by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The biographers of long-time Nevada Congressman and U.S. Senator, Francis Griffith Newlands, tell us that he was born on August 28, 1848 in, or near, Natchez, Mississippi. Why shouldn't we believe them? They are the authorities on the man whose principle claim to fame is the Truckee-Carson Reclamation Project (Newlands Project) in western Nevada. According to his obituaries and biographies, when Senator Newlands died of a heart attack at his home in Washington, D.C., on December 24, 1917 he was sixty-nine years old.

However, Ernie Schank of Fallon visited Newlands' gravesite in 2005 in Washington, D.C.; found a discrepancy in his age; and brought it to our attention in an article in the *Fallon Star*. The marker in Georgetown's Oak Hill Cemetery reads Newlands died in his 71st year. Is the headstone or are the biographers wrong?

The answer is found in the U.S. decennial censuses that the National Archives in Washington, D.C., has made available on microfilm since the 1960s. Today one can subscribe to a database service like Ancestry.com and, entering a person's name, find census data readily at one's fingertips. Let's pursue a little forensic history using documentary sources.

A check of the 1850 U.S. Census finds Francis G. Newlands living in Palmyra, Marion County, Missouri, with his parents, James and Jessie, and four siblings: James, John, Annie and William. The occupation of his Scottish father was physician. The biographies of Newlands make no mention of this brief period in Francis' life before the family moved across the Mississippi River to Quincy, Illinois, where his father died in 1851.

Interestingly enough, Francis was listed in the 1850 Census as four years old and born in Mississippi. The enumerator visited the Newlands household on August 27, 1850, the day before Francis's birthday. Based on this information, young Newlands was born in 1846 and not 1848.

The 1860 U.S. Census found Frank G. Newlands living in Quincy with his mother and step-father, banker Eben Moore, and brothers and sister. The enumeration was made on July 18th and Frank was listed as thirteen. He would not turn fourteen for another six weeks if he had been born in 1846. Otherwise, if he was born in 1848, Frank would have been listed as eleven.

By 1870, Frank G. Newlands was living with his widowed mother--Eben died in 1866—and his three brothers and sister in Washington, D.C. His age was noted as twenty-four, born in Mississippi, and his occupation was listed as lawyer. After briefly attending Yale, Newlands studied law at Columbian University (today's George Washington University) and was admitted to practice in the District of Columbia in 1869. The enumeration was dated July 12, seven weeks before his twenty-fourth birthday if he was born in 1846.

It's reasonable to assume that one or both of Newlands' parents were the informants in the 1850, 1860 and 1870 censuses as the heads of household. However, beginning in 1880, when Frank was the head of his own household we find enumerators being told erroneous information. In 1880, he was living in San Francisco with wife, Clara, and three daughters. We know from Newlands' biographers that he moved to San Francisco in 1870 and married millionaire William Sharon's daughter in 1874. Someone told the 1880 enumerator Newlands was a thirty-one-year-old lawyer, born in Kentucky.

Most of the 1890 U.S. Census was damaged in a fire in Washington, D.C. in 1921 and was not salvaged.

However, in 1900 Nevada U.S. Representative Francis G. Newlands was listed in the census as living in Reno; married to a second wife, Edith; and three daughters from his first marriage resided with him. First wife Clara died in 1882 during childbirth. In 1900, the enumerator noted Newlands was fifty and born in Georgia. It gets better.

In the 1910 U.S. Census for Reno, U. S. Senator Newlands was sixty-five and born in California!

What we do know is that someone, most likely a family member, knew better when it came to engraving the age of Francis Newlands on his gravestone.  Doing the math clearly makes him born in 1846 if Newlands was 71 years old when he died in 1917.  Ernie Schank's visit to Newlands' final resting place and a thorough analysis of the U.S. censuses have finally set the record straight.

Photo credits:  Both photographs courtesy of Ernie Schank, Fallon.
-Top: Entrance to Oak Hill Cemetery, Washington, D.C.
-Bottom:  Close-up of Newlands' gravestone showing his age at death.

The Historic Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal* and *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley.