Finding Baby Lewis

I first became aware of the daughter of Thomas and Sarah Lewis in 2009 after reading about her in two books, *Cholera, Chloroform, and the Science of Medicine: A Life of John Snow* and *The Ghost Map*.\(^1\)

I then found supplementary information on two web sites.\(^2\) I was particularly interested in the Lewis child because no mention is made of her first name in either the books or the web sites. My interest in her was piqued because she has been identified as the progenitor of the cholera epidemic which struck the Golden Square section of Soho, London in late August, 1854.\(^3\) Her full name it seemed, was lost to history. But I am a genealogist by avocation, so I wondered if it would be possible to uncover it.

Each of the two books and web sites goes into quite a bit detail about the outbreak of cholera in St. James, Westminster, and part of St. Anne’s, Soho (Greater London). And each also recounts how two men, Dr. John Snow and the Rev. Henry Whitehead, assistant curate at St. Luke's Church, Berwick Street, worked, first independently, then collaboratively on a parish inquiry committee, to determine the source

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2. This site, the John Snow Archive and Research Companion, and Ralph Frerichs’ “John Snow” web site <http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow.html>.

3. For example, *Ghost Map*, 161.
of the outbreak. From the outset, Snow suspected cholera-contamination of the popular water pump in Broad Street, and sought supporting evidence. Whitehead, however, reserved judgment for many months, preferring instead to gather all possible information by interviewing parishioners and other residents in affected streets. Among the worst “visited” were Berwick Street and Broad Street; Whitehead calculated that of the forty-nine homes located on Broad Street, cholera had killed at least one resident in thirty-seven of those homes, for a total of eighty-six deaths.  

Among them were Thomas Lewis, a police constable, his wife Sarah, and their children, living in the back parlor at 40 Broad Street; their infant daughter came down with cholera on August 28, 1854, and died five days later, on Saturday, 2 September. Just outside the door of the Lewis family residence stood the Broad Street pump, a much-prized source of drinking water by many residents and businesses located in Broad and adjoining streets. Whitehead was the first to trace the origins of the cholera outbreak in 1854 to the five month old daughter of Thomas and Sarah Lewis. He arrived at his conclusion after interviewing residents of Broad Street and by going through the Weekly Returns of Death in London during the spring of 1855 as a member of

4. Henry Whitehead, The Cholera in Berwick Street, 2nd ed. (London: Hope & Co, October 1854); available in “Snow’s Contemporaries” section of this web site.

5. An enumerator during the 1851 census listed two children at the time: Thomas, 13, and Anne, 8. Anne Lewis still resided at the residence in 1861. In August 1854, Thomas may still have lived at home, along with Anne and the un-named baby sister.
the parish inquiry committee and a late convert to Snow’s theory.  

An entry in a *Weekly Return* gave Henry Whitehead the clue he had been seeking for months. It listed the death of a daughter in 40 Broad Street on 2 September, age five months—not from cholera, but due to “exhaustion after an attack of Diarrhoea four days previous to death.” He knew from a previous interview that this entry referred to the daughter of Thomas and Sarah Lewis. Sarah Lewis told him that she had soaked her daughter's soiled nappies in pails of water and then emptied the soiled water either into a sink in the back court-yard or a cesspool at the front of the house. Since the cesspool lay very close to the pump well and given the timing of the baby’s illness, Whitehead hypothesized that the cholera outbreak in Golden Square could have begun with the Lewis baby. Other residents who lived at 40 Broad Street also died from cholera, but in interviewing these families Whitehead learned that the other residents who were taking care of family members with cholera had dumped their waste water into the courtyard in the back of the residence, not into the front cesspool.

6. *Cholera, Chloroform*, 305; for a map of 40 Broad Street, see Ibid., 309.

7. Ibid., 306.


Whitehead informed the rest of the parish inquiry committee of his findings, and the committee ordered an immediate excavation of the entire area around the Broad Street pump. Jehosaphat York, a surveyor for the parish, discovered that the cesspool inside 40 Broad Street and drain leading to the sewer were lined with decaying brickwork; waste water had been steadily percolating into the soil around the pump well and through its brick-work. This was the “fatal connection” Whitehead had been looking for, and a vindication of Snow’s theory (at least in his own mind) that cholera was transmitted by water and not from the air. It must have come as a welcome surprise to both Whitehead and Snow, in light of the excavations conducted by York, that an earlier excavation of the pump well, which gave it a clean bill of health, had failed to uncover the decaying brickwork of the cesspool and drain near the pump. Waste-water containing the dejections from at least one cholera patient had seeped into the well underneath the Broad Street pump, where many residents had obtained water for drinking and cooking, at the outset of the epidemic.  

