

Revisiting Mother Barnes' Plum Hollow Log Cabin

*The Renowned 19th Century Clairvoyant's Historic Home and
A Restored Heritage Property in Leeds County, Eastern Ontario*



Photo by Dave Senger, HPOC

An Enduring Log Cabin

Mother Barnes' bucolic early 19th century hewn log cabin, located on what is now called Mother Barnes Road near the rural community of Plum Hollow in Eastern Ontario, is a superbly restored testament to a renowned clairvoyant's prolonged life and work in this region. Elizabeth Barnes, known locally as Mother Barnes and more widely after her death by the specious title of "The Witch of Plum Hollow", bought her cabin in the late 1850s or early 1860s, and stayed there until her death in 1891, providing reportedly accurate tea-leaf readings daily to the large numbers of enthralled patrons who came to see her from all over Canada and the USA.

From an article "*The Wise Woman of Plum Hollow*", W. Clyde Bell recounts an anecdote by Mrs. Buchanan, who was a granddaughter of Mother Barnes:

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"The house in which she lived was a whitewashed log cabin with a flagged walk leading up to it, and a lonely woods behind it. Inside was a small waiting room where the walls were carved with hundreds of names of people who had waited there before going up the narrow stairs to sit by the table with a black teapot and a cup into which the fortune teller poured tea with plenty of leaves with which she told fortunes. As her fame grew, people came from not only the surrounding district, but from every part of the United States and Canada to have her peer into the future."¹



The upstairs room of Mother Barnes' cabin where she did tea-leaf readings
(Photo Ottawa Rewind website)

<https://ottawarewind.com/2016/10/27/the-plum-hollow-witch/>



Cast Iron Kettle, Black Teapot
The Vintage Home Canada

For Sale on Etsy

<https://www.etsy.com/ca/listing/1398157844/rustic-primitive-cast-iron-kettle-black>



Mother Barnes Mystical Mug
Teacup for sale in HPOC.ca store

<https://hpc.ca/collections/kitchen-pantry/products/mother-barnes-mug-12oz>

Mother Barnes' home would have likely been around fifty years old by the time she purchased it in the mid-1800s. Her 1-1/2 storey cabin, with rough-hewn cedar or pine log construction and keyed corners, is a perfect example of typical settler cabins of the early 1800s, which were usually vacated once a newer home was built following a family's establishment through farming or other early industry. The book *Rural Ontario* indicates that the term "log cabin" was not in general use until around 1800 and "*The first houses were probably small and roughly built, for their builders hoped to replace them as soon as possible... Almost no log buildings have survived from before 1800. An exception is the Scadding cabin, now in the grounds of the Canadian National Exhibition at Toronto.*"²

According to an article "Log Houses" by William C. Wonders in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*:

Log Houses are associated with pioneer settlement, past and present, and Canada's forests provided ready building material. West Coast Indians used log frames for their large plank houses long before the arrival of European settlers.

A wide variety of size and complexity in log houses characterized southern Ontario

¹ "The Wise Woman of Plum Hollow", W. Clyde Bell – article post 1968, from The Athens and Area Heritage Museum files.

² pp. 15, 17, *Rural Ontario*, book by Verschoyle Benson Blake and Ralph Greenhill, University of Toronto Press, 1969.

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settlements. Loyalist settlers introduced "Pennsylvanian" or "American" log houses, with horizontal logs interlocked at the house corners by a variety of techniques, a style originating with 17th-century Swedish-Finnish colonists on the Delaware River, refined by later German settlers and adopted by far-ranging Scots-Irish pioneers. Although most log houses were later replaced by houses constructed of other materials, many are still occupied as residences.³

Also, further details regarding the style of construction can be found in an *Ontario Architecture* website article *Log House (1750 to 1990)*:

Ontario historical societies have done a remarkable job in preserving historical buildings. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of the log house, a vernacular building style that could easily have slipped away over time.

This term applies to both local styles and local materials. A building can be of a grand style in vernacular materials - for example a Georgian building made of field stone - or it can be a vernacular type of building such as an igloo or a mud hut. Vernacular buildings are built to suit the local climate and conditions. Not surprisingly, the log house was the first building style erected by European settlers in Ontario, but few remain outside the site designated for preservation.

A close look at the corners of log houses will tell you who the builders were, or at least what country they came from. This corner detail shows that the end of each piece of wood was beveled or "keyed" before it was placed. This means that a wedge shape was carved into the receiving log while a point was carved into the log that was to be placed in it. The ends were secured by a mixture of lime mortar with small bits of wood in it; a method called "chinking".

