

Finding Jessie's Birth Mother

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This article is available at www.frankhaddleton.com/webster

I. Introduction

Records relating to the origins of Jessie Leighton Webster (1863-1922), the wife of Oliver C. Haddleton (1859-1924) are very much lacking. I have been unable to find any birth record for her, or any marriage record for her birth parents. All of the vital records created during and after Jessie's life, which were based on reports made by Jessie and her children, indicate that Richard E. Webster and Isabel (Ray) Webster were Jessie's parents, but the marriage record of Richard and Isabel indicates that they married each other when Jessie was 6 years old, and that this was the second marriage for each of them. That means that only one of them was likely to be a biological parent of Jessie.

On June 20, 2021, I wrote about my research into Jessie's origins (see www.frankhaddleton.com/webster), concluding that Richard Webster was probably Jessie's biological father and that Jessie's biological mother (a/k/a "birth mother") was probably Richard's first wife, whom I could not then identify. Since writing that piece I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out who Jessie's birth mother really was. This detective work has been really enjoyable, and I now know the answer.

II. Summary of Conclusions

Jessie's birth mother was Elizabeth Barnes (1834-1866), born in Hingham, Massachusetts, the daughter of Cushing Barnes (1808-1879) and Leah S. (Whiting, or Whiton) Barnes (1808-1841). Elizabeth (Barnes) Webster died of cancer on January 1, 1866, in East Boston, Massachusetts, when Jessie was only two and half years old. Jessie probably had no memory of her birth mother after that tragic event. Cushing Barnes, Elizabeth's father, was a ship carpenter who probably worked at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

Plenty of others have researched the Barnes family, which has deep New England roots, and their work can be found on Ancestry.com. One of the more thorough trees is the "Israel Merritt Barnes Family" tree created by Elizabeth Ann White. I have not yet added much of this information to my own tree, but I plan to do so as time permits.

Figuring that it was highly unlikely that Richard and his first wife would have divorced back in the 1860s, I began this research project by looking for a death record

for Richard Webster's first wife – see part III, below. I found one death record, the one for Elizabeth Barnes, which seemed to check off all the required boxes. Then I pieced together the connections between the Barnes and the Webster families, finding that they were living in the same neighborhood (East Boston) around the time of Jessie's birth. Though none of this was direct evidence that Elizabeth was Jessie's birth mother, it was pretty convincing. When I subsequently added Elizabeth and her father and grandfather to my family tree on Ancestry, I was able to find an image of an old Barnes Family record. I checked to see who else on Ancestry.com had shared this image to their trees, and that's how I found three "DNA relatives", all descending from Elizabeth's grandfather, Joseph Barnes in ways consistent with the quantities of our shared DNA. (See the image at the end of this piece.) Taken together, I think all of this evidence makes it reasonably certain that Elizabeth (Barnes) Webster was Jessie's birth mother.

Some very interesting questions revolve around the fact that this entire Barnes branch of the family tree had totally disappeared from view. All vital records that are based upon reports made by Jessie and her children (i.e., subsequent marriage, birth, and death records) report that Jessie's parents were Richard E. Webster and Isabel (Ray) Webster. Isabel was born in Shelburne, Nova Scotia, and her parents were both born in Scotland – no connection to the maternal ancestry of Jessie's birth mother. How did this disappearance occur? Did Jessie even *know* about her birth mother, or her birth mother's family? Did Jessie ever know her grandfather, Cushing Barnes, who lived only a couple of blocks away in East Boston, or her uncles, aunts, and cousins? Were Richard and Elizabeth even legally married?

We will never know the answers to these questions. One possible clue is that Jessie's birth mother is, apparently, buried in the Barnes cemetery plot in Hingham, and the inscription on the headstone reads "Elizabeth, wife of James Gardiner". James Alfred Gardiner was Elizabeth's first husband. They were married in Boston in 1851 and had three children, at least one of whom has living descendants. I believe that James died in 1861. Would this have been standard practice for the burial of the remains of a woman who had been married more than once? Is Elizabeth actually buried there, or is it a misleading inscription? Did Elizabeth's father, Cushing Barnes somehow make this burial, or the inscription on the stone, happen against Richard's wishes? If he did, could this have caused Richard to cut off Cushing Barnes and the rest of the Barnes family forever? Was Richard so distraught over the death of Elizabeth that he didn't really care how or where she was buried? Did Richard decide that it would just be easier for Jessie to negotiate through life believing that Isabel was her birth mother and that the Ray family back in Nova Scotia was Jessie's biological family? If that was the case, how could the relationships with the biological family

have continued – who would Richard have said these people were? As indicated in my prior piece, Isabel took Jessie for a visit to Nova Scotia as early as 1870, when Jessie was only seven, if that has any value as a clue. I don't have any answers to these questions.

