

# **Kessler**

**James H. Kessler**

**Born: March 7, 1904      Death: January 11, 1958**

**Father: Albert Kessler      Mother: Amanda Munion**

**Note: 1900 and 1920 U.S. Census has an Albert Kessler listed as head of the family.**

## **Marriage:**

**James H. Kessler and Catherine M. Gedling would marry sometime in 1924.**

**According to the 1930 U.S. Census in 1930 James H. was 28 and Catherine M. is 22.**

**He was 22 years old and she was 16 years old at the time of their marriage.**

## **Children:**

**Dorothy M. Kessler Reilly**

**Born: January 18, 1926**

**Died: May 4, 2003**

**Married: Edward Reilly      March 16, 1946**

**Children: John James Reilly  
              Stephen Andrew Reilly**

**Occupation: Secretary retired Delaware River Port Authority**

**Verna E. Kessler Connelly**

**Born: November 23, 1928**

**Died: February 6, 2004**

**Married: Robert L. Connelly, Sr.**

**Children: Verna  
Robert  
Bonnie**

**Occupation: retired from New Jersey Telephone Co. after 45 years.**

**Dorothy Marie Kessler would marry an Edward Reilly and this is where the Reilly family would be connected to the Kessler, Gedling, Munion, and Redfield families.**

### **1930 U.S. Census**

**In 1930 the Kessler family was living at 1033 Segal Street in Camden, New Jersey, and was renting a place for \$15.00. Dorothy was now 4 years 2 months old and Verna was 1 year 4 months old. James H. was working as a staker at a leather factory which was located at the end of Segal Street. Catherine was not working having two small children at home. All members of the family were born in New Jersey and the parents of each were born in New Jersey, with the exception of Catherine's father, Harry Gedling, who was born in Delaware. This fact helped trace the Gedling line. James and Catherine lived just two doors down from her mother, Rhoda Gedling, who was now married to a George Wilson, at 1037 Segal Street. There was a cousin, Clarence Dougherty, living with them in 1930. He was 28 and single, worked as a riveter in a shipyard.**

### **Two Tragic Events**

**The years 1930 and 1931 would be tragic years for the Kessler family, especially for the two little girls, Dorothy and Verna. Two events took place that would affect the girls for the rest of their lives.**

First, Catherine Kessler would leave James Kessler for another man. This would take place sometime between April 1930 and September 1931. For a short time Dorothy and Verna would be with their mother and her new husband. There is some question as to whether they were ever married. The children's grandmother, Rhoda Gedling Wilson would at some point turn her daughter, Catherine, into the authorities, for some illegalities involving support payments from the State of New Jersey. Dorothy and Verna would become wards of the state and eventually Rhoda Gedling Wilson would be given custody of the children. She would raise them in a very strict home environment until they graduated from high school. Catherine would raise a whole new family with Monroe, while the girls were abandoned by their mother and would have contact with her only sporadically in the years to come. The girls would be haunted by the questions of why their mother left them and why they could not have a regular family like their half brothers and sisters. (For more details of this time period please read the section of Dorothy's early life in the Reilly Family history.)

### **Skillman Village for Epileptics**

Second, the father, James H., whose Grand Mal epilepsy would worsen, also, he developed mental problems apparently in response to Catherine's leaving. This would result in James being institutionalized for the rest of his life at the Skillman Village for Epileptics in Skillman, New Jersey.

James H. Kessler was living at 545 Cedar Street in Camden, New Jersey with one of his married sisters, Anna Reign in 1931. On September 15, 1931 James was

courted ordered by Judge Samuel M. Shay of Camden to be committed to Skillman Village. At the time he was 27 years, 5 months and 28 days old according to the Register of Admissions at Skillman. Dorothy was about 5 years old and Verna about 3 years old when this happened.