This "keying" made for a tighter fit and a less draughty corner. The method of keying corners was brought over to Canada through the United States by the Swedes, thus it is referred to as Swedish Keying. Swedish Keying was first seen in Pennsylvania in 1650. It was found in Canada shortly thereafter.⁴

Set on a two-acre backdrop of trim green lawn framed by massive maple, apple and elm trees and a cedar rail fence, Mother Barnes' former home is a picturesque historic cabin that was saved from a dilapidated condition by Ottawa resident Eloda Mae Wachsmuth in 2005.⁵ The cabin was a source of fascination and a concern for preservation by Mother Barnes' descendants, prior to its purchase by Ms. Wachsmuth. Following is an excerpt from an article on the website of Ottawa author and columnist Linda Seccaspina, indicating its state in 1982, which would have been much more pronounced by the time Eloda restored it:

³ Feb. 7, 2006 article "Log Houses" by William C. Wonders in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* – <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/log-houses>

⁴ *Ontario Architecture* website article *Log House (1750 to 1990)* – <http://ontarioarchitecture.com/Log.htm>

⁵ "The mother of all fortune tellers" article from *The Recorder & Times*, June 18, 2005.

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"...near the shore of nearby Lake Eloida, the derelict abode of the Witch of Plum Hollow sits empty, ravaged by time and vandals. However for three generations of Joynt women, descendants of Mother Barnes, a visit to the tiny cabin shortly before Halloween proved a sentimental journey of sorts.

Lera Joynt, daughter Carol, 11-year-old Susan Joynt and Lisa Joynt, 14, had varied reactions to the forlorn cottage. "I recall Grandpa Samuel Barnes telling of hitching up the horses for the long ride from Smiths Falls to Plum Hollow," Lera reminisced. Sam, one of Barnes' nine children, was a blacksmith and mayor of Smiths Falls in 1906. Her daughter Carol felt a strong bond with her famous ancestor. Mother Barnes 'gift' to foresee the future appeared in every generation, she said. Lisa and Susan, daughters of well-known farmer and auctioneer John Joynt, were fascinated. With visions of bats, broomsticks and black cats racing through their heads, they gingerly tip-toed through the debris.

"There's an old piece of wood in here that's marked made in 1805," Susan called out excitedly. Lisa reported with disappointment the rickety old stairs were gone. "I'll come back in my old clothes and climb up there," she told her grandmother. "I want to see the room where Mother Barnes read the tea leaves for all those people."

Lera Joynt disapproves of the dubious title of witch applied to her ancestor. "We don't like it at all. Her kindly advice and honest predictions helped countless numbers of people."...

Lera Joynt and other family members felt the same. Some years ago, they purchased the two acres with its original cabin, its apple trees, tumble-down barn and abandoned well. Lera and husband Percy re-shingled the roof and cleaned up the grounds when they took over the property but it hasn't weathered the years very well. Weeds have taken over, the roof sinks in and vandals have removed the original pine doors and smashed the windows."⁶



Cabin of Mother Barnes (Good witch of Plum Hollow)

Painting by Shirley Gibson-Langille
Leeds and The Thousand Islands Archives

<https://ltiarchives.ca/056>

⁶ Sept. 14, 2020 post "The Plum Hollow Witch 101 – Mother Barnes", Linda Seccaspina on Wordpress. Weekly columnist for the Sherbrooke Record, documents history every single day and has over 7800 blogs about Lanark County and Ottawa.

<https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2020/09/14/the-plum-hollow-witch-101-mother-barnes/>

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The Setting: Plum Hollow, Ontario

An excellent overview of settlement in the Leeds County area is provided in the book “*The Heritage of Upper Canadian Furniture*”:

In 1791, the Imperial Parliament in London created the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada... Upper Canada was an incredibly large area of virgin forests and lakes which, only a decade or so earlier, had been peopled by a scattered Indian population and a few hundred French Canadians, the only settlements a few isolated military and fur-trading outposts. The new province was created in response to the arrival in 1783 and 1784 of just over six thousand refugees from the turmoil of the American Revolution.

These refugees, who had either fought for the British or suffered losses as a result of their sympathies for the Crown, were known as Loyalists... As a group, they encompassed a wide variety of cultural elements. Many, as might be expected, were of English, Scottish and Irish origin, but there were also Dutch, Swedes, Swiss, Danes, French Huguenots, Spaniards, Germans and Indians. Some came from military and government backgrounds, but the greater part was made up of farmers and all manner of tradespeople ... they were excellent settlers, having an understanding of the wilderness of North America and the skills required to tame it based on the experience of a generation or more in the American colonies...⁷

The first European settler who arrived in Plum Hollow, Upper Canada, was Abel Stevens in the early 1790s. It was a vast and abundant valley set amongst rolling hills, with flowering plum trees nestled in the hollow, hence the ensuing obvious and appropriate name for the newly established community.

According to Cathy Livingston from the Rideau Lakes Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee:

“...Elder Abel Stevens ... arrived from Vermont in the early 1790s. In 1794, he was granted land where he finally settled and named the community Stevenstown, now known as Delta.

It has been noted that prior to arriving and settling in Stevenstown, he travelled through what is now the historic settlement of Plum Hollow. Following the Plum Hollow Creek, which at the time flowed into two smaller lakes, one a bit higher than the other, causing a small rapids, Stevens was able to construct his first wooden mill.

⁷ pp. 17-18, *The Heritage of Upper Canadian Furniture*, book by Howard Pain, published by Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., 1978.

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After building a small dam, the water flooded the land, combining the two lakes into what is now called the Upper Beverley Lake.