But the Broad Street pump had been closed long before York’s discovery of probable contamination. Snow had somehow convinced the Board of Governors and Directors of the Poor for the Parish of St James, Westminster to order removal of the pump handle so that residents could no longer draw the water from the well beneath. The


11. Ibid., 300.
handle was removed on September 8, 1854. By this date however, the number of people with cholera in the Broad Street neighborhood was on the decline, probably because a constant flow of water from the well into the pump since 2 September had cleared the contamination introduced by the soiled Lewis nappies. That less people were becoming sick may also be due to many residents of Broad Street moving to lodgings in other parts of London until the local epidemic was over.

At the time of the pump handle's removal on September 8 however, Thomas Lewis was suffering the symptoms of cholera. He died of the disease eleven days later, on Tuesday, 19 September. The removal of the pump handle had come too late to save Thomas from a disease that had also took away his daughter.

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For the past several years I have been assisting people in finding their "British Roots," utilizing various online search engines such as the Latter Day Saints website and a website called FreeBMD. The FreeBMD


13. Ibid., 162.


15. Ibid., 296.

16. Property of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), 35 North West Temple Street, Room 344, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84150-3440.

website allows genealogists to access birth, marriage, and death indexes for England and Wales, held by the General Register Office (GRO) in Southport, Merseyside. Utilizing the FreeBMD search engine, my goal was to see if I could learn the first name of the daughter of Thomas and Sarah Lewis, first by accessing the St. James Westminster GRO death indexes for the September quarter of 1854. The September quarter includes the months of July, August, and September.

I found that the GRO indexes for St. James Westminster list the deaths of four people in the September quarter of 1854 with the surname Lewis. These deaths include Frances Lewis, James Lewis, Mary Lewis, and Thomas Lewis. In some cases the ages of the deceased are noted in the indexes, but none of the four names had ages at death attached to them. GRO indexes for people with the same last name are listed alphabetically by first name. I knew the index for Thomas Lewis would refer to police constable Thomas Lewis of 40 Broad Street, Golden Square, as he is the only Thomas Lewis whose death was recorded in the St. James Westminster district for the September quarter of 1854.

Thomas's daughter then, would either be Frances or Mary Lewis, as these are the only two females whose deaths were recorded in St. James Westminster in the September quarter. Steven Johnson, in his book, *The Ghost Map*, wrote that the Lewis family had moved to 40 Broad Street sometime in 1840s, and that the daughter of Thomas and
Sarah Lewis was born there in March of 1854.\footnote{18}{The Ghost Map, 21.}

March belongs to the March quarter and also includes the months of January and February. With this information I went back to the FreeBMD search engine to see if I could locate a GRO birth index for a Frances or a Mary Lewis, whose births were recorded in the March quarter of 1854. The indexes for the March 1854 quarter for St. James Westminster show the births of two females, Elizabeth Ann Lewis and Frances Lewis. I suspected I had found a match in Frances Lewis, but indexes of themselves are not proof of identity, and so in January of 2009 I sent away to the GRO for the birth and death records of Frances Lewis, and the death record for Thomas Lewis.

I knew from past experience with English birth records that the birth record for Frances Lewis, would likely provide the names of her parents, the date and place of her birth, as well as her father’s occupation. The death record for her would provide information such as the date, place, and cause of her death, as well as the name of the informant who reported the death. I also knew that the death record for Thomas Lewis would give the date, place, and cause of his death, as well as his occupation at the time of death and the name of the informant who reported his death.\footnote{19}{A more detailed explanation of what may be found in birth, marriage, and death records for England and Wales can be found in a website hosted by Barbara Dixon, <http://www.dixons.clara.co.uk/Certificates/indexbd.htm>.}
After several weeks I received the birth and death certificates for Frances Lewis and the death certificate for Thomas Lewis. The birth certificate for Frances Lewis notes that she was born on the "Twenty First" of March 1854 in 40 Broad Street, Golden Square, St. James Westminster, and that her parents were police constable Thomas Lewis and Sarah Lewis, "formerly Edgley"— Edgley referring to Sarah's maiden name. The birth was recorded by the district registrar named William Barney Parkes. This was the match I was looking for and thought myself pretty luck to have found this information on the first go-around. Anyone who had been involved in genealogical research is aware of how much time and expense can sometimes be accrued in looking for this type of information without having a great deal of background information about the people they are searching for.