## **Admissions Record**

Searching for more information about James as a patient at Skillman Village contact was made with the New Jersey Division of Archives and Records Management and a copy of Kessler's admission papers were obtained, but not without a lot of effort because the medical records of all patients who were at Skillman are sealed. A wealth of information was gleaned from just the one page admissions document. It was noted on the admissions form that James had "very little" education, his habits were "cleanly" and that he was in good physical condition when admitted; also that he was Protestant. Kessler's occupation at the time was as a glazier. An Alfred Kessler and an Amanda Munion are listed as his parents. His sister Anna Reign was the contact person in case of sickness or death. He was living with her and her family when he was sent to Skillman Village. James was diagnosed with Grand Mal epilepsy the cause of which was unknown. (Epilepsy was still at this time considered a mental disorder and family would send the person to Skillman to remove the financial burden on themselves and the stigma of a family member being epileptic) It was further determined as he was admitted to Skillman his mental condition was that of a "low grade moron, possibly psychotic." During this whole process he had been examined by two doctors, an Alexander Ellis and a Berry Wrotlenski of Camden and at Skillman he was referred to a Dr. R.K. Adams.

Two Camden City detectives, Richard Donnelly and Louis Schlam accompanied James Kessler to the Village for Epileptics. It was 6:15 p.m. on September 15, 1931 when James began his stay at Skillman; a stay that would last 24 years, 4 months, and 6 days. Until the end of his life, and even in death, James would never leave Skillman Village.

## **Dorothy and Verna**

His two little girls would only be able to visit him at Skillman a few times over the years. Dorothy only remembers only making three visits to see her father at Skillman. Two times when she was young and her great grandmother Munion took her. She was the mother of Amanda Munion who married Albert Kessler, the parents of James H. Kessler. During one of those visits James became very belligerent and said some horrible things to Dorothy and Verna who were barely in their teens at the time. Years of being in an institution had taken their toll on him. The last time that Dorothy and Verna saw their father was when Edward and Dorothy Reilly and Bob and Verna Connolly visited him was some time before he died. They took a train, a bus and then a cab in order to get to Skillman Village. James was very sick, bedridden and did not even know that his girls were there. The only thing that Dorothy and Verna have from their father is a letter he wrote to them April 4, 1940. It is all that remains of his life. At the time Dorothy was 14 years old and Verna was about 12 years of age. Dorothy kept the fading, worn, dog-eared letter from her father in her bible for over 60 years. He was 55 years, 10 months and 4 days old when he died on January 11, 1958.

## **The Sacred Grounds Cemetery**

**James H. Kessler would be buried at The Sacred Grounds Upper Cemetery of the Skillman Village for Epileptics. For over 45 years the location of James H. Kessler's grave was unknown to the family. In 2002 the Upper Cemetery as it was called was rediscovered. John Reilly, a grandson who never knew his grandfather, began searching for where James Kessler was buried as part of his genealogical research. With only a name and a small notation in his mother's bible which read "James Kessler, Foote Cottage, Village for Epileptics, Skillman, New Jersey," a Google search found a reference to Skillman Village and the Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey. This led to a woman who had just a few months earlier had compiled a database of the cemetery using a grid system to aid in locating a particular grave. The database includes the names, birth and death dates and the location of each person buried in the three sectioned graveyard. A total 467 unwanted or forgotten souls were buried in the cemetery from 1904 and 1960. An examination of the 10 page database found the name of James H. Kessler listed along with his date of birth and date of death. James H. Kessler was indeed buried at the Skillman Cemetery. He is in grid location B10@. His grave is toward the back right corner of the cemetery as you enter.**

### **"Forgotten in Death, Remembered in Life"**

**The cemetery was in such bad condition the local Rotary Club was asked to help clean up the deteriorated cemetery; removing fallen trees, clearing out the overgrown brush and fixing and setting upright any fallen or broken headstones. Today the Rotary Club maintains the cemetery on a yearly basis; bush hogging and**

cutting the grass around the graves. Their motto for this project is “Forgotten in Life, Remembered in Death.” The rediscovered Upper Cemetery was renamed The Sacred Ground Upper Cemetery of Skillman Village for Epileptics. There are a few articles giving information about the cemetery and its history and one article about the trip John and Edward took to find the grave of a long lost grandfather they never knew.