One can only imagine what Abel Stevens first saw when he came to the crest of the Plum Hollow hill overlooking “a beautiful fertile valley surrounded by hills covered with sugar bushes” (Phyllis Tackaberry). Quoting Anna Greenhorn [local historian and Director of the Delta Mill Society]: “I can remember Phyllis saying the old story was that the first [settler] in Plum Hollow arrived in the spring when all those plum trees were in bloom in the valley below, as seen from the top of the hill where the old cheese factory used to be. Immediately they gasped at the beauty of this new land (it really must have been impressive) and called it Plum Hollow”.⁸

An article from *The Ottawa Journal*, Harry Walker writes: “The immediate area was settled by United Empire Loyalists, the majority of them being Quakers. In that Puritan atmosphere lived mysterious Mother Barnes, of supposedly Spanish origin and with her uncanny powers of divination.”⁹

The Recorder and Times, June 7, 1958, adds to the descriptions of the area: “Plum Hollow is just a little place, located on the township line of Bastard and Kitley, in a north-easterly direction from Athens. Actually, “all roads lead to Plum Hollow!” The village itself is nestled at the foot of a hill, driving north from Athens; or at the top of a hill, driving east from Delta; or just around the corner, driving west from Frankville.”¹⁰

At this time, nearby Lake Eloida was called Lake Loyada (see map below). Visitors would travel the distance using horse-drawn carriages, regularly from Brockville, Smiths Falls, Perth and nearby Farmersville (later renamed Athens).



⁸ Cathy Livingston, Rideau Lakes Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee.

https://www.rideaulakes.ca/experience/things-to-do-continued/museums-heritage-sites/historic-settlements/plum-hollow#_ftn2

⁹ *The Ottawa Journal - Tales of the Valley* (32) (~1968), from the [Athens and Area Heritage Society and Museum](#) collection).

¹⁰ *The Recorder and Times*, June 7, 1958.

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<https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/Images/Maps/TownshipMaps/lee-m-yonge.jpg>

1862 Atlas indicating location of Mother Barnes south of Lake Loyada (today known as Lake Eloida), Township of Yonge in the County of Leeds
The Canadian County Atlas Digital Project

Jane Elizabeth Martin

Elizabeth Barnes, née Jane Elizabeth Martin in either Ireland or Spain on Nov. 5, 1800¹¹, was reputed to be the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter (although some sources contradict that claim), which supposedly gave her access to the clairvoyant talents for which she later became famous. *“According to the 1851 and 1861 census records for Leeds and Grenville counties, she was born in the County of Cork in Southern Ireland. However, the 1871 census records her as being born in Spain,”* writes Eleanor Glenn, whose 1990s essay *“Breaking the Spell: a Feminist Perspective of Elizabeth Barnes”* is excerpted in an article clipping on Linda Seccaspina’s website, in one of her many informative blogs about Mother Barnes.¹²

Ms. Glenn continues: *“Elizabeth’s father was a wealthy Irish landowner of English descent, who achieved the rank of colonel in the British army. Her mother is believed to have been an Irish woman of Spanish gypsy descent, who may have accompanied her husband on a military campaign against Napoleon in Spain. This could have led to the discrepancy surrounding Elizabeth’s birthplace.”*¹³ That she may actually have been born in Spain is corroborated in an article from *The Kingston Whig Standard*, June 9, 1888, which was an interview conducted with her at the age of 88.

In Ireland, Jane Elizabeth lived the comfortable life of a daughter of a well-to-do family. Ms. Glenn indicates in her essay: *“Because of her father’s wealth, Elizabeth’s younger years were filled with privilege and prestige and she received a good education. Lera Joynt recounted family stories about her great-grandmother’s writings as being quite poetic, almost in verse.”*¹⁴

One obituary for Mother Barnes from *Qu'Appelle Progress*, Feb 26, 1891, mentions that she *“claimed to have exercised her alleged occult powers since she was seven years of age.... Her father held a commission in the English army under George IV and for her divining power was christened the “Star of Connaught” by King William IV, who presented her with a gold medal.”*¹⁵

However, despite her privileged upbringing, she made a dramatic departure from Europe at age 20 with her true love, young sergeant Robert Harrison. It was a last-minute escape from a

¹¹ Eleanor Glenn – *“Breaking the Spell: a Feminist Perspective of Elizabeth Barnes”*, an excerpt of her essay posted in a blog about Mother Barnes posted on Linda Seccaspina’s website:

<https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2023/10/10/mother-barnes-the-witch-of-plum-hollow-grain-thefts-etc-mother-barnes-series/>