The death certificate for Frances Lewis shows that she had died on the "Second" of September 1854 in 40 Broad Street. The cause of her death is listed (similar to what Whitehead found in the Weekly Return) as "Exhaustion after an attack of Diarrhoea four days previous to death." Her father is listed as police constable Thomas Lewis. The name of the informant to her death is listed as "S Lewis," who could only be her
mother Sarah. The death certificate is signed by registrar William Barney Parkes.

The Thomas Lewis death certificate shows he died in 40 Broad Street on the "Nineteenth" of September 1854. The cause of death is listed as "Diarrhoea 4 days, Cholera 3 days, Fever for 7 days." Added up chronologically, the number of days that Thomas was ill totals fourteen, which means the onset of cholera in his system first appeared on 5 September, three days after the death of his daughter Frances, and three days before the Broad Street pump handle was removed as recommended by John Snow, and as ordered by the Board of Governors and Directors of the Poor for the St James Westminster parish.

The Thomas Lewis death certificate also notes that he was a "Police
Constable," and that "S Lewis," was present at his death. Again, "S Lewis," could only be his wife Sarah. The death certificate, like the birth and death certificates for Frances Lewis, is signed by registrar William Barney Parkes.

True to keeping the confidentiality of their clients, neither John Snow or the Rev. Henry Whitehead, as far as I could determine, ever mentioned in print, the name of Frances Lewis. I could only guess what those living in the neighborhood of Broad Street during the late summer of 1854 would have thought if they had known the epidemic had its origins with infant Frances in 40 Broad Street. For the widow, Sarah Lewis, remained in the neighborhood for many years. The 1861 census indicates that she and a surviving daughter, Annie, still lived at 40 Broad Street.20

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20. The 1861 census for 40 Broad Street, Westminster St. James shows that Sarah Lewis is the 51 year old head of the household, born in "Northamptonshire." Her occupation is "Laundress." Also in the household is Sarah's daughter Annie, a 17 year old "Embroidress," born Westminster, Middlesex. The census index from Ancestry.com. The census image from the National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU, source citation, Class: RG9; Piece: 65; Folio: 136; Page: 49; GSU roll: 542566.
Appendix A – Birth Certificate for Frances Lewis

Transcription

Registration District: Saint James Westminster

BIRTH in the Sub-district of Golden Square in the County of Middlesex

No. 11

1. When and Where Born: Twenty first March 1854 40 Broad Street

2. Name, if any: Frances Lewis

3. Sex: Girl

4. Name and surname of father: Thomas Lewis

5. Name, surname, and maiden surname of mother:
   Sarah Lewis formerly Edgley

6. Occupation of Father: Police Constable

7. Signature, description and residence of informant:
   T. Lewis, Father, 40 Broad Street, St. James, Westminster

8. When registered: Twenty-ninth March 1854

9. Signature of Registrar: William Barney Parkes, Registrar
Appendix B – Death Certificate for Frances Lewis

Transcription

Registration District: Saint James Westminster

DEATH in the Sub-district of Golden Square in the County of Middlesex

No. 232

1. When and Where Died: Second September 1854 40 Broad Street

2. Name and Surname: Frances Lewis

3. Sex: Female

4. Age: 5 months

5. Occupation: Daughter of Thomas Lewis, Police Constable

6. Cause of Death: Exhaustion after an attack of diarrhoea four days previous to death. Certified.

7. Signature, description and residence of informant:

   S. Lewis present at death, 40 Broad Street, St. James, Westminster

8. When registered: Fourth September 1854

9. Signature of Registrar: William Barney Parkes, Registrar
Appendix C – Death Certificate for Thomas Lewis

Transcription

Registration District: Saint James Westminster

DEATH in the Sub-district of Golden Square in the County of Middlesex

No. 429

1. When and Where Died: Nineteenth September 1854 40 Broad Street

2. Name and Surname: Thomas Lewis

3. Sex: Male

4. Age: 49 Years

5. Occupation: Police Constable

6. Cause of Death:
   
   Diarrhoea 4 Days, Cholera 3 Days, Fever for 7 Days, Certified

7. Signature, description and residence of informant:
   
   S. Lewis present at death, 40 Broad Street, St. James, Westminster

8. When registered: Twentieth September 1854

9. Signature of Registrar: William Barney Parkes, Registrar