In a strange coincidence, I gave the family name "Barnes" to the Harwich school teacher in my novel, *Walker's Key*. All of the characters in the novel have either family names from my family tree or the names of certain friends and neighbors (why not, right?). Barnes was an exception. I don't know how that one happened. It makes me wonder how things really work.

DEATHS REGISTERED in the City of Boston for									
ES WHERE NECESSARY, GIVE ALL NAMES TO BE GIVEN IN FULL.									
FULL NAME OF THE DECEASED (If a married or divorced woman or maiden, give also maiden name and initials.)	SEX	AGE	DISEASE OR CAUSE OF DEATH (Primary and immediate cause)	1. Residence		OCCUPATION	PLACE OF BIRTH	NAMES AND BIRTHPLACE	
				Years	Mo.			Days	2. Place of Death
Bridget Connelly m. n. Grauer	F	Mo	38	Chlorosis	67	Prince st.	Ireland	Michael	Mary
Catharine Middelberg	F	S	1	Prem. Birth	175	Dorchester "	Boston	Joseph	Catharine
Emma J. Mitchell	F	S	1	2	Pneumonia	2	Jackson Ave.	"	Samuel P.
Ella F. Kurtyz	F	S	1	4	Smartion	79	Warren St.	"	Cecelia A. George
Amanda M. Reed	F	S	32	Phthisis	4	Vernon "	Canada, East	Abraham	Frances M. Annie
Elizabeth Webster m. n. Burns	F	M	31	3	Cancer of Uterus	144	Saratoga "	Bingham	Cushing Leah S.

This is one of two versions of the death record of Elizabeth (Barnes) Webster. This one has her maiden name misspelled as "Burns", but the other one has Barnes, and Cushing and Leah Barnes are very definitely Elizabeth's parents, as indicated on her tombstone and in other records.

III. Search Criteria

I concluded that Richard E. Webster was Jessie's biological father because I have identified several "DNA relatives" -- fourth cousins, mostly -- who descend from a family of Websters in Maine, and I can find no possible connection to them in my family tree other than through a Webster. (But I haven't yet figured out how Richard Webster connects to this Maine family.) Having reached that conclusion, I figured that Richard's first wife had to be Jessie's birth mother. If there was a death record for this person, it had to meet the following criteria:

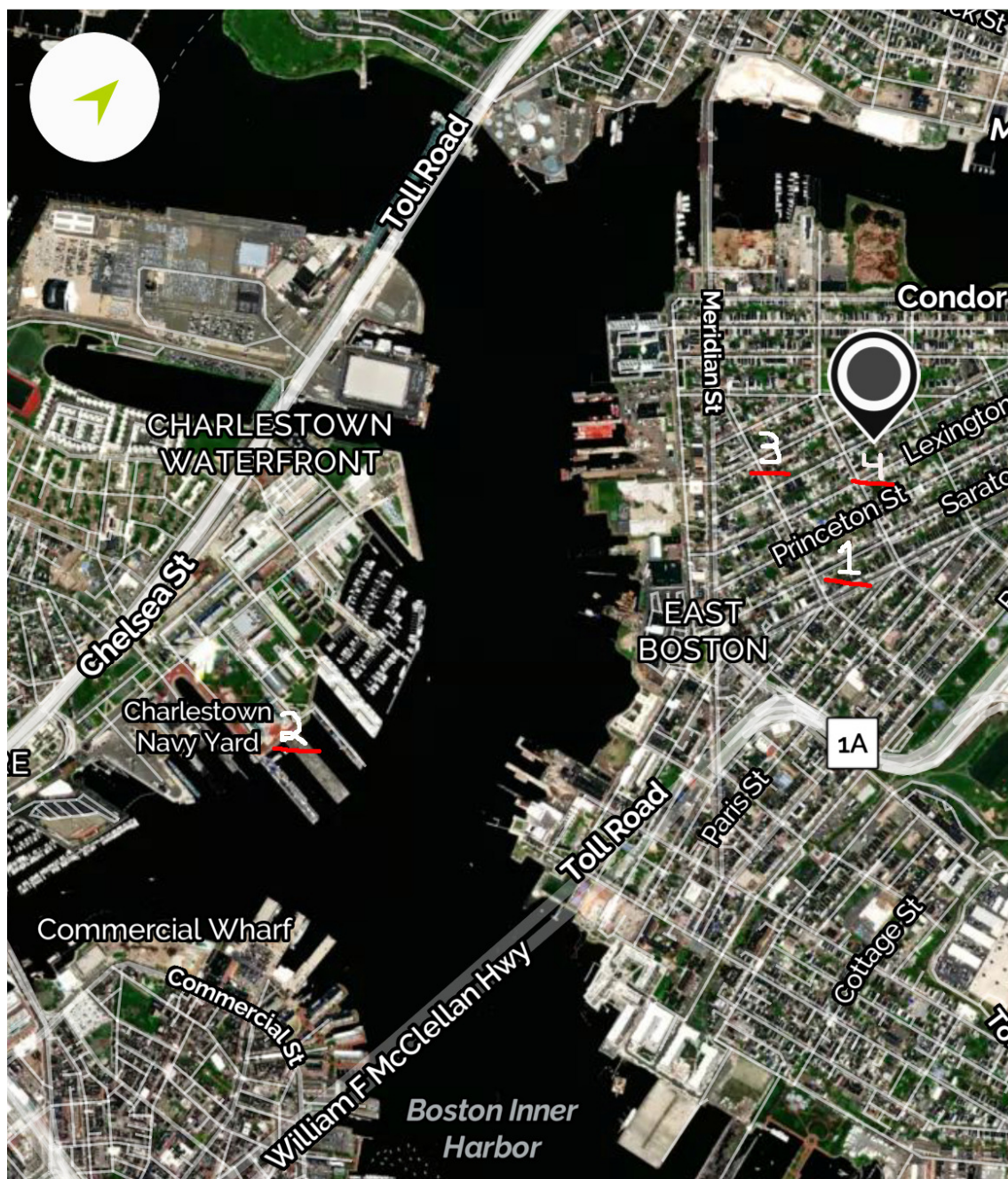
-- The deceased person had to be a woman