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

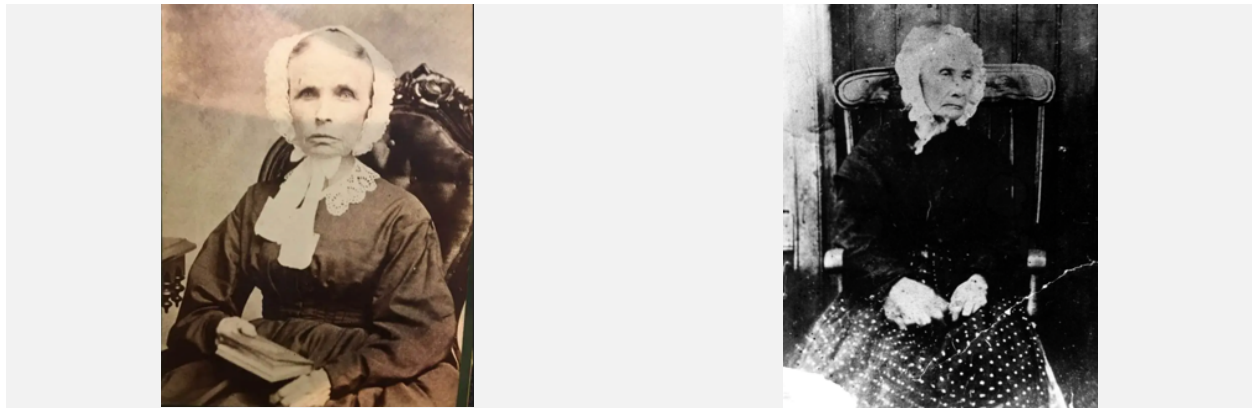
¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ *Qu'Appelle Progress*, Feb 26, 1891 – note that this is the only reference found to this potential event in her childhood, so this claim requires substantiation.

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tradition of the time of an arranged marriage, in this case with a man twice her age, a friend of her father. She earned her freedom by crossing the world with her chosen husband to New York, arriving on the sailing vessel *Nightingale*, aboard which she wed Mr. Harrison.¹⁶ Later in life, according to a 1965 *Ottawa Journal* article: “She often described to her grandchildren the six weeks’ voyage by sailing ship from England to New York and the anxiety she felt when contrary winds drove the ship back almost to English shores.”¹⁷

Her father disapproved, believing she had married “beneath her station”, and her choice cost her the support of her family, who disinherited her and never spoke to her again.¹⁸



Mother Barnes

Many research sources indicate Elizabeth, seemingly no longer using the name Jane, and Robert moved directly to Upper Canada (Cobourg, Ontario), but the preponderance of evidence, such as Lockwood’s book, tells of their life in New York prior to moving to Canada. They had one son together before Robert, who worked as a tanner, died soon thereafter in 1927, leaving Elizabeth widowed and alone to raise their child in a new land.¹⁹

A few years later, Elizabeth met David Barnes, who worked as a shoemaker. They married, and Margaret, their first child, was born in 1832. They had two more children, sons John and Thomas, who then died at an early age.”²⁰

One source describes how Elizabeth lived with her family in a flat in the same building as a fortune-telling business, learned the tea-leaf reading trade by apprenticing to the resident fortune-teller, and became so proficient as to earn pay for readings of her own:

¹⁶ *The Kingston Whig Standard*, June 9, 1888

¹⁷ [The Ottawa Journal](https://lindaseccaspina.tumblr.com/post/171895480994/mother-barnes-the-colonels-daughter-in-plum), Ottawa, Ontario, Canada Sat, Oct 2, 1965 – Page 6, found at <https://lindaseccaspina.tumblr.com/post/171895480994/mother-barnes-the-colonels-daughter-in-plum>

¹⁸ *Kitley: 1795-1975, a book by Glenn J. Lockwood provided by the Brockville Museum*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 290

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“Three children were born to them and Mrs. Barnes who lived on an upper floor, visited a famous fortune-teller on the first floor, telling her of her need of more sustenance for herself and family. She was advised to follow the same trade as hers as she was quick to learn and of extremely keen insight. The good fortune-teller aided her in the study of the stars and the significance of the tea leaves in the cup and then called to mind that she was the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, which added to her confidence.

When the fortune-teller had many clients she summoned Mrs. Barnes to assist her and, as her competence grew, she sent extra clients upstairs to Mrs. Barnes quarters.”²¹

Ultimately, Mr. Barnes apparently heard of free land grants in Canada, so they moved to Sheldon's Corners in what was known as Upper Canada and established a farm. Ms. Seccaspina relates: *“The family is recorded as having settled at Sheldon's Corners in approximately 1843.”²²*

Ms. Glenn in her essay, writes: *“During this time, Elizabeth began to play an active role in her community, helping neighbours through illness by providing home remedies and acting as midwife. Many stories recount her sympathetic and generous nature... Over the course of her marriage to David Barnes, Elizabeth would sometimes invite the ladies of her surrounding neighbourhood to tea. As a form of entertainment, she would read their tea leaves and, very often, these predictions came true.”²³*

By 1851 Elizabeth and David had seven children in their family. Around that time for unknown reasons, Mr. Barnes abandoned Elizabeth and six of his children, going to live in Smiths Falls with their eldest son Samuel. Ms. Glenn continues: *“The true reason [for Barnes' departure] will forever be a mystery, however, since Elizabeth apparently refused to discuss the subject. Again being alone, this time in her late 50s, Elizabeth had to find a way to support her children. She sold the Sheldon's Corners homestead and moved to a small house near Plum Hollow, on the boundary line between the Rear of Yonge, Escott and Kitley townships. It was known as Fortune's Line because of a land surveyor from the Lower Ottawa region who had worked in that area”.²⁴*

²¹ *The Recorder and Times*, June 7, 1958 (or 1938), page 5, provided by the Brockville Museum.

