PROFILES IN OBSCURITY

Charles Bernard “Buddy” Bivins [Bivens] and his wife, Mabel A. Congo Bivins, lost their first three children, all boys. The first, Manuel Bivins, was stillborn on November 29, 1915, and buried in the NCCH Cemetery in its role as a Potter’s Field. The second, recorded only as Baby Bivins, male, was delivered after 6 months of gestation on June 12, 1916, and was also buried in the NCCH Cemetery. Their third was Charles, who was stillborn/premature and was born and died on February 24, 1917. He was buried in the Mt. Olive Burial Grounds in Wilmington. It wasn’t until the births of their daughters, Jeanette, on June 28, 1918, and Marie, on March 30, 1920, that they were able to begin their family.

Charles was the son of Joseph and Debbie Bivens, born on February 7th, either in 1891, or 1892, or 1895 (depending on the source!) in Wyoming, Kent County, Delaware. His father Joseph was from Maryland and was a street and sewer cleaner, according to the 1940 census [indexed as Biunno for surname]. In 1940, their household consisted of Joseph, 75, Debbie, 67, and their son George, 42. Debbie was from Delaware. Debbie died in 1942 and is buried in Star Hill AME Cemetery in Kent County.

According to her Pennsylvania Certificate of Death, with information provided by Charles Bivins, Mabel A. Congo Bivins was the daughter of Henrietta Congo of Delaware and William Hicks of Maryland. Mabel was born on February 2, 1898, in Delaware. Note: There is much confusion in the online records. There was a Mabel Congo born in 1880, daughter of Edward and Tempy Thompson Congo, the younger sister of Henrietta Congo, born in 1876. I think the 1910 census that lists Mabel Congo, age 13, as being the daughter of Edward and Tempy is incorrect, and that actually she is their granddaughter through their daughter Henrietta, named after her aunt Mabel. Edward Congo worked excavating outhouses, and his wife Tempy had a retail shop.

Online records for Methodist minister William Henry Hicks and his wife, Henrietta Congo, show that they lived in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but do not document a daughter named Mabel. They did have daughters named Lola, Emma, Irene, and Grace. One issue with being certain that Mabel was also their child is that Lola supposedly was also born in 1898, only 7 months after Mabel, and the 1900 census listing Lola and Emma report only 2 children (Emma died before Irene was born in 1907). So it may be that we will never be able to confidently document who Mabel Congo Bivins’ parents were.

At any rate, Charles Bivens and Mabel Congo were married on October 27, 1915, when he was 23 and she was 19 (and pregnant). They were married by Reverend J.W. Jewett, a prominent local clergyman active in the Methodist Church (Colored) of Delaware. Their first child was Manuel, who was stillborn on November 29, 1915, just a month after Charles and Mabel were married. He was buried in the New Castle County Hospital Cemetery. Although the cemetery served as the county’s Potter’s Field at the time, it was common for anyone who had a stillborn baby to send the body there for burial, rather than have a full-fledged funeral at a church or private cemetery, even if they could afford it. Just 7 months later, on June 12, 1916, Mabel gave birth after only 6 months of pregnancy to another stillborn male child, who remained unnamed, and whose body was also sent to the NCCH Cemetery for burial. On February 24, 1917, Mabel again gave birth to a premature/stillborn son, who was named Charles, and was buried in the Mt. Olive Burial Ground in Wilmington. Note that Charles’ birth certificate lists Mabel Congo as his mother, while his death certificate (from the same day), lists his mother as Mabel Simon. Another mistake, one presumes.