- Having the last name Webster
- Being about the same age as Richard E. Webster
- Having died no earlier than Jessie's birth (May or June, 1863) and sufficiently before Richard's marriage to Isabel (April 29, 1869) to allow for a new relationship to take hold
- Being in the correct place (Massachusetts, probably Boston)
- Not having any conflicting marriage record – in other words, having no marriage record at all (for the current marriage), as is the case with Richard's first marriage

I found only two possible matches. One record, Elizabeth's, met all of these criteria. Upon further research, I found that the connections between Elizabeth, Richard E. Webster, and Richard's brother, John E. Webster, were too numerous and too significant to be mere coincidence. I have summarized these connections in part IV, below. Part V presents the DNA connection I subsequently found to three other descendants of Jessie's grandfather, Joseph Barnes.



A tombstone in Hingham, Massachusetts, identifying Elizabeth as the “wife of James Gardiner”, her first husband. See my discussion of this inscription, above.



123 Trenton St
Boston, MA 02128



Places in East Boston and Charlestown: 1) 144 Saratoga St., where Elizabeth Barnes died in 1866 (and where Jessie may have been born in 1863). 2) Charlestown Navy Yard, where Cushing Barnes and John Webster may have worked. 3) 53 Eutaw St., the home of Cushing Barnes and family. 4) 123 Trenton St., where Richard Webster lived in 1878, after returning to Boston from Springfield. Not flagged: (5) 514 Saratoga St., John Webster's home in 1876, (6) the home of the Luce family in 1850, John's in-laws.

IV. Timeline and Geography

1850 U.S. Census (August, 1850): Elizabeth Barnes (age 16), her father, Cushing Barnes (listed as a ship carpenter), and her siblings, Thomas (age 14), Ann (age 12), and Horace (age 5) are living in East Boston. Cushing Barnes will remain in East Boston until his death in 1879. Elizabeth's mother, Leah S. (Whiting or Whiton) Barnes, died in Hingham in 1841.

The largest employer of ship carpenters in that area at that time was almost certainly the Charlestown Navy Yard, just across Boston's inner harbor. It is very possible, if not very likely, that Cushing Barnes was employed at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

1850 U.S. Census (August, 1850): Phoebe Luce (then age 13 according to other records, though this census says age 11), is living in East Boston with her mother, Ruth, and her siblings, Mary (age 8), and Margaret (age 6). Her father, Hiram Luce, is not listed. Other records indicate that Ruth works as a nurse and the family later moves across the inner harbor to Charlestown.

It seems all but certain that the Barnes family would have gotten to know their East Boston neighbors, the Luce family, at some point around 1850. The children probably attended the same schools.