²² <https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2023/10/10/mother-barnes-the-witch-of-plum-hollow-grain-thefts-etc-mother-barnes-series/>

²³ Eleanor Glenn – “Breaking the Spell: a Feminist Perspective of Elizabeth Barnes”, an excerpt of her essay posted in a blog about Mother Barnes posted on Linda Seccaspina's website <https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2023/10/10/mother-barnes-the-witch-of-plum-hollow-grain-thefts-etc-mother-barnes-series/>

²⁴ Ibid. Note that Elizabeth's exact age is difficult to verify.

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Mrs. Barnes was left to her own devices and turned to her clairvoyant talent to start a business reading fortunes. "Lera Joynt said she feels Elizabeth believed this gift of being able to predict the future was a "divine call" from God. Thus, when in need of a way to provide for her family, she decided to use this gift to its fullest potential."²⁵ Thus began her legacy as Mother Barnes, renowned clairvoyant of Plum Hollow.

I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.

Louisa May Alcott – 1832-1888 – Novelist-Short Story Writer – Poet

Contemporary to Elizabeth Barnes was American writer Louisa May Alcott, who wrote the novel *Little Women* in 1868. According to the National Women's History Museum website: "Famed author Louisa May Alcott created colorful relatable characters in 19th century novels. Her work introduced readers to educated strong female heroines... *Little Women* was an instant success and the book cemented Alcott as one of the foremost novelist of the 19th and early 20th century ... She also joined the women's suffrage movement. Throughout her life, she would contribute to several publications which promoted women's rights. She was also the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Connecticut."²⁶

In my view, Elizabeth Barnes was similarly an important early Canadian feminist, who proved through example that a woman could take care of herself and her children, as well as contribute to her community, through choosing to use her innate talent to provide a sustainable income. Her famed reputation has ensured that her legacy would continue to inspire future generations of women.



THE HOUSE WHERE "MOTHER BARNES" LIVED. — This old home, situated on the township road, about two miles west of Sheldon's School (and about three miles northwest of Plum Hollow, as the crow flies) is where Mother Barnes (Elizabeth Martin Harrison Barnes) established her home midway through the 19th century. An additional structure at the left has since been torn down. "Mother Barnes" apparently told her fortunes to district residents and many others who came from afar, while seated in an upstairs room. As she grew older she was often seen rocking in a chair in front of her home. (SPE)

[The Recorder and Times, June 7, 1958 (or 1938), page 5, provided by the Brockville Museum]

²⁵ Sept. 14, 2020 post "The Plum Hollow Witch 101 – Mother Barnes", Linda Seccaspina. <https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2020/09/14/the-plum-hollow-witch-101-mother-barnes/>

²⁶ <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/louisa-may-alcott>

Efforts to Restore Mother Barnes' Cabin and Her Living Memory

The Joynt family who inherited Mother Barnes' cabin carried the responsibility to maintain the property of their beloved ancestor, and tried to obtain public heritage designation by offering it to the Upper Canada Village and the Ontario Heritage Society, but protection was not forthcoming for whatever reason.²⁷ From my vantage point, there are many facets to both the property and the story of Mother Barnes to warrant special heritage consideration and protection.

The cabin must be approximately 125 years old... On our last visit there we noted still on its weathered door and log interior the nearly obliterated names of many of those who came to consult the famous "Witch of Plum Hollow." The cabin is still standing but it should be restored and designated as an historic site.²⁸

The cabin and its grounds became further ravaged by time and neglect, until Ms. Wachsmuth discovered, saved and restored it to its former rustic glory. According to the *Recorder & Times* article, she visited the lonely, forgotten cabin on a country drive in late 2004. The property was for sale, which is why she was visiting, as her sister found out about it and let her know. The article described it as:

A dilapidated old log house surrounded by piles of dead sun-bleached grass, the house was more of an eyesore than the piece of real estate it was advertised as. A haphazard rail fence surrounds the property. Draped over the sagging roof of the house, blue ribbons – the shredded remains of a tarp – only add to the forlorn appearance...

But when a Navan resident first laid eyes on the house last November, she fell in love.... "I took pity on it," said Eloda... "When I walked in, I felt a great sadness about the place. It felt neglected, forgotten."²⁹

²⁷ Note that this information was read by the author, but the source wasn't located in time for publishing.

²⁸ From "Tales of the Valley" (32) in *The Ottawa Journal* article "'Witch of Plum Hollow' Had Remarkable Powers" (date ~ 1968).

²⁹ "The mother of all fortune tellers", article from *The Recorder & Times*, June 18, 2005.