## **A Thanksgiving Visit**

On Thanksgiving Day in 2002 John Reilly and his son, Edward, traveled to Skillman in order to be shown by a local resident the location of this obscure and long forgotten cemetery. Aerial photos reveal the close proximity of the cemetery to the Village. On a remote knoll there is a large, square clearing surrounded by woods and farmland not far from the large, pretty homes that make up much of upscale Montgomery County. It is a quiet place where only the sounds of birds, the rustle of squirrels through the leaves and the mournful cry of a distant cow can be heard. It is a place of deer and turkey. A serene place. A Sacred Place. The cemetery is located on the south side of Rock Brook off of Burnt Hill Road. Turning from Burnt Hill Road into a corn field there is a dirt road that meanders its way through two other corn fields. The dirt road seems to be more of a path for farm tractors. But following the path to the top of the hill, going through a canopy of tall trees that opens to the entrance of the hidden cemetery; which bears a sign proclaiming you have arrived at The Sacred Grounds Upper Cemetery of the Village for Epileptics at Skillman.

## **“We Have Remembered”**

John and Edward stood silently at the grave looking at a marker. It was painted white with black lettering long ago, but 5 decades of being exposed to 50 harsh winters, the paint has chipped off in spots and rust has appeared on the metal tombstone. There was the name. James H. Kessler. The search had spanned a year and took a 1200 mile journey in order to stand before it. Pictures were taken and the words: “We have remembered” were spoken. Prays were made for James. Reverend John Reilly stood on a Thanksgiving morning with the biting November wind that swept through the trees and across the silent rows of grave stones. Father and Son stood together before James Kessler’s final resting place. Reverend Reilly then read a portion of the United Methodist committal service which was offered in love, compassion and grace “for someone who has suffered a tragic or untimely death.” The committal service contained a prayer spoken to God which said: “O God, no mortal life you have made is without eternal meaning. No earthly fate is beyond your redeeming. Amen.” This was our hope and prayer for James; that through God’s love James Kessler’s life had meaning and that no situation that is faced in life, even a life which has spent 27+ years in obscurity, unknown to the rest of the outside world, that life is not beyond God’s redemption.

## **Skillman Village 1898-1998**

Skillman Village for Epileptics is located in Skillman, New Jersey, about 18 miles north of Trenton. The Skillman Village began in 1898. At the time until the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century The Village was considered an innovative residential center and one of the first to separate epilepsy patients from the insane. Historically,

people with epilepsy were considered mentally ill. The facility was designed to function like a small, self-contained “town.” There was a powerhouse, several residential units, a theater, hospital/medical facilities, agricultural areas, landfill or dumps, a wastewater collection system and treatment plant. The Skillman Village is now an abandoned ghost town closed in 1998. The Village fell on hard times following World War Two with loss of funding, dramatic increase in patients and deteriorating condition of the facilities. From the 1940 through the 1960’s New Jersey State newspapers called Skillman Village “the snake pit of New Jersey,” because conditions there were so horrifying. There is a history of the Skillman Village written by a Walter Baker, several newspaper articles and a video that are available for more information on the Skillman Village for Epileptics of New Jersey.

James Kessler had two sisters both older than him. Linda, who was born in September, 1894 and Anna, who was born in October 1898, according to the 1900 U.S. Census. James was born in 1904.

### **Linda Kessler**

Linda Kessler married a Jacob F. Bender and according to the 1920 U.S. Census they were both 19 years old when they married. If this is true then they were married in 1912-1913. In 1920 they were living at 146 South Thirty Second Street, Camden, New Jersey and owned their own home. Jacob and his parents were all born in Pennsylvania and Linda and her parents were all born in New Jersey. Jacob worked as a Mechanical Draftsman; Linda was at home. In 1920 they had three children: Jacob B. (Edward) age 7, Robert A. age 4 and 9 months and Ada L., 6

months old. In 1930 the Bender's were still living at 146 South Thirty Second Street and their home was valued at \$6500. Jacob was 38 and Linda was 37 and their children: Edward, Robert and Ada were 17, 14 and 10 years of age, respectively. Jacob was a Draftsman at a Radio Factory and his son, Edward, was an apprentice draftsman. Living with the Bender family at this time was Jacob's, father, Chas. E. Bender age 60 and widowed. He was a machinist at a Naval Shipyard.