1855, January 4: Phoebe Luce married Richard Webster's brother, John E. Webster, in Roxbury, Massachusetts. So if the Luce family knew the Barnes family, as of this time there was at least an indirect connection between the Barnes family and the Webster family.

1860 Census: John E. Webster, Richard's brother, is living in Charlestown with his wife, Phoebe (Luce) Webster, and their two young children. It is possible that John is employed by Charlestown's largest employer, the Charlestown Navy Yard, where Cushing Barnes may also be employed. If these two men met, this would be an alternative, and direct, connection between the Barnes family and the Webster family.

1863, May or June: Jessie Leighton Webster is born. I can find no birth record. A good guess would be that she was born at 144 Saratoga Street in East Boston, the place where her birth mother died in 1866.

1866, January 1: Elizabeth (Barnes) Webster dies at the age of 31. Her death record indicates that she lived at 144 Saratoga Street, East Boston. I can find no record of Elizabeth's marriage to Richard Webster, nor to any other Webster. Elizabeth's first marriage was to James A. Gardiner, from Canada, on June 29, 1851, in Boston. I believe that James A. Gardiner died in Boston in 1861, based on an index of deaths in Boston (some family trees on Ancestry.com report his death as occurring in Louisiana

in 1863, but that 1863 record is clearly not the death record of this man – the name isn't even spelled the same and he is from New York, not Canada.) As an aside, Elizabeth and James apparently (according to the research of others) resided in Prince Edward Island and in New Brunswick and their marriage produced three children in the 1850s, some of whom left descendants now living.)

1868: Richard E. Webster is a member of the Pine Street Church (Methodist) in downtown Boston, as is Isabel (Ray) Archer. (This is the earliest record of Richard E. Webster which I have been able to find as of now.)

1869, April 29: Richard E. Webster and Isabel (Ray) Archer marry in Boston, the second marriage for both of them, according to their marriage record.

1870 U.S. Census: Richard and Isabel are living in Boston with Jessie, then age 7. The Boston City Directory gives their address as 100 Camden Street, in Boston's South End. Richard is listed as a carpenter.

1871, November 23: Frederick Webster, the 6-month old son of Richard and Isabel dies in Boston. The Websters are then living at 335 8th Street, which is either in South Boston or at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Charlestown (there is no 8th Street in South Boston, only East 8th and West 8th, and Charlestown didn't get annexed into Boston until 1874, but I know that pre-1874 listings in the Boston directory treat Charlestown as part of Boston – see e.g., the record for Ruth M. Luce in 1870). Sometime after Frederick's death, Richard and Isabel move to Springfield, Massachusetts, where their second daughter, Florence Isabel Webster ("Bella") is born on February 26, 1875 (Unlike Jessie, she has an actual birth record). By 1878 (see below), the family will leave Springfield and live in East Boston.

1876: According to the City of Boston Directory, John E. Webster is living at 514 Saratoga Street, East Boston. (He and his wife, Phoebe, will relocate to Iowa by 1880, and he dies in 1888 at the age of about 55).

1876: According to the City of Boston Directory, Cushing Barnes is living at 53 Eutaw Street, East Boston.

1878: According to the City of Boston Directory, Richard E. Webster is living at 123 Trenton Street, East Boston. This is the latest record I have found for Richard. In 1893, Isabel is living in Chelsea, just to the north of East Boston, and is listed as the widow of Richard.

1879, January 24: Cushing Barnes dies at the age of 70, his residence still being listed as 53 Eutaw Street, East Boston.



An easterly view of Boston Harbor from above the Charlestown Navy Yard, circa 1870. Charlestown is in the foreground, Boston is to the right, and East Boston is to the left.
Source: <https://ussconstitutionmuseum.org/2015/06/24/caisson/>

Jessie Webster's grandfather, Cushing Barnes, probably worked here. Her uncle, Robert E. Webster, may also have worked here.

V. DNA Confirmation

After I added Elizabeth Barnes, her father (Cushing Barnes), and her grandfather (Joseph Barnes) to my family tree on Ancestry, I came across an image of an old Barnes Family Record which someone had posted to their tree under Joseph Barnes. I clicked on the profiles of some of the other Ancestry users who had copied this image, and that led me to three "DNA cousins" who are all descended from Joseph Barnes in ways consistent with the quantities of our shared DNA. This final clue makes it reasonably certain, I think, that Elizabeth Barnes was Jessie's birth mother.

Reactions, thoughts, and corrections are welcome.