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Photo from the files of the Athens and District Museum

According to an article by Doreen Barnes, *"A lasting legacy: Mother Barnes homestead restored"*, Wachsmuth told her: *"We started the cabin renovations in 2006."* She further related that: *"she remembers that her and her sister couldn't open the front door because the ceiling had caved in. They found two tree limbs to prop up the ceiling while they continued cleaning. While working they noticed that part of the window sills had initials, names and years etched into them. One very visible name was W.S. Howison and was dated 1883. Wachsmuth saved these planks... other finds included a ring, found in the window frame. "It looks like it's made out of copper with all kinds of carvings on it"... Another treasure was a carved wooden bird, colorfully painted, thought to have been used as payment for a reading.... The inaugural opening was July 15 with many descendants of Mother Barnes attending and giving support to this venture. They have supplied stories, offered copies of newspaper clippings and gave Wachsmuth encouragement to continue."*³⁰

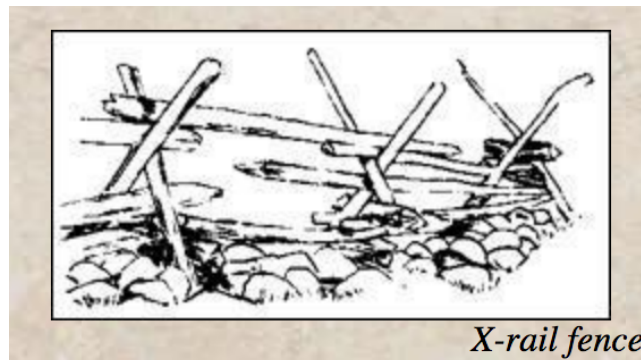
Her vision was completed, and the Mother Barnes cabin was open to the public for some time. Later, in 2016, Eloda listed the property for sale, but as there wasn't a buyer then, she still has ownership and maintains the property in exemplary condition. HPOC has endeavoured to contact Ms. Wachsmuth for an interview, but hasn't yet been able to locate her.

One of the striking features of the overall renovation is the newly constructed cedar x-rail fence, encircling and demarcating the entire property. Eleanor Hammond, author of the Rootsweb article *A Look at Brockville & Area Fences*, indicates: *"One of the highlights of the recent, and most entertaining Glenn Lockwood-led tour was my first visit to the home of Mother Barnes On a lovely sunny fall day, my daughter and I revisited the site and found the new owner, Eloda Wachsmuth, hard at work planting rose bushes near a brand new fence. She told us that the picturesque rail fence, with a tripod of posts for the upper support was the work of a local master.... The rail fences were often made from cedar, which was durable, easily split and*

³⁰ Doreen Barnes, *"A lasting legacy: Mother Barnes homestead restored"*, freelance article for the Smiths' Falls EMC publication.

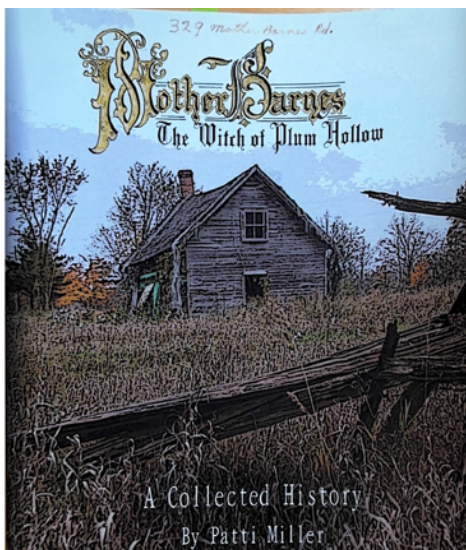
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abundant in this area... To me Mother Barnes' new fence is a work of art!! The fences of Leeds County are to be treasured."³¹



If These Walls Could Talk...

There is a great deal of historic and contemporary scuttlebutt circulated over time regarding Mother Barnes' clairvoyant and fortune-telling gifts. One recent book that has endeavoured to provide a collection of resources about her from her lifetime and shortly thereafter, is local author Patti Miller's *Mother Barnes – The Witch of Plum Hollow: A Collected History*. This paragraph from the preface sums up Mother Barnes' fortune-telling offerings:



“Sir John A. MacDonald is reported to have sought the Witch of Plum Hollow’s advice when Queen Victoria was deliberating on the location of our nation’s capital and again when he was uncertain of his political future.

For twenty-five cents Mother Barnes told fortunes, located lost articles, and solved mysteries in the attic of her tiny cabin outside of Brockville.

Was she a witch? Her family didn’t think so. She called herself a fortune teller.”³²

One of the foremost stories about Mother Barnes involves John A. MacDonald consulting her on at least two occasions. *The Ottawa Journal*, circa 1968, makes reference to these reported incidences:

³¹ Eleanor Hammond, author of the Rootsweb article *A Look at Brockville & Area Fences*.
<https://sites.rootsweb.com/~onbdhs/fences.html>

³² Patti Miller, *Mother Barnes – The Witch of Plum Hollow: A Collected History*

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... for more than half a century, and particularly during the American Civil War period and our own Confederation decade – people from the two countries waited on this remarkable woman. During that time the world of politics and society, as well as the people of the area, and even the law and the outlaw, made a beaten path to her log cabin that brooded in the shadow of a mighty oak.

An early writer of the district credits “Mother Barnes” with predicting that Bytown would be the Capital of Canada. Also the same source stated that Sir John A. Macdonald consulted her during a political crisis, seeking to gauge the fickleness of public favor.³³

In addition to helping countless people with relationship and family advice, Elizabeth was sought out by neighbours and strangers for help with locating lost or stolen articles and farm animals.

