

## **The Titanic and Elizabeth Barrett Rothschild**

### **By John Pulos**

It was New Year's Eve 1997. I spent it at the mall watching James Cameron's movie *Titanic*.

It changed my life. Even though I knew that the Jack and Rose characters were fictitious, the scope of the movie overwhelmed me. (*After years of Titanic research and many more viewings of the film, I continue to be amazed at how accurate the movie and Cameron's extensive research were.*)

I entered my restaurant, Chef's, the next morning at 5:30 and told Nick, who was always sitting at the last seat on the counter, that I had seen *Titanic* and it was amazing. He said, "You know, a local woman survived it."

That statement would send me on a 10-year Titanic voyage of my own. It was New Year's Day and only restaurants were open. At 9 a.m. on Monday morning I was at the local library reading all that I could about Watkins Glen native Elizabeth Barrett Rothschild – Titanic survivor.

Elizabeth Jane Barrett was born on February 10, 1858, in Watkins Glen. She was the ninth child of James William Barrett and the fifth child of James and his second wife, Mary Phelan Barrett. James' first wife, also named Mary, died in 1851 at the age of 24. (James and his first wife had named their second child Elizabeth Ann.)

James was listed as an "innkeeper" in the 1865 Town of Dix census. He was born in England, and his second wife was born in Ireland. James died when Elizabeth Jane was only 9. Her mother died at age 61 when Elizabeth was 28. Elizabeth Jane was listed as "Lizzie" in her mother's death notice and is referred to as Aunt Lizzie by her existing relatives today. Elizabeth moved to New York City to live with one of her sisters. She was an accomplished seamstress. After moving to New York City, she went to work in a clothing factory owned by Martin Rothschild, whose famous family had financed the Napoleonic Wars. Martin and Elizabeth met and were eventually married in 1895, when Elizabeth was 37.

The Rothschilds, who traveled extensively during their marriage, were returning from a winter in France when they boarded the RMS Titanic on April 10, 1912, in Cherbourg, France.

Titanic struck the iceberg on April 15, shortly after their final dinner together. Elizabeth and her Pomeranian dog were placed in Lifeboat 6 by Martin, who covered the dog in her lap with his topcoat. Sitting a few seats away from Elizabeth was Margaret Brown, forever known after the fateful voyage as the "Unsinkable Molly Brown." The lifeboat had a capacity of 65 people; there were 23 aboard. Of the 23, Elizabeth was the only one who never gave an account of her time on the ship or in the lifeboat.

When her lifeboat reached the rescue ship Carpathia at 6 a.m., the crew at first refused to take her dog on board. She refused to leave the lifeboat without her dog. Both were eventually hoisted aboard the ship. Two other dogs survived the sinking. The survival of Elizabeth's dog was not known to Titanic historians until the late 1990s, when I presented my findings to Philip Hind, curator of the world's largest Titanic information site, [www.encyclopedia-titanica.org](http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org).

There is some dispute about the final fate of the Pomeranian. Some of Aunt Lizzie's relatives reported that the dog was killed in a dog fight in New York. The other story relates that the dog jumped from Elizabeth's arms after disembarking Carpathia in New York and was run over by a carriage.

Elizabeth was 54 when Titanic sank. She died in 1943, at age 85. She never remarried during her final 31 years. Martin and Elizabeth did not have children.

Elizabeth returned to Watkins Glen during the summer months and purchased a house in the village on the northeast corner of Eighth and Porter streets. Her summer arrival was always noted as her black Packard, complete with chauffeur, entered the village. She often dressed in black, mourning her husband until her death.

She was remembered in the village for her wonderful smile and generosity to those who were less fortunate. Many remembered her shopping at the local market, with her chauffeur carrying her groceries to the Packard.

My mother, born in 1922, remembers Elizabeth walking the streets of the village. All knew that she had survived Titanic, and whispers from my mother's young friends always occurred after she walked by. Long-time Watkins resident Bill Cherock, also born in the 1920s, remembers Elizabeth hosting the St. Mary's altar boys at her Watkins home for a summer picnic.

Elizabeth made frequent summer trips to the home of Catherine Shanahan, who was her summer seamstress. While Elizabeth was being fitted, Catherine's niece, Marian Littell (Utter) hid behind some curtains that led to the living room. In a conversation I had with her in 1998, when she was 92, Marian remembered Elizabeth talking about her dog who was killed by the wheels of a carriage in New York after she arrived from the disaster. Marian also remembered Elizabeth saying that she had never been able to sleep in the dark after the disaster and always slept with a light on.

During those summer years in the early 1920s, Elizabeth took her evening meals at the Jefferson Hotel on the main street of the village and at the famed Glen Springs Resort overlooking the village. Playing the violin at both of those venues was a young Talitha Bostford. She was an accomplished violinist, having recently graduated from the Ithaca College of music. Talitha's famous architect brother, William Hull Bostford, had also perished on Titanic. Talitha never knew of the connection in her three years of playing dinner music for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's brother Thomas was a Roman Catholic priest active in Watkins Glen in the 1920s. He was the first native son of Watkins Glen to be ordained to the Catholic priesthood. His home parish was located in Buffalo, New York.

Elizabeth also became a great friend of St. Mary's of the Lake Church in Watkins Glen. One of the massive stained glass windows in the church is dedicated to the memory of her parents. Elizabeth also purchased land to add to St. Mary's Cemetery, which borders the land of the famed state park gorge, and had the cemetery road paved. On this land she had built a gothic style mausoleum in memory of her husband, which is still considered today one of the finest in the area.

The inside of the structure has a stained glass window above an altar and a kneeling bench, where Elizabeth often prayed. A large bronze plaque attached to the altar reads: "In Memoriam – Martin Rothschild – Born December 12, 1865 – Died in the Titanic Disaster April 15, 1912. Be Thou Faithful unto Death and I will Give Thee a Crown of Life."

Her brother Thomas had erected a large crucifix of Barre granite just above the Barrett-Rothschild Mausoleum. Elizabeth's good friend Archbishop Thomas Walsh of Newark, New Jersey, came to Watkins Glen to consecrate the cemetery and mausoleum on August 30, 1931. The Bishop often vacationed at the nearby and famed Glen Springs Resort as a guest of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth wintered in East Orange, New Jersey. Her brother Thomas eventually moved to New Jersey to live with his sister after retirement from priesthood service in Watkins Glen and Buffalo. She built a private chapel for them in her home at 75 Prospect St., East Orange. It was the only private chapel of its kind in the United States and was built with the permission of Pope Pius XI.

Thomas died in 1930, and his body was moved to the family mausoleum in Watkins Glen. Because of her activity in the affairs of the Roman Catholic Archdioceses of Newark, New Jersey, New York City and Rochester, she was awarded the Papal Distinguished Merit Cross in 1941 by Pope Pius XII. These awards were usually bestowed by the Pope at the Vatican. Elizabeth, because of her age of 82 and her refusal to travel by ship, received the award in New Jersey.

Elizabeth died at home in New Jersey in 1943, after a three-week illness. She was 84. Archbishop Walsh returned to Watkins Glen for her requiem Mass at St. Mary's and her subsequent burial in the mausoleum dedicated to her husband.