

## WILLIAM HENRY CHANEY – JACK’S PUTATIVE BIOLOGICAL FATHER

John London married Jack’s mother, Flora Wellman, on September 7, 1876, when Jack was about 8 months old. John London raised Jack as his son. It wasn’t until Jack was 21 years old that he discovered that William Henry Chaney was most likely his biological father.<sup>1</sup>

Chaney and Flora lived together in San Francisco before she married John London. They held themselves out as husband and wife but were never formally married.<sup>2</sup>

Theirs was a tumultuous romance. Chaney, 22 years Flora’s senior and with multiple failed marriages, wanted Flora to get an abortion when she became pregnant with Jack. She refused to have an abortion. She attempted suicide twice, by laudanum and by self-inflicted gunshot, but to no avail; Chaney still abandoned her.<sup>3</sup>

Flora related her story about Chaney’s abandonment to a San Francisco newspaper reporter and the resulting article caused a mob of about 150 to gather, threatening to hang him. Chaney left San Francisco in December of 1875.

When Jack discovered that Chaney was likely his father, he tracked Chaney down to Chicago and wrote to him.<sup>4</sup> We have copies of their 1897 correspondence, with Chaney denying paternity, claiming he was impotent.<sup>5</sup> Despite Chaney’s denials, most London scholars believe he was indeed Jack’s biological father.

But just who was William Henry Chaney?

Chaney’s life surprisingly mirrored Jack’s in many ways. Like Jack, Chaney had a difficult childhood, loved books, and worked at a number of different jobs, including at sea. He was born on January 13, 1821, in the backwoods of Maine near Chesterville. Chaney’s father, a farmer, died when Chaney was 9 years old and he was “bound out” (essentially sold as a laborer) to other farmers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Flora entered the name “John Griffith Chaney” on Jack’s birth certificate.

<sup>2</sup> It could have been considered a type of common-law marriage which was legal in California until 1895. Chaney claimed that under pressure from Flora, he agreed to sign a “marriage contract.” Their “marriage contract,” dated June 11, 1874, provided in part: “this copartnership is binding only as a mutual agreement, and may be cancelled at any moment at the desire of either of the contracting parties.” The entirety of their marriage contract was self-published by William Chaney and sold for “10 cents” in response to what he described as “the infamous article in the Chronicle . . .” where Flora had disparaged Chaney to a reporter for his abandonment of her.

<sup>3</sup> In Chaney’s 10 cent pamphlet describing his marriage contract and relationship with Flora, he refutes that Flora actually had a self-inflicted gunshot wound. According to Joan London’s biography of her father, however, her grandmother bore a scar on her forehead from that bullet wound.

<sup>4</sup> It is unknown exactly how Jack discovered Chaney was likely his biological father. Biographers have suggested various theories: that Jack may have learned about it from step relatives; or from running across the old newspaper article of Flora’s abandonment; or by seeing the name Chaney on his birth certificate; etc.

<sup>5</sup> He likely meant sterile.

Chaney had a keen interest in books and education at a young age; he resented the farm work which deprived him of educational opportunities. At the age of 15 or 16, he ran off. Initially he worked as a carpenter and then went to sea with the hopes of becoming a pirate. He worked on a Yankee fishing schooner and then for a short time in the U.S. Navy until he jumped ship.<sup>7</sup> The pirate experience never materialized but Chaney tried his hand as a school teacher, store clerk, city clerk, preacher, surveyor, attorney, editor, writer, astrologer, and lecturer, among other ventures.<sup>8</sup> He earned his tuition at one academy by sweeping floors and did the same during his legal apprenticeship to become an attorney, practicing law in several states.<sup>9</sup>

Chaney was also a writer and interested in politics, science, phrenology,<sup>10</sup> and philosophy. He ran a small newspaper in Maine and became head of the “Know-Nothing” Party.<sup>11</sup> He was the editor of “The Spiritualist Age,” a leading publication of Spiritualism. He did free-lance writing, miscellaneous editorial work, and reportedly wrote stories and novels that have been lost.<sup>12</sup>