Linda Seccaspina shares a less-known anecdote:

Another story about “Mother Barnes ...” is related by John Murphy, 115 Spadina Avenue. Mr. Murphy tells that in 1870s a certain resident of South March had a considerable amount of money stolen from him. He had kept it in the house ... and they suspected a certain person.

One of his sons went to Plum Hollow to see Mrs. Barnes. Mrs. Barnes refused to tell the chap who had stolen the money, but said the owner would find it in a hole in a log at a certain corner of the house. The son went home and told his father what Mrs. Barnes had said, and sure enough, the money was there.³⁴

She also was consulted by authorities from time to time, to contribute for example to solving a murder investigation. Arlene Stafford-Wilson in her book “*Lanark County Calling*”, describes the defining moments when Mother Barnes helped authorities locate a hidden body in nearby Charleston Lake:

“The local police had been sceptical about her abilities, until she solved a murder in the summer of 1860. Cousins, Edgar Harter and Morgan Doxtater, from Jefferson County, New York, came to Canada, passed through Athens, and worked for a local farmer for a couple of days. They told the farmer that they planned to do a bit of sightseeing, and set off together, with two guns they had brought with them from the U.S.

Three days later, Edgar Harter returned to the area alone, carrying both guns, and a watch. When one of the local farmers questioned him about the watch and the extra gun, his responses just didn’t make sense. Jane Barnes was consulted, and she said that Harter

³³ “Tales of the Valley” (32), *The Ottawa Journal* article “‘Witch of Plum Hollow’ Had Remarkable Powers” (date ~ 1968):

³⁴ <https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2018/10/29/mother-barnes-and-the-missing-money-of-south-march/>

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had drowned his cousin, and she knew where the body could be found. When the police arrived, Doxtater's body was discovered, as she had predicted, submerged under a log, in Lake Charleston ...

Police charged Harter with murder... There was a great deal of publicity in 1860 when news spread that Barnes had solved such a high-profile crime, and reporters flocked to her tiny cabin requesting an interview.”³⁵

Glenn Lockwood's "Kitley: 1795-1975" says that "Mrs. Barnes' reputation was universal. It is interesting to note that she was not considered a lowly fortune teller by the rest of the community, but was one of the most respected personages in the whole of Leeds and Grenville. Her reputation spread throughout North America as more and more people discovered that her predictions did come true.”³⁶

An 1892 novel by Thaddeus W.H. Leavitt, written after Mother Barnes' death, entitled "The Witch of Plum Hollow", is excerpted in Lockwood's book.

"For many years past, Mrs. Barnes, better known as "Mother Barnes", has attracted visitors to her residence near Lake Loyada. Her fame as a "fortune teller" has spread beyond the confines of the Province to the Lower Provinces and the United States. From the examination of a few grounds of tea, she professes to be able to read the past, reveal the present and forecast the future. Unlike many modern soothsayers, she possesses a local reputation which time has not diminished. It is no exaggeration when we state that thousands upon thousands have visited the Sybil, some departing with the word "humbug" upon their lips, others half-doubting and many firm in the faith that only a knowledge superhuman could have unfolded the secret history of their lives.”³⁷

Several sources indicate is the first instance when Mother Barnes was referred to in this way, however Ms. Stafford-Wilson finishes her anecdote about the Doxtater murder with this to say that one of the reporters who visited her when she solved that case, "wrote an article for a local paper, and he referred to Jane as 'the Witch of Plum Hollow'. The name stuck, and ... the young reporter had created an attention-grabbing headline that would follow Jane through the decades to come.”³⁸

Mother Barnes would set the price of 25 cents for a tea-leaf reading, which she never changed or increased. She also accepted dried apples, tea or other goods for payment. In comparison, 25 cents in 1885 would be about \$10 CDN today. ³⁹

³⁵ pp. 119-120, *Lanark County Calling*, Arlene Stafford-Wilson

³⁶ p. 292, Glenn Lockwood's "Kitley: 1795-1975"

³⁷ Ibid., excerpt of 1892 novel by Thaddeus W.H. Leavitt "The Witch of Plum Hollow"

³⁸ P. 120, *Lanark County Calling*, Arlene Stafford-Wilson

³⁹ <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1885?amount=0.25>

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From the article "Prophetess of the East" in *The Kingston Whig Standard*, June 9, 1888, a couple of years before her death:

"The visitor cannot help but notice the hundreds of names which have been carved by her visitors on door post, window sill, and every available exposed timber, until there is hardly space left for another name. The number of these names, and a glance at the registers which she used to keep for the reception of autographs, give a faint idea of the multitudes who visit the place. ...

Mrs. Barnes is very devotional in her character ... It is difficult to say anything about the occult art, for the practice of which Mother Barnes is so celebrated...

Mrs. Barnes claims that she sees into the future by contemplation of the horoscope of the person consulting her. We have heard people describing interviews with her in a way which showed that she possessed a knowledge of their past lives which was startling, and which gave them confidence in her ability to foretell their fortune. We have learned of remarkable fulfilments of her predictions which would contradict the theory that they were chance verifications of random utterances.

