran fore and aft, "To the boats!" All hands then crowded into the boats, which had been hanging inboard, but were now swung out by the davits. The first mate mounted the rail near the forward boat on the port side, in which they were sitting with a large crowd of other passengers. He ordered all of us to get out of the boat, so that it could be lowered. But as fast as one set got out others rushed into their places, and we also went back to our first seat. The first mate then took a sailor's knife and cut the tackle, and the boat fell into the water. Falling some twenty-five feet the boat filled and sunk, and all the people were washed out. I came up under the bottom of the boat, but I found my way out and clambered into the boat.

There were five or six oars lashed together, and they floated out. My father came up within reach of these, and seized hold of them with five or six others. He saw me in the boat, and called out to me, "Oh, my boy, we are all lost!" In a short time one end of the oar drifted near the boat and I caught hold of it, to haul him in. I also asked a passenger near to assist me to save my father. We pulled together, but there were so many clinging to the oars we could not move them. The gentleman said "It is no use, we cannot move them." He then drifted along near us, still clinging to the oars. In this way he held on for nearly four hours.

I could not bear to look at him, and we drifted in silence. There was nothing in the boat to throw to him. During this time the boat rolled over several times, and many were drowned each time. I was so exhausted I could not get into the boat. I asked one of the passengers to assist me, and he kindly drew me into the boat. We drifted between two and three miles astern of the steamer, and could only see the flames rising above the deck. There was no conversation, except an occasional request by the first mate that the passengers would sit still, so as to not capsize the boat. My father by this time had drifted so near the boat, that he caught hold of the stern. I was at the bow and could not reach him. Mr. John F. Cox said, "Charley, your father has hold of the stern of the boat, and can get in." I said, "Oh! I am so glad that he is safe." But he was so exhausted that he held on only about five minutes, and then sunk. Just before he let go he said to Mr. Cox, "If my boy is safe, I am satisfied."

We saw a man some three hundred yards off swimming with a large tin life-buoy, which could be used to bail out the boat. We told him to swim to us and we would take him in. He came towards us, and was received into the boat. He had been swimming about four hours, and was greatly fatigued. It was now after sunset. His name was Hogquist.

The first mate borrowed a knife from a passenger and succeeded

cutting the buoy in two. This made two good bailers. The mate then told us if we wished to be saved, we must now all get overboard except the young woman and let two persons remain in and bail out the boat. We obeyed the order, and all got overboard. In a few minutes the boat was freed of water, and we all got in, observing great caution, so as not to upset her again. The mate then took the steering oar, and with the four others we soon pulled up to the French bark *Maurice*. As the passengers stepped over the rail they all embraced the captain, and all of them shed tears of gratitude for their deliverance. The captain received us all with great kindness. He rigged an awning amidships, and laid a platform for us to lay down upon, giving us all the loose sails he could raise as bedding. We all lay down in our wet clothing, but too much chilled to sleep. The young lady who was saved in our boat was taken into the cabin and her wounds dressed. The captain remained up through the whole night, attending to the wounded, assisted by Jean Polekrusky.

### **Later from the rescued passengers Serious complaints against the captain and officers Fearful particulars of the conflagration**

(From the *New York Post*).<sup>5</sup>

The rescued passengers arrived too late to enable us to publish their full statements today. They all seem to be imbued with a sense of horror in remembering the terrible sufferings and dangers they have passed. They say they can add little or nothing to the full and accurate reports which have already been published, which would be calculated to throw light on the horrible disaster.

All concur in stating that there was gross mismanagement in those who had charge of the steamer. The captain, from the first, gave up in despair, and the helmsman abandoned the wheel.

Every one seemed to seek only his

personal safety. The fire was at first so small that it might have been covered with a man's hat, but for some reason it suddenly spread throughout the lower part of the ship, which was instantly filled with dense, suffocating smoke.

Many were unable to leave their rooms at all. One man was seen with his head thrust through a port hole, unable to get further, while the sheets of fire ran bursting over all parts of the ship, all around him.

The first, second, and third officers are said to have been saved; all the others perished.

Several men were hauled up out of the second cabin and reported that many then were already smothered.

Before the survivors left, they think, that all who were below deck must have expired. The heat was from the first intense.

The flames spread like lightning, overtaking those who tried to escape. Those who took refuge in the chains, as many as could gain a foothold, were soon driven off by the heat. The communication between the fore and aft was cut off entirely within five minutes from the time the fire broke out.

The survivors have very faint hopes as to any more having been saved than has been reported. They say all that could be found were taken off by their ship.

### **Statement of Henry A. Smith**

Henry A. Smith, of Chelsea, Massachusetts, thus told his story: I got on the third boat, as it was cut down from the davits. It fell twenty-five feet and was swamped. In that fall ten or twelve people were drowned, and then the boat capsized at the same time, and, in the endeavor to right her, ten more were drowned. At last she righted, and I got in with twenty-three others, and after being twenty-five hours in the boat we were picked up by the brig *Maurice*.