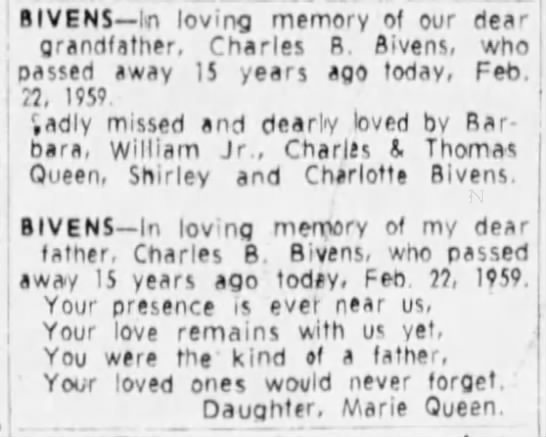
Finally, on June 28, 1918, Mabel gave birth again, this time to a daughter, who survived. She was named Jeanette. Jeanette grew up, and had two daughters of her own (Shirley and Charlotte Elizabeth), living until 1968. Charles and Mabel’s second daughter Marie was born on March 30, 1920, and also survived. Marie grew up, married William Queen, and had four children, 3 sons and a daughter. When she died in 1996, she was survived by her 4 children and 12 grandchildren.

There is little record of the lives of Charles and Mabel Bivens. We know that Charles worked all his life as a truck driver for the Diamond Ice & Coal Company of Wilmington. He made the newspapers only a few times, once when a fire broke out at his house at 726 East 11th St. in December of 1934. Then in January of 1943, he was driving his work truck when he accidentally hit and killed William Richard Kiddoo as he stepped off the curb at the corner of Orange and 11th Streets. Mr. Kiddoo was a prominent white man, head of the Accounting and Business Administration Department at Goldey College. Charles was originally charged with manslaughter, but the charge was “retired” just a few weeks later, meaning that it would not be pursued as long as the defendant met the requirements of a deal with the prosecutors for a specified time. There is no mention of the case after January 1943. Charles has a World War II military registration card, which, for unknown reasons, lists him as being white.

On October 10, 1943, Mabel died suddenly at the age of 45 while in Chester, Pennsylvania. Her COD says only that there was an “inquest pending” as to the cause of death, but I was not able to find out any more information about the circumstances of her death. She was buried in Mt. Olive Cemetery. Her obituary mentions that she was a member of several religious organizations and fraternal beneficiary societies including Jacob’s Well, Daughters of Samaria, Household of Ruth and Naomi, and Pocahontas Temple No. 60 and I.B.P.O.E. of Wilmington.

In November of 1950, Charles Bivens again made the news. He was driving his work truck past a quarry just as a young boy, Joseph Dawson, was being brought to the top of the quarry after having fallen 15 feet from the rocky ledge at the top. Charles drove young Mr. Dawson to the Delaware Hospital for treatment of his injuries.

In 1958, Charles retired from the Diamond Ice & Coal Company after 47 years of service. The next year, on February 22nd, he died of lung cancer and was buried in Mt. Olive Cemetery. He was survived by his two daughters and by his brothers George and Joseph. Fifteen years later, on February 22, 1974, his daughter Marie and his grandchildren published lovely remembrances of him in the Wilmington *News Journal*.

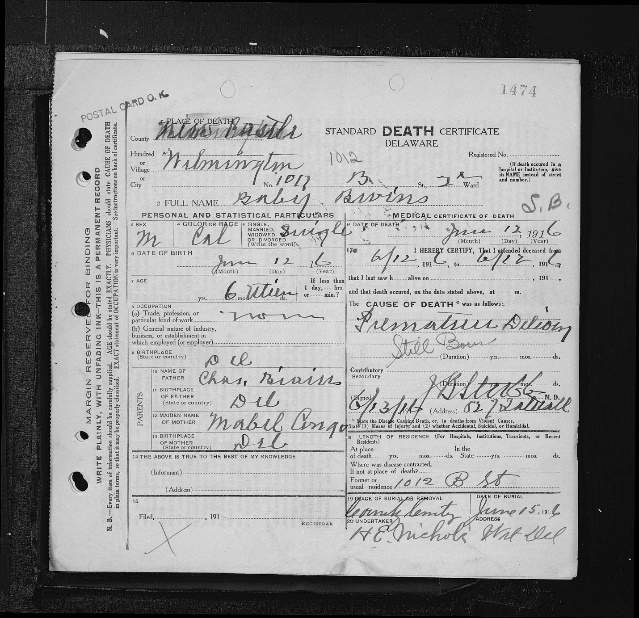


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