Chaney was complicated. A pugnacious personality, Chaney had few if any friends. He could also hold a grudge and wrote that: “I once waited 17 years to get even with a man who used to knock me down and beat me when a boy, then gave him a tremendous whipping, which is always my style of forgiving one who wrongs me. . .” He admitted that he was quick to anger and became a different person when angered, “look[ing] more like an incarnate fiend than an earthly mortal.” Chaney, a fierce anti-Catholic, also helped fan the flames against a Jesuit priest who was subsequently tarred and feathered, after the frail priest objected to the use of a Protestant bible in the local Iowa school.

On the other hand, Chaney has been described as a “romantic individual with a curiosity about life.” He championed the underdog and in his legal work would take on unpopular positions to help a client: “Chaney displayed throughout his life sympathy for the outcast, the criminal, the sufferer, and the pauper.”<sup>13</sup> He argued for judicial reform and had experienced improper

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<sup>6</sup> Chaney’s mother and four sisters went a separate way when the husband/father died.

<sup>7</sup> In the Navy “he began to chew tobacco, learned to box, and cultivated a reputation as a ‘wild rover.’”

<sup>8</sup> Chaney is “usually disparaged as a kind of footloose astrological huckster” by biographers. Joan London, Jack’s daughter and Chaney’s granddaughter, was working on a biography of Chaney in which, though never completed, she hoped to correct the image of him as a “ne’er-do-well crank.” Charmian does not acknowledge Chaney as Jack’s putative father in her biography of Jack.

<sup>9</sup> He reportedly practiced law in Maine, Virginia, Iowa, Oregon, Mass., and California.

<sup>10</sup> A debunked science of how the shape of one’s head correlates to mental traits.

<sup>11</sup> The Know-Nothing Party also known as “The American Party,” was a political party opposed to immigration, in particular against Catholics. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Know-Nothing-party>

<sup>12</sup> Some of his writing, including some poetry survived.

<sup>13</sup> This humanitarian view which he exhibited at times is also reflected in his poem, “The Erring,”: “do not forget, [h]owever darkly stained by sin, [h]e is thy brother yet.”

prosecution after languishing six months in a New York jail without trial before being honorably released.<sup>14</sup>

Chaney's protestation of impotence/sterility is not only called into question by the circumstances of Jack's birth, but also by the possibility of other children. In an interview with Tarnel Abbott, great-granddaughter of Jack London, she discusses a claim that Chaney fathered three other children during one of his six marriages.<sup>15</sup> Chaney was not without humor over these failed marriages, writing: "Marriage is said to be a divine institution and that matches are made in heaven. Judging from my own experience I should sooner think they were made in the other place."

"Professor Chaney" as he became known, made a name for himself in astrology. He studied with Luke Broughton, an immigrant British doctor who popularized astrology in the U.S. Chaney incorporated the ideas of Herbert Spencer into his astrology, with Spencer's ideas of Anglo-Saxon superiority. He believed that astrology could better the world by ensuring the breeding and raising of superior human beings.

Chaney predicted his own death several months prior and while in good health. He died in poverty in Chicago on January 8, 1903, at the age of 81. An obituary listed his estate as some 800 books.<sup>16</sup>

Resources:

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<sup>14</sup> Chaney was improperly arrested for the false arrest of a hoodlum after the vandal broke up one of his astrology meetings, destroying their signs.

<sup>15</sup> Others, including Russ Kingman, believe Chaney had not fathered other children.

<sup>16</sup> Chaney's books were left to Dr. John Howell, a shady physician indicted in 1907 for larceny and arrested the same year for attacking his wife with an ax – "which offense the judge found sufficient to grant Mrs. Howell a divorce."

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By Kate Johnston (See abbreviated version in Jack's Facts #8, June 2025)