### **Statement of Mr. Rosene**

Charles F. V. Rosene, of Richmond, Va., aged 15 says: I was saved in the same boat as Mr. Smith, whose state-



ment you have just got; my father was in the boat at the time she was cut loose from the davits, and he was one of those who fell out of her; he then got the oars and floated on them for a considerable time. Meanwhile I got into the boat with the others, and after much struggling my father got up to her and caught hold of the stern, but being unable to hold on, he immediately sank. I saw him drowned myself, am now without a father.

I was rescued by the brig *Maurice*, but, although I wished to jump out and try to save my father I would not be permitted, and he was lost.

### Statement of Mr. Peterson

I was one of the steerage passengers of the *Austria*, and am from Lanseruna, (?) Switzerland.<sup>6</sup>

The fire was discovered about two or three o'clock on the 13th September, in the after part of the steerage. Immediately after the smoke became very dense, and the flames spread up, from the hold, enveloping the ship from stem to stern. We immediately endeavored to save ourselves by means of the boats, of which there were eight; five of these we endeavored to launch from the side, but they were cut adrift and went past the ship. One was swamped and cut in three pieces by the screw, and another, the one I was in, hung by the bow tackle until filled with passengers. Then we cut her loose at the suggestion of the occupants, there being a large number on the tackle who remonstrated against our cutting the rope. If all had got in, the boat would have gone down with the immense weight. We dragged with the steamer at least half an hour before the boat was cut adrift, and then hung on as well as we could. I was on the outside of the boat, and hung on by the gunwales, as I was a good swimmer. I was so much exhausted that I could not have hung on another hour. We were then picked up by the barque *Maurice*; those in the water around us clung to me, and I was in danger of losing my hold several times, but managed to main-

tain it, and assisted some in getting on board the boat, or otherwise helping them to hold to the gunwales.

Three of the boats of the ship were rendered unserviceable, or could not be used, from the fact that the flames prevented them being cut away or launched.

When I was getting into the boat, and before I left the deck, I saw about thirty passengers, I should think, in the hold, trying to get air, by the port lights. These were told by one of the officers of the ship that if they came up they would be smothered by the smoke or burned by the fire. They probably all remained, and were thus burned to death in the hold. If the engines had been stopped soon after the fire broke out, a good many would have been saved who were crushed in the boat by the screw, which was running like a windmill. The chief engineer, Morganstein, went down to shut off the steam from the engine, but was unable to do so from the great heat and smoke coming from the lower deck. Passengers were, all the time I was near the ship, jumping off the stern into the water and getting what assistance they could from the broken boats and floating articles in the water. Two vessels were seen on the starboard beam, one of which came to our assistance, while the other stood on her course. The confusion was very great, and the passengers and crew seemed to have lost all control of themselves, and the latter to be under no discipline from the officers of the steamer.

### The Boats

(From the *New York Tribune*).

It has been stated that there were eight Francis's Metallic Lifeboats and several ship's launches on board. This is not true. There were only eight on board in all – which would not, at the outside, accommodate more than half of the people on board. These were hung on davits, four on each side of the ship. The four forward boats were of metal, the other four were clinker-built wooden boats. Two of the boats, those hung on the starboard and port quarters, were painted white.

We have endeavored to ascertain what became of the boats. One of the quarter boats, which the captain and fourth officer attempted to launch, was crushed by the screw, and the inmates drowned or hauled up on board again. A second boat, let down from the starboard side of the ship was likewise swamped by the crowd of people. Mr. Brew escaped in a third boat, which was swamped when he got into it; one of the wooden boats over the midshiprail was burned. Four boats are thus accounted for.

The first officer and some thirty people escaped in the fifth, a metallic boat, and after being capsized several times, by which about ten lives were lost, reached the brig *Maurice* safely. Prof. Glaubenskleer, Mr. Vezin, and others saw a sixth boat some miles astern, with six or eight people in her. This boat was supposed to be one of the white boats from the port quarter, which has not yet been reported as picked up. Only six boats were launched, as the flames amidships prevented the people from reaching the others. We are informed that these boats were slung from the davits and instead of being secured to the ship's side with a piece of hempen seizing, which could easily be cut when the boats are required to be launched in an emergency like this, they were set in chocks or wooden bearings, from which they had to be lifted before they could be lowered to the water.

The crowd in them, in most instances, prevented this, and hence so many of the boats were lost in getting them into the water. The white boat, described above, may yet be heard from. It is also possible that some of those persons who were still clinging to the vessel at nightfall, when the captain of the *Maurice* desisted from sending his boats, were able to hold on through the night, and were picked up next morning by the Norwegian brig.

It is difficult to understand why the boats of the French brig could not have continued to save people from the burning steamer during the night. The light from the steamer illuminated the sector a long dis-

tance, and the French brig kept her lights burning. The weather was pleasant, the sea calm and unruffled, and a pull of three-quarters of a mile after nightfall, under these circumstances, when there were precious lives to save, would not have deterred a green landsman of ordinary pluck. Why did not Hahn, the mate of the steamer, when he reached the brig, with his sailor-crew in the six-oared life boat, go after them? It is evident from his acts and expressions, as well as his recklessness in casting his boat adrift, that he was afraid to risk his cowardly carcass on such an errand of mercy. The conduct of this man should be rigidly investigated. .