An interview with her has enough of the elements of mystery and awe about it to make it a unique experience. First the client is required to state the date of his birth, and then several teacups are turned, in reading which the fortune teller relates incidents of the past life of her visitor, and tells what principal events may be expected in the future."

Some stories point to potential deception on the part of Mother Barnes, suggesting she used worldly tools to convince patrons of her authenticity. For example, the original pine deal table that she used to do her tea leaf readings is held by the *Athens and Area Heritage Society & Museum* in their permanent exhibit on Mother Barnes. Sally Smid generously provided HPOC with a large file on Mother Barnes, as well as a tour of the museum and exhibit. The museum received this table by donation from a local doctor who was given it by descendants of Mother Barnes, and indicates on the Museum's Facebook page: *"Though unverified, these holes in the table were said to have been where she would insert a stick to tap on the bottom of the table to aid with spiritual tapping"*. This was the hypothesis of the doctor who donated the table, but after much research we didn't locate any anecdotes or information to support that claim, so we can't confirm it. Our thought is that they also could have been used for a makeshift table extension, by inserting poles and positioning a loose table leaf on top.

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HPOC contacted Karen Brown, owner of [Karen Brown's Antiques and Collectibles](#) in Deseronto, the largest antiques market in Eastern Ontario, who suggested that at that time in Canadian history, such tables were often made with scrap wood, which could account for the holes. Could the table in question have been made from one of the early pioneer hand-made doors, for example, as described in the book *Pioneer Arts and Crafts* by Edwin C. Guillet?

*The Canadian pioneer lived in an age of wood. Many complicated machines and contrivances consisted entirely of wood... Similarly most of the equipment of the pioneer home was hand-made and of wood.... In describing the experience of a settler in Ops Township in raising his log house in the wilderness, Thomas Conant wrote: "To form a door he split some thin slabs from a straight-grained cedar and pinned them with wooden pins to cross slats. The most ingenious parts of the construction, however, were the hinges. Iron hinges he had not and could not get. With the auger he bored a hole through the end of a square piece of wood, and sharpening the other end with his axe, he then bored a hole into one of the logs of the house, constituting in part a door-jamb, and drove the piece of wood into this hole. This formed the top part of the hinge, and the bottom part was fashioned in exactly the same way."*⁴⁰



Original pine deal table used by Mother Barnes
Photos from Athens and Area Heritage Museum permanent
Mother Barnes exhibit

www.facebook.com/AthensMuseum/



This is one of the beams from inside the cabin where many guests would carve their names when they visited

[Athens and Area Heritage Museum](#)

Whatever the case, Mother Barnes had a reputation for being genuine and helpful, and she was under continual observation by family, friends, neighbours, and clients, so if she did engage in "tapping" there would likely be a historical anecdote observing that possibility. If this was the case, it may have been to increase the drama for customer entertainment. However, she

⁴⁰ p. 3 *Pioneer Arts and Crafts* by Edwin C. Guillet

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demonstrated much evidence of having as her top priority trying to help her clients solve their problems.

Nonetheless, the majority of the anecdotes and articles indicate a well-respected citizen of the community she resided in, a sought-after soothsayer with much talent for providing the “right” answers or aid in problem-solving needed by locals, as well as customers visiting her from across Canada and the US.

No matter the truth about her career as a tea-leaf reading, fortune-telling, problem and crime-solving clairvoyant, she was definitely a freedom-loving pioneer woman of individuality, strength, integrity, intelligence, resourcefulness, pride and ingenuity. A mother to a large family, she left a wide-reaching legacy to many descendants, many of whom remained in the region and contributed much to their communities.

Elizabeth Barnes died on February 4, 1891, leaving 7 children, 27 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren, totalling 68 living descendants.⁴¹ She also left behind a truly remarkable story that continues to fascinate to this day.

Mother Barnes was buried in a nearby cemetery, with her exact gravesite unknown and unmarked, until Claude and Ella Flood from the Plum Hollow Cheese factory erected a monument to her. Mr. Flood stated: *“During the 50 years I made cheese here people were always coming in with stories about Mother Barnes.”*⁴²



⁴¹ Feb. 10, 1891 *Athens Reporter* obituary *“Mother Barnes is Dead – The Aged Seer of Plum Hollow Succumbs to the Inevitable And Passes Over To The Great Majority”*.

⁴² <https://lindaseccaspina.wordpress.com/2020/09/14/the-plum-hollow-witch-101-mother-barnes/>

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In closing is a quote from *The Ottawa Journal - Tales of the Valley* (32) (~1968):

*SO TO THIS REMARKABLE WOMAN IN THIS PLACE THOUSANDS CAME TO
PENETRATE THE VEILS OF THE FUTURE AT SOME CRISIS IN THEIR LIVES.*

*AS WE STOOD ON SHELDON'S HILL IN THE OLD PIONEER BURYING GROUND WHERE
THE WOMAN OF PLUM HOLLOW LIES UNDER A CRUDE FIELD STONE ...
WE LOOKED OUT OVER THIS LOST EDEN. IT IS STILL A VALLEY WHERE IT WOULD SEEM
THAT THE MALAISE OF THIS MODERN WORLD COULD NOT FILTER.*