### **Anna Kessler**

Anna H. Kessler married a Walter Reign according to the 1920 U.S. Census. At this time they lived at 226 Milton in Camden, New Jersey. Walter in 1920 was 30 years old and Anna was 21 which would make his birthday about 1890 and her birthday about 1898. His occupation is listed as woodman. Anna and Walter and both their parents were all born in New Jersey. The Reign's were married about 1915. In 1920 there were two daughters: Rebecca age 4 and Amanda and 11 months old. Perhaps Amanda is named after her grandmother Amanda Munion Kessler who was the mother of Anna, Linda and James. Living with the family is an Albert Kessler, age 50 who was widowed. He is the husband of Amanda Munion Kessler and the father of Linda Kessler Reign. The place of birth for both of his parents is listed in the 1920 U.S. Census as Germany. The immigration of his parents brought the Kessler family to America. Being 50 in 1920 puts Albert's birth about 1870. This information also indicates that Amanda Munion Kessler died sometime after 1904 when her last child James was born and before 1920 because Albert is then a widower.

## **Walter and Anna Reighn**

By 1930 Walter and Anna had moved to Penns Grove Township in Salem County, New Jersey. According to the 1930 U.S. Census they are living at 15 Fralie Woods Grove and renting for \$8.00. Walter's occupation is fisherman; Shad fishing. He is now 39 years of age and was married at age 24. Anna is 32 and married when she was 17. This means they were married in 1915. Albert Kessler is no longer living with them. Walter and Anna now have 6 children:

Rebecca	14	(1916)
Amanda	11	(1919)
Walter	8	(1922)
Doris	5	(1925)
Harold	1 yr 4 mos.	(1928)
Hubert	1 month	(1930)

## **Albert and Amanda Kessler**

According to the 1900 U.S. Census Albert and Amanda Kessler were renting a house at 414 Second Street, Camden, New Jersey. They were the parents of Linda, Anna and James. The census states that Albert and Amanda had been married for 9 years which means the marriage took place about 1891. Linda was 5 year old and Anna was just 1 years old; James had not been born yet. Albert's birthday was March, 1870 and Amanda's May 1873. Albert is employed as a carpenter. Living with the Kessler's is Amanda's mother and brother: Abbie Munyon and Webster. Amanda' mother is Abigail Raine Munion; her father was William H. Munion. This census report helped to locate the Munion side of the family. Abbie is 46 and has a

birthday of January 1854. She married very young and was widowed when her husband, William H. Munion, a Civil War veteran, died not many years after the end of the war leaving Abigail to raise several small children. Webster, one of her children is with her at the Kessler's. He is 22 years of age and his birthday is given as March, 1878. Webster is employed as a waiter. No other information about Albert and Amanda is available; only what is in the 1900 U.S. Census. Abigail A. Munion (nee: Raine) married William H. Munion. According to a newspaper death notice and William H. Kessler's Civil War Pension Records Abigail A. Raine Munion was a daughter of John Raine and Abigail A. Raine (nee: Chew) of New Jersey.

### **Albert and Apperemy Kessler**

Finding the parents of Albert Kessler proved to be a difficult task. A search was made of the census from the years 1880, 1900, 1920, and 1930 focusing on New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland. The key was finding a Kessler family where there was an "Albert" would match up with the 1870 birth year of Albert from the 1900 U.S. Census. The only "match" was in the 1880 U.S. Census of the 11<sup>th</sup> Ward, District 26, New York, New York (Manhattan). In this census an Albert Kessler, age 11, was a son of an Albert and Apperemy Kessler. Albert Kessler, the head of the household, was age 35 in 1880, which means he was born about 1845. He was born in Prussia along with his both his parents. Albert's occupation was as a tinsmith. Apperemy, his wife, was age 39, which places her birth about 1841. She was born in Prussia along with both her parents. Her

**occupation was listed as House Keeping. Albert and Appereny had 4 children, three sons and I daughter; all were born in New York and attended in school in 1880:**

**Albert      age 11**

**Annie      age 8**

**Charles    age 6**

**Appelony   age 4**

**At this time there is no other information about Albert, Appereny and the children, except for what is found in the 1880 U.S. Census.**