## Incidents after arrival of the sufferers

Six of the survivors of the calamity who arrived by the *Prince Albert* yesterday went to the Shakespeare Hotel, corner of Dunne and William streets, where they took dinner and saw some of their friends. Their names are Frederick Thompson, a German, Swen Peterson, Swede, Chas. Hogquist, Swede, Herman Randel, Swede, Chas. F. V. Rosene, American, and John Palicrusca, Austrian. It becoming known outside that some of the survivors were there, many persons crowded in to see them and to interrogate them in regard to the calamity.

One gentleman went from one to another in an excited manner, anxiously inquiring of them if they had seen on the *Austria* the original of a daguerreotype of an elderly lady which he held in his hand; but none had seen her. One of the passengers told him that there were so many faces on board it was impossible for him to recollect whether he had seen that countenance before. There was an expression of anguish in the countenance of the stranger as he left the room.

One of the sufferers who lost everything he possessed by the fire, met an old friend in a saloon in Trayon Row, and he was so affected at the meeting that he embraced and kissed his friend, uttering in tremu-

lous tones, "I am here, but it was God who saved me."

(End of newspaper accounts)

## What happened next?

The passengers that were picked up by the French brig *Maurice* were taken to Fayal on the Azores in the Mid-Atlantic. Next they were sent to Halifax on the bark *Lotus*, and then from there to New York by the *Prince Albert*.

Except those already mentioned, these also came on the *Prince Albert*: Philip Berry of Hackensack, NJ; Henry A. Smith of Chelsea, MA; Alfred Vezin of Philadelphia, PA; and professor Theodore Glaubensklee of the Free Academy, NY.

## Charles Rosene, Jr.

He went back home to his mother and brothers in Richmond, where he is listed in the 1860 U.S. Census.

Sometime later he moved to New York, and started a successful career as an actor. In the 1870 U.S. Census<sup>7</sup> he is listed as C. Rosene, and seems to live at some boarding house, with many people from Ireland, Denmark, Germany, and many from New York and other states. He is now 27 years old and established as an actor.

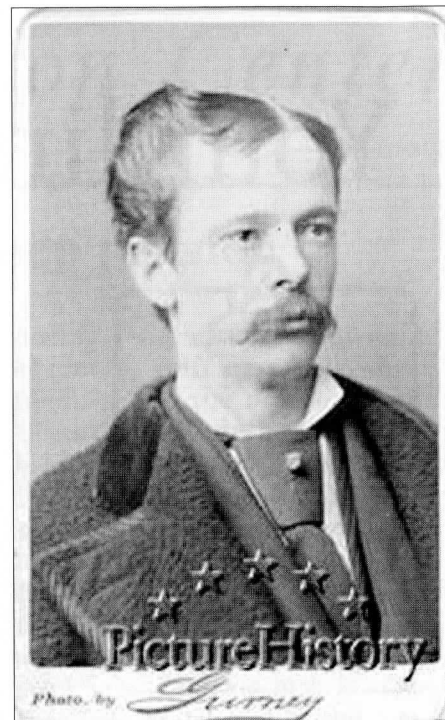
He was first married to Julia Jarvis, who died in 1879.<sup>8</sup> They had children Frances (b. 1875), Ada (b. 1876), and Charles Morton (b. 1878).

In 1880 Jan. 25 he married in New York<sup>9</sup> to Augusta Jane Hammond, (b. 1860). They had children Ellen (b. 1881), August (b. 1882), Edward (b. 1889), and Adeline (b. 1893).

By 1900 Charles is listed as being retired, and he died in 1910 in New York.

During 2013 Inge Sjögren made contact with Mrs. Jeri Hawkins, née Rosene, a direct descendant of Charles F. Rosene. Mrs. Hawkins will visit Sweden next summer.

Inge Sjögren lives at  
Norra Långgatan 13  
S-392 32 Kalmar, Sweden  
E-mail:  
agneta\_sjogren@hotmail.com



Charles Falk (Folke) Rosene (1843–1910).

## Endnotes:

- 1) Kalmar *Stadsförsamling* C:7, page 297 (*Arkiv Digital*).
- 2) Kalmar *Stadsförsamling* AI:21, page 131 (*Arkiv Digital*).
- 3) *Shipping News, Boston Post* (Boston, MA) 1858 Sept. 23 (*GenealogyBank*).
- 4) *Newark Daily Advertiser* (Newark, NJ) 1858 Sept. 30, (*GenealogyBank*).
- 5) *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, NY) 1858 Sept. 30, 1858 (*GenealogyBank*).
- 6) Possibly from Landskrona, Sweden, as he is later described as a Swede [Ed:s note].
- 7) His mother and brothers are still in Richmond, but indexed with last name Rosiri(!).
- 8) Rosene Family Tree (<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/39499988/person/19376821038>).
- 9) New York Marriage Indexes 1866–1937 (*Ancestry.com*).

Internet links to this article are found on p. 30